Online documentation portals in library technical services: Shedding light on local practices and procedures

By: Anna R. Craft

Abstract:

The creation, sharing, and maintenance of documentation are critical to support the often detailed and complex work of library technical services units. This column examines documentation portals that share technical services policies and procedures, with a focus on library-based portals that are accessible to personnel within the associated libraries while also being fully or partially open to external users. A review of the literature is provided, as well as links to and descriptions of selected portal examples.

Keywords: acquisitions | cataloging | electronic resources | local documentation | online portals | technical services

Article:

Introduction

This column seeks to further the awareness of and conversation around library-based documentation portals for technical services and to suggest questions and directions for potential future investigation in this area. For the purposes of this column, a *library-based documentation portal* is an online site created by a library or one of its units to facilitate compiling and sharing departmental procedures and policies with internal staff while also allowing external users access to at least some of the content. Technical services-based portals may include documentation on acquisitions, cataloging, electronic resources, and related areas.

Many technical services units create and maintain documentation on their practices, but the majority do not provide external personnel with free and open access to that content. The establishment of these openly available portals allows for easy access for internal staff while also letting external users—such as those in technical services units at other libraries—learn from and compare practices. Such portals can serve as resources for libraries that are looking to create or

assess their own policies and procedures, as well as opportunities for libraries looking to create documentation or portals of their own.

Literature review

A review of the literature surfaced a small number of relevant articles, few of which bring together both library-based technical services documentation and the use of online systems to publicly share such documentation. White addressed the importance of creating and maintaining documentation in technical services and posed questions about the nature of documentation, what activities should be documented, and the assignment of responsibility of documentation. Her definition of documentation encompasses "anything written down in a department that pertains to the present, past, or future operation of the library and can assist in clarifying and confirming the nature of library activities" (White, 2006).

Brisson provided an early argument for technical services units to adopt online documentation, pointing to online as being more cost-effective and efficient than print. He also examined online documentation systems for use in technical services, comparing Microsoft Word, the World Wide Web, and Folio VIEWS as possible candidates (Brisson, 1999). Current technology allows for different system possibilities, but the issues Brisson identified as being associated with the creation and maintenance of documentation are still applicable today. Creating and maintaining documentation remains a labor-intensive activity, and the identification of responsibility and assumption of ownership of specific types or pieces of documentation is important not just for keeping these documents current but for encouraging buy-in from users tasked with "owning" those areas (Brisson, 1999).

Harizan and Low provided an early examination of library technical services websites; their 1998 article focuses on home pages of library cataloging departments. Though this article is over 20 years old at the time of this writing, the benefits they associate with cataloging websites, such as easy access to departmental documentation and policies, are still relevant today (Harizan & Low, 1998). In 2006, Mundle, Hui, and Bangalore tested an evaluation model for cataloging department websites, using the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members as their study group. The authors evaluated a number of factors, including internal documentation provided through the departmental website; their findings indicated that 81.6% of sites provided information on local policies and procedures "in great detail." The article does not specify the types of documentation provided, beyond mentioning "links to various cataloging tools" and "cataloging cheat sheets" (Mundle, Huie, & Bangalore, 2006). A focus on portals for locally created documentation was beyond the scope of either of these articles.

A 2013 article by Diffin, Coogan, and Fu from the University of Maryland University College addresses the implementation of SharePoint to hold and deliver library documentation but provides a library systems perspective, rather than one from technical services. The authors identify several benefits that came with the adoption of a centralized system for documenting and sharing procedures: the ready availability of easily shared documentation, the ease of updating wiki pages within the portal, and the institution of a habit of creating documentation (Diffin, Coogan, & Fu, 2013). In the same year, Bazeley and Yoose (2013) reported on using LibGuides software to develop an online home for technical services documentation at Miami University

Libraries, highlighting the site as a valuable communication mechanism not only within technical services but between technical services and public services. Efforts to consider this site for inclusion on the following list were unsuccessful, as it does not appear to be available to the public at the time of this writing.

While literature based on local documentation portals is limited, there are several examples of bibliographies and related articles meant to assist catalogers and electronic resources personnel in locating relevant resources and documentation to support their work. Baga, Hoover, and Wolverton (2013) produced an annotated "webliography" of "online, practical, and free cataloging resources" meant to assist catalogers in identifying reliable, quality resources to support their work. This comprehensive list includes many well-known cataloging resources provided by the Library of Congress, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), and the National Library of Medicine (NLM). It also includes several library-based resources, some of which fit within the scope of this column. One of these portals was no longer accessible at the current link at the time of this writing, and a search for an alternate address was unsuccessful; another is still available but does not appear to have been updated in more than a decade. These issues illustrate the difficulty of keeping such a list up to date; those issues are balanced by the ongoing need to document and share information on current resources that can assist library personnel in their duties. Two other library-based portals mentioned in the article—one provided by North Carolina State University Libraries' Acquisitions and Discovery department, another by Princeton University Library's department of Cataloging and Metadata Services—are still active and will be discussed in further detail in the following.

The literature of serials and electronic resources management includes similar articles in support of helping new and continuing professionals identify and locate resources and tools for their work. Jennings provides a United Kingdom-focused bibliography for electronic resources librarians; she references databases, journals, and conferences of interest and provides citations to specific resources addressing general works, acquisitions, access and authentication, administration, customer support, and evaluation and monitoring of electronic resources (Jennings, 2010). Works provided on the lists represent books, scholarly articles, case studies, reports, podcasts, interviews, theses, videos, and websites; library-based documentation portals are not included. Likewise, Griffin shares a significant number of serials-related resources, framed as a guide for those who are new to or considering joining the profession. Her bibliography includes association and organization websites, links to conferences and meetings, online training opportunities provided by vendors and other institutions, as well as books, journals, and websites (2011). Again, library-based documentation portals are not included in any of these lists.

Several factors may explain or influence the limited availability of literature on this topic. Some authors and editors may consider the examination of documentation portals to be of limited scholarly value, especially considering the ephemeral nature of some online content. And creators of such portals, having invested time and energy into the creation and continued upkeep of the content, may feel that writing about freely available resources is not the best use of their time, preferring instead to allow for informal methods of information dissemination, such as sharing on email lists, in conversations, and at conferences and other professional development events. There is also the possibility that departments make documentation available online

because of the ease of access and use for internal personnel while not intending to advertise the availability beyond their own users.

Library-based local documentation portals

Local documentation portals in libraries are provided in a variety of systems. As Diffin et al. (2013) note, SharePoint is one system that can be used for this purpose. An examination of a handful of currently available technical services portals revealed that Confluence is another widely used system. The literature also indicates the use of LibGuides for this purpose; an informal survey of available portals shows limited adoption of this system in practice (Bazeley & Yoose, 2013).

There are potential barriers and pitfalls that may impact the experience of users who choose to interact with publicly available local documentation portals created by other institutions. While made available to wide audiences, documentation in these portals is created first for internal users, and as such, local terminology, acronyms, and abbreviations may not be clearly explained, which may leave external users with questions. The ease of updating, editing, and deleting pages and documents in many of these systems—while beneficial to support evolving local practices— may also result in documentation changing or disappearing from the system unexpectedly.

The following is a sample of library-based online portals for local documentation related to technical services. Portals were drawn from the literature, word of mouth, and online searches; they represent five large academic libraries and one large academic library consortium. There are a couple of reasons why large institutions may be more likely to have and share public documentation. Such institutions—with many personnel based in or working with technical services, especially in libraries where operations are split between or among different physical locations—may have the greatest incentive to establish and maintain online documentation portals. Such libraries may also have more staff among which to divide the tasks of creation and maintenance of documentation in such portals.

The following does not attempt to bring together all portals of this type, nor does it attempt to pass judgment on the quality of the documentation provided by the portals; it is simply a starting point. All portals discussed here provided free and public access to technical services documentation at the time of this writing. They are presented in alphabetical order.

Cornell University Library Technical Services (https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/LTSP/Library+Technical+Services+Procedures+Home)

Cornell University's Library Technical Services portal is available via Confluence, a collaborative wiki tool. This portal includes policies and procedures documenting technical services, as well as administrative policies related to general workplace issues, including food and beverages, professional development, workplace environment, and employee leave. The Confluence tool provides date information on each page, allowing viewers to see how recently pages were modified. An expandable page tree allows for easy browsing among documentation topics; there is also a free-text search box. The portal includes substantial documentation on

authorities work, batch resource processing, cataloging and metadata, maintenance of database quality, electronic resources, government documents, ordering, working with rare and manuscript collections, receiving, working with serials and periodicals, special formats cataloging, and the department's integrated library system (ILS).

Duke University Libraries (DUL) Technical Services (https://wiki.duke.edu/display/DTSP/)

DUL's Technical Services portal, also shared via Confluence, includes substantial documentation on local practices, including those related to acquisitions, cataloging, and electronic resources. An expandable page tree facilitates navigation through topics and subtopics; content can also be browsed via topical labels/tags. As mentioned, the Confluence system makes it easy for viewers to determine the recency of the documentation, as "last modified" dates are prominent on each page. Some content is marked as "staff only" and is accessible only through a Duke University log-in, but the vast majority of pages are available to the public. At least one section (Monographic Cataloging) includes a subpage about "Past Practices," which describes practices that have been discontinued or changed and, in some cases, provides basic context about why.

Harvard Library Houghton Technical Services (https://wiki.harvard.edu/confluence/display/HoughtonTechnicalServices/Houghton+Library+Technical+Services)

Harvard's Houghton Library Technical Services department documentation site represents a documentation portal devoted to special collections technical services. The site, also delivered through Confluence, provides documentation related to acquisitions, manuscripts, digital projects, rare books, ILS usage, and more. Also available are departmental reports and goals; procedures for hiring student workers; and information on the department's mission, vision, and values. Some pages include visual materials such as diagrams or flowcharts; others include links to documentation stored in Google Drive. The site also includes a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) regarding the use of the Confluence tool.

North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries Acquisitions and Discovery (https://staff.lib.ncsu.edu/confluence/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=3408086)

The NCSU Libraries Acquisitions and Discovery documentation portal is another example that uses the Confluence system. The site includes extensive documentation on policies and procedures for acquisitions and cataloging; also available are information related to specific departmental projects, reports, local ILS tools and policies; and a training page with links to tools, tutorials, and resources hosted on other sites. The expandable "Page Tree" navigation structure is available throughout the site; the most extensively documented topics—acquisitions and cataloging—also provide separate alphabetical listings of subtopics. A few sections of the site are marked "staff only" and require a log-in for access; the vast majority of links are currently accessible to the public.

Princeton University Library Cataloging and Metadata Services (https://library.princeton.edu/cams/cataloging-and-metadata-services)

Current documentation from Princeton University Library's Cataloging and Metadata Services department is provided as part of the department's web presence on the library's website; this replaces a previous departmental documentation site identified and referenced by Baga et al. (2013). The location of current documentation situates task-based policies alongside organizational information and context, including a staff directory. Some pages are marked with dates of recent modification; some are marked as drafts. Documentation includes general cataloging practices, procedures for rare monographs and rare serials, and information to support authorities work. There is also a section documenting cataloging practices for East Asian languages, as well as materials related to Princeton's involvement in Linked Data for Production (LD4P) and Linked Data for Production, phase 2 (LD4P2).

State University of New York (SUNY) Libraries
Consortium (https://slcny.libguides.com/training/technical-services-workflows)

This shared documentation example represents a consortium of libraries and uses LibGuides as a delivery tool. The available documentation focuses on common practices and procedures within the group, particularly in relation to the Ex Libra Alma ILS and use of OCLC. Some information is presented directly through the LibGuides web interface; other documents are posted in Portable Document Format (PDF) or Microsoft Word files within the system. Several links to documentation from Ex Libris are also included. For consortial libraries, documentation on common policies and practices may be posted on publicly available sites to facilitate availability to the entire group while avoiding institution-specific log-ins.

Conclusion

The creation, sharing, and maintenance of documentation are critical to support the often detailed and complex work of library technical services units. Shared online documentation can also benefit the profession by providing opportunities for others to learn from and compare policies and procedures. This column neither identifies all extant technical services documentation portals nor addresses the full breadth of questions and issues related to this topic. Several questions presented themselves during the writing of this column but ultimately fell outside its scope, indicating possibilities for future investigation. These include:

1. What resources and resource types do personnel in technical services turn to when they are looking for documentation?
2. What types of documentation do library-based portals provide that are not provided by other sources, such as the Library of Congress and OCLC?
3. How do technical services librarians discover and use documentation portals?
4. What makes libraries decide to make documentation available online to users beyond their own libraries?

As to the final question, the literature does not address the consideration of and decision points associated with sharing technical services documentation publicly versus limiting its availability to internal staff. The creation and ongoing maintenance of documentation is a time-consuming task, regardless of whether such documentation is shared publicly or kept in-house, but there

may be added time associated with sharing documentation publicly. Departments and institutions may have additional standards associated with publicly available documents, which might add to the time needed for creating materials and preparing them for external audiences. But there may be other factors affecting these decisions; further research could shine a light on these reasons.

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