

A Survey of Copyright Statements on Digital Collections of College Libraries: Whether They Can Play a Role in Avoiding Copyright-infringement Behaviors?

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Purpose - This paper will examine the copyright statements attached to digital collections purchased by college libraries, to determine how often they are present and analyze the content of those statements for common themes. The data will tell us that how well libraries are meeting their obligations in this realm. And then, it will explore common copyright-related problems that arise when students use digital library resources; and investigate their misconceptions of copyright laws.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 116 college libraries' websites of universities sponsored by 211 Project in the People's Republic of China were examined for the presence of statements and their content evaluated for common themes. Particular attention was paid to whether the libraries are meeting their obligation to educate users about their rights by including information about fair use and problematic copyright-infringement behaviors. And then, notices published on libraries' websites about students' copyright-infringement behaviors were documented, and three librarians in charge of the digital collections were interviewed regarding student-users' problematic copyright-infringement behaviors that they often encountered. Also, a semi-structured questionnaire about copyright-related behaviors was developed and distributed to college students.

Findings – Of the 116 libraries surveyed, 71 (61%) had a copyright statement. There are, indeed, common elements among statements. They can be grouped, roughly, into four memes: purpose of copyright statement, authorized users, copyright-infringement behaviors, and remedy measures. Less than 10 percent of the statements examined acknowledge the existence of fair use. And some of these statements were often difficult to distinguish from terms of use and were frequently vague or misleading. Twenty-five libraries published notices about users' copyright-infringement behaviors. Combined with the librarian-interview results, we found that students' problematic behaviors included systematic downloading, distribution to unauthorized users, and going beyond fair use. The student-survey results indicated that students had some misunderstanding about copyright laws when they used digital collections, for example: all educational use is fair use; the downloaded digital resources are all legitimately authorized and permitted; and any downloading from college library is permitted. Librarians and libraries should take some measures to solve these problems. For example, the copyright statements should be more comprehensive in structure; have more robust management institutions; copyright education should be delivered along with or imbedded in the general library-use education or information-literacy programs.

Originality/value – This paper analyzes the status quo of the copyright statements of digital collections of college libraries, and explores students' understanding and misunderstandings that arose when students used the school digital collections, and then discusses implications of these results for librarians and libraries with regard to the design of related instruction.