

Following standards: a document ethnography in Chilean University Libraries

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to contribute to extended knowledge about the role of standardization of university library operations and its consequences.

Design/methodology/approach – This research employs a practice-theoretically oriented analysis method with a focus on documents. The Chilean standards for university libraries, which are in focus, are conceptualised as a site that encompasses those who drafted them and librarians who are expected to follow them. The study can be termed a document ethnography, which in this case includes the methods of interviewing and document analysis.

Findings – Whereas commonalities among libraries are in focus for the drafters, librarians are foregrounding context-related particularities and local practices. This results in a collision between different purposes and interests regarding how to use standards. The librarians perceive that standards are primarily intended for management and that they provide little support for everyday work. In accordance, to librarians, the work done by people in managerial positions regarding standards often seems opaque or obscured. Furthermore, for librarians, even though standards are ubiquitous, they are not visible in the daily work.

Originality/value – The document ethnography as a research approach is drawn from the field of science and technology studies and has not previously been used in library research. Standards for university libraries have not been studied in this way before, either in Chile or elsewhere. The study has contributed to making “the dark sides of standards” within the Chilean academic library landscape visible.

Keywords Standards, University libraries, Document analysis, Practice theory, Chile

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

We may not think about it, but many of our daily activities are related to a standard of some sort, sitting on office furniture, surfing the Internet, driving a car or even eating an apple. There is, for example, a standard for cold storage of apples (ISO, 1995). At the time of the writing of this article, ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) announces that it has issued more than 25,000 “international standards covering almost all aspects of technology, management and manufacturing” (ISO, n.d.). The overall purpose of standardization, and thus standards, is to present a general expected level and outcome for a certain activity or arrangement. According to

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Lampland and Star (2008, p. 10) standards serve to “streamline procedures or regulate behaviours, to demand specific results, or to prevent harm”. They are generally perceived as “a valuable and necessary thing to do” and, therefore rarely questioned (Lampland and Star, 2008, p. 10). In this article we view the notion of standards and standardization in line with Timmermans and Epstein (2010, p. 70), who characterize them as “ubiquitous but underestimated phenomena that help regulate and calibrate social life by rendering the modern world equivalent across cultures, time, and geography”.

Standards are necessarily normative in character. They make claims about what ought to be the case in a certain operation. They are not neutral. Rather, they function in a context of competing interests and ambitions. They can be seen as constituting a certain genre (Yates, 2019) that works through mobilising a kind of authority that often implies a neutral position (Gal and Woolard, 2001). Such mobilization, however, tends to be black-boxed and thereby hiding a range of processes during the production, implementation and use of standards; what Cass and Shove (2018, p. 272) refer to as the “‘dark sides’ of standards in action”.

In addition to the standardization of things and processes within areas like technology, management and manufacturing, there is also a widespread standardization related to various professions. In the library sector, standards have been in place for a long time. In 1894, the University of the State of New York established “minimum requirements for a proper library standard” (Windsor, 1917, p. 135). Subsequently, in 1917, a committee within the American Library Association (ALA) was formed to address “the standardization of libraries and librarians” (Windsor, 1917, p. 135). Fifteen years later, in 1933, the ALA officially adopted the Standards for Public Libraries (Kawasaki, 2011). There are library standards that aspire to reach beyond national borders. For example, those issued by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which claim to reflect “consensus on up-to-date principles, guidelines and best practice for a particular library or information-related activity or service” (IFLA, n.d.). Those standards that aspire to reach beyond national borders, therefore, can be seen as international in character. There are also those that aim at standardizing a certain nation’s library operations. For example, the American Library Association’s various standards are said to convey “policies which describe shared values and principles of performance” for libraries in the US (American Library Association, 2023).

Independently of whether they were intentionally thought of as international, now and then national standards find their ways across borders and influence other standards in other parts of the world, which for example, is the case with the US Association of College and Research Libraries’ Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (since 2015 replaced by Framework for Information Literacy). That these standards have reached beyond national borders is clear, for example, since they are frequently referenced by libraries around the globe. They are also translated into several languages. But standards can be influential also in other, more subtle, ways. Standards issued in one country can serve as inspiration (or even blueprints) for standards formulated in another country. Such is the case with the Standards for Chilean University Libraries: Fundamental Principles (published in 2020). These standards, which are the focus of the present study, are an explicit adaptation of the 2018 Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (cf. Comisión Permanente Asesora de Bibliotecas y Documentación, 2020, p. 3).

It is a widespread belief that standards in the library sector serve a function when it comes to, for example, bibliography and electronic resources. It seems obvious that, for example, cataloguing should build on a standardized set of rules for resource description. However, there is less consensus regarding the standardization of library operations as a whole. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, it was questioned whether the term “standards” is useful for this purpose. The main problem identified with standards is that they rely too much on quantitative measures and tend to overlook contextual factors: “[t]here can only be standard solutions to standard problems, and in libraries in general [...] we are operating in a wide range of different circumstances, mostly outside our own control, which demand an individual, flexible approach” (Jones, 1982, p. 278). Instead of standards, it is suggested that libraries within a certain sector,

such as university libraries, aim to establish guidelines and common objectives. These “ought not to be copied slavishly, but need to be modified to suit the different circumstances in which they are to be applied” (Jones, 1982, p. 278). This viewpoint is also something we align ourselves with in this article. Even though standards are formulated, designed, and presented in a way that aims for the reader to perceive them as general and neutral, they must necessarily be understood in the context of the place where they were created and where they are expected to be significant. We agree with Lampland and Star (2008, p. 7) who state that “[s]tandards, and the actions surrounding them, do not occur acontextually. There is always a kind of economy and ecology of standards surrounding any individual instance”.

A phenomenon that in the literature appears as ubiquitous, rarely questioned, not neutral, and black-boxed beckons investigation. The Chilean standards that are the focus of our study are current and considered significant by those who formulated them. Furthermore, they have not previously been the object of study. Chile, in general, represents something of a blank spot on the map when it comes to the review and comparison of national library standards. In UNESCO’s international survey of standards for library service (Withers, 1974), Chile is not included. Nor have we been able to find any later surveys of this kind where Chilean standards are described and discussed.

The aim of this study, then, is to contribute to extended knowledge about the role of standardization of university library operations and its consequences. We highlight how the Standards for Chilean University Libraries: Fundamental Principles (henceforth, *The Standards*) contribute to coordinate and shape the library ecology of higher education in Chile. In short, we hope to shed light on the “dark sides of standards” as these appear in the context of Chilean higher education. To reach the aim, the following research questions guided our analysis.

- (1) What processes, rationalities and ideals reside within *The Standards* (i.e. what stands out and what is hidden)?
- (2) How do *The Standards* play out?
- (3) What in *The Standards* speaks to the librarians that are expected to follow them and to the drafters that have formulated them?

The article is structured as follows. First, a literature review concomitant to the study of standards, and standards within the library and information studies field, is provided. Subsequently, a section on methodology is given; including a detailed description of the materials selected and produced for analysis. Afterwards, the findings and discussion are offered. These are followed by limitations and suggestions for further research.

Literature review

Broadly speaking, standards can be said to dictate how things should be named (nomenclature), what qualities a certain product should have, and how various processes should be organized and carried out (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000b). Within such a broad understanding, our review begins with a brief survey of the increasingly growing sociological literature on standards. We then turn our attention to how standards, and the issue of standardization, have been addressed within the library and information studies literature.

A recurring theme in the sociologically oriented literature on standards is to present them as fundamental for organizing society, as “means by which we construct realities” (Busch, 2011, p. 13). Nevertheless, they are often presented as an understudied phenomenon (e.g. Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000b; Lampland and Star, 2008; Timmermans and Epstein, 2010). One contributing factor to this could be that standards, like norms and directives, do not attract attention if they function or appear meaningful to those expected to follow them, which often leads to them being taken for granted and thus not attracting researchers’ interest (Lampland and Star, 2008). It should be mentioned, however, that in more recent publications, the study of standards, even though a ubiquitous phenomenon, “has transformed from an underdeveloped

and often underestimated subject of investigation to a vibrant topic in sociological literature over last few years” (Arnold and Hasse, 2015, p. 94).

Another recurring theme is to present standards as a form of regulation, contrasting them with norms and directives (e.g. Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000b; Timmermans and Epstein, 2010). Unlike norms, which (usually) are not written and have no direct authorship or organization behind them, standards result from someone or some group wanting to influence how something should be or how some people should act in a certain context (Loconto and Busch, 2010). Mandatory directives differ from standards (and norms) by being based on formal authority, where the issuing organization has the mandate to punish those who do not follow a certain directive (Arnold and Hasse, 2015). Adhering to a standard, on the other hand, is presented as voluntary, as “pieces of general advice offered to large numbers of potential adopters” (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000b, p. 2). Although the literature contains somewhat differing opinions on this point, Loconto and Busch (2010, p. 508), for example, claim that “formal standards usually require [...] relatively clear sanctions for violation”. Succinctly, and in line with Lampland and Star (2008, p. 24), this theme can be captured as a conglomerate of “norms of behaviour, conventional types of action [and] the sorts of standard actions developed around material constraints and the functions of social worlds”.

Another theme addresses the study of those who establish standards and those who are meant to follow them. Standards are generally created at a distance from those expected to follow them. Those who formulate standards “pass the standards on to users but are not users themselves” (Tamm Hallström, 2000, p. 91). The starting point for those wanting to standardize something is usually the general idea that what is to take place in many (often different) locations should be characterized by similarities and commonalities (Botzem and Dobusch, 2012). For those expected to follow a standard, the perspective is the opposite: their specific activities, with their context-related particularities and local and thus unique character, encounter and are expected to handle a set of general rules (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000a). This often means a challenge in adhering to a standard (Botzem and Dobusch, 2012). This strand of literature shows different strategies for this. Roughly speaking, it can involve practicing the standard, changing the way one talks about their existing practice so that it appears as if the standard is followed, or doing both (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000a). Within this body of literature, there are those that suggest that following a standard can relate to identity creation and/or change (e.g. Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000a). Authors within this body also suggest that who proposes the standard carries weight. If the proponent is trusted, or seen as someone to emulate, it is likely that efforts to adopt the standard will be more pronounced.

Before shifting focus in this literature review, it should also be mentioned that standards can be analytically approached from the perspective of genre theory (e.g. Yates, 2019). Miller (1984) has suggested that genres change and evolve over time but maintain an expression of “the action it is used to accomplish” (Miller, 1984, p. 151). The genre of standards can be compared to what Miller refers to as “de facto” genres, mundane communicative actions like “the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper” (p. 155). Furthermore, from a genre perspective, standards can be described as “typified communicative action” (Yates and Orlikowski, 1994, p. 301) “with a socially agreed-upon purpose and recognizable form features” (Yates, 2019, p. 53).

Standards in library and information studies

The literature addressing standards within the library and information studies field is varied. A significant portion of it concerns standards for information literacy (IL) (e.g. Merimaa and Lepik, 2020; Pilerot and Lindberg, 2011). However, the issue with standardization or standards themselves is not necessarily problematized beyond highlighting that IL standards often result in uniform teaching approaches. As such, contextual and local socio-material circumstances are potentially overlooked. As described by Elmborg (2017, p. 62): “the standards were committing information literacy to a vision of ‘autonomous literacy’, with the writing/researcher framed as an autonomous agent producing a product within an unproblematic social context”.

There is also a considerable number of contributions that seemingly uncritically assume that standardization of library operations is something entirely positive (e.g. [Coyle, 2005](#)). Often, these studies examine various standards to determine the ultimate standard that can be used for accreditation or self-evaluation (e.g. [Kania, 1988](#)). There are also those that set out to present “library standards for low-resource countries” ([von Flüe, 2022](#), p. 63). In a similar vein, [Krasteva \(2020, p. 726\)](#) conducted a study in Bulgarian libraries to understand “the benefits of standardization activity and the application of specific standards in the field of library activities”.

Another prominent strand in the literature on library standards is related to the question of impact and whether libraries indeed make a tangible difference to their users. The focus of more than one of these studies is the ISO Standard 16,439 on Information and Documentation: Methods and Procedures for Assessing the Impact of Libraries (e.g. [de Jager, 2017](#); [Poll, 2012](#)). Still within the scope of ISO standards, we also see examples of studies that delve into specific phenomena in the library and information studies field. [Blind and Fenton \(2022\)](#), for instance, suggest the concept of standard-relevant publications. They reviewed around 20,000 references in standards published by ISO to identify about thirty authors, whom they then interviewed on how publications need to be designed to be cited in standards. One possibility highlighted in the study is that standard-relevant publications can enable researchers to indirectly contribute to and improve the standards’ “evidence- or science-base” ([Blind and Fenton, 2022](#), p. 597). Still within ISO, [Furner \(2020\)](#) notes that ISO, in its total of 96 standards on the topic, defines the term “metadata” in 46 different ways. This variation in definitions might seem remarkable and potentially problematic, but, as the author points out, such reasoning assumes that “standardization is a good thing” ([Furner, 2020](#), p. 41). He concludes that it can be positive for individual standards, with their specific target audiences, to be based on their own specific definitions. Since the same term can be filled with different content depending on where and how it is intended to be used, “we should be celebrating rather than denigrating the work of ISO’s committees” ([Furner, 2020](#) p. 41).

In summary, it can be noted that although there is plenty of literature that in various ways relates to standards in the library field, there are few, if any, that do so from a sociologically oriented, document-theoretical perspective. In this study, we intend to contribute to such a direction.

Methodology

In this section, we outline our theoretical starting points in relation to the choices we have made regarding our methods, that is, our methodology. We work in accordance with a practice-theoretically oriented analysis method with a focus on documents (cf. [Asdal and Reinertsen, 2021](#); [Frohmann, 2004](#)). The practice-theoretical approach primarily concerns how we view, understand, and approach what we study. On an overarching level, we examine university library operations; our study participants’ considerations of how these are, should be, and can be thought to be constituted and arranged. We have chosen to conduct this study by particularly focussing on the ways in which formulated standards for this activity play a role in the context. A crucial starting point is our understanding of the concept of practice, which we conceive as “a set of interrelated, routinized actions (including linguistic statements); more or less established and shared ways of understanding the world; more or less pronounced rules (‘one must ... ’), norms (‘one should ... ’) and conventions (‘one usually ... ’); as well as the material objects people interact with, including the places they are located in” ([Pilerot and Lindberg, 2018](#), p. 256). In accordance with this standpoint, we embrace as our object of study both what those we have interviewed say, and say they do, and – in this study – particularly the material object that constitutes our specific focus, namely The Standards.

We conceptualize The Standards, including a set of documents that we see as closely related to it – the document complex – as a *site* that also encompasses the people who in various ways have a relationship with the document complex. We approach this site according to what [Asdal](#)

and Reinertsen (2021) call *document ethnography*, which in our case includes the methods of interviewing and document analysis.

Another important starting point for the study is our understanding of documents. In line with our practice-theoretical perspective, we see them as multidimensional material objects that, through their particular characteristics, their content, the way they are designed, and how they are handled, contribute to shaping and coordinating the practices they are a part of. In emphasising the multidimensionality of documents, we align with a body of literature that highlights the multiple features inherent in documents. For instance, Lund's (2004) concept of documentation from a complementary perspective views documents as having three distinct yet intertwined dimensions: their physical properties as material objects that can be handled, their social capacity to link and coordinate human activities, and their cognitive function, as the content of documents must necessarily be accessed through cognitive processes. Similarly, Frohmann (2004) underscores that focussing on "practices with documents" (p. 396) provides a productive lens for understanding the role of documents in specific contexts. This perspective suggests four interrelated and analytically significant properties of document practices, which constrain (or enable) their use. First, the materiality of documents shapes the practices associated with them. Frohmann (2004, p. 396) provides the example of a work meeting where participants, though using 'the same' digital document, experience variations in pagination based on how the document was printed, thus influencing collaborative efforts around the document. Second, documents are embedded in institutional contexts; Frohmann (2004, pp. 396–397) thus notes that "[m]uch of the authority of the informativeness of documents depends on the institutional sites of their production". Third, document practices involve social discipline, as they require training and instruction, and fourth, document practices are marked by historicity, since practices are evolving, changing, or disappearing according to historical circumstances. A final example of our approach, emphasising the multidimensionality of documents, is reflected in the assertion that studying document practices illuminates how documents "carry institutional structures and point to both past and future activities [and thereby] open a window to larger organizational practices" (Østerlund et al., 2015, p. 391).

According to this perspective, documents can thus both enable and hinder certain actions. In this way, a document can be understood as one among several actors in a given context. Further aspects of documents that are significant for our study are that they can contribute to producing "trust, consensus and agreement" (Asdal and Reinertsen, 2021, p. 3) but also the opposite; they simply give rise to negotiations and discussions, both when they are created and when they meet their (intended) readers. Our methodology thus directs our interest toward how The Standards were created, the qualities of the standard document itself, and how it is received by those it is aimed at. In short, we examine what The Standards do in, and with, the setting of which they are a part, in the libraries where they are expected to be significant. In this respect, it is possible to conceptualise The Standards as a boundary object. Boundary objects, which can consist of various kinds of items – although in our case, it refers specifically to the standard document – serve as links between different groups of people. According to Star and Griesemer (1989, p. 393), boundary objects are flexible enough to adapt to the local needs and constraints of different practices, while remaining sufficiently robust to maintain a shared identity across various contexts. The production and management of boundary objects, such as documents, is suggested to be "a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds" (Star and Griesemer, 1989, p. 393).

With Asdal and Reinertsen (2021, p. 29), we can say that our overall "analytical strategy, following the documents across sites can [. . .] provide rich and valuable empirics for analysing [. . .] the unfolding of" a multi-sited negotiation about how university libraries in Chile can, and should, be constituted and operated.

Through this approach we primarily explore three facets of such a site: the work that took place when drafting The Standards; the document complex where The Standards are the focus, but which also includes previous versions of The Standards and other related documents, and,

finally, the libraries where The Standards are expected to be significant for how the work is conducted and the libraries to be arranged, equipped, and run. Accordingly, our ethnographic exploration entails interviews with the six head librarians that were chiefly responsible for the drafting of The Standards (the drafters) and six librarians who work within libraries where The Standards are operating. These study participants are regarded as key actors in the site that we explore. They are all connected through the document complex in focus of our study.

Both drafters and librarians work at university libraries that belong to Chile's prestigious Council of Rectors of Chilean Universities (CRUCH, for its acronym in Spanish), which comprises 30 member universities. Their joint mission is to advise the Chilean Ministry of Education on various issues, giving them significant political influence (cf. [Consejo de Rectoras y Rectores de las Universidades Chilenas, 2024](#)). At the time of the interviews, all drafters were directors of their respective university libraries, each holding undergraduate degrees in library and information sciences from Chilean universities. Moreover, drafters were also part of the Sub-commission of Standards for University Libraries; a commission made-up of a select number of universities from the 30 member universities of the CRUCH. There are seven members in such a commission, and we conducted interviews with six of them. Additionally, many hold postgraduate degrees in diverse fields such as Digital Documentation, Management, or Information Sciences (some obtained from international institutions). Their experience in the university library system ranges from 10 to 23 years. Similarly, the librarians also possess undergraduate degrees in library and information sciences from Chilean universities. While some hold postgraduate degrees, not all do. Their positions within the university libraries vary and include roles such as reference librarian, special collections librarian, archivist, and user services librarian. Their years of experience in the university library system range from 5 to 17 years. The composition of the participants who make up the librarian cohort was made with the ambition to achieve a variation in terms of library size, experience in the profession, and job responsibilities.

All interviews were conducted within the libraries where the drafters and librarians worked (in total, six university libraries geographically spread throughout Chile – from the northern to the centre and southern regions as well as encompassing university libraries of different sizes and years of operation). They were conducted between March and April 2024. For the interviews, an interview guide was developed. This guide was fine-tuned by means of investigator triangulation ([Elliott et al., 1999](#)): the second author initially drafted a version, which was then carefully revised and discussed with the first author. This second version underwent further revisions and discussions between the second and third authors. Finally, the last version was collaboratively reviewed by all three researchers. On average, each interview was about 80 min in length. All audio recordings were transcribed. Altogether, the transcriptions amount to 59,263 words. The quotes reproduced in the article have been translated from Spanish to English by the authors. This study was approved by The University of Chile's FCFM Ethical Committee. According to the FCFM's ethical protocol, all participants signed a consent form. Furthermore, the audio recordings are kept in accordance with FCFM guidelines by the researchers of this project.

While the web of relations in a document complex can be expanded to great lengths, our exploration is restricted to those documents that we consider have a direct relation to The Standards. These include the 2001/2003 CABID Standards (i.e. a previous version of The Standards); The 2018 ACRL Standards for Libraries in Higher Education; and a set of normative documents issued by Chile's National Agency for Accreditation (CNA). The Standards are an explicit adaptation of the 2018 Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (cf. [Comisión Permanente Asesora de Bibliotecas y Documentación, 2020](#), p. 3) and therefore also included in the document complex. However, it is not only explicit mentions to another document within a document that place documents in relation to other documents. For example, CNA requires higher-education institutions in Chile to have a university library if they want to become accredited. In turn, The Standards explicitly mention having a role and a responsibility to

participate within processes of accreditation (cf. [Comisión Permanente Asesora de Bibliotecas y Documentación, 2020](#), pp. 7–8). As such, and even if the CNA's normative documents are not mentioned within The Standards, they become part of the wider document complex concomitant to The Standards.

The analysis of the empirical data can be described as a combination of theory-driven and empirically driven analysis. Through numerous re-readings, we have carefully studied the material with a focus on passages that could answer our research questions. Additionally, we have examined the material from our theoretical perspective, supported by sociologically oriented literature on standards and standardization.

Findings

In the following, we present the results of our analysis of the empirical data. After a brief comment on the character of the content in the latest version of The Standards, we present the interviews with the drafters. Thereafter, we discuss the librarians' reasoning about The Standards. A discussion based on the entire data set is presented in the concluding discussion.

The character of the content of the standards

As previously mentioned, standards can generally be described as providing guidance on how something should be named, what should be in place, and how something should be done or organized ([Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000b](#)). The Standards is a document of just over 30 pages, structured around a number of so-called principles. Each principle contains several points that mainly prescribe how something should be done or organized. For example, under "Principle V: Discovery," we read that "The library integrates access to resources on the institutional website". Accompanying each principle is a heading titled "Recommendation of data and evidence to be considered". For instance, under Principle V, we see that libraries should "Have instruments to evaluate user satisfaction with respect to discovery services". For most principles, there is also a concluding heading titled "Recommended Indicators". A recommended indicator for Principle V, for example, is "Number of virtual consultations/total referential consultations X 100".

The Standards primarily consist of equal parts directives on what should be present in libraries and how different processes should be carried out. There are no instances of how things should be named. It is mainly in the recommendations for data and evidence to be considered and among the indicators – sections of the document that are particularly focused on during accreditation and evaluation – that we see what should be present in libraries. These sections also have a distinctly quantitative character.

The drafting of the standards

As will become apparent from the analysis of the librarian interviews, the librarians perceive The Standards as something of an invisible document. As one of them puts it: it is "something that's there, but you can't see it" (L5).

The *invisibility* of The Standards can be argued to be, to an extent, a consequence of them working as designed (cf. [Bowker and Star, 2000a](#); [Lampland and Star, 2008](#)). By design, the drafters embedded The Standards into the daily activities of librarians by entrenching them into the University's Strategic Plan (USP). In the words of one of the drafters: "We asked ourselves: In what way can the library become an asset to the university's commitment to education? Well, there is [...] a carefully written principle, where we insert the actions of the library into the wider strategic plan of the university" (D6). The principle in question is the first principle of The Standards which states: "The mission of the university library is to provide information services as well as knowledge management services. These services must be coupled to the mission and Strategic Plan of the University" ([Comisión Permanente Asesora de Bibliotecas y Documentación, 2020](#), p. 7).

Principle 1 of The Standards, then, works as a sleight of hand. It gives The Standards a direct path into the day-to-day activities of librarians while becoming obscure. As such, The Standards become invisible to the librarians who constantly argue that they do not pay much attention to them, but rather to the USP or other documents.

As we also will see from the analysis of the librarian interviews, there is hardly any discussion among the librarians about The Standards. Such lack of discussion, in turn, allows the underlying logics behind their drafting to remain hidden. Thus, making it easier for incongruities to go unnoticed. As an example, drafters constantly argue that a pivotal shift from the 2001/2003 version to the 2020 version is a shift in focus from quantitative to qualitative indicators:

I insist, the old ones [2001/2003] present everything as if it were, like, a number, yes, data, quantity, quantity of people, yes, everything is quantity. They quantify things, but they don't necessarily give quality. The new standards [2020] go after quality (D2).

However, the degree of adherence of any of the principles is still measured in quantitative terms, as we could see in the brief commentary on the content of The Standards. For example, Principle 1 (on the institutional mission and efficacy) of The Standards is gauged by: "Number of accreditations that the library has been a part of out of the total number of accreditation that the university underwent" (p. 8). Yet another example: Principle 3 (on the educative role of libraries) is evaluated by: "Number of courses given on the subject of information and digital competencies out of the total number of courses given by the library" (p. 13). The incongruity, then, is that despite the drafters advocating for a qualitative turn, their formulations in The Standards invites quantitative measurements. There is no mention on the desired outcome of the principles, it is as if they take a surface approach. The preoccupation is on actions taking place regardless of the details of those actions.

Peeking into the black-boxing of The Standards (i.e. exploring the rationalities and logics that led to their drafting) provides insights as to why quantitative remnants are present. Standards are nested within other documents and thus part of a wider document complex (cf. [Bowker and Star, 2000b](#); [Lampland and Star, 2008](#)); therefore, standards have a degree of affinity with other underlying logics and rationalities. In Chile, accreditation has played an important part of an ever-changing higher education landscape. A landscape that is regulated by the Chilean National Accreditation Agency (CNA for its acronym in Spanish). Quoting Drafter 6:

Because, you see, in 2004–2006 the first accreditation schemes for universities began. Before this, the CNA did not exist, so we have after this a radically different understanding of the doings of the university [...] The Standards are a document that reflects this change, our need to keep moving forward. (D6)

Because of the weight of the CNA, when drafting The Standards there is a spillover of logics. As is reflected in this passage where Drafter 3 comments on debating and untimely leaving quantitative indicators within The Standards:

You know, there was a lot, and an important, debate about the quantitative part. We debated whether to include the quantitative measurements within The Standards. Many drafters argued in favour of doing so because they are still used by the accreditation board. The CNA still wants numbers. So, we settled to leave them in this version. (D3)

The concluding observation in the quote, that CNA "wants numbers", is a clear illustration of one of our methodological points, namely that documents of this kind are not neutral and are shaped by various powerful actors in the context in which they are formulated.

Another incongruity of The Standards is related to the inspiration used for their drafting. Drafters consulted many existing standards, frameworks and guides (with a prevalence of European and US standards). After what was argued as a thorough revision, they opted for privileging the US standards. The given rationale for favouring the US standards is that European standards would feel too foreign to the Chilean context:

[T]he US standards [...] was the one that best fit us, I had difficulty imagining the other standards here. For example, if I had a meeting with the Vice Rector of the university, and I told him that we used the German or Finnish standards, he would tell me: “what are you talking about? We are not in Germany or Finland”. The thing is, their systems are too ahead of our reality (D4).

It can first be noted that yet another actor, “the Vice Rector”, emerges as someone who has played a role in shaping The Standards. It is furthermore somewhat odd that the reason given for avoiding a European framework is the idea that their educational and library systems are both highly advanced and too alien. Such characteristics are also mentioned to hold true for US educational systems and libraries: “US university libraries are on another level regarding their stability, because we are talking about libraries that can be hundreds of years old” (D2).

It is plausible that the decision to go for the US standards is related to an urge to choose for translation and adaptation of a set of standards that are well-known and widely regarded as a kind of model. One is reminded of [Brunsson and Jacobsson \(2000a, b, p. 133\)](#), who argue that the decision to follow a standard “may even be [...] a method of acquiring a certain identity”. This observation can also be related to the one made in the analysis of the librarian interviews, where it appears that the standards reflect an ambition to operate in accordance with authorities, the authority in question here being the ACRL.

We have already asserted that The Standard’s exhortation that they should be aligned with the USP leads to them becoming ubiquitous. Librarians, although in an unknowing fashion, have incorporated them into their day-to-day activities. Another area of ubiquity, and a constantly referenced one, is the felt need to adapt to the ever-changing times. Quoting Drafter 1: “It is important for us to be able to keep updated, to adapt to the changing times” (D1). In this line of reasoning, what a library *is*, is argued to have changed. It is no longer “a warehouse where things are stored, where things are given out [...] we [the library] have the capacity to have a role within the life of the university” (D2). However, exactly how this role should be fulfilled is not clear from The Standards. This is also an interesting observation considering that the librarians, as we will see below, express some criticism towards the fact that the standards tend to obscure certain aspects of the work. They simply do not address certain elements that the librarians perceive as integral parts of the job in a library of today.

In sum, the analysis shows how The Standards are linked to the universities’ strategic plans, thereby assuming a kind of invisibility, a thread that we further explore below. We also see how the drafters have been influenced by expectations from authorities in the development of the standards, particularly regarding the quantitative aspect that has indeed been criticized but still persists in the updated standards, as well as in the choice of model.

The standards in library practice

This section presents an analysis of how The Standards are perceived and used by those expected to be influenced by them. The presentation is thus based on our analysis of the interviews with the librarians. The structure is loosely organized around the themes that most clearly emerged from the analysis. On a broader level, it concerns power and authority, The Standards as a tool in accreditation processes and self-assessments, and what The Standards do and do not accomplish.

The empirical data discusses at length that The Standards are formulated based on the library operations at the most prestigious universities in Chile. It is clearly indicated that it is likely easier to meet these standards if one is a large, established, and well-renowned university library with relatively substantial financial resources. As one of the participants notes, The Standards present what “the largest institutions in this country establish as the basic, bare minimum, parameters of a university library” (L4). The fact that those who have developed The Standards have largely directly translated the ACRL’s standards, which originate from a library system that, from an international perspective, is also highly established, well-respected, and financially strong, is also suggesting a kind of hierarchical power structure.

The explored site thus implicitly reflects an ambition to operate in accordance with authorities. The large and powerful serve as benchmarks.

However, one can sense a criticism of this situation. It is asserted that the most prestigious universities “always fulfill and even surpass what is asked for by the indicators of The Standards. But, smaller universities, where there is less staff, [...] they don’t have that capacity” (L3). At the same time, the same participant asserts that The Standards accurately reflect “the foundations of Chilean libraries” since they were formulated by individuals within the Chilean library sector. The standards describe “something that’s already internalized [in and throughout the Chilean library sector]. I believe in all the directors that worked on the document” (L3). The fact that The Standards, so to speak, come from within the Chilean library sector and are formulated by a group of trustworthy individuals – cognitive authorities (Wilson, 1983) – gives them an authority they would not otherwise have had. Ultimately, this circumstance somewhat reduces the problem of The Standards being imported and mandated from above.

Another hierarchical difference related to this aspiration to work upwards is evident, as the interviewed librarians repeatedly emphasize that The Standards are primarily intended for, and therefore most meaningful to, library management, those expected to act strategically. The distance to The Standards seems to increase the further down the library hierarchy one goes. Among the librarians, The Standards are mainly seen as a framework within which operations should be conducted, a kind of “navigational chart” (L1). Considering that The Standards are mainly associated with accreditation processes and self-evaluations, which are likely aspects of the work that primarily engage library management, it is not surprising that they seem more relevant the higher up in the library hierarchy one goes. One participant even talks about The Standards as “something dead let’s say, something that’s there, but you can’t see it” (L5), which clearly indicates a distanced relation to The Standards.

The association of The Standards with accreditation processes and self-evaluations, rather than being seen as guidance for daily work in the libraries, relates to a clear tension between, on one hand, the earlier versions, which have a stronger quantitative approach, and on the other hand, the latest version, which is envisioned and promoted as having a stronger qualitative character; despite the fact that quantitative remnants persist within it, as was previously argued. It seems that the earlier versions can be perceived as more powerful tools in negotiations for financial resources because they are seen to contain clearer indicators of what should be present in a modern library, while the latest version are argued to focus more on how the work should be organized and conducted. All in all, the quantitative thus appears more clear-cut and manageable than the somewhat vague qualitative content. Regardless of which version one prefers, it is generally noted that libraries operate in a context where “it’s well regarded institutionally that you can justify, you can have [The Standards] as a tool to justify” (L2) what you do.

The solidification of The Standards as an evaluation tool is widespread among the participants. For instance, it is noted that they are “a tool to know how much I’m complying with what they’re going to ask me to do when they come to accredit me. But it’s not a document that can tell me, uh, if I’m [...] doing the job right or wrong” (L3). Here, not only is the evaluation aspect emphasized, but we can also sense that the participant perceives The Standards as falling short when it comes to providing guidance in the every-day work.

Regarding the question of what The Standards actually contribute to the work at the library, it is widespread among the interviewees to highlight their function as a kind of foundation for the work, a framework within which one should operate and navigate. It also emerges that they offer “a common language” (L1), a language with which one can conduct their work. Even though not every principle in The Standards is – far from it – noticed or followed, they seem to contribute to changing how one talks about the work being done. The empirical data does not indicate that the participants explicitly oppose The Standards, but when asked whether there are any particular documents that shape how they work, no one initially mentions them. Instead, the discussion focuses on the libraries’ strategic plans and the respective universities’ overarching plans and strategies:

In general, we use other documents. So, for example, there are certain guidelines that come straight from higher in the hierarchy, the university hierarchy, such as, well, the University's Strategic Plan. So, as the university library, we have to work according to that plan. (L1)

It is only when the interviewer specifically asks about The Standards that they are brought up in the librarian interviews. But then a paradox emerges. The participants testify quite unanimously that The Standards are rarely discussed among the staff. At the same time, many of them emphasize that this should be the case. The participants are aware of them and consider them important, but they are more inclined to seek inspiration and guidance in their work from colleagues and other documents, such as internal manuals and routine descriptions. One can sense that The Standards are perceived as a kind of theoretically grounded ideal that clashes with the practical, daily work in the library. "[W]e always give priority to the practical, not the theoretical. For us, we prefer to focus on what happened here? How did you solve it? What steps did you take" (L5). That is what the participants are after. It seems more reasonable to focus on the immediate, the practical, and to try to move forward by discussing with colleagues rather than consulting The Standards. "[T]he standard is something that's kind of up there, right? But in your daily practice, you often find yourself with limited resources, eh? Sometimes the conditions aren't there, and you have to solve it anyway" (L5). The Standards appear to be perceived as something that hovers above, something that primarily concerns managers.

Another theme in the material, which probably contributes to The Standards seeming somewhat distant to a large part of the library staff, is the perception that they lack essential elements. The view that they need to be continuously revised is prominent in the material. Societal changes and changes in how people do things give rise to new needs and interests. Elements such as how gender equality is reflected in collections, physical accessibility for all to library spaces, artificial intelligence, and cultural and program activities are missing from the standards, while these are areas that libraries work with. The Standards are perceived as too general. They belong everywhere and nowhere, and they render some parts of the work that the librarians do invisible.

In summary, we note that The Standards are perceived as something that comes from above. While this contributes to their general credibility, it also means they are not fully perceived as present in daily work. It is primarily library management that is believed to view The Standards as a relevant tool, particularly in connection with accreditation processes and self-assessments. Rather than providing practical guidance in the daily work of librarians, The Standards, to the extent they are considered at all, function more as a checklist to navigate by. The perception that the standards are primarily intended for management and that they provide little support for everyday work likely contributes to the fact that the management's work with The Standards appears black boxed to the librarians. The Standards are ubiquitous, but they are not visible in the daily work. They do not change the nitty gritty of library work. They rather, at the most, change how this work is talked about.

Concluding discussion

We begin by further relating our results to our theoretical perspective. Thereafter, our findings are discussed in light of the literature we have reviewed. Finally, we present our conclusions and a brief note on limitations and suggestions for further research.

Returning to our conceptualisation of the notion of practice, it becomes evident that, although the study participants operate within the same library system encompassing the CRUCH libraries, their discussions and engagement with The Standards do not reflect a uniform set of routinized actions. To express it in line with our understanding of the concept of practice, we can say that they do not fully share a common understanding of the world. Nor do they necessarily follow the same rules, norms, and conventions, even though there are some overlaps (cf. [Pilerot and Lindberg, 2018](#)).

Analytically approaching The Standards from a complimentary perspective (Lund, 2004), considering their material, social and cognitive features respectively, it appears from our findings that these features resonate with the two cohorts in somewhat different ways. From a material perspective, the standards seem to appear as one and the same document for both groups, to the extent that the librarians are even aware of its existence. However, the social ties that the document helps maintain seem to be strongest within the group of drafters. There, The Standards have served – and continue to serve – as an object of collaboration within the group. Although the purpose of this work is to lay the groundwork for how the work is conducted among all CRUCH libraries, the document has not reached everyone in the library system who could potentially be influenced by it. Finally, from a cognitive perspective, the findings reflect that the drafters and the librarians seem to relate to and read The Standards in somewhat different ways.

When approaching The Standards, as they are discussed by the participants in the study, from a genre perspective (Yates, 2019), they appear as an object with recognizable form features, there is nothing indicating that the two cohorts refer to two different sets of standards. It can however be questioned if The Standards are seen by the drafters and the librarians as having a socially agreed-upon purpose (cf. Yates, 2019). Rather, it seems reasonable to portray The Standards as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989) insofar that they provide a clear link between the drafters and the librarians. They are flexible enough to adapt to the needs and constraints of different practices. Nevertheless, if the CRUCH libraries wish to strengthen the bonds between the respective libraries and between different staff categories, this particular boundary object, The Standards, should be given more consideration, it needs to be developed in order to maintain coherence across the intersecting practices (cf. Star and Griesemer, 1989).

Viewing our findings through a Frohmann (2004) lens, and focussing on the participants' document practices as these are described in the interviews – specifically, how the participants engage with and use The Standards – we can first note, as mentioned previously, that the material qualities of The Standards were not prominently discussed during the interviews. At the same time, one could argue that the issue of visibility, and thus the ability to know about and access the document, can be attributed or at least related to a document's material qualities. It is clear that The Standards seem to exist in the background for librarians, remaining relatively invisible, which in turn may be related to what Frohmann (2004) refers to as social discipling. As we will see in the following discussion of our findings in relation to previous research, it is emphasised that the implementation of standards requires planned measures, such as educational components, informational sessions, and continuous follow-up. Additionally, as Frohmann (2004) notes, documents become more or less visible, credible, and powerful depending on how – or if – they are embedded in the institutional context where they are intended to serve a function. Our findings show that, while The Standards are viewed by librarians as reliable – largely due to the perceived credibility of those who formulated The Standards – the degree of embeddedness in the institutions, i.e. the respective libraries, is debatable.

Regarding the historicity of The Standards, we can observe at least two levels in our study. From a longer-term perspective, it appears significant to the librarians that The Standards are based on a set of standards originating from a different context, the North American one, which differs from their own working environment. This fact seems to contribute to the overarching issue that The Standards may be perceived as not entirely relevant to the local conditions under which the librarians carry out their daily work. From a somewhat shorter-term perspective, we also note that since the early 2000s, The Standards have undergone several revisions, with the document's focus shifting from a more quantitative emphasis to a more qualitative one, which seems to create a certain uncertainty regarding how they should be understood, valued, and used.

Our study deviates from the path in the library and information studies literature that assumes the standardisation of library operations is something entirely positive (e.g. Coyle, 2005).

In fact, we have demonstrated that what [Jones \(1982\)](#) pointed out as early as the 1980s – namely, that standards tend to overemphasize quantitative measures and thus disregard context – can still be the case, even though the present study also shows an ambition among those who formulated The Standards to emphasize qualitative aspects. Continuing with [Jones's \(1982\)](#) ideas, and pondering on the opaque nature of standards, it becomes evident that when rationalities and logics become obscured, incongruities are likely to arise. This is particularly salient regarding the tension between the quantitative characteristics of standards and the qualitative ideals they aim to achieve. The prevalence of quantitative metrics can be argued to be a consequence of a historical shift in the Chilean higher-education context. If libraries are viewed primarily as repositories of knowledge, then quantitative measures may seem more appropriate; this can be argued to be the case within the older versions of The Standards. However, given that new version of The Standards were crafted during a time when libraries were also seen as having pedagogical roles, the reliance on quantitative traits becomes problematic. When libraries are understood as pedagogical agents – as the drafters and The Standards assert – it is inevitable that librarians will interact with people, necessitating a more individualized and flexible approach (cf. [Jones, 1982](#)).

Following a standard is generally voluntary (e.g. [Arnold and Hasse, 2015](#)). This is also true in the current case. Similar to how [Brunsson and Jacobsson \(2000b, p. 2\)](#) express it, the librarians in the study seem to perceive them as “pieces of general advice” rather than binding. We note, particularly in the librarian interviews, that one reason The Standards tend to fly under the radar is that there is not much information or educational activity surrounding them. This is a point that [Krasteva \(2020\)](#) also touches on when she states that “information about them needs to be promoted in order to facilitate understanding of their significance” (p. 736). Another potential explanation for why The Standards do not receive much attention among those who are supposed to follow them is offered by [Lampland and Star \(2008\)](#), who assert that if they are perceived as meaningful, they are taken for granted. In such cases, there is no need to talk about them. Whether this is the case in the present study cannot be definitively determined. However, regarding the difference in how the drafters and the librarians relate to The Standards, we can, like [Tamm Hallström \(2000\)](#), observe that the drafters have created something they do not necessarily have to relate to in the same way as the librarians. [Busch \(2011\)](#) mentions that standards are a way in which we construct realities. It seems evident that the drafters’ – and library managements’ – realities differ from those the librarians perceive themselves to be in. Here, the challenge described by [Botzem and Dobusch \(2012\)](#) comes into play: for the drafters, similarities and commonalities among the libraries have been a focus point. For the librarians, it is the context-related, often practical, particularities and the local practices that are in the foreground. Such a difference in perspective invites a kind of collision between different purposes, focuses, and interests.

The literature in the field shows how different strategies can be adopted regarding how those expected to follow a standard might relate to it. As [Brunsson and Jacobsson \(2000a\)](#) point out, it could involve striving to change work practices to comply with the standard, or it could involve changing the ways in which the work is talked about, or possibly a combination of both. In the present study, it appears that the change mainly occurs on a discursive level, although it cannot be entirely clarified that one occurs exclusively instead of the other.

Conclusions

Through our practice-theoretically oriented document analysis method, which focuses not only on the standard document itself but also on those who formulated it and those expected to follow it, we have shown that the Chilean standards for university libraries constitute a veritable field of tension. By tracing the document from its formation to its implementation in library practices, and by considering it as one of several documents within a larger document complex, it becomes clear that it has given rise to negotiations and compromises. Actors in the form of other documents within the complex and from other places in the hierarchical

academic landscape, beyond the document itself, have contributed to shaping The Standards into what they are today. Standards appear more or less visible – sometimes invisible – depending on where one is situated within the explored site.

The Chilean standards should also be seen as one of numerous expressions over time within a genre that, as we demonstrate in the article's introduction, took shape at least as early as the late 19th century. These standards have travelled from the United States, where the latest stop was the model constituted by the ACRL standards and have currently landed in Chile. The study shows that, at least in part due to their genre affiliation and their connection to authoritative instances, they have had an impact on the library operations included in the study, though this impact manifests differently depending on who or what is engaging with them.

Our approach has enabled us to open the black box in which standards often seem to be placed. In doing so, we have contributed to making visible “the dark sides of standards” within the Chilean academic library landscape.

Limitations and further research

A recommendation for further research is to explore the ongoing evolution of the Chilean standards. By employing a methodology similar to ours, future researchers could extend and refine the methods utilized in this study. Even if our research is grounded in practice theory, which emphasizes the examination of people's actions in practice (e.g. Nicolini and Monteiro, 2017), our study is methodologically constrained to semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Consequently, we suggest that future studies on standards and similar documents could benefit from incorporating additional methods, such as direct observations of practices or having participants maintain logbooks documenting their interactions with the document complex under investigation. Moreover, relating our study to the complementary perspective on documents proposed by Lund (2004), we have mainly, albeit not only, engaged in the social dimension. Future studies on documents and documentary practices could gain from encompassing all three dimensions in concert.

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