Abstract of the Dissertation

The Development of ANSI/NISO Z39.50:
A Case Study in Standards Evolution

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This study explored and described factors involved in the development of information technology standards through a case study of ANSI/NISO Z39.50: Information Retrieval (Z39.50) Application Service Definition and Protocol Specification. The study’s goals were: 1) document Z39.50 development, and 2) develop a holistic understanding of that development. The critical importance of standards for information handling in the digital environment, the evidence of major difficulties in producing standards, and the lack of systematic, empirical research on standards development motivated the researcher to undertake this study.

A multi–method research strategy included a qualitative research approach, case study, and model building. Data were collected from multiple sources: documentary evidence, guided interviews with participants in standards development, and participant observation of Z39.50 development. A systems-theoretic model provided a conceptual framework for the study, and the model served as an analytical tool in data analysis. Inductive analysis allowed the discovery of additional aspects and relationships in Z39.50 development.

The researcher characterizes Z39.50 evolution as a continuous development in which multiple stages of standards work can be discerned. These stages reflect changes in stakeholders, goals, participants, and the environment of the standards work system. A revised systems–theoretic conceptual model incorporated constructs that emerged from the data (e.g., mediating mechanisms and relevant environment) to represent more adequately Z39.50 evolution. The concept of mediating mechanisms reflects the dynamic, social nature of standards development and can account for changes over time in system goals. The study demonstrates that complex standards development efforts can be investigated systematically. The research strategy, the conceptual model, and a set of working hypotheses can guide subsequent research.
Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the contributions of many, many people and organizations. First and foremost, my thanks to all those standards warriors who volunteer their time in the pursuit of the social and technical agreements we call standards. I am appreciative of all the members of the Z39.50 Implementors Group (the ZIG) who welcomed me into their meetings, and especially those whom I interviewed and who gave me opportunities to listen and learn. The Library of Congress and the Z39.50 Maintenance Agency housed there, the Council on Library Resources, and the National Information Standards Organization (NISO), and the NISO archives at the University of Maryland offered primary source material, the fodder on which I could begin documenting the complex history of Z39.50 evolution.

My dissertation committee, Jeffrey Katzer and Barbara Kwasnik, provided intellectual support, constructive criticism, and encouragement as I moved through this research. Additional readers Henriette Avram, Stuart Sutton, and Fay Turner, provided insights and helped correct major and minor inaccuracies in the text. Thank you.

Chuck McClure—advisor, mentor, and colleague—offered the guidance to keep me on track and the freedom to explore, learn, and grow. I’m forever grateful for his generous sharing of his most valuable resource, time, to help me move forward. Thank you.

Finally, a special thank you to Henriette Avram, Pat Harris, and Sally McCallum, three people who opened my eyes and mind to the importance, excitement, and challenges of standards and their development.