

**THE ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE:  
CAUGHT BETWEEN GLOBAL  
STRUCTURES AND LOCAL MEANING**

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STUDIES IN INFORMATION

# THE ORGANIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE: CAUGHT BETWEEN GLOBAL STRUCTURES AND LOCAL MEANING

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# Introduction

This book is the result of a one-day conference held in Copenhagen in August 2015. The organizer of the conference was Professor Jens-Erik Mai, University of Copenhagen.

The theme of the conference was Global and Local Knowledge Organization and it was framed thus:

Contemporary digital information society has globalized information structures and facilitated easier access to information across libraries, cultural institutions, and the Internet. While this has helped shaped global discourses, it has often done so at the expense of localized meaning and ethics. This conference sparks a conversation about the tension between the global information structures and grounding meaning and ethics in localized contexts.

In a world where the global and the local constantly intermingle, it was opportune to inquire into how knowledge organization research deals with the problems and challenges caused by the interaction of global and local information infrastructures. Beginning to look into what knowledge organization as activity and practice does in global and local information infrastructures is of course a challenging commitment. As such this book is also the result of an examination of what kinds of questions can be posed and addressed regarding issues of global and local information infrastructures. Ideas of universal bibliographical control and universal classification systems have been with us for centuries, from Conrad Gesner's *Bibliotheca Universalis* through Paul Otlet's UDC-system to Google's vision of organizing the world's information. These ideas and visions always face the same problem concerning the tensions and contradictions between devising universal systems and the local appropriation of these systems. Thus, we should not expect, nor work for, a perfect solution to this problem as human meaning construction, symbolic interactions, and various forms of ideologies will always be part of the picture. Therefore, the most challenging and pertinent task for knowledge organization research is to constantly and critically reflect upon the complexities of human meaning construction, symbolic interactions, and ideologies at stake. These take on different

articulations and content depending on the kinds of questions we ask and from where in time and space we ask these questions. The texts in this volume are an attempt at doing this.

The activity and practice of knowledge organization has during the last 10 to 15 years moved out of the professional walls of libraries, archives, or the like institutions. That is of course not to say that the professional work carried out by these institutions has become irrelevant. It is, however, to recognize the fact that the activity and practice of knowledge organization is now something most of us do on a regular basis: we tag, structure, archive, or search structured digital collections because they are embedded in various forms of software and digital media. Thus, to organize knowledge is not restricted to professional domains. It is also a way of getting around in and making sense of digital information infrastructures. This opens new pathways as to what kinds of questions, conversations, and analytical frameworks to work with in knowledge organization research. For instance, studying the social and cultural implications of tagging, ordering, and archiving culture and cultural products has led some scholars from media, communication, and cultural studies to work with problems of knowledge organization (Beer, 2013; Gillespie, 2014; Hallinan & Striphas, 2016). These scholars work with knowledge organization exactly because the activity and practice has moved into the cultural sphere; that it is something people do in their everyday life in order to engage with digital information infrastructures. But also because knowledge organization in terms of algorithms has implications for how we as individuals are described, how cultural products are presented and circulated, and how public opinion is shaped by code, data, and algorithms — until recently features of software that did not impinge on social and public affairs. But now they do because of the omnipresence of software and digital media and the networked and platformed nature of communication.

However, this circumstance also requires a particular commitment by those who have been engaged in knowledge organization research in information studies. It is an invitation to step into the conversation and inform and shape modern ideas of tagging, ordering, or archiving in terms of what are the pitfalls and what we do already know about, for instance, the social, cultural, and ideological consequences of ordering and categorization from studies of library classification. There is a strong record of research to draw upon here (Bowker & Star, 1999; Mai, 2013; Olson, 2002; Wilson, 1968) and we should offer that line of thinking to the modern contexts. We should see this as an impetus for knowledge organization research to reach out and inform an agenda about what directions our digital information infrastructures can and should take.

Moreover, due to the omnipresence of classification and categorization in today's digital information infrastructures, questions about knowledge

organization become questions with social, cultural, and political ramifications in broader spheres of activity than libraries. Whereas studies of library classification could point out how various people and subjects were described according to some hegemonic ideology (Berman, 1971; Olson, 2002), nowadays almost all our mundane activity is being classified and described because of our daily interactions with and reliance on software and digital media. That does not diminish the issue of ideology in classification. It becomes an issue that applies to all of us as citizens, private persons, or employees because our digital actions are archived, calculated, and classified by not only the state, as in Foucault's biopolitics (Foucault, 2008), but also by private companies, schools, universities, individuals, and various digital platforms. Accordingly, questions about knowledge organization become questions deeply intertwined with commerce, surveillance, identity, cultural taste, or political actions — all spheres that are much broader than library classification and with direct social, cultural, and political implications. This situation puts knowledge organization research near the center in studies of digital culture, provided that the field responds with adequate and socially relevant questions, analyses, and critiques.

The contributions in this volume are all written by scholars in information studies. From their respective points of departure, all the chapters are suggestive in terms of how to deal with modern problems of classification, categorization, and description. They all shape and critically analyze in both historical terms and contemporary settings how the organization of knowledge is a powerful means of understanding human meaning construction, symbolic interaction, and ideologies at stake in present-day digital information infrastructures.

The opening piece of the volume is written by Jack Andersen. He sets out to offer a twofold understanding of the organization of knowledge as both a form of communicative action in digital culture and as means to understand features of digital culture. With this, Andersen offers a new way to analytically approach studies of digital culture.

The following two chapters are historical in their orientation. Laura Skouvig suggests a Foucauldian genealogy in order to carry out a critical attitude toward our contemporary understandings of information. In a reading of different works on early modern information cultures, she discusses how different conceptualizations of information affect concrete uses of technologies of information.

A general assumption in Melissa Adler's chapter is that the way Library of Congress has classified people, nations, and territories must also be viewed as a history of how the United States has researched, used, or organized them into U.S. history. In her historical-genealogical study of the treatment of Māori History in the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), Adler examines how the United States is the universalized and

assumed norm guiding the classification of subjects in LCC and how this can be a starting point for interrogating the intended and unintended consequences of universal classification schemes.

The next three chapters are written by the Spanish and Brazilian scholars Daniel Martínez-Ávila, Fabio Assis Pinho, and José Augusto Chaves Guimarães.

Martínez-Avila is looking at reader-interest classifications in order to consider the social consequences of such classifications and questions whether reader-interest classifications really consider the totality of users.

Fabio Assis Pinho's chapter is concerned with the problems at the intersection of knowledge representation and institutional memory. Pinho considers how a field of description of the informational content of photography allows its contextualization to contribute to the construction of institutional memory. Pinho's main argument is that there is a need to contextualize photographic documents in local systems in order to be able to construct a corresponding institutional memory.

In his chapter on slanted knowledge organization, José Augusto Chaves Guimarães argues that the organization of knowledge is a naturally slanted field. As such, Guimarães argues, this slanted nature of knowledge organization should be recognized as an ethical option in the theory and practice of knowledge organization.

Overall, this volume presents discussions that address the tensions and contradictions between global and local information infrastructures. In a digital and globalized world, human sense-making activities, for example, classification, are called upon and continuously contested. Thus, knowledge organization research must also continuously deal with these challenges and demonstrate how they can be dealt with practically, analytically, empirically, and theoretically. Fundamentally, to classify (or to tag, order, archive, sort) is always an articulation of the relationship between the classifier (whether human or algorithm) and the classified. This relationship is a political one as decisions have to be made, boundaries have to be drawn, and categories have to be established. From various approaches and perspectives, the chapters in this volume have centered on this relationship and have articulated their different takes on this issue. Consequently, we can make use of all the chapters to inform about why the problems of classification will always be with us, why the problems of classification are political, and why the problems of classification are socially and culturally embedded. The chapters can help to shape a contemporary conversation about where the ideas of classification come from and what directions they can possibly take.

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