INFORMATION CRITICISM: WHERE IS IT?

by JACK ANDERSEN

Roughly speaking, one may say that the practitioners of literary theory are the literary critics; that is, those reviewing and critiquing works of fiction. But where, one may ask, are the critics of the functionality and legitimacy of knowledge organization systems? That is, for instance, bibliographies, classification systems, thesauri, encyclopedias and search engines – all systems that in some way or another mediate the recorded part of society and culture. Such knowledge organization systems are also the professional tools of librarians. Due to this fact, we should expect that librarians have a lot to say about the roles and doings of these systems in the mediation of society and culture, but it is hard within the public arena to trace and hear the critical voices of librarians grappling with knowledge organization systems. We are used to reading and hearing the voices of cultural critics, social critics and literary critics debating social and cultural issues – the kinds of criticism with well-established histories and adherents that exist in society. Jürgen Habermas (1996) argued, in his book on the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, that art criticism, social criticism and literary criticism developed in public spaces like the coffee houses, saloons and *tischgesellschaften* and became established schools of thought in written genres such as journals and newspapers. They became organized in the sense that criticism developed particular forms of communication in order to talk and write about social, political and cultural issues in society. These particular modes of communication were maintained because of their appeal to and belief in rational discussion within the public sphere. The forms of communication and the public sphere were dialectical in nature. The public sphere constituted the place and space for particular forms of communication, while the particular forms of communication contributed to materialize and shape the public sphere. The notion of the bourgeois public sphere, as argued

by Habermas (1996), rested on the assumption that private citizens had equal and free access to the public sphere.

Public librarians embrace this notion in that they provide the general public with free access to "information" and thereby identify public libraries as part of the public sphere. This is a widely accepted truism, but we seldom hear librarians participate in the public sphere by means of writing or talking about issues that are concerned with or that threaten this supposedly free access to information.

Insofar that knowledge organization systems do play a role in our late modern society, we should expect that critics who knew this would have an interest in discussing such systems in the public sphere in order to reveal their social, political and cultural consequences. But any explicit evidence of such a critic is yet rather invisible; that is, there remains to be developed a way of talking and writing about the role of knowledge organization systems in society and culture. For lack of a better name, I shall call such a person an information critic (or "public intellectual," see e.g. Weisser, 2002) and such an activity information criticism. Thus, in this paper I will argue for a conception of the librarian as an information critic. Starting with a critique of the lack of an information critic, I shall next pinpoint what such an information critic ought to look like, why it is needed and how the modern librarian may fulfill this task.

The lack of an information critic: the lack of a discipline

Librarians, and library and information studies in general, have always had a paradoxical self-understanding or ideology. On the one hand, they have seen themselves as promoters of, for instance, democracy, free and public access to information, civil courage and literacy. Black (2001, p. 64; author's italics) writes that

> *Public* librarians are especially keen to stress a natural correlation, as they see it, between their historic mission to democratize the dissemination of knowledge and the widening of access that the digitalization of information promises to bring about.

But the apparent lack of active and critical librarians implies that they cannot be seen as advocates of democracy because democracy as a historical category demands constant analysis and critique in

order to be evolving and stable. Democracy is not given condition, no matter how much access to information citizens have.

On the other hand, librarians have usually portrayed themselves as neutral agents in social and cultural communication. That is, librarians claim they make a difference, but are neutral with regard to how this difference is to be understood. One reason for invoking neutrality is, according to Agre (1995, p. 225), the ideology of information, which

> serves to position librarianship as a neutral profession, in two senses: (1) librarians minimize their participation in the internal disputes of other communities; and (2) librarianship does not define itself in relation to the ideology of any particular community of patrons.

If librarians would orient themselves to literatures and not information, Agre (1995) argues, they would be participating "in the internal disputes of other communities" as these make use of literatures and literature has a history and structure. As communities are constituted by literatures, they make use of literature with its history and structure in mind. By invoking "information," librarians transcend the history and structure of literatures and, therefore, librarians are unsullied by any requirement to define themselves "in relation to the ideology of any particular community of patrons." Could it be that, if librarians had to define themselves in relation to the ideology of particular communities, they would have to come out of the closet, becoming active agents, arguing for their position and ideology in relation to other ideologies?

What has contributed to this lofty, above-the-fray attitude among librarians? At this point we may take a look at what kind of "academic" tradition librarians are part of or the product of.

Library and information studies (LIS) is the field educating librarians. Broadly speaking, LIS is concerned with the production, distribution and use of recorded knowledge, and the role of systems of organized knowledge in this activity. The way librarians think, talk, write, read and understand their field is, of course, dependent on the hegemonic discourse in which they have been emersed during their education. That is, the prevailing discourse and schools of thought in library school forms librarians' ideology. To a large extent, the curricula and professional literature of LIS are today filled with technical and

managerial language, and technical and managerial perspectives and writings. Thus, Pawley (2003, p. 426) states that "…the prevailing style of LIS discourse uses techno-administrative language to address technical and managerial problems." This discourse style is widespread in scholarly LIS literature and it inhibits the field's ability to engage in exchanges with other academic disciplines. Cornelius (2003, p. 612; emphasis added), among others, has commented on this when stating that,

> If LIS is to be recognized as a constituent member of, say, the social sciences, *then at some level we must use the same language and engage in the same theoretical debates*. It is not as if there has been no discussion of theory, method, and philosophy in the social sciences, or that such discussions are irrelevant to LIS.

It is vital to LIS that it discursively connects with other academic fields as this paves the way for LIS to discuss its relation to, and role in, society and culture. Otherwise LIS becomes a free-floating field with no significance.

One main area of study in LIS is knowledge organization, an area filled with technical and managerial discourse. For instance, Andersen (2004, pp. 41-47) indicates the extent to which conference proceedings of the professional society for knowledge organization, ISKO, were dominated from the beginning of the conferences in 1990 by technical and practical issues. Recently, McIlwaine (2003) surveyed trends in knowledge organization research. These "trends" were largely technical, concerned with universal systems, mapping vocabularies, interoperability concerns, problems of bias, the Internet and search engines, resource discovery, thesauri and visual representation. The survey clearly revealed that recent "trends" did not discuss or even inquire into the role of knowledge organization activities in society and culture. Knowledge organization cannot currently engage at this level simply because it has not yet developed a discourse which privileges the information needs of society and culture. It is the technical and managerial nature of the prevailing LIS discourse that makes it difficult to engage in public discourse. The lack of a socially engaged discourse results in what Andersen (2004, pp. 218-219) has referred to as an "informational surgery":

> If we only talk about it in the sense of referring to techniques, principles or methods we are in danger of presenting a picture of knowledge organization to students, researchers and the public that makes it look

> like what might be called an "informational surgery." That is, to view knowledge organization as an "intellectual cure" to society and its members and their interaction with systems of organized knowledge.

Such a view (i.e. "informational surgery") conceals every critical activity and removes attention away from the postulated significance of cultural and social needs.

Furthermore, textbooks like Harter (1986), Lancaster (2003), Large, Tedd & Hartley (2001), and Svenonius (2000) can be characterized as texts that solidify the use of technical and managerial language in LIS in the sense that they are basically how-to books, constantly referring to techniques, standards, principles, methods and rules. If one's professional knowledge base has such texts at its foundation, no critical attitude is developed nor demanded because these textbooks do not question at all the role of information seeking or of knowledge organization systems in culture and society. They do not provide students with a language, an understanding, a knowledge that make them capable of participating in public discourse debating the functionality and legitimacy of these systems. These textbooks present, at worst, an illusion to students as they foster the impression that once a student masters such-and-such techniques and principles s/he will become indispensable to society. But one is indispensable only if others recognize the vital relationship between information service providers and users. No one cares or values whether a librarian has mastered particular techniques or principles, because the latter do not demonstrate that they themselves can make a difference in the life of the user. To "make a difference," to earn the status of being "indispensable" one needs an argument, and to argue is to be engaged in discourse. But by invoking such unengaged, technical language, LIS communicates an attitude to students that says: you do not have anything at stake; you are not a shareholder in this discourse simply because there is no discourse. Moreover, simply invoking techniques, standards, principles and rules in order to legitimate a certain practice does not justify that practice, but rather hides behind the practice. Technique is not an identity, and if you do not have an identity, who can identify you in order to see if you make a difference, that you really are indispensable? I claim that such a recognized identity can only be achieved when participating and addressing issues within the context of a public sphere.

The above has pointed to the reasons behind why librarians do not see themselves, and consequently do not act, as information critics. The discourse of their disciplinary background, LIS, is concerned more with prescriptive issues rather than descriptive and analytic issues. During their training, librarians are not introduced to the theories, schools of thought, academic disciplines and knowledge needed to engage in public discourse simply because LIS puts itself at a distance to society and culture through its technical and managerial discourse, although the field clearly does not hesitate from expounding on its own social and cultural significance. In that way, LIS has failed to produce information critics and, consequently, has also failed to develop a critical stance towards the objects of the discipline. In the following section I will argue for the education of a new information critic.

Towards an information critic

Society is the basic unit of knowledge organization. It has particular structures and spheres organized according to particular interests and activities (cf. Habermas, 1996). These have been developed and shaped historically by a variety of human agents, and the structures and spheres have in turn shaped human activity. Thus, society consists of forms of organized and mediated knowledge, which is produced, distributed and used by humans.

SOCIETY AND ITS TEXTUAL MEDIATION

Social organization
GENERATES
Religion, law, politics, science, economics, education, art,
commerce, industry and administration, which
GENERATE
Documents and information affiliated with institutions that
support & maintain social structures,
power & influence, which
GENERATES
Produces & distributes, through a variety of genres:
books, articles, journals, laws, reports, memorandums,
advertisements, newspapers, pamphlets, and
different communicative situations, which
GENERATE
Knowledge organization systems

The depiction of text generation and organization within society in the outline above illustrates the forms and layers of organized and mediated knowledge in society. Although the figure is rather sketchy, it nevertheless shows that broader forms of organized knowledge constitute knowledge organization systems. The part of society that matters most to librarians is the one where knowledge or information, materialized in a variety of genres, is circulating, and what role knowledge organization systems have in relation to that circulation, which implies concern with the impact the circulation of knowledge has on society. If this is the case, it stands to reason that every analysis and critique of knowledge organization systems must be addressed, and understood, in relation to the forms and layers of organized knowledge in society. Librarians cannot offer a view of knowledge organization systems as isolated from society's total communication structures. The practice of librarianship needs to be conditioned by an understanding of how knowledge and documents are socially organized, because this social organization structures and influences the possibilities of knowledge organization systems. Acting as information critics, librarians should demonstrate what Warnick has called "critical literacy" which is,

> the ability to stand back from texts and view them critically as circulating within a larger social and textual context…It includes the capacity to look beneath the surface of discourse, to understand implicit ideologies and agendas… (Warnick, 2002, p. 6)

Knowledge organization systems are also a kind of text, at least in the sense that they make use of textual features in order to represent and organize documents. That means they are also circulating "within a larger social and textual context." This social and textual context is what constitutes the functionality of knowledge organization systems as they are developed as a response to other organized textual activities in society. That is, information critics should be concerned with analyzing what kind of influence knowledge organization systems have in society, compared with other modes of organizing knowledge as expressed through textual activities. Information criticism needs to look beneath the layers of organized and mediated knowledge in society, the "surface of discourse" as Warnick (2002) calls it, in order to point to how particular knowledge organization systems work, and to see what motivates particular forms of organized knowledge. This should provide citizens with an understanding of how they might apply

such systems when searching for knowledge or information, and of what they can expect of these knowledge organization systems, that is, what such systems can and cannot do.

Bibliographies provide an example here. The shift from print to electronic recording and distribution of knowledge has contributed to the detachment of bibliography from the larger history of documents and their role in society. This has caused a lack of awareness of the role of bibliography in society, as electronic databases seem to rest on an ideology of detachment that has supplanted the social grounding of bibliographies as documents with specific histories embedded in sociopolitical activities. If this activity of librarianship's past is no longer recognized and understood, it becomes difficult to conceptualize, much less argue for, the role of knowledge organization systems in general in society and culture.

Acting as information critics, librarians could contribute to the demystification of knowledge organization systems by participating in the public sphere, discussing and justifying why knowledge organization systems, and their functionality, should matter to the public. That is, librarianship must argue that these systems make a difference in society, and also show how they affect our professional and everyday activities. Librarians can and should actively do this by acting as critics of society's textually mediated communication structures.

One way of doing this could be to review and write about such systems in public magazines and newspapers, not only in the research literature. But, in order to do this, librarians need to develop a vocabulary, a discourse, that is not technical or managerial. Librarians as information critics need to address and discuss knowledge organization systems in light of what these do and do not do in people's lives. Such dialogue might contribute to the development of a popular conception that knowledge organization systems are an important – maybe even indispensable – part of society and culture. In so far as this is ever achieved, information critics can make an important contribution to the public's understanding of how the many knowledge organization activities going on society operate and how these, in the long run, serve or suppress democratic purposes. This task would be, of course, conditioned by how knowledge organization activities are made visible to citizens

whose social actions depend on access to knowledge materialized in documents. One way of making these visible is to talk about them in a public discourse (or sphere), to relate problems with knowledge organization systems directly to social and cultural problems. Only in this way can the wider public recognize the potential value and doings of knowledge organization systems. If people can see that the functionality of knowledge organization systems is connected with social and cultural issues, then they might come to understand why such systems perform as they do and, thereby, people might also come to see that like other kinds of information, knowledge organization systems are always grounded in particular ideologies. Having a particular ideology is not necessarily bad. It is not being conscious of the presence of ideology that constitutes a problem. The basic social and cultural responsibility of the information critic should be to inform society about the existence of the ideologies embedded within systems of knowledge.

All this is to say that analyzing knowledge organization systems is much more than merely "evaluating," for instance, databases or search engines and their technical capacities. It is to put the discussion of these entities into a critique of late-modern culture and society. This is not the first time such discussions have been called for. It has been suggested by Campbell (2002), for instance, in his review of Richard Smiraglia's book *The Nature of "A Work": Implications for the Organization of Knowledge* (2001). Smiraglia argues that "the work" is a cultural construction. Campbell agrees with this, but emphasizes that it implies a greater sensitivity "…to the social processes that fabricate our conception of the 'work.'" (Campbell, 2002, p. 109). However, these processes are not, Campbell argues, articulated in catalogues. They are "…to be found in, or derived from, *closer and more comprehensive readings of social and cultural theory*…" (Campbell, 2002, p.109; emphasis added). The call sounded by Campbell for readings of social and cultural theory in order to understand what knowledge organization systems such as catalogs articulate, that is what catalogs do, represents another way of highlighting the significance of connecting studies into knowledge organization to broader theoretical horizons in order to raise consciousness about its activity.

The modern librarian envisioned as an information critic is sorely needed because systems of knowledge organization, in particular

with the rise of the Internet, are part of our everyday life and human activities. This means that we are more than ever dependent on such systems, but at the same time we need critical insight into how such systems work and why. Otherwise, our dependence becomes one of slavery and not active participation. Therefore, critical analyses and criticisms of the tendency of these systems to pretend to act as naturalized tools are constantly needed, because they shape society and culture and, in turn, are shaped by society and culture. The modern librarian should be providing such a critique of bibliographies, catalogs, and encyclopedias etc. because these are librarians' working tools, used daily when mediating society and culture. In this way we may consider the modern librarian as an information critic.

Conclusion

The above discussion has focused on information criticism and information critics. I have argued that librarians are not the primary ones to blame for not displaying a critical attitude towards knowledge organization systems. The root lies in their professional training: library and information science (LIS). This field cannot be characterized as a field that engages heavily with other, related academic disciplines concerning social and cultural issues. Therefore, LIS does not share a vocabulary with related disciplines. LIS has managed to create its own "metaphysical" discourse that tends to favor technical and managerial language use. Such language does not invite critical consciousness and analysis as it stands at a distance towards the objects it is talking about. Indeed, technical and managerial language often stands in opposition to basic human needs, and is more concerned with how to do things rather than describe and critically discuss how these things (i.e. knowledge organization systems) work or do not. In that sense, librarians cannot function as information critics because they are not in possession of the appropriate vocabulary. Librarians' discursive framework needs to change if they are to have a social and cultural significance, which librarians now and then proclaim they have. In other words, if librarians are to act as information critics, they have to engage in and address their professional problems in relation to public discourse. Only then can their proper significance be estimated and recognized.

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