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# Naming and Reframing: A Taxonomy of Attacks on Knowledge Organization

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Naming and Reframing: A Taxonomy of Attacks on Knowledge Organization

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Abstract: Most knowledge organization practices have opinionated detractors. Some criticisms are informed and serious, but unsubstantiated assertions and fatuous dismissals are so commonplace that practitioners grow weary of the perpetual need to refute them. Many have had the experience of conducting and publishing research that contradicts a popular misguided claim, and then seeing this evidence have little effect on the continued repetition of the claim. This paper (which is part polemical essay) will attempt to contribute another tool for tackling this problem: a taxonomy of attacks on knowledge organization. Categorizing and devising names for the major strains of deprecation of knowledge organization, cataloging, and metadata will not defeat those arguments, but identifying and reframing them might strengthen the knowledge organization community's resolve to take them on. Warning: there might be neologisms!

1.0 Introduction

Ethical practice in knowledge organization extends to defending it against those seeking to undermine or devalue it. Criticizing specific practices or tools with the goal of providing better access is also part of ethical practice, but dismissals and declarations of irrelevance are attacks.

Practitioners and proponents of knowledge organization encounter such attacks frequently. The type of "elevator speech" that we need to have at the ready are responses to things like "Why would an e-book need an index?" or "There's no point in cataloging free online resources!" Many of us have experienced being so flummoxed at the sudden posing of such a challenge that we failed to give an adequate response, even though such arguments aren't hard to make.

I would argue that knowledge organization practicioners need to be prepared to take up the typical challenges that are lobbed at us—both ones posed out of genuine ignorance, and ones meant as attacks. While the principal strategy must be conducting research, my aim in this paper is to contribute a completely different tool for use in tackling the problem. Most attacks on knowledge organization are predictable and follow well-established patterns, and I have attempted to create a taxonomy that names and categorizes them.

Because of their essential benefits and functionality, controlled vocabularies are supported and defended by those concerned with the ethics of knowledge organization. At the same time, we are possibly their most passionate critics. Works discussing the problems associated with naming, especially in practices and tools of subject analysis, are classics in our field (Berman 1971; Olson 2002). The practice of naming confers power to the namers over the named. This is most often a negative feature, and it can be a weapon yielded by an oppressor. It can also be a tool of self-defense.

1.1 Motivation/Inspiration

Part of the motivation for devising this taxonomy came from my own experience of conducting research. In 2005, I co-authored a study with Arlene G. Taylor that has been widely cited. Along with many other studies, it showed that terms from controlled vocabularies contribute significantly to keyword searching results—we found that in library catalogs, the average percentage of hits that would be lost in the absence of subject headings was 35.9% (Gross and Taylor 2005, 219). But this seemed to have little to no effect on the endless repetition of the claim that subject headings aren't needed now that users only do keyword searching. (In a telephone conversation with the author, Sandy Berman likened this propensity to ignore all of the data to climate change denialism.)

Because of this, the 2015 follow-up study co-authored with Taylor and Daniel N. Joudrey (which finds that in a catalog with automated enriched metadata such as tables of contents and summaries, the average percentage of hits that would be lost without subject headings was 27%) includes a comprehensive, 20-page literature review on research comparing subject headings and keywords (Gross et al. 2015, 3-24). Compiling the evidence seemed like an important way to help knowledge organization practitioners (especially catalogers) take on an uninformed assertion that is widespread.

This taxonomy was partly inspired by the same desire to provide knowledge organization practitioners with another tool to defend against such attacks, but it represents an attempt to approach the problem from a radically different angle. It takes inspiration from some contemporary feminist social critics and social justice activists, who have discussed and demonstrated the value of having a shared language to discuss the conflicts we face.

Reflecting on the popularity of the term "mansplaining," Rebecca Solnit says (Valenti 2014):

> I used to be ambivalent, worrying primarily about typecasting men with the term… Then in March a PhD candidate said to me, *No, you need to look at how much we needed this word, how this word let us describe an experience every woman has but we didn't have language for*.

> And that's something I'm really interested in: naming experience and how what has no name cannot be acknowledged or shared. Words are power. So if this word allowed us to talk about something that goes on all the time, then I'm really glad it exists and slightly amazed that not only have I contributed about a million published words to the conversation but maybe, indirectly, one new word.

Employing a similar naming/defining impulse to provide women with "a guide to navigating the minefield of internetting while female," feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian (2015) has devised a brief taxonomy of internet trolls. Fascinatingly, some of the trolling techniques she defines and categorizes are reminiscent of the argumentation styles that knowledge organization practitioners encounter. For example, she defines "Gish galloping," as:

> …a device used to derail a conversation with a flood of falsehoods and tiny arguments that focus on nitpicking or minor unrelated details, each loaded with implied accusations. The gish galloper will often assert the same argument simply rephrased over and over again. Rather than expressing sincere concerns, these petty comments are designed to distract and overwhelm you by wasting your time with tangential or disingenuous arguments that sidetrack the core issues you are discussing.

A crucial naming phenomenon that has gained prominence more recently, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement and current discussions about racism in the United States, is "white fragility." As one commentator explains it:

> It's a term I had never heard before Saturday night. A friend uttered it in reference to how so many white people respond when challenged about racism, and I felt like someone had turned the lights on. It was one of those moments when you hear language that wraps around something you've experienced or witnessed, but found impossible to describe. What clarity. What relief. (Martin 2015)

The limited, narrow goals of this taxonomy of attacks on knowledge organization cannot be compared to naming and reframing efforts at the center of struggles for social justice, but their

potential to clarify problems and contribute to building a fighting confidence was an important influence on its creation.

2.0 Limitations

Several caveats are needed. First, the attacks being categorized and named here are specifically rhetorical and ideological ones. The taxonomy doesn't attempt to cover direct acts of destruction, such as the forced elimination of practices and tools or staffing cuts.

Several of the attacks could be applied to all of library and information science, or even more broadly, but the focus here is just on knowledge organization.

I've elected to continue to call it a taxonomy, even though in its current form, it isn't a formal taxonomy with a hierarchical structure. I experimented with creating broader and narrower and related terms, but became convinced that if the taxonomy is to have any practical use, it needs to remain simple. I also tried to come up with neologisms for some of the attacks. Some of them were amusing but didn't really work (Googlesthesia, hatesomony) and a few appear in the "Variants and subcategories," but I felt that they would be too distracting if used in actual terms.

Finally, there's inevitably some bias. A great deal of this effort reflects my own perspectives and frustrations. I've attempted to base the taxonomy on input and feedback provided by a broad range of knowledge organization practitioners. Still, there's no doubt that the perspective of an academic library cataloger is disproportionately represented.

3.0 Method

Before attempting to conceptualize categories, I sought out library and information science literature that could be interpreted as challenging or debunking a popular belief about knowledge organization practices. Some of the resources that I reread or found in this process are included in the references.

I solicited input from individuals, and on online forums. For example, here's the query that I posted to the "Radical Cataloging" listserv (http://listserv.uga.edu/archives/radcat.html) on January 12, 2015:

> Question for my radcat friends! (This is for a writing project. I will share more about it in the future.)
>
> I'm looking for examples of (uninformed, wrong-headed) claims and assertions that are commonly made about metadata and knowledge organization. What arguments do you find yourself refuting again and again? What unsubstantiated assumptions and fatuous attacks are you tired of hearing?
>
> Email me … with examples, anecdotes, citations.

From there, I drafted a list of categories, tinkered with the names, and lived with them for several months. When I encountered or read about what I considered an attack, I'd check to see if one of my categories covered it, and consider adding a new one if none did.

4.0  Taxonomy of Attacks on Knowledge Organization

Embracing austerity
Advocating parasitism
Disregarding quality
Imputing pedantry
Trivializing
Vendor mystification
Search technology mystification
Distorting user behavior
Change cudgeling
Doomsaying

4.1 Embracing austerity

Definition: Promoting or praising cuts to staffing or services as a positive good. Rationalizing cuts as an opportunity. Maintaining that eliminating or reducing an institution's knowledge organization work constitutes progress.

Variants and subcategories: Extoling austerity; Presenting cuts as innovation

In the context of a discussion about innovation in libraries, I once heard one administrator boast to another about cutting cataloging positions. (I expect that this isn't an infrequent occurrence, but it doesn't usually happen in front of a cataloger.) He offered this, without a hint of critical reflection, as an example of his own innovative leadership. There was no mention of new services or improved access, nor of any discussion about what previously unidentified tasks the skills of those staff might be directed to.

4.2 Advocating parasitism

Definition: Maintaining lean operations by relying on collections and services provided by other institutions. Advocating or achieving "efficiency" that is facilitated by deliberately choosing to sponge off the rest of the library community.

Variants and subcategories: Metadata freeloading; Mooching over mutual aid

*Redefining the Academic Library: Managing the Migration to Digital Information Services,* a consultant's report that was widely disseminated in 2011, is guilty of perpetrating most of the attacks defined in this taxonomy, but one of the most explicit is its presentation of the University of California, Merced as a model for other academic libraries because of what it was *not* doing: Minimal physical collection, no subject librarians on staff, outsourced technical services, outsourced reference service, automated circulation (ULC 2011, 18).

This model is feasible only because this library has a parasitical relationship to the rest of the UC system—it depends on their resources and services, but contributes none of its own in return. Clearly, this method of operating could not be sustained if all or most libraries adopted it, and yet it is presented as a model that other academic libraries should strive towards.

4.3 Disregarding quality

Definition: Rejecting any and all standards of quality. Asserting that quality doesn't impact users. Mocking efforts to assure core functionality as serving no purpose.

Variants and subcategories: Metadata floorlessness; Anything-is-good-enoughism

There is such a thing as metadata being good enough without being comprehensive, and there's also such a thing as declaring hopeless garbage to be good enough without considering the implications for users.

Doing the latter is self-defeating—when metadata fails to facilitate the level of searching needed by users, they have a less satisfactory experience. Usage is likely to go down, resulting in even less justification to support and pay for the creation or acquisition of quality metadata.

4.4 Imputing pedantry

Definition: Conflating efforts to assure core functionality and an acceptable level of quality with obsessive perfectionism. Attributing the complexity of knowledge organization practices to the temperaments of practitioners.

Variants and subcategories: Ascribing perfectionism

I definitely would not argue that no knowledge organization practitioner has ever been pedantic, or that cataloger punctiliousness doesn't exist. The sort of attack being referred to here is the imputing of these characteristics as a generalization in order to discredit and undermine the whole enterprise, thus circumventing any serious exploration of which practices are useful and necessary, and which ones are not.

An extremely valuable illustration of this can be found in the 2008 paper "The Perfect Bibliographic Record: Platonic Ideal, Rhetorical Strategy or Nonsense?" by David Bade. Examining the usage of the phrase "the perfect record" in library literature, he finds that it is not a phrase used by catalogers or an ideal they discuss aspiring to, but rhetoric employed by administrators seeking to characterize their work as "unbeneficial overrated arcane and expensive practices" and them as "silly, small-minded, retrograde, obsessive and isolated." (Bade, 2008: 117)

People concerned with the ethics of knowledge organization advocate for user-centered practices that are helpful and inclusive. This means being persistent defenders of what is useful (even if misunderstood) and persistent critics of unnecessarily complicated and bizarre, unhelpful

practices. Quality doesn't mean inflexible, thoughtless adherence to rules. Sometimes it means working to change them, and sometimes it means breaking them.

4.5 Trivializing

Definition: Asserting or assuming that knowledge organization work is inherently very simple, and requires little training or experience.

Variants and subcategories: Assuming simplicity; Asserting effortlessness; Duck soupifying

This category was heavily emphasized in the responses I received from individuals responding to a listserv query. One particularly disheartening one (which I quote anonymously) gave examples including:

- A boss who knows almost nothing about any of our jobs and doesn't care to know, yet assumes that they can't possibly be as time-consuming, complex, or intellectually challenging as we claim them to be

- A boss who back-handedly refers to my cataloging and authority work as "not real work" (the example: Telling me to tell the volunteer I give such work to that she has other "real work" for her to do)

- A boss who expects me to be able to teach cataloging to an intern in one afternoon (if that), and to then expect the intern to be able to do my job or be able to catalog on her own

- A boss who refers to cataloging as processing

The idea that cataloging is the simple recording of information found on a resource likely has not been discouraged by the longstanding bibliocentrism of our standards. Richard Smiraglia (2009) has pointed out that when description is centered on transcription of the title page, access is impoverished. Regard for the skills involved in cataloging is also reduced.

Conveying a view of knowledge organization that would be inconceivable to the boss(es) mentioned above, a letter written in support of my application for tenure referred to my subject analysis and authority work as "small acts of scholarship." If our standards and tools were remade, and somehow made free of excesses and irrationalities like bibliocentrism, the essense of applying them would still be knowing how to identify and "bring out" the important aspects of a resource, and being able to effectively anticipate needs it might fulfill and reasons for which it might be sought. Could this be unskilled, effortless work?

4.6 Vendor mystification

Definition: Holding fantastical ideas about what services are offered by vendors, and how quickly and easily they can be implemented.

Variants and subcategories:  Vendor fantasy projection; Private sector worship

Administrator claim I recently encountered: We outsource our entire cataloging operation to Amazon. They do all of our cataloging (yes, original too!) and processing, and much cheaper than any library vendor!

Verifiable reality: Amazon did experiment with providing physical processing to libraries beginning in 2006, and bibliographic records for materials purchased through Amazon were available via PromptCat, but Amazon didn't perform cataloging. OCLC confirmed by email that Amazon stopped participating in PromptCat (now known as WorldCat Cataloging Partners) in 2011. The pages on the Amazon website detailing these services to libraries have disappeared.

Cases of mystification of library vendors are usually not this out of touch with reality, but administrators who play no role in implementing vendor services often don't recognize the amount of work involved, and assume it to be automatic and instantaneous.

4.7 Search technology mystification

Definition: Asserting that knowledge organization and metadata creation are unnecessary, because everything is full-text and computers can already do anything. Fantastical telescoping of the state of information retrieval technology and natural language processing.

Variants and subcategories: Search technology telescoping; Delusional Googlemancy

This attack often takes the specific form of Google mystification, but it's not limited to belief in the perfection of internet search engines. It includes everything from assertions that full-text resources don't require metadata because they are searchable, to the position that controlled vocabularies should be abandoned because artificial intelligence and computational linguistics are but minutes away from being able to provide seamless searching across all verbal variations of synonyms, languages, and time periods.

4.8 Distorting user behavior

Definition: Proclamations that "no one ever does this" and "no one ever uses that" with total disregard for any users with specialized needs who do. Asserting that users don't use certain types of metadata, even though major search functions are powered by them.

Variants and subcategories: Nobody everism

Assertions that "no one ever" does something are thrown around a lot, without more than anecdotal observations as evidence. A common one, already mentioned earlier, is that no one ever uses subject headings, but the makers of this claim ignore the role of controlled vocabularies in keyword searching, in supporting facets, and in linked data. Conflating "no one" with "not everyone" can exclude the needs of scholars and professionals doing specialized research, who may rely on search functionality that isn't needed by most users.

This type of attack often takes a claim that might be partly accurate, and uses that as a basis to assert something else that doesn't follow. The most ubiquitous example of this is the equation of where users start a search with all user searching.

*Redefining the Academic Library* provides a typical example. As evidence that "students and faculty are using the library's traditional services less and less," the research data on user searching cited by the report includes only data on where users *begin* searches. (ULC 2011, 11)

It is not a surprise, nor a devastating finding for libraries, that users prefer to begin their research with the lowest-effort option available. It would be far more meaningful to examine what users do through the entire research process, and what circumstances motivate them to use library search tools and resources, but the device of conflating this question with where users start a search is pervasive. It should be recognized as a purposeful sleight of hand.

4.9 Change cudgeling

Definition: Using accusations of "fear of change" to delegitimize and dismiss objections to a particular change.

Variants and subcategories: "Changemaster" making; Brandishing disruption; Defining "change" as carrying out a specific agenda; "Littlepeopleing"

This is the category of attack with the broadest application, and it has been huge in corporate culture and rhetoric for a long time. Its incursion into the library world represents the ascendance of an austerity agenda, which seeks to silence resistance by painting its opponents as irrationally clinging to the status quo. In an essay published in the collection *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, I endeavored to lay out this argument:

> In discussions about cataloging, change rhetoric is less about class warfare, and more about cost-cutting to accommodate the budgets that prevailing trends prescribe. In the largely non-profit world of libraries, the ultimate aim of cuts is obviously not to benefit stockholders and executives (except possibly in that the lack of resources available for things such as libraries is connected to the rich paying little or no tax on the wealth that has been shifted to them). Library administrators don't seek to line their own pockets, but to adjust to the budgets and priorities handed down to them, whether they agree with them or not (agreeing with them, of course, makes one more likely to be an administrator). Nevertheless, the outlook that drastically scaling back to "lean and mean" operations is the only possible way forward comes straight from the business world. It's not surprising that change rhetoric would come along with it. (Gross 2008, 143)

I would make different arguments now about "a genuine agenda for the improvement and modernization (and not just cheapening) of cataloging" than I did in 2008 (especially those related to FRBR), but the need for catalogers to see through and expose the disingenuousness of change rhetoric remains the same.

4.10 Doomsaying

Definition: Sensational proclamations of the death of knowledge organization (or libraries in general) as an established fact.

Variants and subcategories: Doomophilia; Morbidisizing; Provocation worship

At the American Libraries Association 2015 annual meeting last month, a program was held with the title "Is Technical Services Dead?" The popularity of raising the spector of the impending demise of any and every aspect of libraries seems to be waning, but for the past five years or so some have treated foreseeing an abrupt end just around the corner as a badge of visionary candor. The Taiga Forum's "Provocative Statements" are prominent examples, but naturally *Redefining the Academic Library* gets in on the act by citing the Taiga Forum under the headline "Writing Our Own Obituary" (ULC 2011, 2). Perhaps initially meant as a means of inspiring critical introspection and innovation, it quickly devolved into a tedious refrain strongly related to change cudgeling.

The harmful effects of this rhetoric have been unpacked brilliantly by R. David Lankes (2012) and Barbara Fister (2012).

5.0 Future steps

The future of this taxonomy is uncertain—this paper could be the end of it. If others find it interesting or useful, it might continue to develop. I will continue to solicit examples, which may lead to improving the names and definitions of some attacks, or adding new ones. If there is interest, a possible step might be to finalize the terms and definitions in consultation with others and register the taxonomy as a vocabulary at the Open Metadata Registry. Suggestions and feedback are most welcome.

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