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Achieving Obligation in Information Organization:
Some Novel Approaches
by
Cary S. Daniel

“Choose that entry that will probably be first looked under by the class of people who use the library,”¹ so advised Cutter in 1889 as he detailed what to choose in attaining objects. In fact, he listed this first, as it were, in order to stress its primacy. Similarly, sixty-two years hence, Haykin, then Chief, Subject Cataloging Division, Library of Congress, reiterated and affirmed that “the reader is the focus in all cataloguing principles and practice.”² Moreover, this focus on the reader was again considered primary, even over and above logical arrangement of material.³

Information organization, or cataloguing, as practiced today, resembles more a Procrustean approach to information organization with scant consideration to the reader’s needs as the end goal. While this does serve a function, it is a very narrowly defined function and quite the departure from the aforementioned user-centered approach. What it leaves in its wake is the researcher grasping for relevant information that resonates with the information need at hand.

Analysis of texts for information organization purposes has taken on a life of its own. This has resulted in a focus on the text for placement in a controlled system for the sake and perpetuation of said system, rather than on the interest of the reader. Exactly when this turn from the principles put forth by Cutter and Haykin took place is difficult to pin down. One could hypothesize that this turn occurred when information started being

viewed as a commodity. We posit some suggestions on how this happened, followed by ways to reverse, or at least mitigate the effects of the trend.

Information, in its various forms and permutations, can be treated and thought of in a variety of ways. One way to conceptualize information, and a fruitful way for this discussion, is to think of it in terms of a commodity. Thinking of information in such a way should not be too arduous a task. One need only consider the past rise of information brokerages, the increasingly tight relationships libraries have developed with vendors of MARC records (either through outsourcing or through shelf-ready material), and the purchase of large sets of bibliographic records, or rather organized information. That said, information as a product can be considered yet one more item to be purchased by consumers. This, coupled with references to patrons as customers, makes it legitimate to look at facets of consumer society, in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of information as a product to be consumed, and the effects thereof.

The availability of information for sale and its delivery to libraries is one aspect of this phenomenon. Libraries, acting as purveyors, in turn supply this information to their customers. They also produce their own organized information and make it available in various ways, organized and unorganized. In purely economic terms, the “need is therefore given its object by the available goods; preferences are orientated by the particular spread of products offered on the market”⁴ creating an effective demand. If this is a valid proposition (information as a commodity) then the views of Baudrillard vis-

à-vis consumers in and of society can be employed. This stretches the concept of commodity, although not by much.

Baudrillard claims that commodities constitute the language by which we communicate.⁵ He further reduces consumerism to elements of linguistics in order to elucidate and expand on various components of social phenomenon. It is via consumption, like language, that we communicate and converse with each other.⁶ We simultaneously present information as a commodity and use it to communicate concepts and ideas. For libraries, the concepts and ideas are of most interest and importance. How we do this, how we organize them leads us in an ethical or unethical direction. The system of needs is the product of the system of production.⁷ Producers manufacture need. It is they who satisfy need by supplying X. In a captive environment (a library catalogue), one can only be satisfied with the supplies (information) contained within, or paradoxically with information not contained within.

Consumption is orchestrated initially as a speaking to oneself, and it tends to play itself out, with its satisfactions and disappointments, in this minimal exchange. Library patrons/customers are there because the product has been created for them. The product is the need. Yet the approach to information organization is directed toward the established system of organized information, rather than to the customer. Thus information works like no other commodity known to consumers.

“I buy this because I need this,”⁸ a tautology used by Baudrillard to drive his analysis of consumerism, the idea of shifting objects and shifting needs. Considering this in terms of the library, or any researcher searching for our organized information, one could also posit the tautology; I search (for this) because I need (this). The information seeking theory of a researcher’s need being satisfied once a state of equilibrium is reached would seem to reside in a standard perception of consumerism. Baudrillard describes our current world (of consumerism) as being beyond equilibrium, one without limits, one of unquenchable needs, constantly requiring renewal, constantly requiring difference. One need look no further than the typical keyword search, or rather the keyword search result. A simple need or a need simply stated results in hundreds, if not thousands of responses or hits. It is an almost bottomless pot of gold, in which everything and nothing simultaneously satisfy. The need for difference⁹ drives the search and will satisfy it, if and only if difference can be identified. Such a search, however, retrieves not difference, but sameness: sameness in the guise of difference, for it all reflects an ambiguous search strategy. This renders the results completely meaningless to the user. Information dissolves meaning to total entropy.¹⁰ If we can manage to increase meaning, resolve meaning, coalesce meaning, in essence activate a negentropic effect, i.e. organize information in a framework that is reflective of activities and practices, then information and the organization of information will produce meaning.¹¹

Baudrillard uses the example of the proverbial and philosophical question of the observance of the tree falling in the forest to demonstrate the reality status of unobserved events.¹² Access (to information) becomes an issue of reality. Merely meeting and

confronting information becomes problematic, for the human mind is finite and cannot comprehend all information at once. By necessity of mental limits, there must be an order. However a cacophony of mental stimuli, not to mention visual and aural, takes place. Only having been first processed through the eyes and ears does it register. So much information broadcasted, yet much of it not registered; perceived, but not processed. A sort of protective mechanism, for the capacity of the brain, while immense, limits the amount and speed at which humans can process information. Only having passed through the human mind, does information become real.¹³ Despite all of our information stored in servers waiting as it were, like a falling tree to be heard, observed, and experienced, until said information is accessed (once it has been negentropied) does it become real. It then fulfills the other side of the equation and fully becomes information.

The events of this world, both real and unreal, are experienced and consumed via mass media that enriches our private and banal lives. This life is only made tolerable if and when we consume society offered as real. Yet we remain comfortably distanced from and fascinated by any broadcasted atrocities, crime stories, and famine in far off lands. The events of the world are both real and unreal: unreal in the sense that they are not experienced.¹⁴ Ironically and coincidentally, researchers engage our organized information, although hopefully not as broadcasted atrocities, in libraries in a similar fashion, by means of a computer screen that simulates a television screen, the same screen that brings simulated reality into their lives. This information frequently becomes no more real than the aforementioned false experiences. Accustomed as we are,

however, to our window on society as perceived via the media, the information we gather in can only be perceived as real or unreal. Thus a wall is created through which meaningful communication can scarcely be made, much less maintained.

Much like language, consumption has become a system of “exchange and production of coded values”,¹⁵ signs and objects. Differences become the matter of exchange in terms of objects, individually or of group prestige, and as a system of communication, which satisfies group integration.¹⁶ All consumers are involved with all others in this exchange, yet they also act alone. Simultaneously consumers experience a drive to act in accord with the crowd, while also individually seeking to separate themselves.¹⁷ Acting alone, or rather communicating alone, does not achieve any exchange. We purchase, or consume, what become signs of happiness.¹⁸ Yet these signs do not satisfy, so we purchase and consume more. Everything purveyed via the media is at our beck and call. This accumulation of signs alienates us from one another. How do we communicate (with one another), particularly in the midst of this alienation?

Just who are the others? They are the Chemistry Department (meaning the individual chemists), they are the History Department (meaning the individual historians), and they are our patrons or customers. We are referred to as the Library. All is in the third person; all is without a face. Each refers to the other, interacting with the other as nonentities, as simulations. For each, the other is in a simulated hyperworld contained wholly and solely of itself and themselves, a world separate and unknown to the other

save in an imagined, unreal, un-experienced fashion. We remain intellectually and physically separate and distant.

This alienation has a tri-fold origin. By our calling patrons “customers”, we have in effect moved them psychologically into a different category, further and further away from us, resulting in less and less obligation to them. Obligation requires a face to face interaction; it requires communication between actual people, with actual names, and actual faces.¹⁹ Ironically, while libraries certainly have successfully made significant advances in achieving access via remote connections to resources, if anything signifies alienation, this does. Great efforts are made to ensure patrons are connected remotely. Researchers, remote as they are, have no face, and nary a name, nary an identity. To the anonymous researcher, the only obligation seemingly is to provide access to what they have already determined to be their need or want. Additionally information organization has been placed increasingly further and further away from the researchers it is meant to serve. Our, or rather, the researchers become no more real to us than earthquake victims in South America whom we experience by extension via the media. Recall for a moment the advice and principles stated by Cutter and Haykin. Cataloguing departments once housed in the main library are now displaced, oftentimes situated quite far from where they once were. Of course there was more a need for that earlier physical proximity enjoyed by cataloguing departments in the pre on-line catalogue years. Information organization and information collection, however, is also performed by distant vendors with not only less connection, but actually no connection to the researcher. In the absence of obligation, which alienation ushers in, there is an ever present tendency to

catalogue for the catalogue, to organize for the sake of organizing. The obligation becomes tied to the rules and principles of information organization, rather than to the information and research needs of the faceless and anonymous researchers. This hyper-isolation favours [an] adherence to contrived language (devoid of any meaning based on activity and practice) rather than a communicative exchange between the knowledge organizers and the researchers, the knowledge seekers.

Meaning of words is contained not in dictionary definitions. Ambiguity simply plays too large a role in standard discourse for dictionary definitions to be überauthoritative.

Language can be considered a living organism. As such, the essence of meaning lies in the activities and practices of people who engage in said activities and practices.²⁰ To use a Wittgensteinian example to illustrate this point, in his Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein wrote “if a lion could speak, we could not understand him.”²¹ One might both be intrigued by the idea, as well as perplexed by the supposed inability to communicate with the lion. This is especially true if we keep in mind that communication is at the heart of language. What then is the barrier to communicating with the talking lion?

Language is not just words, or to phrase it another way, words do not a language make. There is a distinct social aspect to language. The inability to communicate with the lion is due to a gross mismatch of the two societies. Particularly pertinent are the different meanings inherent in the daily activities and practices of the lion and us, in spite of any superficial similarities. Just as isolated activities of the lion have no meaning for us, and

isolated activities of ours have no meaning for the lion, neither do isolated activities of the specialized researcher have meaning for us, or for the lion. Our society, the milieu of information organizers, is alienated from the researchers' society. Communication is therefore impossible. How then can we possibly describe and organize information in a meaningful way for researchers, or for customers, for whom exchange of ideas and signs is the commodity, with whom we cannot communicate and from whom we are alienated?

Currently we employ Library of Congress Subject Headings as a means of description, access, organization, and communication. Subject headings as now applied (diversification according to Zipf) compete with keywords with their myriad ambiguity as now searched (unification according to Zipf). As systems grow larger both in number of individual bibliographical records as well as in the number of full-text items available online, precision (of keyword) searches is marked by failure.²²

However, we best express ourselves with ordinary language. Blair, in his exposition on Wittgenstein, maintains that "when we reduce a [re]searcher's information request to a set of search terms" there will inevitably be a loss of meaning between what was meant by the researcher and what was retrieved in the search.²³ This we do in part by forcing information into our organized paradigm. Wittgenstein argued for an understanding of meaning grounded in activities and practices. Currently our attempts at information organization are predicated on a systematic approach to understanding and interpretation of subject content.

Wilson's treatment of subject analysis or subject determination, speaks of that central, omnipresent one subject. However, admittedly there is not necessarily one subject. Much depends on a variety of content analysis methods employed, none any better than another. How clearly an author can describe or write is a function of the author's ability. To the patron, what resonates as the subject can be quite varied. That which captures the readers attention oftentimes determines (for the reader) the understood central theme or subject.²⁴

Ignorance of meaning as used by researchers is at the root of the problem. It is the alienation on a variety of levels that has rendered true communication with researchers so exceedingly difficult. Perhaps a re-conceptualization is in order. A variety of approaches to subject analysis are valid. In deciding which approach to employ, it is necessary to realize that only by means of a concerted appreciation for obligation can we know how our users (patrons and customers) would approach the subject. Beyond our scope is the ability to anticipate all the ways researchers will search for our organized information.²⁵ Instead of relying solely on the author's intent to describe aboutness when organizing information, we should direct our attention to the readers' intent when attempting to fill that information need. Two relatively straightforward approaches can be utilized in an effort to communicate better with researchers, including undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty.

Cataloguers need to be engaged in activities common to their clientele. That is to say, they should be attending faculty lectures, seminars, and colloquia in the subject areas of

their assigned specialities and responsibilities. By learning the language that researchers use in the practice of their everyday activities, cataloguers would come to a more complete understanding of how specialized concepts are used, and consequently the meaning associated with such concepts. Taking this information back with them, they would be armed with a fuller appreciation for what and how researchers may think in the process of searching for information. Accordingly, this could and should color how information is organized. Information could then be organized with the reader in mind, so that it can be discovered. Cataloguers and organizers of information who engage researchers in this way stand a higher probability of achieving and maintaining contact, and thus an appreciation for meaning based on activities and practices, than any remote vendor could ever hope to achieve. A similar end result can be realized by cataloguers working the reference desk, albeit to perhaps a lesser degree. Cataloguers who work at a reference desk provide a unique perspective on the information organized in the catalogue, for they are the ones with the understanding of the structure of that organization. Although there is a scarcity of true information-seeking behaviour found at the modern-day reference desk, engagement with researchers seeking information, even on a limited scale, would have an enlightening effect. Both approaches hold the potential for a fruitful outcome: the enhancement of the finding tools by means of enhancing the organization of information with the researcher as the focus. This would significantly negate Morville's statement, that information hard to find, is information hardly found.²⁶

These suggested courses of action would require library administrative realignment, or at the very least administrative endorsement. It would establish an administrative acknowledgement of the value and legitimacy of seeking obligation as a necessary and laudable goal in the execution and efficacy of information organization.

In determining how people think of concepts, it is instructive to consider their respective frames of reference. Frames of reference are not absolute. For any one individual, frames of reference serve an adequate function, albeit only temporarily. In the passage of time, with different stages of life, frames of reference also change.²⁷ In the organization of information, however, each item described has its own frame of reference. How information is organized on the one end plays a significant role in how successfully it will be accessed or found on the other end. Somehow it must match, or catch, the changing frame of reference of the researchers. The organization of information, in order to achieve and maintain any semblance of ethics, must be predicated on researchers finding that which has been organized. Meeting that information need should be our primary concern. To increase research satisfaction and to make for a pleasurable experience, the search for (organized) information must match the information as organized in the system. A positive experience with our system of information organization results in a satisfied researcher.²⁸

Although controlled vocabularies have distinct advantages, to wit the ability to level out ambiguity and bring similar concepts and words together, they also suffer from some disadvantages. They consist of contrived elements of language: they are not based on

activities and practices, but rather on definitions as stated in a dictionary. Such a weakness has been elucidated clearly by Wittgenstein in his discussion on “language games.”²⁹ How the expression is used provides great insight to user behaviour—the readers’ intent. One way to gauge how an expression is used is to look at what tags a user applies when tagging a bibliographic record. The practice of tagging has been described as good for keeping found things found, but bad for actual findability.

For a tagger, the reader’s intent, the reader’s interpretation is primary. The author’s intent is secondary, if not tertiary. On the surface this is anathema to all that traditional cataloguing holds to be its professional purview, although it certainly lies closer to the views of Cutter and Haykin. Considering, however, how the user perceives the text lends a considerable amount of insight into meaning as it pertains to activity and practice.

Tagging has some recognized problems, including lack of control. There are a plethora of synonyms, homographs, singular and plural nouns, hierarchical and idiosyncratic madness. In short, we see none of the basics we’ve come to exploit with controlled vocabulary.³⁰ While recognizing the particular weaknesses of folksonomic tagging,³¹ there are some positive attributes, which can be employed to mitigate some of these weaknesses. An ideal solution may be the suggestion of a hybrid, consisting of a contrived language (controlled vocabulary) together with folksonomic tags, thus combining the strengths of both. Employment and manipulation of user applied tags offers an opportunity to move closer to the researcher, albeit via proxy, rather than the personal relationship previously described.

Adding tagged free text terms as an uncontrolled subject keyword would be one solution, albeit somewhat limited in effect, for it would only retain the one-to-one correlation of tag terminology to bibliographic record. This allows Wittgenstein's argument to be satisfied, that is, associating meaning (the researchers' meaning) with the researchers' activities and practices. We could actually improve researchers' needs and expectations further: we could anticipate expectations via enhancement of authorized headings in the Library of Congress Authority File (LCAF) with tag terminology.

Of the seven types of tags usually employed,³² only those that are descriptive hold any value for us in the process of LCAF enhancement and concomitantly discovery enhancement. Tagging and Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) already coexist in the mind as well as in the ether, but in practice, the two would become one. Because researchers tend to search known terms, whether these are learned terms from established taxonomies or free text terms, it is imperative that the term searched, the term framed in reference to activities and practices, matches the indexed term input as part of the organizational process of information organization. This matching can be successful through adding "See from" references to LCAF based on free text tags employed by researchers during the search process, in an effort to provide a representation of the meaning couched in activities and practices, and ultimately to increase findability. "Metadata tags applied by humans can indicate aboutness, thereby improving precision."³³ Library staff would adjudicate and add user tags as appropriate to LCSH authority records on a local level. Previously employed tags would retrieve an increased, yet closely related array of resources hitherto not retrieved: the result would be an

enhanced information seeking and discovery experience. The tag searched will retrieve items not searched, but with a bona fide LCSH. This then has the potential for becoming a learning opportunity, even if only by serendipity, when the subject heading is realized. We run the risk of actually educating researchers. This would serve to bridge the gap between controlled language devoid of meaning and meaning based on what researchers actually do, as defined by activities and practices.

A retrieval system manipulated in this way may ultimately come closer to one that can differentiate nuances.³⁴ Language can have many meanings (be indeterminate) without being viewed as faulty. Indeed, it need only be as determinate as required for the task at hand. By capitalizing on how language is actually used, by considering how it is seeped in activities and practices, we can come to a clearer idea of what is meant.³⁵ Enhancing information organization in the manner suggested optimises findability.

Human cooperation is required to alter how we approach information organization. Providing access to our organized information in such a way that allows it to be accessed requires an ethical appreciation based on an obligation to engage researchers on their own level and on their own terms. Ambiguities in language usage create a barrier as well. Unless we attempt to bridge these gaps, we will forever be presenting information, organized either well or poorly, in a way that is neither used, nor understood.

Conclusion

A number of circumstances in society at large and in the library have brought us to the point we find ourselves: consumers are inundated with media messages to the extent that what is real and unreal becomes blurred. The engagement of library resources as well as any organized information occurs via the same source as the media bombardment. The result is alienation of information organizers and information organization, physically and intellectually, from the actual researcher for whom the information is designed.

A call for obligation, based on Inrona's sine qua non face to face interaction with alienated researchers has been explored. We have also discussed the phenomenon of how ambiguity in language plays a larger role in communication than previously considered. Both have been drawn upon in an effort to suggest some methods for ameliorating negative effects and to bring organized information closer to the researchers in a way that resonates with them. As a result the obligation aspect of ethical practice is thereby established.

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