

The database as a cultural form: Culture and identity in knowledge organization activity

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ABSTRACT

In his book *The Language of New Media* (Manovich, 2000), Lev Manovich argues that the database is our new cultural (or symbolic) form. Before that, Manovich claims, the narrative was the dominating cultural form. The database makes it possible to (re)present and (re)configure culture in ways not possible before the computer. It means that our way of approaching and using knowledge and information is changed (once again) due to a particular medium. In a previous article (Andersen, 2002), it was argued how various forms of media (orality, writing, printing and the computer) influence on our concept of knowledge organization in library and information studies (LIS). This argument was two-fold: 1) Knowledge organization lacks an awareness of media and how they historically shape the way societies and cultures store and organize knowledge, and 2) Media not only shape how knowledge is stored and organized, media also organize knowledge themselves and that this aspect is to a large extent ignored in knowledge organization research.

In this article, I want to further develop the argument presented in Andersen (2002) by taking a specific point of departure in Manovich's argument about the database as a new cultural form. I want to examine what such an understanding of digital media brings to knowledge organization research. I believe that we still do not pay enough scholarly attention to digital media in knowledge organization research and I want to address this here through Manovich's argument. It is more imperative than ever to pay attention to digital media as the practices of storing and using knowledge and information are not separated with digital media.

Furthermore, I suggest we broaden our understanding of knowledge organization so as not to exclude social practices and human activities that do organize knowledge but in a different form and on a different level than indexing, cataloguing and classification (cf. Andersen & Skouvig, 2006). This will bring knowledge organization theory in much closer contact with sociological and cultural understandings which is needed if knowledge organization research intends to have a social and cultural relevance. Therefore, I suggest we understand knowledge organization research to be concerned with knowledge organizing activities as they are practiced and mediated by societies, humans, information and communication technologies, texts, media and genres and the relationship between these. Thus, knowledge organization research has (at least) two levels: 1) The study of problems related to the organization and representation of texts in various forms of information systems, and 2) The study of social and cultural practices and discursive activities understood as knowledge organizing categories. This opens up for including the study of, for instance, how texts, genres and media organize knowledge, a perspective not that much present in knowledge organization research.

Manovich's discussion is a challenge to and informing for knowledge organization research exactly because it takes a view on a specific practice (the database and its collection(s)) that bear a resemblance to what is studied in knowledge organization research and elevates this to cultural and aesthetic level.

The database as a cultural form

The notion of the database as the new cultural form could lead one to conclude that knowledge organization is a new cultural form and to some extent it may be. The general public is more than ever in touch with and uses more than ever systems of knowledge organization such as search engines or wikipeidias. The content of these systems is to a very large extent produced by the general public and, consequently, these systems are not restricted to particular professional domains.

But when stating that the database is the cultural form of our time, how does Manovich arrive at this statement? To claim that a particular instance of computer technology (the database) represents a new cultural form may sound not only deterministic but may also be to ascribe a cultural significance to the database more than it actually has or is capable of having. But Manovich (2000) has a sophisticated argument drawing on both the database as ‘just’ a piece of technology and on what he considers as ‘old’ cultural forms: the cinema (and the novel):

“After the novel, and subsequently cinema privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate - database. *Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have beginning or end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise which would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other*” (Manovich, 2000, p. 218; my italics)

Such is Manovich’s start out. Of course, representing a list of items is not a new activity in human culture. Jack Goody, for instance, makes the argument that the list is a technology that is not simply a reproduction of oral discourse because the list as a formal and abstract device does not represent speech directly (Goody, 1977, p. 80). But the computerization of society and the ontology of the computer invite the database form (or the list form) and introduce it as an everyday form.

Almost echoing the famous McLuhan-statement ‘the medium is message’ (McLuhan, 1964), Manovich tries to show how the database has evolved into a cultural form. That is to say, how culture has moved into the database and then turning the database into more than just a piece of computer technology. About this Manovich (2000, p. 225) says that what makes the database a cultural form is its way of representing the world as a list of items and not as a narrative. Thus, what makes the database a cultural form is what on the surface seem to be the ‘innocent’ characteristic of the database. This claim about the database is of course not to say that the database as a physical and technical object is a cultural form but rather what the database is capable of doing (i.e. representing a list of items), or what users are capable of doing with a database, is what constitutes a cultural form. In short, Manovich claims that representing the world as a list of items has become a dominant form of culture in the digital age.

Thus, Manovich brings us an understanding of the database as more than a technological phenomenon but as an expression and materialization of human culture. This insight is what I want to relocate in knowledge organization research as it provides ground for an understanding of knowledge organization as a specific cultural practice; a specific way of handling the products of human culture and human activity. In short, what I am trying to argue is that, paraphrasing McLuhan, ‘knowledge organization is the message’, meaning that the activity of organizing

knowledge is not just an 'operation' performed on e.g. documents or knowledge, but that this activity make documents or knowledge act or perform in specific ways in human activity.

References

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