

Deliberate bias in Knowledge Organization?

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Abstract:

“Bias” is normally understood as a negatively loaded word, as something to be avoided or minimized, for example, in knowledge organization. Recently Feinberg (2007b), however, suggested that “If we cannot eliminate bias, then we should instead attempt to be more responsible about it and explicitly decide on and defend the perspectives represented in information systems”. This view is linked to another view put forward in Feinberg (2007a): That knowledge organization is too much concerned with information retrieval and too much described in the mode of scientific discovery, as opposed to the mode of artefact design: “From the literary warrant of Hulme to the terminological warrant of the Classification Research Group (CRG), to Hjørland’s domain analysis, the classificationist seems like one who documents and compiles, and not one who actively shapes design.”

This paper examines these claims, which may also be understood as questions about subjectivity and objectivity in classification and about positivism versus pragmatism in research. Is KO an objective and neutral activity? Can it be? Should it be? A dominant view has been that knowledge and KO should be understood as a passive reflection of an external order. This has been termed the “*mirror metaphor*”: Knowledge is understood as a mirror of nature. This view of knowledge is represented in both philosophy and KO, for example, in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) (in his early writing), Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and Henry Bliss (1870-1955). This view of knowledge as a mirror of nature is related to empiricism and positivism.

The opposite view is related to pragmatism and critical theory: According to this alternative view is KO always performed within an organization or another context with given aims, purposes, values and interests will always and should always reflect those interests and values. A description of something (any description of anything) is not just a mechanical listing of attributes, but is always a selection of attributes from a certain perspective or purpose. Consequently is the evaluation of a given description not just a comparison between the description and reality. It is not possible to compare a description with reality because the person performing such a comparison is comparing his own mental representation of reality with that of the description. Thus we can only compare different descriptions but never a description with reality: There exists no neutral platform from which objective observations and

descriptions can be made. From the pragmatic/critical point of view should the evaluation of a description be functional, i.e. its functionality should be considered in relation to some defined purposes. It should not just be considered true in itself or good in a decontextualized sense. We have scientific methods and technical standard which aim at making our descriptions and representations better and more “objective,” but such methods and standards are tools developed in order to increase quality within given contexts and based on some assumptions. Generally they are valuable and necessary, but it is always important to consider their built-in assumptions. They too should be seen as as functional for some purposes rather than just right or true. Although KO may simply be wrong and mistaken (see, for example, Bade, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007), the evaluation of given assignments should from the pragmatic perspective always include a consideration of purpose, values, goals and consequences¹: Tuominen; Talja & Savolainen, 2003 have formulated a view, which is also part of this pragmatic philosophy:

“While unitary documentary languages ensure a maximum of mutual understanding [. . .], they do so by legitimizing a particular ideological and sociopolitical worldview, and by silencing other meanings, voices, and ways of knowing [. . .]. Unitary documentary languages embody a belief in the existence of a unified body of knowledge. They express a belief in the possibility to capture reality isomorphically in “information,” and presuppose a neutral ground from which to judge the truth-value of different theories.”

(Tuominen; Talja & Savolainen, 2003).

A theory of KO is related to a theory of concepts. Again a positivist versus a pragmatic understanding of concepts can be demonstrated. The pragmatic theory of concepts understand these as ways actors are picking out parts of reality in order to be able to communicate and act in relation to that part of reality. The concept of “hymn” is related to the activity “to sing in churches”. The way hymn is defined facilitates certain activities (the singing of certain songs) while relatively hinders other activities (the singing of other songs not understood as “hymns” and thus probably not included in the “hymn book”). In this way KO starts defining concepts by regarding implications of different ways of understanding. This definition of concepts is not a process delimited to LIS-contexts, but involves the larger environment. LIS is neither a passive reflection of this environment or an independent instance, but is an actor which can and should influence its environment by participating in.

Feinberg’s (2007a+b) view is in accordance with the pragmatic or critical position described above. She bases her arguments on “Haraway's situated knowledges”, which is one version of the pragmatic and critical philosophies.

¹ This is reflected in name “*functional requirements of bibliographic records*”, but it might be discussed whether the philosophy behind this name really is pragmatic rather than positivist.

What are the arguments for and against these two theoretical positions? Are they really competing views or can they supplement each other in different ways and be applied to different cases?

One common assumption is that the natural sciences are positivist (as defined above), whereas social sciences and humanities are pragmatic. If we consider a knowledge organizing system such as the *Periodical system in physics and chemistry* it is indeed difficult to consider it as “biased” towards some human interests at the expense of other human interests. If we will try to defend the pragmatic-critical position in natural science, we have to demonstrate why this system apparently fits better to the positivist understanding. This scientific classification is used, for example, in the UDC. Thus we have the same question at two levels: Is the Periodic system a neutral, objective reflection of NATURE? Is (a part of) the UDC a neutral, objective reflection of the Periodical System?

It has been suggested in the literature of LIS that these two levels are principal different: That the classification of physical objects (e.g. chemical substances or animals) is different compared to the classification of documents (e.g. documents about chemicals or animals):

"It is my contention that scientific classification of natural objects, and the bibliographic classification of the content of a document, are distinct for two main reasons. The first has to do with when and how the items are classified, and the second has to do with the nature of the classified items." (Mai, 2004).

This paper examines these arguments in favour of a positivist understanding of science as well as a dualism between physical objects versus documents. Rather than choosing an extreme position, it explores *the relative freedom of indexers and classifiers* in developing systems as well as in the actual indexing of a single document. It is argued that classifiers have different kinds of “*degrees of freedom*” – and that some kinds of classification should simply be considered wrong. On the other hand should KO also reflect the purpose and the target group for which it is intended. Without engagement in specific values and domains, LIS cannot develop a satisfactory theory or practice.

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