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Diversity of Knowledge Organization in Records and Archives Management

Abstract
Different cultural, administrative and linguistic areas make knowledge organization diverse in records and archives management. The paper suggests that there are four salient differences: what knowledge organization systems (KOS) there are to achieve the goals of records and archives management, what is the moment when they are applied to organize information, what is the granularity of actions that the KOS supports and how the KOS is combined with organizational work and records processes.

Introduction
Knowledge organization is at the heart of any library, archive and museum. In this paper I examine the role of knowledge organization systems (KOS) in records and archives management (RAM). The concept of KOS is understood very broadly (about KOS, see Hjørland, 2007; Hodge, 2000): it includes all methods that are applied to make information manageable and usable either conceptually or physically: physical arrangements as well as conceptual tools like classifications, taxonomies and indexes. The purpose is to explore differences in records and archives management across cultural, administrative and linguistic areas—i.e. “RAM cultures”—in the light of some examples. However, no attempt is made to systematically define what constitutes a RAM culture. I argue that the world of knowledge organization is in records and archives management diverse compared to libraries, for instance.

Multiple KOS for Multiple Purposes?
One of the differences between libraries and archives is that in libraries knowledge organization serves primarily information retrieval. Therefore, development of search engines has led to a crisis of bibliographic classification (Hjørland, 2012). Also in RAM the role of classification has diminished. In electronic environment users prefer to search using metadata fields instead of classification scheme (Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2006; Singh, Klobas, & Anderson, 2008, p. 239). Nevertheless, in RAM classification has retained its role, because information retrieval is only one of its many purposes. In RAM literature we find several ideas about what a KOS can or should be used for.

Firstly, the organizational KOS is used to identify areas from which information is needed: the KOS serves as a basis for developing key components in a records management program: considering what documents might be needed to capture in a records management or archival system for evidential purposes. (Kennedy & Schauder, 1998, p. 115). Making functional context of records visible is another function of records and archives management KOS. The business context in which the record was created, received and used should be apparent in the record (including the business process of which the transaction is part, the date and time of the transaction and the participants in the transaction). The primary mechanism employed for this purpose is records classification. It links records to business. Grouping of records together reflects what was done. Classification enables assertions about the authenticity of records by providing context. (Ashton & Reed, 2010; DLM Forum Foundation, 2011, p. 70.) Classification serves as a basis for defining and assigning security levels and controlling sensitive information and for separating important documents from less important (Kennedy & Schauder, 1998, p. 115).
All the functions require knowledge organization in some form. One difference between RAM cultures can be found when we look at what KOS there are and whether one KOS serves more than one purpose. In Anglo-Saxon countries there is a KOS (retention schedule or disposal authority) for assigning retention periods and another (record plan) for classifying records. In Australia both are developed from and aligned with the business classification scheme. (National Archives of Australia, 2003.) In contrast, the traditional Finnish solution was to have three independent classification schemes in RAM: one in records management plan (for guiding retention, disposal, and access), the second in registry (serving information retrieval from registered records), and the third in archives (defining the structure of archival record series and serving information retrieval from the archives). Today it is recommended that the same classification scheme is used in all three. (Arkistolaitos, 2007) A third variant is found in the latest European specification for electronic records management systems (MoReq2010): besides classification and disposal schedules, it recognizes need for “aggregations”. An aggregation can be a traditional file, but it can also be a database or an online library, for instance. An aggregation may contain records that fall under different business classifications. In that case aggregation groups records together, but each record is still classified separately. Alternatively, records can get their classification from the aggregation. (DLM Forum Foundation, 2011, p. 70). Thus, in a MoReq 2010 system there are several layers of knowledge organization systems operating simultaneously.

**Time Dimension of Knowledge Organization**

A second major differentiating factor in RAM cultures is found when we examine time dimension: what KOS there are during record life span and what is the moment when they are applied to organize information. The time dimension is not irrelevant. There is a difference in who creates and applies a classification scheme and which is first, information or its classification. Some types of KOS are easier to create—and perhaps to use—at a particular moment of record life span. An archivist who works outside the context of record creation may find it hard to identify the original function in which the records were created. Some functions overlap (for instance, should wages records be placed under the personnel function or the finance function?) and different archivists may discern different functions in the same collection. (Williams, 2006, p. 78.) Therefore, for an archivist creating a functional classification scheme afterwards and applying it retrospectively to records may not be a viable option. On the other hand, if the functional classification scheme is created before the records and employees in the organization do the classification, the process should be easier. Even in this case it may be difficult for employees to identify the macro level functions that their work is part of (Alberts, Schellinck, Eby, & Marleau, 2010; Foscarini2012; Orr, 2005).

RAM cultures have both short and long term differences in the time dimension. Even at a short term in organizations (ignoring archival dimension) there are two different records management traditions. The first records management tradition is characterized by registry systems and pre-action aggregation and routing of documents. This tradition was exported from Britain to many Commonwealth countries, but it has now disappeared from many of them (Tough, 2006). On the other hand, in electronic environment registration has again become more important (Rankin, 2006). In Nordic countries registries have never lost their central position in RAM.

In registry systems, registers—books, cards or other media—are used to list the receipt and movement of the records of an organization while they are in current use. Registers (or journals) are an index to the records. The control over records is established at the time of their creation and receipt, before they have been processed or acted upon by the person...
responsible for handling a particular matter. Hence, most registry systems represent a highly centralized approach to active recordkeeping, in which one central registry office serves as the central recordkeeping repository for an entire organization. (Kennedy & Schauder, 1998; Maclean, 1959; Stephens, 1995.)

The second records management tradition is American. The American tradition is, in contrast, based on individual action followed by post-hoc filing (Tough, 2006). The first stage in the information life cycle is “creation” in which records are created or received. During the creation phase the records are usually managed by employees themselves. Consequently, during this phase filing systems “end to reflect the individual paperwork styles of the individual”. Only in the next phase—when the records are moved into a more central departmental location they come under the control of records manager and departmental filing system. (Penn, Pennix, & Coulson, 1994, pp. 13–15.) Thus, the American tradition leaves more room for employees’ personal information management than the registry tradition.

Both traditions have survived in electronic environment. Besides Germany (Miller, 2003) registry tradition is common in Nordic countries. A modern Finnish public sector electronic records management system (ERMS) has always a registry component (Henttonen, 2009). In addition, electronic environment has also created its own variations of records management’s time dimension: a “front-end” ERMS captures records at or soon after creation whereas a “back-end” ERMS solution is to capture records when they “fall of” an electronic document management system (Rankin, 2006).

When we look record life span as a whole, there is another major cultural difference: how do we see the relationship between records and archives management? Are there separate phases in record life span or are they, on the contrary, inseparable parts of one “continuum”? These issues are in the heart of the two models conceptualizing record life span: North-American life cycle model and Australian records continuum model. (for an introduction to the models, see e.g. Gilliland–Swetland, 2000; Tough, 2006; Xiaomi, 2003). In the life cycle model a record goes through phases in which it is managed by different professional groups (records managers and archivists) and used by different user groups (organization’s employees and researchers) for different purposes. In contrast, the records continuum model makes no distinction between “active” and “historical” phase of records.

Although the models do not say much about knowledge organization per se, it is easy to see that the transfer of records from one phase to another in the life cycle model (in particular, from an organization to an archival institution) offers a moment where information can be reorganized to meet the needs of new users. In contrast, in records continuum model this option does not exist: records may simultaneously have practical and historical value and they do not flow in one direction only. (Tough, 2006). Thus, in the life cycle model a KOS might be replaced by a new one. In records continuum thinking this is not viable, but there is the possibility of adding new layers of data when records pass from one domain of action to others, for example, out of the domain of the record creator into the broader domain of the workgroup and then on to the organization. (Reed, 2005.) In records continuum model a KOS is thus complemented and enriched, but not replaced. 1

A related issue is the interpretation of the principle of provenance. Whether replacing the original KOS with a new one at archival stage is permissible depends on how we interpret the principle of provenance. The principle states that records / archives of the same provenance (fonds) must not be intermingled with any other provenance; a provenance being “the agency, institution, organization or individual that created records/ archives in the [1]

1 In electronic environment it is also possible to have several views and multiple classifications to same information simultaneously (e.g. Bak, 2012).
conduct of its business prior to its transfer to records center/archives. (Walne, Evans, & Himly, 1984, pp. 130, 134 and 143). In Nordic countries, like in Sweden, the principle is extended to include also “registry principle” which states that also the original order (i.e. the physical KOS with its information retrieval system) should be retained in archives (Gränström, 1995, pp. 21–22). However, not everyone agrees with this.

The way the principle of provenance is interpreted has a connection to the records management tradition that is followed in the country. Registry system makes it easy to establish the “original” order and to return documents to their “right” places. (Lindh, 1994, p. 196). Thus, in countries following registry tradition the original KOS is usually preserved intact also in the archival institution. If, on the other hand, registry tradition has not been followed, there perhaps is no (at least identifiable) KOS which could be retained in archives (Petillat, 1994, p. 183). In that case introducing a new knowledge organization system at the archival stage can be a necessity.

Granularity of Records Management Actions

Thirdly, records management actions may take place at different levels of granularity. Also this makes RAM landscape diverse. Especially in paper environment it is usually practical to operate above the level of individual records. Practically all actions—information retrieval, contextualization, setting access restrictions, disposal, and registration—can be targeted to a group of records instead of a single record. Thus, when a KOS is designed one must consider not only what actions the KOS should support but also the scope of the actions. RAM cultures differ in this respect. Sometimes the focus is on individual records, sometimes on groups of records; containers, files or record series.

For instance, disposition—usually destruction—may take place at the level of individual documents, files, or series. In Anglo-Saxon countries the records management apparatus is geared towards purging files or records series. For instance Montaña (2010, p. 40), who writes primarily to American audience, assumes that “as a practical matter” disposition will occur on the container level—a file folder, box, tape, disk, or whatever: anything else would be “too costly and time-consuming” because it is unrealistic to expect users to open the container and select individual items it for destruction. Therefore, the lowest level of classification should point to the container, and not to part of its contents. (Montaña, 2010, p. 40). Electronic environment, on the other hand, makes it possible to purge individual record types as well as folders or whole branches of classification. (Rankin, 2006.)

The Finnish practice is different. In Finnish public administration disposal is based on combination of record type (e.g. “contract”, “memorandum”, “letter”, “ledger”) and business classification scheme: the place of a record in business classification scheme together with its type determines how long the record will be retained. Therefore, in the functional classification the lowest level consists of record types which are generated in the function. Consequently, different record types in the same file may have different retention times. A similar approach is chosen also in Finnish SÄHKE specification for electronic records management systems (Arkistolaitos, 2008).

Combining Knowledge Organization Systems with Work and Records Processes

Fourthly, RAM cultures differ in what is the expected role of user groups in records processes during the record life span. Generally, during a record life span there can be at most four broad groups of users: two groups of specialists (records managers and archivists) and two groups of amateur users (organizational employees and archival researchers). The groups have different goals and different amount of background knowledge when they access a knowledge organization system. This makes some types of KOS more appealing to some groups than the others. The ways the user groups are
supposed to use a KOS is not the same across RAM cultures. Sometimes a KOS is intended primarily to specialist users. For instance, Australian records managers perceive classification scheme as a records management tool for grouping records for destruction. Thus, users are not supposed to have interest in it. (Singh et al., 2008.) In contrast, a Finnish textbook advocates business classification scheme as a general tool which is used by all employees even in non-records management tasks, like in introducing new employees to the organization (Lybeck, 2006, p. 80).

An important issue is the distribution of work in records processes. Ultimately it sets requirements to the KOS and defines its users. An example makes this clear. In Finland records managers plan record life cycle (including its archival stage) in advance. In principle, they define record life cycle from cradle to disposal before the records are created. As a practical tool for themselves and for the organization they create a business classification scheme in which organizational functions and record types are described. This tool (known as AMS) also contains instructions for disposal and filing and it identifies sensitive information and defines possible access restrictions. What is left to organizational users is to make some minimal selections (like selecting the right functional class and record type) and then to follow the instructions. Files have no names, because information retrieval is based on registries. The title of the registry entry is in some ways comparable to a file title. It is a free text description and does not play any role in appraisal which is based entirely on the AMS. In principle, decisions about appraisal are not re-considered after the AMS is created and in principle in electronic environment disposal can be entirely automated.

In contrast, an Australian solution is to use a functional thesaurus (faceted classification system). In this system users pick keywords from the thesaurus to create file titles. Files with different retention value are identified by the titles. Decisions about disposal take place afterwards by looking at the file titles. Not all term combinations (and corresponding disposal actions) are known in advance and some appraisal decisions are made post hoc. (National Archives of Australia, 2003.)

Hence, in the Australian practice it is important that the KOS supports naming of the files and that the users are able to name the files correctly and consistently. In Finland this requirement does exist. Finnish records management is strongly based on pre-appraisal which requires that there is an enumerative classification scheme in which all possible function – record type -combinations together with the appropriate records management guidelines are defined in advance. Introducing an Australian type functional thesaurus in Finland could not take place without revolutionizing the whole idea of how record life span is managed.

Discussion

Together, the differences make it difficult to examine knowledge organization in records and archives management abstractly without considering its total environment. What is the purpose of a KOS, what KOS and user groups there are, how they are supposed to use a KOS, and what is the role of the actions taken by the users greatly varies from one RAM culture to another. A KOS which is ideal in one context for one group and for one purpose can be less optimal when it is examined in another environment from a different perspective.

A problem of the current literature is that it rarely rises above a particular RAM culture. Although a higher level of abstraction is difficult to achieve, it is needed to advance research of knowledge organization in RAM. Existing literature takes usually for granted unspoken assumptions of the environment. For instance, Williams (2006, p. 78) argues that record types should not be used as a basis for knowledge organization, because it makes
information retrieval impossible without an index to records. This is true, but in RAM cultures following the registry tradition this is not a problem: the registry serves as the index to records.

Although some aspects of RAM diversity are well-known, it is rarely discussed how deep the differences go and how they impact knowledge organization. This creates a problem of comprehension especially for novices who just enter international discussion. A name or even a short description of a KOS does not give away all its connotations. This makes it hard both to communicate your own ideas and to understand what in the international discussion might be relevant. Nevertheless, in a globalized world—and especially in research—we should be able to clearly articulate the ideas about RAM knowledge organization across borders. The first step to this direction is to be aware the diversity of knowledge organization in records and archives management.

References


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