Thematic representation and metadata of photographic documents

1. Introduction

Numerous studies in the field of knowledge organization have focused on the need to give attention to the different types of informational supports given to photographic documents in order to preserve their information and consequently how they relate to the memory of a place or event. These, in turn, are incorporated in the narratives of academic studies and historical research into places and facts, as well as enabling knowledge about the traditions of a city, an organization or even the social organization of a nation.

Accordingly, treatment and preservation are urgent factors, since the treatment of photographic documents both physically (preservation, adequate packaging, etc.) and intellectually (treatment in relation to content, retrieval and user) is equally important for the retrieval of their information. This recovery embraces concepts leading to an in-depth knowledge of the essentials of descriptive and thematic areas of representation. In a way, the deepening of the foundations demonstrates the role that knowledge organization fulfills: working directly with information and studying the processes to which this information is submitted until it reaches its recipients, considering the elaboration of conceptual models with recovery purposes. Therefore, the treatment of the (intrinsic or extrinsic) content of documents using a descriptive process, with thematic metadata, directly influences users’ retrieval and assimilation of photographic information. Descriptive and thematic treatment are thus complex activities that require careful reflection and specific policies specifying precisely how photographs should be treated, given that this type of document cannot be treated separately in a collection, but has its own characteristics and specificities.

As such, this workshop seeks to conduct a discussion about the fundamentals of representation and organization of information and knowledge and how they are used in archives, libraries, museums and documentation centers. Therefore, thematic representation and metadata are highlighted in the discussion, since they are key processes that directly affect the organization, reception and retrieval of these documents.

2. Considerations on the photographic document in the light of thematic and descriptive representation

The terms "descriptive representation" and "thematic representation" are used in order to highlight the different treatment phases to which the various types of informational resources, including photographic documents, are submitted. This
differentiation refers to the stages that are, at the same time, distinct in their elaboration, but complementary in the sense of building records for catalogs and databases. The descriptive representation seeks the individualization of the document so that its representation is specific; that is, it gathers items by their similarity and establishes relations between them (Mey 1995).

Cataloging should “identify users’ possible information needs, followed by the creation of a tag, a text, or a summary, which will intermediate the access, identification and evaluation of the user in relation to the original resource” (Santos 2013, non-paged). Moreover, cataloging facilitates that when performing a search, the user can easily identify, select and retrieve the document or informational resource that has been described, as well as its contents.

Thematic representation, complementary to descriptive activity, helps in the retrieval of documents since it has the function of exposing their contents. It is characterized by the assignment of subjects to documents through the classification, indexing and preparation of abstracts. According to Dias and Naves (2013, page 7), “thematic treatment […] has a strong subjective load, because, as the name indicates, it aims to characterize the document from the point of view of its content. This is what many will call the subject of the document, but this subject will depend very much on who does the reading.” Moreover, when it comes to representing themes, there is a gap in relation to photographic documents summed up as follows: “With regard to thematic representation, it can be affirmed that there is an extensive bibliography that consolidates this stage for graphic materials, but not with regard to materials so that theoretical and methodological gaps are perceived that need attention” (Maimone, Gracioso 2007, p. 1).

Thus, both descriptive and thematic representations are integrated characterizing the socialization of the whole collection with the user, and insofar as an organization is elaborated by means of title, author, year and subject, all documents are made available with clarity and objectivity, representations being realized with the highest possible specificity. For the representations to be made, it is necessary, first, to define the typology of the resource worked in order to emphasize the specificities of the materials that will be treated. In relation to the instruments of thematic and descriptive representations, there is a huge lack of manuals, codes and standards that underlie the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of the image resource, especially of the photographic document.

Therefore, it is necessary to study the representational essence that this type of document requires, so that for the specialized user, recovery and access to the resource are possible.

In this way, Simionato and Santos (2013, p.3) explain that the recording of the image resource in general, regardless of whether its environment is analog or digital,
demonstrates that the characteristics “[...] are not addressed and often the attributes are valued only by contextualized textual features”.

Thus, the existing manuals represent the photographic document in the same way as the book. In this context, it is understood that manuals do not provide the necessary support for these specific documents to be properly represented. In addition, manuals do not offer the necessary representation and organization that should inform collections of photographic documents, whether institutional or personal, seeing as they reflect the thought of an era. It is necessary to consider that the forms of organizing and representing documents must be maintained and respected by the institutions which collect them, in order “... not to erase the features of their organicity, as reflected in the manner in which it has been collected, assembled and, even in what was interchangeable in this meeting ...” (Gonçalves, Marcondes 2005, p. 263).

3. Final considerations

It is hoped that the results point to the existence of institutions and principles specific to each field, in relation to how different types of document relates to society, but also show that there are similarities in each of area of study regarding the need for knowledge about the photographic document.

The understanding that all norms in force in different informational environments can encompass singular objects, including photographic documents, is extremely important in terms of constructing a reflection regarding different environments, such as archives, libraries, museums and documentation centers, and regarding the treatment which is carried out by each one, given their particular specificities.

References


