Katherine Morrison – Indiana University Department of Information and Library Science, United States

Committed to a Narrative
Expressions of Knowledge Organization at The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation

Abstract:
Innovation is one of the most pervasive rhetorical tropes in information industries and technologies. How can we deconstruct the meaning and social currency of innovation? Although science and technology studies critics have approached this question in recent years, it deserves closer study from knowledge organization (KO) domains. The history of innovation is a history of classification. In the Library of Congress, the subject heading “innovation” is classed by industry: technological innovations, agricultural innovations, and organizational innovations, for example. This classificatory structure fulfills capitalist expectations of industrial economics and mystifies the material production of industries and technologies. Significantly, innovation also allows documentary institutions to periodize their materials and order objects of knowledge along a hagiographic trajectory. An important site of study for this issue is The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation in Dearborn, Michigan. This project explores how all The Henry Ford’s diverse collections are classed as “innovative.” My research question asks how a priori commitments, particularly a narrative of innovation that intertwines technological and social progress, shape subsequent expressions of KO as found in the description and arrangement of museum artifacts? This question will guide my analysis of a museum that places the Rosa Parks bus, Civil Rights Movement memorabilia, and slave shackles in the same physical space as Thomas Edison’s electric pen, a Macintosh 512K personal computer, and early television sets. All these objects are classed along a singular trajectory—they are all hagiographic exemplars of American history. Central here is the argument that The Henry Ford classifies innovation by privileging its collection objects’ modes of inscribing meaning in a “cluster of mutually defining” (Gitelman 2000) technological and social practices of change that are themselves already privileged in canons of American history. In this way, we see how KO is not an idealized neutral space to judge and describe objects, but rather expresses a positionality from which regimes of KO are constructed.

1.0 Introduction
Innovation is one of the most pervasive rhetorical tropes in information industries and technologies. How can we deconstruct the meaning and social currency of innovation? Although science and technology studies critics have approached this question in recent years, it deserves closer study from knowledge organization (KO) domains. In the Library of Congress, the subject heading “innovation” is classed by industry: technological innovations, agricultural innovations, and organizational innovations, for example. This classificatory structure fulfills capitalist expectations of industrial economics and mystifies the material production of industries and technologies. Henry Ford is arguably the most canonically important industrial capitalist in American history. He is also celebrated as a legendary innovator, not only for his vision of industrial technologies (the assembly line) but also his bold social vision. His legacy as an innovator is enshrined at The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. The museum and historical village date to 1926, when he purchased 260 acres near his sprawling River Rouge Factory complex with the purpose of

building an equally sprawling museum complex filled with historical buildings and artifacts of domestic and industrial life (Swigger 2014, 17). Today, the space collectively known as The Henry Ford is the largest indoor-outdoor museum complex in the United States. This paper addresses the meaning-making of collections at the museum specifically, whose collection mission is to “illustrate the process and context of innovation.” Of critical importance, then, is an examination of how all the museum’s diverse artifacts and documents are classed as innovative.

This project examines how the groupings of collections at The Henry Ford express contingent meanings and relationships, and how these relationships constitute a particular ideological narrative of innovation. This paper demonstrates the fundamental positionality of any knowledge organization system. A popular replica and exhibit space at The Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village—Thomas Edison’s Menlo Park—allows a glimpse into how the museum positions innovation as a verb and noun in order to make a coherent narrative. This narrative, in turn, relies on tropes of American resilience and novelty. What follows is a discussion of other information and communication technologies—specifically a collection of those meant to evoke feelings of personal nostalgia—on display in the museum. The final section analyzes how The Henry Ford has evolved to communicate more directly with its local constituents in Dearborn and Detroit through the acquisition and display of American Civil Rights movement artifacts. Edison’s laboratory and twentieth century information technologies may not seem to share a common meaning of “innovation” with the museum’s Civil Rights exhibits and the infamous Rosa Parks bus, but as we shall see, they work in concert to collapse the meaning of innovation in order to serve a whiggish American history trajectory. Ultimately, The Henry Ford must maintain narrative control in order to represent and organize American history—a serious knowledge organization task.

2.0 The method

A central goal of this project is to bring together more closely media history and KO literature. If, as Lisa Gitelman and others have suggested, we can think of media as material objects and complicated structures of sociocultural communication (Gitelman 2008, 6), we should examine more closely how meaning-making takes place at the intersections of physical presence and ideas. Lorraine Daston has further emphasized the indeterminate slippage between the “stolidly functional things...[and how they] radiate an aura of the symbolic” (Daston 2007, 19). Such an acknowledgment is particularly important for understanding the conceptual and physical authority of KO systems.

This paper acknowledges the prodigious body of literature on Ford’s Greenfield Village, a strange and impressive village of preserved historic structures and built on site. Jessie Swigger’s foundational text “History is Bunk”: Assembling the Past at Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village (2014) built on archival evidence and secondary literature (such as biographies by Steven Watts and David L. Lewis) to explain how Ford built a selective genealogy of industrial and domestic habits and materials. The particular assemblage of actual historical buildings (including the transplanted Wright Brothers’ bicycle shop and an actual Cotswold cottage transported from England) and altered spaces created by The Henry Ford’s staff over the second half of the twentieth century are a seductively idiosyncratic site of study, rich with anachronisms and impressive efforts at historical authenticity. The museum, which boasts 26 million artifacts spanning 300
years of history, is well-recognized across literatures of technology history, material culture, and public history. The Society for the History of Technology’s journal publication, *Technology and Culture*, has regularly featured articles by The Henry Ford staff and reviews of its exhibits and expansions. This project introduces this site of public and technology history to the domain of KO. Ultimately it argues that the act of “doing” public history is an act of knowledge organization.

In recent years the domain of knowledge organization has recognized museums as powerful sites for critical KO theorization and research. In her illuminating conceptual review on this topic, Hannah Turner emphasized how critical KO analysis of museums “posits museums as key sites of knowledge production and circulation and sets the stage for an understanding of the “background” work of museums as an important site for understanding knowledge organization more broadly.” (Turner 2017, 473). Turner and numerous other KO researchers including Rick Szostak (2017), Melissa Gill (2017), and Lala Hajibayova (2017) have all enriched the KO community’s understanding of how institutional infrastructures and sociotechnical affordances position regimes of knowledge and organization. I offer a contribution to this literature, and also expand its critical and methodological dimensions. By comparing the different ways The Henry Ford describes and models the world, this project asks KO researchers to confront museums collections’ ideological and narrative powers. It is specifically these powers that legitimize museums’ production and organization of knowledge.

Central to this project’s contribution to KO is the emphasis that museum artifacts act as documents with powers of inscription. This argument owes much to the documentality work done by Michael Buckland and Ron Day. Buckland’s foundational 1997 essay explained how museum objects’ semiotic and evidentiary mechanisms of meaning control their existence as documents (Buckland 1997). Day began his most recent book with an important question about Suzanne Briet’s formative 1951 conception of a document as an antelope as documented by scientists (as a stuffed type specimen, for example): “What is forgotten about particular beings when they are subject to (or subjects of) the representation of being, understood as essential universal types (i.e., as class members)?” (Day 2019, 3). What is lost when all the numerous artifacts on display at The Henry Ford are understood as exemplars of innovation? What does “innovation” not say about the RCA-Victor Console Television Receiver, or the Rosa Parks transit bus? These questions have important ideological implications for the organization of knowledge, where classes of documents act “not just descriptively, but prescriptively” (Day 2019, 1).

The intersecting domains of knowledge organization and museums must reckon with the full range of museums’ ideological powers. Kevin Coffee, Chief of Interpretation and Education at Lowell National Historic Park, outlined this extent by remarking that, “museums and similar cultural organizations have a fundamental function to define and control visual expressions of major social narratives.” (Coffee 2006, 435) The resulting “concentrations of ideological symbols” legitimize and reinforce certain narratives about society (Coffee 2006, 435). The organization of museum objects produce prescriptive knowledge about culture, society, and time. Moreover, we can only comprehend the full extent of this ideological operation by unveiling the moral orders that dictated the museum’s collections from its start (Woodson-Boulton 2007, 48-49). By making explicit the complicated lineage of The Henry Ford’s technological collections, we can better
understand why and how knowledge organizing commitments change in museum institutions.

3.0 Innovation and History

Physical exhibition spaces in museums act as a primary principle of division among artifacts. Greenfield Village contains the most popular exhibition spaces at The Henry Ford (visitors may purchase tickets for the museum, the village, or both). Menlo Park—an assemblage of replica structures and authentic artifacts of Thomas Edison’s experimental laboratory—was one of Ford’s first endeavors in creating Greenfield Village. Ford and his treasured Greenfield Village architect, Edward J. Cutler, recreated the building in 1929 with some original elements (https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/179489). As a canonical American inventor, we can look to Thomas Edison to better understand how the institution of The Henry Ford defines innovation. The assemblage of replicas and authentic artifacts cooperate to materialize a convincing general class of innovative objects.

The curious mixture of real and imitation at Menlo Park evince Henry Ford’s presentist image of historicity. Ford’s collecting commitments, which began with the relocation and restoration of historic structures at his ambitious Greenfield Village, hinged on his ambivalent nostalgic attitude, which was a reaction to the mixing of races and cultures forms in American cities. It is cruelly ironic that his pre-urban, pre-industrial nostalgia was in large part due to the changing economic conditions of industrial cities that Fordist capitalism engendered. Ford’s ideology of innovation is best summarized in his infamous 1916 remark that “History is more or less bunk. It’s tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history that we make today.” Ford’s establishment of Greenfield Village and the then-termed Edison Institute and Industrial Museum (Swigger 2014, 3) operated with these two connected goals: to celebrate a hagiographic American history of industrial progress, and to root acts of progress “today” in these whiggish lessons of the past. This narrative control is ideology—specifically, an ideology of American innovation.

The ideological power of Greenfield Village and Menlo Park lies, in part, in how convincing the environment is. The combination of replica and original produces an effective model of historic reality. When Edison himself toured the site with Ford in 1929, he remarked that the site was “99.9% perfect” (Swigger 2014, 78). The Henry Ford even classifies the space itself as an artifact entity, with typical catalog attributes such as creation date (1929, the year Ford reconstructed the building), subject date (1876-1883, the years Edison actively used the laboratory), and materials (wood, glass, metal). In addition to environment-setting objects (furniture, laboratory equipment), the interior contains many of Edison’s original patent models, including his successive printing and duplex telegraphs, electric lights, phonographs, vote recorders, and the electric pen. The artifacts are not organized in a linear progression, but instead are arranged in-situ, placed in naturalistic settings around the interior. Despite the naturalistic physical framing, however, they are described (in both written collection descriptions and scripts enacted by historical reenactors) as a succession of increasingly efficacious and influential inventions. In reality, Edison’s electric pen was a commercial failure and evidence of the nuanced social negotiations of Edison’s many inventions (Gitelman
2000, 5); however, The Henry Ford does not represent the artifact in this way. It is instead classified as an innovation in the overarching trajectory of Edison’s innovation.

In this way, The Henry Ford defines innovation as a verb and a noun. As a verb, the institution follows the normative conception of what Benoît Godin and others have defined as a “linear model of innovation” (Godin 2006; 2012; 2015). While there are numerous ways of thinking about models, it is most applicable here to conceive of models as narratives. The linear narrative of innovation consists of three discrete stages: a research phase, an applied research and development phase, and a final phase of production and dissemination. This narrative is a simplified representation of segments of reality, or potential realities, and does not (or cannot) account for the complexities of scientific practice, market forces, and supply and demand. In this respect, the narrative of innovation is a concentrated set of symbols—it is ideological. Furthermore, this suggests how we can understand the narrative properties of classification and knowledge organization.

4.0 Communication and Media Technologies, Communicating and Mediating Innovation

It should not be surprising that the tens of thousands of objects exhibited at The Henry Ford communicate meanings relationally. As a whole, the museum objects are classed as innovative. Edison’s electric pen is defined as innovative in relation to the other objects in the reconstructed Menlo Park; the assemblage of objects and structures that comprise the Menlo Park site evoke existing grand narratives about Edison as the grand American inventor. As the largest indoor-outdoor museum complex in the United States, it is helpful to examine how objects in the museum proper (as opposed to Greenfield Village) communicate meanings of innovation. Doing so demonstrates how The Henry Ford manifests an organized physical landscape of knowledge comprised of mutually defining media.

The permanent exhibit “Your Place In Time” situates the viewer differently than Menlo Park and Greenfield Village. The exhibit space is structured as a chronological journey through twentieth century popular American technologies. It contains objects of immediate personal nostalgia for viewers, from cassette and record players to an interactive MTV music video creation station. Neither the exhibit space nor its artifacts immediately communicate a message of American innovation the way Menlo Park does. Significantly, however, many of the Your Place In Time artifacts are included in the same collections class as Thomas Edison’s inventions. The Macintosh 512K Personal Computer, for example, is classed alongside the Edison electric pen in the museum’s “Information Technology & Communications” digital collection set. In this example, The Henry Ford partially flattens the historical differences between these artifacts to allow their mutual inclusion in an object type category. Here, the definition of “innovation” as a noun takes precedence over the nuanced negotiation of technology history. After all, visitors at the physical “Your Place In Time” exhibit do not bear witness to a reenactment of the innovation process, the way they do in Menlo Park and Greenfield Village. They instead see and interpret inventions—the end-products of the linear model of innovation.
The different viewer positions at Menlo Park and inside the museum—where the former invites viewers to witness reenactments and engage with physical spaces and artifacts, and the latter invites viewers to look at artifacts and identify with them based on their own personal experiences—create slippages of meaning for understanding innovation. As the viewers visit the different exhibit spaces at The Henry Ford, they engage with narratives that classify innovation as a thing and a process. In the next section, we will see how The Henry Ford additionally classifies innovation as a trait held by a person.

5.0 Rosa Parks, Innovator

The Henry Ford’s evolution should be contextualized in a larger trajectory of public history and technology museums. As technology historians have explained, the field began to question its pervasive and deterministic narratives as early as the 1980s (Staudenmaier 2002, 168-181). The Society for the History of Technology concretized more critical and reflexive methodologies during a 2007 workshop sponsored by the organization and the National Science Foundation. Colin Divall and David Edgerton both began publications at this workshop that asked the field to mobilize a more critical, conceptual framework for the domain (Divall 2010; Edgerton 2010). Edgerton in particular critiqued existing scholarship for focusing too myopically on technological novelties—inventions. Edgerton urged scholars to analyze materials that communicate something about popular understandings of technologies as they emerge in socially, politically, and geographically situated times (Edgerton 2010). Applying this more dynamic imperative to public history, Divall quoted past president of The Henry Ford Harold Skramstad: “...the fundamental challenge is to design exhibitions that have a clear and coherent intellectual intent while at the same time providing engaging individual experiences” (Skramstad cited in Divall 2010, 957). In other words, technology history museum professionals must recognize their own agency in creating complex analyses of technologies, which then inform audience experiences. This co-productive turn toward museum and audience dialogue has affected other public history sites in the United States such as Lowell National Historic Park (Goldstein 2000, 129-137). It is no mere coincidence that The Henry Ford publicly expanded its civil rights artifact collections beginning around 2001, the same era these conversations engaged technology historians. It is also no mere coincidence that this focus on civil rights artifacts coincided with increased support for Greenfield Village’s African American Family Life and Culture program and partnership with the emerging National Arab American Museum (in 2000 Dearborn’s population was more than 28% Arab American; Detroit’s population was more than 80% Black).

As The Henry Ford changed their commitments to meet evolving community needs, their collections came to include an American Democracy and Civil Rights focus area. In 2001 The Henry Ford purchased and restored the “Rosa Parks Bus”—the Montgomery, Alabama city bus on which Parks initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. The bus is the apex holding of The Henry Ford’s permanent “With Liberty and Justice for All” exhibit. An oft-reproduced Pete Souza photograph of Barack Obama sitting alone in the bus in 2012 demonstrates the material and visual power of the artifact (Peralta 2012). Parks holds a distinguished position in the museum’s webpage list of “historic innovators” (as opposed to the museum’s contemporary list of innovators, which
includes figures like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Steve Wozniak)—besides Parks the list features Henry Ford, George Washington Carver, Thomas Edison, and the Wright Brothers.

The museum also now classes innovation by certain social behaviors or “habits”: collaboration, breaking rules, learning from failure, remixing, and being curious (https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/stories-of-innovation/visionaries/). All of these classes deploy a certain linear rhetoric of social progress—they infer new relationships (collaboration, remixing), a progression of standards (breaking rules, learning from failure), and new applied thought processes (being curious). This classification of innovation is socially prescriptive, but ethically and morally ambivalent. The Henry Ford describes Parks as a specific kind of innovator, and one that distinguishes her immediately from the likes of Edison and the Wright Brothers: “…her simple, spontaneous act embodies the notion of social innovation—that a new idea or way of doing things can have such far-reaching impact, that it renders old ways obsolete and radically alters how people think about themselves, their social interactions, and their place in the larger world.” (https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/stories-of-innovation/visionaries/rosa-parks/)

How is this description similar or dissimilar to the museum’s classification of innovation by behavior type? The most appropriate class to categorize this description of Parks is “breaking rules.” Her act of protest “radically” changed others’ behaviors in a new fashion. What about collaboration? This descriptive web page text notes Parks’ attendance at the Highlander Folk School civil rights training during the summer of 1955, but on the whole it canonizes Parks as a unique visionary of the Civil Rights movement: “Many consider her singular act of protest to be the event that sparked the Civil Rights movement […] her flawless character, her quiet strength, and her moral fortitude caused her act to successfully ignite action in others.” (https://www.thehenryford.org/explore/stories-of-innovation/visionaries/rosa-parks/) The text’s uncited quotation of the iconic phrase “they had messed with the wrong one” additionally suggests a move away from failed protests or tactics heretofore in the Civil Rights movement—an echo of The Henry Ford’s innovative behavior class “learning from failure.” Curiosity and remixing are similarly inferred, with the former attributed to her marriage to Raymond Parks and subsequent exposure to the Civil Rights movement, and the latter attributed to her combination of extraordinary moral characteristics. This example shows how The Henry Ford uses a flexible classification structure to appropriately situate the creators of its disparate collections.

6.0 Conclusion

The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation has evolved significantly since Henry Ford’s death, both in terms of its mission and collecting principles. The broad class of “innovation” has allowed the museum to expand its collections and exhibits to meet the evolving needs of its surrounding communities and the evolving expectations of technology history and museum studies. By comparing how the museum accounts for disparate definitions of “innovation,” we can see just how flexible the museum’s ideological classification needs to be. At the same time, this classification flattens the ideological differences between these figures and unites them on a singular trajectory of American history. This paradoxical classing—where innovation means something very
temporally coherent, and so many characteristics that it means little at all—allows us to question the ideological power prescribed by museums.

Meaning in museum spaces takes place at the negotiation between the institution and viewer agency. The settings for these interactions—whether they are assemblage spaces of authenticity and replica, or more traditional museum exhibit spaces—play a significant role in what meanings are produced. At The Henry Ford, institutional agents must account for highly disparate settings (a historic village and interior museum) and collections of artifacts. Under the broad, flexible, and at times contradictory class of “innovation,” The Henry Ford must bring together these settings and artifacts. To do this effectively, the institution projects a grand narrative of American history. Narrativity is key here. In the organization of historical moments, narrativity creates a necessary flow. As Ron Day recently explained, “The theoretical construct of the past as continuous, much less returnable, is an explanation that depends on narrative, historiographical, conventions…Time must be seen as continuous in order for component parts to be retrieved from its series” (Day 2019, 106). Sites of public history and technology, such as The Henry Ford Musem of American Innovation, offer complex opportunities to unveil these narrative—and ultimately ideological—mechanisms. As KO research continues to examine such sites, we should critically consider the fundamental positionality of any KO system.

References


