Provenance as an Ethical Measure for the Archival Knowledge Organization of Photographs

Abstract:
This paper reflects on the use of the principle of provenance in the archival knowledge organization of photographs as a critical and ethical measure to fight their misuses. It discusses the concept of provenance from a pragmatist and domain-analytic perspective to assess the potential of this principle in the determination of the contextual information of photographs to counteract fake news.

1.0 Introduction
In critical Archival Science, photographs that are produced for institutional purposes have achieved a fundamental role due to, among other things, their evidential value and potential to construct emancipatory narratives. In the present paper, we aim to explore the importance and possibilities of the principle of provenance as a pragmatist way of fighting injustices and fake news in the context of archival knowledge organization. More specifically, we aim to further recognize the role of the principle of provenance as a domain-analytic technique (Guimarães and Tognoli 2015) that can be used as a device for the study and development of knowledge organization systems and descriptions in which images taken out of context can be used to reinforce bias or unjust perspectives.

2.0 Domain analysis, provenance, and photographs in archives
According to Hjørland (2016), knowledge organization in archives should be considered part of the Knowledge Organization field while the principle of provenance is its most important principle of organization. Although there are multiple definitions and meanings of the principle of provenance (Tognoli and Guimarães 2019), we argue that the principle of provenance, while proposing the organization of groups of documents based on their production context, can serve as an ethical measure for the semantic representation of photographs. We believe that from Hjørland’s post-Kuhnian perspective, the view of the domain established in the provenance could be compared to the scientific practice in the laboratory, as studied by Latour and Woolgar (1979). Here the production of facts in the laboratory would be similar to the production of knowledge in the archive of an institution. In this sense, documents in archives evidence the actions that originate them, while at the same time the principle of provenance dictates that documents must be organized in a way that reflect the activities, values, and interests of the institution. While the declassification of archives (Garcia Gutiérrez 2007) is a necessary step towards the realization of democracies and open societies, the application of the pragmatist principle of provenance and other critical techniques in the representation of images in knowledge organization systems, information systems, catalogs, and mass media ar-
chives (García Gutiérrez and Martínez-Ávila, 2014) can be used to dismantle the presumption of objectivity that underlies their political use in fake news in the post-truth society.

The image that the photograph conveys should be considered an index of the production process and not a unique element of organization. Thus, in order to make the dialogue between the context of production and its use in a way that is effective and consistent with the functions of the archival document, we propose that the archival knowledge organization processes and, in particular, the organization of the knowledge evidenced by photographs must be ruled by the analysis of each domain according to the principle of provenance and following the institutional process of declassification. As a result, we propose that each institution should be analyzed as a specific domain in which the discursive factors already established in the archival domain should also include the praxis of the institution (as the praxis in the archival domain corresponds to the different processes of the division of labor in the archive, according to the legal and administrative requirements, functions, and activities that become evidence in the generation of documents).

3.0 Conclusion

We believe that since the information recorded in the archival document refers to the activities performed by the institution, it would be more appropriate to emphasize the aspects related to the practical activities and not only the communicative aspects. The reason for this is that the archival empirical practices and reflections emerge based on the principle of provenance, looking for the identifications of the context of production of the documents, interpreting their organic storage, and establishing their external and internal organization as the basis for the functions of the archive (including the classification and the description/representation). Thus, the principle of provenance is a vital process for the photographs as it differentiates and highlights the domain of the archival knowledge organization in relation to other forms of knowledge organization.

With the provenance and context of the institutional production that originated the photograph, it would be possible to preserve, to some extent, the original intention of the photographic record production (or at least to avoid the implicit misuse of its semiotic features) and avoid the manipulations linked to prejudices and social injustices. Moreover, it can guarantee the diversity of knowledge domains, since each context of document production presents its own specificity of intentions and social actions.

References


