ELSIONORE REVISITED

Keynote Address
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Abstract: The Second International Study Conference on Classification Research was held in Elsinore, Denmark on 14-18 September 1964. That conference is revisited and compared with the present ISKO '94 conference on Knowledge Organization and Quality Management to show how much progress has been made, how many old problems still await solutions, and why the fields of work called Classification Research and Knowledge Management have much in common.

1. Introduction

It is indeed a pleasure and an honor to be here in Denmark again, presenting this address to a group of my colleagues from around the world. As a relatively young woman in 1964 I was given the honor by another group of Danes of editing the Conference proceedings for the Second International Study Conference on Classification Research, held at Hotel Prins Hamlet in Elsinore, Denmark. I now feel doubly blessed by the Danes and before we all leave this conference I hope you will agree with me that we are blessed for having the Danes as our host in 1994. These two conferences form a time bridge for me. All of my professional career I have found topics like those discussed at Elsinore and now Copenhagen to be the central issues.

The nice thing about an address like this is that I can be nostalgic and remember the many ways in which that conference was important. Such nostalgia I hope will help to create an ambience for those of us at this conference as well as help us see how far we have come in addressing the questions of information retrieval, of quality management of information systems and services, and of knowledge organization in general.

2. Elsinore - Copenhagen Links

Someone else has created a time bridge between these two conferences which are thirty years apart. On the cover of this conference program you will see that this conference is co-sponsored by Lillian and Dan Fink’s Foundation. Dan Fink was at the Elsinore Conference in 1964. At that time he was the Director of the Danish National Centre for Building Documentation. He reported on the work

in the building field which was using a classification scheme as a multilingual dictionary. The ABC (Abridged Building Classification for Architects, Builders and Civil Engineers) was a special classification based on the UDC which had been translated into eleven languages and was complemented by a Swedish designed faceted system. The precursor of such things as switching vocabularies and UMLS (the Unified Medical Language System) existed in Europe thirty years ago. The concept of related macro and micro thesauri had beginnings here in Scandinavia in the building industry. Dan Fink personifies that involvement. We do have so much to learn from leaders in the field who have gone before. A paper on the CUBE system at this conference will update us on what has been happening in the Building Industry in Scandinavia since 1964. Another time bridge, or what Ranganathan called “research following the relay method.”

Another world leader in the field who was at Elsinore was S. R. Ranganathan. He gave the opening address. I would like to repeat part of his address to this audience because the words are as true today as they were thirty years ago:

“Man has been reaching for one ideal for a long, long time — the ideal of “One World.” Our discipline brings us nearer to that much desired and much sought concept of “One World.” In other contexts, that concept is very, very distant from the stage of realization. It is particularly so in the economic context... In the political context, the resistance to “One World” idea is notorious... If we take the cultural context, we see the struggle between one culture and another, between one religion and another... In the technological context the profit motive obstructs us from a free sharing of ideas. There is an element of secrecy and we do not freely exchange our technological ideas... The whole idea of copyright itself is a barrier... [but] in our own subject, we come as near as possible to the idea of “One World.” There is no secrecy. We know no cultural boundaries, no political boundaries, and no economic boundaries. We freely share ideas with one another. We believe that we find in everybody an identity... The barriers melt away. We are prepared to think together without any reserve... Our research can follow the relay method. That will lead to many technological achievements. [Our work] can lead to the elimination of all barriers except for the ego in man, the disturbance of which can be localized.”

Again at this conference we have the opportunity to show that there are no cultural boundaries, no political boundaries in our field for we do indeed share our ideas freely.

Rasmus Molgaard'Hansen) was the guiding light at the Elsinore Conference, as Hanne Albrechtsen is at this 1994 conference. At both meetings experts in classification theory and practice, thesauri, indexing and knowledge representations have gathered. At the 1964 conference, the ubiquitous computer was still
referred to as "the machine", but its potential and problems were already being felt. Also, in 1964 the term for a new tool in documentation circles was being given special meaning. The term "Thesaurus" was fitted into the lexicon of classification research and it was thought to be complementary to the role of classification in information storage and retrieval languages. It is good to see at this conference in 1994 that there are many papers which will advance the state of the art of the thesauri, their use by end users for query specification and the representation of knowledge structures. I await with great interest such papers and the one by Jones on "Support Strategies for Interactive Thesaurus Navigation" and the other papers on the restructuring of both thesauri and classification schemes. Rasmus Molgaard would most certainly be interested in these papers if he were with us today. He once told me that he would like to be a "friendly ghost" roaming the stacks of the library at DTB in Lyngby. If that has happened (and our Danish friends can tell us), then we should save a chair for Rasmus here. He may come by!

3. Topics and Themes

At this conference in 1994 the computer is taken for granted. All our systems are computer-based. At Elsinore there was still a great deal of skepticism about the computer. Nevertheless, the papers presented at both conferences cover similar topics, with a slight change in terminology. Instead of papers on general and special classification, we now mention "Knowledge Organization in Specific Domains." Instead of titles like "Research in Mechanized Classification" we now label a similar session "OPACS" or "Knowledge-Based Systems". Instead of a session on "General Theory of Classification" we now label our session "Theory of Knowledge" or "Concept Representation in Systems Design". Yes, I see many similarities between the 1964 and the 1994 conferences and I for one think that is a good thing. I am not sure what the Elsinore participants would think of the present interest in full text access and natural language queries, but there was already at Elsinore an interest in computational linguistic approaches and the mathematical and logical foundations of classification. The term "expert systems" had not yet been coined thirty years ago but we did recommend at Elsinore that classification theory be investigated further as it relates to the "domains of application."

The research reports presented at Elsinore covered topics in mechanical translation, thesaurus development, faceted classifications, and the evaluation of retrieval systems. Names such as Salton, Fairthorne, Borko, Cleverdon, Farradane, Mills, de Grolier, the Needhams, Cordonnier, Rolling and Richmond are among those in attendance at Elsinore. In all there were 64 persons present from 16 countries. They brought word to and carried back word from Elsinore. I am sure we will be doing the same because the topics covered during this conference are quite timely and of interest to many of our colleagues not here this week.
Some of the research reported at Elsinore reached a dead end in the ensuing years. The same may be true of some of the research reported here. But the recurring themes seem to ensure a continuation of the work on several important topics. I am glad we preserved the discussion of the reports at Elsinore because these comments are so important but so rarely passed on.

For example, researchers in domain analysis for expert systems and automatic thesaurus generation can learn a great deal from the discussions which followed the papers presented at Elsinore. Robert Fairthorne, in his remarks as Rapporteur of Donald Hillman’s paper considered the applications of mathematics to the subject of classification as “a hovercraft approach in which we use extremely sophisticated techniques and mathematical devices to skim at very high speed and great expense over the subject of concern without ever touching it.”

This visual image of a “hovercraft” was picked up by other participants at Elsinore when Cleverdon’s Cranfield evaluation report was discussed. Most of us who have done evaluation research know of the Cranfield study, but few have gone back to see what was said about these studies by Swanson, Salton, Cordonnier, te Nuyl, Angell, Farradane, de Grolier, and Fairthorne. It is fascinating reading even after thirty years!

4. Concluding Remarks

Rasmus Molgaard-H in his closing remarks evoked Shakespeare’s [Hamlet]. He reminded us that the fundamental subject of that play was “the reliability of information for decision” and that the final goal of information is not retrieval but the right decision. We must have that thought in mind today or the concept of “knowledge organization and quality management” will have no meaning. There may be great potential in Internet, Mosaic, WAIS, Gophers, and WWW, but if the knowledge therein is not organized for easy access decision makers will be very frustrated. Our work in knowledge organization today and in the future must have a strong focus on easing the burden of the user who is searching for information. The needs expressed in Elsinore for a switching vocabulary, a roof classification, and compatibility of index and classification languages are still important unanswered questions. Mere system links may be very useful but they are not sufficient to help information seekers who are concerned about decision making problems.

Eric de Grolier warned us at Elsinore that there are fundamental fallacies which must be avoided in our discipline and that there are minor or semifallacies as well. The idea that hierarchies, for example, were something which could be avoided in an information retrieval language was a fundamental fallacy. That de Grolier was right has become abundantly evident to all but the most stalwart full
text searching advocates. Semi-fallacies, according to de Grolier, included the concept of categories, facets, integrative levels, and literary warrant. He qualified his remarks about these fashionable concepts, saying they have their use, but that they are not the panacea which some people thought they would be. Some of these concepts have already gone by the wayside, but others are still very much with us. Some of the participants at this 1994 conference may want to argue with de Grolier about his conclusions and that would result in a lively discussion I know!

Several recommendations from the Elsinore Conference have been heeded. At this 1994 conference we will hear about work which attempts to improve existing classification, including work on methods for construction of thesauri and related tools. This was an Elsinore recommendation. We will also hear about work which studies the interaction between classification systems and computer technology — another Elsinore recommendation. It is good to see such "relay research". This would make Ranganathan, Molgaard'H, and Coates (the drafter of the recommendations) very happy.

Unless I am misled by the titles of papers at this conference we are not going to hear any papers on the compatibility among classification systems and thesauri or the convertibility of the records of material indexed in one system in another. Work in these two areas was recommended at Elsinore and I consider them to be the most important lacunae in our field today. These areas have been addressed in the field of medicine and have resulted in two very innovative tools, the Universal Medical Language System (UMLS) and the Information Source Maps (ISM). But we need such innovative tools in other fields. Without them we are not helping our users with compatibility and convertibility problems. There is still much to be done. Let's continue in the tradition of Elsinore and Copenhagen!

References