Social change, modernity and bibliography: 
Bibliography as a document and a genre in the global learning society

Abstract – In this paper, the role of bibliography in the global learning society is examined. Through an analysis of issues characterizing modernity and globalization, an understanding of bibliography located in light of these issues. I argue that by considering bibliography as a document performing a particular communicative activity with a particular purpose and as a genre that both creates particular expectations as to how to use a bibliography and how to recognize a given bibliographical activity, bibliography as a form of knowledge organization may be able to deal with the effects of modernity on social and cultural communication. I conclude that these ways of understanding bibliographical activity may provide means as to how understand and situate the role of bibliography in the global learning society.

Introduction

Bibliographical activities and knowledge organization activities in general abound in today's modern global learning society. The Internet and its search engines and indexes, digital libraries and archives, and corporate information systems are clearly evidence of this. However, the notion of a 'global learning society' is not without impartiality. There are people and organizations that are against globalization or feel insecure about its consequences. Accordingly, what does it mean to analyze the role of knowledge organization in this global learning society? Is knowledge organization supporting and contributing to legitimate the notion of a global learning society? If not, what is the activity of knowledge organization then? The outcome of such analyses must point to the sociopolitical activities knowledge organization is involved in. But how are we to understand and conceptualize the involvement of knowledge organization in these activities? What does it imply for the theory and practice of knowledge organization? In this paper I intend to put focus on the old activity of bibliography with reference to its role, if any, in the global learning society. I seek to analyze what theoretical underpinning(s) can be established in order to arrive at an appropriate understanding of the relationship between bibliography and human activities based on the production and use of documents (or information) in a variety of spheres in late modern society. The thesis that guides and informs this study is that the shift from print to electronic has contributed to detach bibliography from a larger history of documents and their role in human activity and in society. This has caused a lack of awareness of the role of systems for knowledge organization in the global learning society. For instance, electronic databases seem to rest on an ideology that has supplanted the fact that bibliographies are documents with a particular history embedded in sociopolitical activities. If these activities are not recognized and understood it becomes difficult to argue for and conceptualize the role of knowledge organization in the global learning society. Thus, the connection to a history of documents is still important as this underscores the situatedness of bibliography and not its detachment from the forms of social organization that foster the objects of bibliographical activity; that is, documents.
I argue that by considering bibliography both as a document and a genre produced to support, mediate, and maintain forms of social organization implies that knowledge organization theory needs to integrate into its theory an understanding of what documents do in society in order to be able to better understand and legitimize the practice of knowledge organization in today’s global learning society. Such an understanding may contribute to scrutinize further the sociopolitical activities knowledge organization is involved in and, through this, to better account for the many bibliographical activities still going on nowadays and what we can learn from them as global citizens participating in a globalized world characterized by various means and modes of electronic communication.

Understanding the role of bibliography as suggested above requires that its theory and practice needs to be informed by broader views of the role of documents in human activity. In so far this is achieved, knowledge organization theory can make an important contribution as to how to understand the many bibliographical activities going on the global learning society and how these in the long run serves social, cultural and democratic purposes. This is, however, conditioned by how these activities are made visible to citizens whose social actions depend on access to knowledge materialized in documents.

The discussion and argument develops through four stages. To begin with, I am discussing the relationship between social changes, modernity and bibliography in order to position and rethink the role of bibliography in the global learning society. Having outlined some selected historical bibliographical issues, I move on to analyze what it means to understand the bibliography as a document and a genre in human communication. The final section examines the theoretical and practical perspectives brought about the view of bibliography put forward here in contemporary global learning society.

Social change, modernity, and bibliography

As a form of knowledge organization activity, the role of bibliography in the global society must be addressed in relation to how such a society is understood and described. How we characterize and conceptualize the global society sets the agenda for bibliographical activities in society and culture. Danish historian of bibliography Svend Bruhns puts it this way: “When society changes, so too does the need for literature and bibliographical information. This entails that the condition of society can be read off in bibliographical documents” (Bruhns, 2004, p. 15; my translation). Thus, one may argue, every understanding and theoretical account of bibliography must be located with reference to social changes.

The term used to label the period in the history of Western Europe from the Renaissance until now is modernity. It refers to the establishment of particular forms of social organizations and institutions such as capitalism, science, media, industry, and the nation-state. As a result of this, the organization, surveillance, and control of knowledge or information represent one of the institutional dimensions of modernity (Black, 1998; Black & Brunt, 1999; Giddens, 1990). That is to say, modernity has contributed profoundly to underscore the role of knowledge organization activities in forms of social organization.

A critical aspect in discussions of modernity and the transformations of modern societies is globalization. Globalization is one of the consequences, or an inherent feature, of modernity (Giddens, 1990, p. 63). Globalization is by Giddens characterized as 'action at a distance' (Giddens, 1994, p. 96). That is, what is intended to be of relevance only to (or directed at) a local audience or is locally embedded have, or may have (cf. the cartoons-case in Denmark), global consequences on a political, social, cultural, or economic scale. This is also why the relationship of time and space and the way it is altered is a critical component in and consequence of modernity.
Another consequence of modernity is de-traditionalization. Whereas in traditional societies (e.g. oral societies) knowledge could be acquired with a relatively amount of certainty and no need existed to question that knowledge because it was usually tied to particular forms of social action (e.g. fishing or hunting) and when these actions performed successfully, no need existed to question them. Late modern societies are, however, epistemically characterized by the notions of trust and risk. Our 'market of knowledge' in late modernity is, like various commodities competing, filled with a variety of knowledge claims not all of them true or relevant. Due to a growing specialization in knowledge production, modernity has taught us that a particular case can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives, each of them emphasizing a particular point. But since we are not capable of always to examine claims to knowledge critically, we are left in a position where we have to trust, choose and prioritize some cognitive authorities or experts systems in Giddens's term. We have to make a choice and rely on some expert systems at the expense of others. However, this also implies a risk, a risk we cannot escape but a risk we as humans have to cope with as it forms part our life conditions in late modernity.

The mere presence of search engines and other similar knowledge organization activities made possible by the Internet make up one of the conditions of cultural transmission in late modernity. Search engines underscore the notions of trust and risk. The way they perform is crucial to how we conceive of and use them in everyday life and professional life. In using them we must to a certain extent also trust the search engines and their way of performing. But by trusting them we are at the same time also running a risk because search engines and their labour is shaped by their politics; that is, by how and why they index as they do (Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000).

Concerning the change in cultural and social communication brought about by the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, one of the consequences of 'action at a distance' is that humans have the possibility of being connected to and acting in a variety of spheres of interest differently located in time and space. In terms of communicating and organizing knowledge and culture, it means that humans have a diversity of means and modes of knowledge organization available to them (e.g. search engines, virtual museum websites, online library catalogs, online book stores). This, moreover, entails that humans have to encounter these with a variety of expectations as to their way of performing and possess a kind of cultural capital as to how to recognize these diverse knowledge organization activities.

'Action at a distance' implies further that nation-states have a hard time controlling knowledge. Knowledge and its organization are de-centered in the globalized world. Knowledge organization can bring about or contribute to forms of action in distant locales. For instance, search engines may provide search results, which give critical information about a certain political actions (e.g. the treatment of prisoners in the Abu Ghrab prison in Iraq) but these results may be out of control of the involved (or affected) political agents who do not have an interest in such kind of information becoming publicly known. In relation to this, Slevin (2000, p. 198) argues for the importance of understanding globalization not in terms of economic issues only but also in terms of culture because globalization affects '...the way in which we produce, store and circulate information and other symbolic materials.' Looked upon this way, we may say there is a close connection between social change, modernity and the means and modes of how knowledge is communicated, stored and organized. Our understanding, I argue, of the role of bibliography in the global society, and hence in late modernity, must be situated precisely in light of the effects of globalization has on the production, storing and circulation of information (or knowledge) and other symbolic materials in order to see how and in what
ways the need for knowledge and bibliographic information changes. For instance, a search in Google may provide results from library catalogs or other similar knowledge organization genres (e.g. subject portals). Registering a critical document in one local/national bibliography/catalog/search engine may affect a situation in another locality in the sense that it can give rise to public debate that may affect a policy decision in some distant locality. These two examples suggest how changes in transmission of culture affect the reception of information and other symbolic material because cultural boundaries are not identical to national boundaries. That is, the examples point to how bibliographical activities can be understood as ‘action at a distance’ and, for this reason, as socio-political activities. At the same time, they also point to how we need to understand bibliography in terms of what kind of activities it is performing as a document and what to expect of bibliographical activities and how to recognize them as particular knowledge organization genres.

**Bibliography: 'Just' a list of documents or a tool in social and cultural communication?**

When using the concept 'bibliography' in the following, I take point of departure in enumerative bibliography, that is, bibliography understood as the activity of compiling and listing books, documents, literature, or information (see Stokes, 1969, pp. 25-69). Not that I regard material, historical or textual bibliography as irrelevant for my purpose but rather because enumerative bibliography has more or less been the dominant way of thinking about bibliography in knowledge organization and in library and information studies in general.

The field of bibliography has historically been considered a part of a larger history of books, documents or literature, i.e. historia litteraria (see e.g. Schneider, 1934; Blum, 1980; Wo ledge, 1983), pointing to its involvement in the communication of knowledge materialized and organized in various sorts of texts. With regard to this aspect, Balsamo (1990, p. 1) argues that bibliography historically needs to be looked at in terms of its institutional function carried out within the context of cultural transmission; i.e. not only, if at all, with reference to its technical compilation.

The documentation movement, in particular personified by Paul Otlet, was in the beginning of the 20th Century also interested in bibliography and its role in social communication. Frohmann (2000, p. 15) writes about Paul Otlet that ‘...his belief that world peace and a just, global society depend upon the exercise of rational thought in both the natural and social sciences, led him to the inescapable conclusion that an ideal social order can be realized only by building international institutions dedicated to the organization and communication of knowledge.’ Otlet’s thinking about bibliography and its function in social organization reveals the modernistic view of knowledge as a means to social progress. As a consequence, Otlet was concerned with how to establish a bibliography and an organization of knowledge that could serve mankind in its struggle for an ideal social order. The link to and emphasis on social order as being dependent on communication and organization of knowledge suggests that bibliography to Otlet was not merely a list of documents but that it could be used to maintain and strengthen forms of social organization.

In 1952 Margaret Egan and Jesse Shera proposed a theory of bibliography. They emphasized the relationship of bibliography to social organization, social action, and communication. They were advocating what they labeled ‘a macrocosmic’ approach to bibliography. With this they saw bibliography ‘...as one of the instrumentalities of communication and communication itself as an instrumentality of social organization and action.’ (Egan & Shera, 1952, p. 125) and further 'Bibliography must be looked upon as
being, in effect, the roadbed over which the units of graphic communication move among the various parts of society as they make their contribution to the shaping of societal structure, policy, and action.' (Egan & Shera, 1952, p. 125). In this manner Egan & Shera demonstrated their fundamental belief in a socio-communicative conception of knowledge organization and bibliographical activities.

What can be traced above is a conception of bibliography as part of forms of social organization. Such a conception does not seem to be apparent today when bibliographies are, for instance, published in the form of electronic databases. Conceiving of databases, as being historically and socially detached is not very productive, as this tends to remove bibliographical practice from human activity.

Our understanding of bibliography must obviously be extended to be more than a mere list of documents or information resources. In its broadest sense one may consider a webpage of a company or organization as bibliographical activity as it compiles, lists, and organizes links on that page and, thus, the webpage also mediates particular forms of knowledge or information. Also the digital scholarly edition may be considered a form of bibliography (Dahlström, 2004). Therefore, in order to better understand and conceptualize the role of bibliography in human activity and in the global learning society, the following will try to point out how this may be done by regarding bibliography both as a document and a genre in social and cultural communication.

**Bibliography as document**

The view of documents to be presented comes from rhetoric. In rhetoric communication is viewed as purposeful action. The means (e.g. documents) for achieving a communicative purpose are regarded from the point of view that documents on behalf of both producers and users want to do something in human communication; they want to act, to perform. Looking at documents from a tools perspective means that we can do something with them. We can achieve some kind of goal in some specified communicate situation. We can, for instance, make them talk on behalf of us (Levy, 2001, p. 23). Bibliography as a document implies, then, that it seeks to accomplish something in the world on the part of both producers and users. This activity of bibliography needs to be understood in order to conceptualize its role in society. Otherwise it will tend to operate in disguise and, hence, leave the impression that it is a value-free instrument, a 'mere' list of documents, in social communication. Historically, the purpose of bibliographies was made clear by their producers, whether the purpose was cultural, social, political or religious (Balsamo, 1990). Such an explication of purpose seems to have, if not disappeared altogether, become rather ignored, in particular when it comes to electronic databases. Users may have a hard time examining their purpose. Knowing a particular purpose of a particular document is crucial because it determines what to expect of and consequently also how to use a particular document. If bibliography is documentation of society and culture, we need to know how it performs this documentation activity in the global learning society.

**Social Action: Bibliography as a genre**

Considering the bibliography a genre may contribute to underline the activity of bibliography in society. Rhetorician Carolyn Miller has put forward a concept of genre that positions it in social action (Miller, 1984). Miller suggested understanding the concept of genre as 'typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations' (Miller, 1984, p. 159). This way of alluding to genre implies that it is not only understood with reference to a particular type of text, but also in connection with a particular kind of situation (or activity) that gives rise to the text. Miller (1984, p. 151) argued that "how a [social] understanding of genre can
help account for the ways we encounter, interpret, react to, and create particular texts", and, we may add, how we organize and search for particular texts. In this way, genre theory is concerned with how to recognize and understand particular text types in particular human activities. Emphasis is not only (if at all) on mere text types and their formal textual features/structures. Bazerman (2000, p. 16) puts it this way:

"Genres help us navigate the complex worlds of written communication and symbolic activity, because in recognizing a text type we recognize many things about the institutional and social setting, the activities being proposed, the roles available to writer and reader, the motives, ideas, ideology, and expected content of the document, and where this all might fit in our life"

As for bibliography considered a genre, this entails that in order to understand its role in the modern global learning society, we need to take into account the forms of social organization that give rise to bibliographical activities. Bibliography is a genre that documents recorded human activity. As a genre, bibliography must be recognized for performing such kind of labor and thereby it creates an expectation as to what and how it accomplishes the work it is doing. The global learning society produces various sorts of social action. The problem facing bibliographical activities in the global society is, then, that there are many agents, institutions, and individuals out there all performing some sort of bibliographical work. Genre theory provides a way of dealing communicatively with the consequences of modernity as it recognizes that there are many forms of knowledge and many means of articulating and structuring knowledge in a variety of communicative forms and that different forms of texts organizes human activity (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986; Bazerman, 1988, 1994, 1997, 2003; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Miller, 1984; Winsor, 1999; 2000). If we take such a view on genre and puts bibliography in light of this, it follows that we must be aware of the different kinds of work various bibliographical activities are performing. We must learn how to recognize and what to expect of such different bibliographical activities such as, for instance, Amazon and a digital public library. What kind of social action are they performing on behalf of producers and users? What institutional and social settings develop bibliographical activities? These are the questions we must deal with when considering bibliography a genre in late modernity. It enforces us to look at bibliography as more than a mere list of documents. It enforces us to understand bibliography as yet another consequence of modernity.

Concluding remarks

Understanding the role of bibliography as suggested above requires that its theory and practice needs to be informed by broader views of the role of documents in human activity. Considering bibliography as a document performing a particular communicative activity with a particular purpose and as a genre that both creates particular expectations as to how to use a bibliography and how to recognize a given bibliographical activity, bibliography as a form of knowledge organization may be able to deal with the effects of modernity on social and cultural communication In so far this achieved, knowledge organization theory can make an important contribution as to how to understand the many bibliographical activities going on the global learning society and how these in the long run serve democratic purposes. This is, however, conditioned by how these activities are made visible to citizens whose social actions depend on access to knowledge materialized in documents.
Bibliography
