Visual Knowledge Organization
Towards an International Standard or a Local Institutional Practice?

Abstract
With the aim to digitize visual cultural heritage collections and make them accessible to a broader audience through the Internet, there has been a demand for replacing local knowledge organization (KO) solutions with more international and standardized ones. The argument has been that it is more rational, economical and user friendly; it enhances communication across domains and the user can search for pictures in the same way irrespective of the whereabouts of the local collection. The advantages are obvious. This paper will instead discuss the pitfalls with this development: what might be lost in a process of far-reaching standardization efforts; how local institutional KO solutions might be repressed and knowledge and perspectives invested in those local systems lost.

I wish to make two important points with this paper, firstly that throughout history different institutional settings have developed different ways to collect, manage, and organize pictures. My second point is that this institutional differentiation, when it comes to approaching and describing visual material, has been challenged by digitization. Because digitization creates opportunities for a more global and general access to the material in question, it brings with it certain ambitions to adjust local KO solutions to more standardized KO tools. This paper addresses questions of representation and power; emphasizing how KO tools are embedded with power, and how KO tools and KO practices do not reflect and represent our visual cultural heritage but create it. Empirically the discussion takes its point of departure in a specific, local, institutional setting — The Map and Print Department of The National Library of Sweden. Theoretically the argument is set in a sociocultural, discursive, and domain analytic camp.

Introduction
The digitization of visual cultural heritage collections to make them accessible to a broader audience through the Internet has accentuated the need for more efficient picture indexing tools and retrieval systems. Existing local practices, vocabularies, and indexing tools have been perceived as too specific, exclusive, and too domain-orientated. They have been criticized for not meeting the needs of the general user and limiting the use of the collections (Jörgensen, 1996, 1; 1998, 170–171; 2003, 69–134; Roberts, 1988, 87; Armitage & Enser, 1997, 287, 294; Hollinka et al., 2004, 601, Greenberg, 2001, 921).1

To develop such KO tools there has been a demand for research projects identifying the needs and behaviour of the “average user”.2 Through empirical, cognitive, and perception oriented user studies, researchers are attempting to identify how users in general search for pictures — “in as natural and unconstrained a manner as possible” (Jörgensen,
1996, 2) — and what range of attributes those “general users” tend to use in their search for visual material (Jørgensen, 1998, 164; 2003, 1–7; 203, Choi & Rasmussen, 2003, 499; Hollinka et al., 2004). When identified, the behaviours of, and the attributes asked for by those users, can help to develop more general and standardized tools for picture indexing that can (i) meet the needs of the man on the street, (ii) serve a wide variety of different picture collections, and (iii) enhance cross domain communication (Armitage & Enser, 1997, 287, 294, Jørgensen 1998, 163).

Although this research has advantages — not least in its demand for developing user friendly picture indexing and enhance access to picture collections — this paper criticizes such standardized ambitions based on investigations of how the average user searches for pictures. From a sociocultural and discursive theoretical position, I argue that (i) there is no average user; (ii) information needs and behaviours differ in various institutional settings, (iii) those institutional practices might be a better point of departure for the analysis of picture indexing demands than an analysis of individual users, and (iv) that there is still a need for domain specific solutions.

The sociocultural perspective and the institutional practice

The sociocultural perspective stresses that since the human being is a socially constructed creature, shaped by cultural, linguistic, and material circumstances, no average person — untouched by social conventions and conditions — exists (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 2006; 1991). Different cultural, social, and historical settings, with different tools and material circumstances, will give different experiences and different kinds of knowledge. Stuart Hall describes it as follows: “Knowledge does not operate in a void. It is put to work, through certain technologies and strategies of application, in specific situations, historical contexts and institutional regimes” (Hall, 1997, 49). Consequently, those social settings and tools available will have a decisive impact on how we understand and act in our lives, and, in some circumstance, who we become.

Sociocultural circumstances affect the practices in cultural heritage institutions as well. With different historical traditions, social settings, and material conditions, they will display varying approaches in how to handle, organize, and present cultural items. They will develop different KO solutions; solutions that in the end will frame the way the visual heritage can be presented to, and to some extent understood by, the user. One might say that our cultural heritage is constructed — and not neutrally mediated — through practices and tools used by our cultural heritage institutions.

This sociocultural perspective is far from unknown in the area of Library and Information Science (LIS) and within KO studies. Quite the contrary, in the wake of the linguistic turn within the social sciences and the humanities, many researchers within the field have stressed the importance of paying attention to different cultural and social strategies and solutions in organizing and comprehending knowledge of the world (for instance: Bowker & Leigh Star, 1999; Hjørland, 1997; 2002; Talja et al., 2003; Frohmann, 1994; Olson, 2001). KO systems and classification schemes have been analyzed and their presumptive perspectives have been exposed (Orom, 2003; Hansson, 1999). The consequences — with regard to power — of KO systems favouring some perspectives and disguising others have been analyzed and problematized (Bowker & Leigh Star, 1999; Olson, 2001) and, consequently, KO tools have been regarded as biased and embedded with power (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005).
The library as an institutional setting for picture collections — An example from the National Library of Sweden

In order for me to analyze how picture indexing is affected by social circumstances and institutional practices I chose a specific institutional setting — The Map and Print Department (MPD) of The National Library of Sweden. (For a more comprehensive presentation of this study, see Kjellman, 2006). One reason for this choice was the fact that libraries are not usually associated with the practice of picture management, since books and texts have been the core objects of library commissions. Yet, many libraries have collected and managed picture collections. National libraries in particular can show extremely impressive collections, and The National Library of Sweden is no exception.

So, how has this library specific setting affected the way pictures have been collected, managed and organized? The MPD has actually (i) collected a specific kind of picture material, (ii) developed certain library institution management behaviour towards the material, (iii) and developed specific KO practices. These three aspects have been the focus of my analysis.

The picture material in the collection can be described as being (1) extensive, (2) multifaceted, (3) paper borne, (4) often mass produced and therefore not considered particularly unique or valuable. The library holds millions of objects made in numerous different techniques, with many different functions and with various kinds of motifs. Even material, which from an aesthetic or monetary perspective can be considered not very valuable, has been collected and preserved by the library. One reason for this is of course the law for legal deposits, a unique institutional praxis within the national library setting, which creates conditions for a relatively unreserved form for collecting those pictures that circulate in the day-to-day sphere. It means that the library, to which legal deposits are delivered, operate a unique institutional praxis in the collection of pictures, and that the library, due to that, administers an important and many faceted part of our visual cultural heritage.

Regarding the KO and indexing practices of the material there are at least two aspects worth mentioning here. First: there is a great variation in the cataloguing practices of the material; some collections are very well described in extensive catalogues (especially the older and more unique material) while other collections are treated more rudimentarily. The variation bears witness to the fact that the ordering and indexing tools have evolved historically and pragmatically and thus reflect social and material circumstances, preferences, and focus from different eras. Second: there is in this picture collection a fundamental organizational order which takes its starting point from the identification of people, places, and events; the main categories are portraits, sceneries and historical events. This is an order which in a decisive way distinguishes the library’s indexing procedures and knowledge organizational focal point from, for example, that of museums of various kinds. If the praxis of art museums takes an interest directly in the picture itself as an object, i.e. the material, style, technique, creator of the specific art object; praxis in the library is to orient itself towards that which lies outside the picture, i.e. that which

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3. Not very surprising since it is texts/books and not visual expressions that have been associated with libraries, science, knowledge, and information traditionally, while pictures have been associated with beauty, entertainment, and emotions. W. J. T. Mitchell shows in his book Picture Theory that ever since “Moses denounced the Golden Calf” we have been living in an iconoclasm stressing that it was the spoken or written word that made man into a reflective and rational man, while pictures have been the medium of “the subhuman, the savage, the ‘dumb’ animal, the child, the woman, the masses” (Mitchell, 1994, 2, 24).
the picture refers to, the information or content the picture carries. This is an effect of the institutional practice of the library. The library has, by tradition, focused on text/books and information/knowledge. This orientation has led to a praxis of collecting books and text documents with regard to the content and subjects of the items collected. And a consequence of this focus is that the material and physical aspects of the document are often disregarded, while documenting and informative aspects are emphasized (for a further discussion on libraries’ focus on content and the idea of immateriality of text, documents and information, see Dahlström, 2002, 74; Frohmann, 2004, 6–9; Hayles, 2002, 19).

My investigation showed that the specific institutional setting of this library has developed its own routines and organizational tools emphasizing specific aspects of the visual heritage. However, as mentioned above, when digitizing collections, local KO solutions have been deemed obsolete and in need of replacement, or adjustment, to more national or international standardized solutions. MPD is in this respect no exception. During the last decade, several projects were carried out at the MPD to improve the accessibility of its picture material, not least through digitization and improved KO tools. In those projects there was an ambition to try to achieve broader archive, library, and museum cross domain co-operation by developing shared national vocabularies and indexing tools. The goal has been to develop a joint KO-platform for cultural heritage institutions that provides access to picture material in the same way, with the same KO-tools, irrespective of the whereabouts of the local collection. The development of these projects can be described as a movement from local and internal solutions to a more co-operative and external approach.

Long-term implications of standardization

Standardizing ambitions will, in the long term, have certain consequences. Firstly, different catalogues created within institutional practices are valuable knowledge investments produced and gathered over a long period of time. Not only do they hold valuable information about the items collected, they also bear witness of contemporary interests and preferences; they document the way people once comprehended the material, what they found important to document and what they excluded. A replacement of those catalogues to more standardized solutions will certainly mean an irreparable loss of knowledge. Secondly, a development in that direction will also replace the specific institutional approach — developed within specific settings and invested in organizational praxis — with another perspective representing other preferences and ways of presenting the world. This is the prerequisite for the work of standardization (as the following quotation indicates); the standard you choose will always give priority to someone’s view of the world, and push others into the background: “While unitary documentary languages ensure a maximum of mutual understanding […] they do so by legitimizing a particular ideological and sociopolitical worldview, and by silencing other meanings, voices, and ways of knowing” (Talja et al., 2003, 563). So, the perspective setting the standard will dominate how the visual heritage will be comprehended, and other ways of comprehension will be marginalized. Using the agreed standard will thus limit the ways in which our cultural heritage can be understood and seen.

From this it follows that our KO tools cannot be regarded as neutral — as if they just mediate the world as it is. On the contrary; with these tools we actually create our heritage; with them we construct the present and past of our lives and culture. David Lowenthal, professor of Heritage Studies, gives the following comments on the creative practices of collecting, describing and presenting our cultural heritage:
We still steal, forge, and invent much of our heritage [...] At its best, heritage fabrication is both creative art and act of faith. By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we come from, and to what we belong. Ancestral loyalties rest on fraud as well as truth and foment peril along with pride. We cannot escape dependency on this motley and peccable heritage. But we can learn to face its fictions and forgive its flaws as integral to its strengths. (Lowenthal, 1998, xvii)

As Lowenthal stresses, we cannot choose not to do this, i.e. using tools and practises that bias the representation of our cultural heritage. What we can do is to become aware of our actions and the effects of our chosen tools. A development that enhances more global information and communication strategy with the help of more standardised tools, not bound to domain or nation specific solutions, will in this respect, put local variations at risk. With an example from the tourism and museum industry, Lowenthal argues that we have a development that standardizes — in a Western way — how the cultural heritage from different areas is being exposed:

Most heritage is amassed by particular groups, but media diffusion and global networks make these hoards ever more common coin. [...] Display and tourism layer diverse legacies with common facades. The same multinationals finance restoration in Prague and Peru, using techniques devised in Rome and London. Legacies of nature, prehistory, art, and architecture are hyped in terms ever more alike. [...] The language of heritage that suffuses the world is mainly Western. (Lowenthal, 1998, 5)

Conclusions
Although standardization benefits from rationality and stability — and maximizes mutual understanding — there are negative outcomes as well. In contrast to homogenizing ambitions, I argue for the elaboration of differentiated KO solutions that are sensitive to domain specific demands. During recent years several researchers within the field of LIS, who from experience of standardization of vocabulary in the form of classification systems and other nomenclature always tend to emphasize certain perspectives at the cost of others, have argued for alternative systems based on multi-use, flexibility and openness (Bowker & Leigh Star, 1999; Olson, 2001). Even if this results in a lack of rationality, order and stability, it creates, on the one hand, possibilities for making otherwise marginalized perspectives visible and, on the other hand, an understanding of the constructional nature of knowledge. It is actually in the meeting between different information systems that this constructional ability can be revealed. Bowker & Leigh Star write: “As the information systems of the world expand and flow into each other, and more kinds of people use them for more different things, it becomes harder to hold to pure or universal ideas about representation or information” (Bowker & Leigh Star, 1999, 301). Consequently, the encounter between various KO solutions tends to expose the constructional effects of knowledge representations, while a far developed standardization will run the risk of presenting the world as something stable and universal. Another consequence of this perspective is that our cultural heritage — visual and textual — can no longer be viewed as something that simply is. Instead, it must be seen as constructed through our language, our institutional setting, and our tools. When constructing languages, institutional practices, and KO tools of different kinds, we also construct our heritage. Through these actions we are responsible for whose perspective will be seen, and whose will not.

References


