

Patrick Lambe. *Organising Knowledge: Taxonomies, Knowledge and Organisational Effectiveness*. Oxford: Chandos, 2007. xix, 277 p. ISBN 978-1-84334-228-1 (hbk.); 978-1-84334-227-4 (pbk.)

The knowledge and information world we live in can rarely be described from a single coherent and predictable point of view. In the global economy and mass society, an explosion of knowledge sources, different paradigms and information-seeking behaviors, fruition contexts and access devices are overloading our existence with an incredible amount of signals and stimulations, all competing for our limited attention. Taxonomies are often cited as tools to cope with, organize and make sense of this complex and ambiguous environment.

Leveraging an extensive review of literature from a variety of disciplines, as well as a wide range of relevant real-life case studies, *Organising Knowledge* by Patrick Lambe has the great merit of liberating taxonomies from their recurring obscure and limitative definition, making them living, evolving and working tools to manage knowledge within organizations. Primarily written for knowledge and information managers, this book can help a much larger audience of practitioners and students who wish to design, develop and maintain taxonomies for large-scale coordination and organizational effectiveness both within and across societies. Patrick Lambe opens ours eyes to the fact that, far from being just a synonym for pure hierarchical trees to improve navigation, findability and information retrieval, taxonomies take multiple forms (from lists, to trees, facets and system maps) and play different roles, ranging from basic information organization to more subtle tasks, such as establishing common ground, overcoming boundaries, discovering new opportunities and helping in sense-making.

Over the course of the book, a number of misconceptions haunting taxonomy work are addressed and carefully dispelled. Taxonomy development is often thought to be an abstract task of analyzing and classifying entities, performed in complete isolation. On the contrary, taxonomies are to a large extent products of users' perceptions and worldviews, strongly influenced by the pre-existing information infrastructure. They can also be dangerous tools having the potential to reveal and clarify but also to exclude and conceal critical details that can have a large impact on basic business activities such as managing risk, controlling costs, understanding customers and supporting innovation.

If the first part of the book introduces concepts, provides definitions and challenges wrong assumptions about taxonomies and the work of taxonomy-building, the second one takes us step-by-step through a typical project. From here on, insights become part of practicable frameworks that form the basis of a concrete information-management strategy and process so flexible so as to be used in very different organizational environments and scenarios. Starting from the definition of stakeholders, purpose and scope and ending with deployment, validation and governance, a taxonomy-building project is realistically presented as an iterative and fascinating journey over competing needs, changing goals, mixed cues and technical and cognitive constraints.

Beyond introducing fundamental guiding principles and addressing relevant implementation challenges, *Organising Knowledge* provides a large dose of political and pragmatic advice to make your efforts useful in contributing to the overall knowledge and information infrastructure. Taxonomies, much like architect's blueprints, only represent theory until they are implemented in practice involving real people and real content. As Lambe explains, this step requires crossing over to the other side of the barricade, wearing the user's shoes and constructing an information neighborhood, designing and populating a metadata framework, solving usability issues and successfully dealing with records management and information architecture concerns.

While each single paragraph of the book is packed with valuable advice and real-life experience, I consider the last chapter to be the most intriguing and ground-breaking one. It's only here that taxonomists meet folksonomists and ontologists in a fundamental attempt to write a new page on the relative position between old and emerging classification techniques. In a well-balanced and sober analysis that foregoes excessive enthusiasm in favor of more appropriate considerations about content scale, domain maturity, precision and cost, knowledge infrastructure tools are all arrayed from inexpensive and expressive folksonomies on one side, to the smart, formal, machine-readable but expensive world of ontologies on the other. In light of so many different tools, information infrastructure clearly appears more as a complex dynamic ecosystem than a static overly designed environment. Such a variety of tasks, perspectives, work activities and paradigms calls for a resilient, adaptive and flexible knowledge environment with a minimum of standardization and uniformity. The right mix of tools and approaches can only be deter-

mined case by case, by carefully considering the particular objectives and requirements of the organization while aiming to maximize its overall performance and effectiveness.

Starting from the history of taxonomy-building and ending with the emerging trends in Web technologies, artificial intelligence and social computing, *Organising Knowledge* is thus both a guiding tool and

inspirational reading, not only about taxonomies, but also about effectiveness, collaboration and finding middle ground: exactly the right principles to make your intranet, portal or document management tool a rich, evolving and long-lasting ecosystem.

Emanuele Quintarelli

E-mail: emanuele.quintarelli@gmail.com