Letter to the Editor

What is Knowledge Organization About?

The ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization has recently been launched by the ISKO Scientific Advisory Council (SAC). Its first article has been written by the encyclopedia editor-in-chief, our prolific colleague Birger Hjørland. Appropriately, it aims at setting the notion of "knowledge organization" (KO) itself (Hjørland 2016).

As any article cannot avoid to be biased towards the views of its author, some aspects of this entry have triggered discussion in the SAC mailing list, especially by Kim Veltman and Ingetraut Dahlberg who represent an approach to KO more scientifically oriented, as opposed to sociologically oriented. This is a positive sign of vitality in ISKO organs and the larger KO community.

Hjørland's opening definition of KO is "a field of research, teaching and practice, which is mostly affiliated with library and information science (LIS);" to him, such a field "is about describing, representing, filing and organizing documents and document representations as well as subjects and concepts both by humans and by computer programs." These words are probably not surprising to most readers of this journal, being a well-balanced description of how our field has actually developed in the past decades. As such, they are useful to introduce KO to readers coming from different research traditions. Indeed, as typical in Hjørland's approach, the entry contextually explains that "KO is first and foremost institutionalized in professorships at universities around the world, in teaching and research programs at research institutions and schools of higher education, in scholarly journals," etc. That is, the field of research is viewed here with the eye of sociologists of sciences observing from outside—as it were—its actual discourse community, rather than its theoretical objectives.

On the other hand, this definition may sound too narrow to some, especially as compared to Dahlberg's original conception of KO not just as a part of LIS to be applied in libraries, archives, online information etc. but as a more general and interdisciplinary science. In my own introductions to KO, after mentioning the classical applications to libraries, archives and museums, I often suggest such examples as the subdivisions of knowledge in yellow pages, in school textbooks, in universities or in governments; why a state has a ministry of Economical Development but not one of Psychological Development, or why a pavillion's contents in an international exposition are structured in a certain way also depend on choices of KO.

Hjørland's article does not omit to mention such senses of KO but restricts it to section 4 "Other names and other fields." Here he writes that "KO in a broader sense is concerned with 1) How knowledge is organized in society (e.g., in scholarly disciplines and in the social division of labor) …; 2) How knowledge is organized in scholarly theories, such as biological taxonomies." The author even acknowledges that "there are, of course, mutual interactions between these social KOs and intellectual KOs. KO, in the narrow sense is dependent on KO in the broader sense (i.e., subject knowledge about an intellectual classification; for example, the classification of documents about birds reflects how birds themselves are classified)."

Given that such dependences exist, one wonders whether we should give up aspiring to a more general theory of KO that encompasses both the broader and the narrower senses of the term. For example, knowledge about bagpipes is instantiated not just in published documents on bagpipes but also in police archives, museum specimens, frescos in old churches, puppet collections or folk music associations, which are "documents" in a very broad sense; the concept of bagpipes in a KOS is the only common element having the potential of connecting all these knowledge sources otherwise scattered in very different material carriers (Gnoli 2010).

The "knowledge" in the term KO is usually assumed to be instantiated in documents. This brings us to the old question concerning the nature and limits of documents (Buckland 2014). Is a living tree in a botanical garden, together with its illustration tag, a document? Is any living tree in the field, together with a poster illustrating the local vegetation, a document? As potentially anything can be considered as a document by someone, KO could find itself in the weird position of being a field dealing with anything, just as semiotics is, because anything can be considered as a sign. In this respect, it probably becomes useful to distinguish—as Buckland also does—between objects originally conceived to act as sources of knowledge and objects taken as such only *a-posteriori* like a detective does with clues of a murder.

Whatever the scope of "document" we can agree on, should KO limit itself to "describing, representing, filing and organizing documents and document representations?" Is not knowledge shared by people through orality or gestuality also worthy of being investigated as for its structures? This means the vast majority of knowledge among non-Western populations.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2016-8-668 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

That we usually mean knowledge as it is in documents, I mentioned to Thomas M. Dousa while sitting together on the bus leaving to the visit of Wieliczka mines, during the 2014 International ISKO Conference in Krakow. Tom immediately gave another proof of his vast culture by replying: "yes, unless we want to consider such things as Medieval mnemotechnics ...." This is a great example that opens another wide perspective of enquiry. Were not people like Llull or Bisterfeld dealing with important KO problems (Rossi 2000), despite the fact that Bliss and Dahlberg had not yet come to call them "organization of knowledge?" How can we exclude them from our investigations?

I am not proposing final solutions to demarcate the scope of KO here. Hjørland's article is an excellent new resource to develop our discourse on the nature of KO, as will be the coming articles that will progressively form our Encyclopedia. They stimulate us to further ideas, like the idea that broader senses of the term KO are something worth exploring.

Claudio Gnoli
University of Pavia, Science and Technology Library, via Ferrata 1, I-27100 Pavia, Italy.
claudio.gnoli@unipv.it

References

Buckland, Michael. 2014. "Documentality beyond Documents." *The Monist* 97, no. 2: 179-86.

Gnoli, Claudio. 2010. "Classification Transcends Library Business." *Knowledge Organization* 37: 223-9.

Hjørland, Birger. 2016. "Knowledge Organization (KO)." *ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization*." http://www.isko.org/cyclo/knowledge_organization Also: *Knowledge Organization* 43: 475-84.

Rossi, Paolo. 2000. *Logic and the Art of Memory: The Quest for a Universal Language*. University of Chicago Press.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2016-8-668 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY