
Editorial

Knowledge Organization and the OPAC

More than 25 years have passed since the day we had the exciting, brand-new experience while attending the annual convention of the then American Documentation Institute: on a screen in Philadelphia, PA it was possible to retrieve literature from a rather remote place, probably from Yorcktown Heights, NY – an incredible event at the time – 1964!

Today, every scientist and scholar wishing to do so can have the literature he/she requires displayed on the own PC and perhaps also – in a not too distant future – on the own TV set, and in libraries the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) has become and is increasingly becoming the favorite instrument (if not toy) for online retrieval of available stocks, just as if this were the most natural thing in the world. Not only in the relevant literature can be browsed in this way – one would also like to get through to the knowledge contained in this literature.

But, as happens to be the case with nearly all things in this world: nothing is perfect, and all sorts of problems still await a solution. Just how far have we got in securing adequate and consistent access to the contents of a publication? How can it be realized? Will the use of a thesaurus in retrieval in nonindexed texts prove successful? This is the question explored in this issue by Finnish authors Jaana KRISTENSEN and Kalervo JÄRVELIN (in “The effectiveness of a searching thesaurus in freetext searching in a full-text database”), if for the time being still on a ‘laboratory scale’. Or is consistent indexing, with or without a thesaurus and a classification system, the key to success, as is examined by Peter FURNISS in his contribution “A proposed methodology for examining the provision of subject access in the OPAC”? The wealth of topics concerned and the vast literature pertaining to them are what Winfried GÖDERT and Silke HORNY have chosen to systematically explore and process in a very detailed contribution (“The design of subject access elements in Online Public Access Catalogs”), which we are happy to present to our readers in this issue in unabridged form, as translated from the German by Jacques ZWART.

To those of us planning to participate in the first international ISKO Conference at Darmstadt, Germany,

from August 14-17, 1990, and particularly in the seminar of Charles R. HILDRETH and Karen Markey DRABENSTOTT, this contribution will undoubtedly be a most welcome means to get suitably prepared!

And the summing up? Isn't it like this: the better we know our concepts and succeed in mastering them systematically, the better will we be able to gain control of both old and new knowledge through our Online Public and Personal Access Catalogs (OPPACs). Therefore, the knowledge of concepts – our units of knowledge – and their systematic representability still strikes me as the very heart and soul of everything recognized and done in classification, indexing and organization of knowledge.

This applies also, and particularly, to the topic of the final article in this issue, on which we, too, wish to congratulate its author, our little Chinese colleague Lei ZENG from Wuhan University in the People's Republic of China, soon to be a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh, PA. This contribution, already well known among the circle of her colleagues at the School of Library and Information Science, was selected for the “Orner Award” (an award established in honor of Catherine Ofiesh Orner, a deceased distinguished alumna of SLIS which is given annually for the best scholarly paper in information science). Lei Zeng sent her paper to us on a Macintosh floppy disc, which our PC unfortunately found to be non-compatible. However, a Berlin company was able to write in the pure text via OCR and send us a ‘readable’ disc. The tables and Chinese characters, too, could be (separately) transferred, but they took up so much memory space (4 megabytes!) that the transmission task was too much for our system. (This just as a little hint from experience to anyone interested in such details!).

We are happy that Lei Zeng tackled a subject which years ago was already treated in detail in IC but undoubtedly still contains many unanswered questions – particularly regarding the aforementioned problem of the required intensive preoccupation with our concepts and their necessary as well as facultative conceptual relations. We hope for further contributions in this direction!

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