# The Politics of Knowledge Organization:
Introduction to the Special Issue

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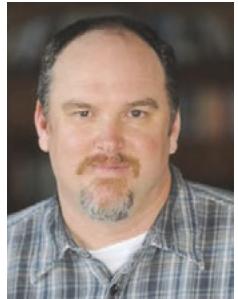
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Abstract: Politics is about the distribution of goods and risks. We can describe the distribution of goods, and we can also characterize those distributions as a kind of inequality. As a baseline definition of "politics of information" we mean the distribution of information goods across different populations. Despite a strong tradition of disciplinary focus in information science, much of the literature is still given over to fairly simple notions of social form and structure. A nascent knowledge organization practice dedicated to social difference is explicitly motivated by justice and nomenclature. Not only is knowledge organization a tool of cultural hegemony, but also it can be read as a product of cultural ordering and bias. Identifying unjust and politically oppressive practice must be part of the path to justice. Understanding the political construction of knowledge organization is essential for the theory of information service in order to build a more just professional practice.

Welcome to *Knowledge Organization*'s special issue on the Politics of Knowledge Organization (KO). What do we mean by the politics of KO? Politics, according to Lasswell's classic (1936) formulation, is "who gets what, when, how." Recognizing that politics is often perceived to be about power, he begins the book with a chapter on elites, stating "The influential are those who get the most of what there is to get. Available values may be classified as deference, income, safety. Those who get the most are elite; the rest are mass" (1). Politics is about the distribution of goods and risks. Laswell states that politics can be described, and that

we can also talk about it in moral ways, stating (1) "the science of politics states conditions; the philosophy of politics justifies preferences." We can describe the distribution of goods, and we can also characterize those distributions as a kind of inequality.

Writing in 1936, Lasswell perhaps did not consider information or access to information in his analysis as a particular social good, but developing notions of the "underserved" within library and information science (LIS) identifies unjustifiable distributions of information as a significant social concern. In many ways, the library profession led the

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way ahead of the LIS research community in creating and defining library services for black readers. Collectors like Arturo Schomburg, Mayme Clayton and myriad other librarians helped shape library services for research in black culture, and by black researchers. However, the treatment of minoritized user populations in the literature of the period as well as mainstream library practice is probably best characterized by efforts to assimilate recent immigrants and ethnic minorities into predominant American culture and its framework of a universal white identity (Honma 2005, 5). Although we see the initial formation of information services as dedicated to African-American users, the research literature itself was still far from articulating black experience as distinct from mainstream American experience, much less joining a description of that experience with the principles of librarianship to develop new kinds of information service based on an explicit recognition of social differentiation.

Which is not to say that information studies (IS, which we are using as the term to indicate the following-on and broadening-out of LIS) was not aware of social context as a way of differentiating user needs and information services. IS, as a discipline and as a group of scholars, has long associated itself with studying the information needs of various groups, particularly in disciplinary and professional settings. Bates and others (1993, 2), in a series of articles that introduced her investigations in the information seeking of humanities scholars, stated "Empirical research into information-seeking behavior among members of various academic and research communities focused almost exclusively on engineering and the sciences during the 1960s, and on the social sciences in the 1970s." The premise of the activity was to describe and produce theory around the "documentary products" of various "domains and professions" (Bates 1999, 1043), "always looking for the red thread of information in the social texture of people's lives" (1048). Following the mid-century period of trying to discover universal laws of information, IS became oriented toward information practices in domains (e.g., Hjørland and Albrechtsen (1995) and Hjørland (1997)) and disciplines. Information was contextual (e.g., the "Information Seeking in Context" conference series, first held in Finland in 1996), though perhaps not yet fully cultural, as it was described within IS.

Also in the 1990s, economists of information such as Hal Varian, founding dean of Berkeley's School of Information Management and Systems (now School of Information) and now chief economist at Google, started a series of projects aimed at market segmentation for information goods, which he defined (2000, 137) as "a good that can be distributed in digital form. Examples are text, images, sounds, video, software." Varian more popularly argued in (1998) for "versioning," that is (2000, 137-38), "offering a product

line of variations on the same underlying good. The product line is designed so as to appeal to different market segments, thereby selling at a high price to those who have a high value for the product, and a low price to those who value it less." For more traditional scholars of information studies, the framework for understanding the distribution of information was one based on need or relevance and they were uncomfortable with segmentations based on the ability to pay. But such approaches accompanied the new economic and political realities in information, and with the rise of Google, in knowledge organization. While traditional forms of IS were grasping towards social contexts based on domains and professions, the realm of commercial information services was obliterating the affirmation of social difference based on cultural identity and developing notions of elite based solely on the ability to pay. For-profit information services cares about the ability to pay, not about social identity, but of course the inability to pay premium prices maps back onto pre-existing social difference, this time in an oppressive way.

Implicit in these examples are illustrations of the definition of "politics" or the "political economy" of information and KO. Following Lasswell, for a baseline definition of "politics of information" we mean the distribution of information goods across different populations. We can distinguish between two kinds of unjust distribution:

- The problem of "unequal information distribution:" This occurs when two groups of presumed equal ability receive unequal distribution of information services. Consider the possibility of two different communities that are generally similar in terms of population, demographics, income, educational attainment, etc., but with different levels of information service, such as access to high quality libraries, book stores, schooling, etc. This is the way that school districts or neighborhoods are often popularly compared, one with "good schools" and the other with "bad schools," where the schooling (teaching, etc.) itself is the presumed independent variable that accounts for different levels of educational attainment, such as high school graduation rates or scoring on high school graduation exams. In other regards, the neighborhoods are presumed to be comparable.
- The problem of "inequitable information distribution:" This is the situation, less common in the popular mind, of different groups having different kinds of need, vulnerability or requiring a particular kind of service. This problem is commonly encountered in the arena of special education, where a student receives an individual education plan that tailors instruction and other accommodations to the student's particular need. For information services that are directed to communities rather than tailored to individuals, community needs may be resources

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that reflect localized cultural identities, practices or expertise, or some other variation that results in resources or methods of accessing those resources.

Despite a strong tradition of disciplinary focus in IS, much of the literature is still given over to fairly simple notions of social form and structure. This may be because of a common implicit attitude to a general social unity and civic cohesion present in the United States political discourse. Appeals to such a tradition is easily found in the literature discussing library services, with popular statements such as (Lankes 2011) "the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities," certainly a welcome refocus on the social rather than the technological orientation that has dominated much of the literature for the last twenty-five years. But the concept of community is still relatively underdeveloped, as well as how they relate to epistemic dimensions such as what they know, what information they use, and how they seek it. The predominant mode of interpreting "community" within the LIS context is still around disciplinary knowledge (e.g., academic vs. public, or art history vs. engineering) rather than the categories associated with cultural pluralism or social justice, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or class. Such generally undifferentiated accounts of social formation lead to concepts of the "underserved" and "under-representation" that is present in much of information policy and in the delivery of information services, and their tacit appeal to the inequality theory of information distribution. Everyone should get a basic level of information service, so the thinking goes, and the problem in poor neighborhoods and regions is the problem of absent libraries or rudimentary information service.

Thanks to the work of Berman (1971) and Olson (2001), however, there is a nascent KO practice dedicated to social difference. Their work was explicitly motivated by justice, and addressed the nomenclature problem in KO: that different communities of people used different terminology to identify and describe concepts, people, organizations and creative works, and that marginalized groups were excluded. Berman, specifically addressing problems associated with the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, identifies the prototypical user of controlled vocabularies, stating (ix):

> headings that deal with people and cultures–in short, with humanity–the LC list can only 'satisfy' parochial, jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle and higher-income brackets, largely domiciled in suburbia, fundamentally loyal to the Established Order, and heavily imbued with the transcendent, incomparable glory of Western civilization.

Olson focuses on the difficulties faced by the marginalized communities (639):

> A large body of research and recorded experience has documented biases of gender, sexuality, race, age, ability, ethnicity, language, and religion as limits to the expression of diversity in naming information for retrieval. These limits, of course, have direct, practical consequences for users of libraries.... Library users seeking material on topics outside of a traditional mainstream will meet with frustration in finding nothing, or they will find something but miss important relevant materials. Effective searching for marginalized topics will require greater ingenuity and serendipity than searching for mainstream topics.

Olson's essay is also notable for "trac[ing] the presumption of universality from its formal adoption into library practice in the nineteenth century to its manifestation in today's libraries by examining" (640) subject headings and classifications, and the "singular public" (642) that defines the selection, naming and arrangement of concepts in those systems. Olson's work supports a theory on the inequitable distribution of information by claiming the presence of social groups that use naming practices that are incompatible with majoritarian (white, etc.) culture. Berman and Olson both pit universalism against a pluralism where an alien other is marked both by cultural difference and also by linguistic difference. Unposed questions here are to what degree does cultural variation correspond with variations in language or in knowledge and ways of knowing and thinking? To what degree do we accomodate or exclude difference? Can KO be a mechanism for communicating across social formations of knowledge and language use? Perhaps our KO, once viewed in the light of mediating access across forms of knowledge, can shed its biases and be more ameliorative by giving voice to the alien other?

Lasswell describes the problem of politics as the problem of distribution, but the social differences identified by Berman and Olson are not merely problems of language and the distribution of information, but are actually also problems of justice. Young (2011, 3) states in her foundational text that "instead of focusing on distribution, a conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression ... where social group differences exist and some groups are privileged while others are oppressed, social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences in order to undermine oppression." An examination of the politics of KO need reference not only social difference, but the fact that many of the social formations of interest are the result of historic and present day oppression, and are fundamentally unjust. Developing an understanding of these formations requires relatively

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more sophistication in our use of social theory and history, which is provided by Honma (2005) and Noble (2018), both of which reference race as a key difference.

For Honma, not only is race a generally unaccounted problem in the theory and practice of librarianship, but it also provides the basis for advancing a framework for reconceptualizing an information practice that accounts for epistemic difference and injustice. Building on the work of Sandra Harding, Honma states (16) that "all Western sciences and Western knowledge systems need to be considered as local knowledges so that the work of nonwestern and nonwhite scholars are not simply viewed as peripheral fields of thought ... If we view the current state of LIS as a local knowledge system, particularly as one that has been dictated through the voice of whiteness, we must do better in finding nonwhite local systems of knowledge that more adequately encompass the populations that have been silenced, marginalized, and overlooked." The politics of information advanced by Honma models sociality as an open field of relational difference to include erased groups, with no center, the position generally occupied by western science and knowledge. Noble provides direct evidence of the mechanism of injustice present in Google as a KO system, by erasing local knowledge and substituting racialized and oppressive knowledge structures in their place. KO, as she describes it, is less a mechanism for locating relevant information, and instead is an active instrument of social oppression and exclusion, and an act of cultural erasure in pursuit of a policy of white universality. Writing on KO representations of Indigenous knowledge, (Duarte and Belarde-Lewis 2015) asks information professionals to consider how (679) "epistemological distinctiveness relates to the cataloging and classification of knowledge," by (687) "open[ing] our awareness to how colonization works through subjugation of Indigenous documents and knowledge artifacts." A politics of KO must account not only for simple social, linguistic, or epistemological difference, but also a difference caused by or exacerbated by political oppression.

Finally, it is interesting to note the extent to which not only is KO a tool of cultural hegemony, but also how it can be read as a product of cultural ordering and bias. Tennis (2012), for example, traces how "eugenics" moves within a classification from a concept in biological science prior to 1960, to a concept within the social sciences starting in the 1970s. Adler (2017) relates the interactions of Library of Congress' treatment of "homosexuality," "sexual perversion," and "sexual deviation" within its collection and KO practices. Information services and KO not only are tools for the reproduction of social difference and bias, but also the material product of tacit oppressive practice and the expression of it. Classifications and other KO products (including Google autocomplete functions, e.g.) reveal prevailing systems of thought, and can show the position of indi-

vidual concepts in constellation with other concepts in ways that reveal their bias and historic development.

In this short essay we have attempted to describe three ways KO might be considered political: in the asymmetrical definition and distribution of KO services across social groups, their interaction and reproduction of social bias and oppression, and briefly two examples of how KO systems can be read as a source of evidence regarding the deployment of socially and politically oppressive concepts. We have, given our space limitations, not tried to be comprehensive, but only indicate one, short, path through texts we have found formative in our thinking about politics and KO. Honma was modest in 2005 when he claimed (20) that for IS the "path to [justice] has yet to be charted, but opening up a space for us to critically dialogue about various interlocking systems of oppression and their intersections with the field of LIS is the first step." Identifying unjust and politically oppressive practice in KO must be part of that path. Understanding the political construction of KO is essential for the theory of information service in order to build a more just professional practice. An ameliorative and inclusive KO will not only result in more effective retrieval of relevant information, but is essential to realize the full benefit of our collections to transform lives and society by interacting with the full range of recorded knowledge and cultural expression.

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