

# Reviews

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Reviews Editor

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Genre theory, originating from rhetoric, linguistics, and literature, has shed light onto a wide variety of areas in library and information science (LIS) and archival science. The genre-themed collections range from a special section of the *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* (2001), a special issue of *Information Technology and People* (2005), a special issue of *Archival Science* (2012), to a book titled *Genres on the Web: Computational Models and Empirical Studies* (2010), and the most recent book *Genre Theory in Information Studies* (2015) edited by Jack Andersen.

In his review paper published in *Annual Review for Information Science and Technology (ARIST)* (2008), Jack Andersen points out that genre-related research in LIS has been carried out in relation to knowledge organization, web design, and digital communication, particularly the growth of digital media. Informed by rhetorical genre theory and its concepts, the eight chapters in the book *Genre Theory in Information Studies* (2015) brought us genre-related research from more avenues. Chapter 2 by Jack Andersen gears toward the area of knowledge organization; Chapter 3 by Melanie Feinberg approaches information retrieval system design; Chapter 4 by Pamela J. McKenzie, Chapter 5 by Heather MacNeil, and Chapter 7 by Laura Skouvig are all about organizational communication; like Chapter 5, Chapter 6 by Fiorella Foscarini is from archival studies but more addresses organizational records; Chapter 1 by Jack Andersen is an overview of genre theory per se, while Chapter 8 by Sune Auken further discusses genre theory from the literary genre perspective. This book can be taken as a collective, continued endeavor on genre-related research in LIS since Andersen's *ARIST* paper.

Rhetorical genre theory, as reviewed by Andersen in Chapter 1 "What Genre Theory Does," concerns the texts and their social and communicative effects, and is the theoretical framework of other chapters in this book. Rhetorical genre theory emerged from Miller's article *Genre as Social Action*, where genre is treated as (Miller 1994, 31) "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations." It is more concerned with the action a text is used to accom-

plish rather than its substance or form (Bazerman 2004; Orlikowski and Yates 1994). Formal and thematic sides of genre can add to and expand the contemporary genre research which is focused on functional aspects of genre, as claimed by Auken in Chapter 8 "Utterance and Function in Genre Studies: A Literary Perspective." Nevertheless, with the emphasis on function, the texts can be viewed within a broader context of typified communicative situations and human activities in which the texts are employed.

Chapter 2 "Re-describing Knowledge Organization—A Genre and Activity-Based View" explores the interrelationships between genre theory and activity theory and interprets knowledge organization from the perspective of genre and activity systems. Andersen particularly discusses what genre as social action entails for knowledge organization, the notion of typification, the implication of the user-oriented nature of genre, and the activity-based view of genre, and therefore, enables us to view knowledge organization as a social and cultural practice rather than simply a distinct professional practice. Genre opens up a way to understand the user collectives toward which the knowledge organization activity is oriented, the bibliographic records as both the product and tool of the knowledge organization activity, and ultimately the concrete situations and activities in which the knowledge organization activity is located. "Looking at knowledge organization as social action takes us in directions where [we] will have to locate and understand who carries out social actions, what is at stake in these forms of social action and what are the broader institutional structures for social action" (24-25). Andersen proposes that the concept of literary warrant should be expanded with a concept of genre warrant, "the words and concepts chosen may not necessarily appear in the single forms of texts but in the very actions (e.g., instructing, giving orders, advising, synthesizing, lecturing, explaining, exploring) the texts accomplish on behalf of their user communities" (26). Genre warrant seems to be in line with cultural warrant, organizational warrant, and user warrant, and switches the focus from the text itself to actions working behind the text and beyond.

In addition to literary warrant, Andersen reinterprets the concept of bias in this chapter. Knowledge organization is social action based in typified and recurrent situations rather than classification and categorization only. It

makes us aware of “the social and cultural effects of knowledge organization activity” and “the choices, motivations, or interests guiding knowledge organization activity,” and “as a form of typification and social action, bias drives knowledge organization” (29). Social action can never be understood without people performing the action, so how users employ genres and other tools to achieve their goals in activities also play a significant role.

Incorporating activity theory “not only suggests that knowledge is organized through typified (genred) human interactions before entering a particular form of knowledge organization but also forces us to see how and in what ways our idea of knowledge organization in information studies connects to human activity consisting of subjects, tools, and an object forming the activity” (33). In view of genre and activity theory, knowledge organization is both an object (outcome) of an activity system and a tool (meditational means) in human activity in a triangle consisting of subject and object mediated by a tool. When knowledge organization is an object, the designer is the subject, while texts, concepts, culture, institutions, information systems, users, and other activity systems are the tools. When knowledge organization serves as the tool, user collectives are the subject, while locating arguments, organizing and coordinating activity turn out to be the objects.

Andersen’s analysis of knowledge organization as social activity, drawn on theories of genre and activity systems, can be traced back to his dissertation research (2004). Andersen looked at what genre and activity systems would imply for knowledge organization: “knowledge organization cannot ignore the role played by social organization and its genre and activity systems, since that is the sphere where the production, dissemination and use of documents take place” (Andersen 2004, 93). He also looked at what knowledge organization would imply for genre and activity systems, “by incorporating the notion of the organization and representation of documents in information systems for the purpose of retrieval and documentation, theories of genre and activity systems are able to offer a rich picture for an understanding of the social role of writing and documentation activities in school and society” (94). As noted in Andersen’s *ARIST* paper, more theoretical and empirical work is needed to further develop and exemplify his argument about knowledge organization in relation to social organization, genre, and activity systems. In Chapter 2 of this book, Andersen states that knowledge organization, as a genre, can be conceived as both a tool and an object in genred human activities, and that knowledge organization can contribute to constructing genre and activity systems as well as aid them, thus further developing his earlier argument. In light of genre theory and activity theory, we can see what knowl-

edge organization looks like as social action and what other actions “knowledge organization may generate, is connected to or is constituted by” (38).

In Chapter 3 “Genres Without Writers: Information Systems and Distributed Authorship” by Feinberg, it is asserted, evolved from Andersen’s (2008), that a digital library is a genre through enabling certain actions while constraining others, without purposeful actions of specific writers but rules and standards in governing the organization of information in information retrieval systems. From a direct finding mode to a more open browsing mode, and further to keyword search as primary access mode, when what users can accomplish by using a digital library has changed, the genre of digital library or catalog is changed accordingly. That corresponds to Andersen’s (2002) statement of bibliographic record as genre where data elements each tell a history, each perform a particular task, and each reveal something about the work they are representing and materializing.

Chapter 4 “Genre and Typified Activities in Informing and Personal Information Management” by McKenzie states the evolvment and development of genres in two settings: information seeking and informing in a clinic, and personal information management in the household. Chapter 5 “The Role of Calendars in Constructing a Community of Historical Workers in the Public Records Office of Great Britain ca. 1850s-1950s” by MacNeil traces the rise and decline of the calendars, as an archival finding aid, within the Public Records Office of Great Britain between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. Chapter 7 “Genres of War: Informing a City” by Skouvig traces genre as the communication of information in Copenhagen during the siege in the beginning of nineteenth century. These three chapters approach genre through case studies and provide more evidence that genres can tell us about established communicative practices of a community, and changes in genres over time can reveal changes in the structuring of that community’s communicative practices. It echoes the concept of *de facto* genres, everyday genres, if not limited to knowledge organization.

In Chapter 6 “Organizational Records as Genres: An Analysis of the “Documentary Reality” of Organizations from the Perspectives of Diplomats, Records Management, and Rhetorical Genre Studies” by Foscarini, with genre approach, the scope of diplomats is expanded and new, and more sophisticated tools are provided for records management to explore the making, use, and transmission of records in the workplace. It is interesting to read diplomats, an analytical technique of documentary forms and functions in archival science, and its intersection with rhetorical genre studies. We can see genre theory could be related to some other theories, such as

activity theory, relevance theory, mental model, and a combination or integration of the two would cast more insight.

As early as the 2001 ASIS SIG/CR Workshop, Davenport proposed that genre analysis should be included as part of the agenda for future classification research. Genre has been studied as one more dimension to subject or topic, as a document descriptor in indexing and as a facet in searching and browsing. “We suggest that enhancing document representations by incorporating non-topical characteristics of the documents that signal their purpose—that is, their genre—will enrich document (and query) representations in such a way that they resonate more truly with the information need of a user as situated in a particular context” (Crowston and Kwasnik 2003, 348). An attempt to systematically examine the power of genre in knowledge organization ranges from the conceptions and treatment of genre in four sets of modern Anglo-American cataloging rules spanning 171 years (Lee and Zhang 2013) to the redefining of essence versus context through stability and fluidity of genre classes in three editions of *Dewey Decimal Classification* (Zhang and Olson 2015). Genre has been found to first appear as a vague and minor concern in Panizzi’s 91 Rules and gradually became an important attribute of the work entity and a useful indexing element in Resource Description and Access (RDA)—its significance has increased over time, though sporadically addressed across rules. From another aspect, genre can serve as a lens to better understand essences, contexts, and concepts and their manifestations and classes since genre has the stability of the essential characteristics that define essence and the fluidity of differing circumstances that define context; therefore, the stable-fluid ambivalence of genre classes reflects that knowledge organization is essentially a genre, a social action. In fact, genre set, genre system, genre repertoire, and other genre-related concepts “indicate a genre can never exist independent of other related genres, its agents who routinely use the genre, the domain where the genre grows and evolves, and the task the genre intends to accomplish” (Zhang and Olson 2015, 544). From his 2004 dissertation to his 2015 book, Andersen endeavors to enrich the picture of the relationship between knowledge organization and social organization, and knowledge organization can be viewed as social action, through genre and activity systems, so as to move from a traditional LIS conception of knowledge organization to knowledge organization as a part of the broader social organization. That echoes the current trend in knowledge organization research that attempts to better understand its social and cultural dimensions and approach knowledge organization from the perspectives of epistemology and ontology.

This book has demonstrated what rhetorical genre theory can contribute to library and information science and archival science from various points of view. The chapters are stretching genre in directions that may be far beyond the scholars of rhetorical genre theory can ever expect or imagine. However, there are no chapters that are specifically related to web design and digital communication, two LIS areas highly relevant to genre research as summarized in Andersen’s *ARIST* paper. Genre has informed the design and use of personal home pages, web newspapers, weblogs, and other digital genres, and with the increasing growth of digital media, more recent research in this regard can be anticipated with a basis in theory of rhetorical genre. This book has opened a potential avenue for genre research in library and information science in general and in knowledge organization in particular, regarding the social and cultural dimensions of knowledge organization. Genre provides a new path to research knowledge organization in theory as well as a guide to improve knowledge organization systems in empirical study.

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