

# Knowledge Organization—Making a Difference.

## Report of the Fourth Biennial Conference of ISKO UK (London, 13-14 July 2015)

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Stella Dextre Clarke has until recently been an independent consultant specializing in the design of thesauri and other types of knowledge organization system. She is probably best known for her work on the national and international standards BS 8723 (Structured Vocabularies for Information Retrieval) and ISO 25964 (Thesauri and Interoperability with other Vocabularies). Her work on standards and on taxonomy development was recognized in 2006 when she won the Tony Kent Strix Award for outstanding achievement in information retrieval. Nowadays she is active as Vice-chair of ISKO UK and Vice-President of ISKO.



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With a theme celebrating the impact of knowledge organization (KO) on society, scholarship and progress, this conference attracted speakers and audience from all over the world—New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, Thailand, Brazil and USA—as well as our closer colleagues in diverse countries of Europe. After an informal social meet-up on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July, two days of presentations, debate and discussion were held in the convenient venue of University College London. Topics ranged from the organization of radio archives and image metadata to the tools for linking vocabularies and other resources, the intrinsic value of information and the need for an ethical stance in performing our duties.

In his opening address Alan Gilchrist, whose personal KO career spans over 50 years, took us back to the dawn of civilization with his long perspective on the development of KO. After a racy *tour de force* through the advances that KO has enabled in the past, we reached current developments such as the Semantic Web and linked data. Gilchrist drew attention to the abstract nature of the matters studied in our field (information, knowledge, language) and the fundamental necessity for creating and applying models that must be continuously updated. He warned also of today's urgent need to tackle unstructured information and concluded (Gilchrist 2015, #): "In our technological age, suffering from communication overload, we must not forget that there is still much to do and that we are still capable of making a difference."

That first keynote, highlighting what KO has done for us in the past, was balanced by another from Dagobert Soergel addressing the role that KO should have in the future, including "the opportunities that lie ahead for KO, and what difference it could really make for economic, scientific and/or cultural development." Soergel (2015, 401) was clear and resolute:

Knowledge organization is needed everywhere. Its importance is marked by its pervasiveness. This paper will show many areas, tasks, and functions where proper use of knowledge organization provides support for daily operations (such as treating patients, making a loan), learning and understanding, for sensemaking and meaning making, for decision making, for inference, and for discovery by people and computer programs and thereby will make the world a better place.

As well as sketching a wealth of opportunities for the application of KO in tomorrow's society, Soergel had some messages for KO professionals. He'd like to see us apply a "principle of unification," in which we seek commonalities and convergences between different KO tools and schemes, while exercising discrimination when it is needed. There's a big opportunity for KO to expand into new applications, he says, but to grasp this potential our people will need enhanced skills and competences. Will

his vision of the future come to pass? The answer is in our own hands.

Another of the highlights attracting over 100 to register for our conference was a talk from star speaker Patrick Lambe inspired by Paul Otlet, pointing to a more proactive role for knowledge organization professionals. Imagine our consternation in London a week before the event, however, when from a holiday in Ireland our star reported that his leg was in plaster after a hiking accident. Not a life-threatening disaster, fortunately, but “No travel” said the doctors. Quick as a flash, our speaker brought his considerable media skills to the fore, and delivered his ISKO UK presentation by video. It was another *tour de force*, magically weaving an ethical debate into Lambe’s account of some historical developments, and his exhortations to the KO profession. Apart from dazzling the audience at our conference, the video is now online on YouTube <https://youtu.be/eT5WBSEfph8> for all of us (and our students) to enjoy.

As usual the Call for Papers had attracted more submissions than comfortably fit into two days, even after the weaker proposals had been weeded out. What to do?:

- Reduce presentation time to just 20 minutes? (Often this is not long enough to deliver a useful message on an important topic.)
- Limit the time available for questions/discussion? (This drastically curtails the value of attending a conference.)
- Cut out all but the most reliable speakers? (This means rejecting some aspirants to the KO profession who may find no other opportunity to present their work.)
- Divide the programme between parallel sessions? (Never popular with the audience, who have to make tough choices.)
- Extend the programme to three days? (The venue costs and conference fees have to rise proportionally, and many employers will not allow staff 3 days away from the office.)

A compromise has to be found for every conference programme. For this ISKO UK event, only papers strictly relevant to the conference theme were accepted, and so only two of the sessions had to be presented in parallel.

Even so, discussion time after some of the presentations was shorter than we all wished. In compensation, debate was welcomed during a lively panel session on “What can “we” do to make a difference?” This stimulated many suggestions for how the field and the profession of KO can and should advance.

One surprise emerged when the call for papers went out in late 2014. Given a theme inviting researchers to present work that demonstrates the value of KO for society, scholarship and progress, we expected a great many submissions from ISKO members keen to show off the impact of their work. In fact we received just 34—far fewer than usual. Is this a sign that university budgets for travel and conference attendance are shrinking? Is it that London holds little attraction for seasoned KO professionals? Or is it that some of us doubt the value of our work? We’ll never know the answer, but let’s hope the latter is unthinkable!

Slides of all 23 presentations are now available on the conference website at <http://www.iskouk.org/content/isko-uk-conference-2015-knowledge-organization-making-difference>, along with audio recordings in most cases. You can download a full paper for 13 of these, including the four to be published in *Knowledge Organization*. And you can find the details of our five posters.

As our Chairman Judi Vernau concluded, this conference showed that knowledge organization and the KO profession are indeed making a difference. They have done so in the past; and have the opportunity to achieve more in the future. ISKO needs to play a key role in supporting the researchers, teachers and practitioners to realize our potential. All of us should use the courage of our convictions to step forward and seize the opportunities.

## References

- Gilchrist, Alan. 2015. "Reflections on Knowledge, Communication and Knowledge Organization." *Knowledge Organization* 42: 456-69.
- Soergel, Dagobert. 2015. "Unleashing the Power of Data Through Organization: Structure and Connections for Meaning, Learning, and Discovery." *Knowledge Organization* 42: 401-27.