

# Provocations of Process in Critical Knowledge Organization Work

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that the most provocative work in critical knowledge organization is happening at the level of *process*. I present three persistent assumptions about knowledge organization work and current provocations that challenge them. First, that systems should be seamless and not reveal the work behind them. Second, that systems should achieve a single authorial voice through consistency, precedent, and patterns. Third, that knowledge organization systems are best applied with minimal interpretation on the part of the worker. The provocations against each of these assumptions come from current and highly regarded work in the field, indicating greater respect and visibility for the processes behind knowledge organization systems.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The common image of critical knowledge organization is reparative or liberatory work achieved through more equitable, authentic, and respectful terminology and term relationships. In this paper, I argue that the most provocative work in critical knowledge organization is happening at the level of *process*. Knowledge organization, as infrastructure, tends to be invisible until it does not work, meaning that those most unjustly treated by colonial, cisgenderopatriarchal worldviews are positioned to notice the operations of a controlled vocabulary or classification while those benefitting from those power relations do not (Star 1999; Huvila 2009; Lee 2015; Bullard et al. 2022). This essay engages in a second, deeper layer of invisibility: the design work that goes into the system itself. These two types of invisibility are entangled; a seamless experience of information retrieval makes it easier to assume that the system is fully automated

and ignorance of the design and maintenance labour of the system makes it easier for users to assume the system is objective or inevitable.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Critical approaches are fundamentally about questioning the assumptions we treat as given and applying a power analysis to the persistence of those assumptions. In knowledge organization, common assumptions amenable to a critical analysis are that our dominant systems are accurate, objective, inevitable, and innocent. Critical knowledge organization work is often about identifying and exposing the harms and distortions of these existing systems. Berman (1971) provided an extensive review of such issues in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) and Olson and Schlegl (2001) provided a meta-analysis of further critiques of subject access through to 1999. As description and documenta-

tion, critical knowledge organization identifies points of failure and the power relations that are reified and exacerbated by our systems, often identifying colonialism (Pacey 1989; Dudley 2017; Biswas 2018; Bullard et al. 2022), racism (Howard and Knowlton 2018; Noble 2018; Baron and Gross 2021), sexism (Olson 2002), and heterosexism and transphobia (Christensen 2008; Howard and Knowlton 2018; Watson 2020; Henry et al. 2022) as the dominant logics reproduced by subject access systems in particular.

Taking such critiques as a point of departure, a productive realm for critical knowledge organization studies is the repair of such systems, remedying what was identified through the descriptive approach. Scholars such as Berman and Olson have typically done both and paired their analysis with proposals for repair and intervention into dominant systems including Library of Congress Subject Headings (Olson 2000; Berman and Gross 2017) and the Dewey Decimal System (Olson 1998). Direct critiques of current standards can intervene in common practice (Billey et al. 2014; Billey and Drabinski 2017), impacting practices at hundreds or thousands of libraries and cultural heritage institutions following such guidelines. Alongside these efforts to ameliorate the harm of discriminatory systems, critical knowledge organizations scholars propose challenges to a “politics of correction,” advocating for instruction and dialogue (Drabinski 2013) and admitting the limitations of subject-based access for identity (Stahl 2024).

An alternate approach to repair is liberation from reliance on centralized and colonial systems, producing community-centred systems that prioritize practices and cultural perspective otherwise marginalized (Allard et al. 2021; Berg et al. 2022), such as Indigenous ways of knowing (Doyle et al. 2015; Littletree and Metoyer 2015) and queer identities (Bullard et al. 2020; Homosaurus 2020). These liberatory projects often champion a departure from universality, embracing a minority or multiplicity of viewpoints with a clear set of values and priorities, aligning to a contemporary model of knowledge organization in which bias is not denied but identified (Feinberg 2007). These liberatory projects are often built alongside and within a particular collection, such as in the systems built for archiveofourown.org (Price 2019) but may also be networked and interoperable with distributed and diverse collections (Homosaurus 2020).

Both the repair and liberation frameworks of critical knowledge organization engage with practical and present use of systems. Distinct from general approaches to assessing and improving the quality of knowledge organization infrastructure (Snow 2017), the critical approaches address how the (dys)function of such systems are not evenly distributed, such that they are invisible (Star and Strauss 1999) and provide a seamless user experience for some users while those made marginal experience friction and aliena-

tion. While such work aims to produce outcomes in the form of more just classes, terms, and term relationships, they often engage in criticisms of processes, power, and epistemology, linking the harms of the status quo to the histories and commitments of dominant systems. A few such works connect the outward harms of the systems with the internal structures of labour, noting that structures of automation, precarity, outsourcing, and reliance on vendor metadata are inhospitable to the types of attention and accountability required for repair or liberatory practices.

The remainder of this paper will expand on the overlap between critical knowledge organization concerned about knowledge organization systems as they exist in the world (as schedules, term lists, or schemas) and critical knowledge organization about the processes that produce the system as it exists.

### 3.0 Assumptions and provocations on process

Throughout this section, I introduce critical knowledge organization processes through the assumptions they challenge. Many of these assumptions are so ingrained into dominant knowledge organization practice that they can be perpetuated without being explicitly stated, and as such it is easier to identify these principles through criticisms or provocations against them.

#### 3.1 Seamlessness

A common goal of user experience design – broader than but applicable to knowledge organization design – is the achievement of a “seamless” experience for the user. Seamless systems are those in which the user experiences no friction, unintuitive steps, or awkward workarounds in their operation of the product. The metaphor draws from physical construction methods (sewing, soldering) in which skillful joining of multiple pieces will leave little evidence of that intervention in the material.

As with the subtle seam of joined fabric or metal, seamlessness is an illusion or a quality of perception rather than a characteristic of the system itself. Behind any system approaching this status is an un(der)acknowledged set of practices stitching together different and changing data sources, standards, and technologies, known variously as articulation work (Schmidt and Bannon 1992) or, when the illusion is of an automated system, heteromation (Ekbia and Nardi 2014). Scholars of articulation work and heteromation point to the enormous of labour that goes into making end user experiences seamless and, especially for heteromation, to keeping the user from perceiving that very labour.

The work of the *Unseen Labor* embroidery project is a particularly apt provocation against the idea of seamlessness. Sourced from an engaged community of catalogue and

metadata workers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, *Unseen Labor* is an embroidery collection exemplifying the creativity, beauty, and humour of their behind-the-scenes work (Kardos 2022; 2023). Contrasting against seamlessness, in which the stitching vanishes within the joined fabric, embroidery is an artwork of visible stitches. Projects like *Unseen Labor* flip the background and foreground of library work, putting the detail-oriented and otherwise invisible work of cataloguing into exhibit boxes and displays.

### 3.2 Coherent authorial voice

Arguing that a knowledge organization system has a voice was once itself a provocation (Feinberg 2007), posing the idea that systems had something to communicate as well as a function to serve in the retrieval of objects. Feinberg's approach was provocative in that each information system in her analysis had a notably coherent point of view, making the idea of voice recognizable through a critical textual analysis method. Her point is applicable to knowledge organization systems broadly: systems are communicative devices alongside and through their labelling, categorization, and retrieval functions.

Applying Feinberg's concept beyond the exemplars in her analysis, we can recognize the emergence of an authorial voice in other knowledge organization systems. She notes that authorial voice as a quality of a text rather than as an outcome of authorial intent was already well-established in literary theory; a text having multiple and distributed authors is not incompatible with an authorial voice emerging in the text itself. The intent or the mechanisms to establish a coherent voice can be traced to the standardization and consistency guidelines of core knowledge organization systems. The Library of Congress's Subject Headings Manual facilitates this coherence across decades of expansion and revision and through the thousands of cataloguers who submit subject heading proposals through key principles of evaluation such as:

- Does the proposed heading employ neutral (i.e., unbiased) terminology?
- Does the proposed heading conform to patterns and precedents in LCSH with respect to wording, form, and style, and to guidelines provided in the SHM? (Library of Congress 2020)

as well as through the centralized editorial process in the Washington, D.C. office. Consistency through patterns and precedents has practical outcomes: users who develop literacy in LCSH formats will be empowered to conduct efficient and effective searches when they can predict and extrapolate to new subject searches. Among the 11 questions presented

in this section of the LCSH manual, the consecutive sequence of two above is meaningful; through a Kantian framework (Fox and Reece 2012), the Library of Congress's approach to ethical and effective organization of resources is to endeavour to treat every subject identically, neutrally, and in mirrored and parallel styles across the entire vocabulary.

In 2023, a working group of the Subject Analysis Committee of the American Library Association submitted (ALA) a report to the Library of Congress, recommending that the institution end centralized control in favour of external oversight of LCSH and its other vocabularies (Badger et al. 2023). Drawing from a wide selection of controlled vocabularies and their models of editorial processes, the report advocates for an editorial board composed of groups described, subject experts, and international users, as well as incorporating input from publishers, editors, non-cataloguers, and non-library catalogue users. The provocativeness of this proposal is tempered by the context the report provides on its consistency with other, positive changes underway at the institution as well as the established precedent in other extant controlled vocabularies.

Editorial boards, like those of the Homosaurus the report uses as an exemplar, pose a model of multivocal rather than singular and coherent authorial voice. Contrasting to the categorical imperative identified by Fox and Reece as being typical of standardized, outcome-independent processes of knowledge organization system design, processes like Homosaurus's are more likely to enact an ethic of care in which terms and term relationships are created and evaluated in their contexts of historical and ongoing oppression and known harms (Fox and Reece 2012). This multivocality can be seen in decisions such as Homosaurus version 3.1 (December 2021) establishing the noun order of "LGBTQ+ [term]" for terms like "LGBTQ+ parents" and version 3.2 (June 2022) making batch changes to 85 of those 259 terms, those involving race and ethnicity, to the reverse order: "Afro-Canadian LGBTQ+ people." The history note explains: "To acknowledge their multiple marginalization, terms for people of color who are LGBTQ+ use the following format: Racial or ethnic identity followed by gender or sexual identity (e.g., Black lesbians)" (Homosaurus 2020).

Editorial processes which distribute the authority of system expansion and revision decisions are more likely to produce such multivocal and context-aware policies and outcomes. Outside of traditional librarianship, a provocation against assumed necessity of centralized control has persisted for over 15 years in the form of archiveofourown.org's curated folksonomy (Archive of Our Own, n.d.; Bullard 2019; Price 2019). With all users able to add free-text tags to their uploaded works, and the site itself growing by millions of works a year, it takes a hundreds of hours a week of volunteer, specialist labour to provide constant maintenance of the back-end thesaurus structure, weaving new terms and

concepts into networks of preferred terms, variants, and term relationships (Bullard 2016; 2019; Price 2019). As with other core principles of the website's design (Fiesler et al. 2016), the primacy of creativity and multivocality are embedded in the process of the vocabulary's construction and maintenance.

### 3.3 Without interpretation

A final assumption of knowledge organization process is that they minimize interpretation. Principles like literary warrant, in which the terminology and proportions of a system are determined by the language, breadth, and specificity of the collection itself, set up processes in which the collection drives the system. Such processes allow knowledge organization workers (and their managers and institutions) to defer responsibility for biases in the system to the composition of the published work; asymmetries and pejorative terminology are not ontological statements made by the system's editors but rather epistemologies derived from works the system provides access to. This maneuver of ethical-side-stepping is less obvious than the labour implications of such processes. Avoiding interpretation may save some conceptual labour on the part of knowledge organization workers though it commits such systems to constant revision, the fractures of back-cataloguing older works with the terminology of current scholarship, and the surveillance and repair work of identifying and incorporating new concepts, trends, and phenomena as they appear in published works.

A recent provocation against minimal interpretation can be found in recent knowledge organization work from the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the ALA. A 2020-2022 working group focusing on updating the "Literature of prejudice" heading in the RBMS vocabulary aimed to facilitate the labeling of historical and contemporary primary materials that manifest prejudice and racism, both to support research on those phenomena and to provide context on materials through the catalogue record (Bychowski et al. 2023). The revised heading "Prejudicial works" now has an expanded set of narrower terms, with the following scope note: "Use for works that exhibit hostility toward or bias against a particular group or groups of people based on religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, creed, national origin, etc. For works that express hatred or advocate harm toward a particular group of people, use: Hate works." (<https://id.loc.gov/vocabulary/rbmsev/cv00108.html>). Bychowski and co-authors note that the terms and their application to works is inherently at odds with "the privilege to do nothing," or the persistent but questioned maxim that cataloguing work should (or could) be neutral.

The existence of "Prejudicial works" and its narrower terms questions the assumption that cataloguers apply work

without judgment or interpretation. In order to apply terms such as these, cataloguers must interpret works not necessarily as they present themselves but in their context as actors in a struggle between human rights and persistent and harmful systems of oppression. Most starkly, these RBMS CV terms are in tension with the recently released *Cataloguing Code of Ethics* (Cataloguing Ethics Steering Committee 2021) which includes the principle to "commit to describing resources without discrimination whilst respecting the privacy and preferences of their associated agents." This principle is most relevant to name authority work and promises to improve creator agency in representation and updating of names and the inclusion of personal information in name authority records. However, in describing resources, terms like "Prejudicial materials" can only be applied by violating the preferences of their associated agents in favour of other principles that seek to disrupt the instantiation of societal prejudices in cataloguing work.

### 4.0 Conclusion

The critical knowledge organization work I have presented here challenges three persistent assumptions in our field: that work should be seamless, have a coherent authorial voice, and should avoid interpretation. While some of the cited projects have their most apparent outcomes in the knowledge organization systems themselves – their classes, terms, and term relationships – the most radical outcomes can be traced back to radical departures from common processes and their long-held assumptions. In addition to producing more just, accurate, and usable systems, these changes in process also hold the potential to improve outcomes for knowledge organization workers themselves.

Skilled, intentional, and accountable knowledge organization work cannot compete with automated or machine learning approaches for scale. Human labour can instead differentiate itself by showing that process matters. These provocations share a sense of respect and recognition of the human labour of knowledge organization work. Should these approaches gain wider adoption in the field, it will add to workers' tools for making visible the value of their labour (Miksa 2008; Borie et al. 2015; Belantara and Drabinski 2022). The value of knowledge organization labour has long been difficult to assert, and processes that make that labour invisible (through seamlessness), centralized (through standardization and the imposition of a single authorial voice), and that denies the workers' perspective and judgement (through the denial of interpretive work) undermine workers' struggles for job security and pay equity.

Critical approaches are, by definition, challenges against the status quo and obsolescence is an inherent part of their success; what is provocative now, in 2024, may be an established mode of work in the future. Knowledge organization

work with its focuses on revision and maintenance accepts that systems must change; if the critical knowledge organization work described here gains traction, we will see that the way our systems change is itself subject to change.

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