Concepts of information organization

1.1. Information organization: What, why, and how

Overview

This is the first of a series of modules that introduce basic concepts related to information organization. During the onsite class, we provided a conceptual overview of information organization. That brief presentation introduced a number of terms and concepts. We will use these Basic Concept modules to review those terms and concepts and prepare you for more detailed treatments in separate modules.

We begin with the basic what, why, and how of information organization.

What is information organization?

One of the first things that comes to mind when one hears the phrase "organizing information" or "information organization" is a picture of a library with books neatly arranged on shelves. Or you might think of a file cabinet filled with color file folders containing documents, brochures, etc. Certainly arranging books on a shelf according to their height, color, or author is a form of organization.

Physical arrangements of things can be part of organizing, but for this course, this is the least interesting and least challenging part of information organization. We need to think more broadly about information organization, and about the nature of information, and the containers in which the information is housed.

Think for a minute about what you do when you are in need of information. First, you recognize that information might help you solve a problem or answer a question. Second, you know that there might be an article or a book that has the information you need. You set off to the library in search of that article or book. When you get to the library, you go to the library catalog and start looking up the topics you are interested in, or maybe you know an author who writes about what you are interested in, or maybe someone mentioned a title of a book. In the library catalog you find records that describe items in the collection. When you discover just the item that seems pertinent to your question or problem, you head to the shelves to retrieve the item. Once at the shelves, you see the orderly arrangement of the books and can quickly find the one you are interested in using the call number on the spine of the book.

This course focuses on the intellectual challenges of preparing descriptions of information (as in a library catalog record) to assist users in discovering the items that may help them. Deciding how best to represent information is critical if we want users to be successful in finding items they need. The concept of information organization is linked tightly with the concept of representation.
Here is a working definition of information organization:

_The processes and practices of describing and representing information objects (containers and content), and identifying the connections and relationships between the objects and the people responsible for their creation and/or production. These processes and practices serve users by assisting them to identify, locate, access, retrieve, and make judgments about information in response to their information needs._

The definition touches upon a number of concepts that we will explore in more detail in the course. And it states the why of information organization.

**Why organize information?**

No doubt you have had a moment when you look at your desk and all the papers, books, and other stuff scattered around and stacked in piles, and you say to yourself, "I need to organize this so I can find what I need when I need it!" Probably the most basic reason we organize information, or anything for that matter, is to create order from chaos. We have a belief that when things are in order, we can find what we need more efficiently.

Creating better ways to find information is a critical reason for organizing it. Yet, it is not the only reason we organize information. The quote above has the following:

_These processes and practices serve users by assisting them to identify, locate, access, retrieve, and make judgments about information in response to their information needs._

As professionals, we organize information to help our users or patrons. Although we may organize information in libraries and information centers for internal use by the professional staff, the primary reason librarians have developed systems for information organization is to connect users with pertinent information. Connecting users is not only about helping them find out that a particular book or article exists, but also about helping them to decide between several items (i.e., make judgments about the items). We do this through the representations we create in our library catalogs, our indexes, and other finding aids.

Information organization is fundamentally about information access. We organize information to help users access that information. The better our information organization systems respond to our users, the more likely they will continue to use our services. Through our organization systems, we should be saving our users time, a scarce resource. We should think about the value we add to the information by organizing it. And if we are not adding value (i.e., providing a value to the users) through our information organization systems, we should be questioning why we are doing it at all! The "how" of information organization is the way we add the value. Have we organized it in such a way that users will be satisfied and return again and again to our libraries and information centers?

**How do we organize information?**

As you will discover through this class, the "how" of organizing information covers many different processes and practices. But we can put forward a couple of basic ideas that can get you thinking about the "how."

First, we organize information by representing it. We represent both the container that holds the information and we represent the content: what the information is about. In a separate module, we will provide more details on the concept of representation. For now, think of a representation as something that substitutes for the actual information item (e.g., a library catalog record is a representation of a book in the collection).
Next, we organize information based on the tried and true methods of *lumping* and *splitting*. We lump information together by showing similarities between two items. For example, Mark Twain was the author of many books. We can lump all books by Mark Twain together based on the similarity of authorship.

We split information into groups based on how items are different. Mark Twain has been the subject of many books (e.g., critical essays, biographies, etc.) We can split the books that are *by* Mark Twain from those that are *about* Mark Twain based on the differences between those *written by* versus those *written about* him.

How we organize information must be geared to the users of our system. We can imagine all kinds of ways to organize information (e.g., by color of the cover, number of pages, etc.), but if our organization system is not responsive to our users we will not produce a system that adds value and ultimately may not be used.

**What do we need to know to organize information?**

This course presents a holistic view of information organization. This means that we need to address the various conceptual components that come together in a successful organization system. Throughout the course, you will gain a deeper understanding of these parts of the whole.

Briefly, we need to understand a little or a lot about the following:

- The nature of information: what is information? what are its characteristics? What forms can it take?
- The people who use our systems: how do people seek information? what behaviors, knowledge, skills, aptitudes, and needs must our systems be responsive to?
- Information systems: how do systems (typically digital or electronic) store and provide access to information? what are databases and search engines?
- Concepts and processes for describing information: how should we describe information? are there multiple ways to describe the same information? is library cataloging the only way to represent information? what is metadata and how can it be used for describing information?

Each of these components could be a separate course. Our job is to help you understand the interaction of these components, and help you appreciate that information organization is an intellectually challenging activity.

**Summary**

In this module, we have set the stage by introducing some basic ideas about information: what it is, why we do it, and how it can be done. We identified several concepts: representation, users, adding value. In the other modules in this Basic series, we will explore these and other concepts in more detail as part of the introduction to this course.