Concepts of information organization

1.3. The information we organize

Overview

This module discusses the "stuff" we might organize. Information is a term that has multiple meanings, and we propose to skirt the issue of defining information and focus on what it is that we have the power to organize.

How people are informed

People use information all the time. In that sense, we can assume a commonsense notion of information. We can suggest that anything that informs a person can be considered information. But that begs the question of what it means to "inform."

The point is that people have many sources of information to help them answer questions, resolve problems, learn how to do something, etc. But not all those sources of information are subject to organization.

For example, I ask a neighbor what he uses to control squash bugs on his eggplant. He lists several different pesticides, explains that some are organic and some are synthetic products. He goes on about the effectiveness of one of the products, and how another one didn't work at all. I walk away from the conversation filled with ideas and ways of solving my squash bug problem. I think I've been informed.

Does a library or information center address the information that I now have? Typically not. Our organization systems typically assume that the information we organize will be in some tangible, recorded form. Certainly, I could have gone to a library (or a bookstore, or the Internet) and looked for information that could have helped. But the point here is that the sources of information are diverse, and only some of those sources come under our jurisdiction for organizing.
The bibliographic universe

A concept that appears in the literature, including our textbook by Taylor (2004), is bibliographic universe. Taylor defines the bibliographic universe as:

*A concept that encompasses all instances of recorded information.*

It is the bibliographic universe that we make valiant attempts to organize, since it is by itself not self-organizing. To be recorded means that information is in some tangible form. For example, information is recorded in books, digital files, pictures, and other artifacts.

What's important to realize is that there is information or knowledge outside of the bibliographic universe. Yes, there is a larger universe of which the bibliographic universe is a subset. In that universe of knowledge is the information my neighbor has about squash bugs and their eradication. And since he passed that information to me, I now have that knowledge.

We will call instances of recorded information *information objects*. And these are the focus of our organization efforts.

Information objects, containers, and content

Since this course takes a broad view of information organization, we need a term that is similarly broad to refer to the things we will organize. Any instance of recorded information is called an information object. Various writers refer to these as information resources, information bearing objects, information packages, or documents. What these labels have in common is the tangible, recorded form the information is in.

Information objects come in a wide variety of formats, shapes, sizes, textures, etc. For example, here is a list of some types of information objects:

- books
- maps
- globes
- websites
- sound recordings
- paintings
- journals
- computer files
- photos
- videos.

Each of these has a physical aspect. We can think of the physical aspect as the delivery mechanism for the information. We refer to this aspect as the container of information.

Each of these also has an intellectual aspect. Usually, this is what users refer to as the actual information they are seeking. We refer to the intellectual aspect of the information object as the content.
One reason for conceptualizing the information object as separate components of container and content brings us closer to the ways we organize information. For example, the story of Huckleberry Finn has been published in many different editions of books, has been turned into one or more movies, may exist in an electronic form, etc. The same content can be held in different containers. One of our goals in information is bringing order to the bibliographic universe by revealing the connections and relationships among the information objects. As mentioned before, the bibliographic universe is not self-organizing.

**Making order in the bibliographic universe**

Somewhere in the bibliographic universe is the information a user needs to answer a question or solve a problem. For centuries, librarians and others have tried different methods to bring order to this universe. We continue in a long line of professionals who want to connect users with information.

Levy (1995) captures an essential aspect of library cataloging (which is one form of information organization):

> It should be clear from this description that cataloging is a form of order-making: it is a set of practices which quite literally put a library's collections in order and provide access through a set of systematically organized surrogates; and it is therefore a crucial part of the system by which books and other materials are maintained and made available to readers throughout the world.

Order making consists of any number of practices and processes (remember the definition we offered for information organization?). Part of making the order is to reveal links and connections between the separate information objects. Another part is to characterize each individual object to assist users in discovery it. Still other activities get to the basics: lumping and splitting.

Most all of these practices and processes use representations of the information objects to create the order. The next module in this series introduces the types of representations we create to order the bibliographic universe.

**Summary**

In this module, we introduced several key concepts related to the topic of information. Specifically, we identified the types of information that are of concern to us, namely information that has been recorded. We use the term information object for instances of recorded information, and identified the bibliographic universe as the concept that encompasses all recorded information. It is the bibliographic universe that we attempt to organize, since it is not self-organizing. Part of our efforts is to help users see the relationships among objects in the universe as part of our goal of connecting users to information.

**Cites & sites**
