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Classificationist as Author

The Case of the Prelinger Library

Abstract

Within information science, neutrality and objectivity have been standard design goals for knowledge organization schemes; designers have seen themselves as compilers, rather than as authors or creators. The organization of resources in the Prelinger Library in San Francisco, however, shows a distinct authorial voice, or unique sense of expression and vision. This voice, in turn, works as a persuasive mechanism, facilitating a rhetorical purpose for the collection.

Introduction

According to standard methods, the task of designing an organizational system, be it a classification, controlled vocabulary, or metadata schema, should be approached with detachment and objectivity. Even as classification researchers acknowledge, as does Clare Beghtol (2001), that “every classification is a theoretical construct imposed on ‘reality,’” the classificationist is still seen as someone who compiles, or documents, the perspective of a defined group or groups (perhaps that of a particular discourse community, organization, or other set of users). This standpoint is sensible when considering professionally developed classifications created to facilitate the retrieval of documents for some defined public. It would not be useful, in such a scenario, for a classification to exhibit the original perspective of its creator.

The Prelinger Library in San Francisco provides a counter-example to the idea of classification as documentation. While the Prelinger Library provides public access to its materials, it does not operate under a standard retrieval orientation. (Megan Shaw Prelinger describes the library as being “browsing-based” rather than “query-based,” to “[open] wide the possibility of discovery.”) In this paper, I explore how, in violating standard classification design goals of neutrality and predictability, the Prelinger Library’s classification system shows an authorial voice, or vision. This voice, in turn, facilitates a rhetorical purpose for the classification.

For the Prelinger Library, authorial voice as represented in the classification system is tightly integrated with the content of the collection. This again goes against professional practice, as selection of resources is often regarded as a separate task from their representation. While the Prelinger Library comprises a discrete set of physical resources housed in a particular location, this design strategy is also apparent in a common feature of social classification systems: the sharing of personal resource collections. The paper concludes by suggesting that authorial voice, as expressed through the combination of selection, description, and arrangement, might be a useful construct in both understanding and designing such shared collections.

Classificationist as careful compiler: the traditional view

Neutrality has been a persistent goal in classification design. The necessity of neutrality in nomenclature is Sayers’s tenth “canon,” or postulate, for classification design (Sayers, 1915). “The introduction of any name which exhibits a critical view of the subject it connotes is a violation of one of the first principles of classification,” Sayers admonishes (Sayers, 1915, 32). While scholars have debated at length the scope of what

might be accurately documented (the whole of knowledge, a single subject field, the multiple perspectives that constitute a particular discourse community), the sense of the classificationist as someone who uncovers an existing order, as opposed to creating a new order, seems fairly consistent. Ranganathan's canon of helpful sequence, for example, seems to function as a logical ideal, a form of external reality that the classificationist should attempt to isolate, and that the classification should faithfully reflect; there *is* a most helpful sequence, and Ranganathan's set of canons, postulates, and so on, enables its attainment (Ranganathan, 1959). Similarly, in contending that classifications should "adapt [...] to the existing structure of thought," Shera makes the identification and representation of this structure the classificationist's goal (Shera, 1966, 84). Shera's "existing structure of thought" seems similar to Beghtol's description of "cultural warrant," a term that she uses to encapsulate the changing meanings of literary, scientific/philosophical, and educational warrant over time (Beghtol, 1986). If neutrality is attained and the chosen scope well documented, then the classification should be predictable for the selected user group, and thus useful in a retrieval context. It is precisely the failure of classifications such as the Dewey Decimal Classification and Soviet library classification to achieve these goals that motivates Clay Shirky's attack on all forms of "ontology" as "overrated" (Shirky, 2005).

While Andersen (2000) suggests that an indexer should be considered an author, and that an indexer, in determining the descriptors to assign to a document representation, should consider the four contexts of writing described in Bazerman's (1988) discussion of scholarly articles (the object of study, the literature of the field, the audience, and the author's own persona), it is not clear from Andersen's analysis how document representation might change with such an approach (if, for example, neutrality would no longer be a goal, and if so, how the absence of neutrality would then affect the experience of using an index).

Authorial voice

Although intuitively understood to mean a sense of the author's presence and vision, voice is a tricky, even controversial, concept. Peter Elbow (2007) describes how concepts of voice have changed within the field of composition studies, or the teaching of writing: in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of voice was associated with a sense of agency, authenticity, and "rhetorical power," in keeping with a pedagogical focus on individual expression. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, voice, and "individualist" pedagogy in general, was subjected to postmodern critique. Scholars and writing teachers focused more on social construction of the text, in particular on the constraints of dominant discourse structures, and became cynical about authorial intention, which seemed inextricably connected with voice. The idea of the writer as a coherent self or any sort of autonomous agent was repudiated as an artifact of the hegemonic discourses of capitalism and patriarchy (Faigley, 1992).

However, one need not equate the expressive qualities of a text with a particular author's "true" identity or intentions. Wayne Booth (1983) asserts that a sense of authenticity in writing results from the textual construction of an "implied author," not from the actual self of the writer. In addition, even within the coordinated structures of a particular discourse community, rhetorical situation, and set of genre conventions, writers are able to make choices that contribute to a sense of authorial presence (Clark

and Ivanic, 1997; Johnstone, 1996). Johnstone, a sociolinguist, comments that “self-expression plays a crucial role in [...] mediating between options and outcome” and notes as well that “even the most formulaic genres,” such as thank-you notes, can be “self-expressive in the hands of good writers” (Johnstone, 1996, 90 and 179). In this vein, Matsuda defines voice as an “amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires” (Matsuda, 2001, 40). Voice, in this definition, represents the overarching quality of difference that distinguishes one writer’s response from another’s, despite the inevitability of various social constraints. In fact, one could say that such constraints contribute to the experience of voice by marking deviations. A thank-you note that manages to express a singular voice will indeed stand out.

The textual features that combine to convey voice are often described as stylistic, referring to form but not content (as in Elbow, 2007). Clark and Ivanic (1997) comment, however, that what is being said may reveal authorial presence more strongly than the manner in which content is presented. An author who claims ownership over unique ideas (as opposed to, for example, primarily citing the ideas of others) has more presence in a text, even if the style is unobtrusive. This detail is particularly important for the investigation of voice in classificatory texts, which lack the range of stylistic resources possible in more conventional forms of writing. We may find voice not merely in the nomenclature used for categories or other primarily expressive techniques, but also in the constitution of classes and their relationships, and in the assignment of categories to selected resources. The way that classes are defined and used, in addition to the way that they are named, may show the confluence of imagination and vision that the concept of voice represents.

Voice in the Prelinger Library

The Prelinger Library is a non-circulating private institution with a collection of 50,000 items. The items are not catalogued, but they are arranged in a progressive order from one end of the library to the other, and different sections of the shelves are physically marked with subject headings written on masking tape (for example, a series of headings on shelf 5 runs from U.S. Internal Dissent to Nuclear Threat, then to War, Conflict, and on to Peace, followed by Radical Studies and then Utopia). In contrast to the standard design goals of neutrality and predictability, the Prelinger Library’s classification shows personality and surprise. These characteristics combine to endow the Prelinger collection with an authorial voice.

In an online essay, Megan Shaw Prelinger describes the library’s organization as a conscious attempt to “represent the realms of thought that bounce around the insides of both our [Shaw Prelinger and her husband, Rick Prelinger] minds” in a coherent linear flow across the library’s six shelves. The library’s primary organizing principle, location, provides one example of how this personality is expressed through the collection and its organization. When location is relevant, resources are classified according to location over subject in most cases. Moreover, classes based on location (primarily an idiosyncratic selection of U.S. states, regions, and cities; examples include Pennsylvania, Tennessee Valley Authority, California, and San Francisco) are placed first in the sequence, suggesting to the browser that, although the Prelinger Library may physically

resemble typical libraries with standard classification schemes in some ways, this library is also significantly different from one's local public branch. In other words, although the Prelinger Library claims membership in the familiar genre category of the library, it also adapts certain genre conventions innovatively.

In a magazine profile of the library, Lewis-Kraus ties the location principle to the Prelingers' personal outlook, claiming that "landscape anchors not only the library but the Prelingers' own approach to most intellectual questions" (Lewis-Kraus, 2007, 50). This quotation is testament to the library's success in conveying an authentic sense of voice. Note that it doesn't matter if the library's location principle really does represent the Prelingers' thought processes accurately; the point is that an outside interpreter believes that the library itself is expressive of a particular worldview and personality. The location principle presents a convincing vision that obtains through multiple texts: Prelinger's online essay, Lewis-Kraus's commentary, the classified collection itself.

As another example, the Prelinger Library's classification has a singular emphasis on the concept of infrastructure, which runs throughout the succession of classes. Categories related to production and resulting products are followed by categories related to services on which those production processes rely. Categories for manufacturing and industry are followed by categories for transportation, power systems, and urban infrastructure such as sewers. Media products and production (television, film, video, radio) are followed by broadcasting and communications infrastructure, including telephone, telegraph, and computer networks. The repetition of this ordering and the detail with which infrastructure technologies (including social technologies, such as urban planning) are enumerated suggests a political concern, an exhortation not to forget the complex variety of systems upon which our production processes depend. Here, the sensation of authorial voice comes from the unfamiliar juxtaposition of these blunt political ideas as embodied within a seemingly conservative and standard set of genre conventions (the arrangement of books in a library).

In addition, the selection and distribution of resources help to shape both the organization of the library and the user's experience, and particularly facilitate a sense of surprise. The collection comprises many forgotten publications, substantially from the first half of the twentieth century, most of which would initially seem to have a short "shelf life" (examples: *Practice and Science of Standard Barbering*, from 1951; *A Study of Cider Making in France, Germany, and England, with Comments and Comparisons on American Work*, from 1903 (a government-sponsored work); *Report on a City Plan for the Municipalities of Oakland and Berkeley*, from 1915; *Big Dam Foolishness, The Problem of Modern Flood Control and Water Storage*, from 1954). There is little contemporary or popular material. Runs of old serials, primarily on industrially focused topics, have been incorporated throughout; most of these are castoffs pruned from other libraries (examples: *Bus Transportation*, *Candy Manufacturing*, *Modern Plastics*, *Retail Lumberman*, *Texas Police Journal*). Surprise is also achieved by interleaving ephemera (often in separate boxes) within the book shelves. The transportation section, for example, includes, in addition to books about rail travel, a shelf of nineteenth and early twentieth century local train schedules from various parts of the United States. The section on domestic environments includes an extensive number of advertisements for household appliances from about 1900 to 1960 (example: "How Ironrite Freed Me from My Hardest Home Drudgery: Hand Ironing!").

Through voice, a rhetorical purpose

Through the construct of authorial voice, the interwoven processes of selection, description, and arrangement provide evidence of a rhetorical motive in the Prelinger Library. The basic rhetorical process described by the literary critic Kenneth Burke via a metaphor of courtship appears to be at work (Burke, 1969). According to Burke's courtship model, an author (or rhetor) first entices the reader (or audience) by emphasizing the essential differences between rhetor and audience (heightening the "mystery") and then, as the audience's attention is engaged, by showing how the audience and rhetor, despite their divisions, also share deep similarities (such as working for the same goal or other characteristics), resulting in *identification* between the rhetor and audience. As Burke says, "In mystery there must be *strangeness*; but the estranged must also be thought of as in some way capable of communion. There is mystery in an animal's eyes when a man feels that he and the animal understand each other in some inexpressible fashion" (Burke, 1969, 115).

Identification, for Burke, represents the primary mechanism of rhetoric, the means by which the rhetor ensures the cooperation of the audience, as well as the goal of rhetoric. When identification has been achieved, the audience feels as if it is collaborating in the opinion voiced by the rhetor, that audience and rhetor are united in the same purpose; they are, in a sense, *consubstantial*. Burke elaborates that:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes they are, or is persuaded to believe so...In being identified with B, A is "substantially one" with a person other than himself (Burke, 1969, 20–21).

Burke additionally associates identification with imagination: in referring to the work of Hazlitt, Burke claims that imagination creates possibilities that, as led through identification, an audience may desire to enact or avoid. When Burke contends that "the *poetic* house is built of identifications," he is noting how a skilled writer can evoke a cluster of associations with a single well-chosen image (Burke, 1969, 85). Depending on how it is invoked, the poetic image of a house can evoke identifications with childhood, security, prosperity, and so forth, often all at once. The image thus works on a variety of levels to bring the author and audience closer together.

In the case of the Prelinger Library, "mystery" is evoked on one level by the initial strangeness at seeing thousands of overtly mundane publications within the seemingly familiar structure of library shelves, then compounded through the unusual organization of these seemingly oddly chosen resources. The initial presentation of these "useless" items puzzles the user and sets up the sense of division. The authorial voice, though, as manifested in the selection, description, and arrangement, suggests that, on the contrary, these apparently worthless items deserve preservation and care. These items have not merely been warehoused, as they might be in a used bookstore or library fire sale; they have been consciously gathered and painstakingly arranged for a very particular *experience* of access. This sense of care provides the pivot point for an identification to emerge. The visitor to the Prelinger, even if not charmed by old train schedules and the like, identifies with the affection and effort lavished by the Prelingers on their collection. Together, the collection and its classification suggest that all information, however negligible as it may initially seem, deserves preservation, and the visitor is persuaded to give the library's contents more serious attention. This identification is imaginatively reinforced by the infrastructure emphasis in the library's collection: the

idea that the products upon which we rely depend themselves on often-ignored infrastructure. Information requires infrastructure for both preservation and access; the library provides this infrastructure.

The new bibliography: communicative classification

While it may be said that a classified collection, the entity that most users actually experience, is the primary carrier of meaning, as opposed to the classification itself, most professional classifications, unlike the Prelinger Library's, are not designed with a specific collection in mind. However, the activities of selection, description, and arrangement are tightly coupled in the shared document collections enabled by various social classification systems (such as del.icio.us, LibraryThing, and Flickr). A tag, for example, does not exist in del.icio.us without being attached to a document.

Hendry and Carlyle (2006) claim that Internet-based shared collections can be seen as a new form of bibliography and suggest that bibliography might provide a conceptual base for such systems. However, bibliographic handbooks provide few details on the selection activity and how it might intersect with arrangement (as, for example, Robinson, 1979, who defers the selection task to "experts"). The only truly acceptable principle for selection often seems to be completeness. For example, the historians of bibliography Besterman and Balsamo both admire the sixteenth-century bibliographer Conrad Gesner, who attempts to compile and describe all printed works, and disapprove of sixteenth-century Catholic bibliographers who created selective works based on church doctrine. Balsamo and Besterman imply that any selection principle other than comprehensiveness is ethically irresponsible (Besterman, 1936; Balsamo, 1983). Balsamo, for example, describes Gesner's approach of including all existing works and providing commentary on them as "without precedent in fullness and accuracy," and notes how similarities between Gesner's concerns and those of modern cataloging and bibliography "confirm the universality of the methodological solution happily achieved by Gesner" (Balsamo, 1983, 34 and 41). On the other hand, the bibliography of the Jesuit author Possevino, who is set up by Balsamo as the "anti-Gesner," is a "proscriptive bibliographic canon which would serve as a tool for imposing ideologically correct works" and "a total cultural program, one without alternative [...] issuing from a single dogmatic mold, with no provision for individual choice." Possevino's "rejection of Gesner's classification scheme" in favor of a theologically based system of organization and selection is described as "the affirmation of a totalitarian vision which denied the autonomy of human knowledge" (Balsamo, 1983, 47).

While Bates (1976) does grant the inevitable selectivity of bibliography, she focuses on acknowledging selection principles at work, and not on studying them to see what they contribute to a bibliography's interpretation of the subject, as manifested in the Prelinger Library through the construct of voice. The example of the Prelinger Library shows that the integration of selection, description, and arrangement may be a key element in formulating authorial voice, and, further, that this voice can partially constitute an experience of access that is different from retrieval-focused systems of organization. While it may be, as Hendry and Carlyle (2006) suggest, that bibliography provides a convenient frame to examine organizational schemes in which selection, description, and arrangement intertwine, such as social classification systems and the Prelinger Library, it seems like bibliography itself requires some expansion to account

for phenomena such as authorial voice. Given the ever-increasing popularity of social classification and other forms of expression that center on the citation and organization of resources (such as iTunes playlists and even Facebook friends), renewed scholarly attention to systematic bibliography, particularly in its potentiality for creative expression, certainly seems worthwhile.

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