Letters to the Editor

Speaking Truth to Power in Classification: Response to Fox's Review of My Work; KO 39:4, 300

It is always a pleasure to see one's scholarship reviewed at length. And it is especially nice to see a review that shows how one has built an interconnected series of arguments over a series of publications, especially when these collected arguments support a novel approach to classification.

There are however a few misunderstandings that should be corrected. And I think that these reflect broader issues of interest to the KO community.

Fox notes at the outset that the books under review were aimed at a general scholarly audience. My research has become increasingly focused on information science since that time. Yet she misconstrues several of my remarks as if they were intended as advice on classification rather than advice on the performance of scholarly research in general. It would be absurd to suggest that we should not classify works that we thought extreme or substandard. The duty of information science is to make sure that there is a place for everything in our classifications. The quotes she cites concerning how we should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different theories and methods, or how we should be careful of extreme views, were advice on how to do research (and perhaps use a classification), not whether to classify certain works.

It is ironic that after this misplaced plea for inclusiveness Fox reproves me for finding it regrettable that some scholars might reject the literature of others on *a priori* grounds. The point of that entire section of the 2003 book was to show that there were a variety of literatures that reached quite different conclusions but were talking about the same recognizable variables: they just disagreed about their relative importance. The point of the paragraphs she references is simply "Some scholars say this." Even if I had been judging the value of these different arguments—which I was not—the important point for information science—that it makes sense to classify all these works in terms of this common set of variables—would still stand.

Fox is likely not the first to conflate two distinct though related issues—the debate between me and Hjørland regarding the possibility of a universal classification (the latest installment is Szostak 2011), and the question of how to make sure that the views of disadvantaged groups are best represented in our classifications. The reviewer's main concern seems to be the second, whereas my writing has mostly focused on the first.

So let me dip my toe into the second. I would ask a question: Are members of disadvantaged groups better served if the literature they generate is found easily by members of more powerful groups, also stumbled upon by accident often by members of those groups, and then understood when it is encountered by others? Or alternatively if it is classified in a unique fashion so that members of any other groups have to make a special effort to find it and have difficulty navigating it once they do? I think that the first is most important, though I have consistently argued (see Szostak 2010 in particular) for the complementary pursuit of domain analysis and a universal classification: this would at least ensure that the meanings of that literature are well captured in the universal classification, and we might find it advantageous to have domain-specific classifications that are translatable into the universal.

It would take a much longer letter to justify, if necessary, my non-naïve reasons for emphasizing that first option.

Note that if one prefers the second option, then the debate between myself and Hjørland is moot: only a domain classification is desired. Hjørland's argument that domain analysis is all that we can do should be carefully distinguished from an argument that domain analysis is all that we should want. They are, in my opinion, wrong for quite different reasons, but equally deserving of classification.

But if one prefers the first option, then the debate between Hjørland and me becomes critical because it focuses on the feasibility of precisely the sort of universal classification that would facilitate cross-group understanding.

I have also argued consistently that works can and should be classified by the perspective of the author (among other things). This argument is admittedly far less prominent in the books reviewed than in the later articles cited (which reflect the benign influence of Claudio Gnoli and the knowledge organization community more generally). So I seek a universal classification which facilitates cross-group conversation and understanding but yet allows the literature of any perspective to be readily identified.

https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2013-1-76
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