

Article Response Week 7

Mai, J-E. (2010). Classification in a social world: Bias and trust. *Journal of Documentation* 66(5), 627-642.

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October 16,2012

Author Jens-Erik Mai explores issues of bias and trust in classification in his article “Classification in a social world: bias and trust.” Deeply focused on the role of indexer in the establishment of aboutness, he seeks to establish pluralism as the new foundation for classification. In his article, the reader is taken from the traditional formation of classification systems to a new, and in Mai’s opinion, ideal process for the creation of classification systems.

In the traditional creation of a classification system, the creator is recognized as authoritative. Yet as Mai emphasizes, classification systems are created within a context. If a classification system is removed from its context, it ceases to appear as authoritative. The interesting implication is that context may provide authority to a classification system, instead of the authority residing in the classification system. The removal of a classification system from its context reveals the “arbitrary and conjectural nature,” (Mai, p.628) and the bias of the creator. The elimination of bias from classification systems is an ideal, and considered impossible. Yet the important task may be to recognize the bias, even if cannot be removed. Bias is inherent in any classification system due to the fact that on some level the human creator of the classification system must make subjective decisions concerning the aboutness of the subject matter. Mai also expounds upon the long history within Information Science to seek the creation of the perfect system for classification.

Despite the constant drive within Information Science to create the ideal classification system, Mai points out that the “exposition of the philosophical basis for classification have gone unnoticed for a good part of the last 140 years.” (Mai, p.629) Following the thought that the philosophical foundation of classification has not been sufficiently examined, Mai cites Miksa concerning the philosophical assumptions of classification systems. These assumptions are that “knowledge categories are by nature hierarchical and logical in a classical, systematic sense,” and that we “should try to produce the one best classification system that will serve all purposes.” (Miksa, as cited by Mai, 2010, p.629) Mai further suggests that these assumptions fit paradigms neatly, especially in traditional sciences. Drawing on the work of Svenonius, Mai also concludes that classifications have traditionally been created to cross many disciplines in the search of commonalities.

In order to dissect the issues of knowledge organization, Mai divides knowledge organization problems (KOP) into three categories. The categories are dubiously entitled, “Big KOP,” “Medium KOP,” and “Small KOP.” (Mai, 2010, p.630) Big KOP describes large repositories of information such as large libraries. Medium KOP tends to be associated with an information collection that exists for a particular purpose. Small KOP are information

organization problems associated with individuals, such as personal collections. Most classification systems have historically been focused on Big KOP with Medium KOP mixed in. However, Mai is correct in assessing that KOP has grown in complexity. This complexity exceeds the capability of current systems that Mai sees as antiquated.

If classification systems are to become more accessible to users, an acknowledgement of that classification systems are created within a context and that context has characteristics is vital. Classification becomes more than placing like or similar texts together. It evolves into an establishment of relationships between texts. From these thoughts Mai treads into dangerous territory saying, “classifications are epistemological statements; they do say something about the world, and they embed politics, religion and moral.” (Mai, 2010, p. 633) The creators of classifications wield great power, having “administrative authority” to preside over technical skills such as the placement of texts. (Mai, 2010, p.635) However, the “cognitive authority” of making ontological statements is a task hidden the classification process. (Mai, 2010, p.635) Mai asks, considering today’s social world, how will users question the cognitive authority of a classification system? Using Wilson’s definition of a cognitive authority, Mai suggest that users question the trustworthiness of a classification system in the following areas: “Credentials;” “Record;” “Reputation;” “Witness;” “Agreement.” (Mai, 2010, p. 637)

In an attempt to engender trust, Mai proposes that classification systems utilize a “principle of transparency.” This principle states that a classification system should inform users as to the philosophical basis for classification system. In order to do so, Mai suggests that classification system creators pull their system out of context and examine the biases and relationships. In revealing the true nature of a classification system, creators will promote the use of the system by both experts and lay persons.

Overall, this is a fascinating article pertinent to the field of Information Science. It acknowledges that information seeking behavior is not simply about retrieval of texts. Mai does well to discuss the ambiguity of this subject, and appears unafraid to challenge classification system creators to reveal their biases.