Article

Access to information and social justice: pivotal values for a critical Knowledge Organization

Acceso a la información y justicia social: valores fundamentales para una Organización del Conocimiento crítica

Acesso à informação e justiça social: valores fundamentais para uma Organização do Conhecimento crítica

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of archives and libraries in promoting social justice and equitable access to information through the lens of Knowledge Organization (KO). It explores how critical and ethical perspectives, including socio-cognitive and epistemological approaches, reshape the organizational practices of these institutions, emphasizing their influence on broader societal narratives. By focusing on professional values such as access to information and social justice, the study highlights how archives and libraries can transcend their traditional roles as custodians of information to become active agents in fostering inclusivity and equity. The paper also underscores the importance of incorporating the ethics of care and critical theory as complementary frameworks to professional codes, fostering relational sensitivity and responsiveness to marginalized communities while challenging systems of oppression embedded in knowledge organization..

Keywords: KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION; SOCIAL JUSTICE; ACCESS TO INFORMATION; ETHICS OF CARE; CRITICAL THEORIES.

Resumen

Este artículo discute el papel de los archivos y bibliotecas en la promoción de la justicia social y el acceso equitativo a la información a través de la lente de la Organización del Conocimiento (KO). Explora cómo las perspectivas críticas y éticas, incluidos los enfoques sociocognitivos y epistemológicos, remodelan las prácticas organizativas de estas instituciones, enfatizando su influencia en narrativas sociales más amplias. Al centrarse en valores profesionales como el

acceso a la información y la justicia social, el estudio destaca cómo los archivos y bibliotecas pueden trascender sus roles tradicionales como custodios de información para convertirse en agentes activos en el fomento de la inclusión y la equidad. El artículo también subraya la importancia de incorporar la ética del cuidado y la teoría crítica como marcos complementarios a los códigos profesionales, promoviendo una sensibilidad relacional y una capacidad de respuesta hacia las comunidades marginadas, al tiempo que se cuestionan los sistemas de opresión incrustados en la organización del conocimiento.

Palabras clave: ORGANIZACIÓN DEL CONOCIMIENTO; JUSTICIA SOCIAL; ACCESO A LA INFORMACIÓN; ÉTICA DEL CUIDADO; TEORÍAS CRÍTICAS.

Resumo

Este artigo discute o papel de arquivos e bibliotecas na promoção da justiça social e do acesso equitativo à informação sob a ótica da Organização do Conhecimento (OC). Explora como perspectivas críticas e éticas, incluindo abordagens sociocognitivas e epistemológicas, remodelam as práticas organizacionais dessas instituições, enfatizando sua influência em narrativas sociais mais amplas. Ao focar em valores profissionais como acesso à informação e justiça social, o estudo destaca como arquivos e bibliotecas podem transcender seus papéis tradicionais de guardiões da informação para se tornarem agentes ativos na promoção da inclusão e da equidade. O artigo também destaca a importância de incorporar a ética do cuidado e a teoria crítica como estruturas complementares aos códigos profissionais, fomentando a sensibilidade relacional e a capacidade de resposta a comunidades marginalizadas, ao mesmo tempo em que desafia os sistemas de opressão incorporados à organização do conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: ORGANIZAÇÃO DO CONHECIMENTO; JUSTIÇA SOCIAL; ACESSO À INFORMAÇÃO; ÉTICA DO CUIDADO; TEORIAS CRÍTICAS.

1. Introdução

Knowledge Organization (KO) deals with the inherent tension between the non-neutrality of knowledge representation and the commitment to respond promptly and accurately to the demands and information needs of different knowledge domains and user communities. This dynamic has led the field of KO to engage in

a discussion regarding the promotion of access, ethics, and social justice through the so-called critical and social knowledge organization. These discussions include cultural perspectives and reflect specific discursive communities and knowledge domains (Milani, El Hadi, & Tognoli, 2024), recognizing a framework of intertwined injustices deeply rooted in historical practices of exclusion and silencing.

A critical discussion necessarily intersects with the socio-cognitive and epistemological approaches emerging in KO. These approaches extend beyond individual cognitive frameworks to encompass knowledge's social, cultural, and historical contexts. Drawing notably from domain analysis studies by Hjorland and Albrechtsen (1995), this framework emphasizes the importance of contextualized knowledge organization processes, positioning professionals not merely as custodians of information but as active participants in shaping the informational landscape.

This paper aims to examine how archives and libraries can serve as agents of social justice and equitable access to information by drawing on two complementary analytical frameworks: the ethics of care and critical theory. These perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of the moral and political dimensions of knowledge organization and provide concrete strategies for inclusive and responsive professional practices.

By adopting an ethical perspective, we aim to explore the complex moral responsibilities faced by professionals in KO. Access to information, widely recognized as a fundamental right, becomes genuinely meaningful only when information is systematically organized and readily accessible. Social justice, in turn, highlights how archives and libraries can function as agents of equity.

In what follows, we explore how these values intersect with the ethics of care and critical theory to reframe knowledge organization practices as active instruments in the struggle for justice and inclusion.

2 Knowledge Organization: a Dynamic Conceptual Theoretical Milestone

Knowledge Organization, as a theoretical-conceptual milestone in Information Science (Tognoli, Milani and Guimarães, 2017), presents itself as a breeding ground for the development of theories and methodologies that aim at organizing and representing the knowledge in order to retrieve it, acting as mediator between the production and the use of information, whether in the scope of context – as in the Archival Science – or in the scope of content – as in the Library Science.

Knowledge Organization has evolved from a positivist and technical model into an interdisciplinary and critical field shaped by cultural, social, and epistemological paradigms. Historically rooted in practices of classification and indexing, KO has expanded its theoretical scope, integrating perspectives from philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and information science. Today, KO is widely understood as a socio-cognitive and contextual process, where the cultural frames of both document producers and users influence meaning-making.

One of the major theoretical developments in KO is domain analysis, which emphasizes that knowledge organization systems are not neutral but reflect the discursive values of specific communities (Hjørland & Albrechtsen, 1995). This shift from objectivity to contextuality allows KO to account for power structures, user diversity, and epistemological pluralism. It also opens space for ethical inquiry, especially around access, representation, and fairness in classification and description practices.

This contextual and relativist perspective enables archivists and librarians to critically evaluate the tools, vocabularies, and structures they employ. Recognizing that these systems can perpetuate exclusion, KO practitioners are urged to rethink their role as neutral mediators and adopt more reflective, inclusive, and community-informed approaches.

3. Pivotal Values for Knowledge Organization: Facing Ethical Challenges

3.1 The ethical challenge number 1: Incorporating the Ethics of Care

The ethics of care, rooted in feminist philosophy, emphasizes empathy, responsiveness, and relational responsibility. Applied to KO, it challenges rigid and universalist professional codes by advocating for practices that adapt to the specific needs of marginalized communities.

Caswell and Gilliland address the application of the ethics of care in archival practice, arguing that archivists are responsible for caring for records and the communities to which these records belong. They assert that archival practice should go beyond mere document management, incorporating sensitivity to the needs and contexts of the communities represented in the archives (Caswell & Gilliland, 2016).

Caswell and Cifor introduce the concept of "radical empathy," proposing that archivists actively promote social justice through their practices. They suggest that archivists must recognize and confront the power inequalities inherent in the creation, preservation, and access to records. This approach requires a critical reevaluation of archival processes, considering who is represented in the archives and who has access to them (Caswell & Cifor, 2016).

Feminist theory offers a critical lens to understand how structures of power and oppression manifest in archives. Nel Noddings, a prominent theorist of the ethics of care, argues that care should be central in ethical theory and practice, emphasizing the importance of relationships and empathy (Noddings, 1984). In archival practice, this implies a more inclusive approach, sensitive to the needs of marginalized communities.

We can analyze some critical points to compare professional codes of ethics and the application of the ethics of care in archival practice.

First, Professional Codes of Ethics are based on universal principles aimed at ensuring objectivity, integrity, and responsibility within the profession. They

serve as unchanging standards established by the community to maintain a consistent and reliable approach to archival practices. In contrast, the ethics of care, as proposed by theorists like Caswell, Gilliland, and Noddings, emphasizes relational sensitivity, empathy, and the importance of understanding the contexts and needs of the communities served by archival work. This approach focuses less on rigid standards and more on adapting to specific situations and fostering relationships.

Second, in Archival and Library Science, access to information is considered a "supra-value," meaning it is prioritized above other values. The primary objective is to make information accessible and align it with ethical commitment to knowledge organization and public service. However, Caswell and Cifor argue that archivists should actively adopt "radical empathy" to address social justice concerns. This involves recognizing power imbalances in archival records and intentionally working to amplify marginalized voices. In this context, the ethics of care challenge access neutrality, suggesting that ethical responsibility sometimes requires prioritizing certain groups or needs over unrestricted access.

Third, the Codes of Ethics aim to standardize professional conduct, providing a clear and consistent framework for behavior. This approach minimizes personal bias and ensures practices align with widely accepted ethical norms—conversely, the ethics of care advocates for a more context-sensitive and adaptable ethical practice. Rather than strictly adhering to standardized rules, this approach encourages archivists to consider the specific histories, needs, and power dynamics of the communities represented in the archives.

Regarding knowledge organization, the focus is on objective classification and systematic access. The ethical commitment largely centers on the accurate and unbiased organization of information. However, the ethics of care broadens this focus, advocating for archives and documents that represent and respect marginalized communities. The aim is not only an accurate representation but also to support social justice by challenging historical biases and exclusions.

For example, participatory description projects involving Indigenous or LGBTQIA+ communities demonstrate how the ethics of care can guide collaborative, respectful, and reparative knowledge organization. Rather than

enforcing standardized vocabularies, these initiatives co-create taxonomies that reflect lived experiences and cultural specificity.

While professional codes of ethics in Archival Science and Library Science emphasize universality, access, and standardization, the ethics of care introduces a more flexible, empathetic approach that addresses the specific needs of communities and actively seeks to confront social inequalities. Integrating the ethics of care could enhance traditional ethical frameworks by adding relational sensitivity, especially when serving marginalized communities.

3.2 The ethical challenge number 2: Advancing Social Justice and Critical Theory in KO

In the wake of more inclusive knowledge organization systems as part of institutions effective for promoting access to information as an essential right to support responsive, participative and representative decision making, discussion on promoting social justice in archives and libraries emerge, understood here under the auspices of Young's (1990) concept to whom "social justice means the elimination of the institutionalized domination and oppression."

For the author, social justice is not only linked to the distribution of material assets but also variables such as decision making, division of labor, and culture. Thus, social justice should be understood beyond distributive justice, as a set of social relations and not exclusively as distribution of things.

In the tendency to expand the concept of social justice beyond the economic scope, there is an increasing concern in the scope of discussions about the professional training and performance in KO in ensuring social justice by recognizing the role of archives and libraries in establishing and legitimizing identities and liberties (Jimerson, 2007). In these institutions, social justice also pervades the professional's ethical values, whether relating to the organization process or the dissemination of information preserved in the collection.

The discussion on social justice in institutions pervades debates on the universalities of processes and knowledge organization systems proposed by the

so-called WEBCHAM (*white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian/protestant, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male*) mainstream, and meets what we discussed about a contextualized KO.

When questioning the universality in organization and representation processes, KO has been guided by the critical theories among which those directed to genre, race and decolonization are highlighted. Thus, there are attempts to "deracialize" Dewey's classification scheme from the Critical Race Theory (Furner, 2007), the inclusion of ethics of care, the feminist theory, as guide in the archival knowledge organization processes (Caswell and Cifor, 2016), the post- structuralist studies and the intersectionality of the feminist studies (Olson, 1997; 2002; Fox, 2014; 2016), studies on the Queer theory and the organization and representation of knowledge in the LGBTQIA community (Pinho; Guimarães 2012, Campbell, 2000, Brilmyer, 2018) and on the indigenous perspectives (Doyle et al., 2015).

These interventions do more than critique—they offer tools for transformation. Concepts like "liberatory description" and "reparative standards" involve community participation in creating and revising descriptive practices, promoting accountability and inclusivity. Such strategies can correct past exclusions and foster democratic access to memory and identity.

Martinéz-Ávila et al. (2016) when analyzing the epistemological currents and methodological implications of three critical theories in the Knowledge Organization – the feminist epistemologies, the Queer's theory and the Critical Race Theory – advocate that they should be classified according to the "other" previously marginalized by the system, to whom the voice was given. In this context, the critical theories seek to highlight the other in the classification systems, meeting an organizational perspective aimed at promoting social justice in archives and libraries.

Ultimately, social justice in KO means recognizing users not as passive recipients of information but as co-constructors of meaning. It requires shifting from universalist to contextualized systems, from standardized authority to pluralistic representation. This transformation must be embedded in professional education, institutional policies, and daily practices.

We agree with Caswell and Cifor (2016) in the defense that the efforts for a social justice in these institutions should be undertaken in order to guarantee equity and fair distribution of resources, from the evaluation, acquisition, classification, description and indexation to preservation and diffusion for the access, being in line with the concept of distributive justice, aiming at promoting the democratization of custodian institutions, as archives and libraries, and the inclusion of individuals and communities commonly marginalized and oppressed.

According to Fox (2016), this oppression takes place in the Knowledge Organization through its processes and systems, such as classification, categorization, and linguistic representation. These systems tend to consider users as homogeneous groups that seek information in the same way, creating hostile spaces and offensive terminologies.

In defense of the reparation as an element to guarantee social justice in the institutions, authors like Adler (2016), Duff and Harris (2000) propose the use of reparative taxonomies that respond to injustice propagated during years in the knowledge representation and classification systems in archives and libraries, whose violence, according to them, became systemic. The Liberatory descriptive standards proposal, where there is transparency and accountability in all processes, as well as the active participation of users in the representation of knowledge, would contribute for promoting the inclusion of marginalized communities, democratizing the access and the use to the institutions and their documents, making them fairer and more inclusive.

In this sense, it can be said that the democratization of access to information goes through the democratization of building knowledge organization systems since it is necessary to understand that users go to institutions for different purposes, coming from other cultures and with different expectations. Including them in the decision-making process is essential for sheltering the user in the archive or library, contributing so he can be recognized as part of a community.

In order to handle this challenge, it is necessary to transform beyond the archivist's and librarians' practice as active agents in this change. The understanding of social justice as an ethical imperative to be followed by those professionals should be based on a critical and reflexive education, (Gilliland,

2011; Tognoli and Rocha, 2021, Adler; Harper, 2018), with pedagogical approaches that cover ethical and diversity issues within a social justice structure with the aim at promoting an academic degree in addition to traditional structures of Knowledge Organization.

By approaching the political and social aspects in the curricula of courses and disciplines linked to Knowledge Organization, an important space is opened for students to understand the epistemological and ontological bases on which KO is built and how they work (Adler; Harper, 2018), which can be an opportunity to discuss how knowledge organization systems often reproduce dominant patterns and how this directly affects the circulation of information, making it difficult to access

Archivists and librarians, specifically those who carry out the processes of knowledge organization, must, therefore, recognize that in the scope of archives and libraries, social justice can function as an instrument for the recognition of systemic and structural inequalities in the production and maintenance of documents, acting directly in the knowledge organization systems in these institutions, since as advocated by Adler and Harper (2018) issues related to social justice, diversity and inclusion are inherent to the KO.

Recognizing social justice as a necessary ethical imperative, the American Library Association (ALA) recently adopted it as a ninth principle in its code of ethics and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) developed a Declaration on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, where the issues related to social justice are contemplated.

Conclusion

This paper explored the role of archives and libraries in promoting social justice and equitable access to information through knowledge organization practices. It examined how two key frameworks—the ethics of care and critical theory—can reshape the organizing practices of these institutions, emphasizing the importance of recognizing their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Central to this discussion is the access to information value as a fundamental right and a key driver of social equity. Ensuring unrestricted, fair, and inclusive access

to information enables individuals and communities to participate fully in life, assert their rights, and preserve their identities. The ethics of care introduces a relational and context-sensitive dimension that encourages professionals to prioritize empathy, responsiveness, and the specific needs of marginalized communities.

Simultaneously, critical theory enables a structural and political analysis of the biases and inequalities embedded in classificatory systems and professional practices. From feminist critiques to critical race theory, these perspectives challenge the assumptions of neutrality and advocate for reparative and participatory approaches to classification, description, and dissemination.

By embracing the ethics of care and critical theory, knowledge organization practices can move toward a more reparative, inclusive, and community-centered model. This shift demands changes in technical processes and deep transformations in professional education and institutional culture. Fostering epistemic justice in archives and libraries is essential to democratizing memory, enabling participation, and affirming the rights and identities of historically marginalized groups.

Integrating these ethical frameworks into the core of KO theory and practice paves the way for a more just, responsive, and inclusive information environment.

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Editor´s note

Author's contribution note

Data availability note

This study is theoretical in nature and does not involve or generate empirical data. Therefore, no datasets were produced or analyzed.