

EUROPEAN MODERNISM AND THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Informing the Present, Understanding the Past

Friday, May 6 - Sunday, May 8, 2005
The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Rationale and Background of conference (Excerpt from conference proposal)

Summary:

This proposal seeks support for a 2-day conference, "European Modernism and the Information Society: Informing the Present, Understanding the past," to be held on campus in May 2005. It will bring a distinguished group of scholars from a variety of disciplines to campus, involve a number of UIUC faculty and will result in a substantial volume of papers available both on the web and in print.

The conference provides an opportunity to examine the ideas of a group of early Twentieth Century European thinkers about how best to create, disseminate and manage publicly available information. Many of these thinkers were also engaged in managing organizations of various kinds associated with information - publishing, libraries, museums, institutes of documentation and a variety of international organizations. Some were philosophers, others scientists and literary figures. Especially important was group of architects and urban planners. Many of them had an association with Paul Otlet (1868-1944) the Belgian internationalist and utopian theorist about knowledge organization. We have designated these thinkers "modernist" because of their strong belief in rationality, planning, standardization, the value of the scientific method and the inevitability of scientific and social progress as they conceptualised and attempted to solve the "information " problems of interest to them. (Cast of characters and their work)

One of the conference aims is to confront ideas of today's globalized "information society" with what might be called the "modernist European knowledge management project." In this "project" there is much that prefigures many features of today's information society but those who concern themselves with what is happening today seem unaware of these prefigurations as they repudiate or contest so much of what has been characterized as modernist. In this way, we hope to encourage a deeper, more historically based understanding of important aspects of contemporary society than is the case at the moment. (Papers/Contributors)

A Modernist European Knowledge Project?

Towards the end of the Nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century, a loosely knit group of European intellectuals were deeply committed to

exploring ways in which knowledge might be better organized and disseminated in order to promote the progress of science, social welfare, and new international institutions. They came from a wide variety of disciplinary and national backgrounds, but many of them were linked at different times and to different extents through their contacts with the Belgian internationalist, Paul Otlet in the course of his long life (1866-1944). Their work necessarily both contributed to and reflected strong intellectual and social currents of the times, a period characterized by the increasingly complex and dynamic movement for the international organization of scientific relations and the international regulation of what we now call communications and of peace and war. It was shaped by the crisis of the First World War and the transformative after-effects of that catastrophic event. (Cast of characters and their work)

The "information" interests of the key figures involved here reflected what we might label a modernist European Knowledge Project. We might sum up the components of this project as:

- a) internationalisation/ globalisation of knowledge - concerns for the way in which knowledge should be institutionalized and disseminated on a global level;
- b) the transformation of knowledge: concerns for the way in which knowledge should be transmitted and represented/visualised; and
- c) the architecture of knowledge: concerns about the ways in which knowledge should be embodied and structured.

Among the "information" issues that were under investigation were the reconstruction of the system of scholarly publication; redefining the roles, practices and organizational arrangements of libraries and museums collecting, disseminating, cumulating, and displaying informative artifacts; creating worldwide "documentary" networks; and developing collaboratively centralized depositories of scientific data.

A key problem was how fundamental units of information were to be identified, encoded in various ways, represented visually, and deployed educationally and in various planning contexts so that social progress might be accelerated. Possible solutions that were explored involved attempts to devise new linguistic formations that ranged from standardized systems of signs and procedures for various professional architectural and urban planning tasks to artificial international and auxiliary languages. Some of the figures involved with aspects of these issues struggled to find a "world view" that would underpin the creation of new kinds of international organizations and that eventually would guide both national programs of social change and the formation of a new world polity. But perhaps most important all involved were committed in their different ways to a pervasive modernist belief in rationality, planning, standardization, the value of the scientific method and the inevitability of scientific and social progress as they conceptualised and attempted to solve "information " problems.

We need to recognize that in the half century of European history that is under discussion here, some of those identified as actors in the modernist European knowledge project worked in ignorance of each other and that much of what they did was not consciously coordinated or cumulative. Nor were developments consistent throughout the period. One might claim that the nineteenth century extended to the outbreak of World War I and that modernism in the twentieth century did not begin until the War ended. Nevertheless, it seems clear that no matter where their life work fell in the period, those who were centrally concerned with information were all responding to an awareness that a great formation of knowledge had emerged that was publicly available and that could be exploited for the public good, however that was to be conceived. This apparently invaluable resource and the systems within which it was constituted and managed seemed to promise much, but everywhere there was evidence that knowledge was increasingly fragmented, duplicative, and incomplete and that much of it was either inapplicable for various important tasks in the form in which it was currently expressed or was simply buried and inaccessible. It is this awareness and the steps that those involved took to improve the effectiveness of knowledge organization, dissemination and use that allows us to characterize them and their work as constituting a modernist European knowledge project. (see Cast of characters and their work; Papers/Contributors)

A Globalized Post Modern Information Society?

Recent developments in the technologies of networked computing, the Internet and the WWW have driven social and institutional changes so great that it is claimed that they have created a radically new and "postmodern" information society. The outcome of these more recent developments is today's "information society" characterized by hitherto unparalleled opportunities for communication between individuals and groups. The technology provides opportunities of access to vast, ever expanding reservoirs of information and information sources that are today, as they were a hundred years ago, increasingly diverse in origin, fragmented, uncoordinated and unorganized. On the other hand, as commercial publishing and communications interests have extended their control of print and broadcast media to web-based digital forms of this information, access to it has been constrained by a market mechanism even more restrictive than that which operates in the print world. In these markets only institutions can operate and afford to buy what is for sale.

In this new technological environment, the physical reality of "knowledge" institutions has been overlaid by virtual extensions and representations: web and internet based education programs, electronic journals, knowledge portals, the digital library, the virtual library, the virtual museum. Digital convergence of the media of communications has brought image, text and sound together in new ways not possible in a world of print or of mass media that relied on previously unrelated technologies. The new "information" technologies have begun to transform the processes and formats of scholarly communication, have introduced new techniques for managing knowledge in particular fields and have brought about new "informatized" subjects that were once almost entirely laboratory -based such as bioinformatics, medical informatics, and chemical informatics.

Our aim in this conference is to confront ideas of the post-modern globalized "information society" of today with what we have called the modernist European knowledge management "project". We can now see in the latter much that actually prefigures many features of the former while those who concern themselves with the former seem unaware of these prefigurations as they repudiate or contest so much of what has been characterized as modernist. In this way, we seek to create a conceptual bridge between the two historical periods and the forms and processes of knowledge production and organization characteristic of them. Our hope is that the conference will help in the identification not just of the discontinuities that seem superficially to distinguish the one historical period from the other, but to identify and trace important continuities between them in new ways and more plausibly than has been the case. This should help in contextualizing and interpreting the nature and direction of the changes that are so strongly a feature of today's "information society." The "bridge" will facilitate a kind of reciprocal interrogation of each period, bringing to those analytically concerned with the present a new kind of understanding of a hitherto little explored aspect of the past.
(Papers/Contributors)

Antecedent Meeting, Mons 2002

A first exploration of the European modernist knowledge project took place in a small invitational colloquium sponsored by the Mundaneum in Mons, Belgium on May 25, 2002. The colloquium was called "L'Architecture de la Connaissance –Le Mundaneum et les prédécesseurs européens du WWW " (The Architecture of Knowledge- the Mundaneum and the European Predecessors of the World Wide Web). The Mundaneum was created in 1990 in Mons with support from the Belgian Communauté Française as a museum and archive related to Paul Otlet and a range of individuals and organizations associated with him and his immediate colleagues. An account of the background to the colloquium is at <http://www.mundaneum.be/media/expo/otlet.pdf> A number of those contributing to this colloquium also contributed to a theme issue on Otlet of the bilingual journal of the Union of International Associations, *Transnational Associations/Associations transnationales* (issue 1-2, 2003).

Financial support and/or endorsement of the conference

(see Sponsors)

Conference Format and *schedule*

A small organization committee will manage the conference (Organizing Committee).

Major drafts of the papers will be distributed before the conference to participants, so that presentations can be shortened and time provided for discussion. Each paper will have a formally designated discussant. It is hoped that discussant comments will be prepared to some degree ahead of time and will form part of the published proceedings of the conference. After the conference the drafts will be mounted on the conference website pending revision for book publication.

The conference will be held on a Friday afternoon through Sunday morning, May 6-8, 2005. The venue will be the lecture theatre of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science.