Paper: Surrogates, Voice, and Narratives from the Margins

Abstract: Information organization and access systems have been designed with surrogates serving as fixed “stand-ins” for people, places, and things. In cross-cultural contexts, fixity becomes problematic. This paper asks how the surrogate can be rethought to construct space for narratives of marginalized voices, to shift the focus from consistency to commonality. Résumé:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, That is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (bell hooks 1989, p.9)

1. Introduction
Can the surrogate discover or construct space for the narratives of marginalized voices? This question grew from pondering the current role of the surrogate in the organization and retrieval process and how we have viewed it in Information Science (IS) across time as a fixed entity to be represented with the standardized content, structure, and application of surrogates all aiming at consistency. Systems for organizing and accessing information have been designed with this fixity in mind; as the cross-cultural adequacy of systems is of increasing concern, fixity becomes problematic. Likewise, as research paradigms have moved from positivist toward poststructuralist the view of information has emerged as dynamic and fluid.

Our interest in the surrogate has come out of various research experiences, notably studies relating to social tagging, and also to material culture and memory. The work reported herein is the theory development of this research on the current and potential roles of surrogates as dynamic spaces where marginalized voices can make themselves heard. We borrow theoretical maps from outside of library and information science (LIS) to navigate closer to the margins than our traditional means can take us.

2. Status Quo
Knowledge organization systems (KOS) and information retrieval systems (IRS) have traditionally required consistency among and between those creating surrogates and those searching for relevant information. To achieve this consistency demands that the same attribute be given the same name at each occurrence. A large body of research on inter-indexer consistency indicates that absolute consistency has not been achieved.1 However, social tagging research suggests that we do share commonalities in a clustering distribution very close to Zipf’s with a core of tags attached to a surrogate representing a particular

---

1 Karen Markey's meticulous 1984 meta-analysis found consistency ranging 4-82%.
manifestation (Olson and Wolfram, 2007). We suggest that a surrogate can take many different forms which may function differently from one another; in our research physical objects imbued with the role of surrogate.

3. Hints of Dynamism
The advent of tagging questions the fixity of the surrogate. Surrogates that include tags are subject to constant change. The tags follow a Zipfian distribution with a core of concepts represented by a core of terms and a long tail. The long tail hints at considerable inconsistency, but also at opportunity. It is possible, for example, for searchers to follow the path from an outlier to a surrogate representing a relevant entity and on to syntagmatically related surrogates based on their co-occurring concepts/terms. The syntagmatic relationships are contextually dependent while the paradigmatic are essential, independent of context. Instead of the fixity of paradigmatic structure drawn from standards such as controlled vocabularies, tagged surrogates connect the serendipitous co-occurrences that name the attributes held in common by the entities represented. Surrogates hold the fluidity of syntagmatic relationships simultaneously functioning within the fixity of paradigmatic links.

4. Appropriating the Surrogate
Physical, uniquely personal objects can be regarded as concrete reflections of what is meaningful in one’s life, conveying one’s values, goals and aspirations, and serving as a form of self-expression, all of which may be more or less aligned with social norms (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). An object’s meaning is invested by its owner (Belk, 1990), and expressed through narratives told about it, which are ultimately about the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Personal objects in the ambient environment can be seen as assisting in the “stability” of self over time by acting as a form of “ballast” (Arendt, 1958, as cited by McCracken, 1988) by “constantly instruct[ing] us” in who we are and what we aspire to... making [our] past a virtual, substantial part of our present” (McCracken, 1988: 124).

In addition, objects, their associated narratives, and “meanings” have properties and elements that allow them to be categorized in terms of affinities (similarities) and distinctions (differences) though perhaps not in the same way by any two people. For example, the same spoon might be viewed as a tool, or as an heirloom depending on one’s perspective. Objects can be seen to play a role in how individuals “integrate” or “differentiate” themselves from others in society (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Findings from an earlier study of individuals with mild Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) (Howarth and Hendry, 2011), suggested that objects standing in as surrogates for an event, a person, or a period of time were evocative in the recall of memories, often expressed as detailed and vivid stories. Moreover, the one-on-one sessions during which the surrogates were considered and discussed offered a kind of “neutral space” in which to engage in a safe, nonjudgmental, and social retelling

---

2 For details of the research discussed see Olson & Wolfram 2008).
of personal narratives. The objects, in essence, gave “voice” to individuals who are often marginalized or isolated in their daily lives.

By using objects as a surrogate for a narrative we are stripping off the baggage of human language. Further, we start with an object and use it to represent or to stand in for any number of fluid entities, such as people, places, things, or events, etc., thus transforming the object into a fluid and dynamic surrogate to secure spaces for marginalized voices.

5. Theorizing Surrogates for Marginalized Voices

Objects are liberatory surrogates. They push the limits of a KOS or IRS. Drucilla Cornell (1992), in her re-creation of deconstruction as the philosophy of the limit, posits the idea that all systems have limits and those limits include some and exclude others. The one who is on the inside has an infinite responsibility to the Other who is outside of the system. Cornell advocates not stretching the limit – there will always be a limit excluding someone – but to make the limit permeable. Then the one can invite the Other to make her voice heard in the system and the Other may decide whether or not she wants to do so. In the case of objects as surrogates for narratives, a given surrogate may be the key to clustering narratives in such a way that the object is somewhat like the connections made by a switching language or crosswalk. The object as a surrogate represents narratives individually, but in so doing links seemingly disparate stories.

6. Authentic Voices

The Other’s voice is decontextualized if it is heard in the system which is likely to change it. Trinh T Minh-ha (1991) warns that to know how authentic an Other’s voice is it is “most important to prove or make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image; …” (p.67) Although the phrase “giving voice” is often used, it will not be an authentic voice if the one constructs the space which is a new context for the Other’s voice. Cornell insists that the voice of the Other must speak of its own volition, not at the one’s insistence. The space created by the permeable limit must, like Lorraine Code’s rhetorical spaces, not limit “utterances that can be voiced within them with reasonable expectation of uptake and ‘choral support’: an expectation of being heard, understood, taken seriously.” (Code 1995, p.ix-x)

It is something like these rhetorical spaces that the object as surrogate might foster in its freedom from human language. In that sense the object may be able to sidestep consistency in favour of connection or commonality. Thomas Couser describes autobiographical writing by people with disabilities as part of a recent change. “Long the objects of others’ classification and examination, disabled people have only recently assumed the initiative in representing themselves … a political as well as a mimetic act—a matter of speaking for as well as speaking about.” (Couser 2005, p.401) Once again, if the self-expression or self-narrative is to be heard those being described need to have decision-making authority to represent themselves.
7. Potential application
This paper will trace our development of a theoretical model of the liberatory potential of the surrogate and the accompanying shift from consistency to commonality. Future work will study application of the model as it offers to information science scholars and professionals a role of greater proactive agency, pushing the fluid and dynamic surrogate into the future.

References


Trinh T Min-ha. 1991. When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics.