PRECEPTS FOR AN ENGAGED KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION

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It is a privilege to be invited to Brazil, supported by UNESP, state research money, and ISKO-Brazil, and shepherded by such a warm and considerate host as José Augusto Guimarães.
I am here today to talk with you about an area of inquiry. This area I call *engaged knowledge organization*.
What I mean by this, is a discipline of knowledge organization that is

(1) focused on its intensions
(2) is self-aware, specifically in its power to use language to provide access to the written record, and
(3) is committed to acting on behalf of everyone from this new-found position of intentional and self-aware stance
Why do I care that knowledge organization transform itself into an engaged knowledge organization?

For these reasons:
(1) I believe that we have an imperative to help people realize their full potential through the written record
(2) I feel that we can be accused of wasting precious natural resources when we systematically ignore the task of organizing new knowledge in context with the extant written record
(3) The economic arguments for “return on value” are linked to a failing model of capitalism that does not acknowledge or respect the idea of cultural heritage – at least not for edification and self-realization
So my interest in ethics in knowledge organization stem from design and evaluation of different and diverse populations of knowledge organization practices and structures over time.

I do this work to improve the value of knowledge organization which is rooted squarely, in my mind, the self-becoming of individuals through the cultural record.
Prolegomena
In order to proceed with this discussion, I first need to provide some introductory remarks, and establish some working definitions.

What follows in this talk, is a set of four assertions that lay down the foundational argument for a reconceptualization of knowledge organization. These four assertions, in my mind, provide the constructs useful to redirecting our focus (intentionality), and guiding future action – specifically toward *right action*.
Right action is a concept, drawn from Buddhist ethics, that I find useful in framing engaged knowledge organization. It deals with the intentionality of action – our everyday actions. But we can apply it here, to examine the role our intentions can play in designing, implementing, maintaining, and evaluating knowledge organization systems.
To help with a clear set of guidelines on right action, we can implement guidelines on intention. Buddhism, as an ethical body of knowledge, claims that we should not harm. This is, in Zen Buddhism, the first precept to which one commits.

Following this precept would then be seen as conducting oneself in “right action.”

However, we immediately see the need for guidance. What happens if a Buddhist, who has committed to right action, and follows the first precept of non-harm, but steps on a spider while walking?
In order to solve the philosophical and ethical problem that surfaces from this scenario ethicists have constructed a two-part measure for considering how unwholesome an act is. This measure asks: what knowledge do we have of the act, and what is our level of intentionality when carrying out the act?

To this end we end up with two sets of measures.
Five Levels of Intentionality:

(1) An action performed without intending to do that particular action, for example accidentally treading on an insect, without any thought of harming, or doing something when one is insane.

(2) If one knows that a certain kind of action is evil, but does it when one is not in full control of oneself, for example when drunk or impassioned.

(3) If one does an evil action when one is unclear or mistaken about the object affected by the action.

(4) An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing, and knows that the action is evil. This is the most obvious kind of wrong action, with bad karmic results, particularly if it is premeditated.

(5) An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing (as in iv), but do not recognize that one is doing wrong. [12]
Measures of Knowledge of the Act:

(a) One is in a state of mind in which one knows one is doing that act
(b) One knows the act to be wrong, if it is intentionally done

These are binary measures (either yes or no), and are combined with intentionality to see the extent to which the act is unwholesome. [12]

We want to keep these measures (levels of intention and measures of knowledge) in the backs of our minds as we proceed through the rest of the talk. We will see that an engaged knowledge organization commits to right action (by being aware of the intentionality and focused on the qualities of our state of mind) in a context of reaction against societal dehumanization (A1), professional inertia (A2), and sometimes invisibly violent status quo of language (A3). This leads us, if we commit to right action, to construct guiding precepts for an engaged knowledge organization (A4).
We can now begin with the first of four assertions.
Assertion One
KELMSCOTT PRESS, UPPER MALL, HAMMERSMITH.

February 16th, 1897.

**Note.** This is the Golden type.
This is the Troy type.
This is the Chaucer type.
William Morris responded to the advances of the industrial revolution by returning to nature and to history. His work surfaced in the milieu of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain (1850-1900).
This movement was a response to the Industrial Revolution. The development of the steam engine by James Watt in 1765 led to the mechanization of industry, agriculture and transportation and changed the life of the working man in Britain.
Industrialization left people with a sense that their life had changed for the worst. Many had sacrificed a rural lifestyle 'in England's green and pleasant land' for the sake of a job in the 'dark Satanic mills' of the Industrial Revolution. As a result, they lost that feeling of security and belonging which comes from living in smaller communities.
The members of the Arts and Crafts Movement included artists, architects, designers, craftsmen and writers. They feared that industrialization was destroying the environment in which traditional skills and crafts could prosper, as machine production had taken the pride, skill and design out of the quality of goods being manufactured.
They were convinced that the general decline of artistic standards brought on by industrialization was linked to the nation's social and moral decline.
Separately, Ron Day and I have argued that we can conceive of indexing and knowledge organization as an act that, at least, defies mechanic reproduction, and at most, is an act of craftsmanship that requires time, materials (resources), and an appreciation of a skill drawn on a body of knowledge.
This is in response to the routinization of knowledge organization practice through standardization and a “one-size fits all” standardization practice that altered the work of cataloguing and indexing in the 20th Century. And which is now called into question with innovations in the technological landscape.
We have artisan’s work in our knowledge organization systems.

Knowledge organization is a craft not an assembly-line process.

Work in knowledge organization does not have to be industrialized.
Assertion One: WE CAN SEE THIS HISTORICAL CONFLICT AS A METAPHOR FOR CONFLICTING STANCES ON THE WORK DONE IN KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION TODAY.
Assertion Two
As it stands there are many open questions about ethics in and of knowledge organization – its practice and products. Many of them in classification, positioned as they are around identity politics of race, gender, and other marginalized groups, ask the classificationist to be mindful of the choice of terms and relationships between terms. To highlight these concerns scholars have invoked feminist “philosophy of the limit,” [1] queer theory, [2] and critical race theory [3].

From this work we understand that race and gender requires special consideration, which manifests as a particular concern for the form of representation inside extant schemes. Even with these advances in our understanding there are still other categories about which we must make decisions and take action.
For example, there are ethical decisions about fiduciary resource allocation, political decisions about standards adoption, and even broader zeitgeist considerations, like, as alluded to above, the question of Fordist conceptions of the mechanics of description and representation present in much of today’s practice versus a more Morris-esque Arts and Crafts version of the same [4, 5].

Just as taking action in a particular way is an ethical concern, so too is avoiding a lack of action. Scholars in knowledge organization have also looked at the absence of what we called right action in the context of cataloguing and classification. This leads to some problems related to identity (mentioned above), and hints at the larger ethical concerns - namely watching a subtle semantic violence persist in our systems without intervention [6, 7].

We can see that with knowledge of explicit harm done by ignoring bias in race, gender, or resource allocation, standards adoption, or in ignoring these issues and other issues, like the persistence of error in online bibliographic utilities, and if we commit to the belief that knowledge organization should be engaged in right action we have a concern on our hands, namely: that with knowledge of committing these acts (e.g., bias or persistence of error), with some level of intentionality, we are engaging in at best, unwholesome acts, or at worst, acts of harm or violence.

In fact I would argue for the strong case: that knowing and acting intentionally after knowing these facts, not taking right action is a act of violence.
Assertion Two: NOT TAKING RIGHT ACTION IN KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION PRACTICE IS AN ACT OF VIOLENCE.
Assertion Three
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Slavoj Žižek in his *Violence* describes three forms that frame our understanding of the same. Subjective violence, symbolic violence, and systemic violence (the latter two are both considered objective violence). Subjective violence is carried out by a subject, an actor, an identifiable agent. Clear examples of subjective violence are acts of crime, terror, civil unrest, and international conflict [8 p. 1].

The two forms of objective violence are not as obvious. In Žižek’s analysis these other forms of violence are embedded and invisible to most of our observations.

Objective violence forms the status quo against which we measure subjective violence. Symbolic violence is the universe of meaning imposed by a language on a group of people and present in the language. Systemic violence is the consequences (often catastrophic) of the smooth functioning of economic and political systems [8 p. 2].
The most striking example of violence Žižek calls out is the violence of the *liberal communist*. This is someone who has made money (thereby taking it from others) and has turned around to “fix” problems in under-privileged and developing world contexts. This asserts a particular socio-political stratification – the liberal global capitalist democracy.
In knowledge organization it is easy to see that objective violence can surface in our work, because our work is rooted in what Žižek calls symbols and systems.

First, we use the symbolic systems of language and its more refined subset of indexing languages – often controlled indexing languages. And we operate within systems, as defined by Žižek that are part of the socio-political system – legitimated as components to help the (capitalist) democratic citizen.
We can further refine symbolic violence in KO, identifying three types pertinent to our work

1. Semantic violence
2. Conceptual violence
3. Reference violence

Briefly, this are:
Semantic violence: the renaming of an extant body of thought (literature) without authority to do so

Conceptual violence: refusal to link bodies of knowledge together in topical discussion or representation

Reference violence: refusal to cite requisite literature (or in any other way instantiate – that is, leave uncited or unrepresented in any way - for the purposes of retrieval)
These kinds of violences are in accord with other acts of protest in this area – work that asks us to consider, for instance, the power to name [9] and work that wants to take the *dick* out of dictionary [10].

Assertion Three: OBJECTIVE VIOLENCE (SYMBOLIC AND SYSTEMATIC) IS POTENTIALLY PRESENT IN CONTEMPORARY ACTS OF KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION.
Assertion Four
It would seem to me that if we buy the assertion that objective violence can surface in our work, then we have ethical decisions to make to prevent it.
There is one caveat: the apparent ignorance of professionals to these kinds of violences. And this is a complicated one. But we can assume the ignorant can be informed through study, and can gain more empowering knowledge of these violences by studying precepts of a more engaged knowledge organization.
If we establish the perspective that knowledge organization its practice and its products are at least complicit in if not tools for propagating violence as outlined above we are then forced to engage with this new stance.

I would argue that the action advocated by an ethical consideration for knowledge organization, in this case *right action*, is an engaged one, and it is here where we can take a nod from contemporary ethical theory advanced by Engaged Buddhism. In this context we can see the manifestation of precepts that guide ethical action, and warn against lack of action.
To this end I will offer preliminary thoughts on the precepts for an Engaged Knowledge Organization.

I will model these from Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Interbeing*
There are fourteen precepts in Thich Nhat Hahn’s work.
I. “Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist [professional] ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.” [11]

Here we can see that we are attempting to get a symbolic violence through detachment. We don’t need our identity permanently attached to doctrine, theory, or ideology (even professional ones). This then allows us to act in an engaged way when we organize knowledge, but not act in a dogmatic way.

2. “Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others’ viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.” [11]

Here we see an amplification of the first precept. And it is key for semantic, conceptual, and reference violence. We have to be able to change our schemes should violence appear in them, to learn our whole working life (and beyond).

3. “Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.” [11]

Here we see that a major part of acknowledging violence in knowledge organization is the commitment to educate, but only through dialogue and only by avoiding fanaticism and narrow-mindedness – even in thinking we are doing the right thing by helping to change violence.

4. “Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.”

For engaged knowledge organization, this relates directly to the belief that we should upon being educated on the presence of violence in KO, not close our eyes to it.

5. “Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.”

6. “Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your hatred.”

Here we see the need to eliminate the ego-self, a distinctively Buddhist concept, but one that I think plays well into an engaged conception of knowledge organization and puts us in check as well. We are not saviors. We are not hoarders of conceptual knowledge. We are not in a position to harbor anger or hatred. We are here to share and make better through our work in knowledge organization.

7. “Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.”

And even if we aren’t the center of the universe, our health is important to organizing knowledge. We have to feel joy and peace in order to carry out the work, and what’s more, we need to lead by example.

8. “Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

9. “Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.”

Here we see that speech is an important factor, but more to our purposes in engaged KO, we can see the power of language represented in these precepts. When we acknowledge violences in KO, then we must speak truthfully but not sew conflict.

10. “Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.”

11. “Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realise your ideal of compassion.”

Here we see Thich Nhat Hahn address his Buddhist community specifically. For us, it would be the community of engaged KO researchers. And we can also see how we benefit and do not benefit from this vocation.

12. “Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.”

13. “Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.”

14. “Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realisation of the Way. (For brothers and sisters who are not monks and nuns:) Sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. In sexual relations, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.”

Here we see the primacy of integrity as it relates to individual human beings and their means of living a happy life. If engaged knowledge organization is built on the practices paid for by others, using natural resources as well as people-power then we have to act with an ethical imperative on helping them realize their full potential through interaction with the written record – through organized knowledge.

This work is preliminary. As you can see I lifted Thich Nhat Hahn’s text directly, and did not paraphrase. The next phase is to translate the spirit of this work into clearly articulated precepts for engaged Knowledge Organization. This way we can make clear how our work manifests as actions to prevent semantic, conceptual, and reference violence in knowledge organization systems.

Assertion Four: ENGAGED KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION ACKNOWLEDGES OBJECTIVE VIOLENCE IN OUR WORK AND WORKS TOWARD FOLLOWING GUIDING PRECEPTS TO TEACH US HOW TO WORK WITH AWARENESS AND TO WORK LESS VIOLENTLY.
Concluding remarks
I have made four assertions in the course of this paper:

1. We can see this historical conflict between Industrial Revolution and the Arts and Crafts Movement as a metaphor for conflicting stances on the work done in knowledge organization today.

2. Not taking right action in knowledge organization practice is an act of violence.

3. Objective violence (symbolic and systematic) is potentially present in contemporary acts of knowledge organization.

4. Engaged Knowledge Organization acknowledges objective violence in our work and works toward following guiding precepts to teach us how to work with awareness and work less violently.
But it seems that Assertion 1 is not linked to the others…
Now we can connect Assertion 1 with the rest.

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The upshot then is perhaps a need for an artistic turn in descriptive practices.
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Thank you

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