Replacing the ideology of information by exploring domains of knowledge

A case study of the periodization of Philippine history and its application to information studies

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the structure of Philippine historiography as viewed by Filipino historians. The purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of the knowledge domain of Philippine history and in particular how its practitioners organize their field of study in terms of periodization. At the end of the paper an application of this analysis is proposed, the development of an online encyclopaedia of Philippine history.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were arranged with willing historians at two of the premier institutions of higher learning in the Philippines: the Ateneo de Manila and University of the Philippines. The historians were asked three general questions: what in their opinion, are the key defining events in Philippine history? What are the key historians for each of those events? And what are the key debates regarding these events? For the purpose of this paper it is the results of the first question that are in focus as it deals with one of the fundamental tools of historical analysis, periodization.

Findings – Philippine history was found to be periodized in a variety of ways, from the traditional to other approaches that stress either Filipino rather than colonial agency or the uneven trajectories of historical development that depend on region, class, or language group. A final approach viewed Filipino history as a network of relations spanning space and time. Wikis designed around the results of domain analysis make it possible to provide information on topics of importance to a discipline as well as reveal something of its deeper structure. Combined with traditional concerns, such as use of appropriate sources, this would serve to help develop a deeper awareness of the nature of knowledge production.

Originality/value – This paper represents both a contribution to the study of knowledge domains, as well as an application of that study to the work of information professionals. Putting the spotlight on Philippine historians and history also helps the LIS discipline to move away from its traditional North American and European focus. Studies of knowledge producing bodies in the rest of the world are important and overdue.

Keywords Philippines, Asia, History, Wikipedia, Domain analysis, Wikis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In an article written in 1995 Phil Agre argues that we need to view the concept of information as an "object of certain professional ideologies, most particularly librarianship and computing […]" (p. 225). It serves "to position librarianship as a neutral profession" (p. 226) in so much as it draws attention away from the internal debates and ideologies of any of its user communities. He notes that if one considers the world of academia, for example, it is not information that is focus of attention of its seasoned practitioners, but literatures. Up to now, particular user communities have generally remained content "to treat the work of exploring literatures as a series of

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discrete problems to be reformulated in the language of information", but Agre suggests that this might change as digital technologies increasingly mediate what he refers to as "the institutional circuitry" of user communities and make possible multiple approaches to the delivery of what to date we call information. In such a situation "it may become possible – and perhaps even unavoidable – for librarians to abandon the idea of information and replace it with the specialized ideology that governs the circuitry of a particular institution". In doing so librarians or information workers will have to deal with the consequences of the abandonment of the neutrality provided by the ideology of information: "If librarians attempted to organize works in the ways their patrons orient to them […] certain difficulties would follow. It would be necessary to make explicit some frequently contested matters, such as who founded the literature, which research groups are dominant […] Librarians would find themselves effectively positioned as participants in the disciplines' conflicts but without the disciplinary standing needed to make their views stick" (p. 226).

The work of Patrick Wilson (1983) is useful at this point in providing a means to move beyond this impasse. Wilson, after a discussion of the institutional authority of the knowledge industry concludes by explicitly rejecting the position "that we simply let each specialist group decide for us whether they produce knowledge and deserve recognition as cognitive authorities" (p. 144). In this regard he wonders "why there are occupational specialists in literary, music, art, drama, and architecture criticism, but not in knowledge criticism" and that "inquiry as practiced by scientists and historians is a form of art and performances at research and writing would seem to be as suitable objects for public criticism as are performances in the arts" (p. 111).

Wilson (1983) is certainly aware that the insiders in any discipline will not usually be in favour of outsiders passing judgement on their work "but that is not sufficient reason for the outsiders to stop" (p. 176). Instead he suggests a new role for the librarian, one that would see the profession adopt Pyrrhonian scepticism as its ideology, an ideology which he defines as "the attitude of one who neither asserted nor denied the possibility of knowledge but continued to inquire, though always unsatisfied that knowledge had yet been found […] Pyrrhonian sceptics would not conclude that nothing could be gained by inquiry of some sort but rather would find themselves unconvinced that anything had been established so far" (p. 194).

An attitude of Pyrrhonian scepticism would, he argue, allow the information profession "a studied neutrality" while providing a means to assist those seeking knowledge to a greater extent than the consultation of standard reference works or bibliographical aids. It would allow librarians to take on the role of a guide to the "institutional circuitry" of any particular subject without claiming any special or insider expertise. The sceptical librarian would report on the various debates and positions in a discipline without claiming that any one of them represented either knowledge or mere opinion. In this way the information worker would "help others make their way through the jungle of the bibliographical world to find what people have to say on various questions, without feeling inclined or required to take a position on the cognitive value of what [is found] there" (pp. 195-196).

But in order to adequately perform the role of sceptical librarian it is necessary to possess an awareness and understanding of the structure and organization of the various disciplines that claim to produce knowledge about our world.

This conclusion echoes the views of Birger Hjorland who has championed what he refers to as the domain analytic approach to LIS (Hjorland, 2002a, b). This approach is founded on the belief that "that the best way to understand information in IS is to study

the knowledge domains as thought or discourse communities, which are part of society's division of labour" (Hjorland, 1995, p. 400). These communities are variated so that "one cannot treat all domains as if they are fundamentally similar" so that studies of individual disciplines are required if the domain analytic approach is to be developed.

Other scholars have taken up the domain analytic approach so that it now has generated a significant body of literature that builds and extends on these central insights. Webet *et al.* used a domain analytic approach to describe the production and use of data in earth sciences (Webet *et al.*, 2012) while Talja and Maula (2003) have applied domain analysis to the use of e-journals by various academic disciplines. Fry (2006) in her analysis of "the use of networked digital resources for information practices", has extended the domain analytic approach by applying Whitley's typology of academic work characteristics. Arguing that "cumulatively transferable definitions of domains must be written" Tennis suggest two axes, area of modulation and degrees of specialization, to help the process along (Tennis, 2003). Domain analysis has been applied to the field of music by Pietras and Robinson (2012) who examine three notions of the "musical work" and relate these to wider social contexts. Also focusing on music is an earlier article by Knut Abrahamsen who examines "some of the epistemological conditions" that underpin the classification of genre in libraries and musicology (Abrahamsen, 2003). Orom (2003) develops an analysis of the linkage between discourses, paradigms, and knowledge organization in art history, arguing that the rise of "new" art history has created "a challenge" for library and information science to represent both it and more traditional approaches. In a collaborative effort, Sondergaard *et al.* (2003) have revised the UNISIST model, originally developed by UNESCO and the International Council of Scientific Unions, as a means to develop "a socio-technical perspective on the activities of scholarly communication" (p. 279), justifying their work on the grounds that domain analysis "stresses the importance of analysing and comparing differences between various knowledge domains and their communication structures" (p. 279). Domain analysis using the UNISIST model is also the aim of Christensen (2014) who has developed a diachronic study of the field of Danish art history.

The domain of Philippine historiography

The rest of this paper examines in a preliminary and partial way the domain of Philippine historiography as viewed by Filipino historians. Domains are made up of a combination of ontological, epistemological, and sociological theories and concepts (Hjorland and Hartel, 2003), but here the focus is on the ontological. Hjorland and Hartel (2003) define ontological theories as descriptions or explanations of reality "and how it is structured" (p. 239). It deals with the objects or topics or elements of disciplinary inquiry. Periodization, or how time is divided and labelled, is central to the ontology of historiography. Hence developing an understanding of the richness of the periodization schemes used by Filipino historians is the first goal of this paper. The second is to apply this understanding to the development of online information resources in a way that illustrates how certain professional historians see their field and by implication demonstrates the plurality and complexity of historical knowledge production. In this aim, the paper seeks to advocate a project based on the results of domain analytic research for the "sceptical librarian" interested in moving beyond the ideology of information.

Philippine history was chosen for this analysis for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is not a particularly large field and hence more amendable to detailed analysis than would be the case for a larger subject. Second, it is important for LIS to move

away from its North American and European focus. Studies of knowledge producing bodies in the rest of the world are important and overdue. Finally, although the field is relatively small it is well established. The University of the Philippines was founded in 1908 and by the 1920s the Department of History was completely staffed by Filipinos (Reyes, 2006; Coraming, 2008).

To gain an understanding of how practitioners of Philippine history-making structure their field, interviews were arranged with willing historians at two of the premier institutions of higher learning in the Philippines: the Ateneo de Manila and University of the Philippines. A total of eight historians were eventually interviewed. Interviews generally lasted around one to two hours and were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The historians were asked three general questions: What in their opinion, are the key defining events in Philippine history? What are the key historians for each of those events? And what are the key debates regarding these events? For the purpose of this paper it is the results of the first question that are important as they deal with one of the fundamental tools of historical analysis, periodization.

Periodization refers to the labelling of time either by significant events or rules, general descriptions, or metaphors. It is a key component of the work of historians but one that "ranks among the more elusive tasks of historical scholarship" as "the identification of coherent periods of history involves more than the simple discovery of self-evident turning points in the past […]" (Bentley, 1996, p. 749). Instead, it requires acts of imagination, emotional commitment, and the cultivation of aesthetic preferences (Jordanova, 2000, p. 115). As such it presents a fertile field for analysis and hence is the object of attention in this paper.

Traditionally the periodization of Philippine history takes as its major divisions the dates of invasion and defeat of the major colonial powers: Spanish, American, and Japanese. To this basic schema is added an early and vaguely labelled pre-colonial and a later independence era situated after the official granting of independence by the USA in 1946. This traditional periodization has been criticized on a number of fronts and as early as 1982 when John Larkin suggested that the time had come for a new approach based on what he saw as the two dynamic forces at work in Philippine history: the gradual linkage of the various islands of the Philippines to the world economy and the equally gradual settlement of the Philippine frontier. But the old approach has tended to persist. Certainly it formed a central part of the scaffolding supporting many of the historians in their discussions with the author. But it was not accepted in totality. As scaffolding it was used to support additions to the various divisions and to "read against the grain" the events of Philippine history. It was also, at times, and by some, accompanied by alternative schemas.

Two of the historians added a geographical or geological component to their periodization. Influenced by Fernand Braudel's concept of the longue duree, phases of history that move at a glacial pace, these historians believed that the "geologic factors […] affect Philippine culture and eventually Philippine history" (Abrera) and that "when you talk about geology, Philippine geography, you also talk about culture" (Llanes). For examples, one pointed to how the archipelagic nature of the Philippines explained why "even up to the present Filipinos have a minimum of two languages […] The people from the other islands came in and they have to speak a trade language […]" (Abrera), while the other linked place names to geographic features (Llanes).

There were a number of other additions to the traditional schema. The rise of Islam in the southern Philippines was one of them, included because the form of government introduced in the Islamic areas created "a new political process and new social relations

in indigenous society" (Abrera). The years between 1740 and 1860 were set off as a key period spanning as they did the emergence and rise to economic dominance of the Chinese mestizos, being for one historian "a very crucial period" and that "the Philippines is […] unusual compared to most countries in the region because [the] traditional native elite died out […] supplanted by the Chinese mestizos" (Aguilar). The period of independence seemed to enjoy something of a consensus in terms of the importance of the martial law years (1972-1981). After 1986 was generally considered too recent for historical work and while events of the pre-martial law period occasionally were brought up, it was not with the same consistency. The martial law period, however, was a fixture in the interviews[1].

One of the historians began the interview with a gentle criticism of the traditional approach to the periodization of Philippine history, noting that "most of the time these are political events […] I would like to look at it a bit differently" (Habana). This historian went on to discuss the importance of various forms of trade in the history of the Philippines, both external, that is, with either southeast Asia, China or Europe, and internal to the communities inhabiting the archipelago. But along with the issue of slave raiding by the Sulu Sultanate these events were eventually merged into "the long Spanish period" thereby accommodating the conventional arrangement.

While many of the historians tended to present the traditional periodization, albeit with various additions, some provided new interpretations. One queried the traditional approach, asking "can we not periodize our history without attaching ourselves to the colonial reference point?" (Llanes). For this scholar, the key problem of the dominant periodization was that it privileged or highlighted the activity of the colonial powers rather than the Filipinos. In the traditional schema Filipinos are without agency, buffeted by whatever colonial power was ascendant at the time. Instead, this historian believed that Philippine history "could be divided into certain major periods focused on the *bayan*[2], the becoming of the *bayan*" (Llanes) so that, after discussion of geography, the focus should turn to the first emergence of homo sapiens in the Philippines, Tabon man, "after that, let's talk about becoming *bayan*, if you focus on the *bayan*, what's happening inside, what's happening within, instead of people acting on you from the outside and you are becoming a nation then things would be different" (Llanes). The historian's example was taken from the 1930s, in the traditional periodization, part of the US colonial era. Like many other parts of the world, the depression years had created numerous protest movements which this historian suggested had tended to be perceived through the eyes of the colonizer, so that these movements were labelled "as rebels, insurectos. Rather than as looking at them as a *bayan* in formation, of becoming, or reasserting themselves as *bayan*" (Llanes). The corollary to this would be to naturally see "the Americans as intruders, trying to break the becoming of the *bayan*" (Llanes).

A second schema for the periodization of Philippine history focused on a critique of the common teleological narrative of Philippine nation-building, a narrative that could find support in either traditional periodization or its "becoming *bayan*" alternative. From the point of view of those offering this critique, the dominant forms of periodization of Philippine history are seen as "just a reflection of lowland Christian historical experience" so that as soon as other areas of the archipelago are examined, areas such as Muslim Mindanao or the Luzon Cordillera, "the very notion of that periodization would fall apart" (Geologo). Another historian used the term "alternative nationalities" to encapsulate the different routes taken to nation-hood and the differing perceptions of the nation that depended on regional, class and linguistic divisions (Holifena). Complicating the situation further was the notion that a radically different way of conceptualizing Philippine history

would be through "a global, transnational perspective" (Aguilar). For this historian, it was important not to anachronistically view Philippine territory through the lens of the modern nation-state. He believed it necessary to instead "really [see] the Philippines as not so much as this already given pre-defined bounded entity, that we know as Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao [but rather] seeing the more amorphous networks that intersect with territory that was the Spanish Philippines" (Aguilar). For this historian there was no question that such an approach would reveal "networks and linkages and cobwebs all over the place!" (Aguilar).

Putting an understanding of a disciplinary domain to use in LIS-related activities

Domain analysis is important as an academic contribution to the construction of LIS as a distinct discipline, as well as being an inherently stimulating approach to the study of fields of knowledge, but it also needs to serve practical purposes as well. Luckily it is not difficult for it to do so. Hjorland describes 11 approaches to domain analysis, among which are activities such as producing guides to the literature and subject thesauri which are very practical indeed (Hjorland, 2002a). Domain analysis can also be useful in designing information systems and among these systems Wikipedia is not in any way the least important to our contemporary information infrastructure.

With Wikipedia consistently appearing among the top ten visited web sites, many are now familiar with this encyclopaedia as a source of convenient online information. Given the commonplace nature of the wiki as an information tool it makes sense for those involved in LIS to work with it, although this does not seem to be much in evidence at present (Snyder, 2013).

Certainly, Wikipedia has gone beyond being a pariah for many teachers, faulted for a presumed lack of accuracy and dubious documentation practices. Instead it has achieved a respectable position as a valued learning tool (Konieczny, 2014; Fessakis and Zoumpatianou, 2013). History teaching has not been an exception to this development. Elizabeth Pollard (2008), for example, writes of her experience in getting university students to contribute new entries on witchcraft, noting that the assignment enabled them to contribute to "high stakes historical discourse" as well as a greater appreciation for "the relative value of various resources for historical research" and the process of "constructing historiography" (p. 9). Chandler and Gregory (2010) developed a similar project for a course on Islamic history at a liberal arts college in the USA. The aim was to have students learn about the research process as well as explicitly "learn wiki-technology" (p. 250). After receiving training on how to contribute to Wikipedia, students were expected to write short papers chosen from a list of topics and, after approval was obtained from the instructor, post them to Wikipedia and afterwards monitor their fate. The instructors noted a heightened sense of ownership of the entries and were generally pleased with the outcome of their experiment, noting that "the students come to appreciate what Wikipedia is and what it is not", (p. 295) in other words, its capabilities and limitations.

In an introductory history course at the University of Baltimore, Elizabeth Nix (2010) has also incorporated Wikipedia as part of the instructional design. Students were expected to write three paragraphs with at least three citations on a topic related to their research on local history and submit them to Wikipedia. Nix wrote of the result: "I have never seen so much activity over any other assignment I have devised" (p. 262), an outcome she attributed to the real world nature of the task they were performing. Unlike most course assignments, students were actually constructing history and participating in debates over that construction.

The three examples I have noted here all had as their primary aim the education of students, but they were also solid contributions to the provision of well sourced documents on topics not well represented on the free internet. In an age of increased information commodification this is no mean feat.

But contributions to Wikipedia are not the only method of achieving this aim. Another approach would be to create a stand-alone Wiki on a particular theme and populate it with articles produced by an editorial team. This was the method favoured by Nupedia, Wikipedia's ancestor. It suffered from very slow growth, relying as it did on volunteer expert editors[3]. But for limited thematic areas more successful examples do exist. Infopedia, an initiative sponsored by the National Library of Singapore is one example, having its origin in an in-house database of answered library reference questions on the topic of Singapore history. These questions were worked up into short articles on important personalities, organizations and events and made available to the wider internet public through a wiki format (Tan, 2008).

Of course Infopedia does not allow for student or more generally public contributions. But other wiki projects do. Austria Forum is one example. Conceived with the aim of complementing, not competing with Wikipedia, Austria Forum provides "fine grained information to users with special interests in Austria" (Trattner *et al.*, 2010, p. 2). It relies on volunteer editors for content, but also has an editorial board that vets contributions and decides when an article is complete and hence locked to further changes.

In producing such hybrid versions of Wikipedia, the analysis of disciplinary domains would be most useful. Such an analysis could provide a certain level of scaffolding for editors, be they the general public or students. An analysis of the various schools of thought could, for example, be used to structure an introductory article on the discipline in question. In the case presented in the first section of this paper, the various periodization schemes put forth by the historian respondents could be used to devise a series of article stubs that could be expanded as part of student projects or as part of the wider social activity of the Internet.

But as well as being useful for students or the general public, the development of such scaffolding would also be an excellent project for the sceptical librarian moving beyond the ideology of information to deal directly with Agre's "institutional circuitry" of knowledge producers (Agre, 1995). In this regard, it is possible to conceive of a wiki that presents the various periodizations side by side as a table of contents of sorts that links directly to articles on various historical subdivisions. Based on the analysis presented in this paper five periodization schemes could be presented. The first would be the traditional approach, based on colonial regimes. The second would combine this approach but with additional categories added for geography, pre-colonial, Islamic, and post-colonial periods. The second would focus on the agency of Filipinos as they attempted to forge an independent destiny in the midst of repeated invasions. Based on the insight given by one of the respondents this could be developed through articles based on the various reactions to colonialism: acceptance, resistance, and assimilation/adjustment. The third periodization scheme concentrates on the uneven trajectories of historical development in the Philippines, noting alternative paths to the unfolding of plural societies within the country. This could be implemented as separate pathways for the key cultural influences in the Philippines: the indigenous, the Islamic, the Spanish, and the American, each divided by centuries. It would then be possible to illustrate the continuing vitality of these cultural currents over time rather than assuming their submergence in the face of the most recent or most powerful cultural force. The final approach to periodization covered here would view Philippine history as a network of

relations between groups of people. One way to visualize this would be through concentric circles of expanding relations: internal (i.e. relations or contact between people within the Philippine archipelago), Chinese/southeast Asian, Islamic, and finally European/North American.

Figures 1-5 present an overview of these four approaches. It must be noted that in no way do I believe that these four exhaust the possibilities for the periodization of Philippine history[4]. This is especially the case for the third structure, where I have focused exclusively on broad cultural divisions. It is easy to see here that there are other ways of charting alternative histories: by class, region, or language, for example, as was noted by the respondents.

By designing wikis around the results of domain analysis (i.e. examinations of the various schools of thought, styles of argumentation, periodization, or the many other features that make disciplines distinct cultural communities), it is possible not just to provide advice on the topics of importance to a discipline, but to actually reveal its usually hidden-to-outsiders contours. Combined with traditional concerns such as use of appropriate sources, this would serve to help develop within students and public alike a deeper awareness of the nature of knowledge production, an aim fundamentally in accordance with Wilson's vision of the sceptical librarian and Agre's view that LIS needs to engage directly with the institutional circuitry of the producers of the knowledge that it collects and disseminates.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I noted the view of Phil Agre that at some point in the future the possibilities of digital technology may require librarians to rethink their reliance on the ideology of information and that although he was right to point out the difficulties

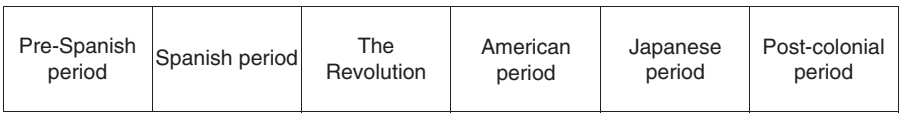


Figure 1. Traditional periodization

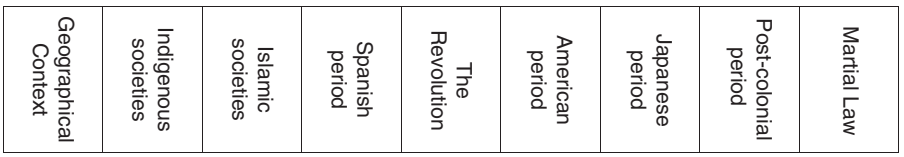


Figure 2. Traditional periodization with additions

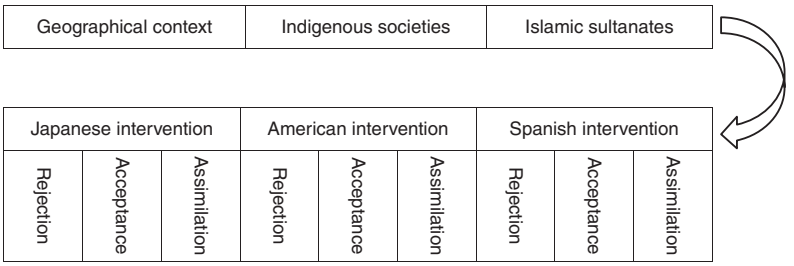
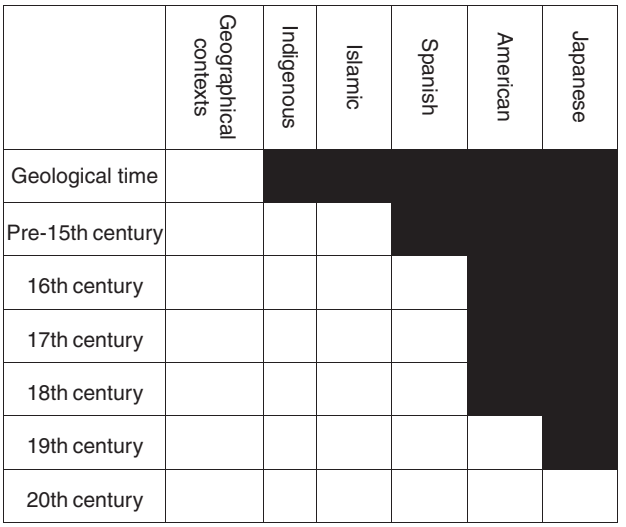


Figure 3. Filipino agency in the unfolding of history



Note: In this figure we see the various social/cultural influences that shaped the Philippines over time, but avoid assuming that each new influence completely obliterated previous influences. For example, although Spanish colonization added greatly to the stock of cultural knowledge, at the same time, the indigenous and Islamic forces continued to be operative. What the Philippines represents from this perspective is a palimpsest, rather than a blank state for whatever more recent influence is at work

Figure 4.
The Philippines as a product of uneven change and cultural influence

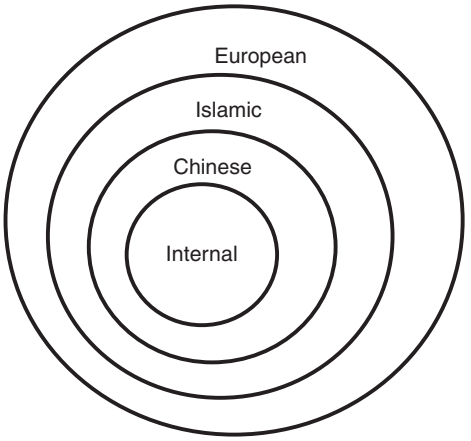


Figure 5.
Philippine history as an expanding networks of relations

such a move would entail, Wilson's concept of the sceptical librarian and Hjorland's programme of domain analysis provides means to move forward. In the case study that followed I provided a small contribution to the analysis of a particular domain; namely, some of the ontological structures that underlie the periodization of Philippine history, and

an application of that analysis to the world of Internet content provision and online learning tools for an age in which the ideology of information should have less relevance.

Although reducing reliance on the ideology of information is a large step, it is one that opens up exciting possibilities for LIS to help users in the future and to create a dynamic profession.

Notes

1. Martial law was declared in the Philippines in 1972 by then-President Ferdinand Marcos. It was in place until 1981.
2. Nation or community in Filipino, the national language of the Philippines.
3. However, it appears that Nupedia could have been stream-lined in order to increase the rate of production of articles. This at least is the view of Larry Sanger, Jimmy Wales' partner in the project. According to him, Nupedia's advisory board was close to accepting the need for a simplification of the editing process by the end of 2001 and a new system, modelled on the process used to run many academic journals", that is, the use of an editor as initial filter and reviewers for added filtering was ready to be unrolled. Sanger's commitment to the nascent Wikipedia at the same time got in the way of these developments and Nupedia was left to languish as a result (Sanger, 2006).
4. This is especially important to note given the critique by Melanie Feinberg who argues that although domain analysis rightly points out that traditionally conceived information systems tend to have "unacknowledged biases" built into their operations, it also has biases in so far as it passes over in silence the role of the analyst or the subject expert in constructing the domain (Feinberg, 2007).

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