Book Review: Everything is miscellaneous – Or, Everything is Metadata[1]

By: Joel Alleyne

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David Weinberger, author of Small Pieces Loosely Joined[2] and one of the four contributors to the Cluetrain Manifesto,[3] published his most recent book last year: Everything is miscellaneous.[4] The central argument for the book is that a new order in organizing ‘things’ that he calls ‘the third order’ is emerging. We need to rethink the frameworks we put in place personally, as well as inside and between our organizations. As David puts it, the book is “about the new principles of digital organization and their effect on knowledge and authority”. [5] He challenges the notions we hold so dear.

David elaborates: In the first order we organized things, putting ‘similar things’ together. He uses several exemplars and analogies, one of which is emptying the dishwasher. When we do this, we put similar utensils (e.g. plates and bowls) together. Similarly, the original libraries stored books alphabetically and therefore patrons relied on a knowledgeable librarian (read “knowledge specialist”) to find appropriate material on their request. But then along came Melvil Dewey and, with the creation of the Dewey Decimal system, libraries moved to the second order. Now we could have card catalogues and organize books by subject as well as by author. The stacks could be opened up to patrons and we could find things without relying on a librarian who needed to have an intimate knowledge of the entire collection. Books, in the second order, are reduced to cards in a catalogue. We have a couple (or a few, but not infinite) ways of organizing them. Therein lies the limitations of second order frameworks.

Welcome to the third order. In the digital age, David claims, everything is miscellaneous. He supports his thesis using a number of exemplars – most of them with strong web-based business models. Along came Amazon leveraging the vast capabilities of computers and techniques of collaborative filtering[6] (‘people who bought this book also bought…’) to allow us to traverse collections of books. Think about it -- we are no longer told how to organize books. The community contributes to our understanding of the relationship between various books and the organization is not static. It is dynamic and grows over time. With every search, the collection is rearranged to match our point of reference or view.

So how do things work in the third order? People organize things the way they (personally and individually) think about them. They put them into folders (or classify them as ‘alike’). They can put the same things (e.g. documents) into several places. They can tag things. They can search on their own tags as well as other people’s tags. Tools such as del.icio.us, YouTube and flikr do this today, without imposing ways of organizing things on the user, participant, or community. What possibilities does this open if we allow similar ways of working in our corporate or institutional collections? Do most organizations have the critical mass to reap benefits from this form of knowledge organization – i.e. can they benefit from the ‘wisdom of crowds’?[7]

Publishers feel that their business models are threatened by the idea of Google books or any service
that allows people electronic access to the full text of their publications. But I sure like the thought of being able to go through the twelve books I have read this year on expertise subjects and find things electronically. Instead I am reduced to manual marginalia (hard to search) and my poor memory (harder yet to search) of what, and where, certain material I have read might be. I like the idea that in the third order, everything in the book (full text) is in the card catalogue (metadata), so to speak. McLuhan talked about media extending our reach. Certainly digital books extend our capabilities and enhance our productivity as researchers. Why are publishers guarding their monopolies on content at the extent of progress?

Those of us who are involved with knowledge management (inside and outside of organizations) need to ask what would happen if we acquiesced to the third order and, instead of fighting it, embraced it? Why not let people in our organizations ‘tag’ their own materials (documents, pictures, websites, books, articles, publications, etc.)? Should we be forcing the world view of knowledge organization (various classification schemes, taxonomies and knowledge organization frameworks) on our people versus letting them organize materials from their own perspective and as they see fit (folksonomies)? Why does it matter how things are organized in a digital / third order world where organization is a dynamic snapshot at any point in time?

There are colleagues here at the iSchool who have made careers in the area of knowledge organization and information/knowledge credibility. Some approached this book sceptically--at first. Some have embraced this wider vision of metadata and the challenges presented in the digital age. Others, while they may quibble with some of the details of Weinberger’s work, have found his views interesting.

At first glance, many of the things that David proposes seem like heresy. But dig deep, and you will find there is much of substance in the way he sees things.

This is an excellent book. If you haven’t read Everything is Miscellaneous, The Power of the New Digital Order yet, I highly recommend it. It will challenge your thinking about what is possible as we develop better tools and frameworks for harnessing knowledge in both organizational and societal settings.

Reference List


See: http://www.cluetrain.com/


