Convergence or chimera?

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Convergence is an accepted concept for the union of information technologies — a union that seems always impending. If the technologies are convergent, can the same be said of the professions that manage the information supported by the technologies?

Many professional organisations stake claims for information management. In Australia for example, the accounting and computing societies, as well as the library and the records management associations have each laid out turf in this area. Whether or not the territory overlaps, often comes down to how you define information ... or data, or knowledge. These terms are regularly appropriated, juxtaposed with other terms, and revalued from earlier understandings, as will presumably happen to 'knowledge management'.

Terminology has the potential either to distinguish or unite the professions. A case in point is meta information. In computing it has long been the province of the data administrators, in librarianship it has been the realm of the cataloguers. MARC format brought a closer association of the two, but even then the systems people were more concerned with how to manipulate the fields as data, and the cataloguers focused on the semantic content of what is in the fields.

The information swamp that is the Internet, has brought these two groups closer in the thrust to self-catalogue Web material as it is put up on the Internet. Together, they have conceived Dublin Core, one of the more developed proposals for doing this. Such development has edged closer to the sphere of the publishing profession, per medium of the Standard Generalised Markup Language(SGML). SGML facilitates generic mark-up of electronic material for printing, but also subsumes the HTML that forms the structure of the Web.

Is convergence happening in user services areas along the lines of technical services? Terminology seems to suggest it. Librarians and computer professionals are both comfortable with the concept of information centre. For librarians, a familiar instance is of servicing user needs in a distinct subject area that may be supported by a collection such as that of a special library. In computing, the information centre may be a formal unit with designated tasks relating to the human-computer interface such as consultation on problems, debugging of support tools, developing user-friendly systems, organising data in useable formats, and education in use of facilities and packages. On a more ad hoc basis it may be a help desk to satisfy queries arising from end-user computing.

This latter approach becomes more evident as organisations turn to outsourcing of software development. In a reverse from the usual direction of appropriation, some help desks have adopted the term 'call-centre' from tele-marketing.

So similar terminology belies a different understanding. An information centre as understood in computing seems to be more about ' How do you work it?', than the 'Where do you get it?' as understood by a librarian. This mental framework owes a lot to the preparation that the respective professionals undergo.

If we had the space here to consider the nine elements of study for course requirements in ALIA's education policy, we would find an emphasis on information needs and provision and the agencies (in a broad sense) that make this possible. In contrast, the Australian Computer Society's core body of knowledge identifies fifteen curriculum components. Many of these have an emphasis on problem solving. The Australian Computer Society also provides scope for educational institutions to approach these areas at levels of 'understanding, use, and design'. This orientation seems to me more towards outcomes than ALIA's 'analysis, evaluation and synthesis'.

If terms like information centre are to converge in meaning, then the Australian Computer Society is going to have to pay more attention to the semantic content of information and how it is imparted. ALIA is going to have to produce professionals who are prepared to engage more with the information that they are managing in order to use it to suggest solutions. This may be antithetical to the principle of disinterest in the information supplied.

The information professions have in common the tasks of intermediation. The intermediary needs skills in communication, information organisation, documentation, computing, management and education. The information professions have carved out their respective niches and made themselves distinct by the emphasis they give to these different areas. If the way of the future is knowledge management, and the successful utilisation of corporate memory, then adaptability is an imperative. Alternatively, the path to distinction may lead to extinction.

(This item with embedded links can be found at http://www.fit.qut.edu.au/InfoSys/middle/contrib/incite97.html) ■

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