Corporate Recordkeeping: New Challenges for Digital Preservation

Gillian Oliver
School of Information Management
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand
Phone (+ 64) (0)4 463 7437

Gillian.Oliver@vuw.ac.nz

Fiorella Foscarini
Faculty of Information,
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada
Phone (+1) 416-978-8295

fiorella.foscarini@utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe an innovative approach to the challenges associated with managing corporate records in the digital environment. Issues and problems with the use of EDRMS are well documented but alternatives are not yet mature enough for workplace implementation. The recordkeeping functionality of Microsoft SharePoint is disputed by practitioners, but this enterprise content management system appears to be emerging as a default solution to manage records. Applying genre theory in the configuration of SharePoint will assist records managers in negotiating shared understanding with their information technology colleagues which is essential in order to achieve digital preservation objectives.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

D.2.9 [**Software Engineering**]: Management – *Software configuration management.*

General Terms

Management, Design, Theory.

Keywords

MS SharePoint, EDRMS, content type, genre theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The challenges of ensuring that born digital information is not only accessible for as long as required, but also can be trusted for evidential purposes have long been the focus of study by the records community. Up until recently the predominant solution proposed has been electronic document and records management systems (EDRMS). However, EDRMS implementations have not been without problems and so alternative approaches are being investigated.

In the meantime, Microsoft SharePoint is rapidly achieving market dominance, and in many cases may be the only option available for corporate recordkeeping. A central feature of MS SharePoint is Content Type, which can be considered from the

perspective of genre theory. This paper suggests that genre theory provides an innovative approach to capturing the context of records creation and use, and as such, it may be usefully drawn on for the analysis and identification of Content Type.

2. DIGITAL RECORDKEEPING SYSTEMS

Research conducted by the international archival and records management community in the last two decades unanimously recommends that recordkeeping functionalities be implemented within offices with active records [3]. This recommendation has been widely adopted by organizations of all types across the globe. Electronic recordkeeping systems have been developed by a variety of different vendors and may be referred to by a range of acronyms (such as, EDMS, ERMS, ECMS, EDRMS). In some jurisdictions, these systems are required by law, but the challenges faced in implementation [9, 17] have motivated research to identify best practice and success factors [7, 16]. A key concern that has emerged from the literature is reluctance on the part of users to engage with EDRMS [13].

Enterprise content management in the form of SharePoint is being presented by Microsoft as a solution that can encompass all digital content, including records [4]. However, the extent to which MS SharePoint can be considered a recordkeeping system is hotly debated by the recordkeeping professional community [8]. A specific issue relates to the critical role of *Content Types* in MS SharePoint. Content Types are a new concept for the records community, and furthermore they have been singled out as one of the major disadvantages associated with using the MS SharePoint records centre. This is because they are perceived as being difficult to administer and understand. As Lappin puts it, "content types … are more powerful than folders, but they are also more complex for you as an administrator to set up and maintain, and for your colleagues to understand and use" [8]. In the light of this strongly worded warning, it seems very important indeed for records managers to get to grips with the concept of Content Type. The official Microsoft definition of Content Types is as follows: "a reusable collection of metadata (columns), workflow, behavior, and other settings for a category of items or documents in a Microsoft SharePoint Foundation 2010 list or document library" [10]. Or, features that enable identifying what a document *is* through what it *does*. This implies a much more multi-faceted approach to Content Type than its name suggests. This is significant because it shows potential for interpretation of Content Type as a genre-like concept.

2. GENRE & CONTENT TYPE

Genre can be defined as a socially recognised communication norm which can range from speech acts to text messages, and has been the subject of research in a number of different disciplines including communication and information studies [1, 15]. Of particular interest and relevance to the records management community is research into genre in organisational contexts [19] and the concept of genre system, which ensures a holistic view of communicative actions [2, 14, 15]. Introducing a genre approach to digital recordkeeping represents exciting potential for a new way of thinking for records managers. The emphasis in current practice is on determining the functions that are carried out by organisations, and from there identifying the records that are being created as a consequence of transactions carried out to support those functions. This is clearly stated in the international standard for records management ISO15489 [6]; but actually identifying and defining functions is fraught with difficulty and ambiguity [5]. A genre perspective on the information created and maintained within organisations allows for a *situated approach* where the functional and social contexts that enabled the emergence of specific patterns of communicative actions become apparent [12, 18]. Some of the insights offered by genre theory may help furnish a common ground to foster the development of shared understanding between records and information technology professionals. This common ground is essential if digital preservation goals are to be achieved.

Each Content Type involves a number of attributes, some rather generic (e.g., properties, metadata, custom features), others more specific (e.g., workflows, information management policies, document templates) and may refer to any kinds of information objects (e.g., list items, documents, folders, photos, videos, blogs) [10, 11]. Because they seem to have unlimited coverage, Content Types tend to confuse SharePoint users. We suggest that the use of Content Type would be facilitated by relating it to the concept of genre as "typified communicative action" [18]. In particular, Yates and Orlikowski's dimensions of communicative action (i.e., What, How, Who, When, Why, Where) [14] would help classify the attributes involved in a more consistent way. Content Type mixes up elements of form (templates), substance (the name itself 'content' type), and context (workflow), while genre theory clearly says that the *action* accomplished by the genre in a specific situation is the criterion to categorize classes of information objects. Action is also inextricably linked to records, which are defined in ISO15489 as "information created, received and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business" [6]. In other words, records have to be associated with 'doing something'. Genre theory appears to provide a disciplinary appropriate lens for records managers to view and define Content Type in such a way as to ensure that context, as well as content, is taken into account, thus maximizing recordkeeping functionality.

3. NEXT STEPS

Further work is needed to test the assumptions made on this paper. One approach will be to survey organizations with similar functions currently using SharePoint to collect data to show how Content Type is currently being interpreted and used. The next stage will be to define a set of Content Types appropriate to each sector, using Yates and Orlikowski's dimensions of communicative action. The resulting set can then be tested as a prototype in work environments. At this early theoretical stage,

however, we can conclude that genre theory offers exciting possibilities for new approaches to the challenges of ensuring that digital records can be maintained for as long as they are required and a way out of the current EDRMS dilemma.

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