

Weinberger, David (2007). *Everything is miscellaneous: The power of the new digital disorder*. New York: Henry Holt.

"To the librarians"

The dedication to David Weinberger's 2007 book *Everything Is Miscellaneous* is a clear indication of his intended audience. Co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (1999), a fellow at Harvard Law Schools' Berkman Center for the Internet & Society, regular contributor to magazines such as *Wired* and *Harvard Business Review*, Fortune 500 marketing consultant, and holding a doctorate in Philosophy, Weinberger is possessed of a cultural overview that few can offer. His book is a sometimes loosely colloquial but always insightful tour through the phenomenon and ideas at the crux of the "new digital disorder" precipitated by the World Wide Web, and challenges the reader to question basic assumptions about the nature and organization of knowledge. It is a challenge that we, as students of Information Architecture and "professionals who design the organization of and human interface with information" (p 165), not only need to address but cannot avoid.

Weinberger begins his exploration by introducing what he calls "The Three Orders of Order". The first two orders he describes as being tied to the physical. In the first order we have the organization of things themselves, the physical objects. The second order is

abstracted, metadata - information about information - such as a card catalogue. The second order is noted for what it leaves out as much as what it includes. The necessary limitations of physical space, the size of an index card for example, means that the information it contains is necessarily constricted. The editing process this implies and the expert authority required to make these kinds of judgments have shaped the way we view information. "These physical limitations on how we have organized information have not only limited our vision, they have given the people who control the organization of information more power than those who create the information." (p 89) From the arbitrary organization of the alphabet, to the decidedly unarbitrary, somewhat eccentric, and 19th century worldview of the Dewey Decimal System, to the definition of what constitutes a planet, to Aristotle, Mendeleev and Linnaeus, Weinberger traces the ways we have tried to make sense of the world around us by identifying relationships between various kinds of information. We attempt to draw clear lines of distinction in order to create understanding. "But suppose this sort of Aristotelian categorization-through-definition were shown to be an essentially artificial way of approaching the world. Suppose the neatness it strives for is impossible. Suppose messiness is not a flaw in our thinking but enables it." (p 183)

Which brings us to the third virtual and digital order - multifaceted, uninhibited, and decidedly miscellaneous. Weinberger identifies four strategic principles he sees as inherent to this new "disorder" -

- **Filter on the way out, not on the way in.** In the physical world the economics of publishing required an editorial process, a gatekeeper who controlled the flow of information. The digital publishing world is wide-open and this abundance, while creating the opportunity for "a self-indulgent pool of slush" (p 102) also creates the possibility of increased value by "locating what's of value to a particular person at a particular moment". (p 103) This has ramifications in academic and scientific communities beyond the blogosphere.
- **Put each leaf on as many branches as possible.** In a traditional organization schema each thing can occupy only one place, each leaf has a particular place on a particular tree. Even in a second order organization one heading or subject becomes primary and other "see also's" secondary. In the third order a leaf can hang from a variety of branches, and this makes it more findable.
- **Everything is metadata and everything can be a label.** "The power of the miscellaneous comes directly from the fact that in the third order, everything is connected and therefore everything is metadata." (p 105)
- **Give up control.**

It's that last one that traditional views of librarianship seems to conflict with the most.

Without faithfully recognized authority controls how do we determine what information is

valid or useful? Weinberger discusses the Wikipedia vs. Britannica debate, and argues that "knowledge - its content and its organization-is becoming a social act." (p 133) Knowledge that is socially constructed requires an active participation and level of critical thinking that the passive consumption of information as dictated by traditionally defined authority did not. It is a conversation rather than a lecture.

The determination of usefulness is where we encounter the conundrum of context, the relationship between the implicit and the explicit. The understanding of the user experience of information is an essential part of Information Architecture and has become an essential part of any form of librarianship. But when we try to make those things we implicitly understand explicit they lose their meaning. Weinberger uses the example of mapping. Whereas a well-worn path represents the "bottom-up" kind of folksonomy typified by the web and its links, a Rand-McNally map is an abstraction, and attempt to represent in a meaningful way the variety of paths encountered. In order to be useful much is necessarily left out - you cannot include every tree, rock, and McDonald's or the map would be unreadable. However, it is the context of the information need that gives information its meaning. In the third digital order that context can be determined on the fly by the user - Google Maps, or GPS systems for example. "The line between the implicit

and the explicit isn't drawn by the intellect. It's drawn by purpose and thus by what matters to us." (p 158)

Tagging is a central component of the global conversation we participate in online.

Weinberger mentions sites such as Flickr, Del.icio.us, Digg, and Amazon as indicative of the power of user generated and user constructed organization. The business applications of employee generated knowledge management systems or data-mining user "click-throughs" almost go without saying. The ethical significance of the tremendous amount of information about ourselves we generate without explicit consent also needs to be considered. Weinberger considers Peter Morville's objections that tagging is insufficient to handle the larger semantic relationships implied by the Web, describing this as the "paradox of the digital order" (p 165) - that tags are removed from their context and therefore from meaning. One man's "Capri" tag is an island while another's is a pair of pants. Once again Weinberger suggests that the sheer volume of user generated content and labeling will only increase their relevance - the algorithmic reasoning of computers can find meaning in these things because **we** find meaning in them. The transient nature of the implicit will thus define itself on the fly as well. "We are building this connected miscellany

link by link and tag by tag. Its value is in the implicit relationships that turn it into an infrastructure of meaning." (p 171)

However, Weinberger does not put a lot of faith in Tim Berners-Lee's attempts to create those relationships through RDF and the Semantic Web. He sees the "triples" of metadata relationships as suffering from the same problems as traditional categorization - attempting to stuff too wide a topic into too rigid a box and mentions it's "glacial" development as indicative of the difficulty in creating such an ontology. More importantly, he feels, is the cultural significance of socially constructed meaning and the sea change it represents. "In the world after the Enlightenment, the cultural task was to build knowledge. In the miscellaneous world, the task is to build meaning" (p 222). From business models to blogs it is the individual voice that is being empowered, the unfettered and global negotiation of points of view. "We are building an ever-growing pile of smart leaves that we can organize as we need to at any one moment . . . But it will be the users who decide what the leaves mean." (p 230)