

Knowledge in the Information Age

In his *Content Management Bible*, Bob Boiko defines content management (CM) as having three major phases: The first phase of CM is the creation or collection of content from various sources. The middle phase is managing the storage and retrieval of the content, including versioning over time, multiple languages, etc. The third phase is publishing and distributing the content. CMS Watch's Tony Byrne simplifies this to just the production and publishing phases.

However you look at the phases, control over the content is slipping away from traditional content owners in the age of Google and Wikipedia, of blogging and social networking.

It is a truism that tools and technology are not the answer. Success depends on people and processes that make good use of those tools. The best content management system (CMS) may not help. As someone who has followed tools and technology for many years, I see a seismic shift away from monolithic content management systems to parallel distributed processing models that mirror the latest thinking in cognitive science about how our minds work.

When the tools are distributed and lightweight, when many are free and open source, when they are Software-as-a-Service (SaaS), and when they all interwork by XML data exchange standards such as RSS for blog feeds, the creators and publishers of today's content are not primarily the employees of the large enterprises that have been buying enterprise content management systems (ECM) in the past.

Companies are doing a very poor job describing their products compared to independent third parties. Who knows more about a product, and who is more trustworthy: the company that builds it or the customers who use it? Marketing content can't be managed when it is being written in Amazon, Netflix, and Newegg customer reviews.

Organizations are doing a poor job promoting their causes compared to individuals who blog about the cause or contribute to community forums. Mission statements and press releases can be managed in an organization's CMS, but they are becoming irrelevant when social networks organize around the same cause.

The media, especially the press, is shrinking as stories are being written by outsiders and posted to millions of websites. The best newspaper CMS cannot compete when independent stories are found in droves via Google searches.

The music industry is watching helplessly while its traditional content goes straight from the creators—composers and performers—to the public. The content owners crushed Napster only to see it reappear as a thousand music distribution systems. The best CMS cannot restore control of self-published content.

And the main storehouse of general knowledge, in library collections of books, periodicals, and encyclopedias, is being challenged by the great international Wikipedia, by open access online publications of scientific and medical research, by Google Scholar, and by personal publishing on demand like Lulu.com.

Even visual content is under attack—from Netflix DVDs threatening traditional movie theaters to future internet delivery in a YouTube model of video on demand that threatens to bring the information highway to a traffic jam in a few years.

What do these changes all have in common? Creation and distribution of content is moving downstream from corporate conglomerates to disparate producers and publishers. The ghost of Karl Marx is hovering over the content industry as “the means of production is now in the hands of the people.” The power of the press now belongs to anyone with a web browser.

The internet is eerily starting to look and work like a planetary mind with a global cortex. Cognitive science sees the mind as a huge number of subconscious processes in a neural network, all communicating with a “workspace,” which Bernard Baars calls the “Theater of Consciousness.” The internet is our shared digital workspace, and all who contribute content are the creators.

At the 2008 annual conference of ON DEMAND publishing and AIIM (the ECM Association), signs of this seismic shift in content creation and distribution were everywhere. First, the ECM show was very weak. The ON DEMAND end had most of the traffic and exciting new trends such as personalized publishing.

Tools and technology are not the answer.

A major theme of vendors who did show was getting control of distributed content creation via Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking. But can they put the content toothpaste back in the corporate tube? Not with tools alone. Harnessing “user-created” content to magically fill up the corporate knowledge-base is just another example of the “Wikiful Thinking” I discussed in January. Wishing alone will not make it so. **■**

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