

The future of taxonomy work

The reality of life is that order does not survive the advance of time, context confuses categories, and an excessive adherence to structure can prevent new opportunities being seized.

(Snowden, 2005)

There are people who say that the days of structured taxonomies are numbered. There are people who rail in public against the ‘industrial age command and control’ ‘dinosaur’ mentality (passion often mixes metaphors) that seeks to structure the management of knowledge and information assets through centrally controlled, designed taxonomies. These people believe passionately that emergent patterns based on individual tagging behaviours will replace structured taxonomy work. Democratic tagging will replace totalitarian taxonomies. Let’s call these people the *folksonomists*.

There are other people who also claim that the day of the taxonomy is done. But these people believe that taxonomies do not go far enough to exploit the power of computers to structure and organise information. Why, they ask, should we allow our technical ability to model knowledge to be constrained by the fallible and primitive human capacities of attention, discrimination and cognitive grasp such as we outlined in Chapter 8? Computers can pay attention to far more things, recover them with perfect recall and navigate domains on a much wider scale, infinitely faster, without error. People suck, computers rule. This camp we’ll call the camp of the *ontologists*.

I’m guessing, if you have read this far, that you are not completely in either camp, but it’s worth finding out why each, for very different reasons, thinks that taxonomy work is passé, and why each is only partly right. If nothing else, the arguments of the folksonomists and the