



A Manifesto of Contentology

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What does “Contentology” mean?

In this Manifesto, Contentology is a coined word that, in its strictest etymology, could mean “the science of content” or “the study of content”. The word “Contentology” is supposed to make people stop and think for a moment, and if it sounds absurd, then we have to ask ourselves why it sounds absurd.

Most people presume that the word content means ‘something that is within something else.’ Yet this popular definition creates a tautology: “Content is content that's inside something that seems to be content.”

Before the Internet became a tool for the masses, “content” or “contents” were simply vague terms for printed copy in a book or a magazine, or the food products inside a can of soup. The popular meaning usually referred to something that was being packaged for consumers, or something that was simply being stored or moved within containers.

How should we define “content”?

The word "content" has an interesting etymology. It derives from the Latin "*contentum*" — to contain — and also "*continere*" — to hold together or enclose. We tend to think of content as “something within something else”, when the etymology of the word tells us that *content is actually a wrapper in itself*. And what does the content wrapper contain? It contains *meaning*.

Content is, by definition, not just something you drop into a vessel, but it is both the vessel and an idea all in one. In other words, it is not a dualist concept — you cannot separate pure meaning from its container. Change the vessel and it changes the idea. Why is this important? Because we have to realize that the substance ideas are attached to the shape of their presentation, and when we try to deconstruct ideas and communication into interchangeable components or modules for the sake of convenience, we are not simply *reusing* or *repurposing* them — we are essentially *transmogrifying* and *mutating* them.

The term Contentology is a word that can help us discuss what content is all about as it is and construct new content theories and practices for the 21st century. It is a concept that can

combine and integrate many overlapping, content-related practices found in information and communications technology disciplines such as information architecture, information science, information design, information technology, Web design, knowledge management, eLearning, communications and media theory, usability engineering, Web technical writing, content management, emarketing, and ecommerce.

Why is it important to have a broader definition of “content”?

Neo-Platonism, with its dualistic influences on Western thinking, has always separated the idea from the structure or *appearance* that expresses the idea. Thus, we see ideas as the pure, abstract, intangible and elemental source of everything we create, while the expressions of those ideas – through art, building, chemistry, design, engineering, etc – are seen as the more physical, tangible, imperfect and somewhat degenerated version of the ideas they came from. Consider instead: Whatever we create is an object of form and meaning – our mistake is thinking that the source-idea is purer or more perfected than the form it takes, because the form *is* the meaning, and vice-versa.

Secondly, we now use graphical interfaces in our daily environment more than at any other time or place in history. Think of how many places we see images that give us information or are used to control devices. From the design of our breakfast cereal box, to the billboards along the highway, to the PCs we use at work and home, to the magazines we read and the TV we watch, some visual or graphical design is used.

Up until the Digital Age, most of our paradigms were mechanical, audiovisual and textual. Now they are graphical and interactive. That’s why when we develop Web sites we tend to have someone write the text, someone develop the functionality, and someone else create the graphic design. And that’s why each of these specialist tends to think of content in terms of their role in developing it – the designer sees it as graphic art, the IT specialist as functionality, and the writer/editor as wordsmithing.

Are we making content re-recyclable...or disposable?

One of the most practical yet ultimately counter-productive trends is toward the re-use of content, which usually means structuring content so that each chunk of data in it and each aspect of it can be extracted from its original form and redeployed in another context using dynamic publishing. This reductionist approach essentially treats the code of language as simply a quantifiable mass of data that can be carved up without losing any intrinsic value; i.e. the sum of its parts is greater than the whole.

While this may work at a practical level for organizations attempting to 1) improve quicker and easier access to content for different users in different contexts, and 2) extract the maximum value from existing content rather than having to constantly reinvent the wheel with new content, recycling content actually makes it more disposable. It mechanizes human communication and mutes or eliminates its human complexities and undertones. It's the equivalent of 'voice to speech' software: you can make your PC speak words with a human-sounding voice, but the effect is inhuman and lacking in originality, nuance, emotion or spontaneity.

To help promote a better understanding of Contentology for the 21st Century, this Manifesto proposes the following 12 foundational principles be adopted by information communications and technology professionals:

The 12 Foundational Principles of Contentology

- Principle 1.0:** The form of content (static, rich, interactive or convergent media), its channel of delivery, the physical environment, and human physiological and cognitive processes all impact the way the content is interpreted.
- Principle 2.0:** The graphical environment and the technical framework surrounding the content impact the way it is interpreted.
- Principle 3.0:** The presentation (layout and design) of content impacts the way it is interpreted.
- Principle 4.0:** The interactivity of content impacts the way it is interpreted.
- Principle 5.0:** The functionality of content impacts the way it is interpreted.
- Principle 6.0:** All text content is substantive content (language).
- Principle 7.0:** All text content in any language is also emotive or symbolic content (graphic design) that impacts the way the content is interpreted.
- Principle 8.0:** All content design attributes (e.g. style, size, color, etc) have a psychological impact on how content is interpreted.
- Principle 9.0:** Metacontent (content written to describe, explain or preface content) is also a form of content that impacts the way content is interpreted.
- Principle 10.0:** Content itself is multi-faceted and therefore may be deconstructed (i.e. facets can be identified for use in search, taxonomies, content management systems), but deconstruction will also impact the way it is interpreted.
- Principle 11.0:** Online content is fluid (changes shape to match its channel, organic (has a lifecycle), asynchronistic (not fixed in time) and acontextual (may be experienced in or out of its original context).
- Principle 12.0:** Content may be pulled or pushed – either people search it out or it finds people – but it may also be encountered by accident or by happenstance throughout the stream of human experience.