

Making documents smarter

BY Ari Schwartz
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FOIA requests, dreaded FOIA requests. My friends at the State Department tell me that in some offices Freedom of Information Act requests are reserved as some kind of hazing for newly arrived interns. When interns are not available, the professional staff members view FOIA processing as the lowest form of bureaucratic drudgery. And State is one of the few forward-looking agencies that have made public access to government information a priority.

Does making government more accessible need to be so difficult? In the Information Age, shouldn't there be an easier way to locate documents and to pre-designate what is public and what is not?

For some time now, information managers have recognized that creators of digital documents tag each document with coding that could contain invisible but computer-searchable descriptions or details about the document. This so-called metadata could streamline the searching, cataloging and public disclosure of information.

To date, efforts to get federal agencies to use metadata have started ambitiously — and failed. There are several theories on this, but many experts believe that the government has too many computer systems speaking too many different languages to make tagging information feasible.

But now, a solution to the document-tagging dilemma seems possible: The medium that has revolutionized how we communicate across computing platforms — the World Wide Web — offers new hope.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the main standards-setting body for the Internet, has created a standard called Extensible Markup Language (XML) that already is widely deployed in many business products. XML enables users to encode detailed information within documents and other data resources. Among the many advantages of XML is the ready creation of metadata. In fact, the W3C is now finishing up a standard called Resource Description Framework (RDF), which sets up a metadata framework within XML.

Simply put, we now have a standard medium for communicating (the Web), a standard way of organizing our communication (XML) and a standard structure for expressing what our communication is about (RDF).

These technological developments offer another opportunity to take advantage of the democratic potential of the Internet. The concept of electronic FOIA requests takes on entirely new meaning if citizens can use Web-based systems to search for and retrieve government documents using tags that identify their subject matter and whether they can be publicly released without further review.

No longer should agencies waste resources on document searches in response to FOIA requests. No longer should documents that merit public release wait in line behind requests that require processing.

The metadata possibilities of XML can produce greater public openness and accountability, taxpayer savings and more efficient service to the public. Goodbye, FOIA drudgery.

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