Intelligent Content Editing: A Prototype Theory for Managing Digital Content

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript examines the role of technical editors in content management and theorizes how to adapt print-based editing practices for digital content. Embracing a user experience approach to content management, it introduces a prototype theory inspired by Rockley and Cooper’s (2012) concept of intelligent content. The user-centered theory emphasizes editorial strategies for developing, editing, and maintaining digital content; it also explores the implications of separating content and product.

Keywords: Content Management Systems, Content Management, Editorial Processes, Technical Communication, Technical Editors, User Experience (UX)

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, many organizations have integrated a content management system (CMS) into their workflow—a content production system that requires strategic planning and oversight. The literature on content management (also referred to as component content management and single sourcing, etc.) reflects the technology diffusion and evolving concerns, such as CMS implementation, best practices, and cultural considerations. However, little attention has been devoted to the technical editor’s role in content management (CM)—the editor and the editing processes are nearly invisible.

I suggest we examine the technical editor’s role in content management. Among other things, a technical editor “tries to find holes, errors, or ambiguities... checks for appropriateness of the examples and graphics for international audience,” tests the step-by-step procedures, and “verifies that each entry is correct and that there are no misunderstandings or misrepresentations” (Corbin, Moell, & Boyd, 2002, p. 289). Technical editing functions as quality control measure; therefore, it is important that we theorize how to adapt print-based editing practices for a digital...
CM environment. Following a brief review of the CM literature, I introduce a prototype theory for editing digital content.

CONTENT MANAGEMENT APPROACHES

Most scholars and practitioners have approached digital content in terms of content creation, content management, and content distribution (e.g., Ament, 2002; Hackos, 2007; Rockley, 2003). Many have acknowledged the rhetorical challenges that occur when content and product are separated (e.g., Williams, 2003; Swarts, 2010). Likewise, many have recognized that writing differs in a digital environment where decontextualized content and dynamically generated content disrupt traditional editorial workflows (e.g., Andersen, 2007; Clark, 2007; Whittemore, 2007).

Some scholars and practitioners have adopted user experience (UX) approaches to CM, embracing practices such as content audits, content mapping, workflow analysis, information models, and metadata strategies (e.g., Hart-Davidson, Moore, & Porter, 2003; Halvorson & Rach, 2012; Whittemore, 2007). But, aside from Rockley and Cooper (2012), who outline how editors’ roles change in a CMS environment; Amare (2009), who argues that content management systems “elevat[e] the technical editor’s role in document production” (p. 182); and Albers (2000), who warns that some editing tasks “do not directly transfer” to content management systems (p. 195), few scholars and practitioners have discussed how editing differs in a digital CM environment.

Specific details on how to edit digital content are even more elusive because in some workplaces the task of technical editing is intertwined with the technical writing process. CM entails a paradigm shift “from document-oriented to object-oriented” editing (Williams, 2003, p. 321) that requires “a reconceptualization of the relationship between audiences, purposes, and documents” (Eble, 2003, p. 345). The granularity level is no longer an entire document, but rather a series of objects, each of which could be as small as one word—editors must contend not only with traditional editing issues such as grammar and technical accuracy, but also with issues that may arise when digital content is combined, such as problems with coherence, consistency, presentation, and style (Albers, 2000). Print-based models of editing are inadequate for dynamically generated digital content (Albers, 2000; Robidoux, 2007) that “can be automatically aggregated, assembled, and delivered on demand to content customers based on their personal preferences and/or customer profile” (Rockley, 2011, n.p.). Technical editing must evolve to accommodate 21st-century CM technology.

INTELLIGENT CONTENT EDITING: A CM PROTOTYPE

I propose a user experience (UX) approach to editing, which I call Intelligent Content Editing (ICE). Inspired by Rockley and Cooper’s (2012) concept of intelligent content, which they define as content that is “structurally rich and semantically categorized and therefore automatically discoverable, reusable, reconfigurable, and adaptable” (p. 16), ICE emphasizes editorial strategies for developing, editing, and maintaining digital content. Unlike other theories that address digital content management, this CM prototype theory specifically emphasizes editing practices and the implications of separating content and product (e.g., the potential for abrupt or confusing transitions).

Intelligent content editing (ICE) embraces a user experience (UX) approach to editing (Buley, 2013), meaning that the technical communicator privileges the user’s point of view when editing...
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