



OSAMA VERSUS USAMA

– Agencies Experiencing Content Supply Chain Problems

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(September 21, 2003) – Even though many of the problems hampering the war on terror are basic “content supply chain” issues, glitches that private-sector companies confront and overcome every day, information sharing among U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies has not improved dramatically, even after 9/11.

The FBI, the CIA, the Department of Homeland Defense and others continue to hunt for terrorists, but incompatible databases and communication networks rife with secrecy barriers and territorial walls often frustrate their best efforts.

Viewed as a whole, the information management challenge seems massive and hopelessly complicated, but many of these problems result from fundamental breakdowns in these agencies’ content supply chains. For example, one intelligence agency spells Osama bin Laden’s name ‘Osama’ and another calls him ‘Usama.’ Consequently, a collective search of their databases turns up incomplete results unless you set up translation registries, which they have not.

There are dozens of semantic traps to avoid and overcome. For example, there are different words that connote different items with the same meaning or identical words that represent different meanings. All of the pitfalls require a deliberate decision to map and manage meaning in the content supply chain. It’s not just about information technology but about information science – their integration into a single effective approach.

This kind of problem has been tackled successfully in the private sector. Recently, an international shipping company called a truck a “truck” in the U.S. but a “lorrie” in the U.K. For that company’s workers to communicate effectively on one database, they built a translation registry that tied equivalent terms together, allowing for an unimpeded flow of information back and forth across the Atlantic.

A content supply chain is the information-age version of a manufacturer’s supply chain: car parts, for example, move along a chain from designer to maker to seller to reseller to dealership in the most efficient way possible. Though many organizations, including U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies, do not work in a world of material “product,” all organizations manufacture content of some kind. Whether that content is a parts manual or a classified dossier on Osama bin Laden, it must be optimized for the demands made on content today, not least of which is

reliable search and retrieval, information sharing, and collaboration.

Since “information management” in the intelligence industry has national security implications, agencies have all kinds of firewalls and special blocking mechanisms to prevent classified content from slipping into the wrong hands. But some of those walls were created because of cultural differences between agencies, and they simply choke the flow of content from point to point, leaving holes for breakdowns like we’ve seen recently.

Today, there are technologies and processes available – many of them put through their paces by information-intensive enterprises in industries like publishing, defense, aeronautics, pharmaceuticals and insurance, but the greatest obstacle to overcoming content supply chain issues is a fragmented awareness of their nature and import.

Step one is understanding you have a content supply chain, whether or not you have been aware of it to date. When you are aware of it and can see the whole thing, you go beyond stabbing in the dark to problem solving.

About the Author:

George Kondrach, Executive Vice President of Innodata Isogen, Inc., is an expert resource on standards-based content management, document management and publishing technologies, and is a noted authority on content supply chains and their economics. Highly sought as a speaker, George has been featured in more than 200 forums and conferences, and has taught more than 1,000 people from varied industries how to use structured information standards like XML to attain targeted business objectives.