

Introduction: Bringing Genre into Focus

by Luanne Freund and Christoph Ringlstetter, Guest Editors of Special Section

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Most of us spend considerable amounts of time seeking information, navigating and carrying out tasks within complex digital information environments such as the Internet, digital libraries and workplace intranets. These environments are filled with an amazing array of documents, expressions of the human impulse to communicate by sharing our knowledge and experience with others.

From the standpoint of an information professional it is easy to lose sight of the creative and expressive aspects of documents, given the decades-old practice of working with surrogates: subject headings, keywords, abstracts and bags-of-words, rather than the full text of documents in their original form. While these surrogates are capable of representing the language and concepts contained in a document to varying degrees, they do not do a good job of representing the document as a whole and provide very little contextual information as to why a particular document was created, what purpose it was meant to serve and how it might be used. But information environments and systems have changed dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years, and increasingly we have access to complete, full-text documents in digital form. Alarmingly, one approach to these digital documents is to consider them simply as containers, which add nothing of value to the information

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content. Proponents of this approach would have us “liberate” the content from documents, pushing and streaming it through networked information spaces to pop up in other locations and in different forms.

The concept of *genre*, which is the focus of this special section, offers a strong counter-argument to this content-centric approach, suggesting that we have much to lose by abandoning established document conventions. Genre has been used since ancient times to classify texts and in the modern world is a prominent feature of almost all large collections of human-authored documents. Genres are naturally occurring patterns of communication, characterized by common elements of form, function and content, which arise out of recurring situations and communication needs and are recognizable within communities. Some of the most highly structured and familiar genres, such as scholarly articles, have long and fascinating histories and have migrated, relatively intact, from print to digital format. Others, such as Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are newborn and surprisingly robust web-based genres. Genres exist because they add value to the communication process – otherwise, they would neither have emerged nor been sustained over time.

In this special section, a group of authors have come together to present and discuss the benefits and challenges of focusing on genre within information science and technology research and practice. Genre-based approaches are applicable in a wide range of areas: knowledge management, information architecture, information retrieval, information systems, archives and records management, and information interaction and use. The idea for this collective effort emerged from a panel on genre and information retrieval presented at the ASIS&T Annual Meeting in Milwaukee in 2007, which

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prompted a lively exchange of ideas among panel members and conference attendees. The scope of this special section extends beyond that of the original panel and delves more deeply into the value proposition of focusing on genre.

In “Why Information Has Shape,” Andrew Dillon presents a thoughtful essay on how and why genres emerge through language use as patterns that facilitate communication. He emphasizes the value of genre in providing cues and structures to support easier information processing, comprehension and navigation. Focusing on genre, according to Dillon, would provide a framework for thinking about information use, a vital but under-studied area in information science.

Mark Rosso turns his attention to the value of labelling genres to support web retrieval in his “Stalking the Wild Web Genre.” He draws upon his dissertation research on genre recognition and presents a lively and detailed list of the pros and cons of genre-based web retrieval. The prevalent role that genre already plays in our everyday information practices is one of the strongest arguments in favor, and the practical difficulty of genre classification is one of the main obstacles. However, Rosso leaves it up to the reader to decide.

In “Situating Relevance Through Task-Genre Relationships,” Luanne Freund offers an alternative perspective on the use of genre in information

retrieval. Freund makes the argument that genres carry the stamp of the situations in which they were created and for which they were intended, which makes them more or less suited to the tasks in which searchers are engaged. This relationship between tasks and genres is valuable as a means of determining situational relevance, which search systems to-date have largely ignored.

Christoph Ringlstetter and Andrea Stubbe discuss “Practical Aspects of Automatic Genre Classification.” Problems of defining an appropriate genre palette, the selection of expressive features and the choice of an effective classifier are discussed. The proper engineering of these challenges is a pre-condition to many of the system-based applications of genre that are under discussion.

In the wrap-up article to this section, “LIS and Genre: Between People, Texts, Activity and Situation,” Jack Andersen presents a broader case for the value of focusing on genre. Rather than emphasizing the role that genre plays in supporting recognition, retrieval, processing and use of textual information, he argues that thinking about genre would result in a fundamental and much-needed shift in the focus of LIS research and practice toward understanding how and why documents are produced, used and organized in the context of human activities and work. ■