



## The Laundry Basket Theory of Organizing Information

I was giving a friend a ride recently and she asked me about a strange icon on my dashboard—a large square over three rows of smaller squares, overlaid with a red slash mark. “Is that telling you that there’s something wrong with your engine?” she guessed. Nope; it was an indicator that my mobile phone wasn’t paired to my car, and, yes, my 2019 vehicle was using an icon from the days of the Blackberry smartphone of 1999 (decommissioned as of Jan. 4, 2022). It’s just about as archaic as using the icon of a telephone handset to indicate the calling feature of my current mobile phone; when was the last time you picked up a handset to answer a call?

While these symbols of old technology may have achieved immortal status as icons, we are also seeing the opposite problem of non-Digital Natives (those of us born before around 1990) assuming that everyone learned about technology within the context of desktop computers. An article by Monica Chin in the tech news site *The Verge* from September 2021 ([theverge.com/22684730/students-file-folder-directory-structure-education-gen-z](https://www.theverge.com/22684730/students-file-folder-directory-structure-education-gen-z)) reported that Generation Z, those born in the mid- to late 1990s, are flummoxed when their professors talk about computer file folders and directories.

Possibly not coincidentally, Google was incorporated in 1998. Today’s young professionals have always been able to search for information without knowing where it is located or what hierarchical structure is used to store the retrieved file. When they are looking through content on social media, they rely on relevance algorithms to show them the content most likely to interest them (and I will refrain from launching into a rant here about the filter bubble and personalized news streams). Their e-devices facilitate the viewing of content and simple content creation for immediate uploading and sharing; neither of these actions require an understanding of hierarchical file structures.

In fact, Chin’s article quotes one university senior describing his mental model of computer file systems as “a laundry basket where you have everything kind of together, and you’re just kind of pulling out what you need at any given time. ...” Professors are finding that the concept of hierarchical files is so intuitive to them that it is difficult to explain it to someone with a laundry-basket understanding of information. I am reminded of the challenge given to anyone learning to write clear instructions: explain how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to a Martian, who is unfamiliar with the concept of peanut butter, jelly, or bread.

Info pros have to address a similar disconnect between our understanding of how search engines and value-added online

services work and how our clients and users think you conduct online research. I was reminded of this with a recent project for a cannabis client, a company full of Millennials and Gen Zers who were inundating each other with the latest news in this fast-growing field. They brought me in to help them understand the cannabis industry information landscape and to identify better approaches for staying on top of critical developments. I drew on my M.L.I.S. bibliographic research classes I took way back in the 1980s (plus ça change ...) to identify the most timely and authoritative news sources, trade associations, regulatory agencies, and industry databases. I designed simple aggregated newsfeeds of the most reliable sources for a half-dozen different aspects of the cannabis industry and Google Programmable (formerly “Custom”) Search Engines with its Knowledge Graph Entities option to help the client search most effectively. It was delightful to see how applicable my grad school classes were these many decades later.

Perhaps the most important—and certainly the most challenging—aspect of the project was explaining to the client the difference between just-in-case (JIC) and just-in-time (JIT) information gathering. Their JIC approach had been to collect as much as possible, throw it all in a Slack channel (aka the informational laundry basket), and hope to find it again when they need it. They had no idea that JIT information gathering was possible, that incoming information could be filtered, or that they could conduct in-depth retrospective research to gather the best information on a topic as needed.

As info pros are justifying expenditures for digital content, negotiating licenses for text and data mining, or explaining the difference between open access and paywalled information sources, we need to examine how we talk about information. The information science skills and perspectives that are intuitive to us may be completely foreign to users who imagine information residing in a giant virtual laundry basket. Our responsibility is to find effective and compelling strategies to illuminate the information infrastructures that our users encounter. And as these Digital Natives become the designers of new information resources, we can expect to see new structures intuitive to them.

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