

TO TALK OF MANY THINGS: OF SHOES - AND SHIPS - AND SEALING - WAX - OF CABBAGES - AND KINGS -

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To talk of many things: Of shoes—and ships—and sealing- wax—Of cabbages—and kings-

This is a quotation from Lewis Carroll's famous nonsense poem 'the Walrus and the Carpenter', which serves as a useful peg on which to hang much of the discussion of the digital environment and the issues that troubled the Verbindungen/Junctions meeting in Brussels in November 2009. The poem opens with these two verses:

The sun was shining on the sea,

Shining with all his might:

He did his very best to make

The billows smooth and bright—

And this was odd, because it was

The middle of the night.

The moon was shining sulkily,

Because she thought the sun

Had got no business to be there

After the day was done—

"It's very rude of him," she said,

"To come and spoil the fun!"

The poem is self evidently nonsense; but for it to work as nonsense it must have some reference. The sun does not shine in the middle of the night; but the sun does make the 'billows smooth and bright' and we can describe the moon as sometimes shining 'sulkily'. Reference to the familiar and, if you like 'authentic' is important when we consider information in either the analogue or digital format; but especially in the digital where naïve users and sometimes not so naïve users seem to be much more trusting and gullible. At a click of a mouse it is possible to make moon shine sulkily and the sun to shine on a midnight scene. There are many opportunities to 'spoil the fun' or to have fun, depending on your perspective. With my colleagues James Currall and Susan Stuart, I have explored the whole notion of authenticity in a paper titled 'Authenticity – A Red herring' that was published in the *Journal of Applied Logic* 6(4) in 2008 in which we argue that authenticity is always a retrospective activity dependent on embedded tokens that must have reference to be either valid or to deceive.

A reading of the next verse allows us to explore this theme.

The sea was wet as wet could be,

The sands were dry as dry.

You could not see a cloud, because

No cloud was in the sky:

No birds were flying overhead—

There were no birds to fly.

Verification of an information object depends on the presence or absence of tokens, such as dates, signatures, addresses, forms of salutation and valediction and so on; but sometimes there may have been no 'cloud', no 'bird'. In other words the tokens are deliberately omitted, often because the parties know each other well and can identify themselves simply from the handwriting. Some commentators tie themselves into knots in trying to decide whether a document that lacks formal tokens is a record or not. It has to be remembered that much familial correspondence was never and is not intended to be used as proof by third parties or those outside the family circle or, if you like, the epistemic community. This is why in the article we wrote, we introduced the notion of different levels of binding depending on the purpose of the document. For example a testament or the title deeds to property need strong binding if they are to be legally admissible, whereas a love letter needs much lesser binding as there is trust between the parties. These analogue practices, which were developed over centuries, have not migrated seamlessly into the digital environment, partly because when networked computers were introduced they encourage informality and many of those who used them were unfamiliar with the processes of record creation and custody. They had had secretaries to do that for them. Consequently many of the tokens associated with analogue practice vanished, such as headers, dates, salutations, valedictions and references. This change is nowhere more apparent than in email. One result of the collapse of record keeping practices is that information objects simply become stand alone objects arbitrarily allocated to so-called files, both by the operator and by the systems.

The Walrus and the Carpenter

Were walking close at hand;

They wept like anything to see

Such quantities of sand:

"If this were only cleared away,"

They said, "it would be grand!"

"If seven maids with seven mops

Swept it for half a year.

Do you suppose," the Walrus said,

"That they could get it clear?"

"I doubt it," said the Carpenter,

And shed a bitter tear.

When the Walrus and the Carpenter weep to see such 'quantities of sand', they could be speaking for any of us who wants to find information that has been reduced to single objects in a digital morass. We would all agree that if it 'were only cleared away, then it would be grand'. As the Carpenter observed it is not as easy as that. Digital systems depend on the ability to aggregate and disaggregate data, creating one to many relationships. This happens in two ways; through free text searching as in most search engines and through the addition of metadata to individual objects that

allows them to be linked, usually less ambiguously, and is most commonly found in dedicated systems, such as accounts or some, but no means all, electronic data records management systems (EDRMS). When confronted with legacy EDRMS many archivists and curators shed bitter tears, as when viewed retrospectively these independent digital information objects lack either reference or tokens that might give them any useful identity. Unlike analogue scraps of paper there are no embedded referents, such as handwriting, watermarks or marginalia. Forensic investigation might help, but it is expensive. This situation is complicated in the digital by the ease with which it is possible to fabricate tokens that can be used for authentication.

"O Oysters, come and walk with us!"

The Walrus did beseech.

"A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,

Along the briny beach:

We cannot do with more than four,

To give a hand to each."

The eldest Oyster looked at him,

But never a word he said:

The eldest Oyster winked his eye,

And shook his heavy head—

Meaning to say he did not choose

To leave the oyster-bed.

This is the subject of the next two verses of the poem where the naïve and innocent baby oysters are seduced by the Walrus into taking a 'pleasant walk' along the beach that can have only one outcome. In the analogue world it is much easier to recognise inauthentic tokens than in the digital. There is a kinaesthetic encounter with the physical object that extends beyond the content itself to its physicality – the feel of the paper, its smell, its size and shape and so on, which is entirely lacking in the digital. You have only go to think of the phishing scams that inundate our email accounts, which have become increasingly more sophisticated and often borrow templates, logos and other ingredients from genuine sites. Although the majority of users approach such scams with caution, some do not and get caught, like the baby oysters in a web of deceit. The problem does not, of course stop there as in the digital, because of the lack of tokens that provide the necessary binding, objects can easily be taken out of context and made to appear to purport to be something that they are not. In other words they possess a dangerous ambiguity. However the processes and procedure required to provide reference and context are expensive and need to be balanced against risk. James Currall and I explored the issue of managing information in the digital environment in a report on Effective Records Management, which can be found at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/InfoStrat/ERM/>. Much of the thinking about managing information confuses keeping records for administrative efficiency and for purposes of external accountability. These are not one and the same and it would be possible to imagine a situation where all the resources of an organization were devoted to accountability that no other business was transacted. It is never cost effective to create information regimes that would save all the baby oysters from their fate.

But four young Oysters hurried up,

All eager for the treat:

Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,

Their shoes were clean and neat—
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.
Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more—
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.

Behaviour in the online environment is puzzling, as unlike in the analogue users seem much more willing to suspend their disbelief or let down their guard like the young oysters and behave uncharacteristically – doing things, such as walking and washing their faces in the case of oysters, which they either cannot do in the analogue or would not do. We can see that very clearly in the case of avatars in second life where people can take on personas that they do not possess in reality. Such behaviour is not confined to avatars but extend to social network sites sometimes with distressing and even disastrous consequences. The explanation is complex; but must include the absence of tokens and associated processes familiar in the analogue and the very tractability of the Internet that inhibits the reflection and reflexivity which prompts questions about authenticity and veracity in the analogue. This still does not explain fully why people are willing to disclose very personal information on the web in a way that they would never dream of doing in the analogue environment. It is inconceivable that anyone would divulge their bank account details, their passport number or sexual preferences to someone who came knocking at the door; but this is just what happens on the web and in social network sites. Such behaviour is as incomprehensible as the young oysters 'hopping though the frothy waves' on their way to be eaten.

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.
"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings."

Here the little Oysters have a moment for reflection while the Walrus addresses them in a rhyming nonsense. These very associations present some intriguing conjunctions. It may not be accidental that kings are associated with sealing wax as their authority was and is often certified by elaborate

waxen seals appended to decrees. Seals are not of course confined to kings; but extend across the social scale. In Japan today for all its high-tech, everyone has a seal from the humble, cabbages if you like, to the Emperor. Their size and shape reflect the status of the user. Size and grandeur are more apparent in an analogue encounter than in the digital where everything can be made to fit the screen or some discrete template, such as a thumbnail. The fact that the sea is more often than not freezing cold, can only be discovered by physically putting your foot in it. In the worlds of second life and gaming it can easily become boiling hot and pigs can indeed have wings, negating the whole purpose of an adynaton as a figure of speech. It is not just that the world can be turned upside down; the danger is that users can come to believe that it has.

"But wait a bit," the Oysters cried,

"Before we have our chat;

For some of us are out of breath,

And all of us are fat!"

"No hurry!" said the Carpenter.

They thanked him much for that.

"A loaf of bread," the Walrus said,

"Is what we chiefly need:

Pepper and vinegar besides

Are very good indeed—

Now if you're ready, Oysters dear,

We can begin to feed."

This was to be the little oysters' undoing as they failed to comprehend that pepper and vinegar meant only one thing for them. As we have already seen context is present in the analogue in the way that it is more often than not in the digital, but providing it comes at a price. Our work in the Effective Records Management project confirmed that users will only add contextual metadata if they are confident it will add value to their working practices, such as reducing the chance of being eaten. If it simply imposes another chore it will either never get done at all or be done carelessly. The problem is that analogue practices do not transfer easily into the digital environment. There has to be substantial business process re-engineering which combines the power of digital utilities with an understanding of the function of analogue processes. Too often digital systems have been redesigned with no attention to existing practice in the mistaken belief that the new technology has rendered the analogue obsolete and nothing can be learned from it. Information of itself has no value and, as we all know from the Dotcome bubble. My colleague James Currall in a pioneering project looked for ways of arriving at some approximation of value of such an intangible assets in the *espida project* by drawing on the balanced scorecard methodology. Details can be found at <http://www.gla.ac.uk/espida/documentation.shtml>.

"But not on us!" the Oysters cried,

Turning a little blue.

"After such kindness, that would be

A dismal thing to do!"

"The night is fine," the Walrus said.

"Do you admire the view?

"It was so kind of you to come!

And you are very nice!"

The Carpenter said nothing but

"Cut us another slice:

I wish you were not quite so deaf—

I've had to ask you twice!"

Trust is the nub of the poem. It is an overworked expression that is enjoying a considerable currency as a result of the financial crisis. In many information exchanges trust is implicit and provides the foundation for the economy to function effectively. An erosion of trust leads inevitably to market dislocation. Trusted relationships are in some sense contractual. The little oysters trusted the Walrus and the Carpenter to take them for a walk, whereas the eldest oyster had no such illusions. He, perhaps, had a moral obligation to warn the little oysters; but they may have had only themselves to blame. Contracts used to be based firmly on the principle of *caveat emptor*; but this is now much less the case particularly when a provider knowingly enters into a contract that the purchaser cannot discharge, for example by making mortgages available at unrealistic multiples of annual earnings. This is equivalent to the Walrus and the Carpenter taking the little oysters for a walk with the only intention of eating them. In addressing the question of trust in the digital environment, we need to be careful to draw a distinction between trust and trustworthiness. The little oysters were very trusting; but neither the Walrus and the Carpenter nor the eldest oyster can be described as trustworthy. Many users of the Internet are trusting; but many providers are not and this raises important ethical issues, particularly as the technology has the ability to capture and store so much information about user behaviour and preferences and distribute it globally.

"It seems a shame," the Walrus said,

"To play them such a trick,

After we've brought them out so far,

And made them trot so quick!"

The Carpenter said nothing but

"The butter's spread too thick!"

"I weep for you," the Walrus said:

"I deeply sympathize."

With sobs and tears he sorted out

Those of the largest size,

Holding his pocket-handkerchief

Before his streaming eyes.

This moral dilemma is very apparent in the reaction of the Walrus and the Carpenter to their meal. In the digital environment the contrast is not so sharply drawn; but the consequences can be just as devastating for people, who through no fault of their own, have their identity stolen or misappropriated, have their credit ratings downgraded or are bombarded with all sorts of

unwelcome email as a result of disclosing preferences and personal details. Many providers simply regard this as fair game and can argue persuasively that by harvesting personal data they can improve user services. If it is, should it not come with some form of health warning?

"O Oysters," said the Carpenter,

"You've had a pleasant run!

Shall we be trotting home again?"

But answer came there none—

And this was scarcely odd, because

They'd eaten every one.

There is no more to say – this is systemic risk to a fault and all that is left for providers to do is to provide for themselves, as the users have all fled or possibly become providers.