e-GIF, e-GMS and IPSV: What's In It For Us?

Abstract: Stella Dextre Clarke provided an article for our Winter 2003 issue on the government's drive towards interoperability, and the role of a controlled vocabulary in easing access to information. Here is an update, casting light on the relevance of the government's standards, from the viewpoint of our profession.

Keywords: information management; taxonomies; metadata; public sector

Resource sharing and interoperability

In the networked era, resource sharing can be a blessing as well as a duty. Tight budgets compel us to use and build on someone else's work, rather than preparing publications from scratch. Email can carry our own efforts to the target desktops almost "before the ink is dry". It's great, but it all depends on technical standards, implemented behind the scenes. For example, the HTTP (Hypertext Transfer Protocol) underpins all our use of the world wide web, and XML (eXtensible Markup Language) is now widely used to support data sharing across different information systems.

Concerned to ensure that information was effectively shared within the public sector, the government has led compilation of the e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF), an assembly of technical and data standards. The initiative dates back to the Modernising Government white paper in 1999, very much focused on enabling e-government.

e-Government Metadata Standard (e-GMS)

The e-GMS is the portion of the e-GIF relating to content management. It supports the labelling (a.k.a. metatagging or indexing) of all items with their date, title, creator and subject, as well as 21 other optional elements. Public sector bodies are required to use it for all their website pages and downloadable documents, as well as in electronic records management systems, knowledge management systems and other services for sharing resources.

The e-GMS is derived from the internationally used Dublin Core standard. The first version came out in April 2002, and has since evolved as far as Version 3.1, published in 2006. Plans for Version 4 are well advanced. You can download a copy of the current version from the GovTalk website, at http://www.govtalk.gov.uk/schemasstandards/metadata.asp.

The leap from GCL to IPSV

From the start, the e-GMS made it mandatory to fill in the subject element. That is to say, the metadata of each item must include at least one term to indicate what it is about. And, according to earlier versions, at least one subject term must be selected from a controlled vocabulary called the GCL (Government Category List). The GCL was a list of just 374 high-level categories reflecting the broad coverage of the public sector. (See LIM Vol 3 No 3/4 pp 185-7 for more details.)

Originally the most active contributors to the development of the e-GMS and GCL had been the departments from central government, but after a time local authorities became much more involved, with the backing of the ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, subsequently reshaped to give birth to the Department of Communities and Local Government).

The high-level categories of the GCL were found insufficient for the detailed indexing needs of local authorities. In 2004 the decision was taken to merge the GCL with the LGCL, a much more extensive list applying to local authorities, and also with the Seamless taxonomy, which was designed to cover voluntary sector needs. The result, known as the Integrated Public Sector Vocabulary (IPSV), was launched in April 2005 and now replaces the GCL as the mandatory controlled vocabulary for the subject element of the e-GMS.

You can download a copy of IPSV, or view it interactively online, from the esd-toolkit website at http://www.esd.org.uk/standards/ipsv/. It has over 3,000 preferred terms and nearly 5,000 non-preferred. It complies with

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BS 8723 and ISO 2788, the British and International Standards for monolingual thesauri. On the same site there is good documentation, with several guides explaining different aspects of how to use it.

Does IPSV help in the legal field?

Plenty of law firms in the private sector use a home-grown thesaurus or taxonomy for organising internal resources, and IPSV would be no substitute for these. But there may be benefits in applying the e-GMS and IPSV to their internet websites, so that relevant portals can harvest the metadata. This brings the website pages to a wider audience.

The subject coverage of IPSV is biased towards citizen interests rather than business needs. For example it is strong in covering social welfare benefits and all the matters regulated by local authorities. For legal firms serving local authority clients, interoperability could bring benefits.

IPSV connections

IPSV is managed by a Board with representatives from the Cabinet Office, the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the National Archives, the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG), Essex County Council, the service provider esd-toolkit, and the high-tech trade association Intellect. Suggestions for updating it come from the users, who share their proposals and their queries on a discussion forum hosted by the esd-toolkit. With a following of over 200 user organisations, there is plenty to discuss! Further input is provided by members of TiPS (Taxonomies in the Public Sector – see website at http://www.nglis.org.uk/tipshome.htm)

For many of the user organisations, IPSV is just one of a number of taxonomies they have to apply for different purposes. To cut down the cost of multiple indexing with different vocabularies, many of them have built mapping tables between the vocabularies. The idea is to index just once, then the corresponding terms from the other vocabularies can be added automatically by looking up the tables. On the main IPSV home page at http://www.esd.org.uk/standards/ipsv/ you may see some of the mapping tables and other tools developed specifically for the local government community.

Thus the original initiative to develop the e-GIF has spawned quite an industry of related developments based on using taxonomies efficiently and effectively to manage information resources. And the community of users is still growing.

Government priorities on the move

Back in 1999, e-government was the great goal, with a vision of enabling the citizen to access all government resources and services seamlessly online. The ODPM was determined to get all the local authorities fully e-enabled, and set targets for compliance. Faced with the threat that their funding from central government might be reduced, several hundred authorities leapt rapidly forward, implementing the e-GMS in their websites. Most of them made very substantial progress, although not all were able to complete in time for the deadlines.

And then towards the end of 2005 a new priority emerged called "transformational government", with a declared aim of improving the delivery of public services. Resources for the previous e-government goals have withered away, leaving us no news of when the long-awaited e-GMS Version 4 will emerge. The mechanism for updating IPSV currently has no funding at all, and no person with the responsibility for maintenance. One ray of hope is that CLG has continued to fund the hosting of IPSV online, together with its discussion forum. The budget needed to support maintenance is in reality quite small, so perhaps a solution will be found.

So what's in it for information managers?

For those public bodies that had not quite completed their implementation, the shift in priorities has left some question marks. If e-government in general and IPSV in particular are no longer priority targets, why should we bother about them? If the government is no longer willing to support IPSV maintenance, what is the point of trying to use it?

For a local authority, the answers are not far away, and they lie in evaluating internal benefits. Adoption of the e-GMS in general is not too difficult, and the investment soon pays off with efficiency gains. Subject indexing with IPSV (or indeed with any controlled vocabulary!) is more of a challenge, but a good number of authorities have invested in automatic indexing software that is said to do the job effectively and economically. The benefit is reaped in time savings, when staff are able to find items more easily. Further savings can be made when several authorities collaborate in sharing syndicated services.

For an organisation serving the public sector, any benefits are likely to come from being able to share information resources more readily with clients. The prospects for resource sharing are what we need to evaluate, before deciding whether and how best to exploit the standards.

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Conversations with Professor Sir Derek William Bowett: a Contribution to the Squire Law Library Eminent Scholars Archive

Abstract: This is the second contribution by Lesley Dingle and Daniel Bates to an expanding audio and photographic archive, which focuses on the careers of prominent academics who have a long affiliation with the Faculty of Law at Cambridge University.
Keywords: law faculties; academics; international law; universities

Introduction

The Eminent Scholars Archive arose from LMD's association with the late Emeritus Professor Kurt Lipstein. For ten years she was privileged to share a room in the Squire Law Library with this remarkable nonagenarian, and one of the many pleasures of his company was hearing his memories and anecdotes of past and present colleagues from over seventy years in the Faculty. We realised that unless we archived this fascinating information for the Squire Law Library, it would be lost for ever. Sadly, Kurt died in 2006, but not before we had put many of his memories on record.[1] The significance of this historical material spurred us on to begin interviewing other emeritus academics from a Faculty that has been blessed with more than its fair share of eminent scholars over the decades.

The following is an appreciation of the career of Professor Sir Derek Bowett, supplemented by his own words from interviews Lesley conducted with him.[2] We have also included a bibliography of his books, a list of his cases involving the International Court of Justice and some photographs.

Sir Derek's association with the Faculty of Law goes back over six decades to when he entered Downing College as an undergraduate (1948-51). He later became a University Lecturer (1960-76), then Reader in International Law (1976-81), and finally was appointed the Whewell Professor of International Law (1981-91). He was made CBE in 1983 and then knighted for his contributions to International Law in 1998.

School and the Royal Navy (1938-1948)

Derek William Bowett was born in Manchester on 20th April 1927, and started his academic life at The Choir