Dan Klyn
Information Architecture is a Way of Seeing
Editorial

In the Midwest of the USA where I live, there is a thinly-veiled disdain among Medical Doctors for "Doctors" of Chiropractic. Depending on which generation of MD or DC you consult with, you'll hear different arguments for why one or the other approach is better. In my personal experience with lower back pain this past Spring, the severity of the malady — and not the weight of the opposing arguments — dictated my immediate course of action: I was unable to walk, weeping from pain and in need of narcotic pain killers. Immediately. And they don't give prescription pads to DC's.

After handing me a print-out of instructions for a series of strengthening exercises and a prescription for Vicodin, the attending physician got ready to send me on my way. Surprised and still squirming with pain, I asked sheepishly, were we not going to take an X-Ray image of my back? The doctor smiled and said it was unnecessary.

Ten long and painful days later, having found no relief aside from what had been in the now-empty prescription bottle, I decided to try the alternate approach. In the office of a chiropractor, I viewed an X-Ray image that showed two distinct mis-alignments of the spine. Another ten days and two brief appointments after the initial chiropractic consultation and treatment, my pain was gone. Incredulous, I asked this miracle-working DC why the MD who treated me with printouts and drugs didn't bother to take an X-Ray when I was in her care. The chiropractor's answer has been rattling around in my brain ever since:

Even if the MD had taken an X-Ray, she would not have seen what I saw. Show us each the same image and we see different stuff.

The analogy is one I've begun to use with my clients and students to explain how information architecture differs from other approaches to this work. Organizations wrestling with today's complex information challenges have a wide variety of options they can explore before settling on the fundamental approach to the problem space. What's different about approaching from an information architectureperspective? To the organizations and practitioners who are gathering evidence about the "pain" that is correlated with the ways information is organized, accessed, retrieved and understood, how do we characterize information architecture's unique way of seeing?

The continuing work of scholars and researchers in our young field builds and expands the vocabulary for describing this way of seeing. Throughout the "dot-com bubble" of the late 0's and at the advent of Web 2.0 there was a pervasive notion among practitioners that conversation about information architecture was necessarily difficult (and often fussy). Brilliantly clear new work published here in the Journal by the likes of Sally Burford and Jorge Arango afford no-fuss, panoramic views into IA's way of seeing the design of information, spaces and information spaces. Arango calls these spaces "Environments for Understanding" and they persist across channels and media, from the familiar information places of the World Wide Web to the Swiss Alps, as you will read in Jan Eckert's research paper.

As our profession matures, and especially as our collaborators and clients accrue experience working from other approaches, information architecturemust continue to differentiate the value of its particular way of seeing the same "picture" of information system performance and usage behaviors that our colleagues from other disciplinary approaches consult in their work. To borrow again from the medical context and metaphor I opened with, in cases where business performance and user delight suffer from poorly-aligned ontologies, failing taxonomies and maladaptive patterns of use, information architectureoffers a systematic way of seeing that allows fundamental — we could even say "skeletal" — bases for taking corrective actions that lead to positive outcomes.

As I drove to work this morning, I noted that my hometown is lousy with doctor's offices and chiropractic clinics. Apparently, for those who suffer as I did, the provision of relief is not a zero-sum game. Differing approaches provide different kinds of value, ways of seeing and paths toward a better way of living. The articles in this quarter's Journal continue the conversation around information architecture's unique way of seeing: read on, you will not be disappointed.

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Guest Editor

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He's interested in planning, strategy and architecture for places made of information, likes coffee an awful lot, and teaches information architecture at the University of Michigan School of Information. Klyn's research is focused on applying the teachings of Richard Saul Wurman and Christopher Alexander in digital practice.