

Panel

Meaning on the Web: Evolution vs Intelligent Design?

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It is a truism that as the Web grows in size and scope, it becomes harder to find what we want, to identify like-minded people and communities, to find the best ads to offer, and to have applications work together smoothly. Services don't interoperate; queries yield long lists of results, most of which seem to miss the point. If the Web were a person, we would expect richer and more successful interactions with it - interactions that were, quite literally, more meaningful. That's because in human discourse, it is shared meaning that gives us real communication. Yet with the current Web, meaning cannot be found.

Much recent work has aspired to change this, both for human-machine interchange and machine-machine synchronization. Certainly the "semantic web" looks to add meaning to our current simplistic matching of mere strings of characters against mere "bags" of words. But can we legislate meaning from on high? Isn't meaning organic and determined by use, a moving and context-dependent target? But if meaning is an evolving organic soup, how are humans able to get anything done with one another? Don't we love to "define our terms"? But then again, is real definition even possible?

These questions have daunted philosophers for years, and we probably won't solve them here. But we'll try to understand what's at the root of our own current religious debate: should meaning on the Web be evolutionary, driven organically through the bottom-up human assignment of tags? Or does it need to be carefully crafted and managed by a higher authority, using structured representations with defined semantics? Without picket signs or violence (we hope), our panelists will explore the two extreme ends of the spectrum - and several points in between.