Identify the Mess

State Your Intent

Face Reality

Choose a Direction

Measure the Distance

Play with Structure

Prepare to Adjust

HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF ANY MESS

Abby Covert

Our world is a mess.
A large part of this mess is made of information.

A tsunami of information is still headed our way...

*HT Richard Saul Wurman

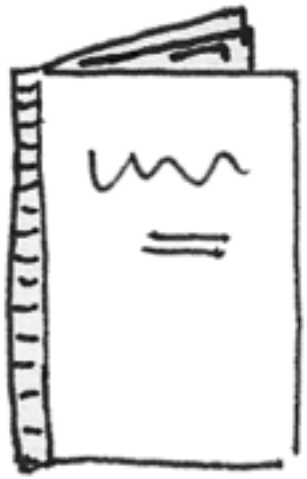
No matter what our job, our world is full of messes we must make sense of

The majority of messes we face are made of information

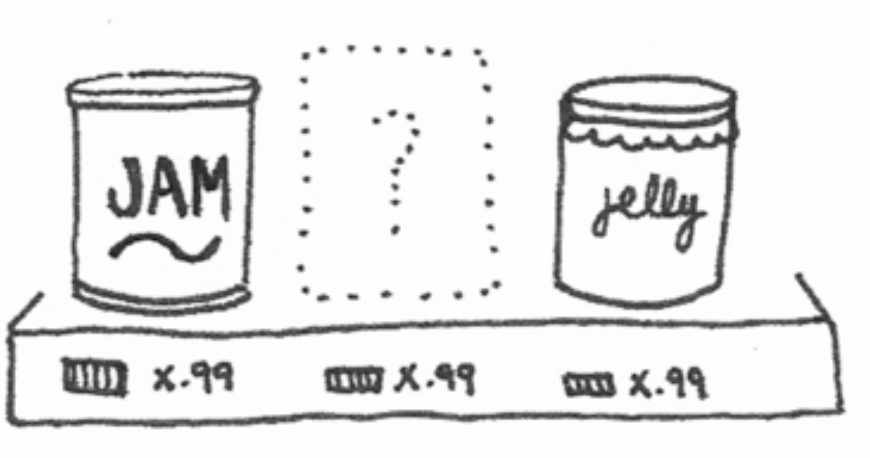
(and people)

Thinking about
information
as material is hard

Every thing has information



Information can be made from the lack of physical material



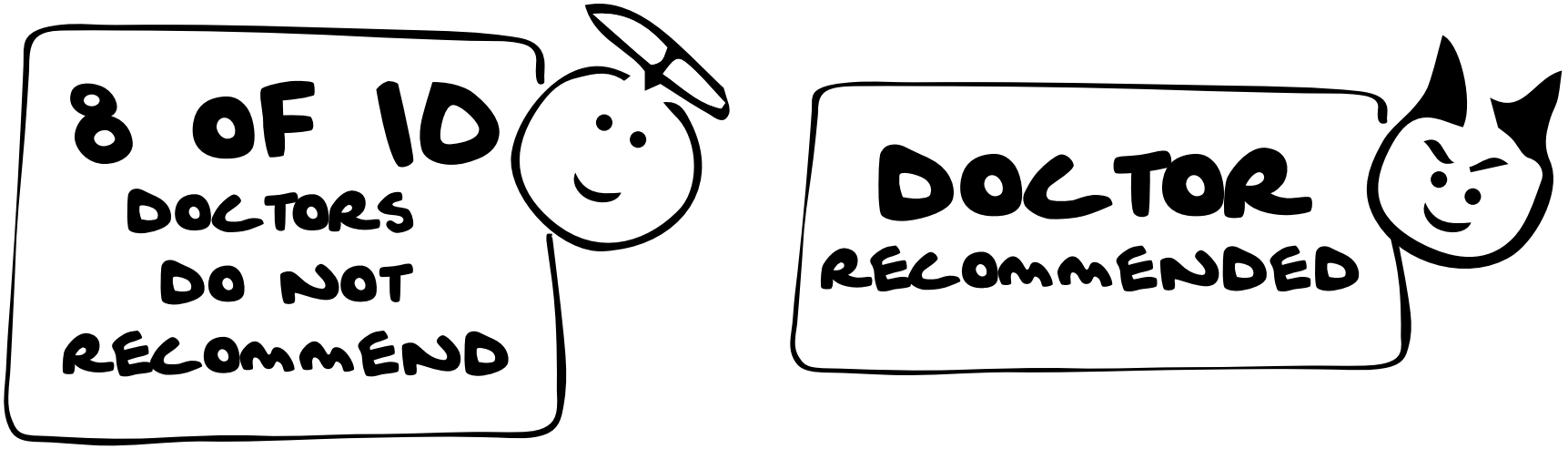
OATMEAL RAISIN
Large House Cookie
2.70
DOUBLE
CHOCOLATE
Large House Cookie
2.70
2.70

Let's dissect this scene.

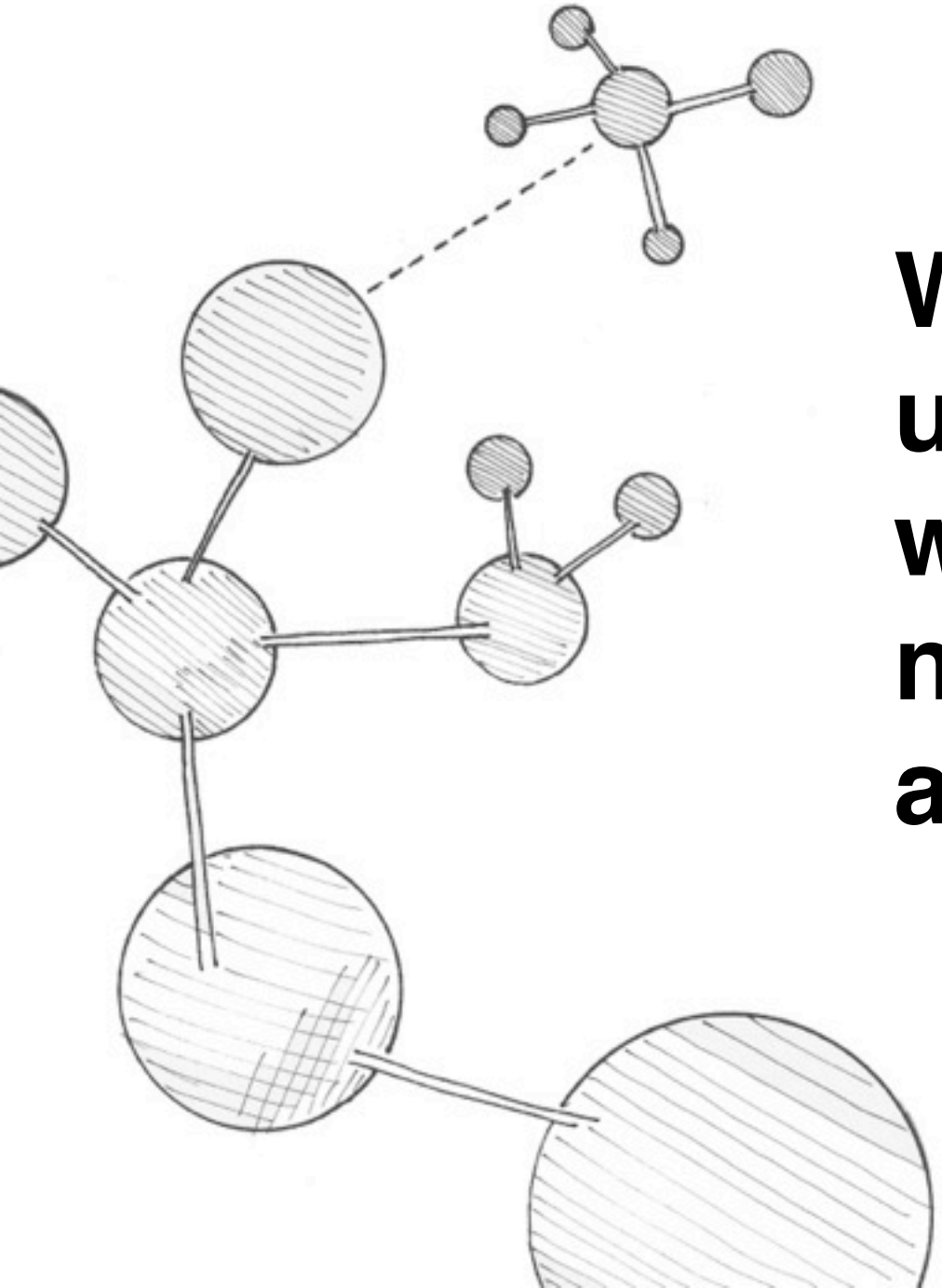
Data is facts, observations, and questions about something.	The individual pieces of context, knowledge, assumptions and questions each viewer considers during their judgement of the cookie arrangement.
Content is whatever a user is interacting with, or as a maker, whatever you're arranging or sequencing.	The cookies, the plate, the signage, the crumbs, the smells in the air, the other products in the case and items on the menu et al...
Information is whatever a user interprets from the arrangement or sequence of things they encounter.	Each viewer's: • Belief or non-belief that other cookies were on that plate. • Subjective reasoning for the unequal amount of cookies.

There is no true

information

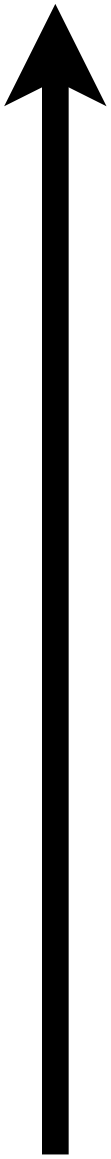


There is only spin



We make and use things within a nested set of architectures

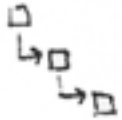
The level of focus changes the details you can see



- **Ecosystem:** A complex collection of systems and structures.

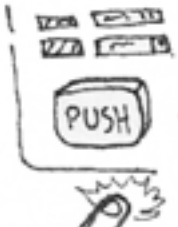
- **System:** A set of interacting structures.

- **Structure:** A configuration of objects and/or interfaces.



- **Journey:** An act of traveling within or between locations.

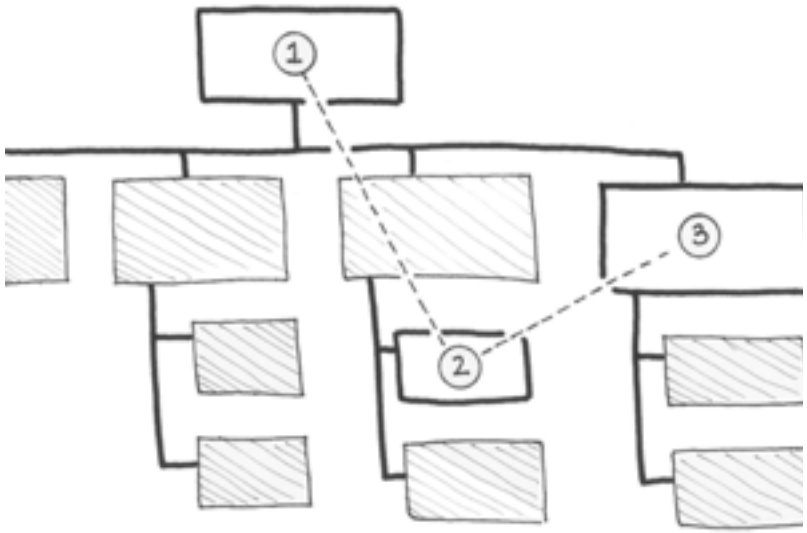
- **Location:** A particular place or position.

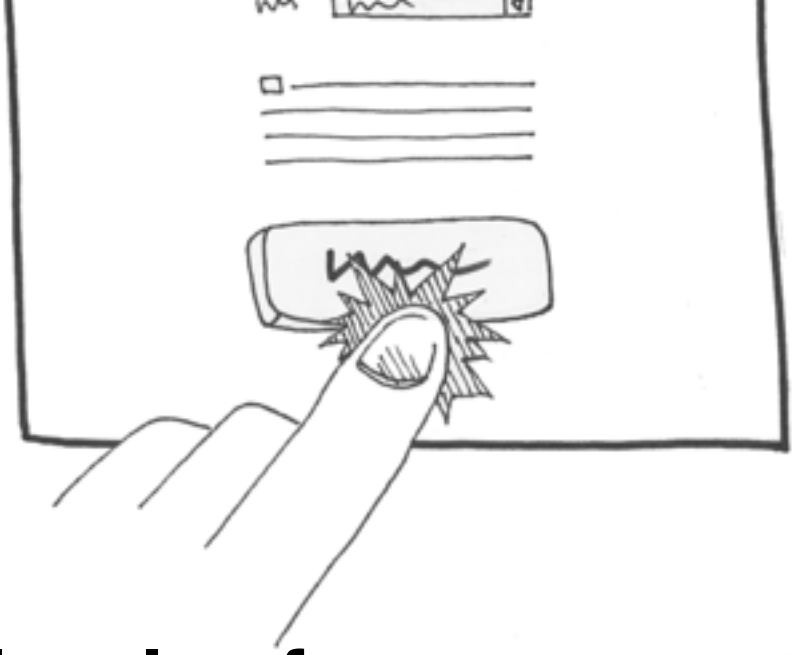


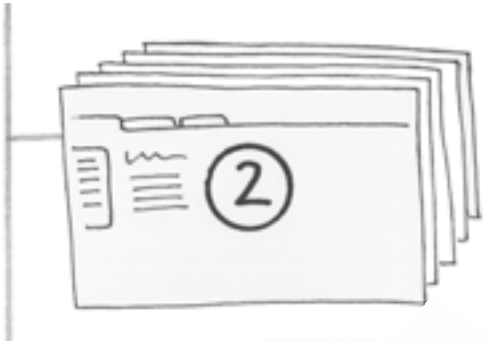
- **Interface:** a point where interaction occurs between user and object.

- **Interaction:** the way in which things affect one another.

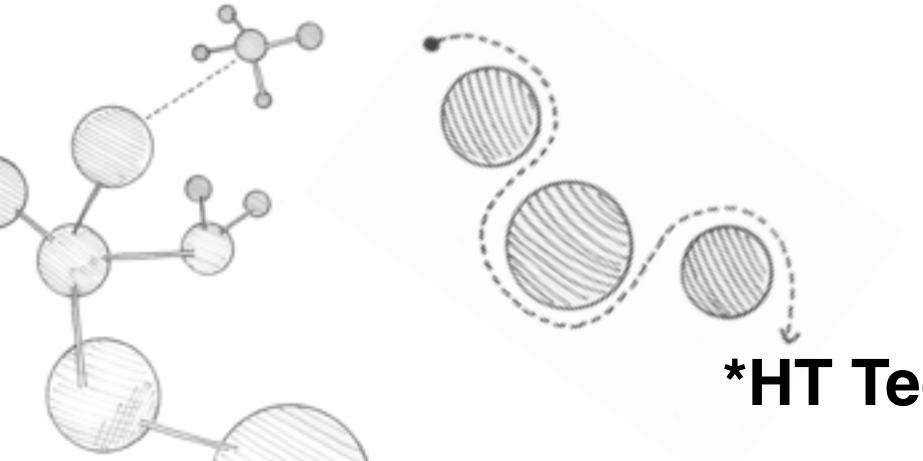
- **Object:** A material thing that can be seen and touched.







These levels of place are deeply “intertwingled”

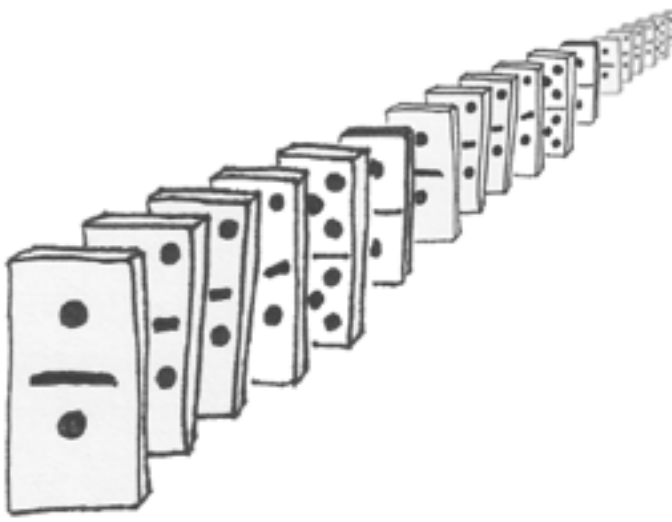


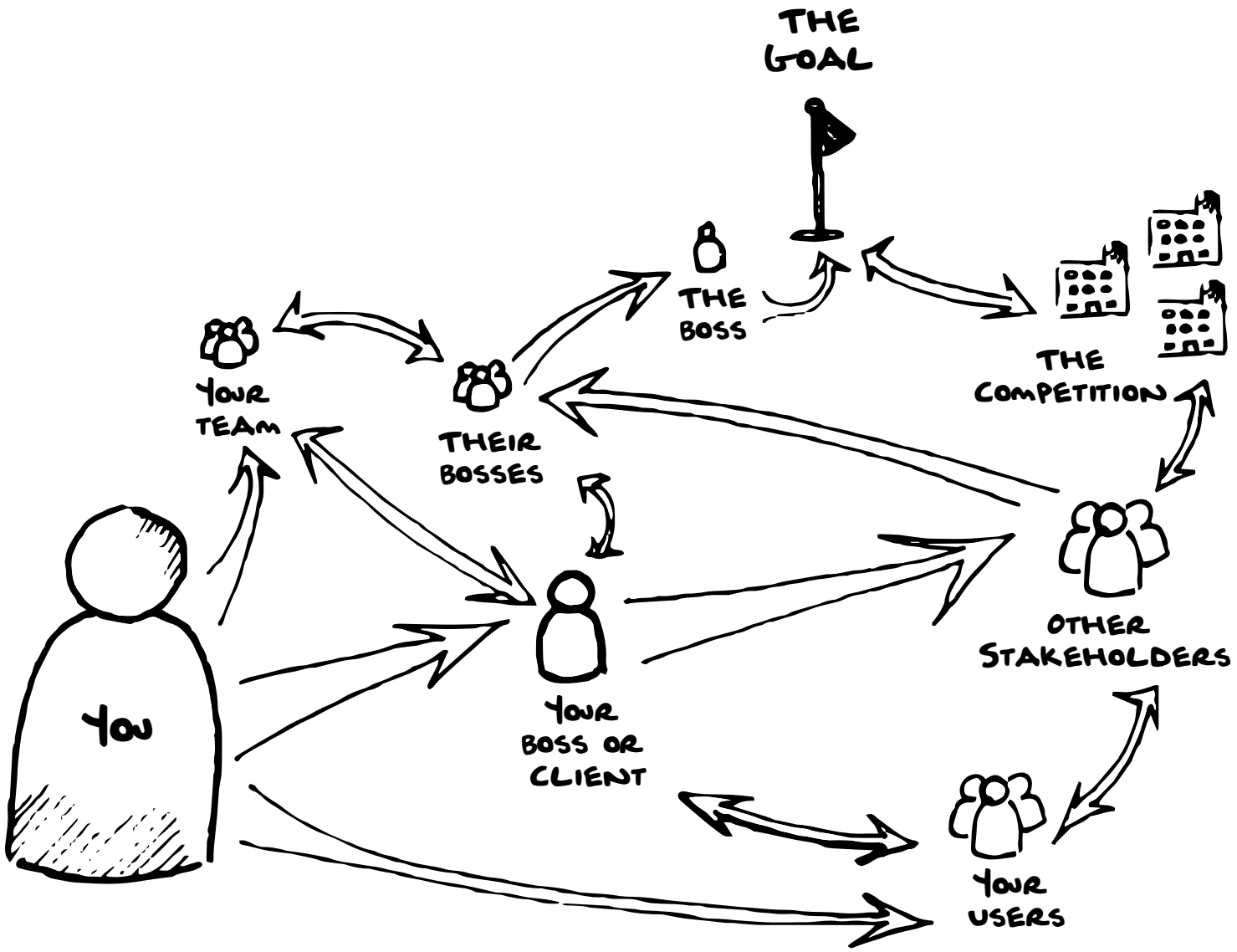
***HT Ted Nelson**

"To make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe"

- Carl Sagan

Change at one level has implications at other levels

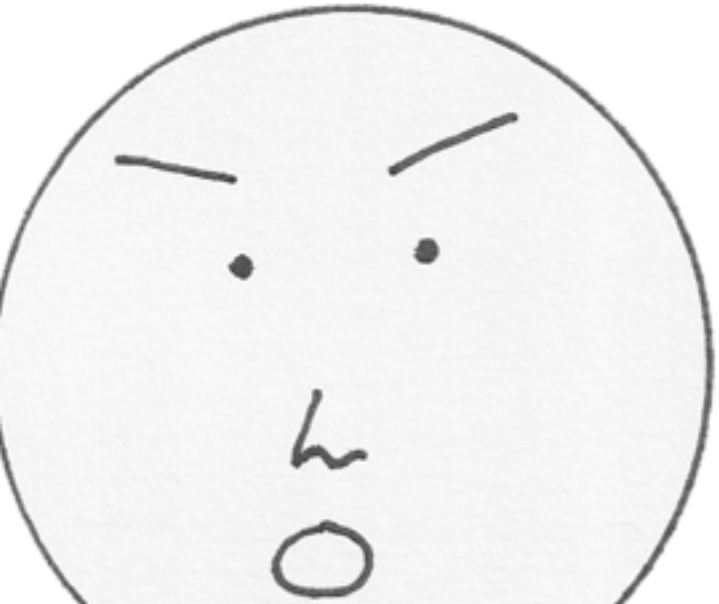




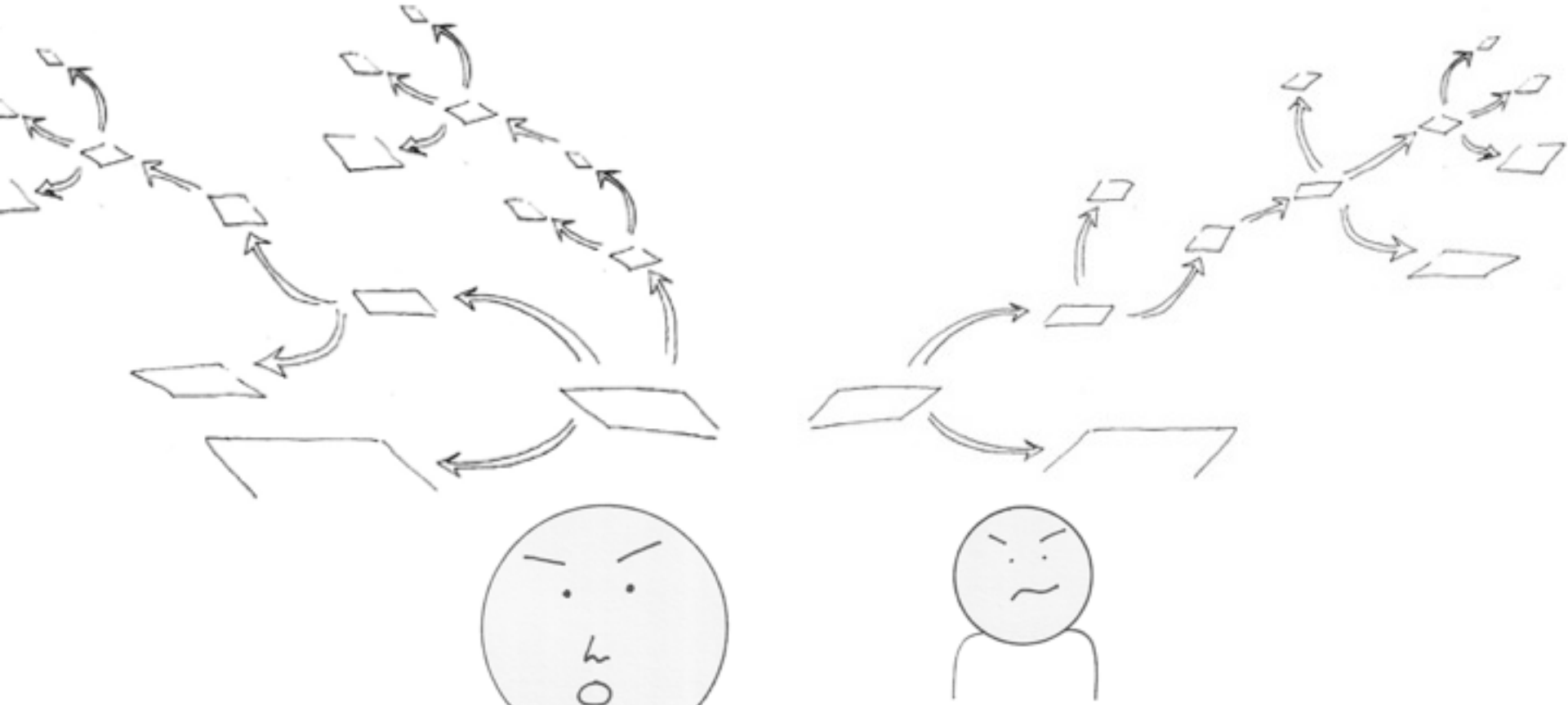
THE POLITICS of MAKING SENSE

Everyone has an opinion

and it can be frustrating to really talk things out

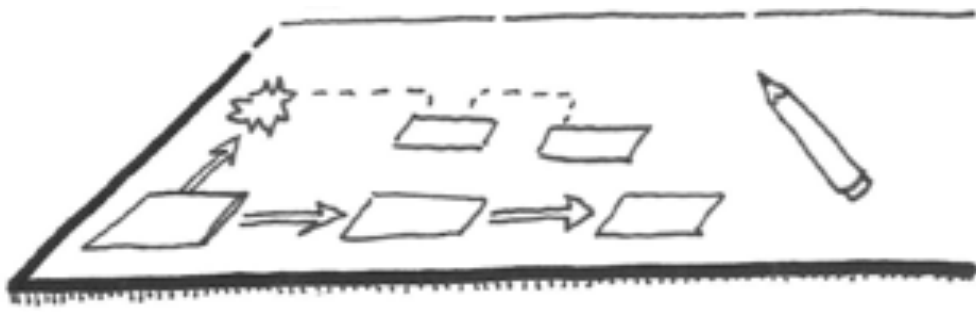


Frustration develops when people have different mental models

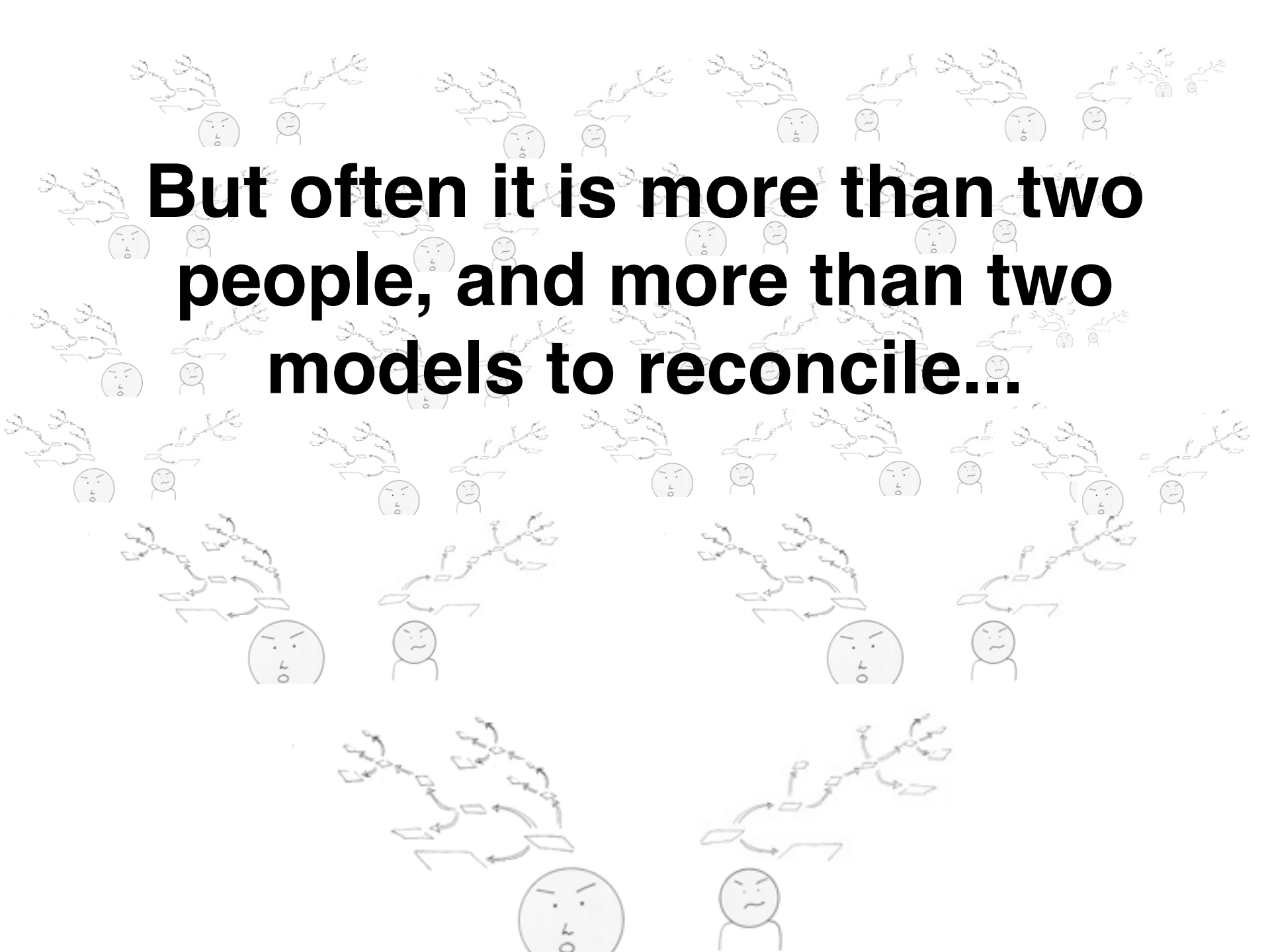


OBJECTS ALLOW US TO COMPARE OUR MENTAL MODELS

When we have something in common to point to we can reach agreement more easily



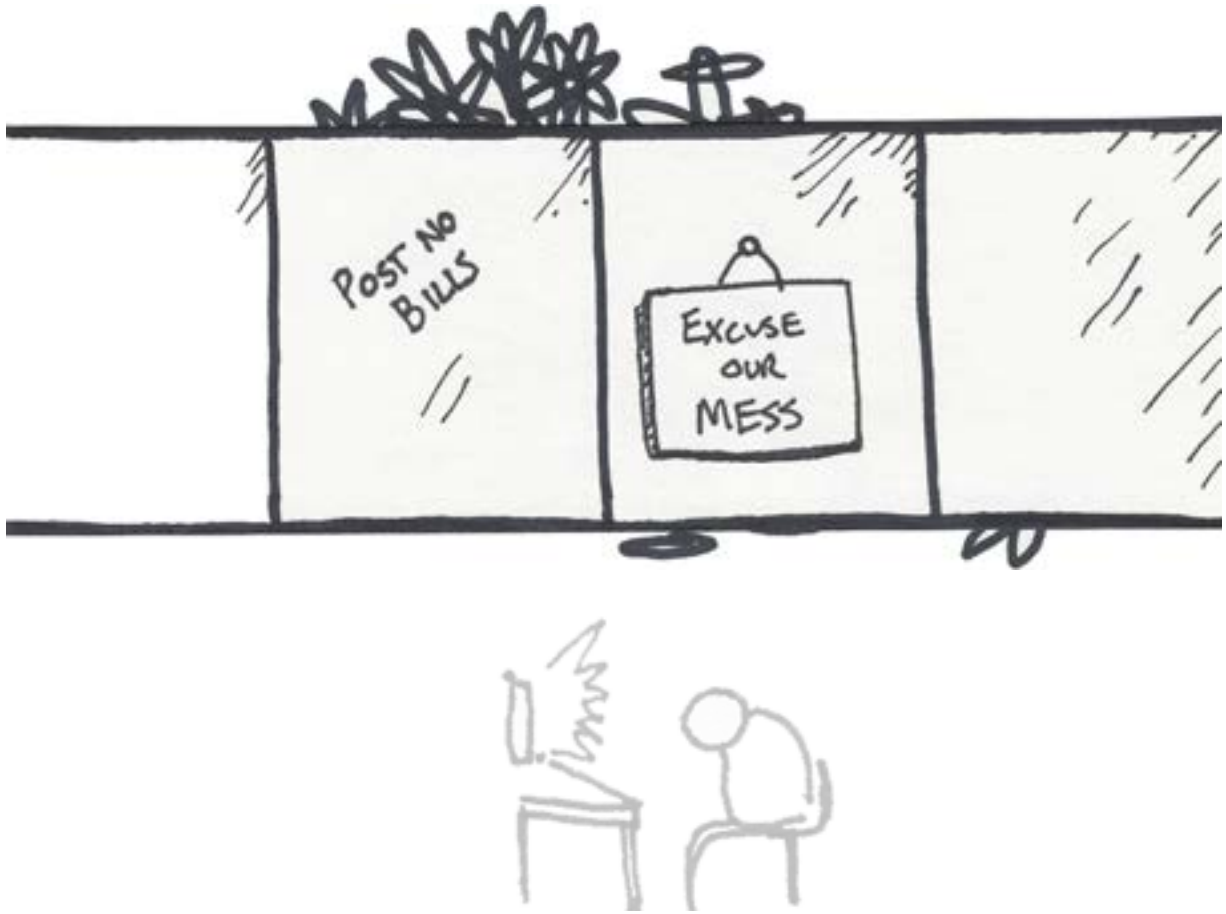
With agreement comes momentum



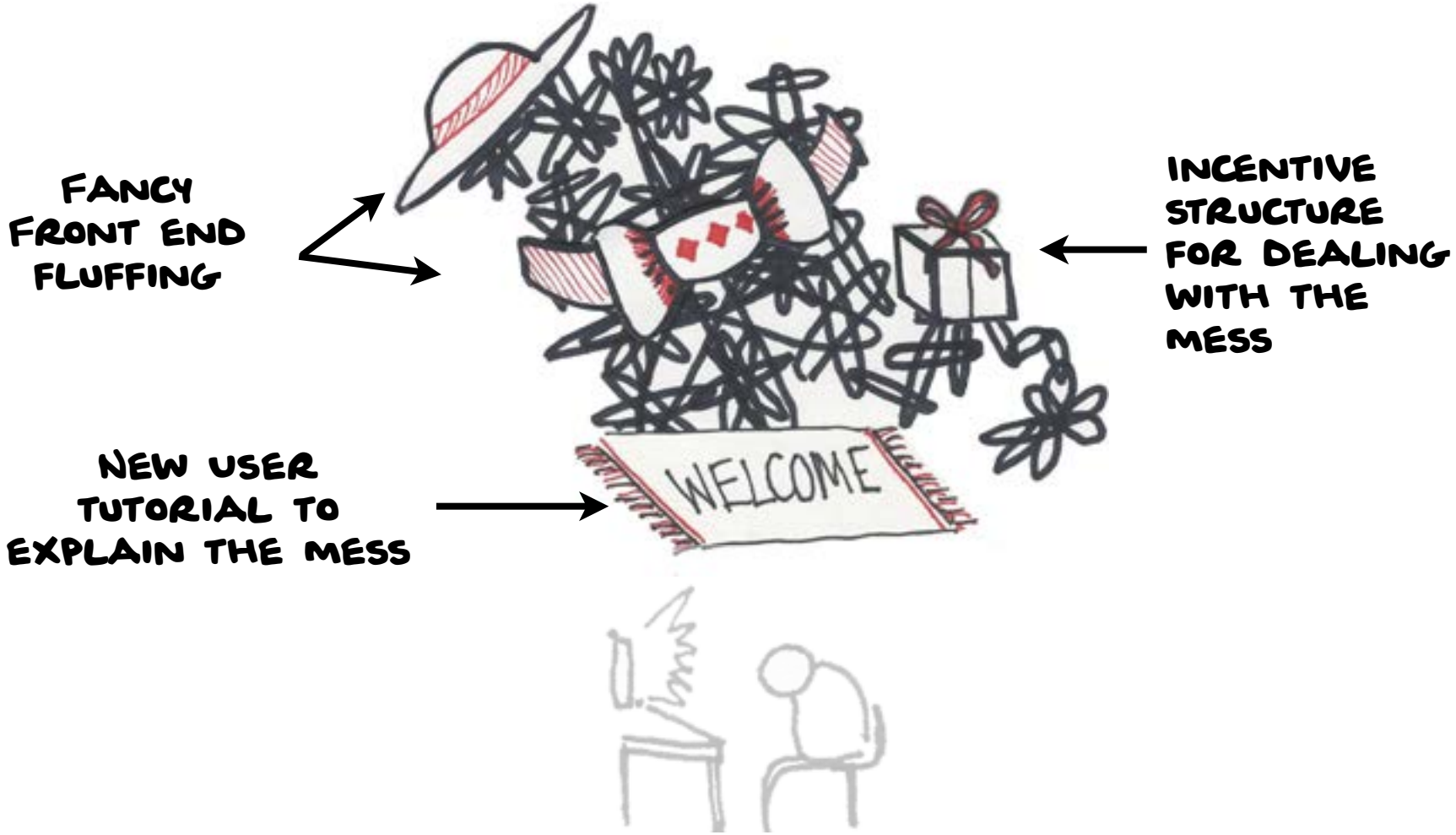
But often it is more than two people, and more than two models to reconcile...

A mess like this can easily feel impossible to make sense of

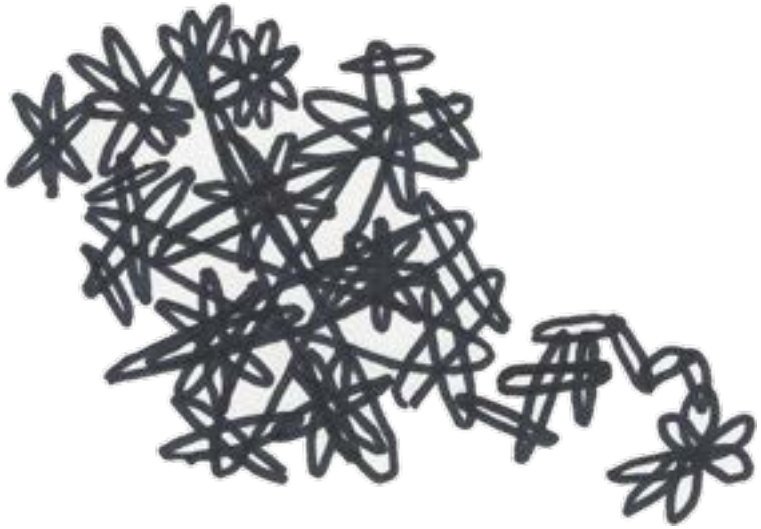
Many people get overwhelmed at this point



They think of ways to hide the mess...

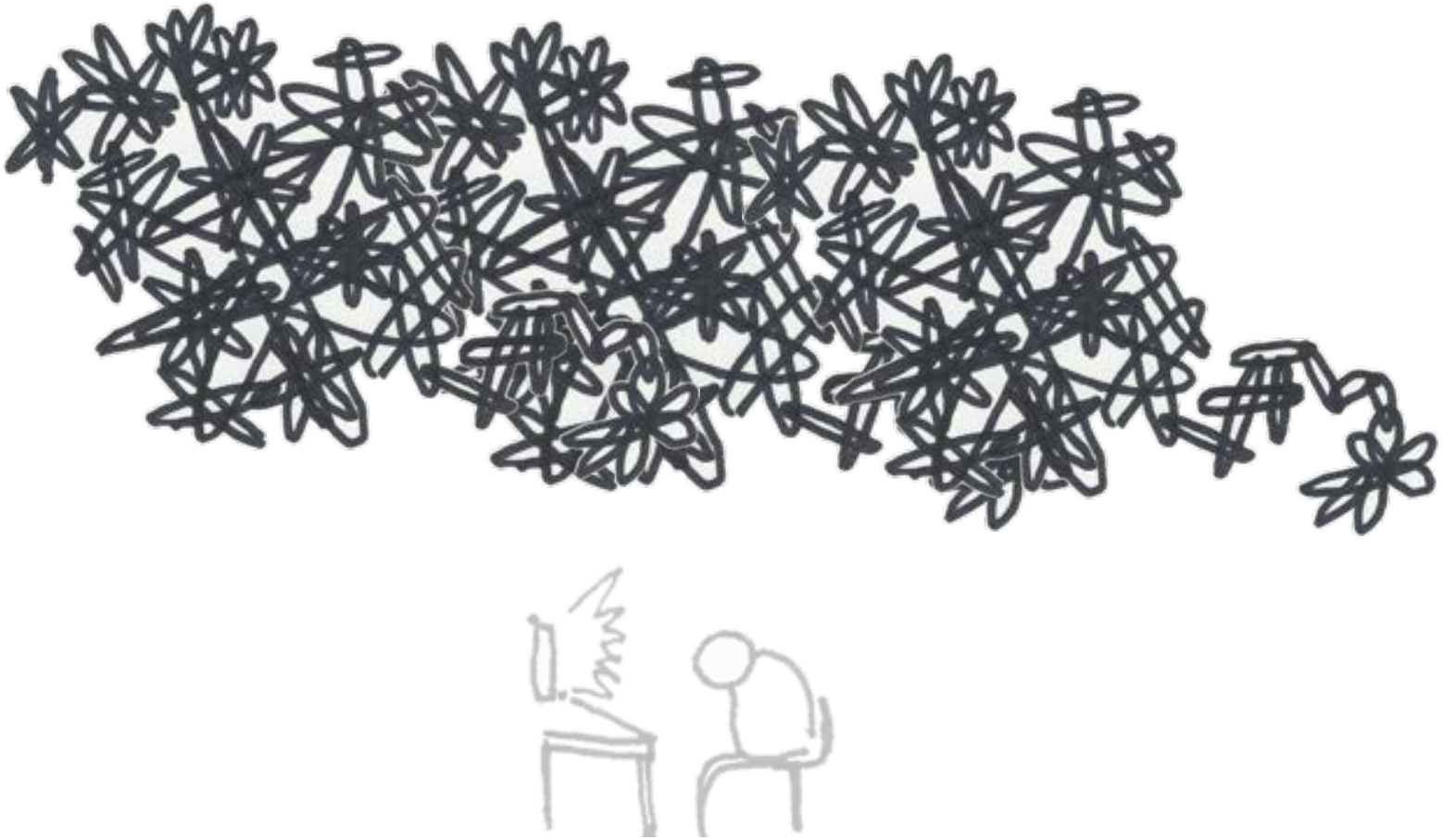


Or they think of ways to pretty up the mess...



...the mess is still a mess.

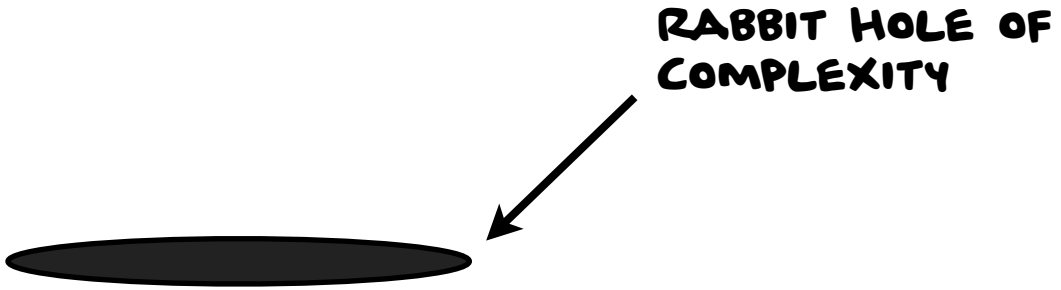
...but they have bought time.

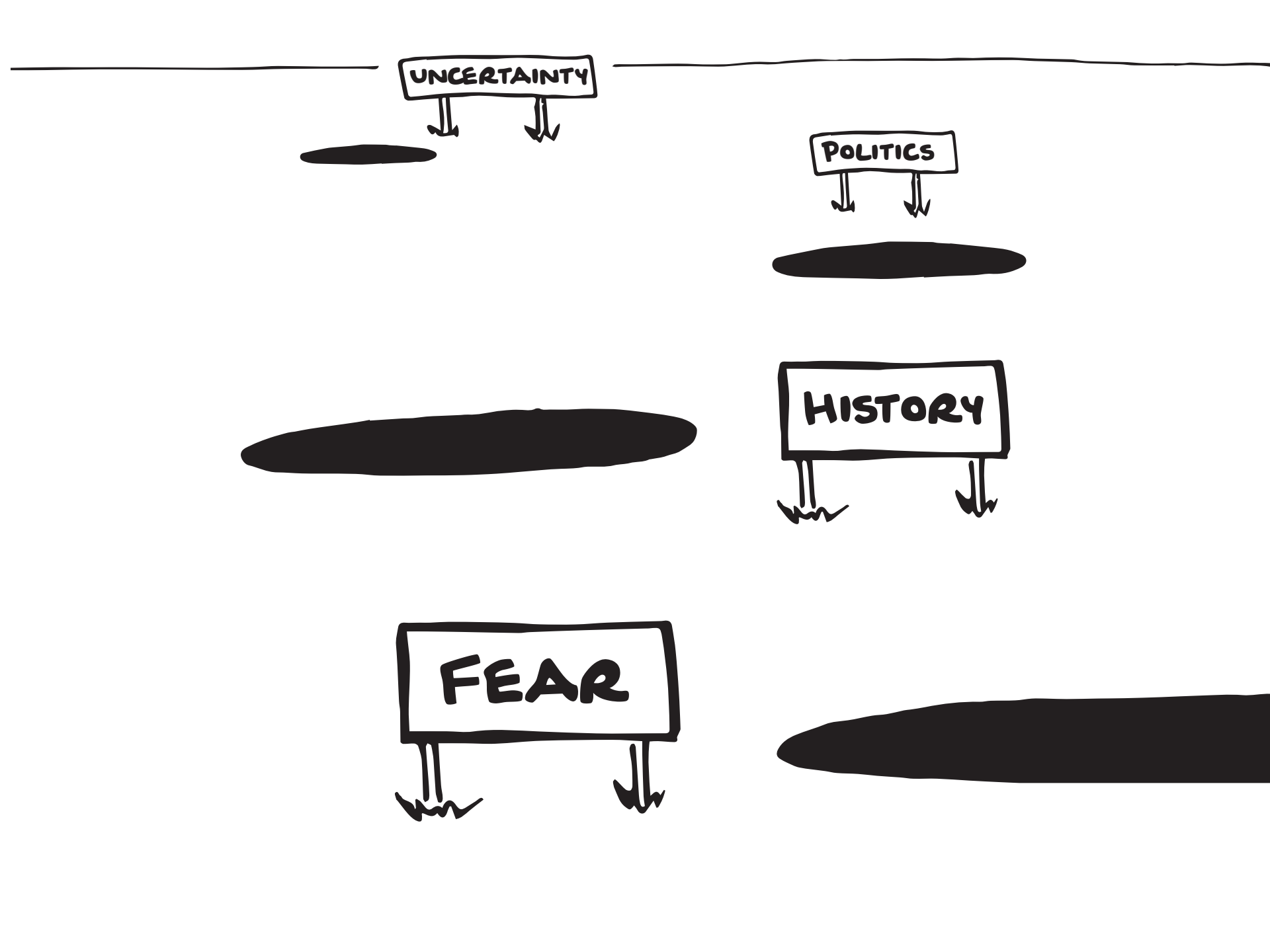


Until the mess grows

(as all messes do when given time)

Complexity is just one thing that can get in the way of understanding



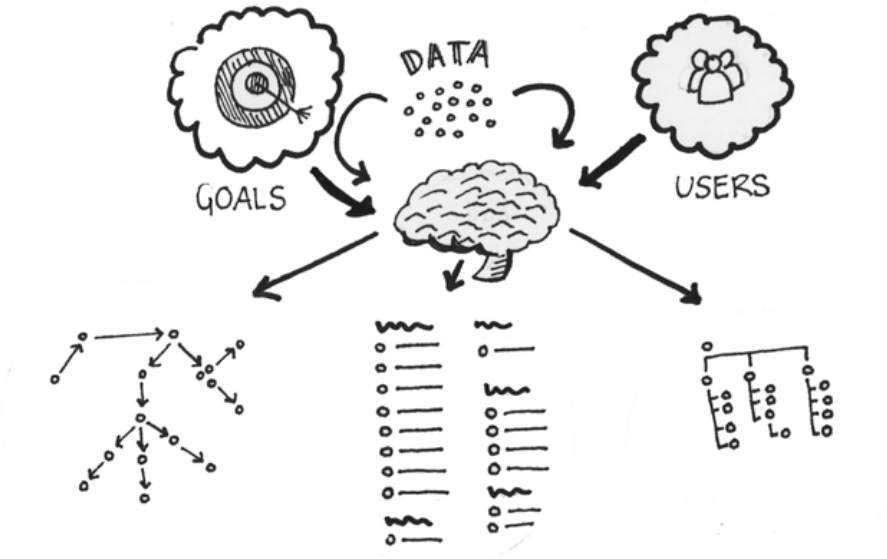

UNCERTAINTY
POLITICS
HISTORY
FEAR

Information Architecture (IA)

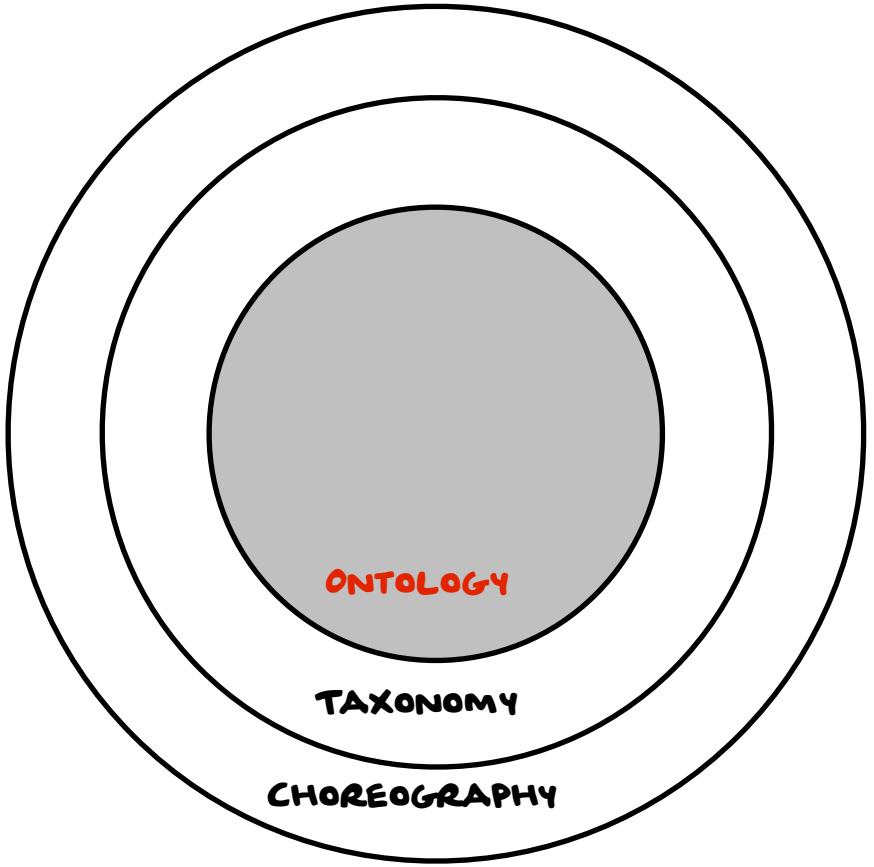
tools and concepts help people make sense of messes made of information (and people)

Information architecture
is the way we choose to arrange the parts of something to make it understandable as a whole.

We spend much of our lives trying to architect information that MAKES SENSE



Critical Components of IA*



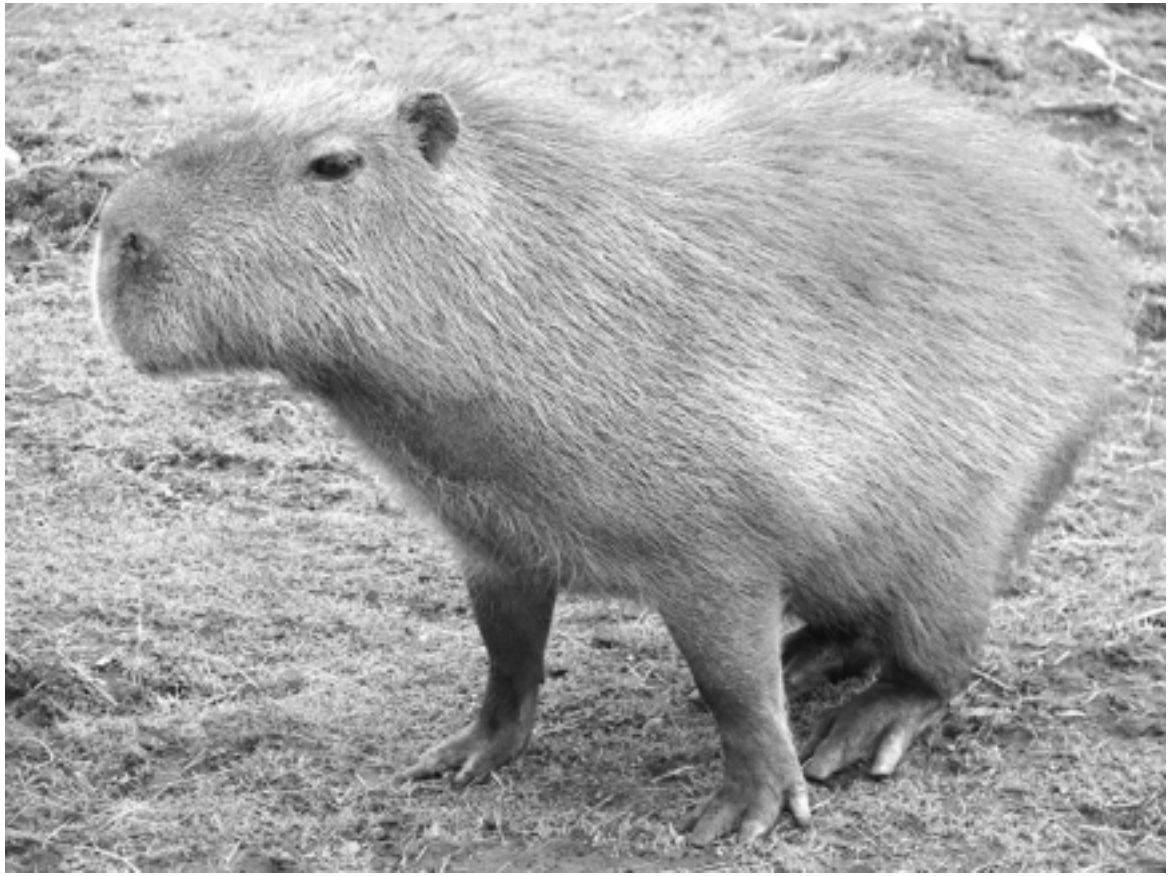
Ontology:
Do you know what you mean when you say what you say?

Taxonomy:
Have you provided logical structures that bring meaning to what you present?

Choreography:
How is meaning affected across various channels, over time and through usage?

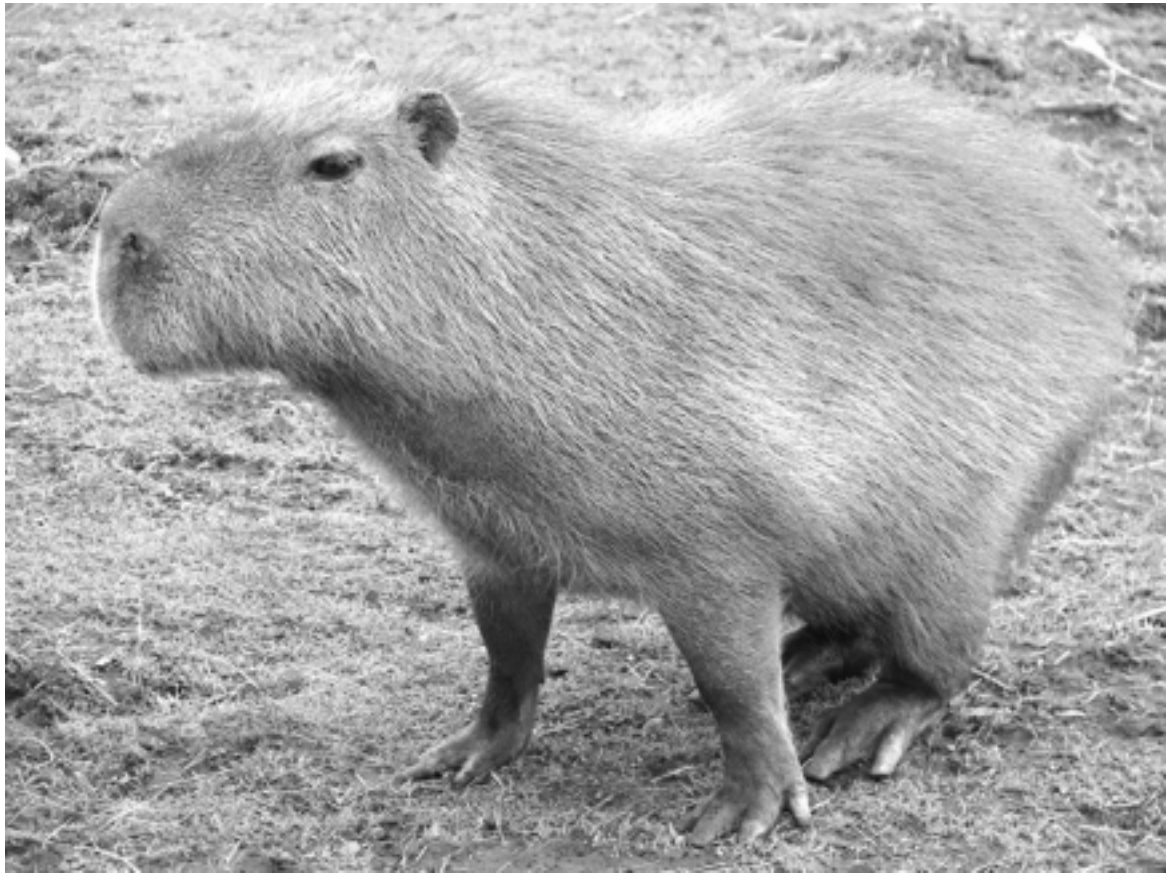
***HT @DanKlyn**

Ontology



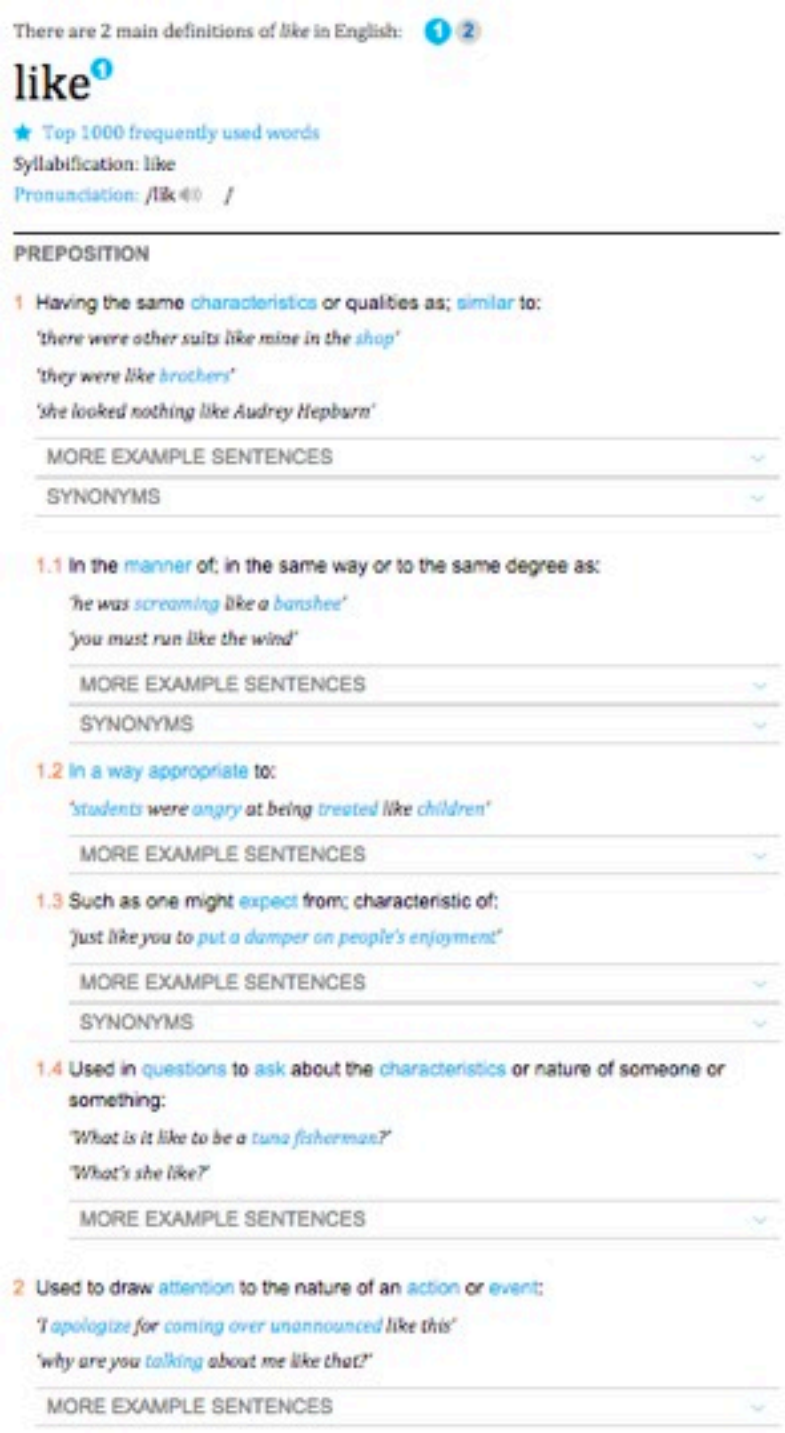
This is a fish.

ONTOLOGY = MEANING



Do we know what we mean when we say what we say? - @DanKlyn

Meaning is subjective
Meaning is demographic
Meaning is socio political
Meaning gets lost in translation
Meaning is complex



There are 2 main definitions of *like* in English: 1 2

like[1]

★ Top 1000 frequently used words

Syllabification: like

Pronunciation: /līk/

PREPOSITION

1 Having the same characteristics or qualities as; similar to:

'there were other suits like mine in the shop'

'they were like brothers'

'she looked nothing like Audrey Hepburn'

MORE EXAMPLE SENTENCES

SYNONYMS

1.1 In the manner of; in the same way or to the same degree as:

'he was screaming like a banshee'

'you must run like the wind'

MORE EXAMPLE SENTENCES

SYNONYMS

1.2 In a way appropriate to:

'students were angry at being treated like children'

MORE EXAMPLE SENTENCES

1.3 Such as one might expect from; characteristic of:

'just like you to put a damper on people's enjoyment'

MORE EXAMPLE SENTENCES

SYNONYMS

1.4 Used in questions to ask about the characteristics or nature of someone or something:

'What is it like to be a tuna fisherman?'

'What's she like?'

MORE EXAMPLE SENTENCES

2 Used to draw attention to the nature of an action or event:

'I apologize for coming over unannounced like this'

'why are you talking about me like that?'

MORE EXAMPLE SENTENCES

Lexicography is the practice of compiling dictionaries. It is the collection of different meanings for words.

Ontology represents the knowledge of terms and concepts within a domain. It is the act of choosing the language you use.

Alien Dictionary

- **Flow:** Periods of time established to stagger the availability of styles and silhouettes within a season
    - **Style:** A group of products that share the same design but is offered in a variety of colors
    - **Season:** Period of time within the year where certain products are sold in support of sport and weather trends. There are four seasons (Fall, Holiday, Spring and Summer)
    - **Silhouette:** Refers to the cut of a product. Used as more detailed level of Silhouette Type. *(Example: Tank top is a Silhouette within the silhouette type tops)*
        - **Silhouette Type:** A logical grouping of silhouettes based upon the part of the body or context where it is worn/used *(Example: Eye Wear, Golf Clubs, Tops)*

Controlled Vocabularies

- A **controlled vocabulary** is a list of approved terms and definitions for a particular context and/or setting
- This exercise can help teams to decide on things like:
  - Variant Spellings (i.e. American vs. British)
  - Scientific vs. Popular Term Use (i.e. Cockroaches vs. Periplaneta Americana)
  - Acceptable Synonyms (i.e. Automobile vs. Car)
  - Acceptable Acronyms (i.e. GE vs. General Electric)
  - Business vs. User Terms (i.e. What we say in meetings vs. what we say to customers)
  - Identification of homographs (i.e. the word “pool” can relate to “swimming pool” or “shooting”)

WORDS WE DON'T SAY

AUTHORED
BIGS (meaning "prominent people")
BISTRO (okay in restaurant reviews, but sparingly)
BOAST (meaning "have")
CELEB
COMELY
COMFORT FOOD
DUO
DON (meaning "put on")
DUBBED
EATERY
EPONYMOUS
FIN DE SIECLE
FLICKS
GRACED
HAILS FROM
HUBBY
INDIE (exception granted for indie rock)
INTONE
LIFESTYLE
MAVEN
NEW YORK'S FINEST
OVERLY
PENNED
QUERIED (meaning "asked")
sentences beginning **RESULT:** or **REASON:**
SCRIPTED
SPORT (as a verb)
STAFFED/STAFFER
TAPPED (meaning "chosen")
, UM,
, UH,
, WELL,
A WHO'S WHO OF
ZEITGEIST

http://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/words-we-dont-say/

Start with language not interfaces

Hamburger
Club Sandwich
Remember language is not just words
Mashable
"HAMBURGER ICON"
Telstra 8:04 AM
Overview
Recent activity
All aboard!

*I am sorry you have having issues using our mobile site. I am sure I will be able to help you...**Can you see the hamburger menu?***

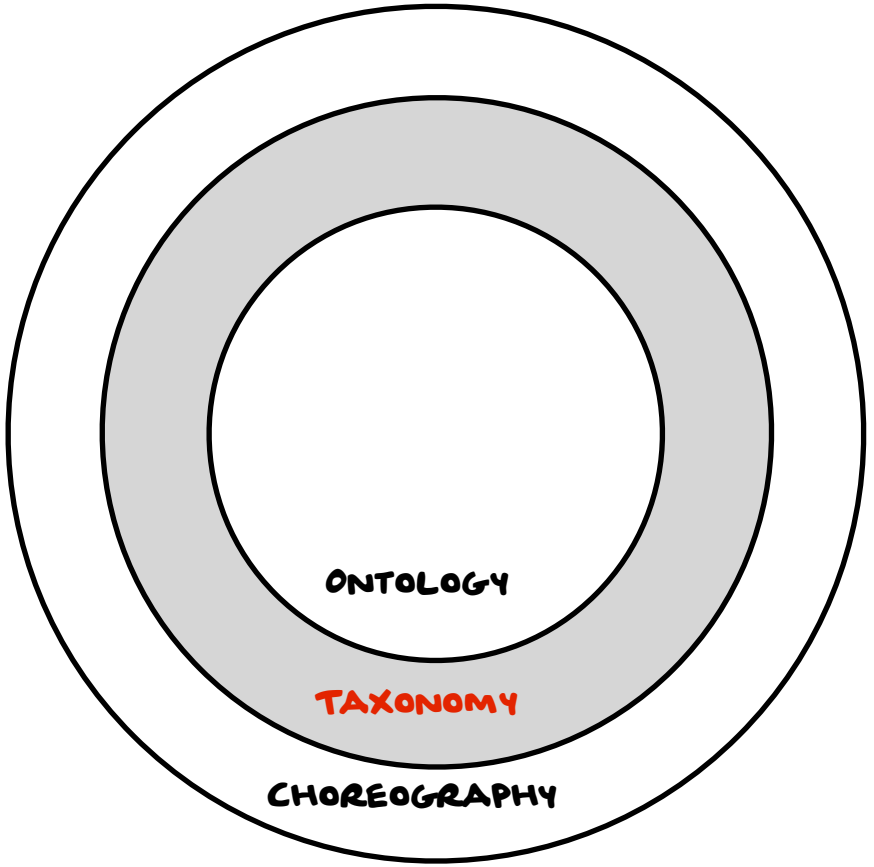
Careful: We LOVE to use words anyways even if we have to make them up

We call this an “uncontrolled” vocabulary

Uncontrolled vocabularies increase linguistic insecurity

People suffering from linguistic insecurity aren't as easy to talk things out with

Critical Components of IA*



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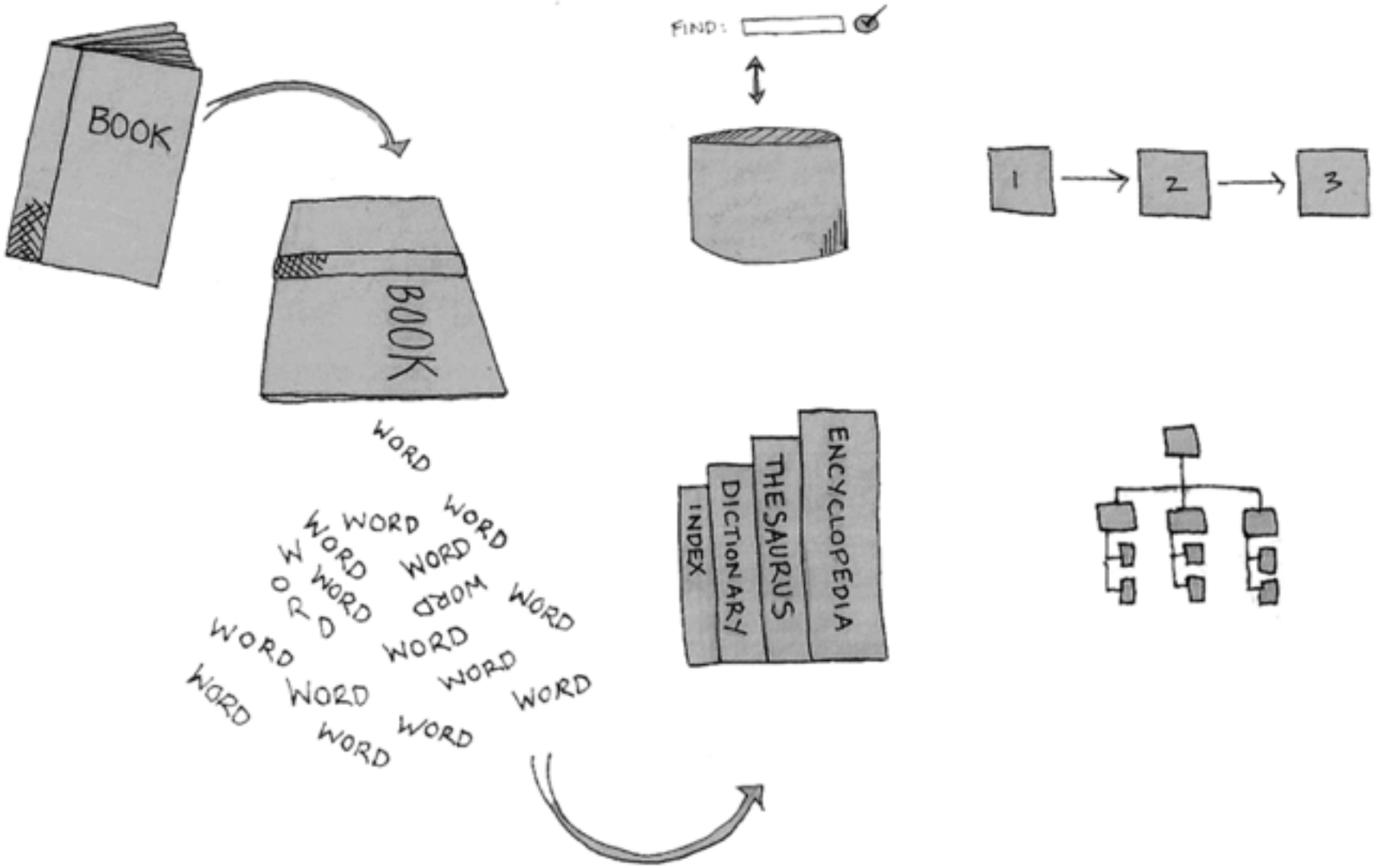
***HT @DanKlyn**

Taxonomy = Structure



ORGANIZING INFORMATION IS NOT THE HARD PART

BUILDING AGREEMENT ON THE MEANING AND INTENT OF INFORMATION IS THE HARD(ER) PART

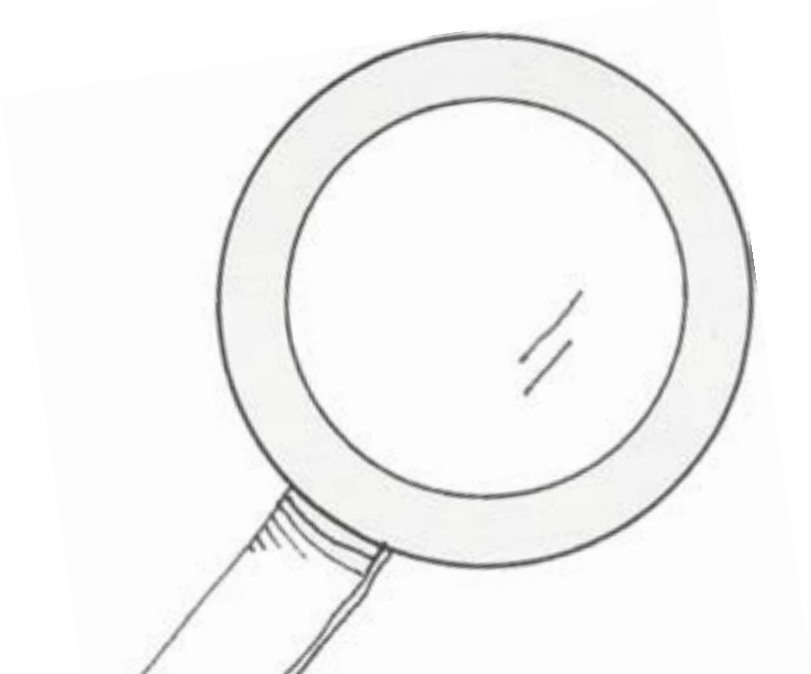
There are only 5 ways to organize anything

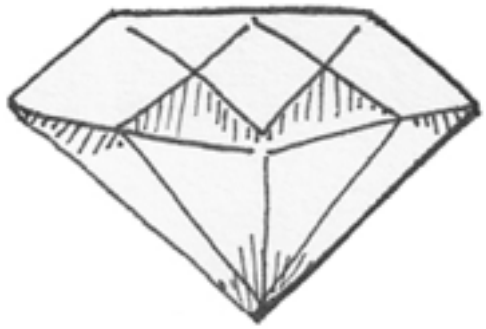
1. **Location:** Rome is a city in Italy
2. **Alphabetical:** Rome starts with “R”
3. **Time:** Rome started in 753 BC
4. **Category:** Rome is a Romantic city
5. **Hierarchy:** Rome is within Italy, which is within Europe, which is within the Eastern and Northern Hemisphere

*HT Richard Saul Wurman - Information Anxiety 2

A facet is a particular aspect, or feature about some “thing”

The more facets something has the more ways it can be organized against other things.





10 facets of produce

1. **Color**
2. **Texture**
3. **Taste**
4. **Season Planted**
5. **Season Harvested**
6. **Soil Grown In**
7. **Class**
8. **Subclass**
9. **Countries Consumed in**
10. **Cost by Country**

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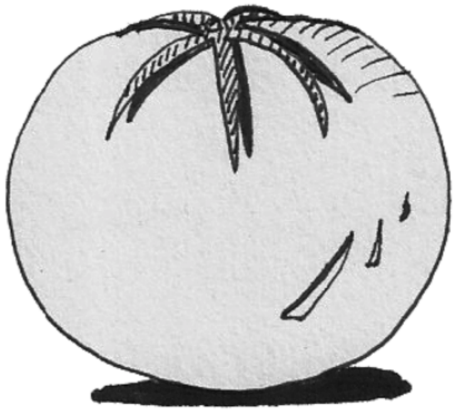
20 ways to organize a box of produce

1. By cost at the grocery in the USA (Location)
2. By cost at the grocery in the UK (Location)
3. By countries it is eaten in (Location)
4. By first letter scientific names (Alphabetical)
5. By first letter popular names (Alphabetical)
6. By first letter cultural names (Alphabetical)
7. By seasonality of harvest (Time)
8. By length of season (Time)
9. By cooking time (Time)
10. By popularity today (Time)
11. By popularity 100 years ago (Time)
12. By color (Category)
13. By taste (Category)
14. By texture (Category)
15. By size (Category)
16. By growing style (Hierarchy)
17. By climate (Hierarchy)
18. By type (Hierarchy)
19. By soil type (Hierarchy)
20. By best storing technique (Hierarchy)

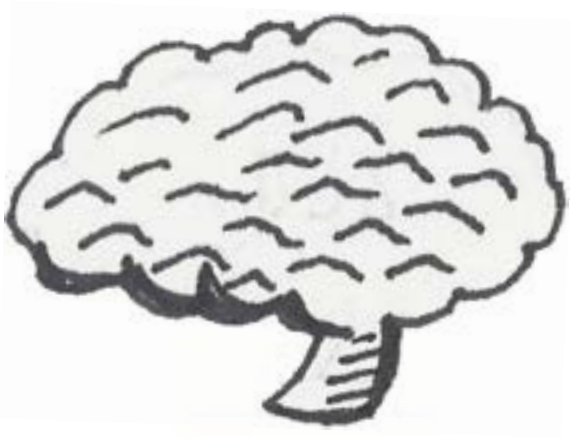
Taxonomy is Rhetoric

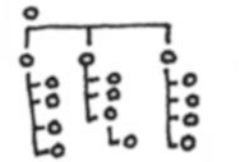
The way you choose to organize your vegetables says something about what kind of store you are



“It takes knowledge to know that a tomato is a fruit, and wisdom not to put it in a fruit salad.”

– Miles Kington



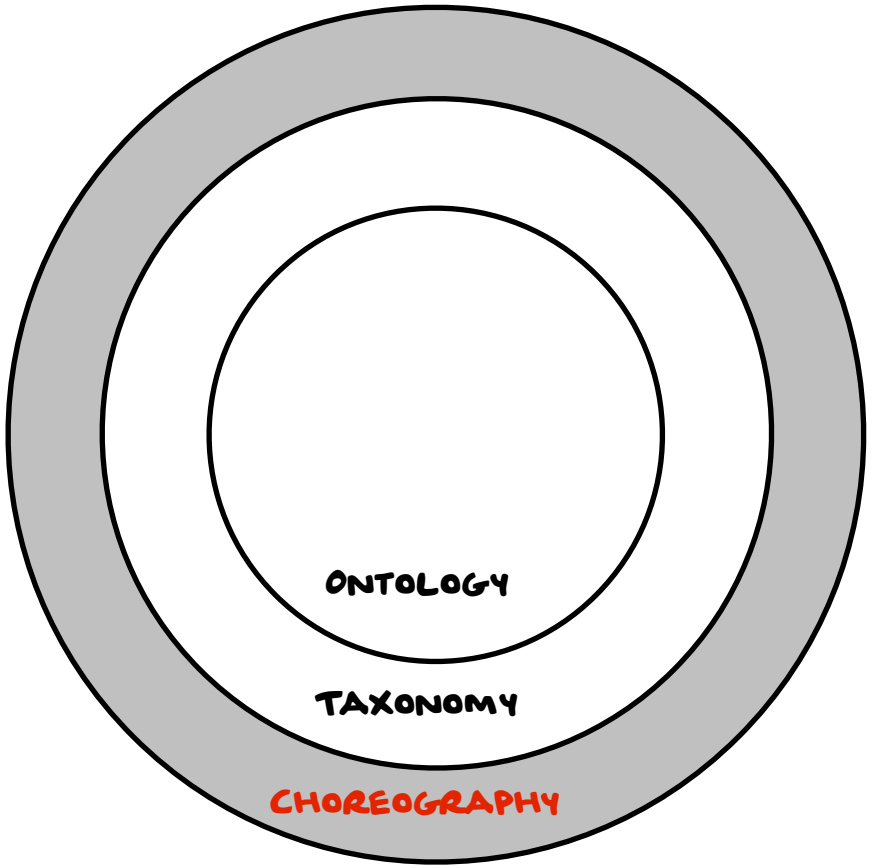


Mental Models Matter

A mental model is an explanation for the way someone makes sense of something.

These models of perception shape our behavior and how we relate to information that we encounter.

Critical Components of IA*



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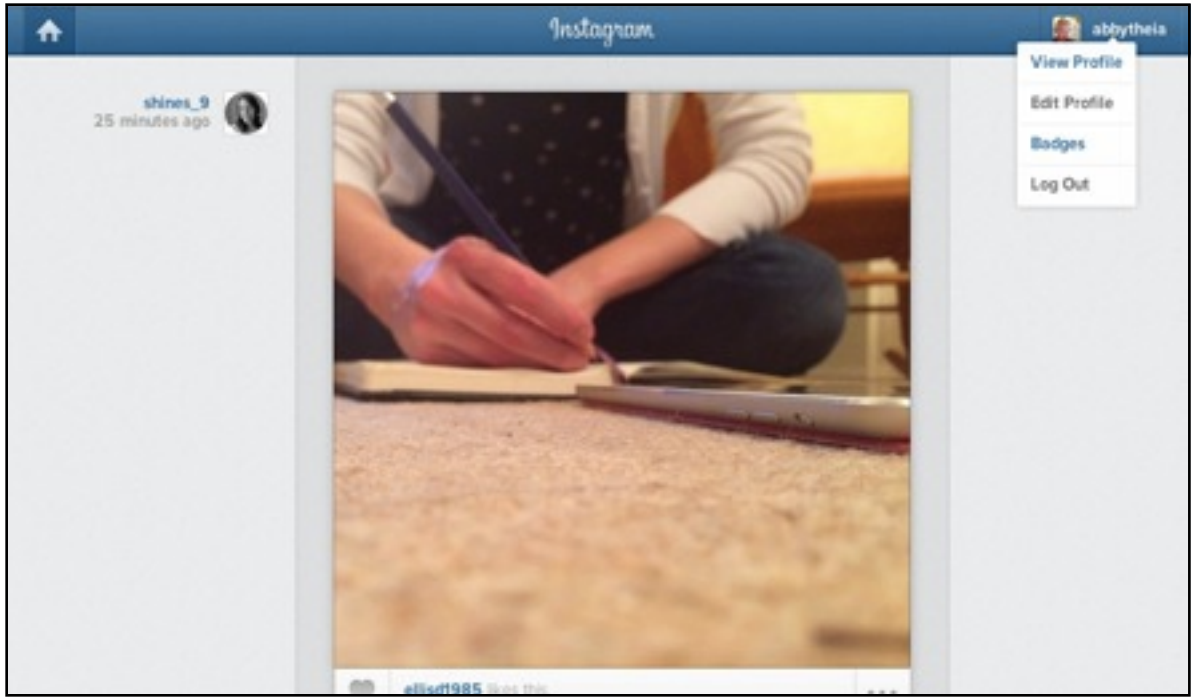
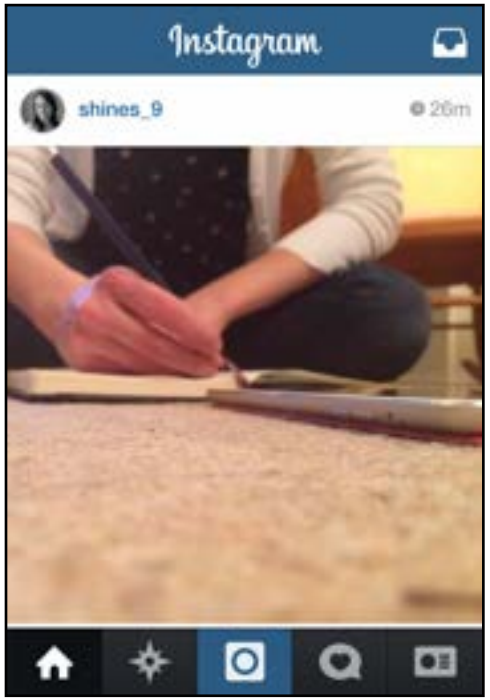
Choreography:
How is meaning affected across various channels, over time and through usage?

***HT @DanKlyn**

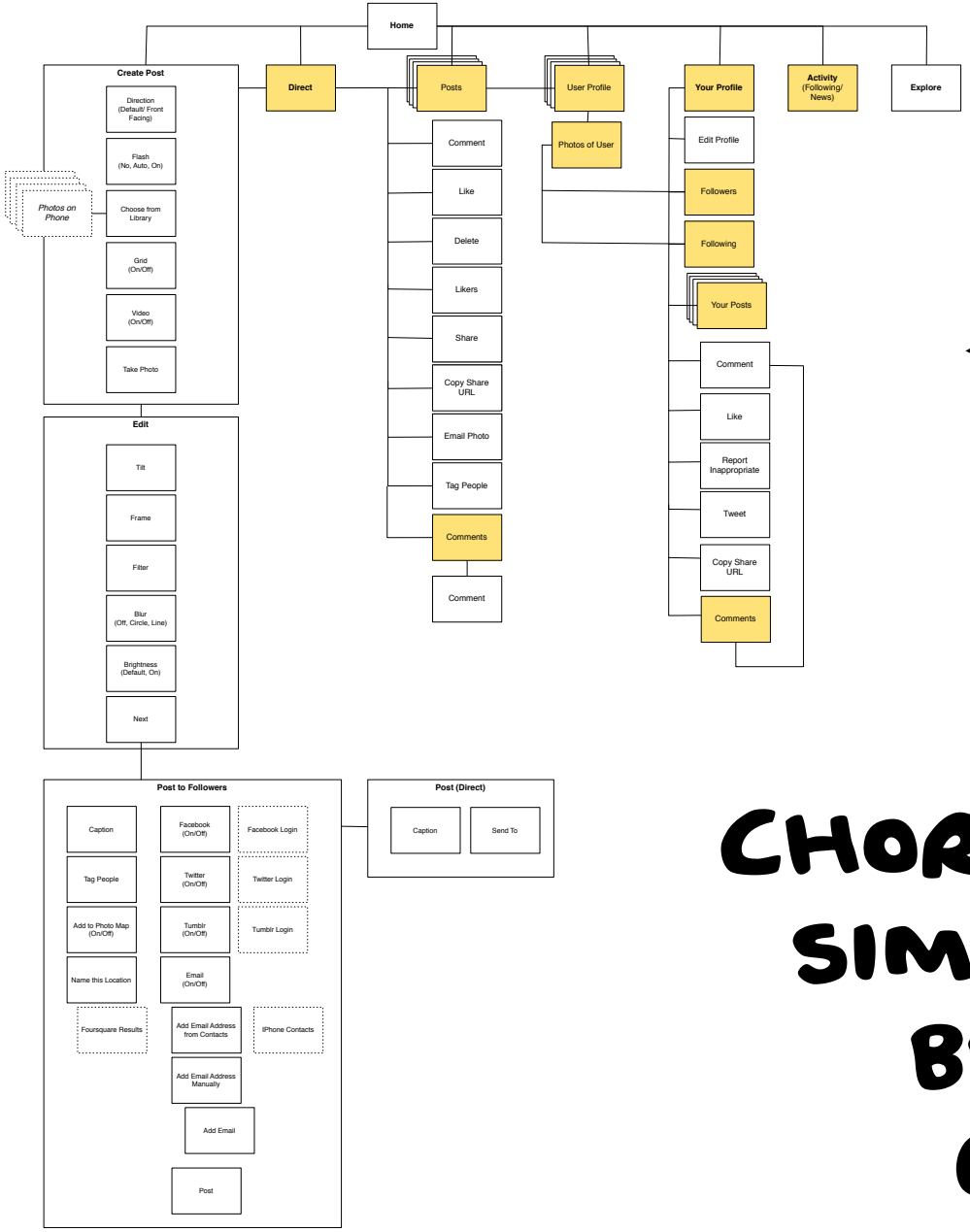
Choreography = Intent

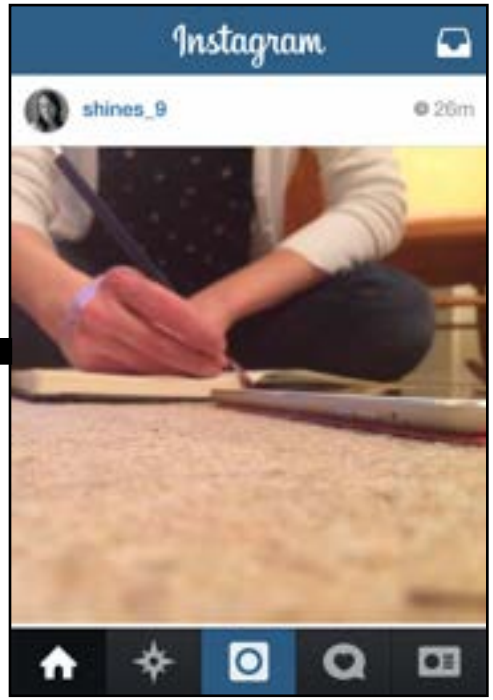
- **Context:** the circumstances that form the setting for an interaction
- **Channel:** A medium for communication or the passage of information



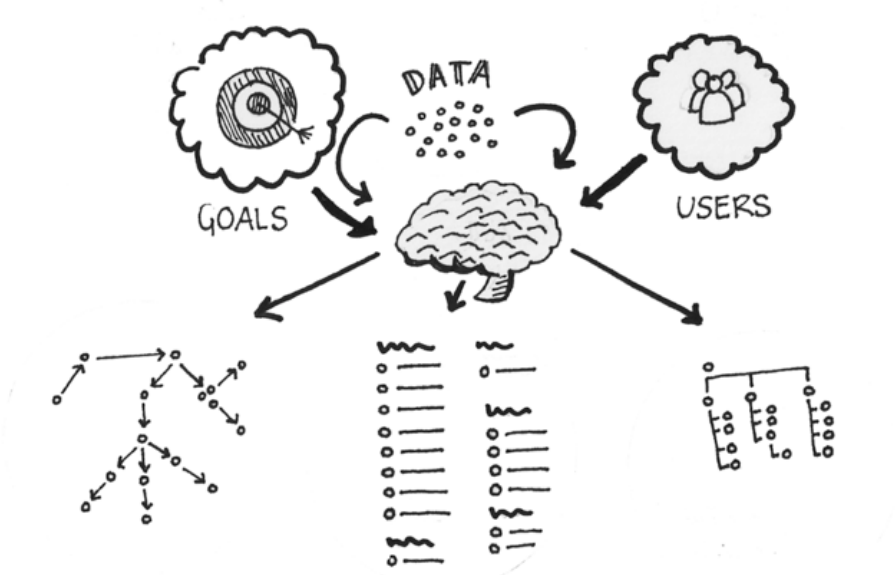


How you choreograph your product says something about who you are





Choreographing simplicity can be really complex



WARNING:

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE ALWAYS EXISTS

Information Architecture

is not just for Information Architects

If you make anything:

you are probably already practicing information architecture

Thanks!

I WROTE A BOOK ABOUT IA!

http://abbytheia.com/makesense/

Available on Amazon in paperback and Kindle.