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# Distributed Digital Data: Keeping files consistent, timely and small

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## Abstract

*Digitalization of information across organizations has made information exchange between organizations easier. Information exchange, however, requires governmental organizations to define security policies, stating which information can be accessed, processed and indexed by which organizations, when, where and how. Ensuring that the information, once exchanged, stays up-to-date is a real challenge, as is enforcement of the security policies. This paper proposes the use of Distributed Digital Dossier in combination with agent technology to enforce these requirements. The domain of a Court of Law is taken as an example to illustrate the approach.*

## 1. Introduction

Information in large governmental organizations is inherently distributed across different physical locations and systems. As much of this information is digital, distribution of information has become easier. Distribution, however, requires governmental organizations to define policies, stating which information can be accessed, processed and indexed by which other organizations, when, where and how. Ensuring that the information, once distributed to other organizations, remains up to date is a real challenge. Staleness of information can have serious consequences: especially when organizations act on the basis of information that is not only stale, but also invalid. Security policies within each of the individual organizations specify the rights and regulations for all entities involved specifying, for example, which information may be exchanged by whom, with whom and how, and how integrity is to be ascertained.

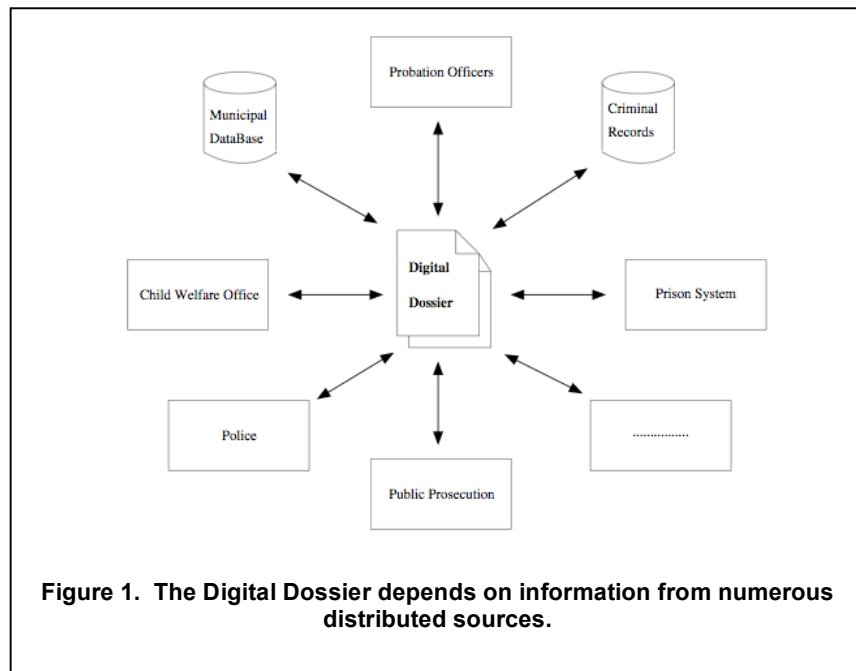
This paper introduces the notion of a *distributed digital dossier*. Responsibility for data is delegated to authorities responsible for data provision. The digital dossier currently being evaluated in a pilot study by the Courts of Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the Netherlands is an example of a dossier that contains information from multiple sources, and for which security is a major challenge. The Public Prosecution is responsible for dossier compilation and management – the dossiers are criminal files. Information is acquired from governmental organizations such as the Police, Prison Authorities, Municipals, and Probation Officers. Administrative data such as name, address and marital status, for example, is provided by the Municipalities, the authority responsible for registration of this information. The Municipalities have well-regulated policies with respect to information provision. Their security policies specify which information is accessible to whom and when and which information is not.

If information changes during the course of file compilation, the criminal file should be adapted. Correctly propagating new information between different sources is, however, often complex. For this reason, in practice the Public Prosecution most often assumes that information does not change during file compilation and between file compilation and a court case. As a result information can become stale. A distributed digital dossier provides the means to propagate changes in data at the source (the responsible authority) to the files in which this information has been included.

A conceptual overview of the distributed digital dossier is detailed in Section 2. Section 3 provides an example of a distributed criminal file for a specific class of crimes – those committed by juvenile repeat offender. Section 4 uses this example to illustrate the role of security policies and infrastructural support. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Distributed Digital Dossiers

A distributed digital dossier [6] contains information from physically distributed sources, distributed across organizational boundaries, see Figure 1. Initialization of a digital dossier is the responsibility of the Public Prosecution. The initial dossier specifies which information is to be included on the basis of the crime committed. It also specifies other meta-data such as the access control list (who may read and alter which parts of the dossier), dependencies between different fields in a document, the organizations responsible for the fields. This part of the dossier is stored centrally by the Public Prosecution, in their own database. The content of different fields, represented as records, are the responsibility of the organizations specified in the central document: personal information is maintained by the municipal databases, family related information for juveniles is maintained by Council for Child Welfare etc. The dossier stored by the Public Prosecution only contains references to this information. The information itself is controlled by the source (from the perspective of the Public Prosecution). If something changes at the source, this is flagged by the responsible organization, and the Public Prosecution is informed. The Public Prosecution then, on the basis of the meta-information on dependencies between fields, checks to make sure the data within the dossier is still consistent.



This guarantees that information stays as up-to-date as possible during dossier compilation. The distributed character of the dossier, however, vanishes, by necessity, once the dossier is sent to Court. The Public Prosecutor's task is namely to compile a dossier. Once a dossier is finalized, however, and sent to Court and the defendant's lawyer the dossier needs to be static. Only via a special procedure and with the judge's permission, can information be added to the dossier. This ensures that all parties have the same information. Note that a finalized (or frozen [6]) dossier is a local copy of the distributed file at that given point in time.

The next section presents an example of a case and some snippets of the corresponding dossier. It concerns a case involving juvenile repeat offenders. This type of case has been chosen because of the number and nature of organizations involved.

## 3. An example criminal prosecution chain: Juvenile Repeat Offenders

An example of a criminal prosecution chain for a juvenile repeat offender is illustrated below. This example has been previously been used in [7] and is constructed from an actual case. All personal information has been anonymized and numerous details have been omitted. However it does illustrate the complexities involved in such cases. Note that this scenario describes the current Dutch situation, legal constraints are also analyzed in a Dutch legal setting, according to Dutch law.

The criminal prosecution chain starts when the Police arrest a juvenile suspect for vandalism. The suspect is escorted to the Police station where an assistant prosecutor questions the suspect. The Police open a new dossier specifically for this case. This dossier contains a summary of the offence for which the suspect is charged, the date and location of the incident, number of suspects, personal data of the victim, the official police report, and other relevant information. The suspect then becomes the subject of investigation: the personal data he/she has provided is cross referenced with the municipal database<sup>1</sup>. The Police also queries local Repeat Offender Databases to discover whether this suspect is a known repeat offender. As this case concerns a minor, a request is issued to other organizations for juvenile offenders, to provide relevant information about the minor's background. All of this information is added to the Police report. After collecting this information, the Police and the Assistant Prosecutor inform the Public Prosecutor of the case and transfer the report.

The Public Prosecutor decides whether to press charges or to pursue an alternative if other (minor) punishment is deemed more suitable. This decision is based both on the specific details of the current case and the (criminal) history of the offender. A dedicated Judicial Documentation Database is used to retrieve information on the criminal past of the suspect. Typically, at this point, the Public Prosecutor will again consult municipal databases and local Juvenile Repeat Offender Systems. All information is cross referenced with the case dossier and information is updated when needed. If the Public Prosecutor decides to bring the case to court, as is the case, the Public Prosecution's criminal file is created with this information. The next mandatory step involves informing the Council for Child Welfare.

In the Dutch context the Council for Child Welfare has the task to investigate all crimes of minors. In addition to the criminal offences of the minor, the family situation and other relevant social factors are taken into account. This results in a motivated advice for suitable punishment of the suspect. This advice is added to the dossier. The prosecutor then serves a summons and a lawyer is assigned to the juvenile suspect. Adding the summons to the dossier finalizes the dossier at this point. A copy of the dossier is sent to the Court and to the lawyer of the suspect. At the court session the information in the dossier is used by all parties involved. The Public Prosecutor demands a suitable sentence, the lawyer presents the defense and ultimately the judge comes to a verdict. The suspect is now sentenced and all information regarding the court session is added to the dossier. The dossier itself is filed in the Judicial Documentation Database for future reference.

## 4. System Architecture

Distributed digital dossiers can be implemented in several ways. A distributed database [3] is an obvious option. As the digital dossier, however, not only needs to store information, but to actively monitor all fields continuously, to autonomously act when changes occur, across different organizations each with their own security policies, to guarantee up-to-date-ness, consistency, completeness and security of the data another approach has been chosen: an agent-based approach. Agents provide the means for decentralized autonomous monitoring and processing of data, coordination mechanisms, and interaction support. A light weight 'skeleton' framework using XML for the dossiers themselves in combination with agent technology [1,2] ensures the more complex and dynamic properties such as completeness etc.

### 4.1. Digital Dossier Skeleton

As stated above the dossier created by the Public Prosecution specifies which information is to be included and its status (mandatory, optional), which dependencies between information exist, which organizations are responsible for which information, which access rights are assigned to whom/which organizations, etc. This meta-data depends on the crime committed. This paper assumes that standard XML templates exist for each class of problems, and that these templates are used by the Public Prosecution to structure the meta-data in a dossier. Figure 2 depicts an example of part of a dossier with both meta-data and data provided by the Public Prosecution. Meta-data includes the dossier number, creation date, type of offence and access control lists. The example depicted in Figure 2 specifies that in this case the dossier has been opened by the Public Prosecution of Amsterdam on the first of July 2007. The offence committed is shoplifting, and the offender is a juvenile repeat offender. This dossier also specifies that four named employees of the Public Prosecution have been assigned permission to read this document (identified in this example by numbers 1234, 2345, 3456, 4567) and that only two of these four employees have permission to edit parts of the dossier (i.e. write permission).

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<sup>1</sup> In the Dutch setting municipals are obliged by Law to maintain databases with personal information on citizens. This information is then used by other governmental organizations, such as tax organizations and the police, To check the correctness of their own records.

This template distinguishes between mandatory and optional information for a specific crime. This information represents the knowledge used by the Public Prosecution to check completeness of a dossier - and provides the structure needed for automated completeness checks [7]. Certain information must always be included in a dossier, such as the suspect's personal data, and the original police report concerning an incident. Other information will only be mandatory for certain types of offences and/or suspects. In this particular example, independent of the crime for which the suspect has been accused, the suspect is a juvenile: according to Dutch law, a report by the Council for Child Welfare is mandatory. Other information, however, is optional. In this example, footage of the incident on the basis of which the suspect has been charged, recorded by a video surveillance camera, may be included. Note that a court case can only commence if all mandatory information is included in a dossier.

The document also contains a number of references, indicated by the 'ref:' keyword, to other documents and their source. In this example references local to the Public Prosecution (PP) are the suspect's original statement (ref:PP-00001statement.pdf) and the video evidence (ref:PP-00001-movie1.avi and ref:PP-00001-movie2.avi). References to XML documents to be provided by other organizations, in this example, include the (national) Council for Child Welfare (ref:CCW-234567) and the Municipal database of Amsterdam (ref:MuniDatAmsterdam-123456).

Figure 3 depicts the data to which the ref ref:MuniDatAmsterdam-123456 refers, the suspect's personal data as stored and maintained by the Municipality - in this case the Municipality of Amsterdam. For the sake of simplicity,

```

<Dossier>
  <MetaData>
    <Ref>PubProsAmsterdam-00001</Ref>
    <CreationDate>1-7-2007</CreationDate>
  <Offence>
    <Main>Shoplifting</Main>
    <Category>JuvenileRepeatOffender</Category>
  </Offence>
  <Access>
    <Read>1234,2345,3456,4567</Read>
    <Write>1234,4567</Write>
  </Access>
  ...
</MetaData>
<Records>
  <MandatoryInfo>
    <PersonalInfo>ref:MuniDatAmsterdam-123456</PersonalInfo>
    <ReportCCW>ref:CCW-234567</ReportCCW>
  ...
</MandatoryInfo>
  <OptionalInfo>
    <StatementSupect>ref:PP-00001statement.pdf</StatementSuspect>
    <Media>
      ref:PP-00001-movie1.avi,
      ref:PP-00001-movie2.avi
    </Media>
  ...
</OptionalInfo>
</Records>
</Dossier>

```

**Figure 2. Example Digital Dossier structure.**

this information is assumed to be stored in the same format as the XML document stored by the Public Prosecution. (Note also that if data is not provided in this format, wrapper agents can perform the necessary mappings).

The data depicted in Figure 3 states that this record may be read by *all* Dutch governmental organizations, but that only one employee, the employee of the Municipality of Amsterdam with identifier 09876, can alter the file. This is a policy that is controlled by the local organizations (the Municipality of Amsterdam). Note that although organizations are independent entities, they do not always have complete freedom in setting their own security policies. In certain cases they are legally obliged (by Dutch Law) to provide information to specific authorities on request. In other cases Dutch Law imposes restrictions on database access, e.g. due to privacy regulations. The ability to add/modify information is typically controlled by the organizations themselves. Note also that the information provided by the

```

<PersonalInfo>
  <MetaData>
    <Ref>MuniDataAmsterdam-123456</Ref>
    <CreationDate>05-08-1993</CreationDate>
    <Access>
      <Read>All</Read>
      <Write>09876</Write>
    </Access>
    ...
  </MetaData>
  <Records>
    <MandatoryInfo>
      <Name>
        <Surname>Jan</Surname>
        <FamilyName>Jansen</FamilyName>
      </Name>
      <DateOfBirth>02-08-1993</DateOfBirth>
      <Sex>Male</Sex>
      <Adress>...</Adress>
      ...
    </MandatoryInfo>
    <OptionalInfo></OptionalInfo>
  </Records>
</Dossier>

```

**Figure 3. Example of personal information stored at the municipal database.**

Municipality in the document depicted in Figure 3 again makes the distinction between mandatory and optional information without more detail. It could, although this is not shown in Figure 3, also have contained references to other documents, stored either locally or at another organization.

A distributed digital dossier thus consists of a number of documents in a networked structure distributed over physically distributed locations with a central coordinator. Note that digital dossiers always form the root of this network, i.e. digital dossiers are not included in (referenced from) other documents, unless the referring document is also a digital dossier. This ensures that digital dossiers themselves (e.g. as shown in Figure 2) are always controlled by the Public Prosecution, an important security requirement. The next section discusses the infrastructure used to link these documents together.

## 4.2. Multi Agent Systems

As described above, a distributed digital dossier is, in fact, a distributed XML document. The Public Prosecution maintains the defining document, multiple other organizations maintain the information for which they are responsible. Each of these organizations is assumed to have defined their own security policies. Nothing has, however, been said about the underlying technology. An infrastructure is needed to link the organizations together, making information exchange possible.

The multi-agent *paradigm* provides a conceptual modeling framework for such systems. Agents are pro-active, adapt to a changing world and can be mobile [8]. Agent systems have a conceptually clear model for autonomous systems that

supports modularity, security and scalability. Specific tasks can be implemented by dedicated agents, allowing for a clear separation of concerns and straightforward integration of new functionality as new agents.

Agent *technology* provides a means to implement large scale distributed autonomous systems [2]. Agents interact through message passing. Agents run on agent platforms. An agent platform is a dedicated middleware layer that provides the infrastructure, such as secure communication, resource management, mobility<sup>2</sup> and access control, for software agents. The agent platform middleware also ensures that multiple hosts within a location can be viewed as one logical unit, each with their own security policies.

The agent based architecture designed for the distributed digital dossier assumes that the agent locations are the organizations involved. Thus the Public Prosecution, the Municipal databases and the Council for Child Welfare (and all other organizations) are locations, each running their own agent platform middleware supporting their own organizational policies. Figure 4 shows schematically how the agent platforms are deployed:

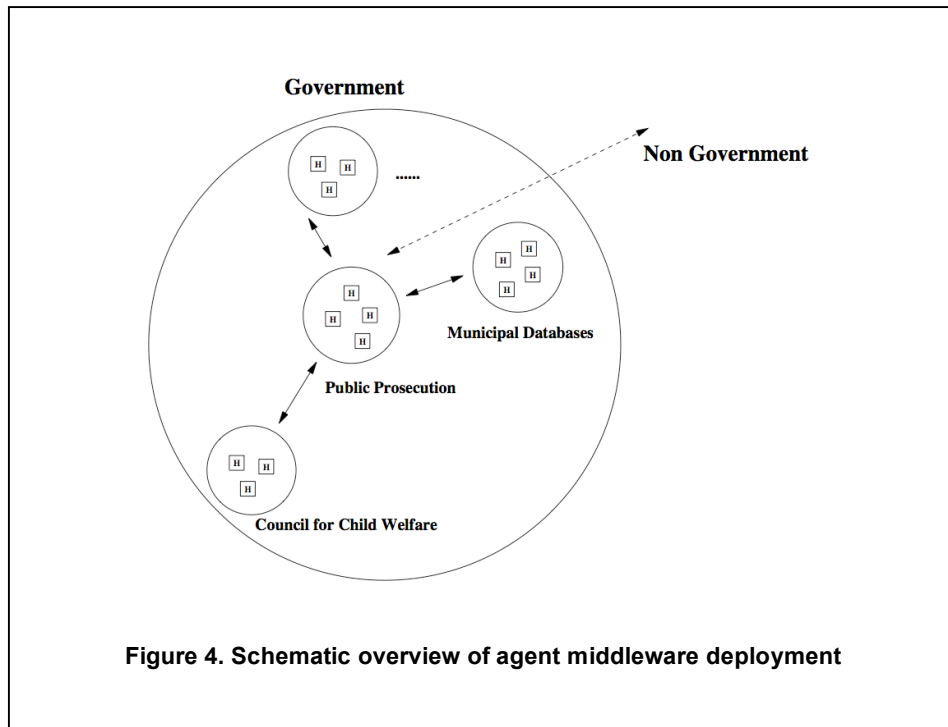


Figure 4. Schematic overview of agent middleware deployment

The agent platform middleware facilitates a uniform software layer across locations. Access to the digital dossier is also provided by this layer. For each location the part of the digital dossier that the organization controls will be accessible via the agent platform middleware, thus providing a distributed digital dossier.

Dedicated agents per organization access their parts of the dossier and keep information up-to-date. The Public Prosecution has agents for more complicated tasks such as completeness and consistency checking. Dedicated software agents perform such tasks as guarding consistency both within a source and between sources within the digital dossier, and notifying appropriate (human) parties when needed. With respect to completeness dedicated agents monitor the availability of necessary documents in the digital dossier. For instance, a trial cannot start if a copy of the original police report is not in the digital dossier. Software agents guard such completeness issues [7].

In a future design the mapping from a specific ontology at one organization to the shared ontology of the digital dossier will be done automatically. However, this is not the main focus of this paper and for now it is assumed that all (governmental) organizations share one common ontology.

### 4.3. Guarding Timeliness

<sup>2</sup> Not all agent systems allow migration of agents between hosts.

The design of the distributed digital dossier ensures that information will stay as up to date as possible. Agents, however, also perform many other functional tasks such as checking consistency or completeness, but also enforcing access control or handling automatic backups. An example of a functional task for which a dedicated agent provides a transparent implementation is that of guarding expiration dates. Specific to the domain of a Court of Law is the example of expiration of criminal files for juvenile offenders after they reach the age of 18. By Dutch law information provided by the Council for Child Welfare may not be used by the Public Prosecution (or any other organization for that matter) after the suspect turns 18, or after a period of 5 years, if no other offence has been committed.

Dedicated agents at the Public Prosecution guard the timeliness of information in the dossier. In the example of the juvenile repeat offender, the dedicated agent can remove (independently) the *reference* to the information stored at the Council of Child Welfare without human intervention, once the suspect turns 18 if all other constraints are fulfilled. The Public Prosecutor of the case and the Council for Child Welfare are notified that the information in the dossier can no longer be used. This ensures that the dossier stays up to date (does not contain information that can no longer be used), without actually deleting information (as only the reference is removed). The Council for Child Welfare can have its own (security) policy that states what needs to be done once information can no longer be used. This may well differ from the policies implemented by the Public Prosecution

#### 4.4. Security Policy

The sensitive nature of the information in a dossier makes security very important. Ensuring that only authorized persons are allowed to read/write/alter the dossier is clearly important, as are other security issues such as integrity of data, secure backups, accountability and privacy. All of these security issues are specified in a *security policy*: a document that explicitly states the restrictions posed on a system in order to make it secure. The security architecture proposed for the distributed digital dossier is based on the design in which (1) agents control all access to the digital dossier and (2) security policies are defined for each organization (each organization can use its own security policies).

Under normal circumstances<sup>3</sup>, all interactions with a dossier are performed via agents. Agents are bound to specific users/employees of the organizations involved. Thus, individual users have their own agent(s) to act on their behalf. A highly ranked legal clerk employed by the Public Prosecution, for example, may have an agent that has the right to change all information maintained by the Public Prosecution in the central digital dossier. Another clerk, employed by the Municipality of Amsterdam, may have an agent whose only task is to flag and communicate modifications to a suspect's data to the dossier's consistency agent at the Public Prosecution. This use of agents for access to the dossier is implicit, users are not continually aware of their agents' state. They interact with their agents through standard interfaces. The access control token of a user, such as the legal clerk, is a combination of a password and public key (X509) certificate. The agent uses the password and certificate to authenticate itself to the system, thereby also authenticating the user in whose behalf the agent acts. Agents can be linked to any legal entity, not just users of the system, but also organizations. The Public Prosecution can thus use its own agents. The mapping to a legal entity is however crucial, as it needs to be clear who is accountable for mistakes and/or malicious behavior. Agents are bound to a legal entity by signing the agents' code with the private key that corresponds with the users' public key certificates.

The other main security attribute is that each organization uses its own security policy. Security policies state rules for all security related issues. Some of these can be global, that is, for all organizations that provide information to the digital dossier. An example is the authentication described above: all users of the system have to use a combination of a password and certificate to authenticate themselves. Another example is the use of one shared lookup service that can be used to find individual agents within an agent system. However, most rules in the security policy are local: the local organization controls who has access to its files, but also which backup procedures is used, what the privacy policy regarding its data is, etc. This ensures that if the computer system of one organization is comprised the other organizations in the semi-open system are not at risk. In particular, as long as the computer system of the Public Prosecution is not compromised, the digital dossier can still be used. The computer systems of the Public Prosecution need to be trusted completely (for 100%). The lookup service, PKI service and authentication mechanism are all hosted by the Public Prosecution. If other systems are compromised the digital dossier is not necessarily effected. Automatic consistency checking, performed each time part of a dossier is altered, detects modifications. If these modifications are unwarranted, the original data may be restored. See [6] for a more detailed discussion of the security architecture designed for the distributed digital dossier.

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<sup>3</sup> System administrators can access the system manually, when necessary. Sometimes this is required, for example, when a backup copy needs to be replaced, or an operating system has to be upgraded.



## 4.5. Semi-open Systems

Information in a dossier comes from many different sources: the combined systems of the courts, the public prosecution, the police and all other parties together form a *semi-open system*. Not quite an open system, nor a completely closed system. An *open system* is a computer system that is configured to allow public access to outside parties. In contrast, a *closed system* only allows (partial) access to known authorized users and their agents. The systems involved in the compilation and maintenance of a digital dossier, are neither closed nor open: the system as a whole is *semi-open*. The rights of individual users are determined by each of the organizations separately. Each organization has its own security policy. The users and their agents do not have direct access to each others databases. Each individual organization is responsible for its own systems, and information provision. In this semi-open environment all systems are trusted and known.

Each of the organization's own computer systems can be seen as a closed systems. Only police officers can access the computer system used by the Police and only employees of the Public Prosecution can access (parts of) dossiers at the Public Prosecution. However, as all of these systems (can) exchange information, the network of systems is no longer a closed system. The characteristics of each site can vary considerably: they can have different procedures for access, reliability and/or security. For example, a Municipal Database that contains name and address information has other goals (and hence system characteristics) than a computer system used by the Council for Child Welfare that stores information on children. Thus the system as a whole constitutes an example of a semi-open system.

Semi-open systems are challenging for numerous reasons. The security policies in such a system cannot be too restrictive, because they also contain public information. Yet it is clear that the privacy sensitive information concerning criminal records and other personal information needs to be guarded as well [5]. Privacy sensitive data needs to be protected against malicious intent and at the same time less sensitive information needs to be made available to a larger public. Such systems generally tend to make *all* data harder to access, including the less sensitive information that can be of interest to a large public. This phenomenon is known as 'label creep' in literature [4]. Finding an optimal security policy in such a setting is domain dependant and will typically be a tradeoff between security and usability. It is important to keep the dual characteristic of such a system into mind when designing such a security policy.

## 5. Conclusions

Distributed digital dossiers have clear benefits for keeping data up to date and consistent across multiple organizations organized in semi-open environments without duplicating large dossiers continually. Organizations determine their own (local) security policies while still exchanging information in a transparent and efficient way. The added advantages of using agent systems in this setting include the option to transparently implement complex functional tasks such as monitoring, consistency, completeness and security with dedicated agents per organization.

Current work includes the implementation of a prototype system using the Public Prosecution's simulation environment, implementing different security policies for different organizations. From a legal perspective research focuses on analysis of legal constraints with respect to integration of the individual systems as determined by (Dutch) law. More research is needed to answer these and other questions.

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