

# Automating Trust Evaluation for Ensuring Information Quality

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**Abstract**—Modern warfare’s situation awareness and operation planning requires analyzing a vast amount of information, ranging broadly from intelligence reports to data from autonomous sensors. Correctly assessing the credibility of such information in a timely manner is as crucial to decision making as being able to obtain the information in the first place. However, manual information quality assessment is time-consuming and laborious, especially considering the amount of information that modern automated knowledge solutions can deliver.

In this paper, we present a novel trust framework called the Personalized Trust Framework (PTF), which can assist military analysts to automate their trust evaluation process, and, as a result, significantly lighten the burden of information quality assessment. In other words, it provides a mechanism for end users to capture their trust reasoning in order for it to be automated by computers. In particulars, a user can specify how he selects a trust model based on information about the subject whose trustworthiness he needs to evaluate and how that trust model is configured. This trust evaluation process is then automated by the PTF making use of the trust models that can be flexibly plugged into the PTF by the user. By so doing, the PTF enable users to reuse and to personalize existing trust models to suit their requirements without having to reprogram them. Finally, this paper demonstrates a simple application of the PTF in automated credibility evaluation to ensure information quality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Modern warfare’s situation awareness and operation planning requires analyzing a vast amount of information, ranging broadly from intelligence reports to data from autonomous sensors. In addition, the advent of network-enabled capabilities and the growth of the Internet as a medium for information dissemination have made much more information from external agencies accessible to military analysts than it has hitherto been possible. This is a boon but also a burden. It is a boon because more information potentially affords better situation awareness. It is a burden because military analysts will have to cope with the ever increasing quantity of information. One of the challenges is that not every piece of information obtained is useful. Information content may vary with respect to a number of information quality criteria (e.g. accuracy, relevance, usability, etc.) [1]. Not all information providers are qualified to provide information; neither are their information offerings always benign. These issues are particularly important in competitive decision-making contexts where there is a strong possibility of adversarial agencies disseminating false or misleading information in an effort to

subvert friendly decision making processes. With the ever-increasing availability of information, ensuring information quality becomes a great challenge since manual assessment is time-consuming and laborious. Hence, there needs to be an automated solution for information quality assessment to cope with the increased workload.

Quality assessment of a piece of information can be broadly divided into two sub-problems: evaluating the trustworthiness of the information provider and examining the validity of the information itself. The former aims to evaluate the credibility of the information from assessing the information provider in various aspects such as its reliability (e.g. the error margin of a sensor), its motives (e.g. how willing the provider is to reveal the information honestly), and so on. The latter is concerned with the logic and the factuality of the information content. For example, an analyst can corroborate the new facts provided with his domain knowledge and previously confirmed facts to derive how likely the new information is true. Automating this task requires a computer be able to fully understand the facts presented in the information. However, as the majority of information exchanged nowadays is typically unstructured and has no well-defined semantics, this requirement is usually infeasible with current technologies (particularly when the knowledge domain concerned is unconstrained and has no clear boundary). Therefore, in this paper, we focus on the former sub-problem: to automate trust evaluation of information providers.

Trust research in computer science has recently generated numerous computational trust models (see [2] and [3] for some examples). The main goal of these models is typically to capture the trust dynamics in human societies and replicate it (along with its benefits) in computer environments. In other words, they aim to automate the human trust evaluation process by delegating this task to computers. Despite the abundance of available trust models, their adoption has been limited. The main reason is that existing trust models typically make assumptions about the availability of particular types of information they require (for their evaluation) and, as a result, do not generalize well to a different application domain than those they were designed for. Therefore, although some might work well within their target domains, none of them is ready for generic applications. Such limitation is understandable (and expected). Trust models are domain dependent because

they rely on various information about the trust subjects—the entities whose trustworthiness is being evaluated—which varies with different types of subject and is typically unique within a particular application domain. For instance, evaluating the trustworthiness of a sensor requires the examination of (significantly) different genres of information than those when evaluating the trustworthiness of an online news agency. In addition, trust, by nature, is subjective [4], and even for the same application, each person has their own view about how trust should be modeled in that application’s domain. Therefore, mainstream users have yet to adopt existing trust models (with the exception of very simplistic models like eBay’s [5]) since they cannot adapt a computational trust model to sufficiently match their mental ones (i.e. change its behavior) without resorting to re-programming it. This is cumbersome and requires the end users to understand the internal working of particular trust models. In addition, different trust models use different trust representations that are an inherent part of their mathematical underpinnings. Some examples are: trust labels (e.g. very trustworthy, trustworthy, untrustworthy, very untrustworthy [6]), scalar numbers (e.g. a real number in  $[-1, 1]$  [7]), probability density function [8], etc. An end user might not be familiar with any of these variants except the one that his organization has already been using. Therefore, results produced by trust models, where possible, should be converted into a customized representation that can be accepted and shared by end users from a particular organization.

Against this background, in this paper, we present a novel framework called the *Personalized Trust Framework* (PTF) that facilitates the utilization of existing trust models by allowing different trust models to be flexibly plugged into the framework and customized by end users. The PTF provides a number of notable capabilities. First, it enables end users to control the trust evaluation process by defining which trust models will be used in which circumstances and in what ways. Second, end users can define their own trust value representation and how trust values of a different representation are automatically converted to theirs. Third, all such user personalization is stored in a *trust profile*, which can be easily transferred to other users for reuse. Customizations to the trust evaluation can be made via editing the trust profile without having to reprogram the PTF. Finally, in addition to the above, despite the high automation of trust evaluation afforded by the PTF, end users will still maintain a degree of control over the process. For example, they can trace how an automated trust decision was arrived at by examining its provenance recorded by the PTF. The framework will also notify the users of any abnormality (for example when it cannot produce a reliable trust value) and prompt for user intervention in order to correct this.

For the purpose of illustrating the design and concepts of the PTF in this paper, we will discuss the application of the PTF for the problem of evaluating the credibility of intelligence information by military analysts. The PTF is particularly suitable for this problem because the variety of intelligence information (e.g. open-source intelligence, human intelligence, and signal

intelligence) requires different approaches to trust evaluation depending on the type of information being evaluated. In this particular domain, information reliability is rated using the Intelligence Source Reliability rating [9], which uses labels from *A* to *F* to denote the reliability of the intelligence source. *A* means ‘Reliable’, *B* ‘Usually reliable’, *C* ‘Fairly reliable’, *D* ‘Not usually reliable’, *E* ‘Unreliable’, and *F* ‘Cannot be judged’.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section II introduces the PTF and its components. Section III then discusses related work. Finally, Section IV concludes the paper and outlines potential future work.

## II. THE PERSONALIZED TRUST FRAMEWORK

As introduced in the previous section, the PTF is designed to automate the trust evaluation process by providing a mechanism for human users to capture their trust reasoning process in order for it to be automated by computers. The focus of this paper is, therefore, on developing such a mechanism, not on trust modeling (which has already been the focus of much research recently). Hence, it is assumed that end users will provide the trust models they want to automate (which can be selected from the many available models, such as those reviewed in [2] and [3]) and plug them into the PTF in real-world applications. At a more detailed level, the PTF aims to address the following issues:

- How a user can define his trust model selection strategy, i.e. matching a trust subject to be evaluated with a suitable trust model.
- How an arbitrary trust model can be instantiated and used by the framework.
- How trust values of different representations can be transformed into a common representation.

In order to cater a wide range of applications, the PTF makes extensive use of semantic web technologies (like ontology-based representation and reasoning) [10], which allow information to be represented in a machine-understandable format, to enable the PTF’s information processing capabilities to be extensible to any application domain. More details on this will be provided in the subsequent sections.

In the next section, we present how trust evaluation is carried out in the PTF (Section II-A). We will then discuss about the main components of the PTF: the Trust Manager (Section II-B), converters (Section II-C), and trust engines (Section II-D). Since trust evaluation may have a significant impact on critical military decisions, Section II-E shows how the provenance of every trust decision is recorded for future auditing.

### A. An Overview of the PTF

The PTF makes use of existing trust models to evaluate the trustworthiness of trust subjects sent to it. In the context of intelligence information, a trust subject is a piece of information that needs to be evaluated to determine its reliability. For the sake of simplicity, we will subsequently be using the term “*document*” to refer to any piece of information to be assessed

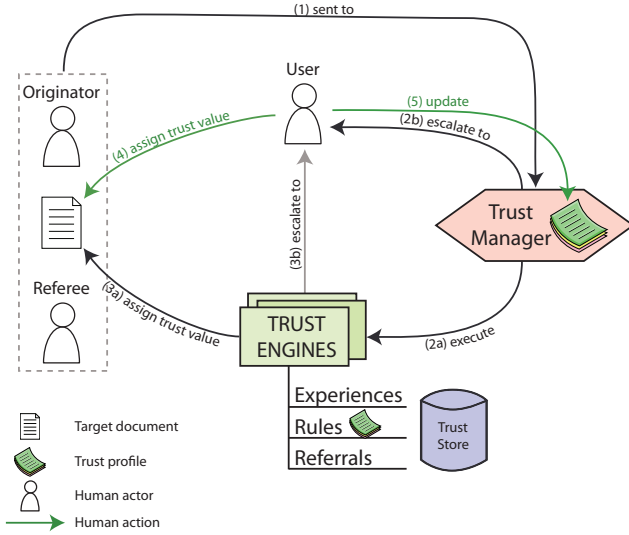


Fig. 1. The trust evaluation process by PTF.

independently by the framework. The PTF is controlled by a software component called the *Trust Manager*, which oversees the trust evaluation work flow in the framework (Figure 1). The normal flow of execution is as follows:

- 1) A document is sent to the Trust Manager along with its meta-data (1), such as its document type, content type, originator, referee, etc.
- 2) The Trust Manager matches the document's meta-data with its trust profile to determine a suitable trust model to be used. A corresponding trust engine—an implementation of the selected trust model—is initialized with appropriate parameters as specified by the trust profile. The engine then evaluates the document's trustworthiness (2a).
- 3) The selected trust engine, depending on which trust model it implements, will derive the trust value of the document from its meta-data using rules, from previous experiences with its provider, or from referrals from trusted sources. The trust value is then returned back to the main application (3a).

This normal flow is automated without human intervention. However, if the Trust Manager detects exceptions in the process, it will notify the user. The main exceptions are: the Trust Manager cannot select a trust model based on the policy in its trust profile (2b), when it receives a document of an unknown type, for instance; and the selected trust engine is not confident that it produced a reliable trust evaluation (3b), for example when it has no information, or too little information, for its evaluation. The user can then examine the document and decide on its trustworthiness (4). Where possible, the user can also add new rules or update the ones in his trust profile so that the Trust Manager will know how to deal with similar cases in the future (5).

As mentioned above, semantic technologies allow the PTF to be extensible to new types of information without limitation.

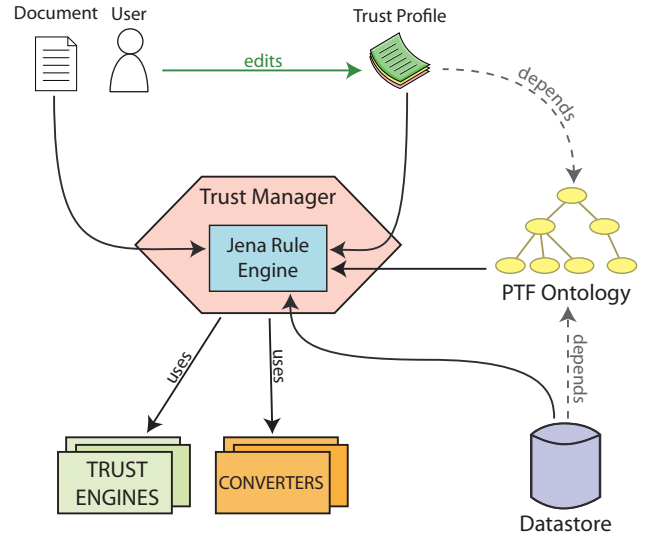


Fig. 2. The PTF's components.

This is achievable thanks to the central role of the *PTF ontology*, which defines the building blocks of the PTF and provides the core language elements for specifying trust profiles. The PTF ontology is represented in OWL<sup>1</sup>. New concepts (described in OWL) that are extended from, or can be mapped to, those in the PTF ontology are automatically supported by the PTF (hence its unlimited extensibility). The PTF ontology will be introduced in part along with the corresponding PTF components in the subsequent sections.

### B. The Trust Manager

The PTF's Trust Manager is responsible for coordinating the trust evaluation process according to the policy in a trust profile provided by end users (see the relationships of the Trust Manager with the other PTF components in Fig. 2). The trust profile is described in OWL using the concepts provided by the PTF ontology. Essentially, it contains a set of rules specifying how documents sent to the Trust Manager are classified and which trust engines are used to evaluate those documents. It also contains concepts (i.e. OWL classes) of the information domain concerned, enabling the Trust Manager to understand information fed to it from that domain. In order to execute the rules specified in the trust profile, the Trust Manager uses the Jena Rule Engine<sup>2</sup> [13]. It operates broadly as follows (see

<sup>1</sup>OWL Web Ontology Language: a standard of the World Wide Web Consortium, <http://www.w3.org/TR/owl-ref/>.

<sup>2</sup>JENA is a popular open-source Semantic Web Framework for Java. It provides libraries for working semantic web data (e.g. RDF and OWL) in various ways. For more details, see [11]. In the reference implementation of the PTF, the Jena Rule Engine is used because it supports both OWL entailments and reasoning on generic rules in one single engine with reasonable performance. As a result, we must use the Jena's rule format for writing rules. From our review, SWRL [12], an emerging rule language standard for semantic web (submitted to the World Wide Web consortium in 2004), offers better expressivity and simplicity than Jena's rule format. However, SWRL's reasoning support has yet sufficiently matured for our reasoning requirements and, thus, we decided to use Jena rule engine until a better candidate emerges.

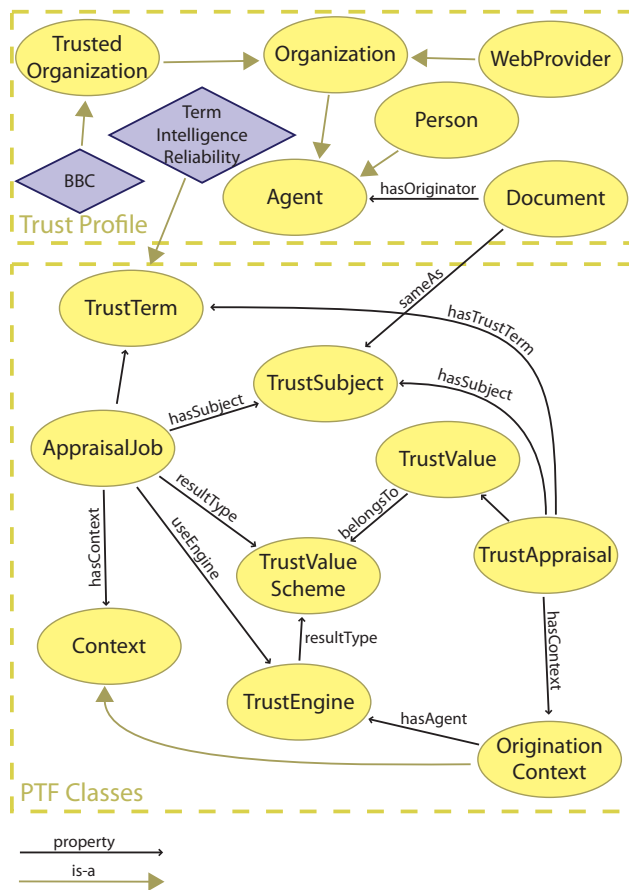


Fig. 3. The PTF ontology's main classes.

Fig. 3 for the PTF ontology's classes that are referenced in italics):

- 1) Initially, the Trust Manager loads the PTF ontology and the trust profile into the rule engine. It then connects the rule engine with the Datastore, a RDF triple store containing all the knowledge that the system has recorded.
- 2) For each document sent to the Trust Manager, it loads the document's metadata into the rule engine for reasoning against the rules in the trust profile and the knowledge in the Datastore.
- 3) If the reasoning process results in one or more new trust evaluation jobs (stored in an instance of the *AppraisalJob* class), the Trust Manager loads the relevant instances of the *TrustEngine* class (see Section II-D for more details) and sends the jobs to those engines.
- 4) The results, in the form of instances of the *TrustAppraisal* class, will be returned to the main application.

In order to illustrate the process above, consider a scenario where online news articles (as open-source intelligence) are collected and evaluated on their reliability using the Intelligence Source Reliability rating. In this scenario, each *Document* instance represents an online news article. The meta-data accompanying a *Document* contains only the URL (i.e. the web address) of the original article. For instance, we have the

following documents:

URI	<i>hasURL</i>
demo:DocBBC1	news.bbc.co.uk/1/.../7219312.stm
demo:DocAJ1	english.aljazeera.net/...925381.html

In the trust profile, we define the classes *Agent*, *Organization*, *Person*, and *WebProvider*, and a property *hasOriginator* (see Fig. 3), allowing us to represent the fact that a document is originated from an agent, which can be a person, an organization, or a web provider. The trust profile also has a number of instances of *Organization* class: *BBC*, *Al\_Jazeera*. In addition, each organization has a property called *hasURLPattern* to store the pattern of the addresses of web pages published by it. For classifying the documents in this scenario, three rules are added to the trust profile:

- 1) *Rule\_ClassifyWebProviders*:

```
(?org rdf:type ptf:Organization)
(?org ptf:hasURLPattern ?pattern)
→ (?org rdf:type ptf:WebProvider)
```

This rule, written in the Jena's rule format, states that if an organization `?org` has the property *hasURL-*Pattern** asserted then `?org` is an instance of the class *WebProvider*. From now on, for the sake of simplicity, we will only explain what a rule does and omit the rule's (usually lengthy) definition in Jena's rule syntax.

- 2) *Rule\_URLPatternOriginator*: If the URL of a document matches an organization's URL pattern then the document must have been originated from that organization.
- 3) *Rule\_WebDocumentEngineSelector*: If a document was originated by a *WebProvider* then create an *AppraisalJob* to evaluate the document on the *Term\_Intelligence\_Reliability* using the engine *WebProviderRuleBased-Engine* and the job must return a trust value from the scheme *Intelligence\_Reliability\_Rating* (see Fig. 4).

With these three rules, when *DocBBC1* is sent to the Trust Manager, it can infer that the document was originated from BBC (Rule 2) and BBC is a *WebProvider* (Rule 1). Since *DocBBC1* was originated from a *WebProvider*, an *AppraisalJob* called *DocBBC1Job* is created for the document to be evaluated by *WebProviderRuleBaseEngine* (Fig. 4). In the PTF, trust subjects are evaluated not on the general trustworthiness (which is an ambiguous term), but on a specific trust term. For instance, the third rule above specifies that the document will be evaluated on its intelligence reliability (*TermIntelligenceReliability*), which is a custom *TrustTerm* defined in the trust profile. Hence, with the PTF, end users can flexibly define different trust terms according to their needs and a document can have multiple trust values on different trust terms (e.g. honesty, cooperativeness, and so on).

### C. Converters

In addition to trust terms, the *AppraisalJob* in the previous section also specifies the expected type of the trust value, namely *IntelligenceReliabilityRating*. Since the *WebProviderRuleBaseEngine* happens to produce trust values of the type required (see Fig. 4). The resultant trust value can be returned to the main application immediately. However, in the case that

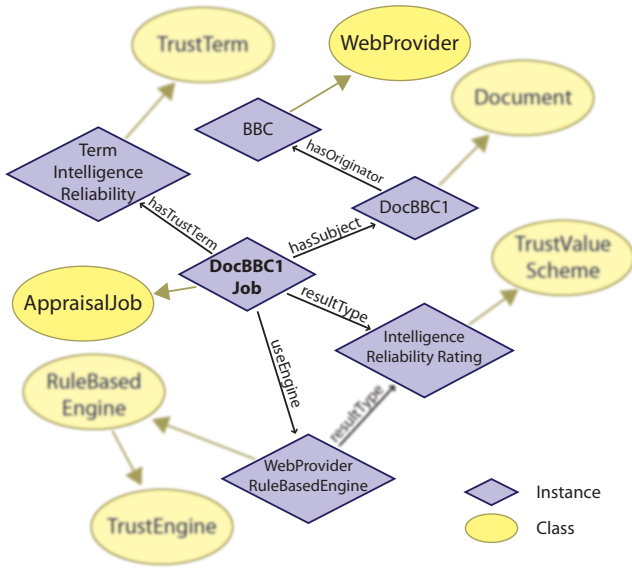


Fig. 4. *DocBBC1Job*: an instance of *AppraisalJob* generated by the Trust Manager (with the new relationships/facts highlighted).

a trust engine does not produce trust values in the required representation, the Trust Manager will look for a suitable converter in the trust profile, and if it finds one, it will execute the converter to transform the resultant trust value into the required representation. If no suitable converter is available, the Trust Manager will raise an exception and prompt for user intervention. Therefore, end users should define necessary converters in the trust profile to enable seamless trust evaluation.

In the PTF, converters can be defined using Jena rules. For example, consider the FIRE trust model which produces scalar trust values in the range  $[-1, +1]$ , where  $-1$  means absolutely negative,  $+1$  means absolutely positive, and  $0$  means neutral. To translate a trust value using FIRE's scalar representation to the Intelligence Reliability rating, we define a converter in the trust profile with rules such as "if the FIRE scalar value is greater than or equal to  $0.25$  and less than  $0.75$  then the Intelligence Reliability rating is B."

In cases where Jena rules are not sufficiently expressive for the required complex conversion calculations (e.g. converting from a probability density function as used in [8]), a custom Java class can be provided with its class name registered in the trust profile. The Trust Manager will load the Java class when the converter is required and the custom Java class will be responsible for the conversion.

#### D. Trust Engines

Having created appraisal jobs for incoming documents, the Trust Manager puts the jobs into a queue and executes them independently. For each job, it loads the specified trust engine and sends the job to the engine. A trust engine is identified by a unique URI<sup>3</sup>, for example the URI for the *WebProviderRuleBasedEngine* is `ptf:WebProviderRuleBased`

<sup>3</sup>A Uniform Resource Identifier (URI) is a string of characters used to identify a resource on the Internet.

Engine. The URI is used to locate the trust engine's specification in the trust profile, which helps the Trust Manager know how to build the engine when required. After a trust engine is successfully executed, it produces an instance of the class *TrustAppraisal* which contains links to the target document, the resultant trust value, the trust term on which the document was evaluated, and a confidence value. The confidence value reflects the reliability of the trust value as judged by the trust engine and is calculated in different ways, depending on the particular trust model used. The Trust Manager uses this confidence value to determine if the resultant trust value can be returned to the main application immediately or a user decision is needed (based on a preset threshold).

In the PTF, a trust engine is typically provided in a Java class. A *TrustEngine* instance in the trust profile then provides the link to the Java class of the corresponding engine, allowing the Trust Manager to load the engine when required. An exception to this is the class *RuleBasedTrustEngine*, a special sub-class of *TrustEngine*. Trust engines of this class use rules to derive trust values and rely on the Trust Manager's rule engine for reasoning capabilities. When building such engines, the Trust Manager simply loads their rules directly from the trust profile. Hence, the class *RuleBasedTrustEngine* allows end users to build simple trust engines in their trust profiles very quickly. For example, in our evaluation, the *WebProviderRuleBasedEngine* is built from the following two Jena rules:

- 1) *Rule\_TrustedOrgDefault*: If a document originated from an organization of the class *TrustedOrganization* then its Intelligence Reliability rating is B (i.e. 'usually reliable') and the confidence value of this assessment is  $0.5$ .
- 2) *Rule\_UnknownOrgDefault*: If a document was originated from an unknown organization (i.e. not in the class *TrustedOrganization*) then its Intelligence Reliability rating is F (i.e. 'cannot be judged') and the confidence value of this assessment is  $0.5$ .

Since we asserted in our trust profile that only the BBC is a *TrustedOrganization* (Fig. 3), the execution of *WebProviderRuleBasedEngine* on the sample documents in Section II-B will give rating B to *DocBBC1* and rating F for *DocAJ1*, a simple and quick classification based on the documents' URLs.

In addition to the above, the PTF ontology also allows users to define composite trust engines (class *CompositeEngine*) that produce trust values by combining the results of two or more trust engines (which can even be composite themselves) in some way. For example, in our reference implementation, we defined a trust engine called *MaxConfidenceEngine*, which executes the *WebProviderRuleBasedEngine* and the *FIREEngine* (using the FIRE model) on the same document and selects the result which has the highest confidence value. By so doing, the *MaxConfidenceEngine* always has a trust value produced by the simpler *WebProviderRuleBasedEngine* as a backup in the cases where the more sophisticated *FIREEngine* cannot find sufficient evidence to produce a reliable trust value. The possible way of combining different engines are unlimited.



### E. Auditing

Since automated trust evaluations may have a significant impact to critical decisions (in military operation planning, for example), from time to time, end users will need to know how certain trust values were produced. In the PTF, this is captured using the class *OriginationContext*. Each *TrustAppraisal* instance produced by the PTF is accompanied with an *OriginationContext* instance that records the minimum following information<sup>4</sup>:

- Subject: the link to the *TrustAppraisal* concerned.
- Timestamp: when the evaluation was carried out.
- Agent: the link to the trust engine used (and that to the converter if the original trust value was converted).
- Originator: the link to the original *AppraisalJob* that led to the *TrustAppraisal* concerned.

In addition to providing a way for end users to trace back the trust evaluation of a particular document, the information in an *OriginationContext* instance can be useful for other information management purposes. For example, when a user updates one of his trust engines, trust appraisals produced by that engine can become outdated or invalidated. The context associated with those appraisals can help to flag documents with outdated trust appraisals when they are presented to the user.

### III. RELATED WORK

An automated trust framework that allows trust models of different types to be used together and allows user personalization to the trust evaluation process is a novel idea that has not been investigated in the current literature. However, a number of the PTF's components have some similarities with existing work in other areas. First, the problem of rules/policy-based management has been studied extensively in various work (see [14]), whose focus is mainly on how to apply rules and regulations on various processes (e.g. identity authentication, access rights, obligations). The PTF's Trust Manager, however, uses rules as an extensible means to replicate a human's reasoning process (in selecting a suitable trust model). The idea of using rules for deriving trust (i.e. *RuleBasedTrustEngine*) is not new in trust research. Nevertheless, it is usually considered rather simplistic (and too domain-dependent) and, as a result, most of trust research has not rigorously investigated this approach. We agree with this view, but still provide *RuleBasedTrustEngine* in the PTF because it provides a simple and useful tool for normal users who are typically not extensively familiar with available computational trust models. Such an approach can also work well in combination with more sophisticated trust models (using our composite engines, as shown in the previous section).

In [15], a taxonomy was developed for different types of reputation (a form of trust value) representation. It also defined a number of conversion functions to facilitate reputation information exchange between different trust models.

<sup>4</sup>A trust engine can add extra contextual information to the *OriginationContext* of a trust appraisal where applicable.

This work has similarity with the converters in the PTF. The main difference is that the conversion functions developed in their work target computational trust models while the PTF's converters aim to consolidate different trust representation into a common, human-defined representation. The work in [15] can serve as a reference for developing PTF's converters, but it cannot replace the end user's role in this task.

### IV. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented the PTF, a novel approach to trust evaluation automation to support information quality assessment. It is unique in providing mechanisms for end users to flexibly define trust engines and to plug in existing trust models to suit their trust evaluation requirements. Trust profiles in the PTF allow end users to capture their reasoning process in trust model selection (and controlling the trust evaluation in general), in addition to capturing domain knowledge, and enable computers to automate the process. Moreover, with the use of semantic technologies, the PTF is extensible to any information domain and application. Despite being designed to be automated, the PTF still provides ways for end users to audit its trust evaluation process. It will also notify the users of any anomalies and prompt for their interventions. The users thus still play an important role in this process by making decisions about trust and actively improving their trust profiles, but only when this is necessary. By doing all the above, the most important contribution of the PTF, perhaps, is that it paves the way for existing computational trust models to get closer to mainstream adoption.

The PTF is a complex framework, which can benefit from improvements in a number of areas. First, editing trust profiles is currently carried out by ontology editors, which are, inherently, not tailored for the PTF. Therefore, we plan to develop intuitive user interfaces that enable end users to rapidly and efficiently create personalized trust evaluation profiles. Second, we will investigate further the reuse of trust profiles. An example reuse scenario can be as follows: (1) an organization uses a default trust profile to bootstrap its members' PTF; (2) each member improves their trust profile when prompted for decisions by their PTF; (3) the improvements (i.e. emerging trust evaluation practice) can then be analyzed and incorporated back into the organization-wide trust profile. Finally, reasoning over a large dataset stored in a database back-end (by the Trust Manager) performs poorly as a result of the vast numbers of database interactions involved. This is an open research problem that is not particular to the PTF but affects its performance nevertheless. On this front, we are exploring a number of caching strategies that selectively load only a relatively small set of relevant data to computer memory (before a trust subject is evaluated) for a significant improvement of the reasoning performance yet the correctness of the reasoning is still maintained.

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