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Creating the academic library folksonomy

Put social tagging to work at your institution

Suppose you are starting to research a current topic—wikis in the library or new developments in electronic resources management, perhaps. You have some current books on the subject and have printed a few articles off the library databases. But much of the most current information is on the Internet, in blogs and news articles, or maybe on the sites of libraries that have implemented the technology you are investigating. You bookmark the sites you find, but soon your bookmark list is huge. You research from home and from work and you can't always find the site you bookmarked yesterday. Was it on your work computer? Are you really finding all the sites that you need for your research? Can Google really find everything you want?

What if you could store these bookmarks somewhere online? Then you could access them anywhere and not have to search through an endless drop-down menu on your browser. What if you could see what other people are reading on your topic? You could find new and unexpected directions for your research. Welcome to social tagging.

Bringing social tagging into the library

Social tagging is a relatively new phenomenon that allows an individual to create bookmarks (or "tags") for Web sites and save them online. These tags include subject keywords chosen by the user and often a brief description of the site. Sites like del.icio.us allow users to share these tags and discover new Internet resources through common subject headings. The resulting collaboration is called a *folksonomy*—a taxonomy created by ordinary folks. In a way, this technology is making users

create their own controlled vocabulary and assign subject headings to each Web site they visit. If we are already making classifiers out of ordinary people, why not bring social tagging into the library?

The library is meant for discovery of information, through the catalog, through the reference librarian, through browsing a shelf. This discovery often stalls at the Internet because it is frustratingly uncatalogable. But still many students turn to the Internet as a resource, without guidance and without a critical eye. What if the library could provide an index to quality Internet resources, created by the librarians at the institution? Sites on specific topics related to classes currently in session could be tagged for the benefit of students. Librarians and faculty working in a subject area could immediately and easily share sites they find. Tagging can also be used for articles in licensed databases as long as the person who creates the tag and the person who attempts to access the site connect through the institutional proxy server.

Another advantage of social tagging is bringing the "gray literature" to light. Much valuable online information created by experts and scholars cannot be found easily. Students, for example, may have a hard time finding these resources if they are not connected to the associations or scholarly networks that share this literature. Tags created by curators, who do have access to the scholarly network, allow

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students to find gray literature that can vastly deepen their understanding of a topic.

Social tagging sites

A few libraries are trying out social tagging: the University of Pennsylvania (UP) was one of the first library adopters with its PennTags (tags.library.upenn.edu/). The site allows UP students, faculty, and staff to bookmark quality Web sites and records in UP's online catalog and share these resources with others. Additionally UP users can create and share "projects" or groups of links on a single site named for the topic.

PennTags is a site dedicated to academic tagging, but this technology can also be incorporated into an existing library Web presence. Stanford University is also experimenting with social tagging, in order to educate patrons about the library's resources and to provide a platform for curators to identify quality external Web sites. Instead of a standalone tagging site, the open source content management software Drupal (drupal.org/) forms the base for Stanford's Information Center site, which also includes wiki and blog modules. From there, the designers have added a del.icio.us module that allows users to find tags organized by subject.

While del.icio.us is one of the best known tagging sites, there are others to consider, including some that emphasize the academy. A social tagging site that is intended for the academic environment is Connotea (www.connotea.org/). As the site is intended for "researchers, clinicians, and scientists," Connotea has the added feature of pulling bibliographic information from major scientific sites (like PubMed) and adding it to your tag. CiteULike (www.citeulike.org/) is also aimed at the academic user and also captures the bibliographic metadata to store with the tag. CiteULike does place an added control on tags by only publicizing links from recognized peer-reviewed journals. A user can have any site bookmarked in a personal library, but the link will not appear on the rest of the site. This allows for some control against low-quality content but narrows the pool of information for scholars to discover.

Creating content for your library's Web site

So you want to try social tagging in your library. It was useful for your own research, and you can see that it would be a significant added service for your patrons. You've chosen the software, and you have found a niche for it in your library's Web site. Now how do you create content? You may want to start with the subject specialists at your library who can identify the best Web resources in their subject areas and tag them. There are a few ways to build content collaboratively, none of which is completely streamlined. Del.icio.us allows you to forward links to another user, meaning that a curator who created his or her own account can forward links to the main library site. This requires a Webmaster who can then move these links onto the library's del.icio.us homepage.

Alternatively, you can give subject specialists the password for the library's account. If librarians without specific subject knowledge have the responsibility to choose and tag resources, they can mine sites like the Librarians' Internet Index (lii.org) or the *C&RL News* Internet Resources columns (www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/internetresources.htm). These sites provide quick ways to fill out your site with quality Web sites to get the program off the ground and show its value to the library community.

There are, of course, a few risks and issues to consider when implementing social tagging in your library, especially if the site is open for all library patrons to update. One is the wonderfully named *spagging,* or spam tagging. Users with bad intentions can tag unsuitable sites for their own profit or simply to create havoc. Another issue is the inevitable variation in tags and the varied degree of user understanding of how to choose keywords. Is it englishliterature, english_literature, english, literature, or books? Should a library control the vocabulary or allow a true folksonomy take shape? We are classifiers by nature, are we ready to give up the reins? If we are, we can provide the beginnings of a guide for our users through the jungle of the Internet. ✍