It's a Tag, Tag, Tag, Tag World

The right to, and manner of, determining, declaring, and sharing information about the "aboutness" of all types of digital objects appear to be undergoing a fundamental transformation. It's difficult to tell if a renaissance of controlled-subject vocabularies, tagging, and subject cataloging is in the offing, or if the recent developments signal the death knell of the methods of determining the aboutness of an information object that we all learned in library school. Tagging, in particular, and the social Web, in general, *could* have a major impact on how digital libraries evolve.

Two pieces of evidence of this revolution in progress are offered for your consideration.

The BSTF Report

The first is the December 2005 Final Report of the Bibliographic Services Task Force (BSTF) of the University of California Libraries. In the Recommendation III.2c part of "Rethinking How We Provide Bibliographic Services for the University of California" it states: "Consider using controlled vocabularies only for name, uniform title, date, and place, and abandoning the use of controlled vocabularies [LCSH, MESH, etc.] for the topical subjects in bibliographic records. Consider whether automated enriched data, such as TOC, indexes, become surrogates for the subject headings and classification for retrieval."

The report goes on to say that, in the digital world where direct access to the full content usually is just a click away, metadata standards that emphasize retrieval are more useful than descriptive cataloging practices.

The task force, comprised of five librarians, was split on this issue. In the report, the minority opinion expressed that there's some value in topical subject headings assigned by trained professionals using controlled-subject vocabularies, especially for large collections containing multiple languages.

Notice that the report writers *do not go so far* as to suggest that actual document users should have an opportunity to suggest a word or phrase that captures the aboutness of the document, nor do they suggest that users should be offered the opportunity to vote on previously proffered words and phrases.

(A PDF of the BSTF's Final Report is available via Karen G. Schneider's January 16, 2006, ALA TechSource Blog post, "The Revolution Will be Folksonomied," at www.techsource.ala.org/blog/2006/01/the-revolution-will-be-folksonomied.html.)

An Online Ecosystem

The second piece of evidence is the recent launch of TagWorld. TagWorld tries to improve upon groundbreaking applications, such as Flickr and del.icio.us, to release the masses' pent-up impulses to tag and share digital content. TagWorld, a privately held company founded in July 2005, describes itself as an "online ecosystem" and sees the five essential ingredients for the social Web as: people, photos, blogs, tags, and storage. As of late in the day on January 25, there were 565,000 inhabitants of this ecosystem. According to an

Tag *from previous page*

article about TagWorld in the February 7 issue of *PC Magazine*, each registrant gets 1 GB of free space, with an option to lease additional space. In mid-January TagWorld added a video feature, presumably as the sixth essential feature.

Advertisements are the main revenue generator for TagWorld. To get a sense of this new tag mentality, consider this quote from the FAQ on the TagWorld site: "Tags are an awesome way to search for things you are interested in. So if you do a photo search for concerts, you will see results from people who tagged their photo as concert. As more people tag, the more useful and interesting the

world becomes. So stop asking questions and start tagging."

In the dawning era of diverse online communities, myriad digital documents, and variegated tagging systems, who has the authority—or who should have, but that just begs the question: Who has the authority to *grant* the authority?—to articulate, and profess for all to read and

use, the subject(s) of each digital document? Authors, distributors, aggregators, indexers, librarians, experts in the discipline, and even end-users all could take a stab at this. Why not everyone?

Then let each user decide if and how they want to filter the use and display of tags along various parameters—the education, socio-economic status, nationality, age, sex of the tagging population, for example.

A Problem for Everyone Else?

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and summarize the overall or essential aboutness of the digital object they are tagging. For example, if a tagger spots something of interest in a digital object, the tagger will want to tag that object with a word or phrase so that others interested in that same topic will know that something about it is contained therein. The tagger will do this even if

the topic of interest contributes *only in a very minor way* to the summative aboutness of the digital object considered as a whole.

This potential problem also could be understood as one of the strengths of the emerging tag, tag, tag, tag world, because, when someone is searching for information contained in digital documents, he or she is not only trying to understand the aboutness of the documents brought to his or her attention, but is also trying to find as many unique instances of discussions of the topic of interest across the entire document landscape.

Another potential problem with widespread folk-tagging is that tags can become cliquish (not the same as clickish) and exclusionary. To take an example from librarianship, the tag "L2" will mean "Library 2.0" to the library-tech cognoscenti. For all others, it could mean just about anything imaginable, from a spreadsheet cell to a terrorist cell.

Looks like we're going to need a wiki just to contain all of the definitions and scope notes for all the tagging schemes that are sprouting up like mushrooms in a hothouse.—*Tom Peters*

Contact: www.techsource.ala.org/ blog/2006/01/the-revolution-will -be-folksonomied.html
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