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Folksonomies and the Information Professional

LIS 5033: Information and the Knowledge Society

October 23, 2016

## Folksonomies and the Information Professional

Folksonomies, also known as user-generated or social tagging classification systems, exist in many different online spaces, including in library catalogs (Pescoskie, Spiteri, and Taruilli 2014) and other online platforms such as the gaming system Steam (Windlehearth et al., 2016). *Introduction to Information Science* presents the concept of folksonomy as a system “whereby internet materials, such as web pages, photographs, videos, and catalogue records for books, are freely indexed by users” (Bawden and Robinson 2012, 124). Information professionals need to be familiar with the growing usage of folksonomies in order to be able to take advantage of the potential of user-generated tagging for the benefit of both professional and user.

Folksonomies are the informal classifications systems brought about by users tagging important information they find on the web (Park 2011). Those tags create the folksonomy based on what the users deem important and connected. Park focuses on the idea that “a folksonomy is grassroots classification that emerges from tagging” (516) instead of simply the user-generated tagging process. This kind of classification system allows the information that the user is seeking to become central in the way the information is organized and linked.

A primary place for a folksonomy in a public library setting is in the online library catalog accessible by public library users. In many online catalog systems for public libraries, such as BiblioCommons, users have the ability to add tags to content in the catalog. Those tags can then be viewed by users of that local public library’s catalog as well as by others using the same online cataloging system. For example, the Tulsa City-County Library system uses the BiblioCommons system at the website [Tulsalibrary.org](http://Tulsalibrary.org). Users have access to information provided by other Tulsa City-County Library users and other BiblioCommons users at other libraries. One study found in *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* explores the use of these kinds of user-tagged systems in online catalogs in

Canada and how those user-generated tags compare to Reader's Advisory models used by public librarians (Pescoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli 2014).

In researching the comparison of user-tagged systems with typical Reader's Advisory models, the study found that user-generated tags complemented the traditional way librarians recommend books and other materials to interested patrons. Instead of replacing the traditional methods, the information provided by user tags offered new insights into what readers are looking for in the books they read. For example, analyzing the tags users chose for books they had read showed that readers were interested in the tone and mood of a book. This kind of information goes beyond the typical data contained in a bibliographic record, such as a book's subject and author. In comparing the goals and interests of a cataloger and a user, the discussion of the study said, "Where the catalogers want an objective stance on what the title conveys, users want to provide a complete picture of the title--what it contains in a factual sense and what it contains in an emotional or reading experience sense" (Pescoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli 2014, 449). With user-generated tags, a public library catalog can add useful and relevant information to the bibliographic records available to both user and library professional.

Another benefit to user-generated tags in the online public library catalog is the way in which it provides links from one piece of content to another. These kinds of tags link like records together in ways that librarian or cataloger created records do not traditionally connect. For example the study discussed how, based on tags, users were interested in the awards won by books and could use the tags of those awards to find books that had won the same award. Yet, in the traditional MARC record, the award category is not usually linked in the same way. Users can also use these tags to find other like-minded users with whom they would have no other way to connect, further developing a social space for readers beyond their current circles (Pescoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli 2014).

Beyond a public library catalog, the information professional needs to be aware of created folksonomies and tagging-based classification systems in other online spheres. One domain using

folksonomies that is researched and published on in *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* is the online gaming platform Steam and the tags that Steam users create. As gaming is an exceptionally popular practice amongst people in the United States, studying how users tag and think about the games they play is relevant to the information professional. The study compares Steam platform tags created by users with categories from the Video Game Metadata schema (VGMS) in order to discover what kinds of tags and information are most relevant for the digital gaming user and how the VGMS needs to be updated for the changing gaming landscape (Windlehearth et al. 2016).

The scope of the project of analyzing Steam tags is significant. The study says, “Steam...offers over 4,500 computer games and serves over 100 million active users. Steam utilizes a tagging system, whereby users can generate descriptive ‘tags’ and apply them to game titles, in order to organize and describe them” (Windlehearth et al. 2016, 418-419). The researchers found 294 unique tags in the platform and sorted those tags into 29 broader categories for their analysis. Steam utilizes tagging for its games in a way that combines aspects of library practices and web practices: essentially they have a structured catalog that also allows users to add tagging content (Windlehearth et al. 2016).

One of the struggles researchers came across in the analysis of these user-generated tags on Steam was trying to decipher the intended meanings from users behind the words used as tags. Because tags are often just one word, it was difficult to obtain a larger context as one can with a word used in a sentence. For example, when users added the tag “America” to a game, sometimes they were referring to the actual setting of a game taking place in the country of the United States of America. Other times they utilized the tag “America” to mean that a game had qualities associated with some American ideas, such as guns and hunting. One conclusion the researchers came to was to accept the ambiguity of these kinds of tags, as ambiguity cannot be completely avoided when it comes to user-generated material. A solution for how to organize this kind of ambiguous information was to make allowances for their existence by putting such tags into multiple broader categories (Windlehearth et al. 2016, 428).

Through their study of the folksonomic data provided by user tags, the researchers were able to identify categories that could be adopted in the VGMS in order to best serve gamers and identify different qualities of games in the future. For example, based on tags they created users seemed to be interested in learning about the mood, theme, and feeling of a game beyond the information about its basic type and gameplay. The researchers also recommended further development and adaptation of the use of Controlled Vocabularies (CV) in the VGMS, particularly because CVs can quickly become out of date with the word used by the users of systems such as Steam. A combination of a CV with an evolving thesauri using user-generated information from a source such as Steam's game library was a possible solution to the challenges of ambiguity and changing vocabulary (Windlehearth et al. 2016).

The comparison of library catalog user-generated tags to Reader's Advisory models and traditional library classification is analogous to the comparison of Steam gaming platform user-generated tags to the VGMS. In both cases, researchers found that there were qualities that users were interested in that were not fully captured by the existing structures of subject headings or controlled vocabulary. Intangible and ambiguous qualities such as mood and feelings were important to users and were only discoverable through user-generated tags. Even though one study focused on a specific library tool and the other study researched a commercial product, their conclusions about how users indicate an interest in information that is different than that of the offered classification system are similar.

The rise of the use of folksonomies in library catalogs and other kinds of systems seems to center on the difference between the information that users want to know and the information that the creators of a classification want to provide. The challenge for the information professional is learning how to best integrate a folksonomic system with traditional cataloging and classification. Through the tags used in folksonomic classification, users tell professionals what kind of information they are seeking. Yet, the information provided in traditional classification models such as subject headings and controlled vocabularies is still valuable and necessary. As the studies referenced here show, user classification and

traditional classification have the potential to complement one another if used appropriately. The way forward is not prioritizing one system over the other, but rather taking the best aspects of both systems and incorporating them together to help users find the information they seek.

### Bibliography

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