Using Social Discovery Systems to Leverage User-Generated Metadata

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Knowledge Organization Innovation: Design and Frameworks

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The use of social discovery systems is rapidly expanding, often building vibrant and interactive communities. Some public and academic libraries are trying out these systems, in which patrons can contribute ratings, reviews, and comments. While user-contributed metadata may not equal the quality of professional cataloging, it can enhance the catalog records with rich supplementary information and personal perspectives. The author's examination of use of social features in two public libraries led to the discouraging observation that addition of user-generated metadata in these contexts was limited, in sharp contrast to other social sites. The question of motivation is key. People's notions of library catalog records and their ownership by library staff may present an obstacle to contributing metadata. User-generated metadata has the potential to add value to records while conserving limited library resources. The challenge of promoting the active use of social discovery systems in libraries demands further research.

KEYWORDS

metadata

bibliographic records

library users

collaborative indexing

user generated content

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For the past few years, I have posited that social applications, such as tagging, can serve to make library catalogs more user friendly, intuitive and interactive [1, 2]. My examination of a number of social cataloguing sites found that although the content of the metadata records of many of these sites was poor in comparison to those found in professional library catalogs, the social and interactive content of the records did help create a vibrant and dynamic community of users who actively share their reading interests [3]. The current paragon of a truly interactive, dynamic catalog must surely be LibraryThing (www.librarything.com). Hundreds of thousands of people willingly input catalog records in LibraryThing, complete with tags, ratings, reviews and online discussion boards. This level of voluntary participation led me to the obvious question: Why can't our library catalogs be like this? More specifically, I think the new, social library catalog can be a place where the following takes place:

- Users can establish a social space to share and discuss common reading, listening and viewing interests.

- Users without easy access to a library branch for reasons such as illness, limitations to physical mobility or lack of local branch can connect to other patrons of the library and the library staff via the catalog.

- Users can provide a grassroots, democratic, readers' advisory service, whereby they make recommendations for future reading, for example, based upon shared interests.

- Users can classify items in the catalog with their own terms (or tags), which may be more reflective of their language and needs than the formal subject headings that are traditionally assigned by library staff.

A number of public and academic library catalogs are incorporating social discovery systems provided by vendors such as Serials Solutions or Encore. These systems allow clients to add metadata to catalog records, usually in the form of tags, reviews and ratings. I embraced this development with joy: My dream of a social library catalog was developing as I had hoped. When WorldCat started providing people with the option to add tags, I knew that the tide had turned.

Of potential concern, however, is the dearth of comprehensive usability studies of these new social discovery systems. While one may certainly agree that these new discovery systems can contribute greatly, in theory, to the search and discovery experiences of public library users, it is another matter entirely to demonstrate clearly the reality of these benefits without conducting such usability studies. More importantly, the actual value to the end user of the social features of these social discovery systems such as tags, reviews and ratings has not been examined. Why *would* users post tags, ratings and reviews in a public library catalog? These systems are costly to implement and to maintain. If we provide users with the ability to contribute content to catalog records, will they actually do so?

My informal observations of a number of these new social catalogs suggested that, in fact, the actual use of their social features is not as high as I had hoped. This concern led to my ongoing research into how clients use the social features of the AquaBrowser and BiblioCommons systems used respectively by the Halifax and Edmonton public libraries. Log analysis data were obtained over a four-month period to examine which social features are used and with which frequency. We also observed a set of 50 bibliographic records in the two systems to track the addition of user tags, reviews and ratings.

The results of our analysis suggest that clients of both Edmonton and Halifax public libraries are making limited use of the social features that allow them to interact with the catalog records and with one another. While BiblioCommons, in particular, shows promising results with respect to user-generated lists (for example, "I own this") and ratings, many of the social features are noticeably underused. Log analysis shows us patterns of use; it says nothing, however, about why people use these features, or, perhaps more importantly, choose not to do so. Do people use social features in a more passive way to search for items or more actively to contribute content to existing catalog records? While both types of use are valid and important, unless people contribute to content the level of social engagement will be limited, and a critical mass of tags, ratings and reviews may not be achieved.

An important question to consider is the extent to which people are motivated to add tags, reviews or ratings to an item after they have read, seen or listened to it. Certainly sites like LibraryThing and Amazon (www.amazon.com) are successful in generating user-created metadata, but to what extent is this success related to the fact that in most cases people are adding metadata to items they own? The film site IMDB (www.imdb.com), on the other hand, often generates pages of user-written reviews for films or television series that people have watched. Ownership of these items does not appear to be a significant factor.

If these sites are successful in generating user-created metadata, why is this not the case for the two social discovery systems examined? Is it because people are so used to library catalogs whose content has always been controlled completely by library staff that they are afraid to add their own content to bibliographic records? Since the implementation and maintenance of social discovery systems is costly, it is important for library management to make informed decisions about which system features are the most cost effective and how these features may be better tailored to meet user needs.

Research into the motivations for participating in social applications is a burgeoning field. An emerging pattern is that people use social applications for three primary purposes: to organize personal collections, to aid in the retrieval of items of interest and to communicate items of interest to others. Extant research into motivation [4, 5, 6] is limited in that it does not address the unique environment of library catalogs. Do patterns of motivation derived for community sites such as Delicious and Flickr apply also to pubic library catalogs?

Social applications are beneficial only if they are used. If people don't add user-generated content, social discovery systems may be almost indistinguishable from standard catalog interfaces. In these tough economic times, it is important to determine whether the putative benefits of these social features are translated into actual use and benefits and what can be done to promote their use. Future research thus needs to focus on clients' motivations for engaging with the social features of social discovery systems and their perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the benefits of these features. ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

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