All indexing is wrong; some indexing is useful: Social tagging in libraries

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ABSTRACT

Social tagging, the activity and process by which users add descriptive tags to shared, digital content, is a socio-politically significant form of indexing. It satisfies the four basic criteria of a social movement: collective challenge, common purpose, solidarity, and sustained collective action (Tarrow, 1994). Most significantly, social tagging is carried out from the bottom upwards by means of user contributions and not from the top downwards by means of authoritative rule. The adoption of an anarchist paradigm for the future study and implementation of social tagging would ensure that it is understood, maintained, and further developed as a social movement.

1.

SOCIAL TAGGING...

- Is an atypical form of indexing, different from other forms of indexing in two significant ways: the tags are shared, and users—not professional cataloguers, indexers, or authors—add the metadata.
- Is an example of bottom-up building of categories.
- Does not (significantly) overlap with traditional content indexing languages.
- Is not designed to replace traditional indexing languages; is not to be thought of as a substitute for traditional indexing work performed by professionals, nor indexing languages produced by them.
- Allows intentional, capricious, and ideological organization of information.
- Grants users the power to name.
- Is an instrument of socio-political commentary and participation.
- Addresses the discordance between how the world has been thus organized and how it is seen and experienced by marginalized groups and individuals in society.
- Allows for inclusive participation in the construction of indexing terms.
- Includes the vocabulary and reflects the needs of taggers.
- Is current: digital tags may be created as quickly as digital content.
- Is flexible and adaptive to changing vocabularies and emerging content; tag connections and discoveries are made in real time.
- Recognizes that meaning is referential, context-dependent, and changeable.
- Allows for serendipity in browsing.
- Augments and refines existing classification methods and schemes to be more user friendly, allowing for enhanced human information interaction.

- Lacks explicit guidelines and instructions.
- Is unusual, unexpected, unpredictable, chaotic and beautiful.
- Does not preclude the observation of unwritten rules and standards.
- Does not control synonyms and homonyms.
- Allows users to "have their say" without interference and censorship of any kind.
- Purpose is to find, manage personal collections, share resources among peers, and interact with the information organization system (Good & Tennis, 2007).
- Is the only available access point for alternative materials that are not accessible through or hidden by traditional indexing languages.
- Allows users to reclassify and regroup according to their own needs and belief systems.
- Can be sloppy and inconsistently assigned.
- Allows users to make sense of the world.
- Is a step towards leveling the playing field of knowledge organization.
- Is a tool to counterbalance the worldviews and limitations imposed by the authority of classificationists.
- Allows space for interpretation and representation by others who do not normally participate in this process.
- Allows users to seek, find, and evaluate information from alternative viewpoints, using alternative paths.
- Is not useful for finding specific, accurate information.
- Can be offensive.

In its broadest sense, social tagging is a social movement.

2.

SOCIAL TAGGING IS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Folksonomies, created collectively by the members of the public, contradict the ethos of traditional indexing languages and challenge their preeminence. Solidarity—the recognition of a common purpose—can be harnessed by scholars and librarians who are interested in the mobilization and maintenance of social tagging as a social movement through framing work and other forms of advocacy.

Tarrow (1994) proposes four basic properties of social movements: (1) collective challenge, (2) common purpose, (3) solidarity, and (4) sustained collective action.

1. Collective Challenge

Social tagging interrupts, obstructs, and renders uncertain traditional indexing practices. More specifically, folksonomies, as postmodern indexing languages, challenge the dominance of modernist, traditional indexing languages. As this challenge is brought about by large numbers of participants, social tagging is a collective challenge.

2. & 3. Common Purpose & Solidarity

Presented together because solidarity among a group of people is the result of their acknowledgement of common purposes and interests. Social movements are formed when poli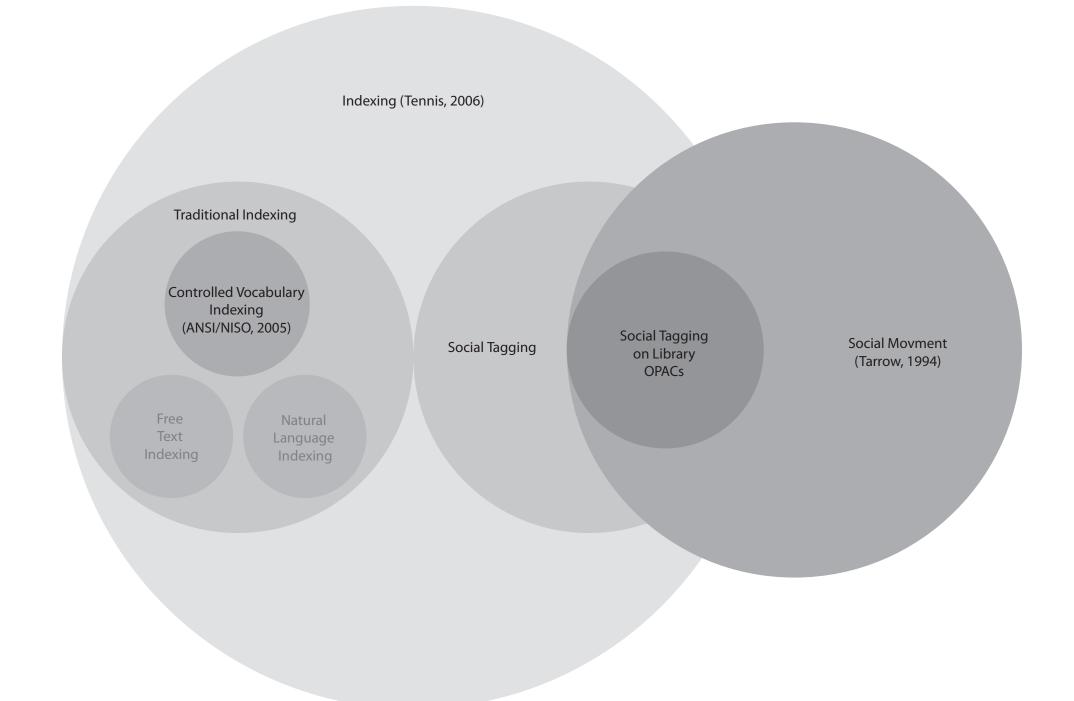tical opportunities arise for social actors who lack them. Social tagging is a chance for the public to participate in the interpretation and representation of information.

Librarianship is not a socio-politically neutral profession and librarians have a significant opportunity for advocacy presented to them. The technology is available and the crowds are willing.

4. Sustained Collective Action

The fact that tagging is, to some extent, a manifestation of an everyday human activity—information seeking—adds to its qualification as a sustainable collective action. The already inherent elements within social tagging, such as its utilization of social networks and convenience of use, favour its candidacy as a tool for sustained collective action and social change. Through the use of online social networks and given the ease and convenience of tagging, social tagging once introduced, can be effectively sustained on Online Public Access Catalogues of our local libraries.

FIGURE A. SOCIAL TAGGING ON LIBRARY OPACS AS A TYPE OF INDEXING AND A SOCIAL MOVEMENT. The selection of a socio-politically engaged paradigm for the understanding of social tagging on library OPACS—the specific focus of this poster and the emphasized area of overlap between social tagging and social movements in Figure A—is needed to realize the full potential social tagging as a social movement.
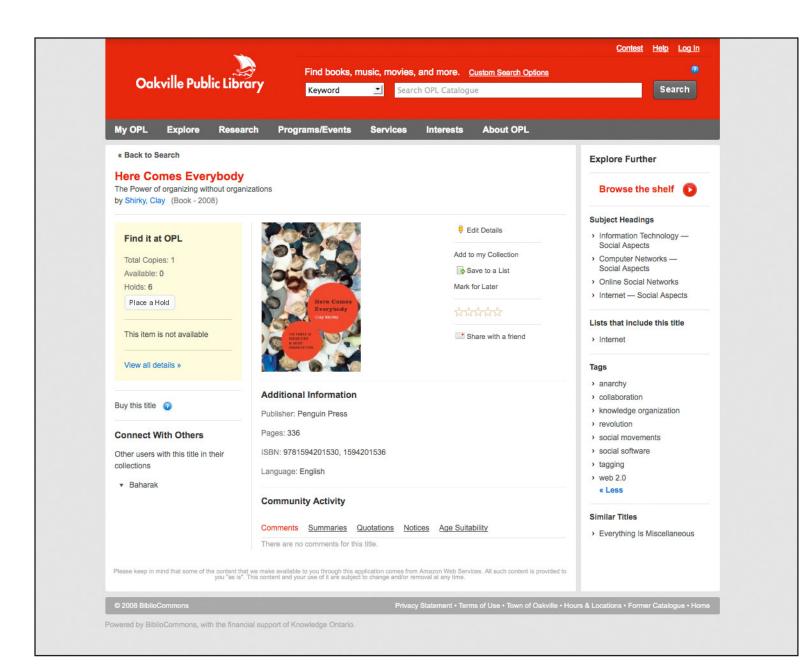
3.

AN ANARCHIST PARADIGM

As an issue of considerable socio-political consequence, it is fitting to seek a politically informed paradigm for the study of social tagging. We are at a critical juncture in our understanding of social tagging, and the ways in which we choose to frame, study, and discuss public participation in library indexing now will have a direct and significant impact on its future utilization or imminent disregard. In addition, it is not enough to discourage and refrain from direct attack on social tagging, rather we must also ensure that librarians are actively engaged with it. The socio-political potential of social tagging in libraries is far too significant for it to be consigned and relegated to non-library indexing alone. The introduction of social tagging in libraries compels us to recognize and re-examine our assumptions about indexing, critical librarianship and information literacy and also to ask fundamental questions about the role of cooperation and authority in human society.

Social tagging is an anarchist social movement by nature, and it can remain so by nurture.

The two central positions—first, social tagging is an anarchist social movement and second, it can continue to function as such—are related but distinct. As far as social tagging is an anarchist practice, it is useful to understand it as such, but for reasons beyond practicality—reasons of ideology and paradigm choice—it is further recommended that we do so. Currently, social tagging is formulated and conducted without the interference of authoritative, central governance such as the Library of Congress and, as such, it is an anarchist undertaking both in theory and praxis. In fact, social tagging is proof that "organization without government [is] both possible and desirable" (Ward, 2004).

For future considerations, the use of an anarchist paradigm would have implications regarding both scholarly research and practical implementations of social tagging in library settings. By choosing an anarchist paradigm for the study of social tagging, librarians can make certain that social tagging continues to be maintained, developed, and studied as an anarchist social movement. An anarchist paradigm is suggested because it will work to preserve the already existing advantages of social tagging—advantages such as inclusiveness and flexibility. It will preserve and further advance social tagging as a socio-political tool and ensure that the interests of taggers are considered at every stage of development and implementation.

FIGURE B. BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORD ON BIBLIOCOMMONS.

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