Enhancing Subject Access to Materials in Library OPACs: Are Folksonomies the Answer?

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Research Questions

1. Can folksonomies be used to enhance subject access to materials in library catalogs?
2. What does user tagging tell us about the way that people think about the subjects of a book?
3. Does the application of folksonomies increase the findability of library materials?

Methods

• Data collected from 35 titles classed under LCSH "feminism"
• Initial data collection from OPAC; additional tagging data harvested from LibraryThing "social information" pages for titles
• "Feminism" chosen as initial search because it is fairly broad, yet in flux and affected by changes in political, social, and academic climates; 5 narrower terms added under this heading in LCSH in 2008

Initial Findings

• Natural language terms show some overlap with assigned subject headings
  • Of eight tags most closely related to initial search of "feminism", four are found in LCSH
  • 64 subject headings used in sample; 13 exact tag-LCSH matches
  • Distribution of frequently used tags follows "power law" scenario outlined by Mathes (2004)
  • Tagging practices and patterns are influenced by collective intelligence

Implications & Future Research

RQ 1 & 3: Enhancing access to and increasing findability of materials
• Used in combination with LCSH, folksonomies provide additional access points and may help support browsing and serendipitous discovery
• Folksonomies reflect current culture and events; can provide additional points of access where terminology is lacking in controlled vocabulary

Future Research: User testing is needed to determine the usefulness of folksonomies as a means of augmenting already existing controlled vocabularies currently used in OPACs

RQ 2: How do users think about subjects of a book?
• Tagging most commonly occurs using broad keywords; user-applied tags are typically not as specific as terms found in controlled vocabularies

Future Research: Surveys and interviews are needed to supplement content analysis and give insight into how decisions are made about what tags to assign to an item

Background

• Controlled vocabulary (Library of Congress Subject Headings) vs. natural language systems (folksonomies)
• LCSH criticized for lack of currency, bias in language, atypical syndetic structure
• Prior related research:

Example of LibraryThing for Libraries OPAC display (from University of TX catalog)

Tag clouds were generated as a preliminary means of visualizing the data for this project. Tag size is correlated to the frequency of use of the tags, with the largest tags being used most frequently. Complete tag clouds can be viewed at: http://courseweb.e.liu.ius.edu/~pirmann2/indstudy/tagclouds/

References