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Homework 6

Gaining User Insights from Folksonomies

The term "folksonomy" was coined by Thomas Vander Wal in 2004. A folksonomy is a classification system created by a user for her personal use. Technical communicators who have been trained to work with traditional taxonomies may not believe that folksonomies are extendable to wider audiences; however, user-created classification systems do offer a few significant benefits: Folksonomies are less expensive to create when compared to formal taxonomies and controlled vocabularies; they offer a treasure trove of information about user behaviors; and patterns can be derived that can help technical communicators determine vocabularies and rules that may make more sense to their users than what can be offered within a traditional taxonomy.

What Are Folksonomies?

As Baker (2012) explains, "Folksonomies [are an] internet phenomena in which users, not professionals, add their own keywords (tags) to information objects" (para. 1). Traditionally, technical communicators and other information professionals have been in charge of creating standardized taxonomies, such as the Library of Congress classification system. However, as Macgregor and McCulloch (2006) point out, "…it has long been recognised that traditional controlled vocabularies (in their various permutations) are not always adequate for online resource discovery" (The Controlled Vocabulary 'Problem' section, para. 1). This is because most users have never received training on how to use a formal taxonomy. This conundrum led to the advent of folksonomic classification systems, in which users classify information by creating and assigning tags to various content items.

What Are Tags?

Tags are metadata, which is data about data. In other words, metadata describes an item using tags such as author, date of publication, version number, and topic. Tagging is, according to Getting (2007), "the practice of creating and managing labels … that categorize content using simple keywords" (para. 1). He notes that "tagging is known by a few different names, such as content tagging, collaborative tagging, social tagging and even the scientific-sounding 'folksonomy'" (para. 1).

Tags can be created by professionals, such as technical communicators, or by users. Professionals typically use a formal taxonomic classification system that makes use of a controlled vocabulary. This type of classification is hierarchical because all tags fall into a logical order. For example, if we were searching a digital newspaper archive, we could easily search for all articles published by John Doe in 2012 because the information architect would have tagged all of the articles with "reporter first name=John," "reporter last name=Doe," and "publication year=2012." Users, on the other hand, may tag John Doe's article with "reporter=John D." or "publication date=5-1-2012." Users are not bound to the same standardization rules to which technical communicators are bound; therefore, users' classification systems do not have to make sense to anyone but themselves.

Social Curation

Collaborative tagging, or social tagging, gained prominence with websites like Flickr.com and del.icio.us in the mid-2000s. Users were given the ability to create whatever tags they wanted to, and this practice opened the door to a whole new area of study for technical communicators. Mejias (2004) noted that "the task of processing all [web] content [poses] an

almost insurmountable problem, without even considering the difficulty of developing and maintaining a taxonomy to accommodate the speed at which new knowledge is produced" (Introduction section, para. 1). The advent of social tagging offered a cheaper, quicker way to gain insight into classification systems by studying the folksonomies that users create. As Macgregor and McCulloch (2006) note, "The emergence of 'collaborative tagging' is … considered by some as a useful way in which to supersede the subject indexing role of the information professional and to facilitate resource discovery and knowledge organisation" (The Controlled Vocabulary 'Problem' section, para. 2). When users create their own tags, Baker (2012) argues, the social community is essentially creating "a controlled vocabulary on their terms" (Folksonomies vs. traditional classification section, para. 4); further, she notes, "By understanding search behaviors such as … community generated subject terminology, [websites] can adapt tools to meet the needs of their [users]" (The future of folksonomies section, para. 3).

Folksonomies from a Technical Communication Perspective

Most arguments against using folksonomies as the basis for classification center on the imprecision of the system. Guy and Tonkin (2006) note, "Probably the major flaw of current folksonomy systems … is that the tagging terms used in those systems are imprecise" (The Folksonomic Flaw section, para. 1). Because users are creating the tags and not following any standardized grammar or spelling rules, tags can be so wide-ranging that there may appear to be no rhyme or reason to the user's choices. However, even in seeming chaos, technical communicators can find patterns that will give them valuable insight into user behaviors. As more users create tags, user-defined rules and vocabularies will start to emerge. Oh and Monge (2013) write:

> …individual users may consult what other users usually do and imitate the others' choices, considering others' choices as a substitute for predetermined rules and standards…. This phenomenon is called 'emergence,' where the collective behavior at the global level arises from the interactions among the local parts of the system, those which are following simple rules (Social Tagging Systems: Structural Decentralization section, para. 3-4).

Research by Oh and Monge (2013) indicates that these rules, or patterns, are one of the most valuable aspects to arise from folksonomies. Technical communicators can study these rules to develop hybrid classification systems that can satisfy users by giving them opportunities to discover information in ways that make the most sense to them.

Another huge advantage of folksonomies is that they are less costly than creating formal taxonomies. Shirky (2005) argues:

> The advantage of folksonomies isn't that they're better than controlled vocabularies; it's that they're better than nothing, because controlled vocabularies are not extensible to the majority of cases where tagging is needed. Building, maintaining, and enforcing a controlled vocabulary is, relative to folksonomies, enormously expensive, both in the development time, and in the cost to the user, especially the amateur user, in using the system (para. 4).

Folksonomies can be developed at very low cost and very quickly; simply offering the capability for users to create tags is enough to get started. Once folksonomies have been created, technical communicators can study them, determine the emergent patterns, and incorporate the user-

developed rules and vocabularies into a website's classification system, ensuring that users will be able to use the system successfully.

Conclusion

While folksonomies are by nature imprecise, there is value in studying them from a technical communication standpoint. The rise of social tagging indicates that there is an inherent problem in a traditional, hierarchical taxonomy: they are difficult for users to learn how to use. Because not many users have constant access to information professionals, folksonomies are a way for users to create their own classification systems that work for them personally. The incredible amount of user insight contained in a folksonomy should excite those of us who rely on user data for every aspect of our jobs. Folksonomies give us a look into the patterns that emerge across many users' classification systems, and these patterns can help us determine many aspects of an information architecture, from labeling to navigation to search. I believe that technical communicators should view folksonomies as a relatively inexpensive user research method that generates a rich amount of actionable data.

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