Tag Writing, Search Engines, and Cultural Scripts

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the social, political, and ethical implications of search engine use and tag writing. Unlike scholars in economics, law, information science, and media studies who have weighed on these issues for more than a decade now, I argue that scholarship in rhetoric and composition has taken a narrow approach by connecting search engines and tag writing primarily with the teaching of research skills. Relying on a folksonomic approach, I conduct a case study of a Romanian online campaign that aimed to work with and against Google in order to change Romanians' online identity. Based on this example, I show how search engines can be used, on the one hand, to write new identity scripts and to change cultural patterns, and, on the other hand, to reinscribe power relations and limited identity politics. I also argue that the campaign is an example of public rhetorical education that calls on us, teachers and scholars of composition, to rethink our pedagogies and to expand our teaching tools. Ultimately, integrating search engines and tag writing into the classroom can teach students to use technologies more responsibly and to reflect critically on their everyday writing practices, which, in their simplest manifestations, are powerful forms of culture-writing.
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The truth is that we like to Google. According to a report in November 2012, Google established a new market share of 70% of the total search engine usage (Goodwin, 2012). If you're looking for world news, recent pictures of friends, personal websites, shopping, or academic articles, Google can help. And we not only like to search, but we also believe in what we're getting from our searches. Sixty-eight percent of users tend to trust their searches as "fair and unbiased source[s] of information" (Fallows, 2005, p. i). And why wouldn't they? Aren't search engines mechanisms that retrieve information depending on *our* keywords? Aren't they digital structures that apply computing algorithms based on *our* input?

Scholars in different fields, such as economics, law, information science, and media studies (Introna & Nissembaum, 2000; Granka, 2010; Grimmelmann, 2008/09; Mager, 2012) have repeatedly pointed out that search engines are social and political mechanisms that can be easily misused. As early as 2000, Lucas Introna and Helen Nissenbaum saw search engines operating according to market forces. Websites of companies whose products were searched for by a large number of consumers seemed to be more visible and benefited from higher search rankings (Introna & Nissembaum, 2000, p. 175). In 2010, Laura Granka reevaluated Introna and Nissenbaum's (2000) concerns. In her study, Granka found that search engines were driven by competition and consumer choice, while user behavior was much more complex. Granka argued that a theory of hegemony enacted by big online companies did not acknowledge the agency

of individual users and their various search-writing practices. People are not passive consumers of online information, clicking the first website retrieved by the search engine. Their decisions are dependent on a wide range of factors, such as the nature of the task, their goals, and expectations.

If the body of literature mentioned before emphasizes cultural, political, and ethical concerns, scholarship in composition studies has been narrower in scope. Michelle Sidler (2002), James Purdy (2010), and Randall McClure (2011) have primarily linked search engines and writing practices (e.g., tag writing and digital folksonomies) with the research process. These scholars have repeatedly pointed out that search engine expertise can enhance research skills. If students are able to analyze how a source, or any other type of digital information, is retrieved in a variety of contexts, students can gain a deeper understanding of the research process and its structure. Rather than the identification of the *right* and most immediate source, good research implies critical thinking about sources and the formulation of effective links and connections among these (McClure, 2011, p. 315).

In fact, it is not surprising that these studies have linked search engine use with the research process. Alexander Halavais (2009) noted that, "the prototypical search experience is still thought of as academic" (p. 43). Because we expect students in writing courses to prepare research-based projects, it is only natural that scholars in composition studies have turned to search engines to explore new ways of identifying, assessing, and using online sources. Driven by a pedagogical imperative, Sidler (2002), Purdy (2010) and McClure (2011) tried to develop strategies to make students more aware of the possibilities of expanding their research skills. However, these attempts to incorporate search engines in the research process are indicative of a conservative approach, whereby everyday writing activities are made to serve established pedagogical agendas. Instead of making the search engine the next tool in the research process, we should also examine other aspects of search writing that can help us design more complex assignments. This will help our students gain a thorough understanding of their everyday acts of composing, and it will better align pedagogy with writing practices beyond the classroom.

In this sense, I turn to what Halavais (2009) called, the *sociable* nature of search engines, an interesting and challenging dimension of search-based writing. As David Weinberger (2005), Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey Grabill (2005) noted, infrastructures, search engines included, are "penetrated by issues of culture and identity"; yet, this is an area that still needs to be explored (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, p. 22). Isabella Peters (2009) argued that part of the problem comes from the fact that the social character of tagging is often hard to trace and remains, for the most part, invisible to its users (p. 227). Despite its apparent simplicity, searching is a fascinating social practice and, because it is such a common activity, we need to know more about the ways in which people use, misuse, and reuse their searches to connect with one another. In composition studies, we have yet to analyze examples of search engine use and the formation of social bonds, power hierarchies, "bias and diversity of result ranking" (Granka, 2010, p. 370).

To address these aspects, I analyze the online campaign entitled "Romanians are Smart," initiated on November 17, 2011. In my analysis, I rely on a folksonomic approach, which I elaborate on in the following section, developed by scholars such as Jodie Nicotra (2009) and Jeff Rice (2012). I explore this case for two reasons: on the one hand, this example demonstrates the rhetorical complexity of an apparently simple act of search writing. The strategic use of Google during the campaign proves how search engines can be used to not only compose new identity scripts[1] and change cultural patterns, but also reinscribe power relations and limited identity politics. On the other hand, I investigate this campaign because it offers a challenging example of *public rhetorical education* that calls on us, teachers and scholars of composition, to rethink our pedagogies, expand our teaching tools, and assess the relevance of our curriculum. Ultimately, what I hope to show is that the *sociable* dimensions of search engines and tag writing go well beyond the development of research skills, and it has profound implications for writing pedagogy.

1. Folksonomies and the algorithms of search engines

Before I discuss the example of the Romanian campaign, first I want to define and explain how folksonomies and search engines function together. Jodie Nicotra (2009) defined a folksonomy as multi-user tagging that "provides a new

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[1] I ground the phrases "identity scripts" and "cultural scripts" in a neo-empirical framework (see Sánchez, 2012, p. 241). While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze this approach, suffice it to say that, from this perspective, identity and cultural expressions reside and take form via acts of writing (Sánchez, 2012, p. 245) and, I would add, via all digital practices and technologies that make identity and culture *happen*.