The roles of tagging in the online curation of photographs

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores the variety of uses people make of the tagging feature on the photo-sharing site Flickr. The site developers intended uses are primarily to build a taxonomy to make the images on the site easily searchable. Data from examples of Flickr tags and interviews with selected users reveal that some tagging fits with this aim, whilst other uses challenge and subvert the intended uses. Tagging is used to do at least the following: identifying existing information in a photo; adding relevant new information; expressing affective stance towards the images; addressing specific audiences; making unrelated 'asides'; and for creative play. The discussion is then broadened by examining a dispute between Flickr and its users about changes being made to the site: this act as a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) as people articulate what the site enables them to do and what it hinders. The dispute generated a thread of more than 29,000 comments, making a corpus of 1,774,401 words. Using corpus linguistics tools the paper demonstrates how users contribute to curating this site, including their uses of tagging. Steps involved in curating the site are identified, including a focus on verbs of curation. Overall, the paper contributes to the analysis of a set of 'new' literacy practices and to understanding digital curation. The methods of the two studies reported here productively combine detailed methods of qualitative research with the breadth of quantitative analysis.

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1. Introduction

The photo-sharing site Flickr was an early example of a site where tagging by users was encouraged. This paper explores the range of creative uses people have made of the tagging feature on Flickr over time and the extent to which this can be seen as a shift in power from the site developers to the users. The approach, which involves the analysis of texts and of practices, can best be described as ethnographically informed discourse analysis and the interest in tags is part of a broader study of people's everyday digital practices. (See Barton and Lee (2013) for further details of the general approach.) In Section 3 of this paper the focus turns to an online dispute between the developers of this site and its users, drawing on corpus analysis to understand the dynamics of this dispute and discussing it in terms of a disagreement about the curation of the site.

The first study reported here shows how tags provide a writing space with particular affordances which users build upon. The study discusses people's purposes when tagging, how tags are used as more than just as parts of a taxonomy or folksonomy and what is lost when discussing tags away from the pages where they are being used. A taxonomy is a classification into categories, usually

in areas of scientific expertise such as biology or linguistics. However, what we see on Flickr is a 'folksonomy' where rather than being created by an outside expert, the categories are provided by the users. The folksonomy comes from collating tags from a large number individual people's tags. A key difference between the two is that any search is utilising people's own words, rather than those imposed by an outside expert. Whilst ways of classifying are important, as we will see below, people can do much more with tagging than just contributing to a folksonomy.

2. Tags as text on Flickr

In this study evidence about tagging practices comes primarily by examining the texts, that is, the web pages containing the tags. This was supplemented by online interviews with some of the creators of the web pages. By way of introduction to the topic, it is useful to begin with a general description of tagging. An initial point to emphasise is that tagging works differently on different sites. In an early study of tagging, Marlow et al. (2006) examine how Delicious (formerly del.icio.us) differs from Flickr. They identify a set of 7 aspects of site design which affect tagging practices. The 2 sites vary on what can be tagged and who can tag. By default any member of Flickr can add a tag to any photo. Sites vary in what support there is for tagging, for example whether there is a limited

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set of possible tags and how the tags are presented. Some tags may be automatically provided, such as date and make of camera. Marlow et al. show how Delicious and Flickr differ on all these dimensions. Further differences can easily be seen by examining other sites such as YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram. In addition sites change over time and, as we will see in the examples below, what was simple can suddenly become very difficult and vice versa. A seemingly small change can make a big difference, as will be clear when discussing the changes made to Flickr in 2013, below.

Underlying the differences between sites are the possibilities which the designers envisage for each site. People act within these possibilities, taking up some opportunities, ignoring others and creating new activities which the designers never intended. It is this creative space between the designer and the user where the unexpected can happen. This constitutes the affordances of tagging. In fact there is a remarkable range of possibilities on Flickr, many of which are hardly taken up, but at the same time there are strong constraints on what is possible. For example, although by default anyone can add tags, in practice most tags are created by the photographer and although they can add tags at any time people tend to create the tags when they initially upload the photo.

Even on Flickr, a site devoted to visual images, there can be a great deal of language surrounding the images. When uploading a photo to Flickr the user is invited to add written titles, descriptions, tags, and more, each having its specific writing space, so each photo can be surrounded by language serving many functions. At the time of collecting this data, the title of the photo was in a large bold font and superimposed over the bottom left hand side of the image. Below in a smaller font was the description space which can be empty or can contain several pages of text. Tags appear on the right hand side of the photo page as left to right text with a space between each tag.

Looking at the tags used on Flickr in this study, it is clear that there are all sorts of words including technical terms, dialect words, obscure words, abstractions and abbreviations, and many written languages are represented. All parts of speech are there. There is considerable deixis, such as 'here' and 'there', although such words are not very good for creating a taxonomy as their reference is constantly shifting. The deictic pronoun 'me' is used nearly 4 million times. Some details of the image are automatically added elsewhere on the page, such as when and where the photo was taken, and details about the camera and its settings. Prior to this if people wanted to display this information they had to add it as tags.

Another early study comparing Flickr and Delicious, Guy and Tonkin (2006) identifies the main criticisms aimed at taggers, that their tags are often ambiguous, overly personalised and inexact. Studies are critical of tags which are only used once, as well as the use of 'nonsense' tags designed as unique markers that are shared between friends. The result is seen as an uncontrolled and chaotic set of tagging terms that do not support general searching. Guy & Tonkin found 40% of Flickr tags were either misspelt, from a language not understood by the dictionary software used, or compound words consisting of more than two words. Ironically, given the current ubiquity of hashtags on twitter and many other sites, one of the complaints then was that 'Symbols such as # were used at the beginning of tags, probably… to list the tags at the top of an alphabetical listing.' Overall Guy & Tonkin saw the problem for tagging systems as being the way they 'are trying to serve two masters at once: the personal collection, and the collective collection.' Starting from people's actual tagging practices provides a richer view.

Turning to the initial study reported here, data from a study of the practices of 30 multilingual Flickr users (Lee and Barton, 2011) was reanalysed with a focus on tags and tagging and provides users' views of tagging (as reported in Barton, 2015a). Firstly, people were emphatic that they use different sites for different purposes: Flickr was often used to display and to document, and for the photos to have a lasting presence. It was a platform for serious exchanges between photographers, including professionals. In contrast the users we interviewed reported that for them Facebook photos were often more transient, were consumed quickly and quality was less important. Most of the multilingual users of Flickr had tags in more than one language. For example, one user stated:

1. *I try to fit all the tags both in English (universalism) and in Spanish (my immediate Flickr public) and, since I know a little French, I put the French word when I remember it.*

Here the multilingual Flickr user is using their languages strategically to address different audiences and to project specific identities. Often the specific aim was to get more hits:

2. *I want to get more views of my photos. I assume there might be lots of people in mainland China that might search for Queen's Pier photos, so I want my photos to come up in the search results when someone searches for Queen's Pier in simplified Chinese characters.*

This is a way of utilising the affordances of Flickr to make their site more popular. Sometimes there was direct translation, whilst at other times people put different information in different languages:

3. *When I post thinking about someone, a close friend or a known follower, I tend to post in Spanish.…. If I tag in Spanish, it has to be for a local (or personal, e.g. 'torollo') non translatable term.*

Some tags would only be recognisable to knowledgeable insiders, such as the tags '365' used to indicate that the photo was part of a project of posting a photo a day for a year. Sometimes tags would be used to repeat information in the image. At other times the tags introduced new information needed to make sense of the image. When interviewing people as they examine a Flickr page we have observed that they often go back and forth between image and language and that they use the tags as part of their reading paths to understand more about the photo. As well as being good examples of multimodal meaning making, these translingual practices (Wei, 2011; Lee, 2017) demonstrate the many ways people deploy their multilingual resources.

Another point to stress is that there is a 'grammar' to the tags: that is, taken together these tags have a meaning which they don't have when considered separately. The tags can be used – in conjunction with the language and image on the rest of the page - to tell a story. To demonstrate this I will work through a rich example taken from a later study. This is of someone doing a 365 project. On the first day of her 365 project she used a photo of a garden gate. The photo has the title '…do I have to go? (1/365)' with the short description beneath: '26th November…dreaded trip to the dentist'. The accompanying tags provide more detail of the day.

4. Project365 365 gate leaving going out
Dentist torture hate fear garden path
Teeth tooth pain dread appointment
Canon eos 400D my day snapshot glance
Day one first starting digging my heels in
Countryside rural Bungay Suffolk me
Life stress everyday myeverydaylife

Note how this is laid out with 4 or 5 tags to a line. There is a strong narrative here linking up the two activities of doing the 365 photo project and the visit to the dentist, both being challenging, and the tags can be read as a small story. This idea of the 365 project being a tough challenge is common in the 365 data. There are many different sorts of tags on this photo page: there are