Visibility, Identity, and Personal Expression
Qualitative Case Studies of Social Tagging on MetaFilter

Abstract:
Social tagging is often studied quantitatively and through a lens of tag typologies and terminological representation. This qualitative study examines three cases of social tagging on MetaFilter, a community weblog with extensive use of and discussion about tagging practices and the significance of tags. The cases illuminate the intersection of social tagging and the cultural and social themes of visibility, identity, and personal expression. We close with a reflection on how community affects tagging practices.

1.0 Introduction
Many websites such as Stack Overflow, GitHub, Goodreads, and LinkedIn allow users to label and organize information by using social tagging. The resulting folksonomies have most often been studied quantitatively, beginning with early studies that measured the distribution and types of tags on Web 2.0 folksonomies such as del.icio.us and Flickr (Kipp and Campbell 2006; Munk and Mørk 2007). While these and many other quantitative studies describe tagging behaviors and outcomes, they do not deeply explore how social tagging intersects with social and cultural themes such as visibility, identity, and personal expression in online communities.

We do have, however, a rich history of studying how other modes of subject indexing intersect with these social and cultural themes. Bowker and Star (1999) describe how classification systems reflect and shape larger social systems and dynamics. Olson (2002) explores representation and identity in indexing and argues that the rigid vocabularies employed by early indexers like Dewey marginalize and exclude those who are different from the indexer. Tennis (2002) introduces the concept of subject ontogeny and traces how social and cultural changes affect our understanding of knowledge and classification choices over time. Furner (2007) applies critical race theory to study how ineffectively indexing languages represent racial minorities. Duarte and Belarde-Lewis (2015) examine cataloging and classification through the lens of colonialism and discuss the potential of Indigenous community-based approaches to representation and identity in information systems.

While these critical and social perspectives represent a major thread of knowledge organization research, only a small body of social tagging research has followed this path. The lack of attention to the social and community aspects of social tagging can be attributed, in part, to early social tagging platforms being weakly linked to online communities. For example, del.icio.us users with similar tagging histories could connect with each other and existing communities could establish canonical tags to share information with each other on services like del.icio.us (Tonkin et al. 2008); however, these social tagging activities were not strongly linked or integrated with other community activities. As social tagging has become a more integrated feature of online communities, a body of research has emerged that has, instead of treating the existence of social tagging as a social phenomenon in and of itself, studied tagging as an activity within these online communities that informs and is informed by cultural and social
factors. Much of this research has focused on terminological representation. For example, Adler (2009) compares the LibraryThing folksonomy with traditional indexes, focusing on representation and vocabulary in describing books with transgender themes. Adler argues that “[T]he greatest power of folksonomies, especially when set against controlled vocabularies like the Library of Congress Subject Headings, lies in their capacity to empower user communities to name their own resources in their own terms.” Bates and Rowley (2011) also consider visibility, identity, and personal expression in the LibraryThing folksonomy and find that minority voices can be well represented and that their identities can be accurately portrayed through concerted community effort. For example, they find that LibraryThing’s social tagging approach “offers benefits over LCSH... in the discoverability and representation of LGBTQ resources.” Coqc (2015) observes a community of Twitter users who tweet in Sami and use Sami hashtags specifically to raise the visibility of the endangered language. These hashtags function very much like social tags, and they allow these Twitter users to increase the visibility of an underrepresented culture and language. Cocq finds, however, that these tweets reach a limited audience outside of the small community producing them. Bullard (2016) captures user discussions about choosing preferred terms for social tagging in a fan fiction community. These discussions balance term popularity, utility for information retrieval, and potential harm to non-dominant user groups. Bullard’s approach allows us to see not just the terms that are ultimately used in the folksonomy, but community attitudes and values that inform the choices.

This study, taking particular inspiration from Bullard, aims to build on the broad tradition of knowledge organization research that considers the intersection of subject indexing with social and cultural factors. We also aim to add to the small body of this type of research that is specific to social tagging. The cases presented in this study consider, qualitatively, the themes of visibility, identity, and personal expression in social tagging that manifest in the community blog website MetaFilter and its subdomain for discussions about the site, MetaTalk. By analyzing these cases, we aim to address the following research questions: 1) How do social taggers use tags to increase representation and visibility of underrepresented voices in an online community? 2) How do social taggers use identification tags that respect the personal, social, and cultural identities of authors and content creators? 3) How do social taggers balance the utility of descriptive tags with the personal and social value of using tags for humor, commentary, and personal expression?

2.0 Method

This study considers three cases of MetaFilter community members discussing how to use social tagging effectively and appropriately in their online community. MetaFilter is a community blog that has run continuously for over 20 years, and is still active. MetaFilter has thousands of community members, paid staff and moderators, and numerous subdomains including a question-and-answer site called Ask MetaFilter. MetaFilter has global membership, but the language of the site is English. The United States and the United Kingdom are disproportionately well represented in the community.

Since 2005, authors of posts on MetaFilter and its subdomains have been able to tag or label their posts with as many tags as they like, using any vocabulary that they
like. Although moderators and members who are closely connected with the original authors can modify the tags for a post, MetaFilter is a narrow taxonomy, meaning that the post author provides the tags for their own posts and other community members do not contribute additional tags. The tags that post authors choose are particularly important in this folksonomy, then, because the community cannot establish different descriptions or identifiers through their own tags and because these tags are displayed prominently next to the content and are used for search and navigation throughout the site.

The MetaFilter community has discussed social tagging practices extensively, with 370 separate discussion threads and approximately 13,000 comments about tagging posted to the MetaTalk subdomain. These discussions are publically available and readily findable because they themselves are tagged with tags such as tags, tag, tagging, folksonomy, and labels. We collected all discussions with these tags, removed discussions about HTML tagging syntax, and began coding discussions by types of tags (Golder and Huberman 2006), motivations for tags (Gupta et al. 2011), types of initial post (feature requests, how-to questions, etc.), and topic of discussion (tagging syntax, culturally appropriate tagging, etc.). Key themes emerged during coding, and we identified particularly interesting discussions about visibility, identity, and personal expression that we surface in the following cases.

3.0 Cases
In this study, we consider three cases from the large set of tagging discussions on MetaTalk to illustrate and explore emergent themes from ongoing coding and analysis work. Two of the selected cases are contained completely or predominately in single discussion threads. The other case spans multiple discussion threads that are thematically connected. These cases were chosen because they illuminate key questions and themes about social tagging and folksonomies, they explore questions that are difficult to answer with quantitative analysis, and they feature rich and thoughtful discussion about how tagging intersects with concepts of visibility, identity, and personal expression.

3.1 #JulyByWomen and diverse global voices
The MetaFilter community regularly reflects on itself as an online community, aiming to create a welcoming space with open discussion and diverse voices. The #JulyByWomen campaign arose from discussions about women being underrepresented in the MetaFilter community, particularly as authors of posts (viggorlijah 2014a). The campaign encouraged women to author more posts during the month of July 2014 and to use the tag JulyByWomen on those posts to raise the visibility of women on the site. The campaign diverged from MetaFilter's typical use of tags because the JulyByWomen tags reflected the identity of the author instead of describing the content of the post. Despite—or because of—this divergent use of tags, the campaign was considered a major success. #JulyByWomen increased visibility of and participation by women (viggorlijah 2014b), and the use of a consistent tag also provided an indexing benefit, as all of these posts were automatically collected in a single place (“Posts tagged with julybywomen” n.d.).
The success of #JulyByWomen led to further discussion about using tags to increase visibility for underrepresented voices and topics on MetaFilter. The case that we consider in this study occurred in a MetaTalk thread titled “#GlobalVoices/#NonWestNov/#GlobalSouthSept,” which was posted on August 5, 2014, directly after the conclusion of the #JulyByWomen campaign and in consultation with, viggorlixir, the MetaFilter member behind #JulyByWomen (divabat 2014). The discussion ran through August 11, 2014, with 240 total comments made by 91 different users. The post author, who identified themselves in the discussion thread as an “Asian international student currently floating between countries,” aimed to introduce a new tag to promote posts by community members “that are outside the White Western norm, especially those outside the US” and “posts about people, places, and so on that take place outside the West” (divabat 2014). The discussants readily agreed with the premise that non-Western voices and topics were underrepresented on MetaFilter and with the goal of increasing their visibility. Community members also supported using a tag as an organizing principle for achieving these goals. However, the proposal received significant constructive criticism, and this criticism can inform our understanding of how tags and identity interact.

One criticism focused on a key difference in focus between #JulyByWomen and the proposed campaign for global voices. #JulyByWomen focused specifically on increasing visibility of women as authors of MetaFilter posts, while the proposed campaign aimed to increase visibility for both underrepresented post authors and underrepresented topics. This lack of focus caused confusion about the meaning of the proposed tag. Should Western community members use the tag to post about non-Western topics? Should non-Western community members use the tag when posting about general topics? The discussion did not reach consensus on how to support both proposed goals with a single tag. Additionally, the site founder, mathowie, and other community members expressed concern that encouraging specific subjects would make the campaign less successful than #JulyByWomen. The criticisms about focus suggest that successful tags, especially tags that communicate complex information like identity and culture, should not be overloaded with multiple meanings.

Another critique of the proposal was the lack of clarity in the proposed tags. Clarity is important because, while affording individuals freedom to choose their own vocabulary is considered a feature of social tagging in general, community members need a shared meaning for a tag to use it successfully in the context of a coordinated campaign. MetaFilter community members expressed confusion about the geographical and cultural boundaries of proposed tags like GlobalVoices, GlobalSouthSept, and NonWestNov. Some were unfamiliar with the term “Global South,” some were unsure of the boundaries of “The West,” some wondered why the United Kingdom might be lumped together with the United States, and some wondered whether non-white topics from Western countries fit the campaign. In contrast, #JulyByWomen had clearer boundaries. Despite gender being complex and non-binary, the concept of “woman” created less confusion than the cultural and geographical constructions discussed in this case.

Clarity is not the only rhetorical aspect of tag construction that matters for visibility. Positive framing is critical to making underrepresented groups visible, as negative framing can marginalize or “other” these groups. For example, #JulyByWomen
was a positively framed and inclusive tag, while JulyByNotMen would have been a negatively framed tag and emphasized who was excluded. MetaFilter community members proposed a variety of tags for the global voices campaign. Those tags that used negative framing, like NonWestNov, RestOfTheWorld, and BeyondUSA were criticized for “othering” the very groups and topics that they aimed to promote. In contrast, positively or neutrally framed tags like PostMoarGlobal, SeptemberForTheWorld, and GlobalFilter were more considered more inclusive and more clear about boundaries.

Finally, this case shows that visibility has a temporal component. #JulyByWomen succeeded in part because it had clear start and end dates. One proposal for the global voices project suggested that there be an ongoing effort to raise visibility of these voices and topics. This idea was roundly rejected as a form of segregation by the post author and not revisited by other community members.

“Having it just be a 'use this tag when you're talking about stuff outside the US' kind of defeats the purpose of this project, which is to make a concentrated effort to highlight and showcase material from all around the world. It can continue past the month, but right now just having it as a general-purpose tag feels like it's siloing off those posts even more” (divabat 2014).

Ultimately, the global voices campaign did not achieve the success of #JulyByWomen, with no officially adopted tag and only 17 posts tagged with the most popular proposed tag, PostMoarGlobal (“Posts tagged with postmoarglobal” n.d.).

3.2 Post tags and deadnames

In this case the tag is an author's name, Daniel M. Lavery (Wikipedia contributors 2020). This author has published work under the names Mallory Oldberg, Daniel Mallory Oldberg, and Daniel M. Lavery. The question put to the discussion thread is two-fold.

“I posted Daniel Mallory Ortberg’s latest instalment of his ongoing serial fic. When tagging the post, I was conflicted about tagging it with his deadname (which is “Mallory Ortberg”. Two questions: 1) on a technical level, will tagging with his full name link up with older posts tagged with his deadname, since the latter is included in the former? He’s the same author, and that continuity of work seems valuable. 2) on a trans-etiquette level, is this shitty and equivalent to deadnaming? (I’m more interested in hearing what trans folks have to say on this one.) I ended up tagging the post with his name and his deadname but I’m questioning that” (sixswitch 2019).

The first question shows us a mental model on how tags work in MetaFilter. The second question is framed as an etiquette question, but given the responses in the thread it is not limited to that. For this tagging community it becomes a contested conceptual move. The term deadname is called into question as inappropriate. So we have two levels of terminology work that surface. One in the tag and its content and the other what we call part of the content of that tag. Both of these rely on community input to reconcile.

The first question is immediately answered. It is a technical question of the mechanics of the tagging system of the site. Further, action is taken by a moderator, Eyebrows McGee, to add the tag danielmalloryoldberg to all posts that had a combination of those names or a subset of those names.

The second question, while framed as an etiquette question, quickly turns into a discussion of the use of deadname in the post. The community rejets this terminology for a name used by a person before they transition to another gender. A decision is taken to flag tags like this as “flag with note” (Lobstermitten 2019). What follows are various discussions of the dynamics of interacting with trans people both in the community of MetaTalk and through tagging.
This etiquette question goes right to the heart of identity and its relationship to tagging. It required the community to engage with sensitive terminology and negotiate how identity changes and does not change in the context of gender transitioning. This engagement and negotiation required intellectual work to understand the role of tags in identity representation. The community did not demand change other than that taken by the moderator. Further, there was no resolution on best practices that the community adopted in this context. It remains to be seen whether best practices will surface around this particular issue at this time.

3.3 Personal expression in tagging

Tags on MetaFilter are valued primarily for their utility, as evidenced by recurring questions about tagging best practices and requests for search and browse features to increase tag utility. For example, MetaFilter community members ask about how to ensure that tags accurately describe the subject matter, how to make tags sufficiently specific, and how to format tags syntactically and orthographically to support retrieval in search and browse modalities (Going to Maine 2016). MetaFilter community members, many of whom are academics and librarians, answer knowledgeably about indexing best practices and the technical details of MetaFilter's tagging and retrieval ecosystem.

Despite the primary focus on utility, tagging is not seen as exclusively utilitarian by the MetaFilter community. Because tags are assigned by post authors, they are considered part of that post author's personal expression. Exercising the freedom that this perspective affords, some community members use tags to joke about and comment on the topics of their posts. These personal expression tags generally do not support retrieval and are rarely descriptive in a traditional indexing sense, but they do allow community members to express their personality and viewpoints and, when used appropriately, can build a sense of community. The question, then, becomes: When and how are personal expression tags beneficial, when and how are they inimical, and how does a community balance these potential benefits and harms?

Multiple MetaTalk discussions recognize the benefit of the creative use of tags. For example, one post asked community members what their favorite tags are and received numerous spirited responses about obscure and humorous tags (Fizz 2017). The humorous use of tags is evident throughout MetaFilter, such as one post with 75 tags, all synonyms for nonsense (Just this guy, y'know 2017). These tags entertain, provide commentary, and establish the personality of the community.

However, some community members have asked whether humorous tags are harmful. For example, one member asked whether an extremely long joke tag should “be frowned upon” (i love cheese 2006). The consensus response was that such tags are not harmful to the folksonomy and have value outside of indexing: “I don't think it affects the usefulness of tags, as long as more accurate tags are included. Plus it makes me smile” (cali 2006). This sentiment is repeated in a discussion about a more controversial tag, batshitinsane (UKnowForKids 2005).

“Silly tags are only noise when that's the only tag you use for your post. If there's four other decent tags included that people might actually use for a search, then why does it matter if there is one that no one will ever use as a search term?” (23skidoo 2005).

However, the tag batshitinsane is problematic for reasons other than being noise in the folksonomy—it is derogatory, vulgar, and persistently popular as a form of humor. As
such, it has been the topic of multiple discussion threads. One such post asks if the term is offensive (CCBC 2010). MetaFilter moderators determined that the tag should not be outright banned, but encouraged community members to use it responsibly. They considered gratuitous use of the tag in posts about mental health and use of the tag to editorialize and stifle discussion to be irresponsible uses, showing that in this case community norms and not utility determined the appropriateness of a personal expression tag.

Another form of personal expression through tagging is not about humor, positioning, or performance. It is about identity and visibility. Shortly after MetaFilter implemented tagging, one prolific user tagged all of their posts with their username to increase their visibility. This approach to tagging ran counter to the intent of tags being descriptive of content, but some community members considered it “harmless fun” (calwatch 2005). Site founder mathowie, however, considered this type of personal expression through tagging to be harmful.

“Tags were added as a way to categorize everything on the site under descriptive keywords. The poster's name doesn't really impart any info, and since you can already find every post by a username, I repeat that it's in effect already built-in and pointless to essentially state the same information twice. There's no need to make usernames into explicit tags. I'm sure quonsar just wanted to see his name in lights on the popular page, which he did, and now is gone. Whoop-de-doo” (mathowie 2005).

This case of tagging as personal expression was considered harmful for reasons of utility—it added confusing noise to the folksonomy—and for reasons of community norms—it did not build community through personal expression, instead benefiting just one user.

4.0 Findings and Conclusion

As is reflected in the literature, tagging is an activity that expands our notion of indexing (Golder and Huberman 2006; Tennis 2006; Munk and Mørk 2007). Tags are powerful symbols of community and are infused with the power to create inclusivity in the community. Therefore, care must be taken to understand how best to curate a tag collection to promote visibility, identity, and personal expression in the community. The power of tags, and the care that they require, are reflected in the extensive discussions on MetaTalk. We analyzed three cases in these discussions to study, qualitatively and deeply, how the MetaFilter community uses the power of social tagging to increase representation and visibility of underrepresented voices, to respect the identities of authors and cultural groups, and to balance the utility of descriptive tags with humor and personal expression.

We found that tags can increase visibility for underrepresented groups, provided that the tags have a clear focus and purpose, clear boundaries, positive and inclusive framing, and are part of a time-bound, concerted campaign. Especially in folksonomies that support unlimited tags for each resource, these visibility tags do not harm retrieval utility and can have a significant benefit of inclusivity, both practical and symbolic. However, the community must agree on a canonical tag for such efforts to succeed. The effort to promote voices outside of the Western and white voices that dominate the community failed because the community, despite significant care and effort, could not establish a clearly defined canonical term to use as a tag.

Similar to our first case, which showed that care and attention can increase the visibility of women's contributions on MetaFilter, our second case demonstrated that
substantive and careful effort can ensure that a social tagging community respects a trans author's wishes in naming. Community moderators implemented a technical solution to unite works authored under different names, and the community discussed with care both the intersection of social tagging and personal identity, and the ethics—not just etiquette—of deadnaming and the use of the term “deadname” itself. This discussion illuminates the symbolic and practical power of tags as signifiers of identity, and shows the importance of not tarnishing tags by implementing them without care and attention.

Finally, in the third case, we saw the tension present between utility and humor in tagging. The role of humor was both contested and celebrated in this context. The community viewed potentially superfluous tags as not harmful, provided descriptive tags were also provided, and beneficial to personal expression, humor, and a sense of community. Specific instances of humor were called out as inimical, however. The use of humorous tags to trivialize sensitive subjects, to stifle balanced discussion, or to promote one's self were considered inappropriate and harmful uses of the power of tags. It seems, then, that using tags for personal expression and humor are generally supported, provided their use does not undermine the core utility of tags or the social values of the community.

The deep, qualitative analysis of social tagging that is presented in this study represents a small step toward understanding social taggers in a more robust way, akin to how we understand the motivations and knowledge of professional indexers. Through the vibrant communication among members of the MetaFilter community, we can see the attitudes, motivations, knowledge, and values that shape social tagging in an online community. We recommend further study of modern social tagging sites to better understand how social tagging works as an integral feature of online communities.

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