LibraryThing and the Library Catalog: Adding Collective Intelligence to the OPAC

The Goal: Enhancing the Catalog with Web 2.0 Technologies

Web 2.0 theorists argue that Internet technologies now allow us to harness the “Wisdom of the Crowd” in unprecedented ways. Successful online experiments such as Wikipedia demonstrate that the collective knowledge of millions of users can produce reference works that are more comprehensive than traditional reference sources produced by a small group of experts. Similarly, “folksonomies,” which use the judgment of the crowd to organize documents, have worked extremely well on popular Web 2.0 sites such as Flickr, del.icio.ous, and LibraryThing. By collecting and analyzing the private descriptions – the tags – that users add to their own photos, URLs, and books, these sites generate valuable metadata about public documents and resources.

Traditional library OPACs lack mechanisms for collecting the knowledge of library patrons. The classification schemes used to organize library collections rely on the expertise of a small group of specialists with detailed knowledge of the Dewey Decimal system, the Library of Congress classification system and the Library of Congress subject headings. Although this system works well as far as it goes, a Library 2.0 catalog that could generate additional metadata from the wisdom of library patrons would enhance the value of the OPAC. An library catalog that could point users to “recommended” titles in the collection based on the reading habits and descriptions of their fellow patrons would be a great benefit to many readers.

The Problem: Library communities are too small to achieve critical mass

For the past few years, OPAC vendors have worked hard to add Web 2.0 features to traditional library catalogs. Many OPACs now allow users to rate and review library books. Some OPAC vendors also have begun to experiment with user generated tags. So far, however, these features have been underused and have added little value to library catalogs. There seem to be at least three basic problems with this approach:

- The community served by any one library is too small to achieve the critical mass required for effective folksonomies. The more people that generate tags the more valuable a folksonomy becomes. However, library users are fragmented into thousands of small communities served by thousands of local libraries.

- Libraries are late-comers to the game of rating and reviewing books. Amazon already has become the dominant player in the world of user-generated book reviews. It is hard to play catch up when most people already think of Amazon.com as the place to go to read and write amateur reviews.
In successful Web 2.0 sites such as del.icio.ous and LibraryThing users have a private incentive to tag their own collections. The site then compiles private tags to generate public metadata. So far, there is no private incentive for library users to add descriptions to the public catalog. As group, library users might benefit greatly from a folksonomy, but individual patrons have little motive to catalog books for others.

A Solution: Using Folksonomies Created by LibraryThing Users

LibraryThing, www.librarything.com, offers libraries an elegant solution to these barriers to developing Next Generation catalogs. LibraryThing.com already has achieved critical mass and has become the place that readers go to catalog and organize their own collections of books. There are thousands of LibraryThing users who have tagged millions of books on the site. Consequently, LibraryThing has harvested a rich collection of user-generated metadata about books that it presents in tag clouds and uses to make recommendations.

For a fairly small fee, LibraryThing now is allowing libraries to use its collective wisdom in local library catalogs. By adding LibraryThing widgets to their OPACs, libraries can use LibraryThing tags to generate links between related books in their own collection.
Examples:

Danbury Public Library: [http://cat.danburylibrary.org/record=1263104](http://cat.danburylibrary.org/record=1263104)

Danbury was the first library to add the LibraryThing widgets to its catalog. The LibraryThing data is integrated almost seamlessly into the record display. Depending on their OPAC vendor, libraries have a great deal of freedom in controlling how and where the widgets display in the record. The links use the ISBN search interface of the catalog to take patrons to “similar books.”

![LibraryThing and the Library Catalog](image)

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San Francisco State University Library (Coming Soon)

San Francisco State will be the first or second Academic library in the United States to add the LibraryThing widgets. Note that San Francisco uses a visual cue to distinguish between information derived from LibraryThing and information housed in the catalog. Libraries control display through CSS. Note also the differences between the LC subject headings and the LibraryThing tags, which are simultaneously available to the user.
The Tag Browser

This is what happens when the user clicks on a tag in the SFSU catalog. All of the links point to other books in the library catalog. It uses JavaScript to make the catalog more interesting and interactive for library patrons.

Implementation

Most of the work required to set this up is done by LibraryThing, but there is some work for the OPAC administrator. There are four basic steps in the process from the perspective of the library.


2. Upload a file of the ISBNs in the library catalog to LibraryThing. LibraryThing prefers a delimited (tab, pipe, or comma) file that includes ISBN, Title, and Author. LibraryThing will compare the file to its collection of ISBNs. (see p. 6)

3. Configure the widgets on the LibraryThing site. Libraries have control over how many tags and recommendations will appear in record. They have access to CSS to control the display, and they have the power to turn the widgets on and off (see p. 6).

4. Add the widgets to the record display in the library catalog. The widgets are added by adding a link to a JavaScript file that LibraryThing writes specifically for each library that signs up for the service. The location of the widgets in the display is control by div tags that are added to the html of the record display page.
Interesting Reading:

Surowiecki, James (2004) The wisdom of crowds: why the many are smarter than the few and how collective wisdom shapes business, economies, societies and nations.


Keen, Andrew (2007). The cult of the amateur: how today's internet is killing our culture.


Thingology: A blog about LibraryThing’s philosophy of tagging: http://www.librarything.com/thingology/


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