

Chapter 14

Social Tagging and Secondary School Libraries: Insights from the AO3 Framework

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the Archive of Our Own (AO3) tagging system and backend design to determine how its successful elements can be implemented in a secondary school library setting. Specifically, it looks at social tagging on the platform to evaluate how effective a collaborative tag-based search system could be as a supplement to a traditional school library catalog. The author conducted field research and created an online library tagging template for school use. Google Forms are also used to generate content for the platform, which is designed for both librarian and student user groups. This work was carried out throughout the 2019-2020 school year. The author found that community care, subject knowledge, and “tag wrangling” are the key elements of the AO3 that can potentially be leveraged in a secondary school library environment to promote student engagement and reading for pleasure.

INTRODUCTION

In 1876, Melvil Dewey devised an elegant method for categorizing the world’s books. The Dewey Decimal System divides books into 10 broad subject areas and several hundred sub-areas and then assigns each volume a precise number...But on the Internet, a new approach to categorization is emerging. Thomas Vander Wal, an information architect and Internet developer, has dubbed it folksonomy — a people’s taxonomy. (Pink, 2005)

With the rise of the internet and more users accessing it, digital data has increased exponentially. The current online data excess requires a type of subject marking to encourage productivity in search; however, the volume of data is well past a size that could ever be managed by data experts. Folksonomy, or social tagging, is a way to deal with this issue. Non-experts endeavor to organize online data by means of tagging.

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Tags are keywords added to content by users. They are generally descriptive, indicating the subject matter or location of content and even providing commentary. Tagging is both a form of information architecture and a means of personal information management, and tagging system considerations rest on “personal versus social uses, individual versus standard tags, freedom versus control, and amateur opinions versus those of experts” (Smith, 2008, p. 20). As a versatile and interpersonal method of categorization, it can be a helpful way of dealing with the ceaseless stream of online information. Free tagging allows users to create their own tags to describe their content rather than enforcing a rigid taxonomy of categories and terms created by the owners of the platform. Folksonomy, or social tagging, evolved from the “personal free tagging of information...for one’s own retrieval” (Vander Wal, 2007). It is a collaborative classification system that develops as users tag content to make it easier for themselves or others to find (Pink, 2005). According to Smith, dependable tagging relies to a certain degree on controlled vocabularies, which connect different terms with the same definition via synonym rings (that link terms with the same definitions) and authority files (which do the same while prioritizing one as the preferred term). Systems can also blend controlled and free tagging by employing user-generated controlled vocabularies. An example of a platform that successfully utilizes social tagging is Archive of Our Own.

Archive of Our Own (AO3) is a fan-driven storytelling platform for transformative works, in which “some element of a canon work—the source text or event—is taken and incorporated into a new creative piece. The taken element can be the characters, world setting, plot, stories, still images, video clips, or something else from the source” (Firestone & Clark, 2018, p. 36). As of 2020, the Archive contains 5,622,000 works and supports 2,289,000 users across over 35,630 fandoms. One of AO3’s overall philosophical mandates is to be a home for works at risk of being taken down on other fan sites. The site is explicitly designed by and for fans: the homepage reads, “A fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fan works, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic.” Archive of Our Own won the Hugo Award for Best Related Work in 2019, evidence of its eminence.

AO3 is built on open source code, programmed by volunteers in the Ruby on Rails web framework. A unique feature of AO3 is its tags. While tags have been used on many online platforms, tagging has developed into a culture on AO3. Users not only use the tags to sort their posts, but also as a means of creative expression. Tagging has developed into an art form. The tagging system on AO3 was developed by librarians; their craft shows in how effective the system is. At present, users posting fan works can make their own tags, so it is in that sense a free tagging framework. However, some tags that are posted by users are considered non-canonical and are connected to the authoritative terms in the backend by volunteers known as “tag wranglers.” The authoritative terms are set up by the wranglers for character names, pairings, and “source” names—the TV program, book, film, and so forth with which the fan work is identified. There is a particular arrangement of rules by which the wranglers decide the standard term—one common rule is showing that a story includes a romantic or sexual connection between two specific characters by means of a forward slash between their names. For example, Elizabeth Bennet/Fitzwilliam Darcy is the canonical term for the lead couple of *Pride and Prejudice*. The framework is comparable to the “use” and “used for” cross-referencing in Library of Congress authority records (Dalton, 2012). The AO3 tag system’s vocabulary control is noteworthy.

AO3 uses free tagging, but certain tags are required, such as a rating and a warning. The ratings on AO3 are comparable to those used in film: Not Rated, General, Teen and Up, Mature, and Explicit. Warnings include: Choose Not to Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Descriptions of Violence, Major Character Death, No Archive Warnings Apply, Rape/Non-con[sensual], and Underage. The purpose of

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