# Enhancing Subject Access to Materials in Library OPACs: Are Folksonomies the Answer?

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*Topics:* Information organization
*Keywords:* folksonomy, tagging, subject access, subject headings

In 2004, Thomas Vander Wal coined the term "folksonomy" to refer to user-defined labels (or "tags") that facilitate the organization and classification of information. Folksonomies are most frequently used in conjunction with social software websites, and allow users to collaboratively tag bookmarks, photographs, and other information items. In contrast to traditional subject-indexing languages that typically employ controlled vocabularies, folksonomies rely on the natural languages of their user base. Vander Wal (2007) maintains that the value of folksonomies is rooted in "people using their own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning, which may come from inferred understanding of the information/object. People are not so much categorizing, as providing a means to connect items (placing hooks) to provide their meaning in their own understanding."

LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com), a "social cataloging" website through which users can catalog their personal book collections, allows users to assign descriptive metadata to books in the form of folksonomic tags. As a means of enhancing its records, LibraryThing also employs the more traditional subject language of libraries: Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). For many years, LCSH has been heavily criticized for its lack of currency, biased language, and atypical syntactical structure. In a study of end-user understanding of subject headings, Drabenstott, Simcox, and Fenton (1999) found that in only 36% of cases did users correctly interpret the meaning of the headings. Despite the inaccessibility of LCSH, little has been done to integrate any more usable or readily understandable subject languages into library catalogs.

Recently, LibraryThing has leveraged the descriptive metadata assigned to titles into LibraryThing for Libraries (LTFL), a series of enhancements that can be incorporated into a library's online public access catalog (OPAC). In an OPAC, the LTFL display will add a tag cloud of the most popular tags to a title's catalog record; libraries can also elect to include a recommendation feature, which will direct users to similar books in the library's collection (FAQ – LibraryThing for Libraries, 2008). The evolution of folksonomies, particularly as they are applied on a site such as LibraryThing, raises the question: What types of descriptive languages provide the most comprehensive subject access to materials in libraries?

This research will examine a given set of books and compare their LibraryThing folksonomic tags with their assigned Library of Congress Subject Headings. In particular, I am looking for commonalities and differences in the ways in which these subject languages describe

the materials to which they are applied.  Can folksonomies be used to enhance subject access to materials in library catalogs? What does user tagging tell us about the way that people think about the subjects of a book?  In an information environment where students are so attuned to keyword and Google-style searching, does the application of folksonomic tags increase the findability of library materials?

References

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