

Museums and social tagging

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Abstract

Museums are memory centers, institutions that preserve, record, and exhibit artifacts, but also knowledge centers, educating patrons on the various artifacts present in their institutions. With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, museums can digitize and present their collections online to a wider population. Cataloging museum pieces is a complex process requiring research of the individual artifacts to be able to provide the most accurate description. This process has been traditionally undertaken by archivists and museum curators who then systematically classify and describe objects. All people bring a unique perspective when examining and interpreting an object. Social Tagging is one way of bridging the gap between traditional museum cataloging and the ability for the patron to engage in the practice of cataloging by assigning terms meaningful to them. This paper will briefly explore the concept of social tagging within museums and cultural centers.

Museums are memory centers, institutions that preserve, record, and exhibit artifacts, but also knowledge centers, educating patrons on the various artifacts present in their institutions. Many of the artifacts within a museum do not have a creator or a title, unlike books in a library. "Artifacts collected and exhibited are diverse: organic and inorganic, cultural and natural, ancient and contemporary" (Gill, 2017) Due to the diverse artifacts within any museum or cultural institution, knowledge organizations must be specialized to catalog and describe the materials accurately. These knowledge organizations must be "unique instantiation of an object and its temporal, geospatial, and cultural relationships" (Gill, 2017). Cataloging museum pieces is a complex process requiring research of the individual artifacts to be able to provide the most accurate description. This process has been traditionally undertaken by archivists and museum curators who then systematically classify and describe objects. This method includes a choice of metadata scheme and the choice of vocabularies (Srinivasan, 2009) and provides a standard for access to a particular museum collection. This, however, is met with a few challenges. One of those challenges is the choice of vocabulary for individual objects. Different people may use different words to describe an object based on their biases, assumptions, culture, or history. All people bring a unique perspective when examining and interpreting an object. "The fact is that individuals within a given community attach different descriptions to shared phenomena, and they need to continue to describe the world differently. These different descriptions do not arise, only, from different languages and different semantics, but arise from different, often incommensurable, knowledge practices. As each of us is a member of different communities, we each describe and classify our world using different concepts at different times and for different purposes" (Boast, 2007).

With the advent of Web2.0 technology, museums can digitize and present their collections online to a wider population. It is common for larger museums to display only a small portion of their collection. The remaining collections are kept for future displays, loans to other institutions, or for research (Dutia, 2021). To move past traditional cataloging, Web 2.0 technologies have been employed by museums to engage current and new patrons alike. These technologies, including social tagging and blogs, can help bridge the gap between a museum and its patrons. Additionally, social tagging can help professionals to understand diverse ways of thinking and categorizing an object. "Information professionals are beginning to recognize the possible use of tags in bridging the semantic gap between the terminology used by professionals and search terms of end users" (Choi, 2016). An item may not be able to accurately be described based on existing vocabulary or metadata. Social tagging, which is a natural language, can help expand the terms available to artifacts museum professionals can use within their catalog system. Additionally, museums must start merging traditional work (the system of classifying and describing objects) with novel approaches (social tags, blogs) to engage communities and encourage diversity. Social tagging for the past few years has been explored by museums to provide a way to engage users and support social interaction among the users of the website. "The promise of social tagging is that participants can describe objects according to categories of their own choosing, and potentially allow the object to be referenced by a rich set of descriptors that would be otherwise absent within the traditional museum catalog" (Srinivasan, 2009). "This allows patrons to directly connect with works of art, to own by labeling or naming them..." (Trant, 2006). Tagging can be beneficial to both the user and the museum by stimulating discussion on the objects and providing active engagement with patrons.

An early example of a social tagging project is the *Proof of Concept Testing* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art between Fall 2004-Fall 2005. This project was to determine if untrained cataloguers were able to provide useful descriptions and access points through tagging activities. They wanted to determine if social tagging could be added to the museum's documentation. Results of this project indicated that participants were able to supply a substantial number (77%) of valid tags for each work. This provided "validation for exploring social tagging and folksonomy as an access strategy within The Metropolitan Museum" (Trant, 2006). Based on The Metropolitan Museum Proof of Concept results, professionals from museums and organizations formed *steve*. *steve.museum* is a collaboration to explore the social tagging/folksonomy description question. Trant (2006) describes *steve* as an "open collaboration with an experimental, research driven methodology". According to the website, "steve is a collaboration of museum professionals and others who believe that social tagging may provide profound new ways to describe and access cultural heritage collections and encourage visitor engagement with collection objects. Our activities include researching social tagging and museum collections; developing open-source software tools for tagging collections and managing tags; and engaging in discussion and outreach with members of the community who are interested in implementing social tagging for their own collections" (<http://steve.museum>). From this project Trant (2006) found that 86% of tags were not found in museum documentation, and many were found to be useful by museum staff for searching. These are brief descriptions of only two of various projects assessing the feasibility of social tagging within museums.

There are many benefits of social tagging including engagement between museum professionals and patrons, increasing search terms, and filling in gaps of perception of individuals. There are however concerns facing the museum, cataloging, and archive professionals. Benoit (2018) compared two nearly identical studies, one conducted in 2010, the other in 2016 which documented growing concerns from practitioners about social tagging. Compared to the study in 2010, the more recent study showed that participants were more concerned with "potential issues and abuses of tagging systems in 2016, as shown by the significant increase in agreement with statements regarding uncontrollability, troublesome users, consistency issues, and sensitive topics" (Benoit, 2018). Quality control and consistency issues were other growing concerns of practitioners between the studies. Based on the studies he compared practitioner perceptions of social tagging and found that in 2016 more felt a stronger need for "incorporating safeguards, including spell-checking features, tutorials, the ability to block users, and requiring that staff review tags before allowing them into the system" (Benoit, 2018). Including these safeguards into practice, social tagging has the potential to benefit museums in being better able to connect and engage with the community. Despite the potential drawbacks, social tagging is moving forward within the museum and cultural heritage communities.

References

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