The Wisdom of My Crowd: 
Motivation and Audience in Enterprise Social Tagging

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ABSTRACT
Social tagging systems allow users to share resources categorized according to community-generated tags. These systems serve to organize personal information, provide opportunities for users to express their identities and to allow for social information seeking. In this paper, we examine the motivations behind tag selection, specifically focusing on the social aspects of choosing tags for an audience. We describe initial results from a qualitative study of users of tagging systems deployed within a large enterprise. Exploratory coding suggests that users remain cognizant that their tags play a social role and that users’ tag selection strategies are managed with respect to this awareness.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces

General Terms
Human Factors

Keywords
Tagging, social software, community, audience

1. INTRODUCTION
Social tagging systems have emerged as a compelling technological framework in which to study the development of distributed communities [4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11]. One common approach, social bookmarking, allows users to categorize shared resources using tags [4]. Social bookmarking systems inject sociality into information seeking; that is, users search for resources via community browsing, such as looking for bookmarks according to popularity or by who’s creating the tag [7].

Tagging motivation within these social systems has been characterized in a largely dichotomous manner. Marlow et al. [6] employ the categories of organizational vs. social, where organizational motivations help users seek individual benefit for re-finding personal resources. Social motivations are expressive of the tagger’s identity and therefore serve a communicative function within the tagging community, possibly including impression management [2, 3] (for related arguments about performing one’s identity through tags, see [9, 10]). Ames and Naaman [1] refine these distinctions by describing interactions between function and sociality. In this case, function encompasses both organization of resources and communication, while sociality describes tagging for oneself versus other recipients (i.e. viewers of the content).

Tag typology has also been studied with respect to whether or not tags are helpful in completing a task [9] or whether they fulfill a specific function such as information retrieval [4]. It is not yet clear from a priori categorization of tags what motivations exist for selecting specific tags. In this poster, we focus primarily on the social motivations behind the tag-selection process, specifically the awareness of one’s audience. We then describe initial findings from a qualitative study of users of tagging systems that are deployed within a large enterprise.

2. METHODOLOGY
We are conducting a field study in which we observe members of two communities of practice within an enterprise: project managers and user experience designers. We focus on these two specific communities to more closely investigate tagging within teams and within communities of practice. Semi-structured interviews are being conducted with a sample of 40 individuals (20 from each community), stratified by tagging activity as determined by log analysis of the Dogear internal social bookmarking website [7].

Interviews include a series of open-ended questions regarding informants’ roles in the organization, the communities with which they identify and general discussion regarding their tagging activities, concluding with specific probes in which we ask informants to discuss specific tags that they have created in different tagging systems. Coding of the interviews is influenced by grounded theory (e.g. [5]): there is no a priori hypothesis; theory emerges from the data; and there are several rounds of interviewing in which the questions for later round are influenced by the themes emerging from analysis of the preceding rounds.

3. INITIAL FINDINGS
We now present themes that have emerged from our initial coding of the interview transcripts.¹

3.1 Social bookmarking and broadcasting
Based on our sampling strategy (high-volume and low-volume taggers in the Dogear site), we asked about user involvement in

¹ There are no apparent differences between project manager and user experience communities so the data are reported across both groups.
different internal systems that employ tagging. Users reported activity in a variety of systems including an enterprise blogging tool where posts are categorized using tags [8], an employee directory allowing for tagging of contacts [2], and a media repository for categorizing internal podcasts. Coupled with the social bookmarking tool, bloggers and podcasters were especially aware that they were employing a combination of media that allowed them to broadcast to an audience. This awareness is supported by several design features in the deployed systems, e.g., subscriptions to one’s bookmarks or podcasts and the authentication of users in each system based on directory [7].

“My audience is people, people who are interested in the different topics that I blog about, bookmark...I have a passion for things regarding knowledge management, knowledge sharing, collaboration...community building, learning, social networking.” (LS, Community Manager)

Broadcasters (authors of blogs and podcasts) used specific tags share information within relatively narrowly-defined topics with larger enterprise audiences (broadcasters also used many other tags, but in a less deliberate or strategic manner). Broadcasters are aware of how their material drives their audience between each of these systems. Because of this shared audience, broadcasters noted that they tried to keep their tags consistent between services but that they were not always successful in their attempts.

“People who are interested in what I’m talking about will also go find me on BlogCentral and Blogger as well. That’s why it’s important for me to keep my tags similar.” (JL, Project Manager)

Besides broadcasting one’s interests and thoughts, the variety of available social tagging systems allowed informants to share their expertise within the organization and to keep track of others’ expertise informally as well. This behavior was especially supported by the employee directory with tagging functionality in which informants used a combination of tags describing their contacts’ expertise and their interests as well. Sharing expertise through tagging also proved valuable in that one could broadcast their expertise to keep track of others’ available social tagging systems allowed informants to share their expertise informally as well. This behavior was especially important for me to keep my tags similar.” (LS, Community Manager)

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“What I like about tagging...it drives on your ability, not on your title...your ability to share. That’s what really got me into it.” (RB, Project Manager)

3.2 The wisdom of “my” crowd

However, the audience is not an undifferentiated one. Instead, users are aware that it is largely composed of members of the organization who aren’t necessarily strangers. The audience usually shares mutual interests (more frequently) and job function (less frequently). As a result, users tailor their tags to their audience by anticipating how each audience might be drawn to the content they are highlighting in each of these systems:

“I choose a selection of tags, as many as possible, in order to pique interest so that people can read it (a web bookmark). It’s not really for me to re-find – I know what each of these articles are.” (ET, Visual Designer)

However, the individual utility of social tagging systems remains salient. While the active taggers in our sample do believe that the value of tagging is primarily social and expressive of one’s interests to an audience, the ease of re-finding bookmarks and blog posts also plays a role in tag selection (see also [7]). We suggest that the dichotomy between social and individual benefit is not as rigid as previously suggested (e.g., in [1, 4, 6, 7]).

4. CONCLUSION

Previous accounts [1, 4, 6, 7] have proposed a binary distinction between tagging for everyone (“the wisdom of the crowd”) vs. tagging for individualistic information retrieval (what might be called “the wisdom of me”). We propose a more nuanced model of social tagging, in which there is a continuum between the individual, the known audience, and the community as a whole (Figure 1). Our initial coding suggests that the social tagging within this organization includes awareness of delimited audiences of shared interests (what we call “the wisdom of my crowd”). We plan to map whether or not these emergent audiences overlap with more formalized community structures, such as online community membership.

5. REFERENCES
