Enhancing Public Library Catalogs with Bibliocommons

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Abstract

While public libraries used to serve as the primary source for individuals to find information, folks are now able to obtain a vast amount of material from online resources. In order to stay relevant in a new, competitive field of information, public libraries need to become accessible to users through the internet. One way for libraries to be competitive with other online information sources is to encourage online patron interaction through catalog software, like Bibliocommons, which allows users to interact with material by adding tags, writing reviews, adding ratings, and interacting with other patrons online. In order for Bibliocommons to be successful in a public library, librarians need to develop an online presence with their users and conduct trainings about different facets of the software. Doing so will can make a library’s catalog more inclusive, and more conducive to self-directed material discovery.
Enhancing Public Library Catalogs with Bibliocommons

Public libraries have served as centers of community education since their inception. Before the internet, people would come to a physical library building to obtain information about any given topic. In fact, libraries “once had a near-monopoly as information providers” whereas, now, public libraries “face increasing competition from online information providers” (Spiteri and Turelli, 2012, p. 134). In order to compete with online search engines and social media websites, library catalogs need to adapt to the capabilities of current search engines and social media sites. Bibliocommons allows users to interact with material and other users through the library catalog like they might on a popular social media site. That is, Bibliocommons enhances traditional cataloging system with Library of Congress subject headings and keyword searches with user-generated content, including tags, ratings, comments, and discussion boards. The interactive nature of Bibliocommons makes the public library catalog more user-friendly, more approachable, and more valuable to users than the limited traditional catalog.

**Literature Review**

**Bibliocommons**

Bibliocommons, a Canadian company, provides public libraries a platform through which to stay relevant and appealing in a new competitive market. The company’s mission is to “help public libraries deliver the same kind of rich discovery and community connection experiences online that the library has always delivered in its branches -- all built around the heart of the library: its collections” (About us, 2016). In other words, a public library using Bibliocommons has the same fundamental mission as any other library: to connect a user with necessary and relevant information. However, through Bibliocommons, librarians and library
systems can connect users to information through a virtual and interactive medium instead of, or in addition to, an in-person exchange. Public libraries in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have adopted the interactive Bibliocommons cataloging software. Some of those libraries include: Seattle Public Library, Vancouver Public Library, and Christchurch City Libraries (Participating libraries, 2016).

One way through which Bibliocommons users can interact with their public library’s catalog is through an mobile app. A mobile application makes the catalog accessible, which proved to be a priority to users of the Vancouver Public Library (VPL) when VPL pursued a website redesign starting in 2008 (Cahill, 2011). During this process, VPL conducted extensive user experience surveys, interviews and focus groups through which users expressed several “priorities for change” including: “added or improved functionality; better (simpler, faster) searching; improved usability; clearer results/item status displays; reviews and summaries; and recommendations from librarians and other users” (Cahill, 2011, p. 274).

**Social tagging in Bibliocommons**

Bibliocommons allows users to create tags for items, just as users can add tags on social media sites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram. Tags created in one library exist in all Bibliocommons catalogs. For example, a tag created by a Seattle Public Library user will appear under the same item in the Vancouver Public Library catalog. By expanding user-generated tags across all catalogs which use Bibliocommons, the social content across all libraries becomes richer. One way to improve this would be to expand this concept across the same titles in different mediums. For example, e-books with the same title as physical books should have the
same tags. Currently, titles are not synchronized in this way (Ajiferuke, Goodfellow, & Opesade, 2015, p. 269).

In 2012, Spiteri and Tarulli found tag searches in Bibliocommons only made up 0.9 percent of total user searches which indicates that users do not know how to effectively utilize the tag feature. Similarly, in another recent study, tags proved to be the least effective access point by which to search compared with keyword and subject searches (Ajiferuke, Goodfellow, and Opesade, 2015). That is; searches by tag returned fewer results than similar searches conducted by keyword or subject heading. While the integration of tagging into library cataloging systems is hoped to increase accessibility to material, users searching by tag instead of keyword or subject will retrieve far less results than users searching by existing keywords or subjects.

**Online Reader’s Advisory**

In order to make the library a more competitive source of information, library services that once took place exclusively at the library now take place online, as well. A library service users depend on is Reader’s Advisory (RA), aid in finding a book or information material. In RA, a librarian will discuss a patron’s reading interest, obtain clarity from the patron as needed, and eventually the librarian will find relevant information with and for the patron (Pecoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli, 2014). Modern day library patrons desire virtual RA sessions, in addition to RA sessions conducted with other patrons, instead of only librarians (Pecoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli, 2014, Cahill, 2011).

When librarians asked users at VPL what they wanted from their library website, users requested book recommendations from librarians, as well as fellow users (Cahill, 2011). With
Bibliocommons, patrons can write their own recommendations and critiques of books using the Bibliocommons interface (Cahill, 2011). This feature expands a library’s reader’s advisory service immensely. Firstly, instead of accessing book recommendations in-person, or perhaps by phone, users are able to find book recommendations, decide on a book, and download an e-book in the location of their choosing. This service can make a person’s public library card just as valuable as Amazon by linking information and access in one virtual place. Secondly, Bibliocommons enables users to receive recommendations from fellow users, in addition to librarians. Users can “follow” other Bibliocommons users to see what they have read, reviews they have written, and ratings for materials. This is a unique parallel to the in-person librarian-patron RA during which a librarian may ask what books a patron has read and enjoyed.

**Discussion**

**Using Bibliocommons**

In order to understand Bibliocommons more, I conducted my own searches using various access points. Using Seattle Public Library’s website, I conducted searches using the same phrase for the following access points: tag, subject, and keyword. I used four different phrases which represented non-dominant user groups, as Bates and Rowley’s, 2011, research suggested that social tagging may make library catalogs more inclusive. As an extension of Bates and Rowley’s (2011) research, the first phrase searched was “LGBT” and returned 122, 105, and 158 results for tag, subject, and keyword searches respectively. The second phrase searched was “People of color” and returned 3, 16, and 265 results for tag, subject, and keyword searches respectively. The third phrase, “Queer” returned 68, 40, and 381 results for tag, subject, and keyword searches respectively. Finally, the fourth phrase, “Women of color” returned 6, 26,
280 results for tag, subject, and keyword respectively. Two searches returned more results by tag than by subject, and all searches returned the most results by keyword. The searches conducted above were consistent with the literature presented.

**Limitations of tagging**

One challenge with tagging is that users must create them in order for tag searching to be effective. Social tags have the capacity to make the library catalog more inclusive for non-dominant cultures which would be an immense service to patrons searching for information about subjects not effectively represented by LC subject headings. For example, Bates and Rowley, 2011, conducted a study which analyzed the tags on LibraryThing, a social networking site which “allows users to tag their own book collections” (p. 436), to the existing Library of Congress Subject Headings. While the tags on LibraryThing proved to be more inclusive of non-dominant cultures, specifically “LGBTQ” materials, than existing LC subject headings, most LibraryThing tags were US-generated. In order to harness the inclusive capability of social tagging in the catalog, public library systems that use Bibliocommons need to incentivize patrons to tag material, as well as search by tags. Otherwise, a key social-interactive component of Bibliocommons is not being used to its full potential.

Public librarians implementing Bibliocommons need to take actions to engage and educate users about the capabilities of the catalog system, especially social tagging. One way libraries can, and should do this, is by harnessing the power of other social media outlets to start a fun and informal dialogue with users about their public library service hopes and expectations. Vancouver Public Library engaged with users via Twitter while considering website and online catalog changes (Cahill, 2011). Incentivizing users to create tags will also make tag searches
more effective. In order for tag searches to be effective, libraries need to engage users to create tags. More especially, libraries need to engage users to create unique tags that are not currently represented well in existing subject headings, since subject and keyword searches seem to do a good job at returning relevant information to users. Users will also be able to understand tags as an access point, and therefore, their self-conducted RA experiences can improve. (Pecoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli, 2014).

The limited search returns, paired with the low amount of searches conducted by tag suggest that user-generated tagging is not currently the most useful feature of Bibliocommons. Tagging is a highly valuable feature of Bibliocommons that is not be utilized by libraries to its full capacity. Tags can connect users to one another, as Pecoskie et. al stated: “the individual user, through those tag connections, may commune with others in varied places and in other libraries” (2014, p. 450); as well as users to librarians. Librarians can understand the experience and content preference of the user by studying the user-generated content. Then, librarians can use that information to purchase material based on online, user-generated feedback.

**Suggestions for engagement**

In order for a public library to successfully integrate the social components of Bibliocommons into a system, librarians need to be prepared to listen to their patrons. Librarians should engage users on social media besides Bibliocommons, like the librarians of Vancouver Public Library did to gauge user interest and understand users’ online preferences on Twitter and Facebook (Cahill, 2011). Libraries implementing Bibliocommons should not underestimate the power of a well-developed social media presence on Twitter and Facebook. The users who interact with the library on social media platforms may be more likely than other to interact with
social media components on Bibliocommons, so it is useful to maintain relationships with users through those sites.

Librarians should also reconsider the real value of Bibliocommons. Social-tagging may not be the most important feature of Bibliocommons, unless librarians plan to educate their patrons. Currently, keyword searches prove to be more effective than tag-searches if users are browsing for a certain topic. However, it is suggested that librarians, engage with users about tag searching through other social media sites. Users may come up with ways to utilize catalog tags in a way that librarians may not.

**Conclusion**

Bibliocommons is an interactive cataloging system which enables public library users to contribute to the existing library catalog through discussion boards, reviews and ratings, and user-generated social tags. While integrating user-generated content has the ability to complement existing LC Subject Headings and indexed keywords to make the library catalog more inclusive, librarians need to engage with users about those features of Bibliocommons. Currently, Bibliocommons users are rarely searching by tag, or adding tags to material. Librarians should encourage users to add tags, as doing so may help underrepresented groups more represented in the library catalog. Similarly, tag searches will become more effective if more tags are added which will also help online, self-directed Reader’s Advisory. That is to say, users can enhance their own searching experience, and also help librarians understand users’ preferences and insights about materials, by understanding power of user-generated tags, and creating tags.
References


