ENCYCLOPAEDIA

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Tag, Tagging

When we speak of tagging in the context of new media we refer to the practice of adding keywords to images or web pages, to assist with the management and retrieval of information. In its narrow sense, tagging refers to the manual indexing of personal photographic archives, which allows one to search through images according to criteria freely defined by the user, a characteristic that separates tagging from the mechanically captured metadata concerning the technical context of the image. In its wider sense, tagging is part of the social phenomenon of folksonomy: a bottom-up subjective categorization system that came to prominence with the spread of online applications in which users – and not an external authority – have control over the generation and classification of knowl-edge (Lister 2009: 206–8). It is in this context of Web 2.0 applications such as the photo-sharing site Flickr and the social bookmarking site del.icio.us that tagging became pivotal to the 'semantic web' – the utopian vision of indexing the web in a way that will one day make all of it understandable for computers.

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In both its narrow and broad sense, the explicit aim of tagging is to compensate for the inability of the computer to recognize images. Tagging of text can be largely automated because text is computer readable, yet in the case of photographs, text-oriented search engines are unable to determine what specific objects, activities and features are contained within the image file.[1]

Despite the constant improvements to automated image recognition, it is salutary to note that in a world of increasingly computerized photography the expressly human function has less to do with the production of images than with the creation of labels, which make images accessible for computers. The importance of tagging for the economies of the web lies precisely in the bridging of the gap between human perception of images and the computer's blindness to them. The sheer number of daily uploads and the increasingly central role in the serving of media-rich content make the description of images by text crucial for the efficient functioning of the web. An untagged image is worthless, as it is invisible to search engines and so cannot enter the economy of the search industry, whereas a tagged image can be discovered by web crawlers and returned as a search result. As a consequence of the need to tag as many images as possible in order to increase the accuracy of Internet searches, Web 2.0 applications attempt to persuade users to tag photographs by providing various means by which to associate images with words. For instance, the photo-sharing site Flickr presents tagging as a rewarding social activity and Google developed an online game, 'Google image labeller', in which players score points against each other by tagging random images.[2]

Discussions of tagging as a Web 2.0 phenomenon often emphasize its unregulated and democratic structure in contrast to the more traditional systems of classification that rely on the central authority of the professional archivist. The ostensibly individualistic and free nature of tagging gave rise to the idea that tagging captures the collective intelligence by allowing individuals to assign subjective categories to a wide range of media objects such as images, blog posts, URLs and bookmarks.[3] Observers of the 'semantic web' discuss tagging as a form of online political activism that can draw large numbers of people to tag for a common cause.[4] Yet the celebration of tagging as democratic and empowering is deceptive, as tagging is based on the positivist premise of an identicality between object and image (and between image and tag), an identicality that is all the more insidious because it is propagated by individual users and not by a central directing mechanism.

Despite the ability to tag other people's photos, for the majority it is still the case of tagging (and often un-tagging) pictures of themselves on social networks and cataloguing personal collections of photographs on photo-sharing sites.[5] Yet, even those supposedly private applications of tags are far from innocuous. Social networks encourage tagging as a playful way of performing the self through the free association of words with images. The resulting blend of narcissism and marketing fuses identity politics with advertising while at the same time assisting computers with the identification of non-linguistic objects. Tags are made of words, but their linguistic content is secondary to the agency of tags in the external world. (Here one might appeal to the theorization of the performative language

1. For background information on computer vision, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_vision, 21 September 2010.

2. For a discussion of the use of tagging in networked photography, see Rubinstein and Sluis (2008).

3. On of the better known examples of this approach is 'The wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki 2005).

4. For instance, 'The tag hurricanekatrina has emerged as the most common tag for people to use for any information related to the recovery. Use this tag in any blog post, photo, or web link that is related to the hurricane' (Samuel 2005).

5. For instance, Flickr allows users to tag not only their own pictures, but also pictures of others, yet this is an unpopular option. See Marlow et al. (2006).

developed in Voloshinov, 1986.) The performative element lodged in the act of tagging is not limited to the construction of identities, as the application of a tag to an image sets in motion a causal chain of physical changes to binary data that exerts influence on the structure, processing and display of information. Tags are linguistic utterances, but their influence on the world is extralinguistic: which is to say that in addition to their linguistic form, tags have a concrete, transformative and non-discursive dimension by which they partake in the material structure of power relations in society.[6]

Despite the formative role of tags for cybernetics, they are often conceived as simply an updated version of traditional image titles and captions that accompany photographs in print. But this similitude is superficial, for the function of captions is the opposite to that of tags. While the caption – by attempting to anchor an image in a particular context – admits to the instability of meaning inherent to the photograph, a tag does not interpret the image, nor does it provide a context for it; instead it establishes complete identity between image and text and therefore strips the photograph of its own concrete and untranslatable language. The unspoken assumption behind tagging is that images can be exhausted by description. In practice, tagging removes the need for interpretation, and in so doing it also removes the most important feature of photography: to 'present a glimpse of the structure of interpretation itself' (Sutton 2009: 135).

Whilst it is tempting to see tags as the minimum semantic unit for the transmission of image data, it would be deceptive to think of their role as purely informative. As an essential link between human perception and computer learning, tags are not so much aids for cataloguing as they are vehicles for the extralinguistic transmission of imperatives, which act as motors of social relations (Massumi 1992: 26–34). After all, it is largely irrelevant whether an image is tagged with 'chalk' or 'cheese'; what matters is that through tagging the image is converted into a meaningful substance that enters an expressive relationship with other media objects such as the class of objects tagged with 'cheese'. It can be said that a tag is the meeting point of different orders of reality: it is the space where language meets action. In the context of semantic computer systems, tagging is grounded in the false premise that an image can be grasped by the list of its properties. Tags express the concept of identicality between an image and a descriptor while concealing the inherent ambiguity of a photograph. By replacing images with descriptors, tagging promotes unseeing rather than seeing. In the face of the constantly growing number of photographs online, tagging can be thought of as a strategy that allows one to remain immersed in photography without being affected by images.

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