ARTICLES

Transcending Library Catalogs: A Comparative Study of Controlled Terms in Library of Congress Subject Headings and User-Generated Tags in LibraryThing for Transgender Books

MELISSA ADLER
School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA

Perhaps the greatest power of folksonomies, especially when set against controlled vocabularies like the Library of Congress Subject Headings, lies in their capacity to empower user communities to name their own resources in their own terms. This article analyzes the potential and limitations of both folksonomies and controlled vocabularies for transgender materials by analyzing the subject headings in WorldCat records and the user-generated tags in LibraryThing for books with transgender themes. A close examination of the subject headings and tags for twenty books on transgender topics reveals a disconnect between the language used by people who own these books and the terms authorized by the Library of Congress and assigned by catalogers to describe and organize transgender-themed books. The terms most commonly assigned by users are far less common or non-existent in WorldCat. The folksonomies also provide spaces for a multiplicity of representations, including a range of gender expressions, whereas these entities are often absent from Library of Congress Subject Headings and WorldCat. While folksonomies are democratic and respond quickly to shifts and expansions of categories, they lack control and may inhibit findability of resources. Neither tags nor subject headings...
are perfect systems by themselves, but they may complement each other well in library catalogs. Bringing users’ voices into catalogs through the addition of tags might greatly enhance organization, representation, and retrieval of transgender-themed materials.

KEYWORDS folksonomies, Library of Congress Subject Headings, controlled vocabularies, transgender, tagging, gender, queer, LibraryThing, social network sites

INTRODUCTION

The terms “Drag queens” and “Genderqueers” were submitted as subject heading proposals by Sanford Berman to the Library of Congress in the years 2005 and 2006, respectively (Berman 2008). Neither term has yet been authorized as a Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH). In contrast, members of LibraryThing (http://www.librarything.com), a social network site that enables members to catalog their own books by pulling bibliographic information from such sources as Amazon.com and the Library of Congress, have used these terms (or slight variations of them) to identify books that they read and own. Collectively, the tags users assign to their LibraryThing catalogs become folksonomies: rich vocabularies generated by users to categorize, find, and share their own resources.

This research aims to provide insight into the significance of the power of a user community to name its own resources. Specifically, it considers the potential and limitations of both folksonomies and controlled vocabularies for transgender materials by analyzing the subject headings in WorldCat records and the user-generated tags in LibraryThing for books with transgender themes. It explores the differences in terminologies assigned to describe transgender-themed books by the people who own and read such books and the library catalogers who add subject headings to bibliographic records in WorldCat.

Folksonomies have arisen out of social networking applications as a user-generated, collaborative approach to categorizing content. Millions of users are actively tagging in online social networks like LibraryThing. Still, it is difficult to imagine a more ubiquitous, institutionalized vocabulary than that of the Library of Congress. In 1902, the Library of Congress began distributing printed catalog cards to libraries across the United States, and from that moment on, American libraries have filled their catalogs with bibliographic information, including subject headings, from the United States’ largest library. LCSHs are now used around the world and across the bibliographic universe, but critics, such as Sandy Berman and Hope Olson, have effectively argued that the headings reflect and serve a mainstream audience, lacking terms for and misrepresenting groups on the margins.
A good portion of this article lays out the field of study at hand by defining terms, contextualizing transgender studies for library and information studies, explaining and defending the methodology, and exploring the implications of the study. The article first presents a theoretical framework and then explains folksonomies, controlled vocabularies, and transgenderism, both in terms of how these entities have come to be and how they function currently. Each of these sections provides a survey of the critical and practice-oriented literature in the fields of study. Next, the “Methodology” section describes the procedures for data collection and analysis. This is followed by “Data Analysis” and case studies, which closely investigate the subject headings and tags for two books and examine negotiation of meaning. The article concludes with implications and recommendations for further study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study explores the terminologies in different environments, begins to uncover the ways in which hegemonic cultures produce certain kinds of authorized discourses, and considers the ways in which communities of practice speak within those structures. Foucault (1990) calls for the unmasking of relationships between knowledge, power, and pleasure to locate the source of the dominant discourse concerning sexuality. A key approach is to ask who does the speaking to find “the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said” (11). The Library of Congress is precisely the kind of institution to which Foucault refers. Categories are also institutionalized by communities of practice, including medicine and law, as well as the members of the categories themselves. As a category becomes institutionalized, it affects the members of the category, and meaning is negotiated among the interested parties within a dominant framework.

Scholarship in the social and cognitive sciences, as well as in library and information studies, has explored the relationships between categories and their members and how categories may have an effect on the categorized, and vice versa (Hacking 1999; Olson 2000; Lakoff 1991; Valentine 2007). Hope Olson (2000) is widely recognized for her feminist deconstruction of subject headings, unveiling their biases and the effect they have on access to information. Marielena Fina (1993) described her 1972 experience as a Latina trying to locate information on library services for Latinas, only to be directed to the heading, “Libraries and the socially handicapped,” to illustrate the impact of LCSHs as a cultural authority. Olson cited this incident to illustrate how the “authority of the catalogue confronts the individual with a reflection of his or her reality. The mirror may be cracked or crazed to send back a distorted image, affecting self-esteem for some and just making others angry” (55). Categories have the power to shape perceptions of the self, and they
tend to play an active part in a wider discourse that shapes others’ views of the people to which the categories are intended to refer.

David Valentine discussed how “self-identity and one’s identification by others are complexly intertwined and shaped by relationships of social power” (2007, 26). He added, “If the categories we use to talk about our worlds contribute, at least in part, to how we shape our action in the world, then we must think about how they impact on those whose categories might be different from ours” (28). “Transgender” emerged and continued to evolve as an identity within and in response to political, social, and historical contexts and motives, and the terms used to describe and identify with the category respond to the reception and use of representations.

Judith Butler’s (2004) theory on language and intelligibility resonates with the issues at play in subject headings and tagging because the Library of Congress, as the authority on a universal, controlled vocabulary, determines how groups and individuals should be represented and, in fact, whether they should be represented at all. The act of naming authenticates an entity’s existence:

> The genders I have in mind have been in existence for a long time, but they have not been admitted into the terms that govern reality. So it is a question of developing within law, psychiatry, social, and literary theory a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have been living for a long time. Because the norms governing reality have not admitted these forms to be real, we will, of necessity, call them ‘new.’ (30–31)

As a large, government bureaucracy, the Library of Congress participates in and enacts a mainstream discourse, often closing off spaces in which self-naming might take place. Social tagging, however, offers a space for such a lexicon to develop, and as it becomes a shared language and allows for expansion, exchange, and revision, it develops into a vocabulary authorized by those doing the speaking and being spoken about. Voices that are effaced in LCSHs are allowed to speak in the long tail afforded by folksonomies.

**LITERATURE REVIEW, DEFINITIONS, AND CONTEXT**

A number of researchers have compared controlled vocabularies with folksonomies (Noruzi 2007; Peterson 2008; Spiteri 2007). Tiffany Smith (2007) has compared tags in LibraryThing with LCSHs by looking at four books to discern whether there was a difference in the efficacy of tags and subject headings for fiction versus non-fiction. At the 2008 GLBT Archives, Libraries, Museums, and Special Collections conference hosted by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, a panel exploring LGBTQ vocabularies and taxonomies in libraries included Analisa Ornelas, who discussed LGBTQ
tags in LibraryThing and LCSHs. The present study builds on existing research by offering a systematic comparison of controlled vocabularies with user-generated vocabularies for a specific user group.

Controlled Vocabulary—LCSH

Controlled vocabularies are designed to ensure uniformity and universality within and across library catalogs or other information retrieval systems so that locating information is predictable and precise. Subject headings are strings of words that are created and maintained by a group of authorities, such as the Library of Congress, to help users find materials on a given topic. Headings are generally based on standard, contemporary American English-language usage and are intended to reflect current literature.

The LCSH is a syndetic system, meaning that it connects related terms, synonyms, or variants by using cross-references. It refers users from non-authorized terms to a valid heading. Online library catalogs provide links to “See also” and “Use” references so that users can choose the authorized terms for their searches. Within bibliographic records, subject headings are also linked to a browseable list of works with the same subject headings.

The Library of Congress database contains 265,000 subject authority records (Library of Congress n.d.). The process of creating and authorizing new headings has evolved into a more democratic process than its original practice, which allowed only subject catalogers at the Library of Congress to establish headings. Today, institutions that employ catalogers with sufficient training in LCSH principles and applications may join the Subject Authority Cooperative Program, a component of the Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC), operated out of the Library of Congress.

According to the 2008 annual report of the PCC, 116 institutions proposed new records or revised authority headings through Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) that year. Headings may also be proposed by libraries that are not members of SACO. Proposals are submitted to an editorial committee at the Cataloging Policy and Support Office at the Library of Congress using an approved form, and they generally require a good deal of labor and research to complete. If a heading is approved, it is usually available for use within six weeks after its submission. New headings are established on the basis of literary warrant, defined as “the use of an actual collection of material or body of literature as the basis for developing an indexing or classification system” (Chan 2005, 518). SACO libraries may propose headings for works that are outside the scope of the Library of Congress collection.

The Library of Congress’ policy states: “Establish a subject heading for a topic that represents a discrete, identifiable concept when it is first encountered in a work being cataloged, rather than after several works on the topic have been published and cataloged” (Library of Congress 2008, H 187). Theoretically, if a work is cataloged by an employee of the Library of Congress,
or a member of SACO, and there is no adequate subject heading to represent the “aboutness” of that work, a new heading should be created. In practice, however, subject heading proposals are frequently denied by the Library of Congress because the subjects are determined to be represented by existing headings. The authorization of new terms must weigh the benefits of adding the term against the cost of implementing the changes, including adjusting existing bibliographic records.

Sanford Berman’s *Prejudices and Antipathies* (1971) is an early in-depth analysis of particular headings and groups of headings. Berman was the one of the first (and certainly the most outspoken) advocates for change and revision in LCSHs, and he is notorious for his letter-writing campaigns and subject heading petitions. Prior to SACO, such petitions were the only avenues for proposing subject headings, as there was no formal process in place to enable cooperative subject cataloging. Berman argued “a subject scheme should represent all of what has been collected by libraries to serve reading communities on a global scale” (ix). He also stated, however, that LCSHs can only “satisfy’ parochial, jingoistic Europeans and North Americans, white-hued, at least nominally Christian (and preferably Protestant) in faith, comfortably situated in the middle- and higher-income brackets, largely domiciled in suburbia, fundamentally loyal to the Established Order, and heavily imbued with the transcendent, incomparable glory of Western civilization” (ix). Perhaps he should have added “heterosexual and gender normative” to that list. Part of this article aim is to provide insight into the ability of LCSH to accommodate non-dominant groups, including transgender people.

Ellen Greenblatt (1990) critiqued LCSH for its representations (or rather, lack of representation) of gays and lesbians. By tracing the history of terms related to homosexuality in common usage and in LCSHs, she concluded the Library of Congress is slow in creating subject headings for gay and lesbian topics, and it may lag years or decades behind the time the terms have entered into common usage. She proposed heading changes and additions based upon contemporary usage. Ben Christensen (2008) revisited Greenblatt’s assessment and analyzed current headings by comparing her framework, which calls for representations of a range of voices, with Grant Campbell’s (2000) universalizing approach to classifying gays and lesbians. While Greenblatt contends that lesbians should be viewed as distinct from gay men and the appropriate subject heading should be “Lesbians and gays,” rather than “Gays,” Campbell believed unmarked representation works toward unification. Christensen concluded the best practice for changing or adding subject headings is to reflect current usage and literature, which does agree with Greenblatt’s views on the distinction between lesbians and gay men. Set against LCSHs, which aims toward universality and uniformity, folksonomies certainly work in favor of Greenblatt’s embrace of multiplicity and diversity.
Folksonomies

Folksonomies are also known as ethnoclassifications, distributed classifications, social classifications, and free tagging systems. According to Thomas Vander Wal, the information architect who invented the term, a folksonomy is:

the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (anything with a URL) for one’s own retrieval. The tagging is done in a social environment (shared and open to others). The person consuming the information does the act of tagging. The value in this external tagging is derived from people using their own vocabulary and adding explicit meaning. (2005, n.p.)

Louise Spiteri asserted that the growth of folksonomies is because of the need to control the huge amount of digital information and “a desire to democratize the way in which digital information is described and organized by using categories and terminology that reflect the views and needs of the actual end users, rather than those of an external organization or body” (2006, 77). Folksonomies adapt very easily to shifts in user needs and vocabularies, as additions of tags are immediate. Users may simply add a tag at no cost, and over time, folksonomies become collections of all of the terms people use to identify the object being tagged.

In a folksonomy the set of terms is a flat namespace; there are no clearly defined relations between and among the terms in the vocabulary, unlike formal taxonomies and classification schemes, where there are multiple kinds of explicit relationships (e.g., broader, narrower, and related terms) between and among terms. (Spiteri 2006, 77)

Although LibraryThing does suggest related tags based on algorithms, there are no formal, hierarchical relationships among terms, no predetermined order, and no authority to dictate rules about relationships among tags. Clay Shirky’s defense of social tagging is worth quoting at length:

[If we are, from a bunch of different points of view, applying some kind of sense to the world, then you don't privilege one top level of sense-making over the other. What you do instead is you try to find ways that the individual sense-making can roll up to something which is of value in aggregate, but you do it without an ontological goal. You do it without a goal of explicitly getting to or even closely matching some theoretically perfect view of the world. Critically, the semantics here are in the users, not in the system. (2005, n.p.)

Rather than being arranged hierarchically, social networking tools, such as LibraryThing, link items that are assigned the same tags. For instance,
clicking on the tag “gender” will lead a user to all of the books tagged “gender.” Tags do tend to lack uniformity because there is no governing body regulating the establishment of terms. Problems arise when systems are not smart enough to locate variant forms of words or synonyms. LibraryThing gathers some tags with their aliases, which serve, in a loose sense, like cross-references in LCSHs: for example, “transgender,” “trans,” and “transgendered” are considered equivalent. However, this is not always effectively employed. The variations of the acronym for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning (lgbt, glbt, lgbtq, lgbiq, etc.) are not entirely brought together. “Lgbtq” is an alias of “glbtq,” but “lgbt” and “glbt” are not aliases of each other or with “lgbtq”/“glbtq,” nor are any other variations assigned aliases.

One can get around some of these problems by using or creating a “tagmash,” which, according to LibraryThing creator Tim Spalding (2007), “closes some of the gap between tagging and professional subject classifications.” Users can combine tags, and the system then stores these as permanent tagmashes that appear on tag and subject pages, offering another search and access option. This powerful feature gives users much greater control and lets them perform more precise searches. For example, the tagmash “fantasy, fiction, transgender” pulls together the books that have been assigned each of these tags (or their aliases), and on the results page, there is the list of books there is a set of suggested related tagmashes, tags, and subjects.

Perhaps the greatest strength of folksonomies is that they allow everyone who is interested in the subject to add to the vocabulary, reflecting all users’ positions without bias and without definitive rules. Bringing minority and marginalized voices together with the more popular, mainstream terms contributes to the “long tail,” as presented by Chris Anderson of Wired (2004). In a folksonomy, this means that people can represent concepts that are left out of controlled vocabularies. A study on the social bookmarking site Delicious (http://delicious.com) found that tags followed Zipf’s law, a power law that essentially means that a few words occur very often while many others occur rarely. The author illustrates the point by citing an example of a blog post bookmarked in Delicious: six tags make up 80 percent of all the tags chosen, and a long tail of 56 other tags account for 20 percent of the tags assigned (Biddulph 2004).

Members of communities will frequently adopt common vocabularies, allowing people to name and locate their own items and to communicate with other members of the community who might be interested in similar subjects. In fact, within a folksonomy, a common language begins to emerge as users share tags. In another study on collaborative tagging in Delicious, Scott Golder and Bernardo Huberman (2006) found tagging patterns stabilize as the number of users increase.

The flexibility of folksonomies rests in their capacity to respond to shifts in terminologies as they happen; terms are added immediately to the
Transcending vocabularies through tagging by any member of the network. A large taxonomy, such as the Library of Congress classification scheme, may take years to add a heading, if it is added at all. Controlled vocabularies are mostly about finding specific information, whereas folksonomies, though less precise, allow for more serendipitous searching through current language that includes more representations of minority or marginalized voices.

Bringing the OPAC and Folksonomies Together

Librarians and scholars are beginning to examine and the efficacy of including social tagging systems in online public access catalogs (Peterson 2008; Spiteri 2007, 2009; Noruzi 2007; Dilger and Thompson 2008). Louise Spiteri (2009) investigated sixteen social cataloging Web sites and concluded that the majority of these lack the bibliographic integrity and quality that library catalogs contain, but certain social features of these Social Networking Systems (SNSs), including tagging, could enhance library OPACs. In a previous study of three SNSs, she also found that folksonomies tend to conform to National Information Standards Organization (NISO) standards and may be integrated into public library catalogs (Spiteri 2006).

LibraryThing for Libraries integrates LibraryThing tags in library OPACs, allowing searching and browsing of tags added to bibliographic records. At this time, patrons cannot add tags via the bibliographic records, but add-ons allow them to rate and review items. As of this writing, 161 libraries have added this application to their OPACs (LibraryThing n.d.). Another tagging tool is PennTags, a social networking tool developed by librarians at the University of Pennsylvania that allows the university community to tag online resources, including items in the library catalog. WorldCat, one of the subjects of this study, also added a tagging feature in November 2008 to its catalog. It is worth noting that, as of this writing, no tags have been assigned in WorldCat to any of the books in this study.

Such explorations and innovations will surely continue across library types. The value added by tags from users could potentially enhance searching, browsing, and locating information in library catalogs. Adding tags would also “make cataloging a more dynamic and open-ended process, a discursive space in which users might create connections or explore connections already made by professional catalogers” (Dilger and Thompson 2008, 49). In addition to expanding the catalog space to honor the voices of the long tail interests, the catalog may become a site of active negotiation of meaning.

Transgender

The emergence of transgender as a category and movement must be understood in the context of historical, political, medical, legal, and social forces and practices in the United States. David Valentine, anthropology and
American studies professor at the University of Minnesota, performed an ethnographic study on the institutionalization of “transgender” as a category. Joanne Meyerowitz’s (2004) history of transsexuality provides insight into transgenderism as it traces the discursive productions of doctors, the legal system, popular culture, and transsexuals to show how attitudes, definitions, medical practice, and social norms shifted and evolved over the twentieth century in the United States. Susan Stryker (2008), preeminent historian of transgender communities, has written a concise transgender history. It is from Valentine, Stryker, and Meyerowitz that the brief history below is gleaned. Because there is such a multitude of terms that can fall under the category “transgender,” and the definitions are difficult to pin down, readers are encouraged to consult one of these sources or the book Finding Out: An Introduction to LGBT Studies (Meem, Gibson, and Alexander, 2009). A good online source is Transgender Terminology, published by the National Center for Transgender Equality (2009).

Although transgenderism can likely be traced to the very distant past, the account presented in this article starts just before the point at which the term “transgender” was coined. A 1966 riot in Compton’s Cafeteria in the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, largely instigated and enabled by broader circumstances, including discriminatory policing of minorities, civil rights activism, and healthcare access in the United States, marks the first public act of resistance of a transgender community to effect long-term change. Stryker asserted that the heightened awareness precipitated a transgender social justice movement and brought the “beginning of a new relationship to state power and social legitimacy” (2008, 74–75). That era also fostered a “taxonomic revolution,” according to Meyerowitz (2004), in which doctors and transsexuals negotiated the meaning and practice of sex reassignment. Social networks were key to protecting and informing gender variant people, and within those networks, identities and representations became powerful political tools.

The term “transgender” was coined in the 1970s as a way to distinguish from cross-dressers and transsexuals and to identify non-surgical gender variance. The 1970s and 1980s brought a new meaning for “transgender” as being the “radical edge” of gender variance … not a category between ‘transexual’ and ‘transvestite,’ but an alternative to binary gender expression” (Valentine 2007, 32). Gender Identity Disorder became an official category of mental illness in 1980 when it was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. This brought political and medical ramifications; while it may have helped to facilitate standards of care, it pathologized transgenderism and transgender people, resulting in more inward, private struggles, as opposed to the social movements of the 1960s.

By the 1990s, the idea of transgender became collective-inclusive of all gender expressions. Leslie Feinberg’s “transgender liberation” in 1992 is “among the first published uses of the collective form of transgender which
explicitly politicized transgender identification beyond individual radical acts and called for a social movement organized around its terms” (Valentine 2007, 33). That decade witnessed the forging of a national transgender identity, with expanded political and social activity, and the emergence of transgender studies as an academic discipline. Stryker (2008) credited the networking power of the Internet as a vital source of strength for the transgender movement (146).

Today, most gender and sexuality historians consider gender to be a social and cultural construct, sex to be biological, and both to be distinct from sexuality and the gender of the object of erotic attraction. Just how independent these facets are of one another is contested, though, and scholarship is beginning to move toward an emphasis on the constructed nature of biology and sexuality and the relationships between the body and the social (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

Judith Butler, professor of rhetoric and comparative literature at the University of California–Berkeley and renowned scholar on the socially constructed nature of gender, challenges the notion of natural or necessary attributes of gender based on the sexed body. She argued that meanings attached to gender are socially and historically situated and produced within a normative framework, and those meanings depend on cultural constraints and dominant ideologies (Butler 2004). Gender, the vocabularies used to identify and explain it, and people’s varied relationships and identifications with it are continually expanding and changing.

University of Wisconsin historian of sexuality Anne Enke (2008) provided two points of departure for talking about transgenderism, defining “transgender” both as an identity and a category. As an identity, it may be one that differs from the sex assigned at birth, a physical alteration of the body’s sex gender characteristics, or a gender presentation that differs from conventional gender expression. As a category, transgender is “an ever-expanding category” that includes transexuals, genderqueers, cross-dressers, butch lesbians, fem queens, studs, drag kings, drag queens, and a multitude of other categories. Enke noted many people who identify with the narrower categories may not identify as transgender.

Enke’s inclusive, extendable definition captures the elusive, slippery nature of the category. “Transgender” and the people who may or may not identify with the term ultimately resist definition, push the limits of categorization, and resist authority control.

**METHODOLOGY**

Twenty books from a range of genres and for diverse audiences—fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, biographies, young adult, and adult—were selected for this study (see Appendix). The books represent a wide range of transgender themes, including drag, transsexuality, genderqueer, and intersexuality.
All the books were included in a minimum of 50 LibraryThing member catalogs, and all were on one of the American Library Association’s Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered Round Table’s (GLBTRT) lists of recommended GLBT books—TRANScending Identities: A Bibliography of Resources on Transgender and Intersex Topics (2008a) or the Rainbow List (2008b).

Because this project depends on samples from LibraryThing users, the number of members was important for analysis. Higher numbers of members means that there were more tagging data to analyze, and it is more likely that patterns will emerge. All the books were at least nominated for an award: one won the Stonewall Award, the best GLBT book according to the ALA’s GLBTRT; five won a Lambda Award, an award given to authors in various genres; another seven were nominated for a Lambda Award; and others won or were nominated for various awards.

Tagging data from LibraryThing and bibliographic records from WorldCat were gathered and analyzed. WorldCat, the collective catalog of 69,000 public, academic, school, and special libraries from around the world, contains more than 125 million bibliographic records for more than a billion individual library holdings. Bibliographic data is shared by participating libraries, which can create new records or load existing records into their local catalogs. A significant function of WorldCat is to facilitate resource sharing, such as interlibrary loan, across libraries. The subject headings were logged for each of the books examined in this study, and the total number of works assigned specific subject headings was tracked to determine how commonly the headings in question are used in bibliographic records.

LibraryThing currently has 538,000 registered members, and more than 32 million books have been cataloged. Users have applied more than 42 million tags to their books. LibraryThing offers comprehensive data on tags, including the number of members assigning tags, the numbers of members using a given tag and its aliases, and the number of books to which the tag (or its aliases) was assigned (see Figure 1). Each tag assigned by LibraryThing members is included in a tag cloud, which presents tags in different sized fonts and boldness, depending upon the numbers of users assigning the tags. Figure 1 presents part of the expanded, numbered tag cloud for the book, She’s Not There: A Life in Two Genders, by Jennifer Finney Boylan, held by 454 LibraryThing members. It shows “transgender” was used 58 times, and it reveals a wide range of gender sexuality expressions, including “mtf,” “queer,” “lgbt,” and “transsexual.”

The data from LibraryThing tag clouds were ranked according to the following criteria: the number of LibraryThing members who added the book their catalog, the number of unique tags, the most commonly used tags, and the number of times those tags were assigned to each book. It should be noted the data were last consulted in May 2009, and because members continue to add books to their catalogs and tags to the books’ pages, the data are expected to change over time.
LCSH has very specific terms for transgender topics. In recent years, the Library of Congress has authorized the addition of a number of transgender headings. The heading “Transgender people” was created in 2007, with a long list of “Used for” references. Users are directed to “Transgender people” from the following terms: “TG people,” “TGs (Transgender people),” “Trannies,” “Trans-identified people,” “Trans people,” “Transgender-identified people,” “Transgendered people,” “Transgenders,” and “Transpeople.” If any of the above terms is entered into a library catalog search engine, the user will be directed to “Transgender people.” Additionally, the category “Transgender people” has narrower terms that fall hierarchically under it. Included are “Transvestites,” “Transsexuals,” “Libraries and transgender people,” and “female impersonators” and “male impersonators.” There are also headings that follow the pattern of “Transgender people,” such as “Transgender librarians” and “Transgender parents.”

Other common headings among the LibraryThing catalogs examined are “drag queens,” “drag kings,” “drag,” “queer,” “genderqueer,” “crossdressing,” “lgbt” (or some variation), and “ftm.” None of these is a subject heading, but “Drag kings,” “Drag queens,” “FTM transsexuals,” and “Crossdressing” are “See references” in LCSHs. “Gender studies,” “intersex,” “sexuality,” “passing,” and “transsexual” are among the commonly used tags in LibraryThing.
that are (or are very close variations of) authorized subject headings. Instead of “Gender,” LCSH uses “Gender identity.”

Of the twenty works used for this study, seventeen have “transgender” ranked as the first or second most commonly assigned LibraryThing tag. The three anomalies that do not have “transgender” as a top tag can be explained quite easily. The two selections about drag, *The Drag King Book* and *Freak Show*, use the more precise “drag queens,” “drag,” or “drag kings.” The top two tags for *Freak Show* are “Florida” and “high school,” but the next most popular heading is “drag queens.” *The Drag King Book* is tagged “Gender” and “queer” more often than “transgender.” *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who was Raised as a Girl* is most commonly tagged as “gender” and “psychology,” followed by “transgender.”

In contrast, only four of the twenty works are assigned the subject heading “Transgender people” in WorldCat. Two more are assigned “Transgenderism,” but there is no link from “Transgender people” to “Transgenderism,” so a search for “Transgenderism” will not take users to books assigned “Transgender people” (see Table 1).

The heading “Transgender people” problematically serves as an umbrella for all forms of gender expression. K. R. Roberto (2008) asserted, “The heading effectively erases many gender-variant individuals from library catalogs, since there is no explicit space in LCSH for descriptions of these identities” (172). Although “See references” direct users from a significant number of alternative terms to “Transgender people,” the potential for those non-preferred terms, as well as other terms that might be considered narrower or related terms, to represent items in the catalog remains untapped. In a folksonomy, however, expressions such as “boi dykes,” “ftm,” or “queer” are easily added to the long tail, and they are not hierarchically arranged under “transgender.”

To assess the prevalence of tags and subject headings for transgender subjects in LibraryThing and WorldCat, the numbers of times certain tags were used and the number of LibraryThing members using each tag were documented, as were the number of books written in English with a similar or equivalent subject heading and the cross-references furnished in the subject authority records (see Table 2). The number of times the tag is assigned refers to each time that tag is assigned to a book; i.e., if a book is tagged “transgender” by 50 different members, that is added to the sum. In the case of “transgender” and its aliases, there is no precisely equivalent subject

<p>| TABLE 1 Occurrence of “Transgender” in WorldCat and LibraryThing for Books in Study |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Number of books with “transgender” as top two tags in LibraryThing | Number of books with “transgender” as a subject heading in WorldCat | Number of books with transgenderism as a subject heading in WorldCat |
| 17 | 4 | 2 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tag and aliases in LibraryThing</th>
<th>Number of times tag assigned</th>
<th>Number of LibraryThing members using tag</th>
<th>Subject heading</th>
<th>Books in English in WorldCat with subject</th>
<th>Cross-references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transgender, trans, transgendered</td>
<td>5423</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>Transgender*</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>Used for TG people, Tgs (Transgender people), Trannies, Trans-identified people, Trans people, Transgender-identified people, Transgendered people, Transgenders, Transpeople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Includes Transgenderism, Transgender children, Transgender librarians, Transgender parents, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossdressing, cross-dressing, cross-dressing</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>See transvestism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drag queens</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>See female impersonators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drag kings</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>See male impersonators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female impersonators</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female impersonators</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>Used for cross-dressers, crossdressers, drag queens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male impersonators</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male impersonators</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>Used for cross-dressers, crossdressers, drag kings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transvestism</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Transvestism</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>Used for cross-dressing, crossdressing, eonism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
heading. Rather, there are “transgender people,” “transgender librarians,” “transgender children,” and about a half-dozen other headings that follow this pattern. A search in WorldCat was performed by using “transgender∗” in the subject field to gather all of the books written in English with “transgender” in the subject, including the heading “Transgenderism.”

Tags frequently assigned to the books in this study were entered into the WorldCat search engine as subjects. If the heading or something very similar exists, then the database indicated how many books have that subject heading attached. If a “See” reference was offered, that reference was searched, and the number of books with that heading was recorded. If there was no see reference, the process was terminated.

A number of interesting findings may be drawn from these figures. First, the number of members using the tag “transgender” and its aliases is remarkable. Seven hundred sixteen individuals assign this tag to the books in their collections. Assuming that no members have assigned duplicate tags to a book, this means that 716 books have been assigned this tag. There seems to be consensus on this tag because it has been assigned a total of 5,423 times. WorldCat, in contrast, only assigns any sort of “Transgender” heading 307 times—to less than half as many books as LibraryThing members do. “Genderqueer” is not used as frequently as “transgender,” but 52 members have assigned it 224 times. “Genderqueer” is nowhere to be found in LCSH. A search yields no “See” references.

A group of related tags and headings fall under the categories “drag queens kings,” “cross-dressing,” “female male impersonators,” and “transvestism.” The Library of Congress distinguishes between female male impersonators and transvestism based on whether the act of dressing in the manner of the opposite sex is for entertainment or for psychological gratification. The scope note for “Female impersonators” reads: “Here are entered works on men who impersonate women, generally for purposes of entertainment or comic effect.” “Transvestism” and “Transvestites” have identical scope notes: “Here are entered works on the practice, especially of males, of assuming the dress and manner of the opposite sex for psychological gratification.” As Roberto (2008) stated, “Calling drag performers ‘impersonators’ emphasizes artifice over intent, creating a hierarchical structure where drag performance is less important than the gender being ‘imitated’” (172). The numbers demonstrate a distinct disconnect between the tags users are assigning and the subject headings.

Case Studies

Two of the books under investigation—Freak Show, a young adult novel, and In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, a nonfiction book aimed at adult audiences—are presented below for closer
Transcending

Freak Show, written by James St. James and published in 2007, was a finalist for the Lambda Award in 2008. It is held by 880 libraries, the majority of which are public libraries, according to WorldCat. The bibliographic record does offer a summary of the book: “Having faced teasing that turned into a brutal attack, Christianity expressed as persecution, and the loss of his only friend when he could no longer keep his crush under wraps, seventeen-year-old Billy Bloom, a drag queen, decides the only [sic] to become fabulous again is to run for Homecoming Queen at his elite, private school near Fort Lauderdale, Florida” (WorldCat). Eight LCSHs are assigned to this book: “Female impersonators Fiction,” “Homosexuality Fiction,” “Prejudices Fiction,” “High schools Fiction,” and the same main headings are offered with “Juvenile fiction” as form subdivisions.

Looking at LibraryThing, 174 members have added this book and have collectively assigned 165 unique tags. Some of the tags are purely for individual members’ record keeping, such as “I heart this book,” but others are likely used to communicate with other members and to locate other books on similar topics. The most commonly used tags were variations of the young adult genre, e.g., “ya.” As for topical headings, “high school” is assigned sixteen times and “Florida” is used fourteen times. This is followed by “drag queens,” assigned by eleven members, and when added to the three tags that use the singular “drag queen” and the four that use simply “drag,” the consensus on gender expression emerges with a total of seventeen tags that are a variation of “drag.”

The tags reveal a number of interesting points. First, there is more than one way to express the concept of “young adult,” and members seem to use them interchangeably. No one uses “juvenile,” the authorized term in LCSH. In fact, most of the terms in the tag cloud, including the most common gender expressive term, do not appear in the WorldCat record for this book. As illustrated in the previous section, “Drag queens” is not an authorized heading. Rather, users will be directed to the heading “Female impersonators” to locate materials on drag queens.

In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives, by Judith Halberstam, was published in 2005 and was also nominated for a Lambda Literary Award. Four hundred ninety-three libraries hold this book on their shelves, and of those, all but handful are college and university libraries. It, like many of the books in this study, was published before “Transgenderism” and “Transgender people” became authorized subject headings. The bibliographic data in WorldCat are up-to-date and descriptive, as the subject headings were changed in 2007 when “Transgenderism” was added to the authority file. The WorldCat record offers “Transgenderism,” “Gender identity,” “Sex role,” “Transgender people in motion pictures,” “Transgender people in literature,” and “Marginality, Social.” In some local catalogs, however, including the University of Wisconsin–Madison, there are no headings for “Transgenderism” or “Transgender people” in the records for this book.
“Transsexualism,” “Gender identity,” “Sex role,” “Transsexuals in motion pictures,” “Transsexuals in literature,” and “Marginality, Social” are the only headings provided. This indicates that bibliographic records pulled from WorldCat for local catalogs may fail to update subject headings as they are added.

One hundred eight LibraryThing members have added a total of 72 unique tags for In a Queer Time and Place to their catalogs. The most commonly assigned tag is “transgender” (nineteen members), followed by “queer” (thirteen members), “queer theory” (eight members), and “cultural studies” (seven members). “Film” and “film theory” also appear, as do “marginality,” “genderqueer,” and four variations on the LGBTQ acronym: “glbt,” “lgbtq,” “lgbt queer,” and “LGBTQ issues.” As noted above, “Queer” is not an authorized term in LCSH, but “Queer theory” is.

The potential for negotiation of meaning is a key aspect of folksonomies and SNSs. In LibraryThing, one way in which this occurs is in discussion groups set up to discuss books and related issues on particular themes. In a genderqueer discussion group thread, users discuss and ponder the application of the tag “genderqueer” in LibraryThing:

“I’ve noticed that if you search the tag “genderqueer” most of the books that come up have been tagged with that tag by only one person. Also, there are only 80 books with this tag. This could, of course mean that there aren’t that many genderqueer books and they’re spread pretty thin among us. But it could also mean that we don’t have a similar vision of what a genderqueer book is ... So when do you use the tag “genderqueer”? Do you see it as distinct from other tags like transsexual, transsexuality, transgender, transgendered and transgenderism? (chrisjones 2007)

In the global sense, rather than the LT-tagging-specific sense, I do see “genderqueer” as distinct from trans*. My personal definition is that genderqueer is more behavior-based and can be transitory, rather than identity-based. Dressing in drag, for someone who doesn’t generally identify as transgendered, can be genderqueer behavior. I think deliberate subversion is a big part of it—when my (cisgendered) friend wears a skirt and a men’s shirt + necktie to work for the sake of messing with people’s minds, that’s genderqueer. If a frat boy does the same thing as a pledge-week stunt, it isn’t. (lorax 2007)

Since this thread was posted to the genderqueer discussion group in LibraryThing in July 2007, the occurrence of the tag “genderqueer” more than doubled within a year, and as of May 2009, it has been assigned a total of 224 times to 123 books by 52 different users. This is a case of a folksonomy serving “as a seed for an emergent community” (Morville 2005, 137).
The term is negotiated both in the folksonomy and in the discussion board, and its emergence within the folksonomy brings people interested in the nuanced distinctiveness of “genderqueer” together.

In sharp contrast, the terms “genderqueer” and “queer” are nowhere to be found in LCSHs (with the exception of “queer theory”), so if a user attempted to find materials by using these terms, they would not even be guided to an authorized heading.

A common and valid argument in defense of LCSHs is that it would be a logistical nightmare to try to keep up with changes in terminologies, as demonstrated by the evolution of the category “transgender.” To update all library records with new headings would be costly and time consuming, and if it is likely that terms will change again, it becomes a daunting, limitless task. The Library of Congress does need to expand its reference lists, though, to include more of the minority voices so that people will be directed to approved headings.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study did not aspire to definitively ascertain whether the members adding books to their catalogs self-identify as transgender. Because of the limited information offered in users’ profile pages, it is not possible to precisely determine the composition of communities of interest in SNSs or whether members are scholars, transgender identified, or other members of the general public.

The next step in the project aimed at understanding tagging behaviors of people interested in transgender books is to conduct a user study. A survey and plans for interviewing LibraryThing members are underway to examine the roles of folksonomies within this particular SNS, as well as the types of people who tag in this online community and what motivates them to tag. Other interesting aspects to examine might be the extent to which suggested or existing tags prompt users to assign those tags; how well transgender tags adhere to standards, as suggested by Spiteri (2007); a comparison with other identity-based communities and other SNSs; and a quantified picture of the tags in the long tails for transgender books. Another important angle to consider is the limitations, constraints, and potential of the social networking technology on the folksonomy.

This study does not attempt to do a genealogy of transgender subject headings. Such a project is in order to understand how and when headings related to transgender themes arose. Additionally, this article makes no claims about folksonomies as sites of resistance, but this angle certainly demands investigation. Finally, a longitudinal study of LibraryThing should examine shifts in the folksonomy over time.
CONCLUSION

This article has set out to mark the distinctions between the tags created by LibraryThing members who add tags to their catalogs in LibraryThing and the process of applying subject headings created by a large government bureaucracy to books that may or may not be of interest to the cataloging staff. Examining the negotiation of meaning in different contexts offers insight into the political nature of classifications and nomenclatures.

Alone, neither folksonomies nor controlled vocabularies are completely effective. Librarians and scholars are beginning to explore the possibilities of integrating tagging systems in OPACs. While controlled vocabularies enable precision and findability, their universal, uniform nature prohibits and marginalizes alternative expressions, and they are slow to adopt new terms. Folksonomies, on the other hand, are democratic, allow for shifts and changes in vocabularies, and allow spaces for the “long tail.” However, the lack of control impedes findability. Library catalogs may be the perfect environment to introduce a “hybrid metadata ecology” combining controlled vocabularies, classifications, and folksonomies (Morville 2005, 139).

The study also reveals two striking features of folksonomies in this particular environment: (1) there is some degree of consensus regarding tagging; (i.e., “transgender” is by far the most frequently used tag for the books at hand), and (2) the range of expressions of minority voices is highly visible and negotiable. Social tagging reflects the relationships between language and communities, and results in very different practices and vocabularies than an authorized, regulated discourse might allow. Although “transgender” pushes the boundaries of categorization, it does serve well as a category of inquiry to illuminate the ways in which folksonomies accommodate shifts and expansions of vocabularies.

LCSHs play a critical role in reproducing the dominant discourses concerning gender and places limits on expression and access to materials. Set against LibraryThing, library catalogs with only subject headings lack depth, appropriateness, and meaning to which people seeking transgender-themed materials identify. Adding users’ voices to the catalog’s controlled vocabularies using tagging may offer the best means to seek and discover information.

REFERENCES


dLIST. http://dlist.sir.arizona.edu/2061/ (accessed May 27, 2009).
APPENDIX: BOOKS USED FOR THE STUDY


Bornstein, Kate. 1998. *My gender workbook: How to become a real man, a real woman, the real you, or something else entirely*. New York; London: Routledge.


Howey, Noelle. 2002. *Dress codes: Of three girlhoods—my mother’s, my father’s, and mine*. New York: Picador USA.


