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I Hear the Train A Comin’ — Penn Tags

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As an elementary school-aged boy in the 1970s, I had very straightforward criteria for prospective friends. You had to drink Orange but not Purple Hi-C. This issue was important. It provided a sort of shorthand for me to determine compatibility. If you were a Purple Hi-C kid, I knew immediately that our broader interests were likely divergent. If you liked Orange Hi-C, I could trust your judgment on other key matters (like Star Wars action figures and Saturday morning cartoons). I broach the example of my younger self because so much of what we encounter within the Next Big Web Thing discussion today relies on sophisticated Hi-C litmus tests. Facebook and MySpace allow users to discover what is new and what is important among their peers by revealing commonalities within what people are reading, listening to, watching, and so forth. Twitter takes this to a new extreme. It connects people by revealing the connections within Joycean streams of consciousness posted by its users. Literally thousands of sites are devoted to a variation of “I like X,” or “I read Y,” or “I use Z.” Why? First and foremost, because I want to meet people like me who value Orange Hi-C and disdain its purple counterpart. These people are potential friends. Beyond companionship, these like-minded souls can provide a valuable service. The information age breeds clutter, so much clutter that I need not just myself, but Proxy Me’s, to cut through the tangle and help me uncover the music that I will love or the video that will make me laugh or the paper that will help my research.

I need an army of Orange Hi-C drinkers at my disposal.

My column this focuses on one specific Hi-C tool, PennTags. PennTags represents the University of Pennsylvania’s attempt to cut through the clutter of Web resources by showing its users what like-minded community members value. It leverages the basic concept of popular sites del.icio.us and Connotea, namely that social bookmarking can provide important cues to the discovery of web-based information. Whereas these other sites are open clubs, PennTags establishes some preemptive commonality among its users by limiting participation to the University of Pennsylvania community. The assumption is that Penn researchers, by virtue of their engagement at the institution, have a shared universe of interests that is distinct from the larger social bookmarking alternatives. Indeed, the project was launched as a result of the del.icio.us experience of two librarians, Michael Winkler (Library Web Manager) and Laurie Allen (Research & Instructional Services Librarian). Both had used del.icio.us and enjoyed the ability to tell the world what Websites they were reading and browsing. However, they shared a frustration at the tool’s inability to work with Penn Library resources, notably cataloged materials, proxy services, and other items that lacked stable URLs. When Cinema Studies Professor Peter Decherney asked his students a project to collect Web-based resources about a specific film, Winkler and Allen realized that to do so effectively would require an easy way for students to grab and share Web pages from both outside and within the library’s walled garden. This provided them the impetus for what has become PennTags.

The first iteration of PennTags was very rudimentary. Like many Web 2.0 applications, it was characterized by a light “let’s figure it out as we go along” approach. Michael Winkler created the basic code over a long weekend, modified it with feedback from Laurie Allen and a small group of self-identified interested parties, and delivered it to Professor Decherney for the fall 2005 semester. His students received extra credit if they used PennTags for the resource collection project. Almost all of the students did so and provided feedback. This helped Winkler further hone the feature set and user experience.

As the next semester opened, PennTags was soft-launched to the greater Penn community. Penn students, faculty, and staff could use the tool to tag records within the library catalog, any public Web pages, full-text article links via the library link resolver, and other sources of scholarly information. The largest limitation was — and remains — the inability to tag content within databases that maintain full text (e.g., LexisNexis).

The library did not publicize PennTags except to add a muted “Add to PennTags” link on an increasing number of Penn resources. Very little marketing or support was provided. In early 2006, Mike Winkler and Laurie Allen secured library management buy-in for the creation of a small working group that met weekly to discuss PennTags issues and features. Many code changes and feature additions resulted from these sessions. Nearly two years into the project, the PennTags team has not as yet done a formal launch or rollout campaign. Even absent this type of push, nearly one thousand users have picked it up along the way (current students, faculty, and staff— a pool totaling approximately 50,000 individuals — are eligible to use PennTags). This grassroots validation has prompted the library to add resources to the project. A code rewrite and a more systematic release to the Penn community are both in the works as a result.

The PennTags footprint is a light one, designed to subtly enhance the research experience. The annotations a tagger makes are viewable both within the library catalog and via the PennTags site (http://tags.library.upenn.edu). There, visitors can search or browse by tag clouds, by contributor, and also by “project,” in effect an annotated bibliography on a specific subject. The PennTags site also contains a number of end user productivity tools, such as the ability to convert tags of interest into RSS feeds.

For materials tagged within the catalog, the PennTags appear alongside more formal cataloging elements. For example, a book in the catalog will include the PennTags post (who tagged it and what the tags are) sitting right below the more formal bibliographic information and subject headings. Tags may be just a few short keywords or rather long discussions of a resource’s merits. These tags appear via Ajax after the page loads so as not to slow down the user experience.

The Penn library, after much discussion with the university counsel’s office, decided not to gatekeep annotations. The PennTags user interface includes a click-through agreement that precedes a user’s first post, advising him Continued on page 79
or her to abide by the rules and regulations of the university. The library does not proactively police the tags. Because each user’s account is tied to a university ID, any questions of legality or conformity with the campus code of conduct can be addressed directly with the tagger. To date, inappropriate use of the tagging mechanism has been a non-issue.

Penntags has produced a number of tangible benefits for the University of Pennsylvania community. It has added greater description and clarity to thousands of library resources through user-contributed annotations. It has provided additional discovery tools via the tag clouds and other browsable Website mechanisms. It has allowed users to organize their web resources in more systematic fashion. But what of the Hi-C test? Does Penntags allow its users to easily identify an army of Proxy Me’s whose judgments and insights can be relied upon? Does the collective wisdom of the Penntags community allow individual users to cut through the information proliferation clutter? As yet, I believe the answer is a qualified no. This may, of course, be due to the lack of a critical mass. More posts are needed, as are more posters. Social networking mechanisms require a certain volume that Penntags does not have at present. The Penntags team has chosen a deliberate, systematic launch course. This certainly helps account for the slow adoption rate within the Penn community.

It will be interesting to see if this community grows, and whether its growth will generate some “collective wisdom of the crowd.” As Laurie Allen points out, academic research is often highly specialized, particularly at its advanced levels. Undergraduate students interested in introductory primers may find similarly-minded individuals within the Penntags community. Tenured professors studying the measurement of regional cerebral blood flow during complex cognitive tasks are less likely to benefit from peer cues within a social network. And this may be the bottom line. Social networking tools aim to connect people to their interests, and to other people who share those interests. This works well if (a) those interests are broad, like movies or music or juice flavors, (b) the network is sufficiently large to attract lots of members with lost of diverse interests, or (c) the network is sufficiently focused that all members are, by definition, like-minded. These criteria are difficult to meet within the academic setting, though by no means impossible. Penntags is thus an experiment well worth following.

Desperately Seeking Copyright — Reuse Licensing: Change is Underway

Column Editor: Edward Colleran (Senior Director, Rightsholder Relations, Copyright Clearance Center, Danvers, MA) <ecolleran@copyright.com>

Pick up any Sunday newspaper during the month of August, and the first thing you might notice is the heft of the back-to-school sale circulars stuffed in the interior of the paper. Back-to-school is always greeted with the inevitable circulars stuffed in the interior of the paper. Back-to-school sale on twin sheets and lava lamps. But the to-school is always greeted with the inevitable

Electronic content use is on the rise, and so is the perception of academic institutions that these uses could leave them vulnerable. In fact, in a college survey conducted by Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) last year, 64% of academic administrators acknowledged greater risk of infringement due to their increased use of electronic content.

Part of the problem is that the faculty members who distribute published materials through their course management systems are generally not as copyright-savvy as their campus librarians. In general, they simply don’t have the training or experience to readily determine whether a particular content use qualifies as a fair use under the Copyright Act, or whether it requires rightsholder permission. And even if they figure it out, they may not know how to secure permission or have the time to do so.

In order for instructors to take advantage of new technology that makes it easier for them to access, use and share information, they need licensing options that take the guesswork out of permissions in cases in which fair use may not apply. Licensing is rising to the occasion. When it comes to sharing copyrighted material, there are more licensing and permission options than ever.

Integrated Rights and Permissions

Many service providers have built access to copyright permissions right into their applications. One of the most notable examples is the Blackboard course management system, which offers the Copyright Permissions Building Block. Blackboard customers who use the Building Block, can search, price and get permission to share articles and other text content without leaving Blackboard.

Elsevier’s Scopus database service is another example of integrated rights licensing.

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