

Understanding film scholars' annotation behavior: Supporting scholarship by enhancing online film annotations

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Traditionally, film archives have been the keepers and designers of curation mechanisms that enable film scholarship. In the pre-digital age, cataloguers and indexing experts determined the main features worth describing in order to provide entries or access points to films. However, the explosion of digital audiovisual productions and online access services severely transformed these processes, moving the center from the curators and indexing experts to the creators, users and “prosumers” of the so called “content”.

The proliferation of practices such as social tagging, a form of crowdsourcing in which non-indexing and non-domain experts, through adding free tags or keywords, influence how audiovisual productions can be found later by other users, corresponds to a new kind of curatorship: broader and participatory (Fossati, 2012). However, from a curatorial perspective, this non-controlled form of description of the information objects is far from appropriate in order to guarantee coherence, quality and order in the retrieval process that supports research. For that reason, a new initiative called “nichesourcing” has been proposed (De Boer et al., 2012), harnessing the advantages of social tagging and crowdsourcing but involving domain experts in the annotation tasks.

In order to convert these novel annotation initiatives into a real solution that enables a better use of audiovisual resources for film studies, it is important to understand the traditional annotation practices carried out by film scholars, their underlying needs in finding relevant sources, and how film specialists make sense of moving images. These topics are the object of study of the Information Behavior discipline, which is at the crossroads of the Information Sciences and the Digital Humanities, since it pursues the understanding of information seeking and searching behavior. This understanding can, in this context, enable better system design and support scholarship. There are some studies about Information Behavior of Humanities scholars (Case, 2012), but few studies have been conducted in relation to Film scholars.

For this purpose, we performed a study to improve our knowledge on film scholars' annotation behavior of audiovisual content. The research used a qualitative methodology and the method of simulated-work tasks (Borlund & Ingwersen, 1999). The participants were ten film scholars at the Journalism and Media Communications Department at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid. Each participant was invited to a session in which they were given five different tasks to annotate and also to evaluate tags for films.

In this presentation we describe the outcomes of this study, indicating film scholars' preferred annotation styles and the attributes and characteristics they found important for describing films. We also discuss the findings in the context of current perspectives for indexing moving images, with special focus on “nichesourcing”, looking at its implications and applicability to other areas in the Humanities.