Community Tagging at Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Library System

Library Staff Uses Encore Feature to Enhance Catalog and User Success

Staff at New Mexico’s Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Public Library System (ABCLS) “know their stuff” when it comes to the local area: from Southwest cooking recipes and stone architecture common to the area, to popular books at the local colleges and guidebooks pointing out the local hiking trails and ghost towns. This knowledge has gone into building an outstanding regional collection and providing top-notch answers to reference questions.

ABCLS staff has begun to bring even more of this specialized knowledge to the web with Encore’s community tagging feature, which allows a new, uniquely valuable kind of metadata to complement traditional MARC metadata.

In a sense, all libraries are engaged in passing on knowledge through adding value to their resources in various ways. Armed with knowledge of indexing terms, metadata, information sources, and community history, library staff members enrich the experience of their users in a unique way. Bringing the totality of their knowledge to bear on library resources has long been a virtue of libraries. At ABCLS, tagging is playing a part.

Scott Denning, a Customer Service Assistant at the library, has started adding New Mexican terms from Suzy’s List to Encore as community tags. Suzy’s List is a compilation of type-written lists of items with New Mexico interest. This document was built as a labor of love by a now-retired librarian and was known by word-of-mouth to reference librarians around the library system. Terms have been cross-referenced to titles and themes such as New Mexico authors, novels set in New Mexico, and more. This home-grown document, although not a controlled vocabulary, unlocks doors to the nooks and crannies of the New Mexico experience through the decades.

Denning selects helpful terms from Suzy’s List and adds them to Encore as community tags. Denning says: “In my efforts, I want to show my colleagues how tagging can expose our local knowledge, because it is these library staff who have something to give in terms of getting our full intellectual weight into our web interface. Not all of the librarians know about Suzy’s List, so to make it open to all, including library patrons, is wonderful.”

Some of the unique New Mexicana material from Suzy’s List are out of print and have MARC records that are susceptible to metadata gaps. For example, classic guidebooks often cover small New Mexico towns, and the names of these towns are now in Encore as tags on the relevant records. Denning says that a number of older, yet valuable reference books have very basic or vague descriptions in MARC. “Every librarian has a list in his or her head of things that are out of print,” he says. “You want the customer to be able to find these valuable resources but the catalog metadata is not as helpful as it could be. Now we can pop in a community tag from Suzy’s List or another source to help the customer get there.”

Denning has been an active tagger in recent months, adding key terms that are visible to the public at the record level—in the tag cloud (if the tag is well-represented in the search results)—and as a search facet. Denning started working in libraries at age seven, a passion that led him to a career in the field, as well as to jobs at independent bookstores and at an Albuquerque company.
doing machine-aided indexing, building of knowledge domains, and construction of taxonomies. He has called upon this experience to enter more than 20,000 tags from Suzy’s List and other items of local or popular interest in the collection.

Library Area Manager for ABCLS, Kevin Unrath, says that regional works are not always easy to access. “We’ve added tags such as ‘Exploring New Mexico’—to complement the New Mexico Guidebooks subject heading—and ‘New Mexico Authors’.” Denning says that staff periodically set up book displays and use community tags to represent the display in the catalog. Later, they can re-create the display in Encore by clicking on a community tag.

Taking a particular catalog term, such as New Mexico Guidebooks, as a jumping off point is a way of building a significant group of tags, says Denning. “I have also tagged items having to do with stone construction. The branch I work at is in the mountains above Albuquerque and people have rock on their properties and want books on yard projects with stone. But how discoverable are the relevant works with traditional MARC data? I put in as tags all the synonyms such as ‘rock wall,’ ‘stone wall,’ ‘rock working,’ ‘stone working,’ and so on. Since this tagging was done, the circulation of these items has certainly gone up!”

Another passion of ABCLS library users is Southwestern Cuisine. Because of this, Denning went to the indexes of the books to see what specific foods were listed in regional cookbooks. Denning says, “I have added a lot of terms in these books such as ‘Green Chili Stew’ or ‘Biscochitos’ that lead to otherwise undiscoverable books. There are very obvious things that would not be obvious in the MARC record.” At a hyper-local level, “search terms that are phrased New Mexico Cookery do not come to people’s minds quickly,” says Unrath.

“A book with great ‘Green Chili’ sauce has been discovered and tagged by a customer or librarian before you do your search. If there is a ‘Green Chili’ tag you can follow that trail.”

“In any user system broader terms and esoterica are both important, and the balance between the two is important,” says Denning. “Encore tagging helps us strike that balance.” On the esoterica end of the spectrum, Unrath explains that there are whole worlds within genres of fiction. “For example, works with Dracula in the title are published across genres and they are cataloged very differently. A ‘vampire’ genre search helps users take a broad view across media in non-fiction and folklore.”

Nothing says esoteric more than the library’s “Paranormal Romance” tag, which is attached to a genre of Romance fiction that blends in elements of fantasy, horror, or the supernatural. Paranormal romance is an example of a publishing term not reflected in standard cataloging but often on the spine of the book; and customers ask for books using the term. Unrath says that the paranormal romance search gets ten hits in the classic catalog (leveraging only MARC data) and 115 in Encore (when tags are present).

Denning thinks a tagging-MARC hybrid platform approach in Encore is a way to pass your experience and knowledge on to customers online. “It is just like being at the information desk but for 300,000 users,” he says. “Because of the way something is cataloged in MARC, it may take an experienced librarian fifteen minutes to find just the right resource. How we can add a tag that gets the user’s search-time down to seconds? That’s the key.”

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