

Using Twitter Hashtags for Information Literacy Instruction

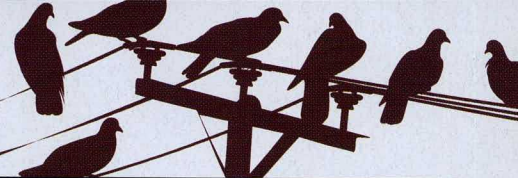
By Paige Alfonzo

THE UBIQUITY OF HASHTAGS HAS OPENED THE DOORS FOR THE TEACHING OF ADVANCED SEARCHING CONCEPTS TO A MUCH WIDER AUDIENCE THAN IN PAST YEARS.

While terms such as “controlled vocabulary,” “authority control,” and “subject heading” are common nomenclature in a librarian’s vernacular, these words are not necessarily resting on the tips of most students’ tongues. Many librarians across the country have encountered vacant stares and covert iPhone checks while trying to teach advanced searching concepts. The difficulty often stems from students’ unfamiliarity (and oftentimes disinterest) with this terminology and the fact that these classic concepts don’t seem relevant to their daily lives. But little do the students know, they employ these methods every day through the use of hashtags in their social media accounts. For instances, every time they pop a hashtag such as #marchmadness into their search box in order to see the

latest tweets on that subject, they are actually using indexed metadata.

Hashtags are not a new phenomenon, but they have become increasingly popular in recent years with the explosive growth of social media sites such as Twitter. They are so much a part of today’s pop culture that people are naming their babies “hashtag,” getting hashtag tattoos, and buying custom-designed hashtag shirts and jewelry. According to the ACRL’s 2013 report, the majority of college-age students use social media, and since most social media platforms support hashtags, it’s highly likely that students in an academic information literacy (IL) class will have encountered and used hashtags. With such a large conglomerate of students familiar with hashtag technology, these metadata tags could be librarians’ “in” when teaching information classification and advanced digital search concepts in the IL classroom.



What Are Hashtags?

The pound sign (#) followed by a word or phrase is a hashtag, for example #informationliteracy. Hashtags are metadata tags used to organize online conversations and images. They are a form of social classification, or folksonomy, similar to tags used in social bookmarking sites such as Delicious (founded in 2003) and blogging content management systems such as Blogger (founded in 1999) and WordPress (founded in 2003). You could say hashtags are the love child of IT and social media brought about by Web 2.0. They combine the social and back-end functionality programming that was once exclusive to information professionals and fill the need for conversation and image organization that users desire. Web 2.0 has brought about the increase of user-generated content that now drives the web. It involves many aspects that can be seamlessly incorporated into today's classroom, including collaboration, active engagement, and innovation spurred by users taking a more active role in information sharing and creation.

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How Hashtags Evolved

The evolution of the hashtag as people see it today started with internet relay chat (IRC) networks, which became popular in the late 1990s. This technology was inspired web designer Chris Messina who introduced the hashtag on Twitter in Aug. 23, 2007 (twitter.com/chris Messina/status/223115412) by tweeting: how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?

The 2007 San Diego forest fires made the hashtag a Twitter celebrity with Nate Ritter's #sandiegofire. Users were able to see the direct benefits of hashtags for gathering groups of people in a real-time environment. Twitter eventually saw the potential of

Popular Platforms That Support Hashtags

The fact that Twitter is now a publicly traded company goes to show how popular this microblogging platform has become. Twitter hashtag success has also prompted other social media platforms to follow suit. Here are some user statistics:

- Twitter: 230 million monthly active users
- Facebook: about 1.2 billion monthly active users
- Pinterest: 70 million users
- Instagram: 150 million users
- YouTube: more than 1 billion visits each month
- Tumblr: more than 300 million unique visitors; 120,000 signups every day
- Google+: 400 million active users

hashtag organization and began hyperlinking them in 2009. Since then, users haven't looked back. They have latched on to the hashtag and now use it for categorization, the expression of feelings, highlighting a specific point or idea, and, unfortunately, even to spam.

Twitter uses Scala for its back-end programming. Hashtags are a piece of logic in the program that enables hashtags to be clickable and searchable.

hashtags and subject headings are data assigned to a piece of information for identification and classification purposes. The ubiquity of hashtags has opened the doors for the teaching of advanced searching concepts to a much wider audience than in past years. Students' understanding of information organization through the use of hashtags can streamline the instruction of authority control, controlled vocabularies, subject headings, keyword searching versus subject searching, and indexing, etc. Another benefit to using hashtags in IL instruction is that one doesn't need a Twitter account to search and use them on the site. Not having to create an account saves time and also makes account privacy issues a non-issue.

Once hashtags are used in a tweet, they are stored in a database and are searchable in Twitter's search API for about a week. (These index capacity restrictions can be bypassed by using archiving applications such as Topsy and Twitter's archive feature.) Hashtags can also be used for data analytics. A very popular Twitter feature has been its lists of trending topics, comprising the most widely used hashtags, keywords, and conversation topics.

Twitter Hashtags in Information Literacy Instruction

Hashtag technology provides a perfect example when teaching subject heading and keyword searching. Both

Using Common Hashtag Annoyances to Make a Point

Students are experiencing, firsthand, the problems that come with poor digital content organization and user-defined classification systems that have plagued librarians for years. These annoyances can be used as a springboard to facilitate discussions and IL activities that can lead to a more thorough understanding of information architecture. Here are a few common hashtag annoyances that can be used as cases in point in the IL classroom (I am going to refer to all these activities in regard to Twitter, but most of them are applicable on any platform that supports hashtag technology.):

A Page From My Lesson Book

Here is how I incorporated hashtag instruction in my information literacy courses. I entered into the hashtag conversation with this simple PowerPoint prompt:

Subject Headings

- What is a hashtag?
- Why do you use them?
- What are some things that annoy you about hashtags?

Once we discussed what annoyances students had with hashtags, I showed them Jimmy Fallon's hashtag video on YouTube (youtu.be/57dzaMaouXA). The video prompted more discussion and led into a short class activity:

Twitter

1. Search Twitter Using Google for: [kennedy inaugural address site:twitter.com](http://kennedy.inaugural.address.site/twitter.com)
2. Click on [camanpour's](#) tweet
 - a. What hashtag is listed?
3. Go back to the Google search page and click on [RonaldGrey's](#) tweet
 - a. What hashtags are listed?

The activity provided a way for students to do the following:

- Search with hashtags.
- Learn the differences between a controlled vocabulary and a folksonomy, including a discussion on the importance of authority control and how databases use subject headings to avoid the pitfalls attached to user-generated search categories.
- Use Twitter as a discovery tool.

Used in the wrong context. A blue hyperlinked hashtag surrounded by black text attracts the reader's eye. Because tacking the # symbol on to the front of a specific piece of text is such an effective attention grabber, people have taken to using it to express emotions and/or to highlight random words. This may be effective for making a word the focal point of one's tweet, but it does nothing for classification purposes. This "cyber litter" can be seen as self-indulgent and useless, leading readers to unfollow an overly enthusiastic hashtagger. Also, typing out the word hashtag instead of using the # symbol and saying the word hashtag in conversation are other common hashtag qualms that Twitter users have.

• **IL activity**—Jimmy Fallon's hashtag videos (youtu.be/57dzaMaouXA; youtu.be/Kwq_GraOC9E) do a perfect job of parodying the exasperations that come from inappropriate hashtag use. These comedic videos can very easily be incorporated into a presentation to illustrate these problems or used as a "flipped classroom" lesson.

Free-form categorization. The free-form categorization that makes hashtags so easy to create is also what makes them difficult to use and follow. The fact that anyone can create a hashtag leads to several different hashtags describing the same thing. For example, the hashtags [#martinlutherkingjr](#), [#mlk](#), [#drmartinlutherking](#)—the list goes on—have all been used when

talking about Martin Luther King Jr. (also not to be confused with the tag [#martinluther](#)).

• **IL activity**—Reviewing free-form categorization is a great segue into a controlled vocabulary discussion and assignment. For the assignment, provide students with a topic and have them search for related tweets. Require them to write out the various problems they run into and write a list of the official hashtags they think should be used for the assigned topic and why.

• **IL activity**—Another idea could be to have students list the pros and cons of hashtags (bottom-up folksonomies) and subject headings (top-down hierarchies). This could help them understand the inefficiencies of hashtag searching, why subject headings are used, where they are available (library catalog and databases, etc.), and why they're important when searching.

The Twitter search is picky. When tweets are searched, Twitter filters them based on what Twitter deems as "quality tweets." While this definitely helps with spam tweets, sometimes tweets of actual quality can be caught in the crossfire. [This can happen when running a Twitter contest (support.twitter.com/groups/31-twitter-basics/topics/114-guidelines-best-practices/articles/68877-guidelines-for-contests-on-twitter) and result in lost contest entries.] A search in Twitter also defaults to a top tweets page, which is based on retweets, shares, and trending hashtags. *The New York Times'* social media editor Daniel Victor (2013) states that the top tweets default view "favors tweets and users that have already gained a follow" and can be considered biased.

• **IL discussion**—This annoyance provides an opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of authority control and how search algorithms function.

Too many. While there are no formalized rules for hashtag use, Twitter recommends using no more than two hashtags per tweet (support.twitter.com/)

entries/49309). Overtagging is an online etiquette faux pas and can lead people to unfollow, hide the user's updates from their feed, or be prepared to launch an all-out Twitter war!

- **IL activity**—Create an activity that requires students to perform a hashtag analysis and determine how many hashtags should be used per tweet to properly describe it. Hashtags.org provides real-time tracking of Twitter hashtags and

resources to be lost or not as easily retrieved and discuss the importance of subject specific databases.

Used by spammers. Some companies and/or individuals take advantage of viral topics by adding hashtags that are completely unrelated to their tweet in order to drive traffic and expose their tweet to a wider audience.

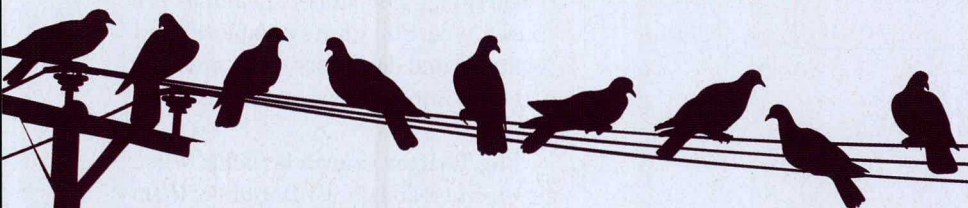
- **IL activity**—Analyze a set of spam tweets and who is tweeting them. Are

of my students were familiar with and build on that knowledge to easily explain advanced research concepts.

Conclusion

As information retrieval continues to evolve so should IL instruction. Messina states that he “chose the hash symbol because it was a convention already established in IRC channels ...” (quora.com/Hashtags/How-did-the-idea-for-hashtags-originate-on-Twitter). In a similar manner, librarians should capitalize on hashtags as instructional tools because they are already established on Twitter and a variety of other social media platforms. Incorporating hashtags into your lessons can be a great way to engage students, teach challenging subject matter, and promote lifelong learning. #

STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF INFORMATION ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE USE OF HASHTAGS CAN STREAMLINE THE INSTRUCTION OF AUTHORITY CONTROL, CONTROLLED VOCABULARIES, SUBJECT HEADINGS, KEYWORD SEARCHING VERSUS SUBJECT SEARCHING, AND INDEXING, ETC



could be a useful tool for this exercise.

- **IL discussion**—Discuss the difference between the indexing of keywords versus subjects.

Hashtag overload. Victor states that “hashtags for big news stories are particularly vulnerable to mathematical futility,” meaning when trending hashtags are used, the tweet probably won't be read because there are so many. He gives the example of the 3 million tweets that were sent over 5 hours during 2013's Super Bowl, stating that if you want to get your voice heard by using #SuperBowl, you have about as much chance as a “Niagara droplet screaming for notice as it shoots down the falls.”

- **IL activity**—Explain information overload and why databases are so useful. Have students create and follow a hashtag stream (RSS feed) during a popular event and count how many tweets pop up in 5 minutes. Then, explain how an overabundance of information can cause useful

they from reputable companies or individuals? Take a look at the tweeter's Twitter account. Has it been hacked? This could help facilitate a discussion about the value of digital privacy.

Teaching With Hashtags

This semester, I incorporated hashtag instruction during my advanced rhetoric and freshman composition information literacy sessions. The past few semesters, I have been working with an English professor as an embedded librarian. I teach two information literacy sessions—one on catalog searching and one on database searching—to his composition I classes. I found that incorporating hashtag examples into my lessons was a very successful way to teach higher-level research skills. It resulted in increased student discussion, greater class engagement, and diversified student learning.

All in all, I believe that using hashtags greatly enhanced my information literacy sessions this semester. I was able to use a technology that many

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