
Messageboard Topic Tagging: user tagging of collectively owned community content

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Abstract

We have designed a feature for the BBC England (www.bbc.co.uk/england) messageboard which allows users to tag their own conversations with words and phrases. This introduces a faceted method of navigation around conversations to complement the current structure. The messageboards' editorially imposed top-down architecture is inflexible and does not consistently reflect the content: users can't easily work out 'where the party's at'.

This 'ethnolocation' follows many of the same rules as <http://www.flickr.com/> (photo collections) and <http://del.icio.us/> (web link collections), where they have been implemented very successfully. However, their content items are owned by individuals, whereas our conversations and therefore the tags attached are owned by a group.

This difference could create community politics, and we await our launch to see what behaviours and etiquettes emerge. We hope to see more 'informational' than 'personal' tagging, but expect a certain level of 'meta-debate'. We should have some results in time for DUX'05.

Keywords

Interaction design, ethnolocation, tagging, community, metadata, taxonomy, folksonomy.

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* The DNA platform is described here: www.bbc.co.uk/dna/hub/ As they put it, "DNA is a system that enables clients to create community websites that are based around user-generated content". DNA was initially developed for Douglas Adam's h2g2 site, www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2, which is an online, community created Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Project/problem statement

The BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) supports about fifty messageboards on the wide range of subjects which fall under the organisation's remit (to inform, educate and entertain). Our project's goal has been to migrate the boards onto a new platform (called DNA*), and in the process improve the user interface template and moderation system. One of the messageboards to be migrated supports all of the BBC's English Region sites (for example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham>).

Problem:

- § The English Regions board has 42 topics: one for each region. There are wild differences in the nature and volume of use in these topics (and the experience levels of the users), and our system does not allow for further 'subtopic' layers to be introduced in busy topics. Communities have formed around regions rather than a board-wide community.
- § English Regions users are typically slightly older and less technically experienced than the average www.bbc.co.uk user.
- § The English Regions messageboard could be a useful 'grass roots' indicator of national news stories. However, not many BBC journalists currently use it as a resource.

Goals:

- § Create a more fluid classification system on the English Regions messageboard.
- § Expose the board's content to users more successfully.

- § Provide a low-investment method of participation for the 'lurkers' (people who read but don't contribute to online communities).
- § Allow BBC editorial teams to find interesting community content more easily.

Background

- § Team: Robin Hamman, English Regions Communities – client; Simon Booth, Producer – liaison with client, requirement gathering, concepts; Jane Murison, Design – requirement gathering, concepts, wireframes; Jim Lynn, Technical Architect – consultation; Mark Neves, Mark Howitt, Martin Robb, Wendy Mann, Tom Whitehouse – development team
- § Project dates: Jan–Jun 05
- § Context: Messageboards projects are carried out by the Communities Team, which is part of BBC New Media Production & Development. New Media Production & Development creates applications and platforms for the BBC's interactive content (including Internet, Interactive TV, and Mobile).

Challenge

Deviating from the template system with new interface ideas has to be well-justified and reusable with other DNA applications. We could theoretically give English Regions exactly what they had before for much less effort, so this project is seen as a 'nice to have'. As a result, work on it is snatched in between more important tasks.

We need to ensure our boards are well-moderated so that the BBC can maintain its position of public trust.

* Our team uses Scrum, a software development method in which work is carried out in month-long iterative 'sprints'. For more information, see www.controlchaos.com

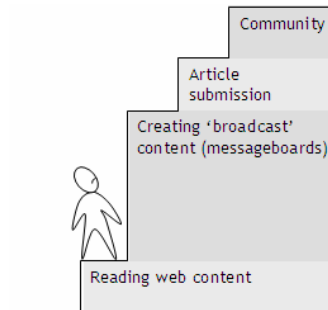


Figure 1a: Current steps to participation

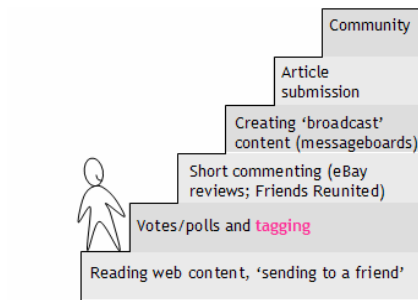


Figure 1b: Possible steps to participation

Smaller, independent websites would be able to take greater risks with community-generated content than we can.

Community interfaces are intrinsically difficult to test with users before they are on a live environment. While it's not impossible, it is expensive to create a convincing fake environment where the user can find a conversation they are interested in, react to messages, add their own replies and then receive responses. On top of that, testing the collective response from a community is even harder. As a result, much of our user research has had to wait for pilot launches.

Solution

A. Process (methods, tools, procedures, influences):

Method:

We have developed a cycle of 'user research → design → user test → iterate', which works in parallel with technical feasibility and development. This coordinates well with the tech team's agile project method*. The initial chunk of user research is discussed with the business function, and the subsequent requirements inform the design. From the first design prototype, we get immediate feedback on technical feasibility, and can balance user needs against technical constraints.

We chose to develop a prototype, and following basic user testing of interactions will be launching a beta. Most of the insights will come after beta launch, and we will have to be quick to react to these and introduce improvements iteratively.

For our initial prototype, the mantra has been to keep the functionality as simple as possible. Community interfaces are more 'recipe' than 'meal': until the community has experienced it, we will not know exactly what they need.

Influences:

Our idea for faceted, user generated topic tagging was strongly influenced by the user tagging schemes used on del.icio.us and flickr.com. We used flickr in particular as a source to understand some of the intricacies of tagging, identity, and content ownership. Our case has important differences, however, the most important being that a messageboard conversation has multiple 'owners'. On flickr, it is possible to add tags to other users' pictures (if this has been permitted by the author). However, because the originator of the picture is an individual, they always have the final say over the tags displayed on their images. Because our conversations are contributed to by several users, our tags are collectively owned, making deletion and editing of tags a more complex issue.

B. Solution details:

Research:

Earlier in the project, we carried out depth interviews in order to create personas. From this research we discovered that here was a big leap in trust and participation from reading online content to contributing to a public forum (see Figure 1a). We needed to find ways to make the progression from 'lurker' to 'participator' more gradual and attractive by providing them with 'low risk' methods of participation. (see Figure 1b).

We also knew from our user testing of live boards that people had some basic trouble finding content they were interested in. Along with our weak search engine, we blamed this on the conventions of messageboard design: topics created by a host rarely related accurately to all the content created in them by users. This is because talk is centred more on social groups of users rather than on particular predefined topics imposed on them. They become a social group because

of a shared interest, but their discourse will often stray away from this one topic.

Design:

Our solution has been to make it possible for users to tag their own conversations. This is combined with 'intrinsic' region tags, to maintain the top-down structure as well and ensure that content will be searchable on a global level (bbc.co.uk's search is controlled by a managed taxonomy). (See Figure 2)

So, for example, a conversation about a music festival in Somerset might be tagged with:

- Somerset (the regional tag)
- Glastonbury (the name of the festival)
- Music

Another user who also went to the festival might reply complaining about the journey there:

- Somerset (the regional tag)
- London (the new user's regional tag)
- Glastonbury (the name of the festival)
- Music
- Trains
- First Great Western (the train operator)

Because the users of this board can be less technically adept, the tagging fields on the message forms have been designed to become a normal part of the messageboard process. The instructional text points out this will make the discussion more 'findable' by other users, which indicates the tags are public, and may increase the visibility (and therefore perhaps, 'busyness') of their conversation.

Conversations can be tagged by anyone contributing to the discussion, or by anyone logged into the board. This intention with this is to use tags as a 'low-risk'

method of participation for users not willing to contribute to discussion. There will be an upper limit per conversation of around 100 tags. (See Figure 3)

For the moment, the tags cannot be edited or deleted by the users. Content is owned by a group of users, who in some cases may radically disagree with each other: a more 'wiki'-like approach to tagging may facilitate a new form of malicious deleting and debate around tags (when it should really be about whatever they're discussing). Users can complain to the moderators about malicious tagging (along with libel and spam), but in the case of a more 'editorial' mistake, users can retag with the correct spelling. Hopefully, this will encourage higher quality tagging, but we will observe this in beta and possibly modify it.

Region tags and 'topic' tags are essentially very similar, but are treated in different ways: the region tags constitute the left-hand navigation and are omitted from the 'tag cloud'*. It is coded in such a way that when tag clouds as a visual concept suffer from an inevitable backlash**, we can consider new ways of expressing this data. When users register with the messageboard, they will be asked to set a region. By default, this is applied to every conversation they contribute to, thus ensuring that every conversation is tagged.

The tag cloud should help with the age-old 'where's the party at?' issue with messageboards. Regular contributing users and 'lurkers' alike are on a search to find where the most action or valuable content is. In addition to this, we are creating a 'map visualiser' which shows which regions are most talkative. This will hopefully facilitate more navigation between regions. (See Figure 4)

Part of the success of establishing tagging with the community will lie with the messageboard hosts (who are BBC employees), who will be able to tag conversations as well. Their contributions to

* The 'tag cloud' concept is seen best in [flickr](#). Our cloud is pretty similar to theirs, but the factors weighting our link sizes are: time degradation, popularity of tag, popularity of tagged content, popularity as search term, and a 'publicity' degradation (so that popular terms don't become too strong). We are still playing with the algorithm to make it 'sensible'.

**...which has already started on Jeffrey Zeldman's Daily Report - <http://www.zeldman.com/daily/0405d.shtml>

Users can add tags as they are contributing new discussions or replies. Each contribution will include *at least* a region tag defaulted to the user's preferred region. The instructional text connects the action of adding a tag to the outcome of their content becoming more 'findable'. A key trigger for messageboard users is acknowledgement: the evidence that someone has read their contribution.

The wireframe shows a web page for starting a new discussion. At the top, there is a header with the text 'Hello mewroh' and a link 'I'm not mewroh'. Below the header is a breadcrumb trail: 'You are here > BBC England Messageboard > Start a new discussion'. The main heading is 'Start a new discussion'. The form contains the following elements:

- Your discussion title:** A text input field with the instruction 'Write a short title to kick off the discussion thread'.
- Your message:** A large text area for writing the message.
- Discussion tags:** A text input field with the instruction 'Help other users find your discussion by writing 3 or 4 descriptive words separated with a space'.
- Mark the discussion with your region:** A dropdown menu with the text '<defaulted to user's region>' and a downward arrow.
- Buttons:** 'Cancel', 'Preview >>', and 'Post message >>'.

On the right side of the form, there are four radio button options: 'H disc', 'E guid', 'A mes', and 'A mes'.

Figure 2 Start a new discussion wireframe (detail)

This discussion is tagged with:

- <region>
- <region>
- <tag 1>
- <tag 2>
- <tag 3>

 [Add another tag](#)

Figure 3a A new tag panel has been added to the discussion page which any registered user can add to.

bbc.co.uk Home TV Radio Talk Where I Live A-Z Index Search


Banner Area


BBC Homepage New visitors: Create your BBCi Membership Returning BBCi members: Sign in


You are here > BBC England Messageboard > (tag)/(region) > (discussion)


<tag or region> House rules | Help


Discussion: <discussion title> Messages 1-5 of 5

Message 1 – posted by Mewroh, 3 hours ago
 Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Maecenas suscipit, orci et venenatis sodales, massa libero accumsan augue.
 [Reply to this message](#)


Message 2 – posted by Plinth, 2 hours ago
 Proin in massa. Mauris eu metus sit amet risus ultricies consectetur. In scelerisque elementum orci. Vestibulum ullamcorper quam nec lorem. Nullam id purus.
 [Reply to this message](#)

Message 3 – posted by Mewroh, 30 minutes ago
 Maecenas varius. Donec porta mi vel eros. Nullam quis magna sed quam placerat ultrices. Nam tellus felis, euismod et, rhoncus a, consectetur vulputate, est.
 [Reply to this message](#)

Message 4 – posted by Malingerer, 26 minutes ago
 Curabitur vel leo. Curabitur aliquet nulla nec est. Quisque auctor vehicula lectus. Quisque
 [Reply to this message](#)

This discussion is tagged with:
 - <region>
 - <region>
 - <tag 1>
 - <tag 2>
 - <tag 3>
 [Add another tag](#)

[How to reply to messages](#)

 [Alert us about a message](#)

[Are you being safe online?](#)

<Board promo>

Figure 3 Discussion page wireframe

bbc.co.uk Home TV Radio Talk Where I Live A-Z Index Search


Banner Area

BBC Homepage New visitors: Create your BBCi Membership Returning BBCi members: Sign in

> England
 Beds, Herts & Bucks
 Berkshire
 Birmingham
 Black Country
 Bradford
 Bristol
 Cambridgeshire
 Cornwall
 Coventry & Warks
 Cumbria
 Derby
 Devon
 Dorset
 Essex
 Gloucestershire
 Hampshire
 Hereford & Worcs
 Humber
 Kent
 Lancashire
 Leics
 Leicester
 London
 Lincolnshire
 Liverpool
 Manchester
 Norfolk
 Northamptonshire
 North Yorkshire
 Nottingham
 Oxford
 Shropshire
 Somerset
 South Yorkshire
 Stoke & Staffordshire
 Suffolk
 Surrey, Sussex
 Tees
 Tyne
 West
 Wiltshire
 Channel Islands
 Jersey
 Guernsey
 About the BBC

What people are saying in <region>

Surfing OAPs
 "Is it me or are all the best spots overrun with wrinklies who got there at 5am?"
 Golow Dydh



Duchess of Cornwall
 "How do people feel about Camilla becoming the Duchess of Cornwall?"
 Tabitha

Find conversations tagged with these words: <region> Go

What people are talking about in <region>... See everything in England

artists, a-levels, asylum, baccalaureate, bbc radio, bikers, bring and buy, clubbing, easter, education, ellen macarthur, fishing, foxhunting, gigs, gm, ken livingstone, lemmings, lumber, migrant workers, mother's day, MRSA, news, organic, police, prisons, schools, sheep, sport, supermarkets, surfing, waste, windsurfing, yachts, more ...


All conversations in <region>

Start a new discussion Discussions 1 - 25 of 2198

First | << Previous 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Next >> | Last

Discussion	Replies	Latest Reply	Tags
Falmouth vs Truro I'm just about to move down to Devoran...	12	Just Now	Cornwall, Shopping, Devoran

Who's talking the most?



most least

This messageboard is reactively moderated.

Opening Hours:
 Monday-Friday 0900 - 2200
 Weekend 1000 - 2200

Need help with registration on the board?

Got a question? Check out our guide.

Map Visualiser – at this level, would show how busy one region was versus another. This is to help users work out 'where the party's at'.

Tag cloud – selecting a tag here would filter discussions from this region.

A new 'tag' column introduced into the normal discussion listing table. This is to facilitate users with filtering discussions.

Figure 4 Region page wireframe (incidentally, the 'foxhunting' tag is prominent because the abolition of foxhunting was a major debate at the time)

discussions and tags can set the tone of the board (as long as they have the respect of the community). Some cultivation from them will suggest forms and etiquettes to the user without resorting to moderation of bad behaviour.

C. Results:

We are launching a 'proof of concept' in mid-September to a group of around 60 volunteer users on a secure server. Following tweaks and bug fixes, we will launch a live beta in mid-October. This will run for a month to test interactions and community development before deciding whether to continue or revert to a traditional messageboard format.

Our key performance indicators and measures are as follows:

- *Does it encourage user participation?* Number of posts/tags, increased number of registered users
- *Does it improve traffic to the board?* Number of page impressions on discussion level pages
- *Do journalists find it a useful resource for seeing local issues bubbling up?* One national and ten local news features that draw their inspiration from user generated topics
- *Do Broadcast Journalists start using the boards more to gauge local opinion?* (Benchmark survey)
- *Does it make messageboard navigation easier?* (user testing)

We will need to monitor the behaviour of the tag cloud and moderation closely during launch and the ensuing weeks to understand the group dynamic, as well as testing on an individual basis with current and new users of the English Regions messageboard.

Re-launching a messageboard is always a sobering experience, because of the instant, opinionated feedback from the most active members of the

community. While this often has valid points in it, it is not a fair assessment of the user experience, so needs to be tempered with user testing and benchmarking over time.

Next steps:

After the beta, there is still a lot to explore:

- Possibly adjust the permissions on tagging according to moderation issues experienced.
- Adjust the functionality based on how swarms form around tags, weird moderation issues we have failed to anticipate, and other unexpected community behaviour.
- Develop a way of filtering and suggesting tags to add to the BBC's English Regions controlled vocabulary of metadata (which BBC journalists use to mark up articles), and possibly other BBC taxonomies as they emerge in popularity on the messageboard.
- Integrate more BBC editorial content by identifying metadata in common with the tags. This is dependent on developing a better connection between the user tags and the internal taxonomy, and on the platform accepting Server-Side Includes.
- Develop a better 'personal space' for users to review their own contributions and tags.
- Adapt the design as a template for other applications.

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