

How does tagging reshape the way we think?

Gheorghe Stefanov

June 19, 2006

Abstract

In this paper I try to examine the tagging mechanism introduced by Gmail and used on sites like Flickr, YouTube and Tehnorati, considering the changes it could produce on our thinking habits. After presenting the way in which the cognitive process of classification was traditionally involved in organizing information held on computers, I try to identify some problems that the regular computer users had to face and the way in which the introduction of the tagging system provided them with solutions to those problems. I argue that while technical solutions to overcome the respective difficulties were available before the introductions of tags, they could not be seen by the computer users without a change of the traditional view on classification. In the end I attempt to describe the characteristics of this change and to formulate some hypotheses about future changes in our cognitive processes that it might entail.

Numerous tasks which we have to perform require us to organize things. We usually do this by producing distinctions, lists and classifications. Let us start by looking at a analogy of what we do when we classify something. The material to be classified is represented by numerous objects laying on the ground. At the end of the classification process we expect to have several groups of objects, with the objects in each group displaying the same visible traits. No object should be left aside and, of course, no object could be member of two or more different groups. This expresses the requirement that any classification should be complete and exclusive.

Since we started to work with computers, we have been dealing with classifying a great amount of information. We usually proceed like this: the files we think should belong to the same class we put together in one directory¹. The educated user does this in accordance with the logical requirements for a good classification: he tries to use the same criterion for the directories on the same branch of the

¹Also called “folder” by Windows users.

directory tree and he also strives to make the classification complete and exclusive. Due the diversity of information, one level of directories is never sufficient. Think of an user who has the following kinds of files on her computer: files related to the operating system and the programs running on the computer, electronic books and articles downloaded from the internet, text documents written by the user, music files, videoclips and pictures downloaded from a digital camera. Now, she could, of course, group all the files in directories according to one single criterion - the kind of information they contain - but this would hardly be enough. She would also want to have the books and articles classified by author, domain or subject, the music files classified by band or music genre and so on.

We want a more detailed classification of the information we have at hand. As a result, we ramify our structure of directories and apply a new criterion at each node, in succession. We face now the problem of ordering our criteria. Between a chronologic criterion and an alphabetic criterion, which one should prevail? Sometimes it is impossible for the user to establish such a hierarchy. Let us look at the following example:

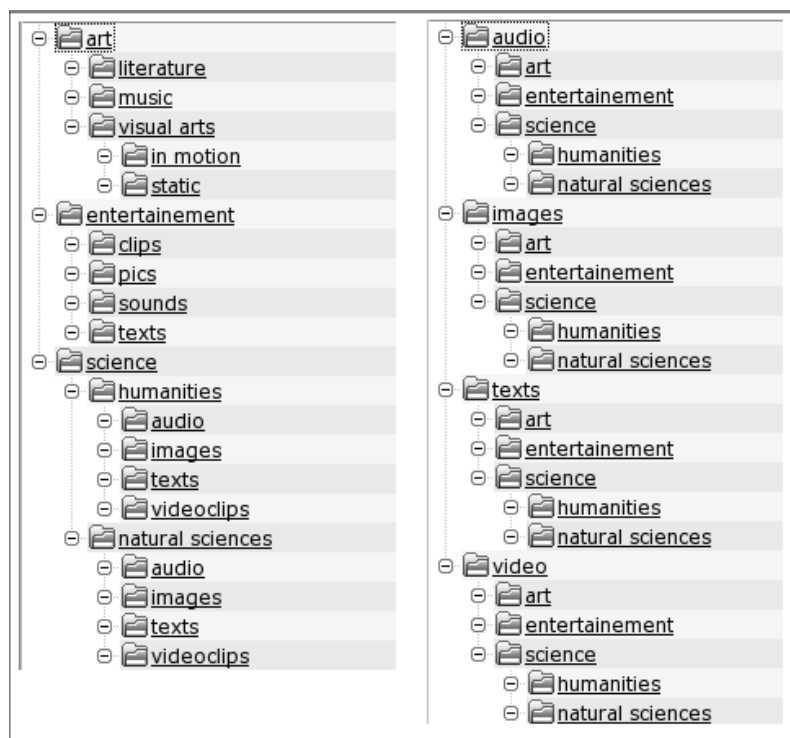


Fig. 1

Which of the two directory structures is better? There is no clear answer.