Tag Writing, Search Engines, and Cultural Scripts

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Abstract

In this article, I explore the social, political, and ethical implications of search engine use and tag writing. Unlike scholars in economics, law, information science, and media studies who have weighed on these issues for more than a decade now, I argue that scholarship in rhetoric and composition has taken a narrow approach by connecting search engines and tag writing primarily with the teaching of research skills. Relying on a folksonomic approach, I conduct a case study of a Romanian online campaign that aimed to work with and against Google in order to change Romanians' online identity. Based on this example, I show how search engines can be used, on the one hand, to write new identity scripts and to change cultural patterns, and, on the other hand, to reinscribe power relations and limited identity politics. I also argue that the campaign is an example of public rhetorical education that calls on us, teachers and scholars of composition, to rethink our pedagogies and to expand our teaching tools. Ultimately, integrating search engines and tag writing into the classroom can teach students to use technologies more responsibly and to reflect critically on their everyday writing practices, which, in their simplest manifestations, are powerful forms of culture-writing.
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The truth is that we like to Google. According to a report in November 2012, Google established a new market share of 70% of the total search engine usage (Goodwin, 2012). If you're looking for world news, recent pictures of friends, personal websites, shopping, or academic articles, Google can help. And we not only like to search, but we also believe in what we're getting from our searches. Sixty-eight percent of users tend to trust their searches as "fair and unbiased source[s] of information" (Fallows, 2005, p. i). And why wouldn't they? Aren't search engines mechanisms that retrieve information depending on *our* keywords? Aren't they digital structures that apply computing algorithms based on *our* input?

Scholars in different fields, such as economics, law, information science, and media studies (Introna & Nissembaum, 2000; Granka, 2010; Grimmelmann, 2008/09; Mager, 2012) have repeatedly pointed out that search engines are social and political mechanisms that can be easily misused. As early as 2000, Lucas Introna and Helen Nissenbaum saw search engines operating according to market forces. Websites of companies whose products were searched for by a large number of consumers seemed to be more visible and benefited from higher search rankings (Introna & Nissembaum, 2000, p. 175). In 2010, Laura Granka reevaluated Introna and Nissenbaum's (2000) concerns. In her study, Granka found that search engines were driven by competition and consumer choice, while user behavior was much more complex. Granka argued that a theory of hegemony enacted by big online companies did not acknowledge the agency

of individual users and their various search-writing practices. People are not passive consumers of online information, clicking the first website retrieved by the search engine. Their decisions are dependent on a wide range of factors, such as the nature of the task, their goals, and expectations.

If the body of literature mentioned before emphasizes cultural, political, and ethical concerns, scholarship in composition studies has been narrower in scope. Michelle Sidler (2002), James Purdy (2010), and Randall McClure (2011) have primarily linked search engines and writing practices (e.g., tag writing and digital folksonomies) with the research process. These scholars have repeatedly pointed out that search engine expertise can enhance research skills. If students are able to analyze how a source, or any other type of digital information, is retrieved in a variety of contexts, students can gain a deeper understanding of the research process and its structure. Rather than the identification of the *right* and most immediate source, good research implies critical thinking about sources and the formulation of effective links and connections among these (McClure, 2011, p. 315).

In fact, it is not surprising that these studies have linked search engine use with the research process. Alexander Halavais (2009) noted that, "the prototypical search experience is still thought of as academic" (p. 43). Because we expect students in writing courses to prepare research-based projects, it is only natural that scholars in composition studies have turned to search engines to explore new ways of identifying, assessing, and using online sources. Driven by a pedagogical imperative, Sidler (2002), Purdy (2010) and McClure (2011) tried to develop strategies to make students more aware of the possibilities of expanding their research skills. However, these attempts to incorporate search engines in the research process are indicative of a conservative approach, whereby everyday writing activities are made to serve established pedagogical agendas. Instead of making the search engine the next tool in the research process, we should also examine other aspects of search writing that can help us design more complex assignments. This will help our students gain a thorough understanding of their everyday acts of composing, and it will better align pedagogy with writing practices beyond the classroom.

In this sense, I turn to what Halavais (2009) called, the *sociable* nature of search engines, an interesting and challenging dimension of search-based writing. As David Weinberger (2005), Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, Ellen Cushman, and Jeffrey Grabill (2005) noted, infrastructures, search engines included, are "penetrated by issues of culture and identity"; yet, this is an area that still needs to be explored (DeVoss, Cushman, & Grabill, p. 22). Isabella Peters (2009) argued that part of the problem comes from the fact that the social character of tagging is often hard to trace and remains, for the most part, invisible to its users (p. 227). Despite its apparent simplicity, searching is a fascinating social practice and, because it is such a common activity, we need to know more about the ways in which people use, misuse, and reuse their searches to connect with one another. In composition studies, we have yet to analyze examples of search engine use and the formation of social bonds, power hierarchies, "bias and diversity of result ranking" (Granka, 2010, p. 370).

To address these aspects, I analyze the online campaign entitled "Romanians are Smart," initiated on November 17, 2011. In my analysis, I rely on a folksonomic approach, which I elaborate on in the following section, developed by scholars such as Jodie Nicotra (2009) and Jeff Rice (2012). I explore this case for two reasons: on the one hand, this example demonstrates the rhetorical complexity of an apparently simple act of search writing. The strategic use of Google during the campaign proves how search engines can be used to not only compose new identity scripts[1] and change cultural patterns, but also reinscribe power relations and limited identity politics. On the other hand, I investigate this campaign because it offers a challenging example of *public rhetorical education* that calls on us, teachers and scholars of composition, to rethink our pedagogies, expand our teaching tools, and assess the relevance of our curriculum. Ultimately, what I hope to show is that the *sociable* dimensions of search engines and tag writing go well beyond the development of research skills, and it has profound implications for writing pedagogy.

1. Folksonomies and the algorithms of search engines

Before I discuss the example of the Romanian campaign, first I want to define and explain how folksonomies and search engines function together. Jodie Nicotra (2009) defined a folksonomy as multi-user tagging that "provides a new

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[1] I ground the phrases "identity scripts" and "cultural scripts" in a neo-empirical framework (see Sánchez, 2012, p. 241). While it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze this approach, suffice it to say that, from this perspective, identity and cultural expressions reside and take form via acts of writing (Sánchez, 2012, p. 245) and, I would add, via all digital practices and technologies that make identity and culture *happen*.

technology for organizing material on the Web, one that moves away from traditional hierarchies and classification systems" (p. 260). Similarly, James Porter (2010) saw a folksonomy as a social network, "a database in which the community of users (including so-called nonexperts) contribute content and create the organizing structure through tagging" (p. 180). In other words, folksonomies allow users to name and arrange content online by classifying and identifying this content based on personal descriptive tags (Battelle, 2005, p. 266).

Unlike taxonomies where classes of objects are given different fixed properties, folksonomies are more lax: anyone can add their own classificatory tags to blogs, bookmarks, images, or any other piece of digital information. In this sense, folksonomies are a "method of categorizing information according to desire, taste, personal interest, communal knowledge, imagination, and so on" (Rice, 2012, p. 87). A folksonomy challenges strict rules of referentiality because it entails flexibility and movement. A user can give any tag to a digital object depending on his or her personal preference and understanding. Moreover, these tags interconnect with other digital texts or objects by virtue of sharing the same tags, but not the same referenced object. For instance, searching the tag "mountaintop" in Flickr brings a photograph of a gorgeous landscape and another image portraying the entrance of a house in the mountains. The common tag "mountaintop" is the primary connector between the two images, but the two referenced images have content loosely connected to one another or to their tag. Therefore, what becomes more important in a folksonomy is the "flexible communal referencing" rather than the meaning *stricto sensu* of a particular object (Rice, 2012, p. 88).

In composition studies, folksonomies and the practice of tag writing have often been discussed in relation to sites like del.icio.us, Flickr, Pinterest, and other image-sharing portals, or in relation to individual posts and common blogs (Rice, 2012; McClure, 2011; Purdy, 2010; Nicotra, 2009). However, tagging can take many forms, and it can be applied both to preferred webpages and hyperlinks, as well as to a variety of digital objects (e.g., video, sound files, discussion topics, products purchased online, personal bookmarks, etc.). Tags can be categorized by genre, function, purpose, content, location, device used, time and task, and frequency (Peters, 2009, pp. 197–203). Tag writing is such a widespread practice primarily because it allows the user to identify, select, and personalize a wide variety of digital content.

Nevertheless, in order to discuss folksonomies, we have to understand how tags function beyond the act of simply identifying digital information. Folksonomies are not just about writing labels or representative phrases for the things we are interested in online. Folksonomies rely on popularity and circulation. As "clusters of tags," folksonomies spread across many users who share similar tags and who apply these labels to the same web pages or objects (Weinberger, 2005, p. 23). A folksonomy includes sets of tags that indicate a sustained collective user behavior. The more people use similar tags or link to the same digital objects, the more popular and visible these tags and links will be for their users, as well as for others who may be interested in similar information. In turn, this visibility leads to more tag popularity and increased reproduction of the same labels. Users who come across others' tagging patterns end up using similar tags, thus increasing the circulation and salience of the digital objects to which the tags point (Halavais, 2009, p. 60).

For search engines, this process is key because, based on tag popularity, search engines decide the ranking of the sites or digital objects that they make available for any user's search (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 58). When a website, image, or post is heavily linked and tagged, it has more chances to be picked up by a search engine and listed among the first entries of a search. Search engines are, in fact, more complicated mechanisms of information retrieval that operate based on a multitude of factors that not only include but also go well beyond tagging. Martin Feuz, Matthew Fuller, and Felix Stalder (2011) noted that a search engine like Google retrieves and ranks digital information based on the users' locations, their topical interests, the specific search query, and web metadata (e.g., site or section title tags). These are obviously not the only criteria based on which a search engine weighs and ranks information online. Google admits to operate its searches on more than 200 input types (Manovich, 2009, p. 211). However, this shouldn't prevent us from exploring the possibilities of acting on search mechanisms. If we dwell in the intricacies of search algorithms, we fail to see the rhetorical and social dimensions embedded in these infrastructures, as well as their relevance for daily writing practices and other digital activities.

Search engines and folksonomies may appear "merely functional" tools that help people navigate and organize the wealth of digital information, but they "can show us both their internal structure and the structure of society" (Halavais, 2009, p. 2). The act of searching is both an operational move of retrieving information and a profound *sociable* practice. For John Battelle (2005), searching becomes interesting if we think of this practice as a way of tapping into the "database of intentions" (p. 6). Every tag, search entry, and click is, in fact, a way of connecting to other people's searches and tags, i.e. to other people's intentions of naming and identifying the things that matter to them the most. When these tags are consistently used, activated, and circulated, individual search writing

engages collective searching and community building. In the following section, I offer the example of the Romanian campaign to illustrate and explore this relationship between the sociability of searching and the rhetorical power of tagging.

2. A positive image: From a scarce economy to a robust national profile

On January 1st, 2007, Romania joined the European Union (EU), and its citizens saw their hopes for a better future closer to reality: they gained free movement in a larger European space, and they expanded their job market. The Romanians' presence in Europe entailed significant changes in the economic and political life of many citizens in other EU countries. Despite socio-political efforts to strengthen and expand a European identity, citizens in other EU countries felt threatened by the influx of Romanians searching for new economic and educational opportunities. Feelings of unease materialized in political and cultural crises, such as the one in Italy in the fall of 2007 and the one in France in the summer of 2010, when the media in the host countries waged a war against the Romanian migrants who were perceived as intruders and potentially dangerous (Mădroane, 2012, p. 102).

Negative attitudes toward Romanians were intensified by yet another factor: the presence of Roma[2] citizens in the European countries. Many Roma citizens left Romania and some of them got involved in petty crime (e.g., begging and pickpocketing). Romanian citizens tried to distance themselves from Roma ethnics, arguing that the latter were not a representative group for all Romanians. While it is hard to have an accurate number of all the illegal acts carried by Roma, one important aspect is worth mentioning: the media in countries such as Italy, Spain, France, and the UK continually reported on these crimes. More importantly, these reports were used as a way to draw a general negative profile of all Romanian migrants. This profile relied on a very simple syllogism: The perpetrator is of Roma ethnicity; Roma people have Romanian citizenship; therefore, all Romanians are dangerous people and need to be kept under control and surveillance.

Hostile reactions against Romanians built up in time to the point where between 2009 and 2011 Romanians acquired a negative profile not only on the ground, in the host countries where they were trying to make a new living, but also online. Whenever a user would make a search starting with the phrase, "Romanians are. . .," the search engine would make suggestions to complete the phrase with a series of negative attributes: "Romanians are thieves," "Romanians are scum," "Romanians are racists," "Romanians are dirty," "Romanians are stupid," "Romanians are ugly," "Romanians are rude," "Romanians are gypsy," and "Romanians are lousy."

Google would automatically suggest an entire folksonomy of negative terms associated with Romanian citizenship. The terms varied slightly depending on the language used in the search engine. For instance, the first four entries in the Romanian version of Google pulled up the following attributes: "Latin," "stupid," "lousy," and "thieves"; the French version would list "sneak-thieves," "thieves," "racists," and "Latin"; and the English version would list "scum," "ugly," and "rude." The symbolic capital attributed to Romanians online shaped up a general negative profile. How does one deal with a damaged digital profile for an entire nation? How does one turn a scarce resource, in this case a positive national profile, into a primary source of symbolic capital? The answer, as you probably anticipate from my previous sections, is through a different folksonomy.

On November 17, 2011, the advertising agency McCann Erickson and a Romanian company that produces chocolate bars entitled "ROM" (note the ambiguous national branding of the product!) launched an online campaign called "Romanians Are Smart." An active website with the same title, numerous articles, and TV shows about the campaign were widely circulated and advertised in Romania, as well as in the diaspora. The campaign aimed to change the image of Romanians online by working with and against Google in order to modify its automatic suggestions. To change the deprecating national attributes, the campaign called on all Romanians to type in Google alternative phrases that would make the engine change the hierarchy of descriptive markers listed in association with the phrase "Romanians are. . ." According to the official website, everything a user had to do was to insert the magic phrase, "Romanians are smart," in Google. Moreover, to ensure that the campaign had a wide impact, these phrases were introduced in a variety of languages: English, Italian, French, Spanish, and Romanian. This tactic changed the hierarchy of negative descriptors

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[2] As an ethnic minority, Roma citizens are a distinct cultural group identified by different appellations. In Romania, the term "gypsy" is considered derogatory, while "Roma" is the politically correct term. What is also interesting is that, despite the official term, more and more people in the Roma community actually embrace the appellation "gypsy" as their identity marker.

not only in Google (the Romanian version of the website), but also in all the other language versions of Google that were targeted.

According to a report published in *Business Magazine* on December 21, 2011, in just one month from the launch date of the campaign, Romania became, "The first country that changes its image on the Internet" (Mihai, 2011). According to search traffic, the key phrase, "Romanians are smart," appeared in 163,779 searches in Romanian; 133,892 in French; 137,782 in English; 79,628 in Italian; and 78,829 in Spanish (Andrei, 2012). Over half a million of searches in Google contained the phrase, "Romanians are smart." Surprisingly, many other positive tags, such as "educated," "beautiful," "talented," "inventive," and "hard working," were also typed into Google. In just one month, a negative symbolic economy that defined the Romanian citizens was replaced by the circulation of positive terms, highly visible and immediately accessible. The article in *Business Magazine* that presented this online success concluded, "Today, Romanians are smart all over the internet" (Mihai, 2011).

3. What can tags do?

The Romanian project of digital reconstruction shows the complex, and oftentimes contradictory, potential of tag writing. On the one hand, the campaign serves as a powerful example of culture- and identity-making. In this case, a search engine became an important technology for writing and circulating new identity scripts and for changing cultural patterns. On the other hand, as I plan to show in section 3.2, the use of tags could also lead to limited identity politics and discriminatory writing practices. The same rhetorical strategies that are successful in scripting a new identity can, at the same time, misrepresent the identity profiles of others. An online tag that represents social capital for a group can easily become the denigrating label of another. These rhetorical contentions help us understand the full potential of search engines and tag writing, and they also give us the opportunity to enrich our writing pedagogies.

3.1. Tags: (Re)structuring identity

Tag writing is a powerful symbolic activity because it works at two fundamental levels. First, it is a form of *structural language*. In the example I shared in the previous section, the new folksonomy used in the campaign helped re-organize the descriptors automatically associated with the category "Romanians." The intensive use and input of positive terms in Google determined a different hierarchy of descriptors and digital objects. To be more precise, by using the phrase, "Romanians are smart," users determined Google to recognize that positive search queries should be ranked higher than negative ones because these were the new popular phrases circulated and searched for consistently by a large number of users.

More importantly, what also made these attributes climb up in the hierarchy of terms suggested by the search engine was the influx of digital texts and objects that many individual users published during and after the campaign was launched. According to *Kandia* website (the primary sponsor of the campaign), over 600 articles were published online in relation to this campaign alone (Campania, 2012). Because blog posts, videos, images, newspaper articles, and other materials were being created and tagged with positive attributes, subsequent search queries that started with, "Romanians are. . ." could be automatically completed with suggestions, such as "educated," "intelligent," and "beautiful." The campaign led not only to tagging, but also to people producing a wealth of digital materials that they circulated. To use John Batelle's (2005) phrase, the tagging campaign was actually a manifestation of people's "intentions" to place the Romanian identity in a favorable light. What made the search engine restructure this national profile was, therefore, a combination of tag writing and intense digital production and circulation that reflected a concerted investment in the image of the country.

Right now, a search in google.ro (the Romanian version of Google) may lead you to the following three automatic suggestions: *Românii sunt frumoşi* (trans., "Romanians are beautiful"), *Românii sunt educaţi* (trans., "Romanians are educated"), and *Românii sunt Daci* (trans., "Romanians are Dacians"). If any of these options is selected, the top three resources ranked highest in the list that the search engine retrieves are websites, images, videos, and articles that favor a positive image. To take an example, if the user chooses the first search phrase, "Romanians are beautiful," the three top sources proposed by Google include a blog post about Romanians' positive traits, an article about the campaign, and a YouTube video with the title, "Romanians are beautiful." All these options indicate that positive search phrases are the popular ones, and their affiliated documents have a high degree of circulation.

Tag writing may seem to be a convenient way of (re)arranging digital information; however, tagging is more that a form of structural language. This practice creates content and builds cultural discourses. What may have appeared as a game of changing an image via one phrase turned out to be a very effective, multi-layered, and immediate rhetorical move of repair. A national identity, damaged online via consistent denigrating terms and negative digital artifacts (e.g., images and articles about Romanians' crimes in EU countries), was altered to match a more beneficial profile. The campaign restored not only the image of Romanians online, but it also rekindled a sense of national pride. The success of the campaign depended on the commitment of hundreds of Romanian citizens who felt offended by the negative terms and wanted to give their identity a better name. This prompted many users to work together toward common goals: feeding the search engine different terms, producing new digital content while tagging it with the appropriate phrases, and linking these materials in a variety of contexts. In the words of Jurgen Faust (2010), the Romanian campaign is an example of "designing design" by "giving design a different meaning, changing the frame to include or exclude what we do or don't consider as a part of the field" (p. 109).

The technology of searching enabled users to gain control over their online image in other countries as well. While Romanian citizens had counteracted their negative profile in various national media outlets (e.g., newspapers, TV shows, political meetings, etc.), they had little impact or control over the media reporting on Romanians beyond the country borders. This lack of agency was reflected in Italian shows that mocked Romanian workers (Draghici, 2011), in the daily lives of the migrants, and online in the tags and resources that search engines would retrieve in relation to Romanian citizenship. The campaign allowed Romanians' voices to be heard more widely because the call to action targeted Google in countries such as Italy, Spain, the UK, and France. The sheer volume of tagging and digital artifacts in all these languages allowed Romanians to express themselves and gain their national pride in a way that had not been possible before.

Romanians' national discourse emerged out of the convergence of a wide range of social and computing actors (i.e., the search engine, the users, the official campaign site, promotional videos, etc.). Through the distributed agency of many users, an immediate sensible outcome was visible in the online world. In "Folksonomies and the Restructuring of Writing Space," Jodie Nicotra (2009) refers to a different type of folksonomy. Tagging images on Flickr, for instance, is a practice that brings people together by connecting them around their common tags (Nicotra, 2009, p. 271). Unlike Flickr, though, the example I presented above achieves similar goals without necessarily connecting people in overt and immediately traceable ways. The users who inserted and circulated their positive statements remained invisible. Google did not identify different user addresses, so the participants in this campaign had virtually no contact with one another; they remained anonymous. However, the aggregate effect of their work had an equally powerful outcome.

If search engines often seem to be mechanisms of random information, this campaign demonstrates that, in fact, search engines can be stabilized quite easily if a collective effort is channeled in a particular direction. As Collin Brooke (2009) argued in his book *Lingua Fracta*: *Towards a Rhetoric of New Media*, digital information is not fixed, and online content is always subject to change. However, this should not detract us from identifying and tracing patterns. Digital patterns reflect and constitute cultural trends and collective preferences that converge and move in certain directions. In fact, a pattern-oriented approach to viewing digital information reflects the flows of a culture and the dynamics of human interaction (Manovich, 2009). Even when search engines give the impression of loose categorizations, Astrid Mager (2012) claims that such mechanisms can be negotiated and controlled through collective social practices (p. 770). The Romanian campaign is such an example of collaborative effort, and the users' input demonstrates an attempt to solidify a common cultural wish: a positive national profile.

3.2. Tags: Identity politics reloaded

If the Romanian example allows us to sense the great potential for social activism and discursive change, we, as rhetors, should also consider the different forms that tag writing can take and the other digital activities that it may entail. Thinking critically about the statements that users were invited to write in their searches, we notice that the positive terms were targeting a nationalist designation at the expense of other descriptors. "Romanians are smart," or any other attributes in this folksonomy, boosted a kind of shallow nationalistic pride, giving the impression that identity problems can be easily solved with a phrase (Vlad, 2011). Alexander Halavais (2009) expressed a similar concern about "the possibility that search engines encourage us to frame our thinking in terms of search" (p. 94). If folksonomies appear to be such quick fixes to our social problems, aren't we actually eluding more thoughtful and richer conversations about our social interactions? This problem becomes even more difficult because we currently

lack well-established measuring tools to gauge the impact of searching on our thinking and writing patterns (Halavais, 2009, p. 94).

Because tagging is such a complex phenomenon, problematic identity politics are likely to surface in many forms. For instance, the first automatic search suggestion in google.it is *Romeni sono Rom* (trans., "Romanians are Roma"). This is a problematic tag because it provides a simplistic definition of an entire nationality. By arguing that the two identity markers are equal, any user is left wondering to what extent the phrase allows for nuances. Is any of the two categories broader in scope or more diverse? Does each identity category include other groups unrepresented by the tag phrase? As Ralph Cintrón (2012) has suggested in "Fieldwork, Take 10," ethno/nationalist politics "are full of darkness" (p. 2). These categories remain profoundly troubling criteria, and in the previous example, *romeni sono rom*, simplistic identity politics get reproduced via search algorithms.

Can folksonomies be a way of bending the rigidity of categorizations? Jeff Rice (2012) is convinced that folksonomies are, in fact, a powerful remedy to the problem of prescribed classifications systems. In a folksonomy, people are the driving engines, the ones who populate and link up new terms, properties, and identities. Through users' interactions and connections, identity markers are always open to revision. A folksonomy can be a way of enriching or playing with the descriptors attached to a certain identity group, and it is this openness and dynamism that hold the promise of discursive complexity. Even so, we need to consider the fact that these folksonomies may dangerously serve old identity politics that have previously populated other social formats and technologies. This seems to be the fate of the phrase I commented on above, *Romeni sono Rom*. What gets inscribed in this proposition if not discriminatory identity politics adapted to algorithmic operations?

In light of my previous discussion about the Roma label attributed to all Romanians, the tag phrase, *romeni sono rom*, could indicate that Google hasn't changed its negative folksonomy. This would be misleading, though, if we do not also take into consideration the highest ranked websites that the tag points to. In fact, the sources retrieved by this tag link to positive content. The first three sources associated with the tag are: an Italian Wikipedia article clarifying the Roma identity, a YahooAnswers list of comments where users make clear cut distinctions between Roma ethnics and Romanians, and a blog post that reinforces the same identity separation. While the tag, *Romeni sono Rom*, used to be associated with articles that portrayed Romanians as Roma criminals and burglars, currently this same tag is associated with new content that explains the differences between the two groups. The change is significant and seems to confirm Rice's (2012) belief in the flexibility of folksonomies. The unresolved issue that remains, however, is that the last two of the retrieved sources actually paint a positive image for Romanians at the expense of a stereotypical Roma profile. Romanians are described in some of these comments as decent people like the Italians, while Roma citizens are portrayed as nomads living in barracks on the outskirts of large cities.

Besides the ethical and rhetorical implications behind different folksonomies, another aspect that should be of concern is the fragility of discourses built through tag writing or the problem of persistence. The viability of any discourse, as with any language economy, is dependent on its sustainability and infrastructure (Wal, 2010; Brooke, 2009; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michael, 2012). Similarly, the rhetorical effectiveness of tag writing is dependent on its maintenance. Without users *training* the online system to link certain texts with different digital artifacts, the discourse can get stuck in limited folksonomies, depending on what other users search for and the texts they produce. In the case of the Romanian campaign, the Australian version of Google was not among the targeted search engines. Unsurprisingly, according to Google Australia, Romanians are "scum," "gypsies," and "rude." While the first and third tags point to websites populated with negative comments about Romanians, the second tag leads to digital information distinguishing again between the two groups, Romanians vs. Roma. The identity battleground is still wide open!

4. Tag writing in the classroom and beyond

The Romanian case is a prime example of alternative *public rhetorical education*. What made the campaign an immediate success story was the simplicity of the rhetorical task that users were to follow. In the initial call, everything a user had to do was to type a simple sentence in Google. Users had the incentive to participate in the campaign because they didn't need a lot of computing expertise. If we take into account the intuitive nature of the Google interface, and the time it took a user to complete the task, we can quickly see why it was so easy to engage such a large number of participants.

It is also important to mention that users could participate in the campaign because they had been given a brief rhetorical guide on how to proceed. Each participant acted upon the civic instruction that was facilitated on the website

of the campaign, in online tutorials, and via other promotional videos. All these materials told users what to type in Google, what effects this action would trigger, and how much individual effort the task required. In fact, as you may recall, the entire process started with only a few powerful and knowledgeable actors: the advertising agency and the chocolate company. These were the two main promoters of education, who told potential users how to participate.

One may wonder, then, why would teachers and scholars in composition studies want to get involved in these phenomena? If the public sphere has ways of self-managing its discourses, then why intervene? If a national profile can be generated and managed online organically, through the concerted effort of different public actors, what can we learn about public life that can be used in a composition course? I argue that, by not thinking about cases such as the Romanian campaign of national reconstruction, we risk missing discussions about the ethics of our writing acts, we may fail to see how culture gets produced, circulated, and changed during our most mundane writing acts, we may not recognize alternative sites of rhetorical education, and we may forget to interrogate their mission or outcomes. In the last sections of this article, I offer a series of teaching ideas that could enrich our classroom practices, as well as our students' public lives.

4.1. Democratic participation and cultural-infrastructural flows

As I have suggested in this article, through tagging, individuals can take ownership of their digital information, they can steer it in the direction of their preferred discourses, and they can rearrange the order and importance of their most representative content. All these moves hold the promise of agency and freedom of expression. As Jodie Nicotra (2009) pointed out, this is one of the reasons why, after learning how to use tagging strategically, "students will leave the composition classroom with the unambiguous conviction that writing can be both democratic and participatory" (p. 274). If shown how to take advantage of digital infrastructures, students will gain a better understanding of how they can become active participants in networks that they populate and engage with. The options for tagging are limitless, and the technological expertise to operate tags is minimal.

Yet, any claim about the democratic potential of tagging is suspicious if we simply believe that, just by teaching tagging use, this will automatically lead to ethical use. The example of the Romanian campaign clearly demonstrates that tagging can sometimes take narrow and unreflective forms to build a national profile. With these concerns in mind, students need to understand that the practice of tagging, in its apparent simplicity and looseness, can be a versatile tool that allows users to write new identity scripts or, at the other end of the spectrum, to replicate power structures and identity-based inequalities.

To test the democratic dimension of tagging, students can track rhetorical activity online. This monitoring activity can target different identity groups, public events, or topics that students study during the course of a semester. After they have recorded search results in relation with these groups or topics, students can evaluate and analyze the significance of these descriptors, the importance of their hierarchy, and the socio-cultural implications of their searches. In other words, why is it important that a particular public event retrieves only a certain range of websites or terms automatically suggested by the search engine? What do these search results tell us about the ways in which online users understand or construct that event or topic? How do these folksonomies reflect users' intentions and motivations for representing certain events online? How are these results limited and conditioned by the search engine, the location of the user, or the language used during the search? How much discursive diversity or cohesiveness can students identify in their search results? How do these search results compare with other public formats or texts that represent the same topic?

In *The Available Means of Persuasion*, David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel (2012) remarked that rhetorical effectiveness of a digital text or object depends on its infrastructural accessibility and resources, as well as on the cultural flows that these resources make possible (p. xxv). Tracing folksonomies, as I did with the Romanian campaign, can help students understand and analyze these cultural-infrastructural flows. Students can begin to see how certain discourses or cultural trends develop, morph, and adapt in time, in relation with digital platforms and tools that are being used. To some extent, Google itself can help with this type of analytical work because it already has a dedicated page that identifies and updates search trends (http://www.google.com/trends/). Students could start with this page to identify a phenomenon or issue that they would like to assess and analyze further.

In the course of short-term or long-term projects that aim towards search engine use, students can also learn about the relationship between rhetorical impact and method. If cultural discourses depend on the digital infrastructures through which they move (e.g., search engines), rhetorical effectiveness does not rest only with the content and form of a text. The rhetorical power of a digital object (e.g., a tag, an image, a blog post, etc.) depends on the flow and

circulation of different writing practices online, and the methods by which we arrive at that object. How users arrive at a text, whether it is first retrieved in a list of searches or buried at the end of a search list, has a strong influence on how persuasive or rhetorically meaningful users may find that text. At the beginning of this article, I mentioned how users tend to put more trust in the first searches that appear in response to their queries. This trust is, in part, the effect of all the algorithmic operations that prompted a search result at the top of the list (i.e., the method of retrieval). Knowledge about these methods that make digital content emerge in the public sphere can help students understand and work better with the many factors that lead to the persuasiveness of that content.

If these may be odd and atypical classroom activities, it is important to note that tracking search engines is gradually becoming a rhetorical activity that public actors have been interested in. For instance, during the 2012 presidential debates, a few important websites, such as *Yahoo News*, *The Atlantic*, and *CNN*, reported on the top Google searches, including the now famous term, "malarkey," used by Joe Biden. A cultural shift from "what's going on in the news?" to "what are people searching for on Google?" is an important symptom of our current rhetorical culture. This example suggests that users have become increasingly interested not only in the content of political debates, but also in what terms (read folksonomies) gain the most rhetorical attention and traction. If being part of the public sphere means working with and in light of search terms, then teachers of composition should take advantage of this opportunity and ask students to consider the implications of this kind of rhetorical activity.

4.2. Search writing: A technology of (self)production

If we ask students to merely analyze and understand how tagging works, we are obviously only halfway in our journey toward a richer digital literacy. "Being an informed user of digital media," Halavais (2009) argued, "means more than being a critical evaluator; it means that the person is a producer of media, a willing interlocutor in the distributed conversation of the web" (p. 110). In this sense, students can be encouraged to produce tags and work with search queries actively in order to see the rhetorical effects of their tagging practices. As savvy composers, they can try a series of strategies, such as repeating and refining tags, aiming for more precision by expanding queries beyond vague phrases (Peters, 2009, p. 311), adding more context to the tags (Peters, 2009, p. 227; Weinberger, 2005, p. 30), and including more variety in the search phrases. All these strategies require the formation of new habits of writing and digital circulation, habits that ultimately can give more agency and control to their users (Halavais, 2009, p. 42).

In the process of producing and manipulating tags, students also produce their own intentions, values, and social knowledge. With the advent of personalized searches, students should understand and test the ways in which tagging becomes self-tagging, and digital production can also lead to (self)production. To anticipate and serve every individual's needs, Google algorithms are designed to learn and adapt their rankings according to users' search patterns. Based on search writing tags and linking practices, Google re-organizes the sources according to the user's expectations and intentions. The more an individual searches, the better the engine will be at placing these same sources at the top of future searches. In other words, individual patterns have the potential to overwrite collective patterns.

The move toward personalization is critical because, "by privileging certain sources over others there is the danger that a searcher can become trapped by her own search history" (Halavais, 2009, p. 52). As Google is trying to anticipate search intentions and values, "you are less likely to stumble on the unexpected, the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the uncomfortable. Your Web search experience will reinforce whatever affiliations, interests, opinions, and biases you already possess" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 183). For instance, since I started working on this project, Google already knows that I am interested in the Romanian campaign, and, every time I search for new content about it, the first searches are the previous resources I worked with. To find out new information, I have to go beyond the first ranked entries and I have to tweak my queries to find new materials. While my search writing is helping find sources I am interested in more quickly, it is also trying to reproduce my intentions and wishes, therefore, limiting my social horizon of the topic in which I am invested. If you conduct the same searchers that I presented above, you are also very likely to retrieve different results, depending on your own search history and previously tagged content.

Writing our intentions in Google, tagging, and pointing to the same digital artifacts can catch us in the same patterns of use-and-production, which can ultimately close down our abilities to see beyond the discourses with which we are most comfortable (Fuez, Fuller, & Stalder, 2011). Therefore, our students need to learn and test how search writing can easily trap them in a circle of self-production, rather than of "radical encounters with the other" (Vaidhyanathan, 2011, p. 182). To prevent the formation of such closed circuits, students have to become more versatile at trying out *alternative methods*: querying an alternative search engine, writing in a different phrase, tracing the same topic of

interest represented in a different medium. Unfortunately, as Felix Stalder and Christine Mayer (2009) pointed out, we cannot afford to opt out and expect that our search engines will do the work for us. Instead, we have to use our technologies with more versatility.

5. Conclusion

Some teachers may doubt that the goals of first-year composition should include knowledge about search engines. They could argue that this type of classroom material would better fit in advanced composition courses where digital writing is the main focus. Others may say that one more student site or tagged image will not change the rest of the Internet world. The possibility of becoming the next big hit online is very low, and the level of sustained effort required for making substantial changes based on searches is not a rhetorical affordance that individual composers can count on. However, I want to point out that tagging and search writing are already routine practices; these are acts that we all engage in daily, whether we reflect on them or not. In fact, some users have already designed methods to work more actively with and against the automatic suggestions offered by search engines. In "The Google Dilemma," James Grimmelmann (2008/09) presents the phenomenon of *Googlebombing*, which he defines as the process of flooding a search engine with tags in order to re-arrange its suggestions. Among many examples of Googleboming, Grimmelmann mentions the case of George W. Bush's webpage in 2003, when Democrat users consistently inserted in Google the phrase "miserable failure" in association with Bush's official biography. This intensive online tagging led to the automatic retrieval of the phrase "miserable failure" whenever someone searched for Bush's biographical information.

If this may seem to require a large-scale engagement, Grimmelmann presents other cases of tag writing which are more localized and have a narrower scope, but are, nonetheless, equally effective. For instance, in 2001 a college student named Adam Mathes discovered that his website appeared as the top entry whenever he searched for the phrase "Internet rockstar." This phrase started as a joke among friends who posted the label in association with Mathes' name on their personal websites or in various social networks. In a very short period of time, Mathes' website ranked up at the top of all searches that read "Internet rockstar." In response, Mathes called on his peers to tag another friend, Andy Pressman, with the phrase "talentless hack." Unsurprisingly, in a few weeks, Pressman's site also climbed up in the search entries and his name got robustly attached to his new label (Grimmelmann, 2008/2009, pp. 942–943)

Googlebombing is only one type of critical intervention, and, as I mentioned in the beginning of this article, tagging can take many more forms than typing search entries and bombarding Google with different phrases. Although scholars such as Grigoris Antoniu and Frank van Harmelen claimed that tag writing is often "ambiguous, arbitrary, and chaotic" (as cited in McClure, 2011, p. 318), tagging can be a very powerful and effective rhetorical strategy, cohesive at times and robust rather than aimless or inexact. Besides being an interesting form of digital writing, tagging can be a cultural tool that leads to the formation and circulation of attitudes and opinions based on the kinds of discourses that search engines make available.

At this point, the future and impact of tags is uncertain. We are still learning how to organize, label, and connect digital information with one another. In the meantime, the algorithms behind search engines are also trying to keep up with our desires and choices. As Alexander Halavais (2009) noted, it may be too early to tell with certainty if the mere existence of a search engine changes the ways in which people think, write, and look for information, but one thing is certain, "[n]o new technology leaves us unchanged, and often the changes are unexpected and unpredictable" (p. 30). We are yet to find out whether tagging will encourage us to reduce complex social relations to labels, or whether it will help us better synthesize different pieces of information about our relations with others. In the meantime, what's more important is that we keep a critical eye on how we design information, how we compose and circulate our daily queries, and what language we use to express our identities, intentions, and values. If designers pay close attention to all these aspects when they build complex algorithms, we, as scholars and teachers of composition, cannot afford to miss being part of this constructive project —a project that is both rhetorical and cultural at its best.

Acknowledgments

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