Websites of mass description

Social software: New "tagging" websites make it easier to share content, find items of interest, and form online communities.

The images flicker across the screen, one every few seconds: a bed, its ruffled covers pulled back to reveal a lonely emptiness; two pairs of lips gently touching, on the verge of a kiss; a lamb playfully nuzzled beneath its mother's belly; two little girls whispering secrets to one another. The photographs come from a college student in Oklahoma, a middle-aged man from rural England, and a Dutch woman, none of whom has ever spoken with or met any of the others. Each photo takes its place among the rest simply because it has been "tagged" by its photographer with the word "intimacy".

The photographs form part of a slideshow on Flickr.com, a website that allows its users to store, manipulate and share their digital photos. While such sites have been around for years, Flickr stands out because it makes it easy for users to categorise, search and share photos through "tags"—one-word descriptions that capture the essence of a photograph. A tag can be a name or a place, an adjective or a verb, concrete or abstract.

More importantly, though, tags allow Flickr and other sites that rely on them to harness the social power of the web. Give users the option to make their content public, and the ability to search everyone else's content for a given tag, and a world of possibilities opens up. As thousands of users tag photographs and web pages, information begins to percolate in new and interesting ways, as communities have formed around particular tags. These communities of interest are not based on real world connections or networking, but rather on bits of content. Consider the tag "memory maps", for example. Memory maps are digital scrapbooks that make use of another feature of Flickr—the ability to annotate photographs with boxes which display pop-up captions when the mouse pointer rolls over them. Starting with a satellite image of a city or town, users attach captions to places of particular significance: their old school friends' houses, for example. The memory map can then be shared with friends or added to by others who live in that city. Users of another tagging site, Tagzania.com, sprinkle maps with restaurants, bars and other places of interest.

After the London terrorist bombings in July, a Flickr group quickly formed to share photos of the aftermath. Since users can upload photos directly to the site from mobile phones and add comments to photos, an image of a tube ticket bought at King's Cross station on July 7th became a forum for people to share their thoughts and offer their condolences.

Other users simply want to have fun. The "infiniteflickr" tag invites people to contribute photos of themselves looking at Flickr photos of people looking at Flickr photos...ad infinitum. The Toy Camera Awards group votes for its favourite photos in different categories (self-portraits, underwater photography, and so on). A group calling itself "It's the Crew" uses Flickr to make bizarre online comic books. Photos are doctored using Photoshop, have captions added, and tell a story when viewed as a slideshow.

Make, a magazine geared toward hobbyists who like to play with and modify technology, has embraced both Flickr and del.icio.us as new ways to interact with readers. Writers contribute useful links and photos of projects as they research and write their stories; readers view and add to them as they work on projects of their own.

Is it all just another internet fad? In March, Flickr was acquired by Yahoo!, and in July Yahoo! launched My Web 2.0, a del.icio.us-like bookmarking site. Other tagging sites have sprung up that let users catalogue book recommendations or restaurant reviews. Technorati.com, which has been tracking blog entries using tags since 2002, now lets users search through Flickr photos and del.icio.us links as well. Having brought together social software, blogging and search, the idea of social searching (and tagging) looks as though it is here to stay.