

Epicurious: The Organization of Food Information

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Introduction

Epicurious (www.epicurious.com) is a recipe website that provides food articles and cooking how-to videos, and allows home cooks and professionals to share, rate, and review recipes. Their Facebook (n.d.) page describes the organization as a “digital voice in food... [meant to] empower food lovers everywhere”, while their Twitter (n.d.) account describes them as “[h]elping the home cook since 1995”. Epicurious is owned by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Publications, a multi-billion dollar media consortium, that publishes Bon Appétit, Glamour, GQ, The New Yorker, Reddit, Vanity Fair, Vogue, and more (Epicurious, n.d.; Forbes, 2015). It is a broadly but not deeply faceted website that allows multiple approaches to searching and browsing. While the site’s facets are not perfectly consistent, their breadth makes them easily applicable to the many and diverse users of the site.

Categories and Controlled Vocabulary

There are seven top-level categories listed on the homepage: Recipes & Menus, Expert Advice, Ingredients, Holidays & Events, Community, Video, and Takeout, as well as a seasonal category that in mid-March was “Easter”. The top-level categories link to results pages where the facets are the only subcategories, excepting the Community Page which has subcategories and some sub-subcategories of its top-level categories. The recipes on the seasonal, community and video pages aren’t faceted and the how-to videos don’t link to written recipes. Results can be sorted by Relevance, Ratings, Photo, Name, and Newest. Controlled vocabulary seems to be used for the facets but not for the content of the recipes, which can be posted by anyone with an account. Some tags match the vocabulary of the facets on the

search and browse pages but some differ slightly and the tags don't lead to the same results as the facets, even when they are the same word.

Facets and Navigation

There seem to be one or two facet levels, depending on point-of-view. For instance, there is a Dish Type facet field, but this cannot be selected. There are numerous facets, or subfacets if you prefer, beneath this heading that can be selected, but they are all on the same level with no further subfacets. When a search has been made, the facets that can be used to filter the information are listed on the left-hand side of the results.

When comparing the browse and advanced search pages, facets are nearly but not entirely identical. For instance, Holiday/Celebration facets are identical, but some of the Dish Type facets are the same and some are not. Given a search of "Chicken", the facets that can be used as filters are generally different again, e.g. Dish Type only lists the facets that have chicken recipes while Holiday/Celebration offers many more options than are listed in either the advanced search or browse pages.

The browse page seems at first to allow the selection of multiple facets simultaneously, but in fact the searcher can only choose one and then filter the results. Furthermore, some facets seem to be broken, so that when searching "Chicken", the facets on the side indicate 32 results beside the "Japanese" sub-facet, but clicking that link will result in the message "We're sorry, we did not find any food recipe results for Chicken, Japanese" (Epicurious, n.d.). On the advanced search page multiple facets can be selected before beginning a search.

Specificity

The "principal of specific entry... [concerning assigning] the most specific term that is available for that concept in the controlled vocabulary," if it exists for Epicurious, doesn't seem to be followed consistently, since sometimes more or less specific terms are used (Taylor & Joudrey, 2009, p.342). For instance, "Kale" is an Ingredient facet but sometimes the broader tag "Leafy Green" is used, or

sometimes specific terms such as “Pickles” are used as tags which are not included in the Ingredient Facet list.

Some categories may be too broad to be useful to some users (Rosenfeld, Morville, & Arango, 2015). For example, “Dinner” is a very broad category under the Meal/Course facet, but other categories are slightly narrower, e.g. “Bread” or “Vegetable” under the Dish Type facet, and some are narrower still, e.g. “Bean” or “Tomato” under the Main Ingredient facet, which allows users to focus their search. Some facets are task-oriented and some are subject-oriented, allowing considerable flexibility which is essential on a site this size which anyone with internet access can search. (Rosenfeld, Morville, & Arango, 2015). Furthermore, this particular broad and shallow scheme seems quite scalable (Rosenfeld, Morville, & Arango, 2015).

Further Analysis and Conclusion

Some facets could qualify as genre facets, e.g. Entertaining and Holidays, since they “are characterized by both form and purpose” and make the selection of documents “fit to the user’s situation”. This ability to search by both subject and purpose is especially useful in such a large and diverse collection of documents (Crowston & Kwasnik, 2003, p.345, 347). Areas in which the website could improve are in the consistency of the granularity of faceted terms and in the consistency of term choices across searching options.

Facets on Epicurious (n.d.) allow users more control over the choices regarding the subjects they are interested in, though they don’t completely resolve the problem of inconsistency in indexing (David, Giroux, Bertrand-Gastaldy, & Lanteigne, 1995). Despite this allowance for the multidimensionality of relevance, Epicurious allows only limited user interaction or participation in the framework, i.e. it allows ratings and reviews but not user tagging, at least not without an account, and therefore is not as dynamic as it might be if accounts were not required for some site activity (Saracevic, 1996).

Epicurious may be trying to minimise western bias by including facets for international cuisines and holidays, although this could simply be a result of supply and demand. Because their classification is highly faceted and doesn’t require a hierarchy, not only is it easy to expand as new information is added,

but it doesn't require recipes to be classified only into one category or another, and it allows users to select multiple facets, which "build[s] on the idea of diversity rather than universality as a way of accommodating...diverse users and collections, and thus, decreasing levels of bias" (Olsen, 2001, p.121). Facets for minorities' cuisines, though they don't have many entries yet, are valuable because "the assumptions users of systems...make about the information world are invisible to them and to all who share their culture" (Beghtol, 2005, p.905). For example, the majority of North American users may want Christmas or Easter recipes and may not consider Ramadan or Passover recipes necessary, but Muslim and Jewish North American users might want such recipes. Although the lack of hierarchy may prevent the system from showing certain relationships that some groups have to others, it allows for more flexibility in adapting to changing cultures, which any classification system depends on (Beghtol, 2009). Epicurious could work to expand their content for communities outside the mainstream to bring in even more users.

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