Social Bookmarking

Scenario

Professor Smith does much of his work on the Web these days. When he is not teaching or doing primary research, he spends time on the Web looking for information related to his area of expertise. Dr. Smith gets his information from many sources: he receives e-mail newsletters from professional organizations and colleagues, he subscribes to several dozen RSS newsfeeds, and he uses search engines to help uncover resources that may be of value in his teaching and research.

He uses folders in his Web browser to organize bookmarks of online resources, but this practice has become inefficient. If a resource is relevant to several topic areas, he has to save that bookmark in multiple folders. At times he will discover that his essential bookmarks are on his home machine while he is at the office. Other times he is fairly confident that the bookmarked site is on his machine, but the process of finding one site out of hundreds of bookmarks is more difficult than refinding it using Google. Often Dr. Smith needs to share bookmarks with students and colleagues; this task requires finding the reference and e-mailing it.

Dr. Brown has all of the same needs as Dr. Smith but uses del.icio.us to manage her bookmarks. When Dr. Brown finds a Web site to bookmark, she "right clicks" the site to add it to her del.icio.us account and "tags" it with a few relevant keywords. Since her list is public, she can easily direct colleagues and students to it. Others can find the list through the keywords. Dr. Brown has a few other advantages as well. When she bookmarks a site, del.icio.us tells her how many others bookmarked the same site. If she clicks on that number, she can see exactly who else bookmarked the site and when they found it. A further click shows her the bookmark collections of others interested in "her" site. Finally, if she chooses a common tag, Dr. Brown can see all of the other sites with that tag. This makes group collection and aggregation of bookmarks very easy.

Dr. Brown has broken from the model of using private folders to organize information. Social bookmarking creates a true web of resources and connections—one that is not limited to individuals and their folders but represents the interests and judgments of a community of users.

What is it?

Social bookmarking is the practice of saving bookmarks to a public Web site and "tagging" them with keywords. Bookmarking, on the other hand, is the practice of saving the address of a Web site you wish to visit in the future on your computer. To create a collection of social bookmarks, you register with a social bookmarking site, which lets you store bookmarks, add tags of your choice, and designate individual bookmarks as public or private. Some sites periodically verify that bookmarks still work, notifying users when a URL no longer functions. Visitors to social bookmarking sites can search for resources by keyword, person, or popularity and see the public bookmarks, tags, and classification schemes that registered users have created and saved.

Who is doing it?

Social bookmarking dates back just a couple of years, when sites like Furl, Simpy, and del.icio.us began operating. Other social bookmarking sites include de.lirio.us, an open source version of del.icio.us, and citeulike, a social bookmarking site for academic papers. Social bookmarking is particularly useful when collecting a set of resources that are to be shared with others. Anyone can participate in social bookmarking.

How does it work?

Social bookmarking opens the door to new ways of organizing information and categorizing resources. The creator of a bookmark assigns tags to each resource, resulting in a user-directed, "amateur" method of classifying information. Because social bookmarking services indicate who created each bookmark and provide access to that person's other bookmarked resources, users can easily make social connections with other individuals interested in just about any topic. Users can also see how many people have used a tag and search for all resources that have been assigned that tag. In this way, the community of users over time will develop a unique structure of keywords to define resources—something that has come to be known as a "folksonomy."

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Why is it significant?

Activities like social bookmarking give users the opportunity to express differing perspectives on information and resources through informal organizational structures. This process allows like-minded individuals to find one another and create new communities of users that continue to influence the ongoing evolution of folksonomies and common tags for resources. Using a folksonomy-based tool for research lets you take advantage of the insights of other users to find information related to the topic you are researching, even in areas that aren't obviously connected to the primary topic. If you are looking for information about sailing, for example, you might find that other users saw a connection between sailing and boat repair, taking you in new, potentially valuable directions. These kinds of tools also encourage users to keep coming back because the folksonomy and the collections of resources are constantly changing. It's easy to imagine assigning a value for individual resources, resulting in a ranking system that functions as a collaborative filter.

What are the downsides?

By definition, social bookmarking is done by amateurs. There is no oversight as to how resources are organized and tagged. This can lead to inconsistent or otherwise poor use of tags. For example, if a user saves a bookmark for a site with information about greyhounds but only tags the site with the term "greyhound" and not also with "dogs" or perhaps "dog racing," that resource might never be found by someone looking for information about breeds of dogs. Because social bookmarking reflects the values of the community of users, there is a risk of presenting a skewed view of the value of any particular topic. For example, users might assign pejorative tags to certain resources. In addition, social bookmarking means storing data in yet another location that you have to maintain and update.

Where is it going?

The technology behind social bookmarking is not complex, which means the threshold to participate is low, both for Web sites offering such services and for users. The ideas that social bookmarking is built on are working their way into other applications; the practice of tagging information is being extended to other types of resources, such as multimedia files and e-mail. This shift away from formal taxonomies may have important implications for how user communities are born and how they function. As the landscape for online resources changes and new systems of classifying those resources emerge and mature, the design and function of databases themselves may ultimately be changed to accommodate new ways of managing information.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Tagging information resources with keywords has the potential to change how we store and find information. It may become less important to know and remember where information was found and more important to know how to retrieve it using a framework created by and shared with peers and colleagues. Social bookmarking simplifies the distribution of reference lists, bibliographies, papers, and other resources among peers or students.

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