

# TAGS

Social bookmarking and tagging boost participation  
By Melissa L. Rethlefsen

# HELP MAKE LIBRARIES DELICIOUS

**Traditional library web products**, whether online public access catalogs, library databases, or even library web sites, have long been rigidly controlled and difficult to use. Patrons regularly prefer Google's simple interface. Now social bookmarking and tagging tools help librarians bridge the gap between the library's need to offer authoritative, well-organized information and their patrons' web experience.

"Librarians are so careful about what is bought for the print collection, but then we watch our googlers race around the Internet among unedited and ill-founded and repetitive single-page resources. [Using del.icio.us] is our attempt to select suitable material, to post it without delay, and to provide access points and comments on content," says school librarian Jan Radford, whose Delany Library (Delany College, Granville, Australia) is embracing del.icio.us, LibraryThing, and other social tools.

## Tag what you find

Del.icio.us lets users bookmark web pages for themselves and others, check out what others bookmark, and organize bookmarks in one place for portability. Besides its well-known basic tagging and bookmarking capabilities, del.icio.us offers a built-in tool set and application programming interface (API) that let libraries do practically anything with their data. Its tag roll and link roll features—which update steadily—provide any account user with a snippet of JavaScript for any web page or blog, allowing easy access to a library's del.icio.us links.

Libraries like the Thunder Bay Public Library, Ont., and the Nashville Public Library have del.icio.us tag clouds rolled on their web site, so patrons can find information on any number of topics just by clicking on a tag. Other libraries like the College of New Jersey Library and University of Alberta Libraries

experiment with del.icio.us link rolls to replace or supplement traditional subject guides and pathfinders.

But why is using social bookmarking tools better than traditional pathfinders and subject guides? It lowers barriers for participation, both for library patrons and staff. Tasha Saecker, director of the Menasha Public Library, WI, notes that del.icio.us helps "less tech-savvy librarians have an equal voice in the collection," instead of having one or two librarians editing a static web page.

Kelli Staley, information technology department head at the Lansing Public Library, MI, notes that staff use del.icio.us to add links like "timely news items or local students' assignment topics." Kate Stirk, librarian at the North Metro Technical College in Acworth, GA, observes that for people like her, who use multiple computers and are on the road, del.icio.us offers persistent access to favorite sites.

Though students and patrons may be more familiar with other social software tools like Facebook, MySpace, and blogs, social bookmarking is less widely known. A library del.icio.us account, which is easy to set up, can introduce patrons to these tools. Some librarians have gone a step further, offering del.icio.us classes or incorporating it into instructional sessions.

## Letting go of control

While library catalogs and databases rely on controlled vocabularies and traditional subject guides, and pathfinders often address only broad categories, tags allow library staff to assign worthy links multiple tags in what Staley calls "plain language."

Tagging is often controversial among librarians, largely because adding keywords to resources lacks authority control. But libraries employing del.icio.us and other social tools can use the lack of controlled vocabulary to their advantage.

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## Bundling

Though often decried, “task tagging”—tags that are designed for a specific purpose or audience—can be especially useful. For example, school and academic librarians create tags specific to particular classes. They also use the platform’s tag bundles, a method of grouping tags under a topic heading, to organize links to correspond with school subjects. Public libraries generally also use tag bundles to help give their tags some organization. The San Mateo Public Library, CA, has introduced some library flavor into its tags, arranging them in bundles by Dewey classification.

Even more extensively organized is the Bibliothèques de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne’s (BUPS) account, which divvies up tags by time period, discipline, format, country, and language, among others fields.

to the knowledge not only of their own patrons but also of other libraries and the general public. The BUPS account has 60 fans.

When users tag a resource, that bookmark, the tags the library assigned, and any comments are part of the larger, hand-selected set of resources del.icio.us has become. For each link in del.icio.us, users can track who else bookmarked that link and how they tagged it. Tags are also browsable, both by user and through the whole del.icio.us system. “The social part of del.icio.us is handy for those of us looking for the serendipity of finding sites we like because someone else saved it,” says Stirk.

The more people have bookmarked something, the higher it will rise in search results. Since presumably people bookmark sites they find important, heavily bookmarked resources are usually the cream of the web. “It is a huge and powerful resource,” says Delany Library’s Radford.

## What is the “Thing”?

LibraryThing has been another way for Radford to empower her students, who have access to the library’s LibraryThing account, with the ability to post books and tag them. Radford feels that it gives all students better access to the library—“much more friendly than our catalog”—and encourages reading.

Dozens of public, school, and academic libraries use an organizational account on LibraryThing for enhancing access to their collections. Like del.icio.us, LibraryThing has tools, or widgets, enabling users to roll lists of newly added books or random books to a web page or blog using a small piece of JavaScript. This widget provides one of the most common reasons for libraries to use LibraryThing, especially for those institutions whose catalogs don’t have built-in RSS feeds for new books.

All LibraryThing accounts have RSS feeds for new books added to LibraryThing, as well as for new reviews written by a member. LibraryThing widgets are extra special, though, because they generally include book jacket images, giving visual spice to library web pages and enabling patrons to “browse” new books online. Like del.icio.us, LibraryThing widgets can be created to highlight a certain tag (perhaps new mysteries or children’s books) as well as all new acquisitions.

Though many libraries use LibraryThing to display new books added to the collection, an equal number use it to feature recommended books, either for a specific age group, a class, or within a genre. Tagging, as with del.icio.us and other social bookmarking tools, lets libraries label books in ways that make more sense to patrons than traditional subject headings.

The Carl A. Pescosolido Library, which serves the Governor’s Academy in Byfield, MA, employs tags to describe book contents as well as give call numbers. Similarly, the Noble Neighborhood Library, a branch of the Cleveland Heights–University Heights Public Library specializing in genre fiction, has three LibraryThing accounts, one each for mystery, horror, and sf. Within each of these accounts, patrons and staff can quickly find materials on a subgenre, with a type of character, or written by women, or any number of criteria that a library catalog can’t do.

LibraryThing is so user-friendly that some small medical and church libraries let LibraryThing function as their catalog.

## Socialize your books

LibraryThing’s social features are similar to those of del.icio.us—users can browse by user or tag—but with some extras. For every book entered into LibraryThing, the display shows top tags in a tag

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a del.icio.us account page for 'delany\_library'. The page header includes the del.icio.us logo and the account name. Below the header, there are navigation links: 'your bookmarks', 'your network', 'subscriptions', 'links for you', and 'post'. The main content area lists several bookmarked items, each with a title, a 'save this' link, and a timestamp. The items listed are: 'The Ultimate RSS Toolbox - 120+ RSS Resources' (saved by 20 other people, 5 days ago), 'The Best Online Research Apps/Sites You' (saved by 10 other people, 5 days ago), 'The Stolen Generation' (saved by 1 other person, 5 days ago), 'HREOC Website: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice' (includes the Government point of view, saved by 1 other person, 6 days ago), 'HREOC Website: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice' (personal stories, saved by 1 other person, 6 days ago), 'Australian Indigenous Stolen Generation' (huge file of links for this topic, saved by 1 other person, 6 days ago), 'Information process' (saved by 10 other people, on June 04), 'Reading Is Fundamental | Articles : Teenagers and Reading' (saved by 2 other people, on June 03), and 'Ancient Egypt' (lots of links in this US Middle school Ancient Egypt topic, on May 18).

**Tag It: Delany Library’s bookmarks empower librarians to comment on and post web links quickly. Even a student can send bookmarks to the Delany del.icio.us account**

This also engages patrons in their own space. “If our web-savvy users notice [that the library] is using del.icio.us,” says Joanna Aegard, head of virtual library services at Thunder Bay PL, “our hope is that they will recognize our position in the community as information providers, visit our web site, work with our virtual collection, and become engaged library users.”

Even for those libraries primarily using del.icio.us to replace subject guides, patrons—especially students—can contribute link suggestions.

## Feed your head

Beyond direct solicitation for links, there are other ways to connect to patrons, notably RSS feeds, which are available for every account, tag, and account/tag combination. The del.icio.us network feature allows those with accounts to watch other accounts, becoming “fans.” So libraries with del.icio.us accounts contribute

cloud, book ratings as rated by LibraryThing members, and recommended books based on similarly tagged items and ratings.

Reviews also help with readers' advisory. Libraries can select books and write short or long evaluations. Owing to the success of LibraryThing, it recently released LibraryThing for Libraries, a JavaScript-based add-on that imports LibraryThing data into library catalogs. Tim Spalding, LibraryThing founder, says four or five dozen institutions have shown interest. The first library to go live was the Danbury Library, CT, in May 2007 [see "LibraryThing for Libraries," *LJ* *netConnect*, Summer 2007, p. 3].

LibraryThing for Libraries currently focuses on adding aggregate tag data and recommendations from LibraryThing to library catalogs but may integrate patron tagging as well. Despite continuing challenges, Spalding observes, "Ultimately, I think we've proved that even the most locked-down systems can be opened up."

Other libraries and library vendors have responded. One impressive venture is PennTags, the University of Pennsylvania's own self-hosted social bookmarking application. PennTags not only acts like a typical social bookmarking application, it also is integrated directly into the library's online catalog. Catalog records show tags, and library patrons can use PennTags to create resource lists for class projects easily. Because it is campus-specific, PennTags doesn't capitalize on the power of mass tagging in the same way LibraryThing does, but it has been successful for student and faculty personal use.

## Bookmarking for libraries

Springshare, a company owned by Slaven Zivkovic and billing itself as providing "practical, easy-to-use Web 2.0 tools for libraries and educational institutions," has developed a new library-oriented social bookmarking application called LibMarks. Though not as developed as Springshare's other Library 2.0 offering, LibGuides, LibMarks is a Digg-like tool that lets users bookmark, rate, and tag web sites. Libraries interested in experimenting with a local social bookmarking tool but without the staff to design one afresh or install an open source option like Scuttle might look to LibMarks.

In January 2007, the Ann Arbor District Library (AADL), MI, released what developer John Blyberg (now at the Darien Library, CT) called the SOPAC, or the social library catalog. The SOPAC integrates tagging directly into the library catalog. Anyone can create an account on the AADL web site and begin tagging. User tags are displayed in catalog records as well as viewable in a catalog-wide tag cloud. Getting back to tagged resources is as easy as logging into an account and clicking on My Tags. Users can also rate, review, and comment on items in the catalog. Bookspace, from Hennepin County Library, MN, similarly lets library users rate and review

The screenshot shows the Nashville Public Library website. At the top, it says "NASHVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY" and "A CITY WITH A GREAT LIBRARY IS A GREAT CITY®". Below this is a navigation menu with categories like "Library Catalog", "My Library Card", "Locations & Hours", "Books, Movies & Music", "Research & Subject Guides", "Local History & Info", "Events & Classes", "Kids Zone", "Teen Web", "Ask a Librarian", "Services", "For People with Disabilities", and "About Us". To the right, there's a "TEEN WEB" section with links for "Come hang out at:" (Main, Bordeaux, Edmondson Pike, Green Hills, Hermitage, Madison, Southeast), "What's Going On" (Monthly Teen Events, Annual Events), "What to Read" (Your Picks, Staff Picks, Summer Reading, Boy Reads, Fantasy, Gritty Realism, Romances, Mysteries & Thrillers, Sports, Tearjerkers, More...), and "Teen Web Links on Del.icio.us" (abuse, advice, books, careers, college, drinking, drugs, education, financial aid, games, get help, GLBT, graphic novels, health, homework, magazines, manga, reading, research, sex, sexuality, teen.web). There's also a "Teens @ the Library" section with a "Songwriting Contest" link.

**What Teens Want:** User-created tags let teens see what's generating the most interest among their peers. Manga anyone?

books and share recommended book lists.

Library vendors have developed their own social library catalogs, too. Ex Libris's Primo will include some form of tagging, as will Innovative Interfaces' Encore, though many librarians are still skeptical of allowing patrons free rein in the catalog. Concern mostly lingers over the potential for obscene or otherwise inappropriate tags. In a large tag population like LibraryThing for Libraries, which only displays heavily used tags, that shouldn't be a problem.

## DIY OPAC?

Tagging experts like Spalding are wary of tagging in the catalog, though for different reasons. "You need to structure a tagging system so that people want to tag. They do it for themselves, not for you," he says. "And, even if a library catalog did make the user's experience, the payoff, the center of tagging, it would still fall short. People are not as motivated to tag in a library catalog as they would be in something like LibraryThing."

Still, AADL's SOPAC, in its debut, has already shown that users want to be able to tag items. Though tagging on a smaller, local scale may not be as potent as a large-scale operation, it still offers unprecedented and easy access to library materials.

Tagging and social bookmarking tools—whether to improve accessibility of library materials, to introduce patrons to new tools, or to make creating subject guides easier for staff—empower users and staffers in new ways. Says Patricia Anderson, Health Sciences Libraries, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, "I find del.icio.us has probably been the single most valuable tool for personal and professional productivity that I have encountered in a long time."

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