

# Taming the

Finding good stuff online isn't a problem, making sense of it is. Thank goodness for social bookmarking.

BY WILL RICHARDSON

Blogs, wikis, and other nifty Web-based tools, ones that enable us to create and distribute content like never before, get all the glory, it seems. Then there are the applications that help us organize all that material that we consume online. Though not as sexy, perhaps, as blogging or podcasting, social bookmarking is equally empowering to users, helping us make sense of what we find and use on the Web and, even better, enabling us to share our treasures with others.

Today, information literacy implies an ability to organize the world around us, and that encompasses the big ol' Web. While traditional library methods have effectively tamed print resources, the digital content residing on more than one billion Web pages is a different beast altogether.

Enter social bookmarking, tagging, and folksonomies. In a nutshell, the operating principle behind these concepts is this: if I find something interesting enough to save, odds are good that you will, too. And together, using these tools, we can build comprehensive resource lists much more effectively than any one of us could working alone. Exemplifying the wisdom of crowds, these applications are fast becoming an important resource for relevant information.

## Join the Party

Here's how it works. You're poking around the Web and run across a resource—text, audio, video, or whatever—that you know you want to access and use again later. Rather than saving to your “favorites” or “bookmarks” list on your browser—an old school move—you save to a social bookmarking site, Del.icio.us being the most popular. There, millions of users are already busy saving and sharing their treasures, and lots more are doing the same at similar sites, such as Diigo, Connotea, Furl, and CiteULike.

Beyond simply saving the link, social bookmarking sites allow you to add keywords or “tags” that help you easily identify what the site is about. So, when bookmarking a great resource on “Romeo

and Juliet,” for instance, I might add the following tags: “Shakespeare,” “theater,” “plays,” and “Romeo\_and\_Juliet.” Later, I simply search my bookmarks using any of those tags to retrieve that material.

Now for the really cool part. The resource I saved with those tags becomes connected to similarly tagged content on Del.icio.us (or whatever tool you are using). So with a simple search, I can easily locate related content that has been tagged by other users. It's a homegrown taxonomy for the Web, hence the term “folksonomy.” Folksonomies are transforming the ways in which we organize our stuff, whether it's videos on YouTube, photos on Flickr, blog posts, or anything else that we create and publish.

## They Even Deliver

There's even more that you can do with social bookmarking. Remember RSS (“Merrily Down the Stream,” July 2006, pp. 40–42)? Say you want to track everything that carries a particular tag. Del.icio.us and other book-



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marking sites offer a unique RSS feed for every tag contained on their site as well as one for every account holder (on Del.icio.us, I'm "willrich"). So, you could "subscribe" to anything in the Del.icio.us universe tagged "Shakespeare" or limit your feed to a single user's bookmarks bearing that tag. That means that all of those links automatically come to you through your RSS reader or aggregator. And it's tags that make it all work.

While Del.icio.us is the top dog of social bookmarking, other sites are worth exploring. Diigo is a service that saves a copy of the entire page into your account so if that precious resource disappears tomorrow (behind a subscription firewall, for instance) you still have access to it. CiteULike—a favorite of librarians—specializes in the organization of academic content. All these services are Web based, so the resources that you tag and bookmark, stored on a remote server, are accessible from any Internet-wired computer. In addition, most of these services allow users to easily download backup copies of your bookmarked items.

## Working Together

Now, how might this work in schools? One obvious application is to have collaborative groups, classrooms, or even entire districts decide on a unique tag that everyone can use when they bookmark something of interest. Take the AP calculus class of Darren Kuropatwa in Winnepeg, for instance ([apcalc06.blogspot.com](http://apcalc06.blogspot.com)). Anytime his students find an interesting and useful site about calculus, they bookmark it at Del.icio.us with the tag "apcalc06." So not only are they collecting sites for themselves, they are collaboratively building a classroom resource. At the University of Pennsylvania Library, there's the "Penn Tags" program ([tags.library.upenn.edu](http://tags.library.upenn.edu)). It allows Penn students to create "projects" and collaboratively save links, like the nearly 300 that are listed under the title "1935-1945 Films, Philadelphia Film History." Imagine the possibilities.

Social bookmarking also works great for books. If you've never looked at Library Thing ([librarything.com](http://librarything.com)) or Shelfari ([shelfari.com](http://shelfari.com)), you're in for a real folksonomic treat. Basically, the idea is to start a free account that allows you to create an online catalog of all of the books in your physical library, and then lets you add notes, descriptions, and, you guessed it, tags that describe what they are about. Then you get connected to everyone else in the community who has also cataloged and tagged that book.

View their comments, see the other books in their "library," and get all sorts of ideas for what to read next.

Developing self-organizational skills in this world of overwhelming information is key to enhancing your professional and personal learning practice. And the good news is, with tags and folksonomies, we're all in this together.

*Will Richardson is the author of *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts and Other Powerful Web Tools for the Classroom* (Corwin, 2006) and the blog [www.weblogg-ed.com](http://www.weblogg-ed.com).*

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