

5 reasons why online bookmarking is the wrong tool

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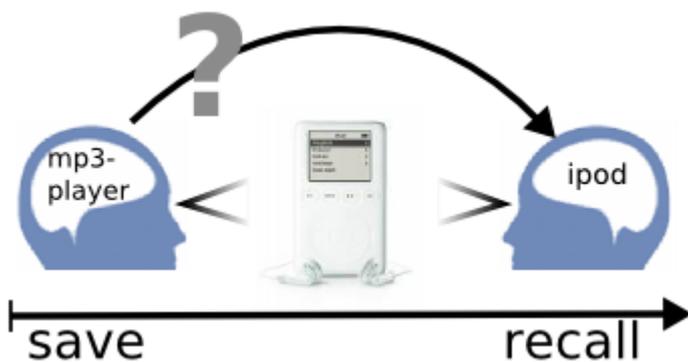
One common task while browsing the web is making sure you will be able to recall a valuable information you are just looking at. This article aims to prove that social bookmarking as in [delicious](#), [simpy](#), [magnolia](#) et al. is the wrong tool for that task.

Please note that this just a post is just a question if delicious et al. are the right tool for remembering. The social part such as link sharing or collaborative link collections still is a very valuable facet of these services. Delicious, Simpy and Magnolia all have features that let you do that.

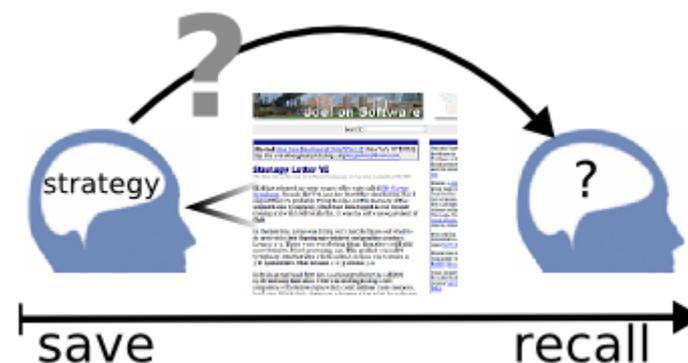
Reason 1: You can't foresee the future

Deciding which web site will be valuable in the future is a very very hard task. I'm not too good at it. I pile up tons of bookmarks I never look at afterwards and on the other hand I decided to not bookmark sites which I needed afterwards. In fact I'm so unsure about my ability to bookmark the right pages I often don't try searching for a link in my pile of bookmarks but instead google first because I expect being faster this way. Too often I searched my bookmarks altering tags and search terms and didn't find the bookmark in the end.

Additionally: Even if I would know which links will be of interest in the future, I can't decide how I should tag (categorize) my bookmarks. When I tag an article, I normally have skimmed it and while categorizing I look at its title. When I tag I'm in a completely different situation - information wise - from when I search for the link.



Your categories may change when you get familiar with a product or topic



Your information level when looking at a document differs from when trying to recall that document

Reason 2: You tear links out of its context



Bookmarking is like cutting passages from books: you remove information from the context you originally found it

The word “bookmark” relates to the pretty carton markers you use when reading books. Although the way it is used in the web is far far from what it means in books lets delve into that comparison a bit: To go sure you will be able to find an important passage once you finished a book, you underline or write a few words into the margin to outline a paragraph. Then, when you recall that great sentence you most certainly know in which book it was written (unless that book is a conglomeration of quotes). Then, you often can remember the way that statement was used in the argumentation and in what topic it was embedded. And finally, amazingly, your brain often tells you where on a page (e.g. bottom left) the searched sentence is written. So you normally get quite a bunch of context information to guide you in your search and you will find the wanted sentence within a short amount of time, even if it wasn’t underlined. And even if you don’t find it, you often have a good time reading through the other amazing statements and end up quoting something you didn’t intend.

The way bookmarks are handled in the web would mean to books that you tear out that sentence out of the book, stick a few colored post-its to it and throw that snippet onto the pile with the 1325 other quotes. Bookmarking means taking information out of the context you originally found the information in. On the web context means how you found that link: Was it on Google or in your feed aggregator? Was it a blog post of one of your colleagues? Was it in an email? I often remember these things. Without being a psychologist or having an education in these things I guess our brain is pretty good in remembering context. So why don’t we use techniques that help our brain instead of trying to replace it?

Reason 3: It takes too much time

Bookmarking should save you time - and frustration. Leaving out the frustration bit: Does it really save you time? Lets say it takes 10 seconds to categorize a bookmark and lets say you’ll use every 20th of your saved bookmarks (which are rather optimistic guesses). That means that when trying to recall an url from your bookmarking service you need to be 200 seconds faster than when you didn’t bookmark any pages at all (as it took you 200 seconds for bookmarking the 20 bookmarks out of which you used 1).

I’m pretty sure you won’t save over 3 minutes in average searching in your pile of bookmarks compared to thinking for halve a minute where you found that link and then going down that trail. So: Why the hassle?

Reason 4: It didn’t work for me

I tried it. I gathered 3444 bookmarks in 2 years using 3034 tags. I asked myself how I could change my tagging practices to improve the recall. I failed. [I gave up](#). I cannot believe there’s no one out there feeling the same.

I stopped bookmarking nearly two months ago. First, when reading articles that felt so interesting it was hard to not bookmark them. Then, it was kind of liberating not having to think “is this page valuable in the future?” “what tags should I use?”.

I never missed it. I always found that link. I don’t regret.

Reason 5: Social bookmarking won’t improve that soon

You may argue that there soon will be techniques to overcome the problems I just mentioned. But my claim is that social bookmarking sites won't improve that soon.

In my last post I asked: "Why is tagging stuck?". Gene Smith [argues correctly that tagging isn't stuck](#). He continues:

Want to know what *is* stuck? Del.icio.us

The same is true for all the other social bookmarking sites. RawSugar did a [brilliant next step](#) (before it went offline) but the social bookmarking market is quiet ever since. I couldn't find fresh ideas in [delicious' current redesign](#). It seems like they moved buttons from here to there. I hoped they wouldn't just redesign the appearance but would also change the way users interact with their data.

So, I guess these services are just as good as it gets. No improvements to wait for. That means it's our - the users - turn to change our habits, to find the right tool for the job.

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