Chapter 12
Web 2.0—Social Bookmarking: An Overview of Folksonomies

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ABSTRACT
Folksonomies is a relatively new concept and, as yet, it has not been widely studied in academic circles. In practice, folksonomies have therefore outpaced academic research in finding solutions to the problems facing them. The goal of this chapter is to bring together the current literature on folksonomies and explore avenues for future work. Hence, this chapter will examine what are folksonomies, what they are/can be used for, and explore their benefits and challenges using real world examples from systems such as Delicious and Flickr. The chapter also overviews some of the current research and suggests avenues for further work.

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web (WWW) has been growing at a phenomenal rate over the last decade as more and more resources of diverse types are added to the Internet daily. While many sites such as ecommerce sites tend to rely on web analytics and various usability features to elevate them in the search lists, information sites especially those created by amateurs and other information-oriented content (e.g. images, music, video) are sometimes more difficult to locate and index. Social bookmarking systems address this gap by providing a method that enables users to create and apply bookmarks (tags) to information content that they want to retrieve at a later stage. Consisting of freely chosen keywords, these tags can then be organized, managed, indexed and shared with others for later retrieval of the content.

Also referred to as collaborative tagging, social indexing, and social tagging, social bookmarking is gaining popularity. This is due in part to the inadequacies of taxonomies for indexing and retrieving the vast amount of content now available on the web and elsewhere. Most bookmarking services are free; some also provide free storage for users (e.g.
Flickr for digitized images). Advances in social software applications are also enabling better indexing and sharing of content, especially content that would normally be overlooked or ranked low by search engines.

Although the basic concept of user-defined tagging itself is not new, emergent forms of social bookmarking such as folksonomies that have come about with Web 2.0 are relatively new concepts. Deriving from the activity of social bookmarking, folksonomies comprise freely chosen tags or keywords used by individuals to classify content for later retrieval of that content, and sharing the content with others. So although these user-assigned tags are often created for personal use in most cases they are made public that is, available to others so they can locate and retrieve the same or related content. This allows the sharing of content with others interested in the topic area and the forming of communities of people with similar interests. This openness and sharing enables the social aspect of bookmarking.

Folksonomies are gaining popularity as they become more widely used across various social software applications. This meteoric rise in popularity is largely attributed to developments and trends in Web 2.0 in areas such as technology/software development, information retrieval, and collaboration among users. Although the mechanisms and subject matter for social tagging may vary across systems, the collaborative open nature of the folksonomy tends to be shared by most systems. Given the popularity of collaborative systems and the services that support and enable these forms of user-driven tagging (e.g. Delicious for bookmarks, Flickr for digitized images, Connotea and CiteULike for bibliographic data), it is becoming increasingly important for practice (and hence researchers) to address the many problems and issues that relate to folksonomies, social tagging, information retrieval and individual and communal behaviors. These social tagging systems may also afford multiple benefits to organizations enabling and supporting informal networks within firms for resource and knowledge management, information sharing and retrieval, social networking and expert discovery (Damianos et al., 2007).

In practice, folksonomies have outpaced academic research in finding solutions to the problems facing them. As academic interest in folksonomies increases, researchers are largely focusing on issues linked to information retrieval such as addressing the ambiguities that can arise when individuals use different tags to refer to the same content, and extracting semantic structures from folksonomies (Mika, 2007; Spiteri, 2007). While there has been some success in these areas, little has been done to understand the motivations and behaviors of those engaged in these social communities (Marlow et al., 2006) or explore the value of folksonomies in business and social settings (Damianos et al., 2007). Hence, the goal of this chapter is to bring together the current literature on folksonomies and explore avenues for future work, particularly as these relate to the behavioral and social dimensions of folksonomies. The chapter will therefore explain what are folksonomies, what they are used for, and outline the advantages and challenges of folksonomies. Solutions to some of the challenges of folksonomies are also examined, as well as avenues for further work in information retrieval. There are also many opportunities for researchers to explore the motivations and behaviors of the online communities that form around these tags.

BACKGROUND

What is a Folksonomy?

A folksonomy is the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (i.e. anything with a URL) for one’s own retrieval. The tagging is done in a social environment and is usually shared and open to others (Vander Wal, 2007). A folksonomy therefore arises from the act of tagging by the
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