

## DEALING WITH INFORMATION OVERLOAD – SOCIAL BOOKMARKING FOR NGOS

### **PART IV: ‘Hold on, why would I want to share what I’m reading with anyone?’ – Social bookmarking and privacy**

By Leigh Phillips , science writer Contactivity bv, Leiden

---

*‘Hold on, why would I want to share what I’m reading with anyone?’ – Social bookmarking and privacy*

Last month, the Contactivity site published a series of articles on social bookmarking, explaining the concept with an NGO audience in mind and imagining a specific scenario that showed how social bookmarking is a useful tool for development and other civil society organisations.

The technology is initially most useful to web researchers as a sort of virtual filing cabinet, accessible from any computer. Many of these services (such as Furl) also allow webpages to be permanently saved, ensuring that research found on the net will never be lost again, even when sites disappear into the binary ether.

However, social bookmarking really takes off when you ‘peer over the fence at your neighbour’. That is to say, when you save an article, you can see who else has saved the same page. The people who save similar articles to you may also have similar research interests to you. With social bookmarking, you can ‘peer over the fence’ and see what else they have saved, potentially opening up useful but previously unconsidered avenues of research that eagle-eyed-but-dumb Google never could. Furthermore, unlike Google, such capability is not static. The more people share their researches, the stronger social bookmarking becomes. (For a more extended explanation of social bookmarking, visit [‘Social bookmarking for NGOs I: More than an online filing cabinet’](#))

Nevertheless, a handful of our readers, notably academics, have said that they feel very protective about their research and sources and don’t wish anyone to see where they are getting their information until, for example, an article is published, while others are concerned about privacy. ‘Hold on,’ they say, ‘why would I want to share what I’m reading with anyone?’

One example of an organisation that might not want to share its researches might be a human rights or environmental organisation that does not want the groups or governments that they are currently focussing on to be monitoring what they are monitoring. I think we can all understand why the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Periwinkles may not want the periwinkle industry to be subscribing to an RSS feed of the RSPCP’s Furl’d researches.

However, while still publicly sharing your links, there are two or three really simple things that you can do to keep them away from the beady little eyes of, say, the Alliance for the Promotion of Periwinkle Industries.

First of all, a number of social bookmarking sites do offer a privacy option (Furl, Delicious and Magnolia all do). That is to say, you can make certain items you bookmark – or all of them – visible only to you.

It should be noted, however, that by doing this, you aren't then able to make use of others' research, or they yours, for those items you privately save. You can't 'peer over the fence' any more. When you choose to privately save something, you are only using social bookmarking as a sort of online filing cabinet – which is nonetheless still a powerful application of the services and more than reason enough to use them.

Alternately, you could keep everything public, but – and this solution is exceedingly easy - you could always just *not use your real name* when you sign up for a service.

Comparably, for the academic who feels very protective about her researches prior to publication, a username different to her own would prevent others from making the connection that, say, it was Professor Plum that was researching lead piping in conservatories.

A more legitimate privacy concern is the way in which social bookmarking potentially could aid in the compilation of a user or consumer profile that might be of some interest to commercial or other quarters.

Most web-surfers are aware of the dangers of spyware tracking their surfing habits in order to build a consumer profile that is then used to serve back to them tailored advertising or spam. Similarly, many high-street shoppers choose to forego the financial incentives of signing up to a loyalty scheme for Shoeworld or Evil-Mart out of the knowledge that the mega-corp will sell on details about their purchases to third parties or use the information themselves for nefarious purposes.

By publicly providing a list of what you are reading online via social bookmarking, along with any meta-data or annotation you attach to your links, you are theoretically voluntarily compiling the very user or consumer profile that spyware and loyalty schemes do. Your 'tag cloud' tells an awful lot about your commercial, political and cultural interests. However, the simple act of using an anonymous username prevents social bookmarking from being anywhere near the worry that an Evil-Mart discount card is.\*

On a more prosaic level, do you really want your girlfriend or future employer to know what hilarious typical dodgy-item-found-on-the-internet-that-girlfriends-should-not-see or guide to office stationary theft that you've bookmarked lately?

Thankfully, the solution is very simple: check the 'private' or 'do not share' box when you save a link.

When social bookmarking service Delicious introduced a 'private saving' option, one commenter to the service's blog, a British public relations student, cheered the development: "I think [private saving] is a great idea ... I was helping a guy who sells Chlamydia home testing kits a few months back, so I had to carry out a little research on the infection via the web. What better place to save my findings than my Delicious account ... but there was always the worry that any friends/colleagues/potential clients etc., who happen to browse my saved bookmarks got the wrong idea."

Alternately, to make sure you don't even *accidentally* publicly bookmark webpages that reveal your interest in edible undergarments or the home contact details of periwinkle industry lobbyists, you could choose one social bookmarking service, say, Furl, for work, and another, say, Delicious, for personal items. Or one for the sort of research wherein it doesn't matter who knows what your organisation is up to, and the other for your more secret-squirrel investigations.

Finally, whatever you do, make sure that the privacy policy of the social bookmarking service you use says that they won't sell private information onto third parties.

Also, always be mindful about what you save – or do - online. The concern here ultimately is less about privacy than the broader issue of development of online identities.

When you blog, or comment in an online discussion group, or review a book on Amazon, or put up compromising pictures on MySpace or Facebook, it is all part of the creation of an online, searchable identity that boyfriends or girlfriends, employers, student loan collection agencies, Interpol and the Alliance for the Promotion of Periwinkle Industries can at some point view. Social bookmarking is – or can be – no different. Thus it is not social bookmarking that would reshape our attitudes to privacy, but the internet itself.

Social bookmarking is incredibly useful, and could even radically transform the internet via the development of distributed classification or 'folksonomies' (see the last [article](#)). It would be a shame not to use such services due to concerns over virtually non-existent privacy issues. So long as you take the same, appropriate precautions that you usually do on the web, there is no reason to worry – or at least no more so than anywhere else – that your privacy is being compromised.

\* There is also a not-so-simple thing you can do: use an anonymous proxy such as [Proxify](#) or [The Cloak](#), but this is more than a little befuddling for most non-techies.