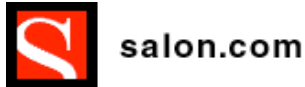


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## Steal this bookmark!

Tagging, the Web's newest game, lets you see what other people are reading and thinking. Welcome to the key-worded universe.

By Katharine Mieszkowski



Feb. 8, 2005 | [Erik Benson](#), 28, is a man with plans -- [28 plans](#).

His goals include [writing a good novel](#), [seeing "The Daily Show" live](#) and [starting a company that survives longer than two years](#).

He's posted these aspirations for the whole Web to see at "43 Things," a site he and some friends launched at the beginning of 2005. The purpose of the site: Anyone can post their

goals, resolutions and grand designs, and meet others who share the same ambitions. There are currently 119 other people on [43things.com](#) [decreeing](#) their pledge to do a start-up that makes it past that two-year threshold. Nine others are hankering to see Jon Stewart give his mocking spin on the news in person and eight more burn to write a good novel. (Update: After publication of this story, Salon learned that *43 Things* is [primarily funded](#) by Amazon.com.)

But what's intriguing about 43 things isn't the voyeuristic itch it scratches, as we get to see so many people baring their heart's desire. What makes the site work is how it connects all these people to each other. By a simple software tweak known as tagging, this site and many others, like the photo site [Flickr](#) and the bookmark-sharing system [del.icio.us](#), have found a new way to organize information and connect people. The surprise is that the organizing itself is unorganized -- and yet it works.

On 43 Things you state a goal, such as "write a novel." That immediately links you to all the other people who have the exact same goal. But you also attach tags to your goal -- essentially key words that you choose -- such as "writing," "novel" and "fiction." Tags are not selected from any pre-codified hierarchy set by the site designers. They simply arise from the grass roots -- you and others like you. Now you're

suddenly connected to everyone with similar goals, such as "write a good novel" and "write a book and have it published" and "finish my novel."

It's a very simple concept, and 43 Things is a very simple site, but tagging as it is used here and at some of the Web's most interesting and lively new sites is launching a revolution of self-organization on the Internet. You could call it the latest twist in the ongoing evolution of [social networking](#) software. Except there's a difference: On social networking sites like Orkut or Friendster, people join, and then declare their alliances to each other explicitly. On sites that employ tagging, the networks emerge, implicitly, out of the shared interests of users. Order isn't proclaimed, it just happens.

What 43 Things does for personal goals, the bookmark-sharing site del.icio.us does for everything its users are interested in on the Net. Here, what people are looking at and saving from the Web becomes the basis for learning new things, and making connections with each other. "It's like Friendster for knowledge as far as I'm concerned," says [Howard Rheingold](#). "I look to see who the other people are on del.icio.us who tag the same things that I think are important. Then, I can look and see what else they've tagged ... And isn't that part of the collective intelligence of the Web? You meet people who find things that you find interesting and useful -- and that multiplies your ability to find things that are interesting and useful, and other people feed off of you."

Tagging is by no means perfect -- even its biggest proponents are quick to point out that there are glitches. Words are slippery things: "One person's Israel is another person's Palestine. One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter," says Dave Sifry, the founder of [Technorati](#), a site that recently enabled real-time searching of the tagged Internet.

If you give users control over how things will be categorized, you never know what will come out the other end. After all, what could be more culturally and socially determined than how we choose to label the things we're thinking about?

An excellent demonstration of the power of tagging can be found in the ongoing war between file sharers and the entertainment industry. In the peer-to-peer world, the latest file-trading network to [feel the heat](#) has been the one constructed around the program [BitTorrent](#), which enables the sharing, among other things, of bulky video files. Rather than target actual file sharers, the Motion Picture Association of America has targeted the operators of Web sites that helped people find the files. The largest, most popular such sites have mostly been shut down. Now, to find the TV show that you missed, you have to find small, relatively unknown Web sites where people share pointers to the necessary information. But how do you find something that is unknown?

You can try del.icio.us. Before a small, new Web site has much presence on Google, groups of people sharing bookmarks on del.icio.us can help direct attention to the right target. There, the "bittorrent" tag, combined with, say, the "Battlestar Galactica" tag, can lead you quickly to the information you need -- to dynamic, ad hoc communities that may disappear as quickly as they are created.

"This isn't a big technical innovation," says [Ross Mayfield](#), CEO of [Socialtext](#). "It's more the simplest thing that could possibly work, that shouldn't work, but happens to."

Tagging has the potential to spread beyond just a few creative Web sites. Users of Google's Gmail can add "labels" to their e-mail messages -- the equivalent of tags for e-mail. Matthew MacLaurin, a program manager in the social computing group at Microsoft Research, thinks that tags are the future for computer desktop organization: "I personally believe that, over time, tags will rival, if not replace, folders as a primary way that users create organization ... Eventually it will be more like folder names -- unnoticed and absolutely essential."

There's something brilliantly lazy about tags. You don't have to look up categories that your information fits into, predetermined by a Web designer. You just tack whatever comes to mind onto whatever you are doing, and move on to the next thing.

"Humans like to group stuff by whatever is convenient. That's the revolution that's going on here," says [Anselm Hook](#), 37, who lives on a farm in Scappoose, Ore., where he wrote the code for [Books We Like](#), a book recommendation site that uses tagging. "Tags let people do things by voluntary organization, not what a scientist says or what some organization has done to classify things. It's a much more folksy, grass-roots application."

When it's applied to bookmarks, tagging takes your own desire to save things and then later find them again, and turns that impulse into a way to share information. "It's basically a way to remember in public," says [Joshua Schachter](#), who wrote del.icio.us as a way to keep track of all the things he was thinking about posting to the blog [memepool](#). "The actual database represents crystallized attention -- what people are looking at, and what they're trying to remember." About a year old, and with 50,000 users, the crowd on del.icio.us is still very much an early-adopter scene, which makes looking at the most [popular links](#) -- based on how many people have bookmarked them -- a snapshot of what's of-the-moment on the Web.

Tags don't have to be popular -- you could use obscure words to tag all your information and end up with a secret language known only to you. But then your data doesn't get to play with everyone else's. "The fact that you know that there is a social aspect to this actually encourages you to pick tags that are relevant," says Technorati's [Dave Sifry](#). "It's kind of like this invisible hand of positive social pressure that results in something that's much bigger than the person himself could ever hope to achieve."

After less than a month of allowing [tag searches](#) from multiple sources, such as Flickr, del.icio.us and blogs, Technorati is already tracking more than 230,000 tags. "This is about exposing and creating communities. It's helping people find each other. I think that in the end is the fundamental power of tags," Sifry says.

Some think that the social utility of tagging may be somewhat exaggerated. Sure, many bloggers are excited about tags, but we already knew they were into sharing information and ideas. What about everyone else?

On the bookmarking site [Furl](#), you can make the bookmarks you save private or public. Mike Giles, creator of the site, which is now owned by LookSmart, says: "When I talk to people who aren't in the technical elite, most people's reaction is: 'Why would I want to share this stuff? Why would I want to make it public?'" For some people, sharing with the world might not be a motivation, but a deterrent. Do you really care to make the research you're doing public to the world? Is the value of what you might learn from others on the way worth enough to eclipse your desire to keep it private?

Microsoft's MacLaurin thinks that it can be easy to overstate how much you might have in common with someone who tags similar things to you: "I'd say it's more a matter of figuring out who knows where the good stuff is, and less about finding new friends by tagging. I cannot imagine forming a relationship with someone because we tag our photos a similar way on Flickr."

Tagging can also make for some rude surprises. Rebecca Blood, author of ["The Weblog Handbook,"](#) stumbled upon [this Flickr picture](#) when searching the tag MLK on Technorati on Martin Luther King Day. As she wrote in her [blog](#): "I personally was offended -- these sentiments reflect the polar opposite to those espoused by Dr. King. More to the point, such an illustration is inappropriate -- that poster has as much to do with Dr. King as would a picture of a banana peel." As Blood points out, in the context of a Flickr user's personal photo list, the tag might make sense, but out of context, it was jarring.

Then there's a more basic problem: The ad hoc nature of tags means that some of the most popular tags can be the least interesting. Do you really want to look at all the photos labeled "photo" on Flickr?

But maybe that doesn't matter. You just ignore the more general tags, that mean less to you, and search the more specific ones that strike your fancy. The system doesn't have to be perfect to work well enough for participants to find it useful. [danah boyd](#), a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley's School of Information Management and Systems, puts it this way: "Now, we're not just going with how

Google wants to organize things. Now, we're going with how a collection of people have come up with schema to organize data. And it's not about accuracy. It's just a particular way of organizing data."

From a crowd that has enough in common, you can get a spontaneous, collective understanding out of the sum of everyone's contributions: "If you take a bunch of people's instincts and find where they overlap, you have a fairly good picture of the core of the understanding of that thing," says Schachter from de.licio.us.

But will tagging continue to be useful as it gets more popular, as millions of people start adding tags? Or, worse yet, will spammers discover it, and ruin it for everyone? "Maybe it will turn out that tagging will only work for relatively small applications among people who think alike, and that's a type of solution too. The thing that's so exciting is that we're so completely at the beginning of this," says [David Weinberger](#), a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School. "We'll go through the normal sorts of scaling problems and despair, and brilliant insights and joy."

Over at 43 Things, Benson founded the site with his friends at Seattle's [Robot Co-op](#) with the hope of making all their own vague plans and aspirations more likely to actually happen. The site's ambitions spread from there: "Psychologists have known for a long time that specifying your goals helps you achieve them by making you focus a bit more on your desires and articulate more achievable outcomes," Benson writes in an e-mail.

"We think the social aspect of doing this together might heighten the process -- just as Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings introduce more accountability."

It's still too early to tell how much users will help each other achieve their goals. You can see the positive peer pressure having some influence in some of the more modest ambitions members have decreed -- like [making Firefox my default browser](#). Will the people who share the goal of "[Bring 'Building Basecamp' to Boston](#)" actually get together and do it? Will those who have pledged to "[build community in my immediate central Seattle neighborhood](#)" make it happen?

The Web is littered with the corpses of millions of good intentions. But like the future of tags, there's only one way to find out.

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