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Knowledge sharing through collaboration: How community contributed content improves global studies research and teaching

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For several years the implementation and implication of social networking tools, also referred to as Web 2.0 tools, have been included in discussions about ways to support interdisciplinary research in areas such as global studies. Although these discussions derive from different fields of interest, ranging from regional to national and including international institutions from the northern as well as the southern hemisphere, they all assert that Web 2.0 will improve the creation and sharing of knowledge.

But what does this mean for the area of global studies research and teaching? These areas are already creating new knowledge through research, publication, and instruction. Why then should global studies research and teaching be concerned with using Web 2.0 tools? The main argument for Web 2.0 tools is their potential for filling some of the voids created by accessing literature and data in an interdisciplinary environment. This article describes how social bookmarking can actually contribute to the improvement of knowledge creation and sharing for global studies research and teaching.

Why then should global studies research and teaching be concerned with using Web 2.0 tools

Web 2.0 is increasingly becoming a buzz-word as a solution for knowledge management. Nonetheless, the term Web 2.0 was coined to highlight the differences with the traditional Web 1.0. According to Miller (2005), “Web 2.0 enhances the discovery and manipulation of information ... by building virtual applications ... in which users participate”. Social bookmarking, a web-based service to save and share electronic resources, is an example of such a virtual application.

In the period of Web 1.0, Internet users used to save their favorite websites locally on their computers. As a consequence, these lists of websites could only be accessed from that same computer. While on a business trip, attending a conference, or just working from home, these sites can be difficult to access. Additionally, by saving useful collections of websites on only one computer, the collections are only available to and accessible by one person. Contrarily, social bookmark platforms such as del.icio.us and citeulike.org let Internet users save lists of websites on the Internet. This is a major improvement for researchers who are increasingly using resources accessible on Internet while the number of digital

libraries and sources of information increases daily. Consequently, Internet users can retrieve their favorite websites on every computer as long it has an Internet connection and share their favorite websites with others.

Specifically this means that researchers and teachers in the field of global studies can maintain their own virtual filing cabinets, also known as a social bookmark account, which builds into the creation of a knowledge network. Let’s illustrate this with an example. Victor, a researcher in Kenya, uses the Internet to find information about the analysis of agricultural projects. While surfing on the Internet Victor finds useful information in databases of journals; information he normally does not find through generic search engines. To make sure he can retrieve the found page next week or next month, he uses del.icio.us to save his favorite website. With one click of the mouse he adds the website to his social bookmark account. Additionally, del.icio.us asks Victor whether he wants to label his favorite website with a keyword to improve accessibility. He labels the website with keywords and it is listed in his social bookmark account. Additionally, Victor’s social bookmark account also shows how many people have saved the same website and, consequently, Victor is now able to browse through the social bookmark accounts of those people with the same interests and find new electronic sources about the same topic. Through this process Victor builds a knowledge network through people who he never would have known without using social bookmarking.

Eventually, the shared knowledge of interesting resources in the field of global studies results in knowledge creation among peers.

Not only on an individual level are people participating in social bookmarking. First, communities of practice (CoP) increasingly emerge within social bookmark platforms. For instance, a CoP in the field of international development co-operation has agreed to save electronic sources about knowledge management for development with the keyword NPK4DEV. Consequently, you can monitor everyone’s contributions by subscribing to the RSS feed offered by the social bookmark platform. Second, institutions start their own social bookmark accounts in which staff members save their favorite websites. Third, and finally, initiatives emerge in which the efforts of both the individuals and institutions are combined. Focuss.Info, a content specific search engine in the field of global studies and international development cooperation, indexes the favorite websites of individuals – who have subscribed themselves as social bookmarkers in the same field – and partner

organizations – who have been requested to start implementing an institutional social bookmark account. As a result, Focuss.Info generates lists of hand-picked websites as opposed to the results given by generic search engines such as Google and Microsoft Live.

As indicated in previous examples, individuals, groups, and institutions/organizations can create content-rich communities by simply using social bookmarking. It is not proposed that social bookmarking is the total-solution for knowledge management. Polanyi (1958), one of the first persons to introduced knowledge management within a business-context, argued that we only know what we know, when we need to know it. Hence, we will only know what has been social bookmarked by our peers. Thus, the more people who are social bookmarking in the field of global studies, the better electronic resources will be mapped. Eventually, the shared knowledge of interesting resources in the field of global studies results in knowledge creation among peers. In other words, social bookmarking is a tool that improves resource discovery among researchers, teachers, and many more interested in a particular topic.

References

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