

Does it make us any smarter?



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by [Marc Buyens](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com

With the increasing number of social bookmarking platforms, social networks, RSS feeds, etc. the quantity of information that we collect exponentially increases. However, does it make us any smarter?

In one of the discussions we recently had on the [Twine](#) platform on the subject of bookmarking, tagging, etc., someone came up with the interesting question "*Does information flowing through me make me smarter?*"

Well, in these times of information overload, this is a very justified question. Like many of us, we subscribe to RSS feeds to bring us the latest news on a variety of subjects; we are member of social networks where we participate in discussion forums, we collect peices of information from various sources, we bookmark, we categorize, we tag. A lot of time spent and a lot of effort, but does it makes us any smarter?

Well, as usual, there is not a yes/no answer to this. It depends. Information makes us smarter when it is put into action. Without action, it is just stuff waiting for action.

Perception and heuristics

In essence, information that gets to us falls into two categories: things that are "in context" and things that are "out of context". Context here in the broad sense of the things that we are interested in for whatever reason.

"Out of context" is simple. The words say it all. No reason to keep, bookmark or tag this. If unexpectedly this becomes in context later on, you better start from scratch anyway. No reason to prepare for what you don't know that you should be preparing for.

Items that are "in context" are further divided into two categories. First, there are the items that allow you to get a new or enhanced perspective on the things that are important to you or that allow you to develop a new or a better heuristic (method) to solve certain things or to handle certain problems.

Second, there are the items that are in context, but you do not yet have an immediate fit for them. We call these "loose ends". They have relevancy because they are in content, but we do not have immediate use for them.

In order to (hopefully) clarify this, an example.

Since 1999, we have this website that we maintain ourselves. Initially, this was purely static HTML, which has of course some disadvantages, especially regarding the ease of change. So, after a while, we started looking for alternatives, which might have been a CMS solution, a blogging platform, etc.

So, we started collecting pieces of information regarding possible alternatives. All these were in context, but still loose ends. Eventually, we made the decision to move to an Apache/PHP platform using a self-written low profile CMS. The loose ends were put together and were the basis for a new heuristic. We indeed became smarter. At the same time, the items of information related to this became irrelevant. We knew the solution. No need to keep this stuff.

So, what we find and read and decide to keep (as a bookmark or whatever) are essentially the loose ends.

At that moment, they do not make us smarter since the information does not yet translate into action. They will do when we develop the new perspective or the new heuristic.

Some however, will never do. As a general rule, we remove everything that we have collected and that is two years old, without any further control. Until now, we never deleted anything that we needed afterwards.

Life moves on. Being smarter always comes later...

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Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium
Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com



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