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Annotate the web: four ways to mark up web content

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Internet Connection
Annotate the web: four ways to mark up web content
Shortened title: Annotate the web

Robin Camille Davis

Abstract: Web annotation has been a pipe dream almost since the birth of the Internet itself. Commenting in the margins of a text itself is so simple for paper and print, yet replicating the experience online remains elusive. In this article, I examine four tools for private or public web annotation. Hypothesis and Genius offer users a shareable way to annotate webpages line by line and start conversations in the margins. Pinboard and Evernote allow users to organize and save web documents and add private annotations.

Web annotation has been a pipe dream almost since the birth of the Internet itself. Commenting in the margins of a text itself is so simple for paper and print, yet replicating the experience online remains elusive. Many annotation services have fallen by the wayside, including Google Sidewiki and Third Voice, as commentary on web documents has moved to comments sections and social media. But these fragmented annotations are trapped within the website or social network, and moreover users can comment only at the document level without delving into the text. Can granular web annotation ever become reality?

Recent endeavors at enabling web annotation include Hypothesis and Genius, which both offer users a lightweight way to annotate texts line by line and start shareable conversations in the margins. Both of these projects have the funding and momentum to become commonly used tools. Two more tools for clipping and annotating web documents include Pinboard and Evernote, which enable users to organize and save web documents and add private notes and metadata.

Hypothesis: annotate and share links

A Kickstarter project that subsequently won grants from Knight, Mellon, Sloan, and other foundations, Hypothesis launched in 2014 as the anticipated answer to the problem of web annotation (Hypothesis n.d.). With a free account, a user can turn on annotations on any webpage or online PDF using a browser bookmarklet. The bookmarklet enables the user to highlight text and add notes. It also opens a sidebar that displays all of the user's annotations — along with other public annotations of the same page. Every annotation can be replied to, leading to the

possibility of a conversation in the margins of a webpage. Hypothesis also captures an archival version of the webpage or PDF so that annotations on a changing page don't lose their context. (Note that archival versions of web pages often lose formatting or functionality, due to the difficulty of web preservation. This issue plagues Pinboard and Evernote as well.) Users can share a link with their annotations to someone without an account. Currently, Hypothesis is only available as a web app and browser bookmarklet; both are free.

The non-profit organization anticipates high use of its product in academic settings. A user can save their annotations to private groups, ideal for a class project. Hypothesis has also partnered with over 40 scholarly publishing companies such as JSTOR and arXiv to develop features that will allow scholars to annotate articles within academic databases (Whaley 2015). This could take the form of the age-old tradition of marginalia, or it could even become a platform for peer review.

One major project that uses Hypothesis is Climate Feedback, wherein a group of scientists annotate news articles about climate change (Dattaro 2015). They highlight critical findings, question political maneuvering, add scientific evidence, and include citations of or links to studies that support their claims.

Use case example

Tania is working on a group project that focuses on public discussion of arts education. She finds local news articles reporting on funding arts programs, adding notes with her own critiques and highlighting comments that argue for and against increased funding for teaching the arts in schools. She does the same for open-access articles about arts education. Her annotations are filed in her group's folder, which she invites their instructor to view so he can examine their aggregated work.

Genius: annotate and share links, too

Best known for the long-standing site Rap Genius, in which users annotate rap and hip-hop lyrics with useful contextual information, Genius has expanded into an annotation service for other texts and webpages (Genius n.d.). With a browser bookmarklet or on a website that has enabled integration, a user with a Genius account can highlight and add notes to portions of text on a webpage. All annotations from Genius users show up in a sidebar when the bookmarklet is clicked. Genius does not capture an archival version of the webpage, meaning annotations on a changing text may lack context. PDFs don't seem to be annotatable.

While Hypothesis has a simple interface and seems to be geared toward scholarly annotation, Genius leverages its large community of users to be a more social experience (Simonite 2015). Every annotation is public and can be upvoted, downvoted, replied to, and shared on social media. Some users are marked as community experts with a green checkmark, similar to Twitter's "verified" marker.

Use case example

Jamie follows the news with Genius's news annotation project, News Genius, which invites journalists and the general public to mark up selected news articles. As a political science student, she enjoys seeing others fact-check political debates and adds her own two cents, too. She is incentivized to make insightful and pithy comments to gain upvotes on the page and to earn "IQ points" on her Genius profile. She feels proud that her username is on the News Genius

leaderboard nearly every week — and that she is rewarded for adding her informed viewpoint to the conversation.

Pinboard: save and organize links

Pinboard is an inexpensive subscription service that provides website bookmarking in the cloud (Pinboard n.d.). Once signed in, a browser bookmarklet allows the user to add links to their collection, along with a note and tags. Each bookmarked link, or the collection as a whole, can be marked publicly viewable or private. Users can locate previously bookmarked links through search or by its date or tag. Data export is free and simple.

For an added fee, Pinboard will capture an archival version of the webpage when you bookmark it. For resources that may change, it can be useful to have one (or several) snapshots of the page. Beyond this, Pinboard is a no-frills service. It does provide an API to developers, so there are several smartphone apps that can provide Pinboard access and functionality.

Use case example

Luke is collecting web sources for a gender studies article he is writing. He bookmarks each useful resource, adding a quick summary in the notes section. He tags each note *gs16*, making it easy for him to see all his bookmarked links at once under the *gs16* tag. He shares these links with his adviser by sending him the URL of the *gs16* tag page.

Evernote: clip webpages and add notes

A note-taking service that has been around for nine years, Evernote serves millions of users for a variety of purposes, from taking class notes to organizing business documents to keeping recipe collections (Evernote n.d.). Since its early days, Evernote has swelled with many features beyond quick word processing. One such feature is a web clipper, a browser bookmarklet that saves a snapshot of the webpage to the user's account. These snapshots can be in the form of the webpage, article text, a screenshot, or a link with a short description; all are treated as documents kept in collections set by the user, who can add annotations, tags, and additional metadata to each snapshot. All notes and snapshots in Evernote are accessible offline through the desktop app, and selected "notebooks" (document collections) can be accessible offline in smartphone apps. By default, all notes and snapshots are private, but read or read/write permission can be granted to other Evernote users. Evernote operates on a freemium model: the basic note-taking features are free, and additional features, including smartphone offline access, are available to paid accounts.

Use case example

Robbi is collecting information on accommodations and interesting sites before they go on an international trip with no anticipated wifi access. They clip webpages and write notes in a notebook created for the trip. When they are on the road, they can access their information offline on their smartphone and add more notes along the way.

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