The Federal Lawyer In Cyberia

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"Bookmarklets" Open the Door to Enhanced Online Investigatory Possibilities

We all use browsers, and we also share some of their boringly familiar features. But did you realize that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of littler helpers out there that you can painlessly add to your browser that will certainly increase your efficiency and perhaps your fun. I'm talking about tiny programs that can be stored as hyperlinks, called "bookmarklets." Basically, they're simple little add-on tools that extend the surf and search capabilities of Firefox and Explorer Web browsers.

Bookmarklets are free, and, they're pretty safe as "downloadables" go. Quite a few of these programs are described at www.bookmarklets.com. As is accurately stated there by the self-identified site guru, Steve Kangas, who calls himself the site's "chief of rocket science," bookmarklets are safer than traditional software for the following reasons:

1. They are extremely simple. With only a few lines of Java code, it's hard to make a programming error that isn't detected immediately.
2. You don't need to install software. Traditional software programs can produce conflicts with other programs on your hard drive. Bookmarklets work entirely within your Web browser, so they can't independently interfere with the functioning of other programs.
3. Because you don't install software, you don't have the security risks posed by traditional software (which can install files all over your hard drive). Your hard drive is protected by JavaScript security restrictions.
4. Even if something goes wrong (say, you try to use a Netscape-only bookmarklet on Internet Explorer) the worst thing that is likely to happen is that you will get a JavaScript error message.

Various bookmarklets can allow you to do things like change the way you see someone else's Web page; extract data (hidden or not) from a Web page; search more quickly (and, often, in ways not possible with a mere search engine); and navigate the Internet in novel new ways. Probably the best way to explain all this to bookmarklet neophytes is

through examples, and, oh, *do we have examples*!

The first is a bookmarklet, as suggested by Marshall Kirkpatrick, a blogger and technology writer for the *New York Times*, (marshallk.com/google-real-time), which allows you to highlight a word or phrase on any Web page and then click that button, or just click it freestyle and enter a query. Then you'll see what Kirkpatrick describes as "the freshest search results on the internet … including new web pages, Twitter messages, Facebook, and more." Not bad for journalists and lawyers engaged in research! This example is a form of what are known as "search bookmarklets," which can help you to surf faster, because you don't have to click on links. Normally, when you surf the Web, you do so by clicking on links. This can work well, but what if you see a word or phrase that interests you that the author hasn't turned into a link? Search bookmarklets allow you to select that word (by dragging across it) and quickly feed it into a search engine. This might be thought of as a "user-defined hyperlink," where you're not at the mercy of the site designer. This bookmarklet is considerably simpler than copying the text, going to the search engine, pasting the text into a search box, and pushing a button.

One of the things you'll soon happily discover is that you can follow your own ideas much more easily using search bookmarklets. And your speed will increase because normally, if you want to search, you first have to open another Web page that contains a textbox so that you can enter your key words. Search bookmarklets allow you to avoid this step by providing a textbox without a page, eliminating the need to wait for that extra page to load. You can just trigger the search bookmarklet without selecting any text, and you'll immediately get a pop-up search box. Nifty!

Another bookmarklet allows those of you who frequent Wikipedia to deal with the pesky little bracketed superscript numbers that link to the all-important documentation that is so necessary for verifying the accuracy of entries in this open-source encyclopedia. The thing that makes the source links pesky is that you cannot see what the documenting source is until you scroll all the way to the bottom of the article, which is annoying at best. With the "Wikipedia Footnotes" bookmarklet, you can simply hover over links, and the source is displayed in a pop-up box.

A bookmarklet that regularly saves me from myself is known as "View Passwords." I spend far too much time entering passwords, only to get them wrong because my Caps Lock key was on or because I simply mistyped a digit. The output I see on my screen leaves me clueless, however; it simply shows up as a series of enigmatic black dots. By using this bookmarklet, I can be assured that I typed the "secret code" correctly, because it is displayed as the letters, numbers, and symbols that it is instead of the black dots, enabling me to spot my error instantly and correct it.

It seems as though every feature on the Google site has an accompanying bookmarklet. One of my favorites is the one that goes with "Google Translate." In fact, if you look, there are more than 50 bookmarklets for the online translator, enabling the user to convert foreign text into his or her native language (with some limitations) instantly by simply highlighting the word and clicking. This feature facilitates surfing and searching on sites that are written in foreign languages—a definite plus.
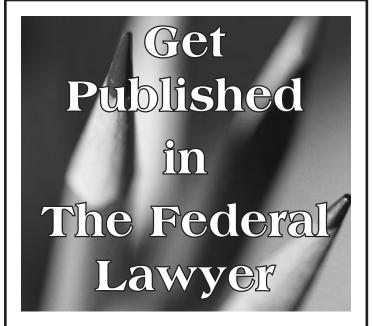
While I'm on the subject of Google bookmarklets, another one that can be helpful is the one that accompanies "Google Images." If you're typing away and want to see visual examples of mouse ears, for example, the Google Images bookmarklet can lead you there quickly. This feature one can be both fun and informative.

Before I leave Google, I suggest that you run a search for "bookmarklets" or "lawyer bookmarklets" and see what you find that you like and that will enhance your practice.

Conclusion

Bookmarklets open the door to enhanced online investigatory possibilities. Check them out. See you next month in Cyberia. **TFL**

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