

Web 2.0
What people do online
Briefing
26 April 2007



What do MySpace, Google, Flickr and Digg have in common? They are part of the buzz known as Web 2.0 - a description of innovation on the web, which makes use of what people do online. As the *Web 2.0 in Nonprofits* blog puts it Web 2.0 is about "normal everyday people using the Internet to do and create things." (<http://npotechbestpractices.pbwiki.com/Defining-Web-2-0>). Web 2.0 can also be understood as 'social media', where people share music, information, photos, reviews or opinions.

The phrase may seem overused, but we are only beginning to see the power of the trends to which Web 2.0 points. The term is often associated with technologies – blogs, RSS, wikis, or 'tagging'. Blogs allow conversations to travel in real time. They can be brought to the user as syndicated content 'RSS feeds' where users see instantly when their favourite websites are updated. Wikis allow people to create content collaboratively. Social tagging allows the user to apply keywords to any item of online content, which puts the power of classification of information in the hands of its readers and users.

Reading the McKinsey Global Survey published in March ("How businesses are using Web 2.0") you would be forgiven for thinking that Web 2.0 describes simply a cluster of new (they identified 9) technologies. (see David Wilcox's A-Z of social media for more technologies and definitions:
<http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/A-Z+of+social+media>)

Though this may help to describe how people do what they do in the web 2.0 space, it is the principles behind those technologies which constitute the meaning of web 2.0, and why it matters. As individual blogs are linked together, new communities of ideas emerge, which are self-directed and not bounded by geographical region. The results of social tagging can be viewed for navigation purposes as 'tag clouds' where the most commonly used words appear larger than other words. These tag clouds are sometimes called 'folksonomies' (as opposed to taxonomies) because they represent the diverse perspectives from which people view a piece of content.

When Tim O'Reilly published his "What Is Web 2.0" (<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>) he subtitled it "Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software." Web 2.0 gives us a different set of behaviours and activities from Web 1.0. Rather than online versions of company marketing

materials, or straight back-and-forth exchanges of information, software was being developed which exploited more fully the properties of networks.

The easiest way to understand the design behind the tools is to imagine what happens when people stop using them. If someone stops using a corporate website, nothing happens to the website itself. But if people stopped using a wiki, it is no longer a wiki. If people stopped hyperlinking between websites, Google's search would not exist. It is based on algorithms which capture the linking preferences in people's behaviour and reflect it back to the user. The user can then see that a site ranks high in search because lots of other people linked to it.

Of the 7 'design patterns' described by Tim O'Reilly as fundamental to companies developing in a web 2.0 world, three are worth reproducing here:

The Long Tail

"Small sites make up the bulk of the internet's content; narrow niches make up the bulk of internet's the possible applications. Therefore: Leverage customer-self service and algorithmic data management to reach out to the entire web, to the edges and not just the center, to the long tail and not just the head."

(The Long Tail, <http://www.longtail.com/about.html> written by Chris Anderson describes the value of the niches that appear outside mainstream consumer focus, and turns the traditional blockbuster model on its tail.)

Data is the Next Intel Inside

"Applications are increasingly data-driven. Therefore: For competitive advantage, seek to own a unique, hard-to-recreate source of data."

Users Add Value

"The key to competitive advantage in internet applications is the extent to which users add their own data to that which you provide. Therefore: Don't restrict your 'architecture of participation' to software development. Involve your users both implicitly and explicitly in adding value to your application."

With social media or Web 2.0, the reasons for collaboration are up to people. There is no structural reason to get together except to get something done. Allowing people to share information, the way they share photos on Flickr, gives the company who created the application something unique. It also gives users an incentive to continue using the application, because they get the benefit of everyone's shared input. Wikipedia is knowledge-in-use. Google is internet-in-use. And Patient Opinion is health services-in-use. This sort of capacity for 'mass collaboration' is not limited to online spaces, but online, it is easy to see how your contribution makes everyone's service better.

