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Web 2.0: How the Web got Loose

By Jeff Cain
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Depending on whom you ask, Web 2.0 has many different meanings and interpretations. To some it may be the underlying programming standards and language. To others, the definition revolves around the connection of people. [1] The term does not have strict boundaries; rather it is used to describe newer ways of developing for and using the Internet. [2] In reality, Web 2.0 is not even a new concept, but an advancement closer to the original vision for the Web — a connective and social medium in which people interact.

Web 2.0 applications such as Delicious [3], Facebook [4], YouTube [5], and others have allowed the Web to sever itself from the restricting confines of its previous stereotype as a digital “bookshelf.” [6] This newer evolution of the Web is now less of a place for information to be provided, searched for, and digested, and more of a dynamic participant within our social landscape. The applications and subsequent ways that people use them have begun to have subtle, but substantial socio-cultural effects on different aspects of society. The socio-technical evolutions of Web 2.0 have outpaced our attempts to grasp the legal, ethical, and societal expectations, [7] creating new issues to consider and resolve. By briefly illustrating these emerging issues through a series of short vignettes, I hope to provoke further conversation and debate about Web 2.0 and technological determinism. The following sections represent three of the many significant changes precipitated by Web 2.0 in different aspects of contemporary society: loss of demarcation between public and private lives, rise of collective intelligence, and shifts in the flow of information.

The Merger of Public and Private Personas

As short as ten years ago, it was relatively easy to differentiate between public and private spaces. The demarcation between actions conducted in private and those in public was mostly clear-cut. Possibly the strongest, most far-reaching change imposed by the popularity of blogs, Facebook, Twitter [8], YouTube, and other social media is the breakdown of that distinction. The online public display of attitudes, opinions, and actions once expressed primarily to others in
relatively private venues has alarmed many not accustomed to this type of communication. This transition in social communication has occurred at such a high speed and volume that society is struggling with how to react. Traditional laws do not apply very well and new ethical issues have arisen. [9]

The crux of this public/private issue is the collapsing of contexts. [10] In the Web 2.0 world, people operate at different levels in the same digital space. Sometimes those interactions are with family, sometimes they are work-related, and sometimes they are equivalent to a Saturday night out with friends. Combining these interactions simultaneously in the online environment collapses them down into a wholly different context, depicting an amalgam of the many different “lives” of people. This proves very difficult for others to interpret, especially as it relates to work, careers, and professional lives. Social norms dictate how people act in specific contexts and most of us behave differently in different contexts. As a society, we have not determined the proper way to address the flattened contexts of online communication.

This struggle is clearly illustrated in the case of a student expelled from nursing school due to her personal blog containing opinions judged by the school to be contrary to professional ideals and offensive to some students, faculty, and patients. [11] The blog contained personal expressions originating from a private venue; however, those traditionally private opinions were voluntarily made available to the public. The act of posting personal opinions on a blog straddles the traditional public/private boundary line, rendering those opinions neither wholly public nor wholly private. A myriad of legal and ethical questions arises in this type of case, [12] including “How should that student be judged by the school?” and “Should she even be judged at all?” Our inability to separate public and private makes it difficult to answer these types of questions using traditional cases as precedent.

The Rise of Collective Intelligence

The emergence of collective intelligence is one cultural trend spawned by Web 2.0 that academia has resisted. This concept, described as a component of Web 2.0, is one that shifts the power structure of knowledge authority and threatens the foundation of the academy. The vast availability of information from unlimited sources leads to real-time context and fact checking, which drastically alters the “authority market” [13] and the meaning of “expertise” in the Web 2.0 world.

One only has to look at Wikipedia [14] as an example of this problem. The inherent concepts of user-contributed and user-driven information are fundamental to the popularity of Web 2.0 and have almost singlehandedly changed the paradigm of expertise. A close examination of the paradigm shift reveals the potential disparity between reliable information and usable information, which tends to be at the crux of the issue. Detractors posit that information on Wikipedia is subject to bias, may contain inaccuracies, is incomplete, and does not differentiate between novice and expert contributors. [15] Alternatively, supporters state that the collective intelligence is closer to the truth than what any one or two can construct. In addition, the real-time updates of Wikipedia contrast with older models that require days, weeks, months, and sometimes years,
to update information. [16] For these reasons, supporters are willing to forgive temporary inaccuracies in exchange for the agility and usability made possible by the technology and formed through collective intelligence.

**Altering the Flow of Information**

The shifting of news and information flow is a third example of Web 2.0’s effect on societal transactions. Traditional media sources such as newspapers and television newscasts have long been the primary provider of news and information to the public. Those working in “legitimate” media areas operate under a set of rules and guidelines about when and what to publish and under what circumstances. Among other things, they are bound by ethical guidelines that prevent reporting without proper verification.

As blogs (and now micro-blogs) became popular, information slowly started to flow through these informal communication channels. Bloggers and Twitterers are not necessarily bound by the same restrictions as those in traditional media. Because of this, “breaking news” may come through social media channels first, as bloggers and micro-bloggers are free to report on speculation and opinion without going through an extensive vetting process. The resulting change is that many have turned to social media as the initial source for news and information deemed important to them, creating a growing angst among some traditional journalists who decry the advantages of bloggers in that professional field. Some journalists have taken notice of the change and are beginning to adapt to the social media world in their own ways. [17, 18]

The sports reporting field provides an excellent example of social media’s impact on communication channels. During a recent transition between basketball coaches at the University of Kentucky, the self-proclaimed “Big Blue Nation” [19] clamored for information related to the coaching search and the subsequent college commitments of several high profile recruits. Local media coverage of the program is good, but inherently restricted in terms of the speed and fluidity of information transmission. The desire for up-to-the-minute facts, rumors, and opinions concerning the basketball program was and continues to be satisfied by bloggers, with one blog in particular attracting a large share of the audience. In a relatively short period of time, the Kentucky Sports Radio blog [20] has transformed itself into a major source of news and commentary on UK basketball and other team sports. Updated several times daily, the blog attracts not only hardcore message board users, but also scores of mainstream Internet users by providing a free “one stop shop” source for team news. During the most recent peak periods, a quarter million hits were recorded daily [21] as fans stayed abreast of the stories, relegating traditional media sources to official verification of information found on the blog. This switch to social media for information illustrates how the flow of information has changed and in some cases reversed, with Web 2.0 applications filling the role of the primary news provider and traditional media sources struggling to remain relevant.

**Conclusion**

The above are just a few examples of the numerous ways social media is affecting the fabric of
our society and they may not ultimately even be the most important or far-reaching. This paper simply provides a starting point for those types of discussions. Web 2.0 is forcing us to reconsider what is public, what is private, what is expertise, as well as how we receive and transmit information. To what extent these transformations will continue, and whether they are good, bad, or otherwise is yet to be determined. Their effects may be reduced or exacerbated as we adjust to the socio-cultural changes. The current speed of technological advances may also mean that other changes will occur before we have adapted to the current ones. The underlying message is that the Web is now loose and we need either to wrestle with it or go along for the ride. The choice is ours.

Endnotes


[19] The University of Kentucky official team color is blue and “Big Blue Nation” is a term used by many to describe the large, rabid fan base.


[21] Personal communication with Matt Jones, co-founder and primary blogger for the Kentucky Sports Radio blog; July 2, 2009.

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ONE THOUGHT ON “WEB 2.0: HOW THE WEB GOT LOOSE”

Editor

on August 1, 2009 at 4:29 PM said:

Poster Name: Marcus
Message: Interesting article you got here. It would be great to read a bit more concerning that matter. Thanks for sharing this information.