

Web 2.0 – and Beyond

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Web 2.0 first and foremost is a metaphor coined to signify a new era of internet usage driven by user interactivity, engagement, and collaboration. This digital phenomenon is seen as a marked contrast to the internet in its initial stage where the World Wide Web served as a mass media tool that communicated information from the producer to their public in a one-way direction. Tim O'Reilly, the internet guru, is credited with being one of the first to recognize the unique characteristics of this emergent participatory architecture in 2006 (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009). He professed that these digital structures become more effective as usage grows and his insight gained legitimacy with the rise of co-creative platforms such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and Facebook. He compared the collective contribution of different users to this platform to a global brain, where the constant streaming of thoughts shapes its inherent dynamic structure, the hyperlinking feature of the web resembling the process of how synapses form in the brain as associations become stronger through repetition and intensity.

Social network sites are seen as synonymous with Web 2.0, allowing individuals to connect with other users within public or semi-public web systems. Boyd and Ellison (2007) underline the uniqueness of these platforms by emphasizing the fact that users can make visible their relationships and networks, extend their offline relations, and organize their connectedness via these digital affordances. They emphasize the dynamism of this platform by pushing for the term “networking sites” versus “networks,” since what makes this platform novel in computer mediated communication is its capacity to facilitate connections between strangers. The spread of Web 2.0 has also given rise to new user practices in the online presentation of the self, impression

management, and friendship performance, creating an important niche area of research in internet studies and related fields.

At the center of the innovative Web 2.0 platform is community formation – arising out of the intrinsic need for people to create groups to connect, network, and share in common pursuits regardless of geographic constraints – or what has popularly come to be viewed as virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993). This is as much a social as a technical revolution. The potential of these virtual communities has been wide-ranging. Several scholars have been optimistic about the digital shift, equating these information architectures with a new form of the digital commons. For instance, James Surowiecki (2005) argued that Web 2.0 provides the technical affordances to harness collective intelligence or what he terms “the wisdom of crowds.” He argues that, contrary to common perceptions, the masses are better at solving problems, fostering innovation, coming to wise decisions, and even predicting the future than individuals. The social software of Web 2.0 enables massive aggregations of people across diverse contexts to come together and, therefore, it can be said to contribute to the process of democratic knowledge construction. This idea has taken root and given credence to processes such as crowdsourcing (soliciting people to execute small tasks, often by businesses) and crowdfunding (the collective effort by networks to pool their resources for nonprofit and/or for-profit endeavors) (Howe, 2006).

User generated content has awakened the classic notion of the public sphere where Web 2.0 serves as a public domain in which all people can contribute to the shaping of the digital space. The Wikipedia project is often cited as an ideal example of such collaborative efforts and numerous studies have examined how “many minds” (Sunstein, 2006) voluntarily engage and labor extensively in developing the world's largest online encyclopedia for the common good. This digital free labor has gained much attention because it challenges the conventional dichotomy between the producer and the consumer in media

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studies. These distinctions are understood to be fading, giving rise to the term “prosumer” and to the blurring of producers and consumers (Bruns, 2007). This also implies that the line between professionals/experts and amateurs in creating new media content is also being challenged, compelling us to revisit the notion of credibility, trust, and expertise in knowledge production via Web 2.0.

With new technology platforms and new expectations also come concerns. A strong dystopian argument pervades the literature asserting the impersonal nature of virtual networks. There is a fear that the immersion of individuals in virtual communities can serve as a poor substitute for the offline communities around them. Eli Pariser (2011) points out that, far from the democratic ideal of a “community” promised by new media platforms, we live in an age where our networks are being carefully curated by algorithms that are programmed to expose us to mainly like-minded people. In other words, we live in a “filter bubble,” an invisible information architecture that appears to be objective, true, and neutral but is in fact deeply mediated by commercial and other interests, creating the illusion of a harmonious society. Mitch Parsell (2008) suggests that Web 2.0 has escalated the polarization and prejudice between social groups by enabling online communities to remain within their own private spheres of beliefs. These enclosed spaces can be viewed as echo chambers where a certain perspective can be reinforced through constant repetition, making it appear as truth. This poses a problem when it comes to knowledge production because the “wisdom” of the crowds could just as easily prove to be the ideas of false prophets, professing misleading opinions that can have serious negative repercussions in the information age. Andrew Keen (2008), one of the more vocal scholars against the popular notion of collective intelligence, argues that wisdom is not in the crowd but in people with expertise and talent. He criticizes the romanticism of the open system of Web 2.0, where the masses dictate knowledge and culture; disputes the celebrated and much revered cult of the amateur as a signal of equality and democracy in society; and calls for an appreciation of healthy differentiation and discrimination to sustain quality in the cultural and intellectual domain.

Another growing concern about Web 2.0 user generated content is the fear of the exploitation of individuals who freely contribute to the building of these platforms through the sharing of their ideas, networks, and personal data. With the rise of Web 2.0, there has been a change from traditional media where users had to be proactive when engaging in free labor. However, internet users who engage with social networks unintentionally and automatically find themselves engaged in free labor (Terranova, 2000). Another conversation that has become central to this area is the notion of data privacy and consumer protection. Mark Andrejevic (2011) calls attention to the growing surveillance and commercialism of personal data for profit by the private sector within Web 2.0 platforms. He makes the case that new media platforms create new ways to monitor and control consumer behavior and render individuals vulnerable to exploitation. Web 2.0 and its participatory culture have, in his view, created a new online economy that requires overarching legal policy to protect the rights of privacy of the prosumers, and careful attention to be paid to notions of ownership of content.

In looking at the future of Web 2.0, we may well ask what might be the hallmark of the next era of digital media – Web 3.0. The medium of access is fundamental to this conversation as the mobile web is transforming how we produce and consume content (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009). The emergence of supplemental tools such as motion sensors, geopositioning systems, digital cameras, and more is giving users on the move a set of tools to augment their reality and to move seamlessly between the online and the offline worlds. Real-time content sharing is now a given, but how this raw data will be synthesized is the new challenge. Sophisticated and yet user-friendly visualization tools are coming to the fore which communicate tremendous amounts of data in engaging and context-specific ways. We may yet encounter a sentient web whose system of intelligence can have wide-ranging impacts from the noble to the sinister. By paying attention to the popular rhetoric framing the web, we can gauge the climate of perception and expectation, and the range of cultures being enacted, on the web (Arora, 2012). We have come some distance from the wild wild West and the information highway metaphors of the web in the 1990s to

the walled garden, electronic ghetto, and the Digital Commons of today. The discourse in the media will continue to guide us with regard to the underlying and emerging sensibilities of Web 3.0.

SEE ALSO: Content Creation and Curation; Semantic Web; Social Media; Social Media Business Models; Social Media in Organizations

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