

The phrase Web 2.0 by now elicits a broad spectrum of responses from both the digerati and the general public — enthusiasm, distrust and, frequently, confusion. Regardless of where you fall along the spectrum, the underlying cultural and technological shifts of Web 2.0 are profound, evolving and durable.

In the past year alone, the number of citations in Google for Web 2.0 has increased from approximately 10 million to over 125 million; the number of products and services claiming to be representative of Web 2.0 has grown from a couple hundred to well over a thousand; and the number of bloggers, podcasters and social network participants has exponentially exploded by more than 200 percent on average.

Even after the hype — attendant to all paradigm shifts and potential moneymakers — wears thin, the foundational elements of Web 2.0 will remain and support a radically evolved framework for business, communications, education, entertainment and much, much more.

So what exactly is Web 2.0? What is changing and what is staying the same?

What is Web 2.0?

The origin and definition of the term is a topic of great debate in the blogosphere. It was likely used first as a moniker for the emerging next generation of Web services by information architect Darcy DiNucci, but then popularized by Dale Dougherty and Tim O'Reilly of O'Reilly Media.

Basically, Web 2.0 describes the continuously evolving next generation Web in which 1) the Web is a platform for services and software and 2) user participation is encouraged and leveraged. This evolution and maturation of the Web has given rise to new models of business, community and information distribution. Huh? Consider the case of eBay, one of the original Web 2.0 pioneers.

eBay uses the Web to provide business services and software functionality to a global group of users. These users then provide the content and products for sale. eBay is an enabler, a glorified middle-man whose competitive advantage is its critical mass of buyers and sellers.

Other examples of Web 2.0 innovators include Amazon, Google and Yahoo.

Amazon receives the same product descriptions and images as its competitors. They sell the same products, but created competitive advantage by trailblazing user participation — customer reviews, “people who bought this also bought” feature, and wish list sharing. All these features, concocted by Jeff Bezos and his colleagues, revolutionized the online marketplace.

Google’s breakthrough in search was PageRank, which uses a vast link structure as an indicator of the value of an individual page. Previously, search paradigms had been based simply on the content of a page. Google revolutionized advertising with AdSense, a free program enabling users to sell space on their Web sites for targeted ads served up by Google. The whizzes of Mountain View also provide other services characteristic of Web 2.0 like Gmail with integrated Talk, Blogger, Calendar, Notebook and much more.

Beyond these foundational exemplars of Web 2.0, a new batch of innovations is approaching critical mass. Craigslist and Wikipedia epitomize the efficacy of user-generated content and network effects. The network effect is the idea that a thing or tool becomes more useful and valuable as more people use it. For example, a telephone is relatively useless if only one person has it but quite the opposite if multitudes use them.

Craigslist is basically a massive network of urban communities featuring free classified advertisements, community information, forums, etc. It started with 10 U.S. cities and now boasts 310 cities worldwide.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia collaboratively created by volunteers from around the world. The project began in January 2001 with a handful of articles and midway through 2006 had more than 4.6 million articles worldwide, including more than 1.2 million in the English-language version.

As the Web matured from what was ostensibly an information sharing and publishing platform to an application rich environment with more people using and contributing content, interesting functionality and networks developed. This evolution points toward a few trends not likely to abate for some time.

What Is Changing/Staying the Same?

The Web has always been about communicating between individuals and communities, distributing content and data and, of course, shopping! This isn’t going to change. Indeed, it’s going to continue to increase exponentially, and therefore users need better ways to find and share information.

One method for helping people find high quality targeted content is social bookmarking. Joshua Schachter pioneered the method with del.icio.us — a Web site and service recently bought by Yahoo!. The site allows users to bookmark Web sites in personal accounts and tag them with keywords. All Web sites bookmarked in del.icio.us are public by default and browse-able by keywords. Instead of bookmarks (or favorites) being bound to your individual computer’s browser, you can access them from any computer online. Moreover, you can browse sites tagged by others according to keyword. This is

as useful for finding quality articles about Web 2.0 as for finding the most popular Web sites about the Red Sox.

Another method for navigating the ever expanding Web is via a mash-up. A mash-up refers to using application programming interfaces (API) to access and combine two or more sets of content for creating something newly meaningful. For example, housingmaps.com combines Google's map service with Craigslist real estate listings, thereby enabling users to search and geographically plot rental and sale properties. Another is ipodradar.com, which combines Amazon's e-commerce service with del.icio.us, eBay, Google AdWords and Technorati to help people find everything and anything about iPods.

Tearing at Web 2.0

There you have it — Web 2.0 — the Web as a platform for services and software, harnessing user generated content and participation, creating network effects, requiring social bookmarking and utilizing mash-ups.

Sound complicated? It's not really. It's just a bit like a wormhole. Everyone's used to thinking about information, communication, commerce and applications in set dimensions, and instead need to tear through this paradigm to see new opportunities. The trick with Web 2.0, as with any major trend, is to focus on quality content and let the hype fade away.

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