Foreword

Web 2.0, the term no longer inspires curiosity. Indeed, Web 2.0 has become a commonplace, even an assumed feature of many digital venues. Although a measure of the term’s utility, it is more importantly a measure of the enormous and popular success of what it describes. In just a few years the World Wide Web has changed, offering new ways to publish and share content. Education has also been transformed, either by direct engagement with Web 2.0 technologies and practices, or by academia’s contact with the larger world.

The term was coined by publisher Tim O’Reilly for a 2004 conference and unfolded in a 2005 article. It superseded a then-current software project label called social software. That term of art addressed a longstanding problem in digital culture: namely, the assumption that digital projects were asocial, if not actively inhuman. This draws on a generation of pop culture and cultural criticism, portraying machines as enemies of humanity, disconnectors of persons, agents of alienation, and enablers of bowling alone. “Social software” was raised as a banner for those with a diametrically opposed vision, those who saw technology connecting people. This view draws on the roots of networked computing, seen most significantly in epochal figures from J.C.R. Licklider to Tim Berners-Lee. It was seen in the rise of virtual communities during the 1980s, and the rapid growth of people sharing documents through the Web.

By the first years of the 21st century Web services emerged that were explicitly designed to connect people. Friendster was initially the most notable, succeeded shortly by MySpace and Facebook, then by dozens of other platforms. As we can see from their name recognition and enormous user bases, such social software platforms clearly connected with a significant cultural need. People find something rewarding and meaningful in the process of posting personae and linking up with other people, from total strangers to friends from the past.

The term “Web 2.0” then appeared, recasting social networks in a new light. O’Reilly’s 2005 article argues that these social software projects actually partake of a broader Web publication movement. This views Friendster alongside the blogosphere and MySpace as allied to the vast wiki world. It is now commonplace to see Web 2.0 as difficult to define, with blurry boundaries and far too many projects to monitor. But O’Reilly’s intervention did offer a generalizable model with certain readily understood characteristics. The total lack of a replacement term, four years later, suggests that the phrase is quite workable.

First, we can note that there is no black-line division between Webs 1.0 and 2.0. Indeed, there is no special software to download, applications to run, or hardware to purchase. The numerical distinction describes a shift in style, a shift of information architecture.

Second, Web 2.0 describes an emphasis on social connectivity. While Web 1.0 enabled people to share documents, opening up alternatives to broadcast media, it did not focus on connecting persons. Think about the ways a 1999 Web user had to connect with a Web page author: that is, through private email or a guest book. If such a connection were made between browser and creator, there would be no
way for that link to appear in the larger world. Web 2.0 services, in contrast, emphasize such links. If Alice comments on Bob’s blog, Carol and Charlie can read the exchange. Since Carol can post her own comment, or Charlie post to his blog linking back to Bob and Alice, the link is productive. Other people can then see these links appear, adding their own.

Third, what makes these social connections happen so quickly is an emphasis on microcontent. A decade of Web 1.0 practice established a publication apparatus: creating HTML locally, FTPing that local content to a Web server, and maintaining that Web host. The investment of time in following that multi-legged publication arc, while far easier than what broadcast media offered, was still significant. Web 2.0 drastically lowers the amount of that investment. Rather than designing a Web site from architectural scratch, one creates a blog in five minutes of clicks. Instead of building a new HTML page, one uses a wiki. We edit content on our Twitter feeds or Facebook walls in seconds, rather than going through the file-FTP-server cycle each time we want to alter our material.

The result is a fast-growing, quickly modified, extensively social Web. It runs alongside the classic Web, not replacing it so much as constituting another layer. For example, educational practitioners have responded to this new Web stratum in several ways. First, many educators are invested in course management systems; those are following the Web 1.0-2.0 arc with microcontext-themed platforms emerging (e.g., Moodle) and the largest one, Blackboard, extending a series of social software tendrils. Second, a wide and connected body of educators has been teaching with Web 2.0 tools of all kinds, either using them to publish course materials, assigning students to use them, or both. Third, educators swim in the larger sea of cybertecture. Even if they don’t use wikis, a large number of students use Wikipedia. If they do not Twitter, many people in academia know the Facebook status box. Blog content crops up in our Google searches, even if we refuse to touch a single piece of the blogosphere.

In short, since “social software” gave way to “Web 2.0”, educational practice has changed.

And, educational practice will continue to do so - as Web 2.0 churns and grows, throwing off ever new services and concepts. By the time you read this book, dozens of new platforms will have appeared. Some of these will not have generic names, but we will try to understand them. The chapters in the Handbook of Research on Social Interaction Technologies and Collaboration Software: Concepts and Trends constitute a superb place to start.

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