Chapter 22
Towards a Combined Model for On-Line and Real Conferences: A Proposal

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a combined model for on-line and real conferences. The chapter introduces Web 2.0 and its importance. Then, using Web 2.0 in real and virtual conferences is discussed since Web 2.0 can make a difference in supporting such a conference model. A past on-line event is analysed and evaluated in order to have lessons learned and make recommendations towards this proposal. The combined model approach is presented and detailed in its components and the importance of Web 2.0 elements is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Real events have been for years the traditional meeting place for all sorts of professions, ranging from academics to doctors and other professionals. In these sorts of events, participants can interact with each other, see and comment presentations, talk to each other during coffee-breaks, attend all sorts of sessions, etc.

These kind of traditional events have however several limitations:

- Travel and hotel costs;
- Costs linked to rental of physical space and all facilities (i.e. coffee-breaks, lunches);
- Rigid program schedules;
- Limited duration in terms of days;

To overcome these limitations on-line events are a possibility. These have the following main advantages:

- No costs in terms of travelling and hotel;
- Availability during 24 hours a day and for weeks, months or even years;
• Availability after the end of the event of most of the materials that can be recorded.

A combined model between traditional and online conferences may be a solution to overcome the limitations and enhance each other’s strengths. Web 2.0 can play an important role in such combined mode between traditional and on-line events. In the next two sections, Web 2.0 and its possibilities are introduced and using Web 2.0 in real and virtual conferences is discussed.

WEB 2.0

Web 2.0 is now a widespread phenomenon with repercussions in practically all sectors of society. It has evolved so rapidly and so steadily that the decision at this point seems to be either to use it and adapt to it or risk becoming superseded (Kittinger, n.d.: 3).

This term is used freely to define not only websites and applications but online collaborative activities, the exchange of data and the possibility of creating content (Eikelmann, 2007, p. 1). Web 2.0 is based on the principles of simple to use applications, the delivery of software as a service, the use of network effects and the centrality of the role of the user (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008, p. 235-236). It uses collective intelligence and its growth is inherently dependent on the users’ collaborative activity (O’Reilly, 2005). Web 2.0 advocates the use of open software and free information flow, so it is based on a code of free delivery of services and users have learn to expect exactly that from the sites they use. Only a reduced number of websites have resorted to commercialising their services (Hoegg et al., 2006, p. 10, 11). Web 2.0 applications can be used both for professional and social matters and the features they offer depend mainly on the nature of the website (Leitner and Grechenig, 2008, p. 189, 190).

Web 2.0 applications are, for example, Blogs, Podcasts, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), Wikis, Social networks (Bughin, 2008, p. 257, 258) and they all have in common the promotion of interactivity between the users and the internet. MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and Wikipedia are some of Web 2.0’s websites (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008: 233). Web 2.0 isn’t intrinsically connected with a pioneering technology, it is instead a unique blend of existing protocols and languages (Hoegg et al., 2006, p. 5). Its dynamism is in part the responsibility of the programming technologies supporting it: XML, AJAX, Ruby on Rails, Java Script and others (Kittinger, n.d.: 3). These programming languages facilitate the effortless flow of information and data, which adds dynamism to content (Lewis, 2006). AJAX, for example, results in an improvement in the user’s experience, because it allows for a reduction in the amount of the information transferred between the user and the server. It ensures that only the changes the user has introduced are updated, rather than the whole page (Hoegg et al., 2006, p. 6). The role of the technologies behind Web 2.0 applications is central, because it is essential to guarantee creative freedom by adding numerous possibilities to the websites, but without compromising their user-friendly nature (Kittinger, n.d.: 7, 8). The software must be straightforward, it is meant be a tool to facilitate the use of Web 2.0 applications and not a disincentive (Zajicek, 2007, p. 35).

The 1.0 version of the web was about people, this improved 2.0 version is set up around the user (Johnson, 2006). Users are no longer limited to their motionless role of information consumers; they assume a different part in this new version of the web, the part of proactive creators of content (Eikelmann, 2007, p. 1). The content generated by users can assume a wide range of formats like audio, video or text (Chai et al, 2007). The time and effort users invest in these applications is compensated by the feeling of belonging to a community, the opportunity to take part in enriching discussions and the access to information (Ewing,