

The Fascinating World of Web 2.0

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Abstract: *New Media has a major impact on our contemporary society. It is the redefinition of the way people communicate and may also be the redefinition of classical journalism. It is easy to become a journalist with the help of new technologies. The article stresses the importance of the interactive video-sharing portals and focuses on a definition of the web 2.0 world. The definition of web 2.0 is not strictly a technical one. It also implies everything related to consumer (user) generated content as an attitude towards participation. The issue of blogging and its impact on political communication, journalism and democracy is presented in the last section of the paper.*

Just as the appearance of traditional electronic media (radio followed by television) had a profound influence on the transformation of modern society, the appearance of the internet generated a series of essential changes as well. As the value of intellectual property gained new dimensions, the virtual space became a sort of a glossary to which anyone's work can be added and one's story may be transformed and developed by other users. The internet means a different thing to different people, one of the common features being, however, the activation and interaction as well as the struggle to extend communication relations within the network – this is what web 2.0 is really about. One of the common characteristics of sites like *Youtube*, *Wikipedia* or *Flickr* is that their pages publish a content generated by their own users, while blogs stand for a different way of expressing one's freedom of speech. Thus, users become potential journalists or correspondents, and the internet offers countless possibilities for the

expression of people's individual opinion. At the same time, however, the internet starts to connect people in a different way than before: it may connect representatives and political management, and millions of computers are logged to the *net* not only for the purpose of downloading music or films (quite unfortunately for the authors, these actions are sometimes performed illegally), but as part of vast scientific networks established to cooperate with a common effort to find remedy for diseases like cancer or AIDS.

We suddenly realize that we have two lives (no wonder that one of the *metaverses* is called *Second Life*): a real and a virtual one, because one way or another we all use the solutions offered by a *second generation* web. From the passive, reading-based lifestyle the society drifts slowly towards the interactive activities, and this happens not only for financial reasons, but also because a common spiritual value is created. This is characterized by the willingness to share, to offer access and to create a vast, common knowledge. Users relish this spiritual experience, the process of teaching and learning gains new dimensions, while in the field of communication the sociological indicators lose their decisive character, because the differences of age, race or gender are no longer an impediment. Being interested has become the most important factor. Lifelong learning can be done, therefore, from one's home, from a computer logged to the internet.

Web 2.0 – a short history

Man is a typical social being, thus in time his personal relationships (meetings, common experience, and development of trust) and interpersonal communication get a greater value and they are expressed stronger and stronger. Virtual space is a wonderful background for this type of interaction. It influences human relationships regardless of borders or other, geographic barriers, fills out the gaps in one's spare time, educates and entertains. Therefore, from the very beginning, the internet was considered a social medium: it was regarded as an open, extendable and unpredictable structure that lacks order.

In the last fifteen years, owing to its ten billions of hypertext links (Bowman-Willis: 2003, 15) the web became a very useful social network of communication. (Figure 1)

At the end of the 20th century thousands of internet based businesses were established in the United States, all aiming to exploit the possibilities offered by the net, while on the stock market everyone was investing in the electronic commerce. Due to these million dollar investments those companies that had sonorous domain names and were involved in the internet sales promised important amounts of profit and a fast growth, even though their content was fairly poor.

In the autumn of 2001, at the moment when the dotcom balloon suddenly broke, the companies that managed to survive the massive stock market losses were those that were able to resume and exploit new opportunities (Tim O'Reilly/ Dale Dougherty:

consumers, a new way of thinking and even a new business perspective. In a podcast interview, Tim-Berners Lee, the „creator” of the internet declared that *Web 1.0* served exclusively for the establishment of connections. Even if for the moment it is just slang, *web 2.0* represents nothing else but the exploitation of the possibilities offered by *web 1.0*, in other words the users who think, are challenged to get involved in activity and interaction. *Web 2.0* is a space in which virtual communities and online social network are created. The new web is the place where people from different geographic areas, with different areas of interest can meet. The dynamical development of the network implies a series of professional questions as well, questions that concern the transformation of communication and the development of mediatic communication. Will the media that functions in a framework which is quasi free of charge, be able to play the role that traditional journalism used to play for centuries? In which direction will develop the media of the 21st century? How important is the fact that journalists can be met everywhere? (Figure 2)

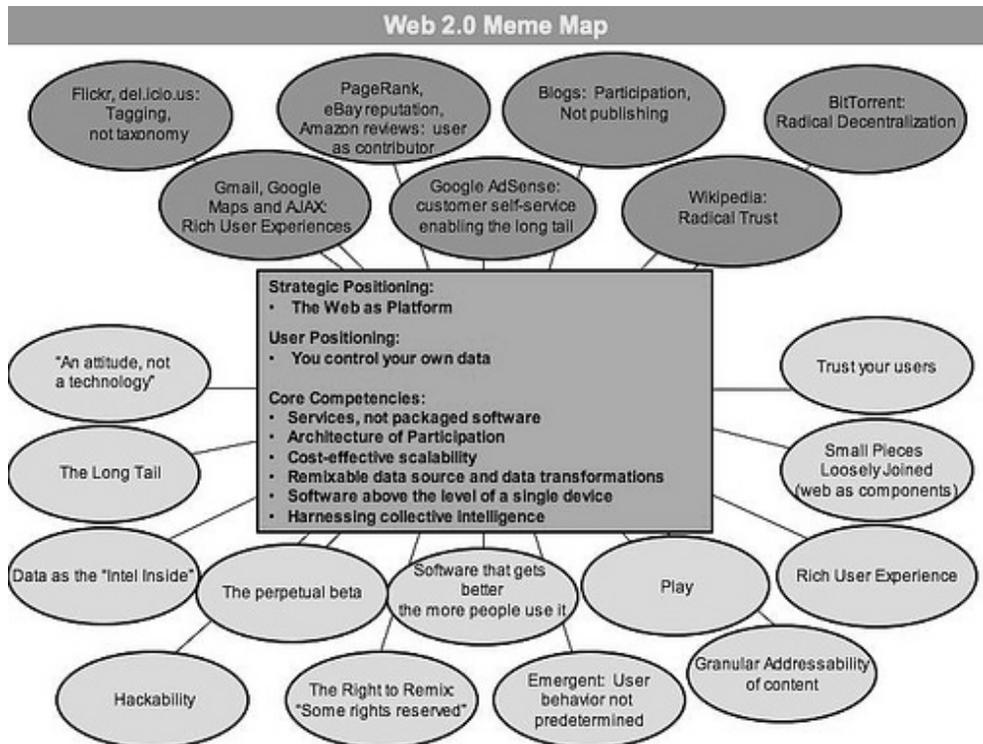


Figure 2: The map of web 2.0 elaborated during a brainstorming held in the framework of a FOO Camp (the conference of computer experts organized annually by O'Reilly Media), featuring the basic ideas of the new web.

Definitions are contradictory and rarely cover the same area. Media expert, *Jakob Nielsen* thinks that blogs, podcasts, video games, virtual worlds, wiki-type encyclopedias and interactive televisions may be considered as part of web 2.0, adding that look and *design* is less important than the content and easy usage, because many people just *pop in* for a moment to search for a certain information. If the look is not right and they cannot find the desired information, it is quite unlikely that they will return. Other, however, consider that blogs and virtual worlds are part of the social media, because they play an important part in the development of online communities.

In principle, the law of great numbers guarantees the neutral character of blogs: the more opinions are expressed, the more groups are represented. Users may choose from them according to their value preferences, but, even if the manipulation or canalization of attention is already present, we cannot speak of a virtual world influenced on a global level yet. Successful blogs catch the attention and, due to the viral marketing transmitted on the web, they reach a large public, which may mark the end of neutral and independent character: *Bloggers became the victims of their own success: the more they are employed by media pages to create content, the more they are integrated directly into politics* (Drezner-Farell: 2004, 38).

Owing to its collaboration-based character and the fact that communication is directed from the upper level towards the lower one, the single directional influence becomes bidirectional: the *one for all* type of communication is replaced by the *all for all* type (Lilleker-Jackson). Berners-Lee considers that web 2.0 does not represent a social product only, but a political force as well. In comparison with the web 1.0 defined by Tim O'Reilly, its characteristic is that this second version is aimed to establish relationships and develop a network of relationships that are not the property of any great corporation but can be employed and refreshed by all users. *Web 2.0 is a more humane manifestation of interactivity* (Barsky, E., in Lilleker-Jackson, 2008). It means discussion, establishment of an interpersonal network, personification and individualism.

Significance and collaboration are the keywords. The Hungarian International Board for Telecommunication and Computer Technology considers that, although very useful, the internet is not very smart and does not understand the meaning behind the torrent of information, and users have not learnt to handle them yet. For a computer an unlabelled article is just a pile of characters. According to the information on the CIA website dating from 2006, in Romania there are five million people who use the internet, and this figure situates us on the 36th rank on an international level.

The great number of theories concerning web 2.0 points towards the fact that its concrete significance has only started to take a shape. Due to its complexity, there has not been anyone so far to provide a definition that would cover all the aspects of the phenomenon, therefore the questions are a lot more numerous than the answers.

Balázs Szekfű thinks that an essential problem within the development of the network established in 2005-2006 is to connect the maximum number of people,

therefore developers concentrate on creating the most advanced technologies in this field. The author considers that the existence of a second generation of the network is due to the personal computer from the eighties and the appearance of the internet in the nineties. In the 21st century the internet itself means a computerized platform where life exists, the simple applications have been replaced by services, and instead of the traditional software from one's computer a person can access the net to grab the fashionable ones: a word processor program on GoogleDocs, labeling programs on StumbleUpon or del.icio.us, news on Feed-Burner, online calendar and reminder on SpongeCell or safe storage for pictures on Google Picassa.

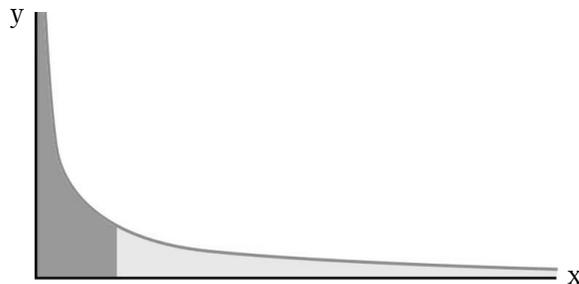
A good example of the cooperation of factors presenting the same condition is the Linux operation system which, beside its free of charge character, is continuously developed: the *open-source* permits any person to improve it or modify a certain service in the desired way, and later share it with others. The model offered by Linux is far from being the only one, as the word processing package of *Open Office* and the Mozilla browser work the same way.

Stephen Fry is somewhat more skeptic and considers that the phenomenon is far from being real and web 2.0 exist only in people's heads. Everything is just appearance, mutuality, equality, and the unlimited democratization of the online surface has no real base at all. In our days the concept of internet is a synonym to decentralization, free software and collaboration (Szekfű: 2006, 80-86).

The results, or the characteristics of the online society of our days are multiple: many people use *peer-to-peer* programs, electronic books, films and music are disseminated on torrent pages, people spend their night playing games, they keep in touch with friends, blogs are written and read, encyclopedias are used for documentation, and the enumeration can go on and on.

The Long Tail Phenomenon

An optimal explanation of the democratization of the internet could be represented by the phenomenon called *Long Tail*. In one of his articles Chris Anderson, chief editor of the Wired magazine illustrated the market strategy with a long, snake-shaped chart (Anderson: 2004).



y represents popularity (vendibility) and the obtained profit, while x marks frequency or the saturation of the market.

The chart demonstrated that, in contradiction with the usual trends (according to which popular products generate a large profit, while less fashionable products appear more rarely on the market because they produce less profit) the yellow tail gains more attention. Thus the chart is elongated and the field marked with yellow becomes wider. In reality this means that certain companies are willing to cover small market segments and to sell products that do not belong to the *mainstream* and are not very much in demand, these companies being able to make profit from product vendible in smaller quantities, at higher prices. Following the dotcom boom, the father of the Excite search program, Joe Kraus identified the marketing deficiencies of the program and discovered that the internet is a new market which, for good functioning, needs a new policy. A good example in this matter is the Amazon online company which at the moment has around 125,000 volumes, sold also in bookstores, and the figure represents 40% from the total of merchandise. The rest of the profit is obtained from the remaining 60%, represented by books purchased by customers who do not prefer *bestsellers* and popular issues but rather those volumes that cannot be bought in an average bookstore. As a famous British journalist said, the mass production of the 20th century meant a few dozen of products sold to millions of consumers. The 21st century, however, means a market of millions sold to a few dozens of people.

In order to sell their products to these few dozens of people, producers need to know the expectations of their customers. This led to the development of the producer-consumer (*prosumer*) category that knows exactly what he wants and is also able to realize it.

In practice, the youngest generation of consumers benefits of many information sources and entertainment opportunities. The online *bulletin boards* or pages that compare prices, the possibility to send an *instant message* and blogs facilitate the evaluation of offers and sales by consumers, therefore the generation of the internet refuses to act as a passive consumer and challenges producers by formulating increasingly higher expectations. The possibilities of choice, the comfort and personalization are only some of the characteristics of nowadays' internet society as consumers undertake the design, production and distribution of products (with the help of such sharing programs as BitTorrent, Kazaa, Napster „consumers” may look for everything they are interested in. Their appearance was a revolutionary novelty in the field of *sharing* music, programs, TV shows and films with others but, at the same time, it generated great problems in the field of *copy write*).

Regarding the prosumer phenomenon, Stefan Thomke writes: *Companies no longer want to understand exactly the expectations of their customers, but they equipped their clients with gears that help them to design the desired product* (Thomke-Hippel: 2002). Internet technologies assure individualized services and are capable to attend personal needs, creating thus a new type of active consumer and transforming the public and clients into participants and creators.

The democratization of the internet actually means that on the internet everyone can do whatever he wishes, he only needs to find the interest circle he can rely on.

This is a beneficial thing especially for teenagers who want to express themselves in an uncensored, democratic way, look for company and friends, and wish to give full swing to the development of their personality (Guțu: 2007,22).

In the field of internet web 2.0, applications *embrace* phenomena like *long tail* or *prosumer*: the less popular pages have an increasing right to existence and slowly all services, information and virtual applications can be accessed on the web. This is very benefic for those who want to obtain some fame, as on the internet you can find anything, anyone can express himself, the only difficulty is to separate voice from the background noise. The democracy of the internet is expressed in the field of usage as well, because it is the user's autonomy to select the preferred themes.

Blogs and the basic principles of democracy

Among others, democracy is characterized by pluralism, decentralization and the right to freedom, these features being expressed on a virtual level as well. Web 2.0 applications assure the right framework for the practice of freedom of speech, right of assembly or the freedom of opinion; therefore, beside the democratization of society we may speak of the democratization of the internet as well. The explosive increase of the content generated by users, the massive publication of blogs and the slow restructuring of the institutional media are all part of this process. Adding a comment to a blog or uploading a film can be done in a few minutes, and the possibilities are more and more diverse: with the aid of the internet even programs and personal musical preferences can be shared with others.

As a social being, man is part of several groups at the same time, and his life consists of a series of interactions and continuous processes of establishing, maintaining and modifying relationships. In the spirit of the pluralist democracy those opinions that are different from the public opinion shall be considered too. Committed supporter of radical democracy and the creator of the notion of *citizen's media*, Clemencia Rodríguez considers that citizenship shall be achieved and constructed in the framework of the quotidian (Barta: 2007). Thus, in the spirit of plurality it is no longer strange that someone serves as a news channel without being accredited or having superior studies in the concerned field. In his volume called *The World of Blog* György Bőgel writes: *Hearst would turn in his grave. Nowadays anyone can afford to have a press.* Kovach and Rosenthal consider that, owing to the globalisation and conglomeration of the media, the new technology moves from the educative journalism towards the support of a healthy democracy (Bowman–Willis: 2003, 11).

Subsidiarity represents another basic principle of democracy: all decisions are taken on the lowest level where the optimal information, the responsibility towards the taken decision and the effects of decisions can be traced best. Informality would be the essential characteristic here: the leader works just like others, as hierarchy is not based on authority. The promoted symbol would be solidarity and the achievement of the common good (Körösényi, 1994, 21-25). In the field of *mainstream* journalism this is

expressed by the difference within the organizational framework: while the traditional media is composed of profit-oriented commercial enterprises structured in a hierarchic way, their commercial model is based on advertisement and dissemination, and they prefer integrity and editing processes, the journalism characterized by participation consists of web connected communities whose members are less interested in obtaining profit but promote interaction, collaboration and equalitarianism. The hierarchy of this field is not characterized by Weber's regime based on authority, but (according to Lasswell) rather by democracy, a direct, informal approach, where the leader works just like his colleagues.

In democratic societies the press continues to be the symbolic protector of citizen and the institutional form of the expression of opinion. In certain places on the internet the press has already been used as a political instrument. In 2004 Howard Dean's election campaign became *famous* for the collection of donations through the internet, many political organizations applying to the opportunities offered by the web. However, in those states where democracy is an unknown notion, governments like that of Cuba, Iran, North Korea, China, Myanmar or Saudi Arabia use specialized software to limit the access of their citizen to certain internet pages banning mostly those with pornographic and religious content. In May 2003 there were as many as 15,000 banned sites.

In Iran blog writers are severely punished. Even though, there are many young people who assume the risk just to become an additional information source beside censored television and radio broadcasts. Accessing other pages than the Iranian ones is strictly forbidden, and people suspected of transmitting pornographic content or material related to the women's rights are punished severely (Bowman-Willis: 2003, 53). Iranian authorities have already forbidden the access to the *Blogger* and *Persianblog* servers, while in Turkey the access to *Youtube* was banned. The employees of the Pentagon were forbidden to access community pages and video sharing sites, and the argument was that visiting these pages slows the net and in case of an emergency the transmission of information may be affected.

Our world has two faces: it may, on one hand, enforce the principles of democracy but, at the same time, can abuse them violating the basic human rights. *Web 2.0* acts as a new platform where, in certain countries, individual initiatives and opinion directed from the lower level towards the higher one come into contradiction with the government control directed from the higher level towards the lower one. This collision cannot, however, remain a hidden issue of internal affairs, as publicity is represented by millions of internet users.

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