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Editorial
Web 2.0 and the end of civilisation

Summary
Discusses the rise of Web 2.0, and perceived problems with a consequent lack of identifiable authority in the communication of information.

Web 2.0 - a catch-all phrase for a rather ill-defined assortment of novel internet tools and functions - has come very much into the public eye during the first half of 2007. While there is no clearly accepted definition or explanation of exactly what Web 2,0 is, the term is usually taken to encompass a variety of sites and tools for shared information creation and updating, and for social networking and communication. These may include blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, podcasts, sites for sharing photographs and videos, sites for social interaction and social bookmarking, and virtual worlds, among other manifestations. Though the initial usage of such tools and resources was largely for social, recreation and popular culture purposes, and to large extent remains so, a professional and 'serious' dimension has emerged; Bradley (2007) and Farkas (2207) give illustrations of Web 2.0 applications in libraries and information services).

The uncritical adoption of such tools, and the assumption that they show the future of the web, of the communication of information, and indeed of society itself, has recently been encountered by negative commentary, most dramatically based on the idea that the adoption of a Web 2,0 world implies nothing less than the end of civilisation as we understand it.

Essentially these apocalyptic warnings stem from concerns about the loss of the 'expert editor' role. The whole *raison d'etre* of tools such as wikis - of which the best known open access example is Wikipedia - is that they may be rapidly and readily extended and amended by any user; similarly, the whole point of weblogs is to enable any writer to express themselves fully and rapidly. This clearly leads to issues of quality control, arguably more serious than those found previously: Cronin (2005), for example, has written in strong terms of the unacceptable content of much of the 'blogosphere'.

A more specific concern about the Web 2.0 world is the loss of identity inevitable in tools which allow anonymity and pseudonimity in their contributors. There are numerous anecdotal accounts of contributors to wikis making false claim to qualification and authority, and of authors of blogs adopting false personas, making it particularly difficult to assess the validity of the information presented. It is this loss of identifiable authority which has led some commentators to claim that this aspect of Web 2.0 so attacks the basis of the authority of any recorded information as to amount to the end of Western culture and civilisation; see, for example, see Keen (2007) and Anderson (2006). Similarly, the rise of social bookmarking and social tagging may also be interpreted as a loss of identity and authority, as subjectivity replaces an objective (albeit imperfect) knowledge organisation in the form of taxonomies, thesauri and the like.

Whether such apocalyptic visions are justified only time - though perhaps not much of it - will tell. What seems undeniable is that the Web 2,0 paradigm must greatly influence the way the which recorded information is generated and communicated, whether information specialists approve or not. Some serious research into these issues, so that the debate does not rely so much on anecdote, is urgently needed.

David Bawden

Keywords: Web 2.0; social networking; blogging

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