3 Introduction to the Social Web (Web 2.0, social media, social software)

Web 2.0 is a widely-used and wide-ranging term (in terms of interpretations), made popular by Tim O’Reilly who wrote an article on the seven features or principles of Web 2.0. To many people, Web 2.0 can mean many different things. Most agree that it can be thought of as the second phase of architecture and application development for the Web, and that the related term ‘Social Web’ describes a Web where users can meet, collaborate, and share content on social spaces via tagged items, activity streams, social networking functionality, etc. There are many popular examples that work along this collaboration and sharing meme: MySpace, del.icio.us, Digg, Flickr, Upcoming.org, Technorati, orkut, 43 Things, and the Wikipedia.

3.1 From the Web to a Social Web

Since it was founded, the Internet has been used to facilitate communication not only between computers but also between people. Usenet mailing lists and bulletin boards allowed people to connect with each other and enabled communities to form, often around topics of interest. The social networks formed via these technologies were not explicitly stated, but were implicitly defined by the interactions of the people involved. Later, technologies such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat), web forums, instant messaging, blogging, social networking services, and even MMOGs or MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online [role playing] games) have continued the trend of using the Internet (and the Web) to build communities.

The structural and syntactic web put in place in the early 90s is still much the same as what we use today: resources (web pages, files, etc.) connected by untyped hyperlinks. By untyped, we mean that there is no easy way for a computer to figure out what a link between two pages means. Beyond links, the nature of the objects described in those pages (e.g. people, places, etc.) cannot be understood by software agents. In fact, the Web was envisaged to be much more (Figure 3.1). In Tim Berners-Lee’s original outline for the Web in 1989, entitled ‘Information Management: A Proposal’\(^1\), resources are connected by links describing the type of relationships between them, e.g. ‘wrote’, ‘describes’, ‘refers to’, etc. This is a precursor to the Semantic Web which we will come back to in the next chapter.

---

\(^1\) [http://www.w3.org/History/1989/proposal.html](http://www.w3.org/History/1989/proposal.html) (URL last accessed 2009-06-09)
Over the last decade and a half, there has been a shift from just ‘existing’ or publishing on the Web to participating in a ‘read-write’ Web. There has been a change in the role of a web user from just a consumer of content to an active participant in the creation of content. For example, Wikipedia articles are written and edited by volunteers, Amazon.com uses information about what users view and purchase to recommend products to other users, and Slashdot moderation is performed by the readers.

Web 2.0\(^2\) is a widely-used and wide-ranging term (certainly in terms of interpretations) made popular by Tim O’Reilly. O’Reilly defined Web 2.0 as ‘a set of principles and practices that ties together a veritable solar system of sites that demonstrate some or all of those principles, at a varying distance from that core’. While this definition is quite vague, he defined seven features or principles of Web 2.0, to which some have added an eighth: the long tail phenomenon (i.e. many small contributors and sites outweighing the main players). Among these features, two points seems particularly important: ‘the Web as a platform’ and ‘an architecture of participation’. Actually, in spite of the 2.0 numbering, this vision is close to the original idea of Berners-Lee for the Web, i.e. that it should be a par-

\(^2\) http://tinyurl.com/7tcjz (URL last accessed 2009-06-09)