

Web 2.0; user-based content, free speech and self censorship

Web 2.0 is confusing. The term “Web 2.0” is quite misleading and as such there is no true definition for what Web 2.0 is, however what is definitive on the subject is that there is no ‘new’ technology involved and Web 2.0 is not the ‘new’ Internet. Web 2.0 is simply user-based content, information and sharing. Web 2.0 is about people. This essay is aimed at defining Web 2.0, the people, communities, user-based content and related quality, trustworthiness and appropriateness of its content with regards to free speech and self censorship.

The web has evolved, it’s quite obviously not the same as it was say 5 years ago, technology has played a side-role position ‘in’ Web 2.0; broadband, personal computer advancement, more computers in homes; the factors that have increased the population of the Internet, but that is not what Web 2.0 is about. Better use of existing technology has given birth to these new names at the forefront of Web 2.0, but what define Web 2.0 is the people – the user-based content. A comparative example for instance: new software, versions of software are released periodically with whole new features, they do brand new things, Adobe Photoshop 7.0 becomes Adobe Photoshop 8.0, the argument here is that the technology used to make these products remain the same, they’re just used to achieve new things. Web 2.0 is built on the same technology as Web 1.0, it simply does new things, it has a new purpose, and it’s about communities, people and sharing information.

The websites, the communities, the pioneers of Web 2.0, popular names such as E-Bay, MySpace, YouTube, Wikipedia, Flickr, Bloglines, Del.icio.us, these names have sculpted the general vision of Web 2.0, they make up and encompass what Web 2.0 is all about and what makes these so popular; it’s the content, it’s the user control: *“Information created, commented or rated by users, is more interesting and richer than content generated unilaterally”ⁱ*. Taking this further and quickly exploring into the psychology of this it’s easy to see why Web 2.0 is so popular, take for example one of the largest, traffic heavy and fastest growing companies in Web 2.0 at the

moment, MySpace. It's user content, it's controlled by the people who use it, it's interesting because it's user content and the following quote from The Guardian brings in the additional interesting point:

*"Everybody sitting at a computer screen is at the centre of the world. Everybody sitting at a computer screen, increasingly, wants everything to be all about them"*ⁱⁱ

Which is quite rightly stated, and MySpace, its name and its function is exactly that, it appeals to a massive audience because of this and without drawing too much spotlight in the wrong direction it's also not hard to believe that teenagers make up a fair percentage of the users in this 'MySpace' world that seems to consist of "me, me, me".

YouTube is another very successful and widely used Web 2.0 pioneer, it brings video content to the users, supplied by the users, with power over video sharing, viewing and video blogging (vlog, vlogging, vlogger), users can rate and comment the videos, it's a massive community website, again adhering to the attributes that make all Web 2.0 applications successful. There are of course issues with YouTube, much the same with all Web 2.0 communities and that's the subject of content posted by the users and whether it should be censored or regulated in any form, but what constitutes the boundaries of uploaded and shared material. Stepping away from what is politically wrong or grotesque, material or ideals that probably shouldn't be shared and publicly available, YouTube gives host to the sharing of music videos, millions of them, many a breach of copyright against the record labels that have no real control over the users uploading such content on YouTube and other similar Web 2.0 sites. Even with this breach of copyright, it may sound surprising that most copyright owners turn a blind eye to thisⁱⁱⁱ and there are now plans to have YouTube host every possible music video in existence, to be displayed free of charge^{iv}. The power of Web 2.0 is quite amazing.

Moving further on from music video piracy, lawsuits are not foreign to and in relation to Web 2.0 and the sharing of certain content; a notable incident in May of 2003 saw "the Star Wars kid" become widely known across Internet and as of the

27th November 2006 it became noted as the most viral online video ever^v. The video, a recording of Ghyslain Raza (filmed by himself), was pretending to be a Sith Lord from Star Wars and unknowingly it fell into the wrong hands and was further distributed via the Internet. Video replications and edits are still found and are very popular on Web 2.0 sites, YouTube being top of this list^{vi}. Further issues surrounding this video distribution and Web 2.0 is the concept of free speech and censoring in relation to some of the comments posted by certain users on YouTube about this video, quite shockingly comments like *“its good this fat piece of **** is getting some sort of exercise”* are allowed to be shared, various other insulting comments of this nature accompany the genuine laughs and applause this video receives, all sadly subject to the kids humiliation.

The question that is left floating around before any form of censorship can take place is: what is considered offensive and inappropriate? People are offended by different things, how can anyone dictate what should be removed and what should be left without cries of unjust censorship?^{vii} – The answer is it’s down to the users themselves, both in judgment and in posting of their own thoughts and feelings; self-censorship should take place to encourage a better community, in a perfect world anyway.

The cries of unjust censorship and the opinions of the people on this matter are voiced no better anywhere on the web than in blogs. Blogging, which is a term used to define web logging, which to the uneducated is generally a mixture of commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; or in many other cases they simply function as more personal online diaries^{viii} and they all make up a huge part of Web 2.0. Ideals and beliefs on censorship are ripe within the blogosphere, comments are frequently added by readers in response to the topics and external links are also included which loop together other blog responses to that blog, it’s a massive network of information, a social network, commonly referred to now as the blogosphere.

Self-censorship is something that any blogger has to deal with from time to time, for instance this select quote taken from Dave Polaschek on his blog post “Blogging and self censorship” deals with his views on this matter:

“Here on Dave’s Picks, I do some censoring myself. I seldom talk about ongoing relationships. I’ll mention some of my friends in passing, but for the most part, when I do offer extended commentary, it’s about what I’m thinking, and I’ll leave out names and details that might make people uncomfortable. Part of it is that I don’t want to hurt my friends inadvertently. The other part is that I was raised that there are some things you just don’t talk about.”^{ix}

This is a perfect example of how certain users of Web 2.0 take the initiative to keep things in control, the concept of free speech is still there but with this self censorship the content remains clean and does not offend anyone. This is how Web 2.0 should be. An interesting development from this concept of self censoring is an idea surrounding a system of community commenting levels which is being addressed in a “draft blogger’s code of conduct”, a collaboration of Tim O’Reilly and Jimmy Wales (founder of Wikipedia), and it is a concept in answer to the possible self-policing censorship of comments left on blogs, maintained by the community, but in the same post covering this ‘blogger code’ on Vantan.org the idea is opposed with a very just argument

“Some good may come out of this on certain sites, but not all. More often, I’d expect to see trolling and chaos rather than self-regulation and order.”^x

This is ultimately true, self regulation among communities can only work within the communities that consist of members that can self-regulate themselves, which amongst many in a community is few and far between in the online world of the Internet. The “Draft Blogger’s Code of Conduct”^{xi} which is posted on Tim O’Reilly’s website has met with much debate among the blogosphere, comments and links left in response to this topic are generally ill-receiving and there is much against any form of censoring. This draft code for blogger’s had several points on what to say

and what not so say in blogs, to take responsibility for ones own words, to ignore trolls and to take action when unfair attacking is present. 'Badge' images were created for display on sites who abided by these new rules, each used to declare what kind of commenting space the site allowed; this is the most ill received part of the blogger code, quite possibly not helped in its promotion by one being the image of a sheriffs badge; The Wild West, law and order, censorship? One comment linking off to another blog was simply titled "No Stinking Badges" and within this well written reply is the argument that it's not really a blogger's code, but more a "commenters code" and explains precisely why this will not work:

"Commenters -- ask anybody who has them -- have no code of conduct and come around precisely because there is no code to begin with. They are free to type whatever they want to into the comment box and hit submit."^{xii}

There is no need for a code of conduct, not only is it not needed, one would quite clearly never be obeyed by everyone, therefore making it obsolete anyway. It's not possible to make rules for the people that will be obeyed; the Internet simply cannot be regulated. It very simply comes around to self-regulating, self-censorship; it's down to the individual and those individuals that have control over their blogs and the comments:

"I don't need no stinking O'Reilly badges -- as much as that would make his heart swell -- because I already have my own personal little rule. It's quite clear and quite direct. It goes: COMMENTS ARE MODERATED AND MAY NOT APPEAR IMMEDIATELY. COMMENTS THAT EXCEED THE OBSCENITY OR STUPIDITY LIMITS WILL BE EITHER EDITED OR EXPUNGED."^{xiii}

Now this is all well and good but what about the large Web 2.0 sites, the information sites like Wikipedia, how can the content on such a huge website be regulated and trusted, considering its completely user-based content and seemingly impossible to check over it all, especially with the consideration that it is an encyclopaedia. Well, the truth of the matter is this: it's down to the community of people again; there are

always people that will vandal or sabotage, post un-sourced content which incorporates biased views and opinions leading to untrustworthy material, its all subject to the reliance on user-based content which is providing a vast, almost limitless amount of material, weighed against the accuracy, it relies on the good of the people to correct the information^{xiv} - the community. There are control methods in place, the locking of threads can be initialised by administrators that deem a topic complete and thus restrict the public ability to change it thereafter, is this unfair? No, it's preserving the content for the good of the community. Recent amendments are also kept, previous versions of topics can be reviewed, and changes are detailed and if necessary rolled back^{xv} - this approach of making damage easy to undo as opposed to preventing it in the first place is known as soft security and it works really well.

On the whole this method of community 'goodness' works well, the re-editing and checking of content by the users generally results in quality user-based content. In a well revealing comparison between various contents of the established encyclopaedia Britannica, matched equally next to Wikipedia there was found to be very few differences in the information provided^{xvi}, the underlying fact is that Wikipedia is generally quite a reputable source despite it being solely dependant on the good of the community.

One last reference to Wikipedia aside the accuracy of its content is that of China, back in October of 2005 access to the website was blocked completely by the government, the reason behind this related to free speech and censorship. 'Harmful' articles and sensitive material regarding China was posted on Wikipedia, which the government deemed threatening, along with other issues regarding communities forming which the government apparently had no control or awareness over, this they did not like; the result being the banning of the website.

"The Internet has emerged as a venue for people with shared interests -- or grievances -- to meet, exchange ideas and plan activities without the party's knowledge or approval."^{xvii}

There was much uproar over this, the ban left the people with the inability to remove or edit said data thus being unable to correct the worlds viewing of that information, this goes hand in hand with the loss of access to a very rich information source for the people.

“not only as a reference tool but also as a forum where people across China and the Chinese diaspora could gather, share knowledge and discuss even the most divisive subjects.”^{xviii}

This is a very extreme form of censorship and throws into light how certain user-based content can have unjust consequences if it is not self-censored properly, though in this case the self-censoring could have over-lapped the users freedom of speech (all due to the harsh governing), and in the online world of Web 2.0 free speech should be completely free. Further yet, Internet users in China with enough technical know-how (using anonymous proxy^{xix}) still managed get around the censoring and view Wikipedia anyway, a relation to this can be made with bloggers and the blogging code of conduct, just like that people oppose it, avoid it and go around it, censoring will not be embraced, that is the way the web is, that is how Web 2.0 will remain, uncensored and free because it's about the people and the user-content, we are in control.

ⁱ “My definition of Web 2.0 companies”, Tech IT Easy, Jeremy Fain’s Blog, comment by Rupert Schiessl, January 2nd 2007.

<http://jeremyfain.wordpress.com/2007/01/01/my-definition-of-web-20-companies/>

ⁱⁱ “A bigger bang”, Guardian Unlimited Technology, November 4th 2006.

<http://technology.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1940641,00.html>

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<http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20060816-7521.html>

iv "YouTube aims to show music videos" BBC News, Entertainment, August 16th 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4798133.stm>

v "Star Wars Kid is top viral video", BBC News, Entertainment, November 27th 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6187554.stm>

vi "YouTube – Star Wars Kid", YouTube, added January 15th 2006. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPPj6viiBmU>

vii "Self-censorship on the web", Vantan.org: The Daily Weblog, April 9th 2007. <http://vantan.org/archives/2007/04/selfcensorship.php>

viii "Blog", Wikipedia, May 7th 2007, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>

ix "Self censorship and blogging", Dave Polaschek, December 16th 2002, amended January 29th 2003, <http://davespicks.com/about/self-censorship.html>

x "The Daily Weblog: Self-censorship on the web", Vantan.org, April 9th 2007, <http://vantan.org/archives/2007/04/selfcensorship.php>

xi "Draft Blogger's Code of Conduct", Tim O'Reilly, April 8th 2007. http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2007/04/draft_bloggers_1.html

xii "No Stinking Badges", American Digest, April 9th 2007. <http://americandigest.org/mt-archives/006559.php>

xiii "No Stinking Badges", American Digest, April 9th 2007. <http://americandigest.org/mt-archives/006559.php>

xiv "Wiki", Wikipedia, May 10th 2007. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

xv "Wiki", Wikipedia, May 10th 2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki#Controlling_changes

^{xvi} "Internet encyclopaedias go head to head", News @ Nature.com, December 14th 2005. <http://www.nature.com/news/2005/051212/full/438900a.html>

^{xvii} "Reference Tool On Web Finds Fans, Censors", Washington Post Foreign Service, Philip P. Pan, February 20th 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/19/AR2006021901335.html>

^{xviii} "Reference Tool On Web Finds Fans, Censors", Washington Post Foreign Service, Philip P. Pan, February 20th 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/19/AR2006021901335.html>

^{xix} "Blocking of Wikipedia in mainland China", Wikipedia, April 28th 2007, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blocking_of_Wikipedia_in_mainland_China#Circumvention_of_the_block