

Chapter 88

Studying Web 2.0 Interactivity: A Research Framework and Two Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

With more than one third of the world's population being online, the Internet has increasingly become part of modern living, giving rise to popular literature that often takes a teleological and celebratory perspective, heralding the Internet and Web 2.0 specifically, as an enabler of participation, democracy, and interactivity. However, one should not take these technological affordances of Web 2.0 for granted. This article applies an interaction framework to the analysis of two Web 2.0 websites viewed as spaces where interaction goes beyond the mere consultation and selection of content, i.e., as spaces supporting the (co)creation of content and value. The authors' approach to interactivity seeks to describe websites in objective, structural terms as spaces of user, document, and website affordances. The framework also makes it possible to talk about the websites in subjective, functional terms, considering them as spaces of perceived inter-action, intra-action and outer-action affordances. Analysis finds that both websites provide numerous user, document, and website affordances that can serve as inter-action or social affordances.

INTRODUCTION

With more than one third of the world's population being online, the Internet has increasingly become part of modern living, giving rise to popular literature on the Internet that often takes a teleological and celebratory perspective (Curran, Fenton, & Freedman, 2012), heralding the

Internet, and Web 2.0 specifically, as an enabler of participation, democracy, and interactivity.

However, although Web 2.0 has become a central concept in contemporary discussions about the Internet, the actual meaning of the phrase is still subject to discussion and several authors emphasize its hyped character (Stern & Wakabayashi, 2007). In a sense, Web 2.0 can be

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considered as “the marker of a discourse about the nature and purpose of the Internet in the recent past” (Allen, 2012) through which we make sense of the web and which enables us to tell the history of the web as introducing means for articulating change and continuity.

As they afford Internet users to easily consume (read, listen, watch, download, search and buy), create (personalize and contribute), share (publish, upload), facilitate (tag, recommend, subscribe to channels and items through RSS) and communicate (send messages, post comments and chat) online (Beer, 2009; Slot & Frissen, 2007), Web 2.0 can be understood as a large-scale shift towards a participatory and collaborative version of the web. Web 2.0 supports and mutually maximizes collective intelligence and added value for each participant (Hoegg, Martignoni, Meckel, & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2006) and in contrast to web environments that use proprietary data sources (Hudson-Smith, Batty, Crooks, & Milton, 2009), users create content themselves (Gruber, 2008; Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2010). In short, we can frame Web 2.0 as a medium that creates a new degree of agency in constructing engagement with online resources and with other Internet users.

In this respect, Fenton (2012) concludes that the Internet and Web 2.0 sites are first and foremost expressive tools and should therefore be understood in terms of their potential for articulating the dynamics of political environments. Other authors that have explored the ideological meanings, and the social, political and ethical implications of Web 2.0 argue that Web 2.0 functions as a framing device (Scholz, 2008) or as a tool or framework for (peer) surveillance (Fuchs, 2012; Albrechtslund, 2008; Zimmer, 2008) contributing to the increased corporatization of online social and collaborative spaces and content (Andrejevic, 2012; Petersen, 2008). From this viewpoint, Web 2.0 does not provide an “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly, 2003) but rather an “architecture of exploitation that capitalism can benefit from” (Petersen, 2008).

Although the phrase “Web 2.0” is characterised by its conceptual vagueness, most agree that Web 2.0 sites employ notions of collective intelligence, network-enabled interactive services, and user control (Song, 2010), pointing to the importance and significance of participation and engagement through interactivity on Web 2.0 sites. However, one should not take these technological affordances of Web 2.0 for granted. Instead, one should look into the ways Web 2.0 users understand, appropriate, and experience interactivity on Web 2.0 sites (Barassi & Treré, 2012). As a contextual and holistic approach for analysing user interactions on Web 2.0 sites is missing, the goal of this article is to address this shortcoming by developing an analytical research framework based on a conceptual analysis of interactivity. Additionally, the article seeks to test the value and usefulness of this analytical framework using a qualitative, small-scale and exploratory research design targeted at the users two Web 2.0 sites.

This article is structured in four parts. First, the concept of interactivity is theoretically unpacked. Second, we suggest a framework, encompassing a descriptive vocabulary and a methodological approach for the study of Web 2.0 interactivity. Third, the developed framework is applied to two cases: the websites Flickr and deviantART. Finally the value of the proposed framework is evaluated and linked to the exploratory study of interactivity on Flickr and deviantART.

A CLOSER LOOK AT INTERACTIVITY

Interactivity is a difficult concept to grasp. The concept is often used in relation to new media and the (theoretical) discourse on new communication technologies. Scholars working in the discipline of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have been using the concept since the mid-1980s. Three important perspectives on interactivity can be detected in the literature. The first perspective focuses on the (technical) properties of media (Jen-

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