Chapter 4

Workplace Use of Web 2.0 Communication Tools and its Implications for Training of Future Communication Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Traditional instructional models in web design and web communication have, until recently, leaned towards seeing websites primarily as vehicles for information distribution from one centralized source, like a company or organization, to a mass audience. Consequently, training in web communication and design has often been limited to those types of websites. However, with the advent of phenomenon known variously as "web 2.0," or "social web" several years ago and and increasing use of web 2.0 tools in the workplace, this type of training may not be enough for future communicators and designers. This chapter investigates the extent and purposes with which web 2.0 and social media communication tools are being used in the corporate and other workplace settings. Based on this analysis, a set of recommendations for teachers, trainers, and administrators is offered.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the best-known explanation of the term "web 2.0" is the one by Tim O'Reilly, of O'Reilly Media (O'Reilly 2005). O'Reilly describes web 2.0 as a "set of principles" which, briefly described, denote the shift from the Internet as a one-way conduit of information from content writers and designers on one end to users on the other, to a more user-centered Internet. Among O'Reilly's principles are the ideas of the Internet as a "platform," users controlling "their own data," "architecture of participation," and so on (O-Reilly 2005). Practical manifestations of web 2.0 familiar to most users nowadays are blogs, wikis, social networks podcasts, and so on. All these applications make the publishing and sharing of content easier for non-experts.

Several years into the history of web 2.0, which is also variously known as the "read/write web," or the "social web," some skeptics challenge the fact of its existence, dismissing the term as "marketing hype." Hype or not, it is hard to deny that in recent years, the nature of the "Internet experience" has changed. Therefore, in this chapter, I will treat the expression "web 2.0" as a key operational term which is useful for describing the contemporary users' experience on the web.

During the web 1.0 era, users went to the Internet mainly for information. With the development of web 2.0 communication and collaboration tools, many users who used to passively find and consume information also became co-creators of that information.

During the web 1.0 era, all Internet users were, more or less, neatly divided into content creators and content consumers. The creators were typically computer programmers and other technically minded individuals who had access to expensive hardware and special skills in HTML coding. That access and those skills allowed them to create, host, and disseminate web content. The main vehicle for such content were various personal and organizational websites, usually coded in HTML, whose purpose was the publication and dissemination of information.

By early to mid-1990s, such major industry players as Yahoo! (http://www.yahoo.com), Lycos (http://lycos.com), and, later, Google (http://www.google.com), began offering web authoring and publishing tools which allowed non-experts to design and publish web sites relatively easily. Amateur web designers from the 1990s and early 2000s will remember Lycos's Angelfire, and, or recently discontinued Google's Page Creator.

In addition to being free, those services offered multitudes of Internet users an easy way to design and publish websites that combined text with images and hyperlinks. They democratized the Internet as a publishing and information exchange space, diminishing the barrier between the coding and design experts on the one hand and lay users.

These services also took part in another important change in the Internet experience. Users now did not have to code a site on a desktop computer and then upload files to a web server. Instead, they worked in the window of an Internet browser. Much of the design process boiled down to making choices from a list of templates and page layouts. Publishing a website was literally done with the push of a button. While this approach to designing web pages continues to have very significant limitations, it allowed literally millions of people to join the formerly exclusive group of Internet content creators.

The purpose of most of those amateur-made websites was distribution of information, about oneself, one's family, or one's organization. Simultaneously, Angelfire, Google's Page Creator, and other similar services facilitated the inclusion of discussion forums and other elements of interactivity into web sites. While those interactive elements did not afford the level of user participation allowed just a few years later by web 2.0 applications, their availability to the average user marked a significant shift in the Internet experience. The web was becoming not only a place where information was published. Now, users could interact with one another more easily.

Web 2.0 applications eroded the barrier between creators and consumers of the Internet further. While it is still the case that an average user is probably not capable of programming and deploying sophisticated web 2.0 social and business applications, web 2.0 made the creation and posting of multimedia content to the Internet much easier. Substantial portions of a web designer's and communicator's work have moved from the individual's desktop and into the web "cloud." Such skills as HTML and XML coding, the knowledge of software tools like Dreamweaver, Photoshop, and others, as well as principles of document and graphic design will never lose their relevance. At the same time, changes in the nature web communication may necessitate adjustments in the training of future communication professionals.

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