

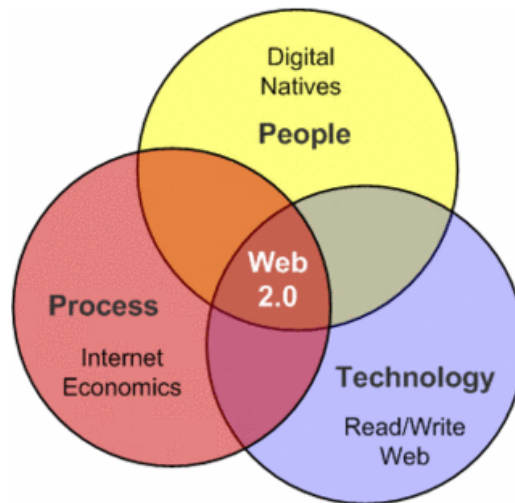
What does Web 2.0 Mean?

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Web 2.0 is creating lots of buzz at the moment, both positive and negative, and the inevitable 'dotcom' bubble comparisons have begun as the main players go into acquisition mode. I think it is too soon to be defining what is, and what isn't, Web 2.0. But I do think it's important to consider what it means and why it matters. So here's my attempt...



People: The Digital Natives

There's plenty of argument about the rise of the amateur versus the professional, and whether that's a good thing or not, as argued by Nicholas Carr in '[Web 2.0 is amoral](#)' and Lawrence Lessig in '[Amateur journalists and professional trolls](#)'. There are times when being a professional is an absolute requirement - brain surgery for starters - but in the wider world, the boundary between amateur and professional status can be very blurred. James Surowiecki's book "[The Wisdom of the Crowds](#)" makes a strong case against assuming the experts will always be right, and here is one example that I found particularly compelling, written by Gary Wolfe in the May 2005 issue of Wired Magazine (print edition, can't find the link online):

Civil engineers spent 4 years studying the deconstruction of the World Trade Center towers. Lesson learned: Disobey authority. In a connected world, ordinary people often have access to better information than officials do... According to engineers, use of elevators in the early phase of evacuation, along with the decision not to stay put, saved roughly 2,500 lives. This disobedience had nothing to do

with panic. The report documents how evacuees stopped to help the injured and assist the mobility-impaired... The people inside the towers were better informed and far more knowledgeable than emergency operators far from the scene... [They] answered their cell phones and glanced at their blackberries... News of what was happening [i.e. this was a terrorist attack, not an accident] passed by word of mouth, and fellow workers pressed hesitating colleagues to continue their exit...

Put that in your professional pipe and smoke it!

But there's another element that will influence what Web 2.0 becomes - the digital natives. In 2004, Marc Prensky wrote an article in Strategy+Business titled '[The Wisdom \(and Worth\) of Generation Tech](#)'. He identified how a generation (mostly the under 25s) that has grown up surrounded by developing technologies, such as the Internet, has also acquired new behavioural skills that will challenge and change traditional ways of working. Those fully at home in a digital environment don't talk about information overload - they crave more of the stuff.

This generation is better than any before at absorbing information and making decisions quickly, as well as at multitasking and parallel processing

They are less concerned with 'command-and-control' hierarchies and more interested in 'just doing it!', whatever 'it' may be. The companies that harness this approach will be the ones who lead the Web 2.0 world.

Process: Internet Economics

We are seeing new economic models emerging from the Internet, currently highlighted by two key trends: The era of participation and 'long tail' markets.

Plenty of people are talking about this age of participation. I first heard Tim O'Reilly talk about it in his presentation '[The Internet Paradigm](#)', and Yochai Bentler, professor of law at Yale University, identified the trend in '[The Rise of the Networked Information Economy](#)'. The '[Cluetrain Manifesto](#)' group have been talking about it for 6 years now. Like it or not (and certain 'professionals' in the media certainly don't), the Internet is bringing out properties that have always existed in people - the desire to help for non-monetary and voluntary reasons, the desire to talk, converse, argue, share... to participate. Business thought leaders are also recognising this trend, [Tom Peters](#) rants on and Charles Handy touched a nerve in his book '[The Elephant and the Flea](#)':

"...perhaps we are all naturally inclined to be fleas of one sort or another, shoved against our instincts into logical boxes by our organisations, persuaded by our schooling to elevate reason above human nature..."

The second trend we are seeing is what Chris Anderson has identified as '[The Long Tail](#)'. The Internet is riddled with power laws that have exponential growth curves. But most research has focused on getting to the top end of the curve - the law of the few. Chris Anderson instead identified the potential from not

being at the top end of the curve. For example, he spotted that the market for books not even sold in a physical book store is far larger than the market for those that are. The average Barnes & Noble store carries 130,000 book titles. More than 50 per cent of Amazon's book sales come from *outside* its top 130,000 titles.

"...with little or no sales costs, a hit and a miss are on equal footing"

The Internet has opened up markets to a far bigger range of supply *and* demand. The amateur who writes one book has access to the same shelf space as the professional author. Large scale success for the author will still depend on good ol' advertising and targeting the influentials, but that doesn't mean small can't sell. [Seth Godin](#) also supports this trend - small is the new big.

Technology: The Read/Write Web

We hear plenty of references to Web 2.0 being the read/write web, but perhaps don't pay it the attention it deserves - its too easy to get all giddy and excited about the myriad of new applications currently appearing. The concept of a read/write web represents a fundamental shift in how we use information technology applications.

[Blogs](#) and [wikis](#) are still immature technologies but they will influence the design of future content management systems and collaborative work space technologies. [AJAX](#) is introducing new interactive web applications that are challenging traditional software development methods, as described by Tim O'Reilly in '[The Internet Paradigm](#)' and Adam Bosworth in '[Intelligent Reaction](#)'. [Web Syndication](#) (RSS/Atom feeds) enable us to keep up with more sources of information without having to search for it. All of these elements will influence the way we work in the future. For the digital natives, it will be a natural progression. They are less attached to PCs and more interested in accessing information through mobile devices, when and where they need it. Traditional rich client applications, designed to run on a specific platform, will struggle to meet such demands if they don't change. The value of an application is becoming its ability to connect to, and interact with, the web. An application without a web connection becomes little more than an offline reader - sure you can author content offline, but that means you aren't *participating*. Your creations are worthless until you share them.

Whilst I don't think rich client applications are going to disappear any time soon (hey, I'm writing this article off line...), I do think we will see some significant changes in what they are used for. I also think their importance is beginning to diminish in areas where they have been leaders in the past. If these applications don't keep up with the web, they risk ending up serving niche markets. I look at the way my own working habits are starting to change. I used to use Outlook at work and home for email. But now, I find using a web-based mail application more useful for home stuff. At work, a fair chunk of the email I receive would be better suited to distribution as a news feed. Increasingly, communications that require a response have transferred over to instant messaging. I used to use Word to record information and my computer as the file store. Today, I increasingly use FrontPage or a browser to record and a web server to store... FrontPage is my rich client when I have my laptop with me, but I can also update and

synchronise content using my PDA with a wireless connection and, interestingly, Pocket Word rules my PDA for recording information - an example of a rich client application crossing platforms... (update #2: in fact, thinking about it, FrontPage and Visio are the only apps without equivalents on my PDA - there's Pocket Word, Excel, PPT, Pocket Streets, Pocket MindMap, Pocket RSS reader, PDF reader, media player, MSN messenger... even OneNote can sync to it.)

Right now, I believe we are at an inflection point for many information technologies and I think the next five years are going to introduce a lot of changes in the way we work. Plenty of people like to promote a scenario that is all doom and gloom for Microsoft and all singing and dancing for Google. I wouldn't be so quick to judge on either count. We do not yet know who will rule this Web 2.0 world, they may not even exist yet. But there are certainly plenty of new contenders joining the established players - look at the likes of [TypePad](#), [del.icio.us](#) and [37 Signals](#) for starters.

Finally...

Ultimately, it is too soon to be defining what is, or isn't, Web 2.0. It is a bit like going back in time to 1939 and asking someone from that year to define World War II. Leave the definitions to the historians. What is important today is what this stuff all means when choosing and adopting new technologies and solutions. I think a successful Web 2.0 company will be one that is able to leverage the trends outlined here - Digital Natives, Internet Economics, and the Read/Write web. Instead of trying to predict the future, let's get on with creating it!

Note: Definitions are courtesy of [Wikipedia](#). Be warned, that's the outfit Mr. Carr dismisses as amateurish and inaccurate. Personally, I use it for simple research, not to read profiles of famous people, and its not let me down yet.