

# DEFRIENDING THE WEB

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DENNIS KNOPF, 2009



## DEFRIENDING THE WEB

When Tim O'Reilly coined the term Web2.0 we all got a little crazy. Even though none of us really understood what this "upgrade" meant, we still had the feeling that the new and improved version of the Web and its endless possibilities would change everything. Time Magazine even picked "you" as the person of the year 2006:

" As "individuals" are changing the nature of the information age, [...] the creators and consumers of user-generated content are transforming art and politics and commerce, [...] they are the engaged citizens of a

new

digital democracy. " 1

This statement, and the general mood that surrounded it, was reason enough for me to want to take a closer look at the social networks, blogging platforms and content hosting sites that were the building blocks of this supposed new digital democracy.

## A VIRTUAL METROPOLIS

The philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel believed that the conditions of monetarism (value being measured with money) and anonymous social interaction prevalent in the urban environments of the "metropolis" created, amongst its inhabitants, a need to express individuality. In contrast, in the simply structured and personal environment of a small town, these expressions of individuality were unnecessary. The overly complicated patterns of the metropolis are based on rational dispassion and factual reason. The constant change of inner and external effects "with the tempo and the variety of economic, occupational, and social 2 life" challenges the citizens to develop an intellect in order to process the overwhelming amount of impressions. While citizens of small towns rely on their *gemüt* and act upon emotional sentiment,

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" the metropolitan type of man – which, of course, exists in a thousand individual variants – develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart. In this an increased awareness assumes the psychic prerogative. Metropolitan life, thus, underlies a heightened awareness and a predominance of intelligence in metropolitan man. The reaction to metropolitan phenomena is shifted to that organ which is least sensitive and quite remote from the depth of

the  
personality. " 3

Only a desensitization of perception and an unemotional view can ensure the coping with life in modern cities – its procedures are too complicated for an in-depth, case-by-case perception. With this intellectualized view of their environment, Simmel argues that people allow each other more individuality than would find acceptance among smaller networks or small towns.

One can easily look at the development of the WWW—with its lightning-fast means of global communication, its rapid commercialization in the mid-1990s and its accessibility to a huge audience – in relation to this notion of the metropolis. When the Internet, which previously was solely used by institutions, was opened to public and commercial use, global communication and information transmission became incredibly fast. The speed of email messages can't even be compared with traditional mail, which already bears the nickname "snail mail." Mailing lists, forums and chat rooms have facilitated an open exchange of ideas; tools for publishing on private web pages and blogs have made displaying personal content easy; and since so called social networks like Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, last.fm and so on have appeared, a large part of social life has begun to happen online. In an environment like this, the number of possible contacts for each person has grown far

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beyond what could be expected in a large city. Yet just like in a large city, the Internet's anonymous structures have resulted in impersonal modes of communication.

Software that allows easy publishing of content—blogs and social networks—is based on “templates.” Thanks to these standardized web sites that simply have to be filled out, users do not need to know HTML or any other web specific technology in order to let the whole world access their photos, videos, music or texts. As the act of publishing became such a cakewalk through pre-fabricated web pages, naturally the users' influence on the way their information is presented has completely vanished. Each photo on Flickr is framed in the same layout; every YouTube video fits into the same grid.

But if the Web is an advanced version of Simmel's metropolis what are users doing to stand out as individuals within the mass? A mass that is significantly bigger than the number of people one could meet in a large city?

### ESTABLISHING THE INDIVIDUAL

Within the world of highly formatted and templated social networks, one possibility for individuality is to change the appearance of one's profile page. Blogs and MySpace pages are getting “pimped” by changing small bits of their source code. This makes it possible to manipulate the layout, font sizes, color and background images (There are also tools, so-called MySpace editors that help authors with the pimping process). Users who know about these tricks (or at least about MySpace editors) seem smart and stand out from the masses, who have to rely on defaults. Users also incorporate music, images and videos into their profiles. These multiple cultural signs piled up on the page underline one's own cultural intelligence. Other platforms like YouTube allow almost no freedom for personalization. Often users can only choose from a limited set of templates. In networks that allow even less modification of the overall look

(like Flickr or StudiVZ, the German clone of Facebook), users attempt to individualize themselves by using special characters (^\_^) in their user names.

*fig. 1*  
**see page 19**

In addition to creating visual identities, users voluntarily provide a lot of personal information to reflect their personality in a text-based form. Most free services require age and sex information to sign up and most users are happy to give away information about their profession and marital status. Facebook users take part in endless rows of quizzes (e.g. IQ tests, “Pick your 5 favorite beers” or “What Star Trek character are you? The result: Data”) and answer questions about their personal interests so their profile can represent them in the best possible way.

Within these networks, one can not only set up an account and profile, but also browse through millions of other profiles. But first, in order to set oneself apart from this mass, one has to join it. What appears grotesque about this practice is that the users, who are trying to express their uniqueness and individuality, are simply contributing to a collective mass of information. The main asset of any social network, besides offering the tools for personal websites, is their database—their social pool of users.

Unlike the open source movement or Wikipedia, however, participants of social networks do not seem to follow a common noble goal, or celebrate a community spirit. The focus here lies on the individual, like the “i” in iTunes, the “my” in MySpace, the “you” in YouTube or the “we” in Wii (emphasizing the option of multiple individuals playing together).

*fig. 2*



Even the shape of the “i” reinforces this sentiment. Similar to icons used to represent the user – a neutral figure which on one hand could apply to almost anybody but on the other hand expresses personalization and individuality. The “i”, the torso with a faceless head stands for a promise of individuality and a big pool of me’s.

## PROFITING FROM THE PROFILE

Henry Ford, the car manufacturer, in inventing the assembly line, symbolizes the idea of mass production. A term that bares his name—fordism – describes the principle of mass production for an anonymous customer. Post-fordism on the other hand, (also dubbed “toyotism” since Toyota is known for introducing it) has proved to be a more successful strategy of mass production by producing cars on demand. When production depends on the sales, a company is able to lower storage costs, prevent overproduction, and quickly adapt to changes in the industry. For post-fordism to work, however, it is essential to gather information about the customer’s wishes and then be able to satisfy them.

Post-fordism has huge implications outside of the auto industry. Media firms have realized that information gathering and segmentation of audiences into homogeneous consumer groups proves highly profitable. In the case of media this process enables advertisers to target only the specific group they are interested in. Again, this model requires a reliable and detailed system of consumer feedback that provides details about personal interests and behaviors. This system has manifested itself as the ‘user profile’ in which anonymous information is derived from statistics, or consumers voluntarily provide personal information about their demographic such as age, sex, nationality, profession, and interests. As entities requiring user profiles often promise a reward, or service of some kind, tracking down personal and behavioral information is not seen as privacy invasion, but as two-way relationships between media and consumer.

Now, the social web is all about user profiles; any Web2.0 service offers the free and easy set-up of a personal profile. In his text “Audience Construction and Culture Production: Marketing Surveillance in the Digital Age” Joseph Turow describes how newspaper and magazine publishers “realized that they could make most of their profits from advertisers by charging low subscription rates to garner the huge numbers of readers advertisers wanted.”<sup>4</sup> Philip M. Napoli in his book “Audience Economics. Media Institutions and the Audience Marketplace” mentions how,

“ [I]t is widely believed that Blockbuster Video’s most valuable asset is not its facilities or video and DVD library but its database of customer demographic data and video rental histories. Such data have become increasingly vital in the Internet context [...]. As a result the media environment of the future probably will be one in which media organizations increasingly will seek ways to gather and charge for the personal data of the audiences that they attract. ”<sup>5</sup>

This data gathering is more explicit with Blockbuster’s replacements like Netflix, where customers fill their preferences into user profiles so as to have movies suggested to them. A great service, and all you have to do is to provide detailed information about who you are and what you like. Even greater is your service to them; their market research isn’t just free, you even pay for participating in it.

Unlike classic television and radio where quotas about the audience can only be roughly estimated, the Web delivers exact numbers of viewers and details about their behavior through simple technologies like click streams and page view statistics. Furthermore, the detailed information users are voluntarily entering in their profiles allows for an unprecedented ability to analyze and segment the overall audience. Especially categories like nationality, sex and age; here the user chooses from default answers, and provide answers that require no abstraction or interpreta-



tion. Of course one could always find alternative ways to determine another's sex—by looking at that user's avatar or photos, screen name and so on. And you could also argue that although providing the user's age is required for legal regulations, the user agreeing to the general terms and conditions should be enough. In addition a legal disclaimer could be used, noting that the user must be over a certain age to participate, including the typical "enter, I agree" button. But there is clearly a unique value to users providing unambiguous information about themselves, as it is required to set up a user account at any social networking or content hosting site. Of course there are always a few paranoid users who provide the wrong information on purpose, but most tend to provide at least some information that is correct (just think of the millions of Facebook users who actually provided their real names in their profiles). This concrete demographic information, combined with the personal details users insert voluntarily as a way to express their individuality, makes the social web a perfect post-fordist marketing tool.

In addition to allowing for the highest possible degree of audience segmentation, in the Web2.0 each individual user is also a potential producer of content, and a media outlet. And, thanks to the tagging of this user-generated content the massive amount of channels can be searched and dynamically organized, enabling users to shift between defined audience groups without losing track of them. That said, tagging, or folksonomy, happens in a fairly haphazard way and rarely functions across platforms. More than traditional broadcast media firms splintering their audience into narrow yet differentiated target groups, Web2.0 firms can segment their audience even further down to the smallest possible unit, the user, potentially without losing the effectiveness of their mainstream marketing strategies.

The implications of this degree of fragmentation in commerce are immense. Chris Anderson talks about "The Long Tail", a term that refers to a graph of industry statistics with a high-amplitude popularity of few products, so-called bestsellers or hits, followed by a very broad low am-

plitude popularity of niche or "underground" products. As Anderson mentions, even though the sum of The Long Tail often takes up just as much or even more than the popularity of the short head (the sum of hits), it has been ignored for a long time. Bottlenecks in distribution and costly logistics force traditional bricks-and-mortar bookstores to devote most of their shelf space to popular books since it is too expensive to waste on niche products. With virtual stores such as Amazon or iTunes, the selling power of The Long Tail has finally become lucrative and thus the logistic possibilities of the Web offer an even more concrete realization of post-fordist production and marketing strategies:

" When consumers are offered infinite choice, the true shape of demand is revealed. And it turns out to be less hit-centric than we thought. People gravitate towards niches because they satisfy narrow interests better, and in one aspect of our life or another we all have some narrow interest (whether we think of it that way or not). " <sup>6</sup>

## fig. 3

Google found a way to tap into The Long Tail with its AdSense system, an automated advertising service that places ads on websites. What really makes AdSense special is how it targets minor audience groups in the same way as consumers who view popular content. Participants agree to host small ads on their webpages and receive money every time someone clicks on the ad. Not only does Google make money through commission on advertisers' micro payments to audience sellers, they also withhold the money they owe to these sellers until they reach a total revenue of \$100 (less popular sites can take relatively several months or even years to collect as AdSense revenue of \$100). This means Google has ready stream investment money at its hands which actually belongs to people using AdSense—as much as 379 million according to their fiscal year 2006 results. <sup>7</sup>



The Long Tail is one of the factors that helped fuel the Web2.0 hype. If every individual user represents a possible target group, however, who produces all the right ads for them? Doesn't each user require an art director? The phrase "customers who bought this product also bought..." isn't quite how you would imagine the ideal advertisement to look. I truly wonder who actually clicks on Google ads. Is it the same kind of people who still buy music CDs?

An interesting aspect is the new autonomy of consumers being able to decide what, where and especially when they want to consume content, instead of depending for instance on the broadcasting schedule of a TV network. The Web2.0 even took on demand production to a new level with the printing of custom requested content such as T-shirts by CafePress or Spreadshirt – that's as post-fordist as it gets. And again, these phenomena such as the lucrative Long Tail require reliable sources for consumer feedback, which remains the main characteristic of postmodern production strategies.

So, all this makes the Web seem less about establishing a "new digital democracy," and more about converting the general desire of people to express their uniqueness and personal information online into an intelligent marketing system. Maybe instead of "You" Time Magazine's person of the year 2006 should have been "Them"!

This more insidious side of Web2.0 is further illustrated by the censorship scandal that plagued Flickr in the summer of 2007. Through their 'Terms of Service' Flickr prohibited users in Germany, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea from viewing images that had not been explicitly flagged as "safe." Not only did Flickr authorities not announce these grave changes, but neither did they give any adequate reason for them—upsetting their community of users, many of whom had paid for a premium membership, a "pro account." A simple solution could have been to consider using the pro users' credit card information as a proof of age, since 18 is the required age to hold a credit card in Germany. Instead, Flickr contin-

ued to ignore the problem and even censored its users' protest, removing images that displayed slogans like "Think Flickr, Think!" and "Against Censorship." This type of action clearly shows that the aim of such sites is to service corporate interest first, and users second, even though in the end it is the users who give such services their value!

## WALLED GARDENS

The self-referential character of the typical Web2.0 service is also revealing of the darker side. While folksonomy should provide the user with greater search and cross-referencing abilities, this potential is hindered by only being provided within a particular system. For example you wouldn't get a video clip on YouTube as a result of searching with a certain keyword on Flickr. This reflects a strong interest in tying the user to single services, what online media firms refer to as creating "walled gardens" <sup>8</sup> in order to keep users navigating within their range of control. Such online environments like AOL, Google and Yahoo! offer multiple services like information and news, communication, entertainment, and commerce, as well as the customizable presentation of that content.

## *fig. 4*

Again, the user needs a profile for this personal customization, which is of course, presented as a service. These environments are supposed to make the user feel comfortable with the information, displayed according to their own personal interests and with exclusive services offered for free. The broader the offerings of such services, the more information can be derived from its users' behavior. If you log into your Google mail client, you're automatically logged in to every other Google service, such as Blogger or YouTube. In addition, a history of your regular Google searches can be archived in order to create intelligent statistics of related interests. Only one login is required for all offered services, hoping at some point the consumer will be too lazy to remember several logins of

different providers and thus stick to one ("password fatigue"). Facebook has found a new way to expand its walled garden with the single sign-on service Facebook Connect, where users can enable external sites to draw information from their Facebook profile and vice versa:

" Facebook users represent themselves with their real names and real identities. With Facebook Connect, users can bring their real identity information with them wherever they go on the Web, including: basic profile information, profile picture, name, friends, photos, events, groups, and more. " 9

This means that the walls of the walled garden are dynamic and the range of "data about audience members' interests and movements" is becoming much broader. In other words,

" [s]uch customization allows the site to cultivate a relationship with its audience and to develop data about audience members' interests and movements that it can use for targeting ads. " 10

This tremendous amount of voluntarily provided and fully indexable personal information is unparalleled in history.

The importance of such walled gardens is clearly illustrated through the recent actions of the larger media outlets. It has almost become a sport to establish a start-up featuring some useful or attractive service, generate some buzz making it popular quickly while gathering as much valuable data about its users as possible, and then sell it and its user data off to a big media mogul. In 2006, after having already bought Blogger, Google bought YouTube (for \$1.65 billion) despite the fact that they already had their own video hosting service, Google Video. Likewise Yahoo! bought Flickr and the bookmarking tool Del.icio.us (each for a rumored \$30-35 million) in 2005, CBS bought Last.fm for \$280 million in

2007, and mega-media conglomerate News Corp bought MySpace for an estimated \$580 million in 2005. Trying not to miss an opportunity or be outperformed by their competitors' range of offerings, the big media firms are competing to invest and speculate in the right services, overbidding each other with vertiginous prices of acquisition. Some critics claim that this trend helped lead to the current economic bubble as the money paid in such deals exceeds the actual value of those service sites by far. Others point out the fact that such dazzling amounts of money represent an exception, and that usually acquisitions achieve much less. But the question still remains, all of these services are "free," so what did they really buy?

### TEMPLATES AS DIRECTIVES

As mentioned earlier, social networks are based on standards such as templates for publishing user-generated content. Such standards can also tell us a lot about how these services want the user to behave within their systems.

YouTube for instance is a service for viewing and publishing video; its format highlights the video frame and suggestions for similar or relevant content. The description area for videos (like date and permalink url) is relatively small and almost unnoticeable, placed in the "boring" area top right of the page. The description is often abbreviated and the user has to click on "more information" to view the full text.

## fig. 5

What is more noticeable than the author's description is other users' comments. YouTube's success is based on the viral nature of its users' videos. By highlighting the community's reactions rather than the authors' statements, YouTube is stressing the role of the viewer in this process. It clearly shows how essential and precious user participation is. If sim-



ply clicking on a Google ad means real money in the model of AdSense, imagine what leaving a comment or rating material on YouTube means. This assumption explains the tiny space designated to the author's descriptive text: it is of no value for providing feedback, and therefore allotting would mean giving away useful surface. If one is too lazy to comment the development of the five rating stars is used to lure the more reluctant user into participating in this system of feedback. It doesn't even matter how a video is rated, just the fact that it is. "Awesome!" or "poor" confirms that "I have seen this video and paid attention to it".

## fig. 6

In other words, the template also reflects the way users are supposed to consume content: keeping them watching videos, jumping from one to the next. Their feedback works as evaluation, but more importantly, a way to keep them in the system – a system that relies on the presumed laziness of the consumer. What matters most is not the user communicating a deeper understanding of the content, but their emotional reaction to it. This makes video much more appealing than text:

" Reading is a process which presumes a substantial intellectual activity and isn't learnable offhand. Essential is the direct ability to associate what is read with stored knowledge. Television, however, requires no further abilities besides language. With a minimum of mental activity a maximum of emotional reaction reaction can be

achieved. " <sup>11</sup>

Another effect of such standardized templates is that the form of presentation becomes indifferent. Allowing only a limited amount of customization (and costumization), often none at all, gives the illusion that the focus is on the content provided by the user. As was mentioned before,

all Flickr pages and YouTube pages look the same, only the pictures/videos submitted by the users change (the only exceptions are advertisements; some sponsored content have additional banners). This focus on the user implies a strategy called "immediacy," described by David Bolter and Richard Grusin in "Remediation: Understanding New Media." Immediacy describes a strategy of making the viewer forget the presence of a medium and instead feel as if the represented objects are actually present. The medium is supposed to become invisible just like the glass window that is being looked through. <sup>12</sup>

In the case of Flickr, the template is considered to be neutral both functionally and aesthetically – a point of view which is to be questioned. Not only does their standardized format influence perception (photos being down-scaled for a better preview images), but so does the side bar information: how many times was a picture viewed? How many people call it a favorite? Are there any comments and did it cause an interesting discussion? These are essential details that have come to define our perception of a photograph, which means the template itself (no matter how neutral) is far more than an invisible window to content. Another crack in the window is the fact that Flickr also names the type and brand of the camera a photograph was taken with. When one clicks on the camera name a short list of item specifications, its price and a link to Yahoo! Shopping—an ideal example of how Yahoo! directly benefits from bringing Flickr into its walled garden. The neutral reputation of the template

## fig. 7

makes it a mighty tool for credible advertisement: among all other brand names, Nikon was the only one with its logo being displayed on Flickr. But I guess this was a bit too obvious; the logo disappeared in order to prevent the interface from losing its credibility as a neutral medium.

In Facebook many applications place ads that subtly offer products for



your mobile phone, or food to eat while updating your profile, deliberately trying to take advantage of the above-mentioned reputation.

The use of templates highlights an important dividing of competencies. While the user is responsible for providing content, Flickr or Facebook is, in this case, responsible for the presentation. The division allows these services to expand their functions without boundaries, while the user (who provides the content) is still dependent on directives and boundaries created by the service. She/he probably doesn't even notice the transfer of the competence when deciding on the form of presentation.

### NOTHING COMES FOR FREE

I feel that a general understanding that the creation of free social networks is not simply about connecting people has become quite obvious today. On the other hand, I also feel that the media conglomerates' ability to actually realize all of the marketing possibilities of Web2.0 have been generally over-estimated. Web services not directly connected to selling goods have been suffering serious losses; Facebook doesn't make any money, not to mention MySpace and many others. If thanks to the sophisticated targeting of ads I was to buy two packs of Skittles instead of one, would that really pay the rent for all the server farms? For right now the user information itself seems more valuable than what could be done with it. So why keep the structures if nobody really benefits from them? It's like the only true winner is Google, because they have somehow managed to put a thin layer on top of everything and you basically have to pass through it if you want to do anything online. They made a gazillion dollars thanks to a technical infrastructure the Stasi only dreamed of. I doubt there's any other company able to take advantage from its gathered user information like Google is...

A conclusion two years ago might have been that the users should become aware of their position and demand the right to co-determine the ways the Web2.0 tools work. Recently users have managed to force

Facebook to retract from changes about copyright in its terms of service, which may indicate an important step into this direction. Today I'm curious how to put "social" back into the Web so that everyone doesn't feel exploited with every click. "Invite friend," and "add as a friend" – why can't the network be our friend!?! Google just introduced a preview to Wave which might provide alternative ways of communicating and sharing content outside social network and media hosting services. Wave will not necessarily be part of Google's infrastructure and could be hosted on anybody's serv-<sup>13</sup>er. Similarly, Opera just presented Unite, which promises to put "the power of a Web server in your brows-<sup>14</sup>er." Theoretically this would enable users to create their own social network service by connecting their home computers.

However, it is still early to predict how, or if, those two represent a change in "the landscape of the web." I'll be careful writing about something that just came out a week ago, so that by the time you read this I don't sound like somebody still hooked on Second Life. Also, why should we expect any change in the attitudes of the big media companies after they've been ripping us off for years? What should make us believe they are cool all of the sudden? Wave and Unite both try to give the user as much control as possible but will still keep the "protocol" under their own controls.

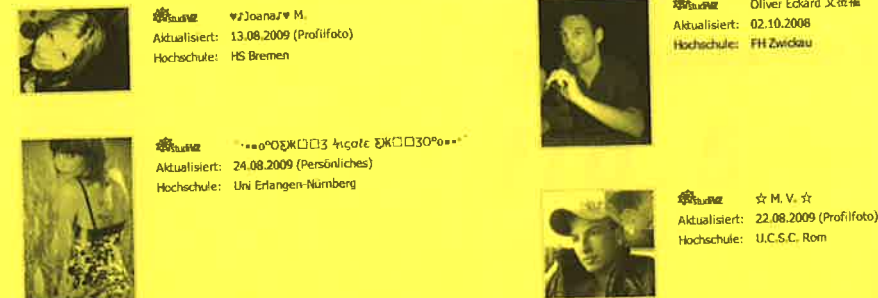
Let me finish with a car-metaphor: just because Google might finally let you sit in front doesn't automatically mean you're the driver! How come instead of everyone driving their own Toyota we're all still sitting inside the same motherfucking school bus? Post-ford me this.



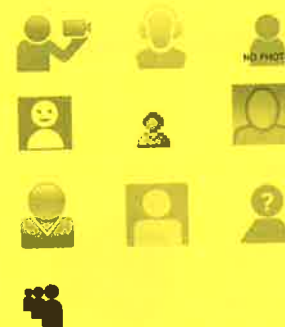
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## FIGURES / ABBILDUNGEN

*fig. 1*

Examples of profile names with special characters on studivz.de

*fig. 2*

Default user icons as found on youtube.com, last.fm, chess.com, usatoday.com, wikipedia.org, livejournal.com, Skype, Garageband, multiply.com, and myspace.com. Large collection can be found at <http://www.marketing.com/journal/?p=3098>