

What is Web 2.0? How Web 2.0 Is Defining Society

By Daniel Nations, About.com Guide

What is Web 2.0? It is a question with many different answers. There is no clear definition of web 2.0, and like many concepts, it has taken on a life of its own. But one thing is clear: Web 2.0 marks a fundamental change in how we use the Internet.

Web 2.0 is the move toward a more social, collaborative, interactive and responsive web. It is a change in the philosophy of web companies and web developers, but more than that, Web 2.0 is a change in the philosophy of society as a whole.

Web 2.0 marks a change in us as a society as well as the Internet as a technology. In the early days of the web, we used it as a tool. Today, we aren't just using the Internet as a tool -- we are becoming a part of it.

What is Web 2.0? It is the process of putting us into the web.

Web 2.0 is a Social Web

The idea of human society merging with a network of computers might sound like the bad plot out of a pulp science fiction novel, but it is a fair description of what is happening in our society today.

Not only are we increasing our usage of the Internet -- from how much time we spend on it at home to how we are increasingly carrying around a version of it in our pocket -- but we are changing the way we interact with it.

This has led us to a social web where we aren't just getting information dumped to us from a computer, but we are reaching out to connect with other people to hear what they have to say on a subject.

We do this in the form of social media sites like blogs (Techcrunch, Mashable), social networks (MySpace, Flixster), social news (Digg, Propeller) and wikis (Wikipedia, Wikia). The common theme of each of these websites is human interaction. On blogs, we post comments. On social networks, we make friends. On social news, we vote for articles. And, on wikis, we share information.

What is Web 2.0? It is people connecting with other people.

Web 2.0 is an Interactive Internet

These Web 2.0 ideas of bringing the power of people into the Internet wouldn't be possible without the technology to support it. For the collective knowledge of people to be harnessed, websites must be easy enough to use that they don't stand in the way of people using the Internet to share their knowledge.

So, while Web 2.0 is about creating a social web, it is also about creating a more interactive and responsive web. It is in this way that methodologies such as AJAX become central to the idea of Web 2.0. AJAX, which stands for Asynchronous Javascript And XML, allows websites to communicate with the browser behind the scenes and without human interaction. This means you don't have to click on something for the web page to do something.

It sounds simple, but it is not something that was possible until the last few years. And what it means is that websites can be more responsive -- more like desktop applications -- which means that they are easier to use.

This allows websites to harness the collective power of people because the more difficult a website is to use, the less people that are willing to use it. So, to truly harness that collective power, websites must be designed to be as simple as possible so as not to get in the way of people sharing information.

What is Web 2.0? It is an easier Internet.

What is Web 2.0? Putting It All Together

Web 2.0 ideas have taken on a life of their own. They have taken people and put them on the web, and the idea of a social web has transformed the way we think and the way we do business.

The idea of sharing information is being valued as much as the idea of proprietary information. Open source, which has been around for decades, is becoming a significant factor. And the web link is becoming a form of currency.

This is Web 2.0.

Special Report: Social Media's Impact on SEO, Trends to Guide an Integrated Strategy

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Summary: Social media exerts a growing influence on search engine results pages, and marketers who have integrated social media in their SEO strategies are already seeing the benefits. Early movers are attracting more inbound links and claiming more page-one real estate.

Social media generates reams of online content, and search engines are indexing more and more of it. But this explosion of content poses a challenge for search marketers: How do you optimize content you only partially control? The answer is not to try to control social media, but rather to develop a strategy that takes advantage of the SEO benefits inherent in that content.

Many marketers are already seeing the power of integrating their SEO and social media marketing strategies:

- 69% of marketers using social media score its effectiveness at improving search engine rankings at three or higher on a scale of one-to-five, according to MarketingSherpa's 2010 Social Media Marketing Benchmark Report.
- Marketers also are successfully using social media for targeted search goals. Below are the percentages of marketers who say social media is somewhat or very effective at achieving specific SEO objectives:
 - Improving search rankings – 91%
 - Increasing traffic from targeted keywords – 90%
 - Expanding content shown in universal search results – 89%
 - Improving the ROI from search programs – 80%
 - Generating more qualified leads – 78%

Trend #1. A solid social strategy must come first

It's important not to put the search cart in front of the social media horse. Developing a clear social media marketing strategy has to come first.

Setting up brand profiles on social networks, adding a forum to your website, starting a company blog -- they're all tactics designed to better connect your brand with your audience. Your primary goals in these channels must be to provide great content, interact with your audience and build relationships.

Once you have an established strategy, you can develop a range of secondary goals, such as improving website traffic or brand sentiment. Incorporating a natural search strategy should be among those goals.

Trend #2. Search engines are increasingly indexing social content

Google and Bing have recently added social data to their search packages, with video, images, comments and profiles that originate on social media sites showing up in search results. Bing has a Twitter search feature, and Google has added content from blogs, Twitter updates and Facebook fan pages to some search results and in a separate "updates" search feature.

Marketers with well designed, keyword optimized and updated profiles on networks such as Facebook and Twitter are finding those profiles listed for searches on their general brand names -- giving them more ownership of the valuable first results page.

Trend #3. Social media builds inbound links

A key tenet of social media marketing is to provide value, often through great content and interaction. Audiences that receive good content will often link to it, and those links can dramatically improve a site's natural search performance.

"Our entire interest from a search perspective is almost exclusively on the power of social for link building, which is such a critical part of search performance," says Dan Roberts, Senior SEO Strategies and Analyst, Hearst Digital Media.

Roberts' team found that repurposing content for social news websites such as Digg and reddit can generate a tremendous number of inbound links.

His team -- and several others we spoke with -- also notice content highlighted in social networks attracts more attention from audiences, and generates inbound links when people grab the content and share on their own blogs, websites and other locations.

Trend #4. Search and social data complement each other

Many of the tools used to monitor social media conversations are keyword driven. Search engine marketing is also keyword driven -- and the two channels can benefit from one another's data.

For example, your SEO keyword research can identify keywords and phrases to use in social media channels to attract more visitor traffic to that content, and to help that content rank well.