Junkies Like Us

How the Social Web Influences
Our Understanding Of Privacy

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Introduction

With Web 2.0 becoming increasingly popular, people tend to make more and more personal information available on the Internet: in social networks, blogs, chats and wikis. The younger generation especially seems to enjoy social networks and gives information about their lifestyle away freely. Have we, or will we, become Web junkies who deliberately put more or less their entire lives online?

Looking at the material that people put online, it's easy to be torn between two positions:

- On the one hand, there's the concept of online communities, the idea of a democratic Web, the perspective of a more open society, and the fun that comes from actively participating in today's most popular medium.

- On the other hand, there's the unpleasant prospect of endless personalised advertising, the possible danger that virtually anyone can track you down and collect arbitrary information about you, and the possibility that all our concerns for privacy might vanish one day.

So is the Social Web a good thing or a bad?

This focus group set out to discuss this question. We first analysed the benefits and risks involved in the Social Web and then moved on to explore possible strategies and personal practices for handling the challenges. The following photograph shows the session output that was produced.

Evaluation

Benefits There was consensus among the focus group participants that there is value in the Social Web and that it makes options available that weren't available before. The following table summarises the benefits of the Social Web that were identified during the session.

Area	*Benefit*
Access to information and services	• gain access to information (event announcements, etc.) through web sites, blogs, etc. • gain access to services (shopping, banking, printing services)
Publishing general information	• share / publish opinions and recommendations (for books, music, movies, restaurants) • share / publish photos • tag information with keywords • rate published material
Publishing personal information	• build an information repository (bookmarks, etc.) • share / publish personal status / location • share / publish personal photos

Community building	• stay in touch
	• build a community of practice
	• build a niche community
Culture	• satisfy your curiosity
	• build collective intelligence
	• add diversity to the web
	• improve free speech in totalitarian countries / repressive societies

Borderline Properties

In addition, the focus groups participants identified a few characteristics of the Social Web that they were reluctant to classify as benefits, although these characteristics aren't necessarily negative either. They were tentatively named 'borderline properties'. The following table summarises these 'borderline properties' — things that can be regarded as positive or negative, depending on perspective.

Area	*Benefit*
Information transparency	• employer checking out a job candidate's personal data
	• candidate putting material online to improve job chances
	• easier investigation into crime, etc.

Risks

Just as there was no doubt about the Social Web offering benefits, there was no doubt about the existence of risks either. Participants' opinions varied regarding how severe the specific risks are, but it was clear from the discussion that awareness of these risks is a precondition for using the Social Web safely and successfully. The following table summarises the risks that were identified.

Area	*Risk*
Information overload	• a flood of useless information (requires effective filters)
	• relative importance of search engines and information portals ("if you can't find it, it doesn't exist")
Lack of reliability	• amateurisation (everybody acts as a journalist)
	• subjective information is confused with facts
	• intentional / unintentional misinformation

Lack of authority	• unclear copyrights • plagiarism • derivative work (users who copy from different sources and publish under their own name)
Lack of awareness	• information is less protected than users think • illusion of anonymity
Data misuse	• user monitoring (without the user knowing) • cross-linking (information about a user being collected from different sources) • personal data (etc. addresses, profile, personal preferences) being sold to third parties (etc. for personalised advertising)
User misbehaviour	• open doors for slander without legal redress • vandalism / personal threats (especially when anonymous)
Time	• published material is volatile • no information revocation (once published, information cannot be deleted)
Culture	• communication stress (pressure to be always online) • exhibitionism • growing disregard of privacy (pressure to put private information online)

Strategies and Practices

The second half of the focus group was devoted to a discussion of possible strategies for handling the challenges imposed on us by the Social Web. The discussion was somewhat controversial, but anyway we were able to come up with a list of strategies, or personal practices, that were widely regarded as useful.

Some of the strategies may seem slightly contradictory at first (especially the first two in the following table), but in fact they aren't. They aim to resolve the tension built up by the Social Web, its benefits and risks, and their combination should constitute a sensible approach to using the Social Web.

The following table lists these strategies formulated as prototypical patterns.

In a way, others expect you to put information online and if you don't, then that will give a poor impression of you, therefore: Tell the world what you want the world to know. Put material online if you're sure it represents you well.
Once you've published something, everyone can (in principle) read it and you can't delete it either, therefore: Apply selective foresight. Publish material only if it's ok with you if the world finds out about it.
Sharing (with a community) and publishing (for everyone to see) may not be the same thing, but information can leak, therefore: Share information only if it's generally ok should the information get published.
Web 2.0 is full of unreliable sources, therefore: Question your sources. Watch out for opinions dressed as facts. Look up multiple references.
Some parts of Web 2.0 are more reliable than others, some are perhaps dangerous. Smaller (more specific) communities are often more trustworthy, therefore: Build a mental map of the Web and identify areas of trust. Find out about the people behind the scenery (owners of a social site etc.).
Some sites respect your privacy more than others. Some are quite ok with respect to privacy, while others have made selling your personal data a part of their business model, therefore: Favour sites with an opt-in policy (where by default, personal information may not be passed to third parties) over sites with an opt-out policy (where users must actively deselect the dissemination of their data).
More and more stuff is put online and it's easy to lose track, therefore: Reflect regularly about your sharing habits. Google yourself regularly.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 is a pretty cool place. All focus groups participants said they used it to some extent, although there are clear limits to what we would put online and to what online platforms we'd use for sharing information with others.

But it's not just us that matters. Almost all participants agreed that, if they were 15 years younger, they'd probably use the Social Web more. Perhaps much more. It's safe to assume that there are (younger) people out there who use the Social Web quite extensively, largely oblivious to the existing risks. We therefore felt it was important to name these risks and to think of ways to avoid them.

The idea is not to avoid the Social Web. The idea should to embrace it, and at the same time to be aware of its technological background, its dangers and its cultural implications. Hopefully the strategies developed in this focus group can contribute to this goal.

Acknowledgements

Suggested Reading

[Anderson 2006]

Chris Anderson. *The Long Tail - Why The Future of Business Is Selling Less Of More.* Hyperion, 2006.

A book that explains how the Internet has helped niche markets to come to fruition. Not primarily about the Social Web, but significant anyway.

[Berners-Lee 2008]

Tim Berners-Lee. *Questions & Answers.* BBC News, 2008-Mar-17.

An interview with the founder of the Web who argues against net tracking.

[Doctorow 2007]

Cory Doctorow. *Little Brother.* "www.craphound.com/littlebrother/", 2007.

A novel about a teenage hacker's quest against omnipresent surveillance.

[Hodgkinson 2008]

Tom Hodgkinson. *With Friends Like These...* The Guardian, 2008-Jan-18.

A newspaper artcile that details reservations about a popular Social Web site.

[Shirky 2008]

Clay Shirky. *Here Comes Everybody - The Power of Organizing Without Organizations.* Penguin, 2008.

A book about the Social Web and its implications on our society. An in-depth analysis of what is described as one the most revolutionary developments of our time.