

User Generation

Web 2.0 signals a communications shift that can't be ignored

Web 2.0 might sound like tech jargon or just another buzzword, but it's more than that--it's a paradigm shift in communications that is greatly affecting education. This article defines the term and offers some background, describes how it relates to technology, outlines how and why Web 2.0 affects education, and offers a detailed description of the new mix of marketing and communications channels campuses should consider as part of a strategic communications plan. A sidebar, "Steps to You 2.0," outlines practical recommendations to get advancement/marketing professionals up to speed with Web 2.0. A complementary article, "Hiding in Plain Sight," explores effective crisis communications in a Web 2.0 world.

By Karine Joly

If you think you don't know what Web 2.0 is, think again. Chances are you have probably experienced it firsthand. Or, if you read Time magazine's 2006 Person of the Year issue, you pretty much have the gist of what Web 2.0 is all about. In his article, "You—Yes, You—Are Time's Person of the Year," author Lev Grossman declares that the millions of users creating and publishing content on the Web influenced the news the most last year. He asks, "Who has that time and that energy and that passion" to make their own movies or write restaurant reviews online? The answer, he says, is "you." And "you" also deserve this honor for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, and for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game.

User-generated content is at the heart of Web 2.0. Technology book publisher O'Reilly Media first coined the term in 2004 as a name for a series of its conferences, and since then there has been a lot of buzz—and confusion—around it. Many definitions have been floating around for the past three years, but the popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia—an integral part of the Web 2.0 phenomenon—offers a comprehensive definition patiently crafted by thousands of its dedicated volunteer editors. It says that Web 2.0 "refers to a perceived or proposed second generation of Internet-based services—such as social networking sites, wikis, communication tools, and folksonomies—that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users."

For there to be a 2.0 version, there had to be a 1.0 version. Web 1.0 was all about visiting and reading Web sites. There was some interactivity via online forums and chats. Publishing content on the Web required a lot of work and effort. It was possible, but it wasn't easy or fast. Updating was painful. As Stanford University Law Professor Lawrence Lessig put it on his blog (www.lessig.org/blog) and in a December 2006 Financial Times article, Web 1.0

was the “read-only” Web. With the advent of Web 2.0, the age of the read/write Web has begun. Anyone with a computer, a browser, and an Internet connection can create, publish, and promote text, audio, or video content potentially reaching millions of people—and traditional influencers.

Although the term is already somewhat used and abused, its importance should not be overlooked. Web 2.0 defines a true paradigm shift in communication that is already having a tremendous impact on the way institutions handle public relations and marketing to target audiences.

What’s tech got to do with it?

Although it might be difficult to believe, Web 2.0 is really not about technology. It has everything to do with communication, specifically a new communications approach and a new media mix.

In 1964, Herbert Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian professor of English literature and a communications theorist, wrote *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. In this book, he developed the theory that media have an impact on society beyond the content they deliver, and he coined the famous and sometimes overused phrase, “the medium is the message.”

Traditional media such as newspapers, radio, or TV can deeply transform messages. With the rise of Web 2.0-driven social media, the traditional communication schema—a message crafted by an organization and delivered via a set number of identified media channels to target audiences—has become obsolete. Today, the conversation is the message.

With user-generated media, target audience members can create, publish, and promote their own messages about a particular topic or issue. Instead of a few message sources and distribution channels to choose from, virtually hundreds now cohabit and compete.

How did this happen?

Although this communications paradigm shift isn’t really about technology, technology played a major role in its making. Tools based on user-friendly, open-source, and no- or very low-cost technology have considerably reduced, if not removed, the traditional barriers of entry to content publishing such as money, time, and effort. The love-love relationship that search engines have developed with fresh content has also helped fuel this media revolution—Google indexing algorithms are known to favor content published on blog and wiki platforms. Once people have found something they’re interested in, they can subscribe and receive updates via Really Simple Syndication or e-mail, both accessible and low-cost distribution channels. In this age of Web 2.0, what makes the biggest difference isn’t your promotion budget, but the quality of your content.

Forefront of the (r)evolution

Based on audience demographics alone, education institutions will likely feel the impact of Web 2.0 more than most. Whether they're called Millennials or Net Geners, the current—and future—generation of college students has been raised in a technology-driven world and grew up with the Internet at its fingertips. They don't marvel at or appreciate changes in technology as much as they expect and demand such advances.

Institutions also have multiple audiences—current and prospective students, parents, donors, friends, and faculty and staff members—each eager to participate in a communications process in its own way. Joe Hice, associate vice president for communications and marketing at the University of Florida, explains that the members of an institution's target audiences are all passionate users, and passion is the best motivator behind user-generated content.

Web 2.0 signals many changes for education communications and marketing efforts, but the greatest and perhaps most difficult to accept is the end of the controlled message. While traditional news outlets have already started to notice the media revolution in progress, it will probably take more time for most institutions to acknowledge and accept it. Even if the end of the controlled message isn't all that apparent, it's already there: A few (or many) members of your target audiences have seized the power to convince their peers, traditional influencers, and the world with the help of Web 2.0. The new tools of the trade are not just reserved for professionals—media or PR pros—any more. Get in the mix

Web 2.0 offers a new mix of marketing and communications channels that institutions should study and consider as part of a strategic communications plan. Consider the following, some of which might already be familiar and in use on campus.

Wikipedia. As described earlier, Wikipedia (wikipedia.org) is a popular online encyclopedia compiled and edited by thousands of volunteers around the world. It is composed of more than 5 million articles in dozens of languages, 1.3 million of which are in English. Wikipedia is supported by a software application called wiki, a Hawaiian word meaning “quick,” that lets visitors add, remove, or edit its content. Wikis are, in essence, the best examples of the read/write Web.

Wikipedia ranks among the top 20 most visited Web sites on a regular basis. Students use it a lot; so do journalists and most bloggers. The WikiProject Universities (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:WikiProject_Universities) has created a template for articles about colleges and universities. Several institutions, such as the University of California system, have extended articles,

complete with photos and lists of quick facts about the campus. As long as the community rules are respected, institution officials and others are welcome to take part in the editing and updating process of articles about their campus.

Really Simple Syndication. According to Wikipedia, "RSS is a family of Web feed formats, used to publish frequently updated digital content, such as blogs, newsfeeds, or podcasts." RSS provides an easy way for users to receive updates from Web sites in an RSS reader or aggregator as soon as they are published. More and more institutions, such as Duke University and the University of Utah, extensively rely on it to distribute and customize their news offerings.

Blogs. The use of blogs, short for "Weblog," might have been popularized by online diarists, but there's definitely much more to blogging than keeping a personal journal. Some blogs about politics or technology have several millions of readers. According to Technorati, a blog search engine, 50 million blogs are indexed and a total of 1.6 million posts are published daily. In 2005, the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 39 percent of adult Internet users and 38 percent of teens read blogs regularly. A 2005 study by Euro RSCG Magnet and Columbia University reported that 51 percent of mainstream media journalists are also blog readers.

Blogs have already started to and will continue to play a major role in the way institutions handle public relations and communications and marketing efforts. Many institutions have launched admissions office-sponsored student blogs, but Ball State University's Real Life initiative (bsu.edu/reallife) has become a textbook case for campus blogging. Started in fall 2005, these blogs have had positive results and generated buzz among prospective and admitted students, their parents, and the higher education community. At the other end of the PR spectrum, the University of Missouri-Rolla started UMR Visions (visions.umar.edu), a blog about campus research. The institution tried to promote this project via traditional press releases, but the media coverage it received resulted from the blog.

Podcasts. Podcasts are series of audio or video programs delivered over the Internet via a publish-and-subscribe model. According to the November 2006 Pew Internet & American Life Data Project Memo about podcasting, 12 percent of Internet users have downloaded a podcast compared to 7 percent earlier last year.

Several institutions have launched podcasting initiatives as part of their student recruiting efforts or alumni relations programs. Examples of campuses using podcasts for other purposes include Mansfield University, which produces a podcasting series about college life (podcast.mansfield.edu), and the University of Florida, which has adopted a podcasting strategy focused on news by

adapting content already created for other venues (news.ufl.edu/audio).

Flickr. Flickr (flickr.com) is a free online photo management and sharing Web site. Anyone with an account can upload, tag—assign descriptive keywords—and share photos with friends or with the world. Flickr counts more than 4.5 million registered users and 17 million unique visitors per month. The Web site hosts nearly 230 million photos.

Current students widely use flickr to share photos taken at parties or other social activities, along with regular shots of their campuses. It's also used as a giant real-time and unfiltered college viewbook. Paul Stamatiou, a student at Georgia Tech, wrote on his blog (paulstamatiou.com): "When I was accepted into Georgia Tech, I wasn't able to visit until the summer. I had gotten into a blind agreement, but then I just hit up flickr and was really impressed with the photos I found so I wasn't shocked or anything when I finally got a chance to visit."

Users can create groups for any topic on flickr, and some institutions such as Amherst College and Simmons College have done just that. They let flickr users share their best shots of the campus (flickr.com/groups/amherstcollege and flickr.com/groups/simmonscollege).

del.icio.us. del.icio.us (del.icio.us) is a social bookmarking Web site. It stores users' bookmarks online so they can access and add to them from any computer. del.icio.us also uses tags to organize bookmarks, which is a much more flexible system than folders. Any bookmark, unless made private, is accessible to all users. As a result, this Web service functions as a human-powered filter to the content available on the Web. While mainly used in technology circles, it is also a great tool for people such as bloggers or journalists using the Web for research purposes. PR NewsWire has recently integrated this service in its online press releases.

MySpace. By now, MySpace (myspace.com) needs no introduction. It is the most widely used social networking Web site, where users can create a profile page and share photos, media files, stories, and messages with friends or total strangers. As of August 2006, there were more than 100 million MySpace profiles. According to HitWise, a leading online competitive intelligence service, in July 2006 the site had the highest site traffic of any U.S. Web site.

Much has been written about the dark side of MySpace (lurking child molesters, underage drinking photos, and so on), but there's also an upside that institutions can use to their advantage. Campuses should be monitoring the site regularly to see what's being said about them, but they could also consider using the site for promotional purposes. The entertainment business and some corporations have done it with great success. Some institutions have already set up MySpace

profiles. Ithaca Park School of Communication shares videos created and produced by current students, and American University offers historical photos and facts about the campus.

Facebook. Since it launched in February 2004, Facebook (facebook.com) has been the social networking Web site of choice for college students. They create profiles of themselves and link to their friends' profiles, thereby making it the online hub of their social lives. Until September 2006, only e-mail account holders from high schools, colleges, universities, and some selected companies could become Facebook members. At that time, the site was claiming more than 13 million users from more than 2,200 institutions of higher education and 22,000 high schools. Since it has opened to the larger public, it now counts 16 million registered users and more than 47,000 networks.

Facebook has become a medium to explore for marketing purposes. Mars Hill College has used the site with great success to keep open communications channels with prospective students that recruiters meet at college fairs.

LinkedIn. LinkedIn (linkedin.com) is another social networking Web site, used by more than 7 million professionals from around the world representing 130 industries. On LinkedIn, members create a résumé-like profile and connect with people belonging to their professional network. Members can then get introduced to people belonging to their contacts' networks. This tremendously increases the size of the pool they can tap for job candidates, job leads, introductions to other professionals, clients, deals, investors, and so on.

The site also offers a group feature. The California Institute of Technology has set up such a group for its alumni association. Since its launch more than a year ago, the group has grown to more than 1,400 members, a little more than 7 percent of the contactable alumni body.

YouTube. According to the site (youtube.com), "YouTube is a place for people to engage in new ways with video by sharing, commenting on, and viewing videos. YouTube originally started as a personal video sharing service, and has grown into an entertainment destination with people watching more than 100 million videos on the site daily." According to Nielsen NetRatings, the site counts nearly 20 million unique users per month.

In September 2006, the site launched a "Colleges" section for institutions and students (youtube.com/school_main) to gather and promote videos organized by institution. Because the site offers user-friendly video-sharing features, it's a perfect tool for viral marketing initiatives based on communities. Several institutions, such as the New Jersey Institute of Technology and UMR, have uploaded news and promotional videos to YouTube. Huntington University uses

YouTube to showcase some of its academic programs with a series of “Insider’s View” videos featuring current students’ interviews and portfolios. Ignorance is not bliss

Thanks to Web 2.0, everything is now 2.0: PR 2.0, Newspapers 2.0, Recruiting 2.0. (Even “Viewbook 2.0,” an article in the February CURRENTS.) You can add the 2.0 suffix to just about anything from marketing to admissions to information technology to signify the next iteration of something, but that shouldn’t diminish its significance. Campus communicators need to accept that Web 2.0 and all that it brings is here to stay.

Steps to You 2.0

With all this talk about how the advent of Web 2.0 is affecting institutions, it’s easy to overlook how it affects you. So it’s time to get ready for the new you: You 2.0. Get ready to cope with the phenomenon that has started to rock your profession with the following tips.

Use an RSS reader. In the age of information overload, this tool will help you keep up with the flow. Several RSS readers are available free of charge. Some can be downloaded to your computer and integrated with your current applications. The latest version of Internet Explorer, IE7, now makes it easy to subscribe to RSS feeds. Many Web-based RSS readers are also available via bloglines.com, yahoo.com, or google.com. (I’ve been using Bloglines for the past four years and would be happy to set you up with a free Bloglines account already loaded with a few good higher education RSS feeds; e-mail me at karine@collegewebeditor.com.)

Set Technorati watches and Google news alerts. With so many sources of information, it is difficult to keep track of what the blogosphere writes about your institution, your president, or your initiatives. Free and easy-to-use tools can help you do the work by monitoring specific keywords or phrases. Just go to technorati.com/watchlist and google.com/alerts, sign up, and set up the alerts and watches that will let you know via RSS or e-mail when someone’s online content includes your selected keywords.

Read, listen, and comment. This is the read/write Web, which means that you have also the right to comment, talk back, and give your opinion—so make sure you do. Reading blogs, listening to podcasts, and watching videoblogs is the best way to learn how these new media work and how you can use them in your work.

Create a personal Facebook account. Prospective, current, and graduate students spend a lot of time and energy on this social networking Web site, so

you should find out what it's all about. By setting up a personal account, you will be able to tour the premises—and maybe end up using it as a venue for some of your campus's advertising initiatives.

Get your press releases on a blogging platform. They will be automatically optimized for search engines. A blogging application such as WordPress will also offer out-of-the-box RSS feeds, making it easier for journalists or members of your target audiences to keep up with your news.

Create and update your institution's Wikipedia article. The popular online encyclopedia strives to include an article for every higher education institution. Reviewing, fleshing out, and editing your institution's article is a smart move as long as you follow the template set up by the WikiProject Universities, which aims to standardize coverage of colleges and universities.

Create a MySpace account with your institution name. Whether or not you use it will depend on your institution's culture and capacity to live with totally uncontrolled messages. However, you should reserve the account name to make sure you can use it if you ever want to and that nobody else will.

Set up a del.icio.us account for your team. del.icio.us is a great online application meant to share links to interesting resources and even online news clips. If you create an account and everyone on your team uses it, everyone will be able to share individual findings.

Set up a YouTube account with your institution name. Do this for the same reasons you would create a MySpace page. In the case of YouTube, you should also check from time to time to see the videos about your institution that have been uploaded. You can also upload your own institution's videos.

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About the Author

Karine Joly is founder and editor of Collegewebeditor.com, a blog that has been covering Web, marketing, and PR in higher education since February 2005 and now receives more than 6,000 unique visitors per month.