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The utopia of second generation internet technologies : communication by the masses to the masses

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The utopia of second generation internet technologies: *Communication by the masses to the masses*

Interview with Serge Proulx

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C&S: You are a sociologist specialising in virtual communities (and have recently published a work on this topic entitled “Virtual communities. Networked thinking and action” Laval University Press, Quebec). In your opinion, does web 2 .0 signify anything beyond the continuation of a familiar trend towards structuring the web with community systems?

SP: The term “Web 2.0” was coined in 2004 in California. It is a polysemous concept that refers to three broad types of definition. The most mediatised definition involves the nature of the web sites that are produced: Web 2.0 sites are sites that function based on the participation of a large number of internet users. Internet users are no longer mere users of services, but have become information producers. On the site *MySpace*, for example, each internet user that registers is attributed his/her own space and easy-to-use, automated digital tools, and can therefore create a profile detailing his/her interests and desires. Exchange networks are thus growing up around mutual interests or desires. Some analysts are referring to this phenomenon as the formation of “communities”: yet this is based on a very vague acceptance of the word “community” given that the site *MySpace* has over 100 million members! Other analysts use the term “social media” to describe this type of site, which encourages exchanges and meetings.

The second definition of Web 2.0 refers to the tools used by developers to create such sites, as well as the tools made available to internet users enabling them to create their own cyber-media worlds. I am thinking, for instance, of the collaborative Wiki tools that enable amateur internet users to get directly involved in creating web pages. The most well-known manifestation of this type of tool is the web site *Wikipedia*, the first online encyclopaedia, compiled primarily thanks to contributions from thousands of amateurs by a process of self-organisation. The site exists in around a hundred languages. The English version of the site has over 1.2 million entries (versus the digital version of the encyclopaedia *Britannica*, which has around 100,000 entries). The *Wikipedia* site has proved highly controversial due to its definitions, which include errors and biased viewpoints. Although certain control mechanisms are applied to the definitions submitted, the site is a victim of its own massive success: there aren't enough “controllers” given the very high number of contributors that are constantly submitting new entries.

The third definition of Web 2.0 refers to the business models adopted by this type of site. How do such sites become profitable? In its early days, analysts wondered whether the internet could be interesting in terms of generating advertising revenues, yet increasingly

profitable business models have emerged over the course of time. In effect, these social media sites have turned out to be highly profitable. On the one hand, the advertising banners on these sites are paid for by sponsors either based on a count of “impressions” (namely the appearances of advertising images on internet users’ screens), or on a count of “clicks” by internet users through to sponsors’ sites. On the other hand, the internet system makes it possible to gather information on the behaviour of internet users (their preferences and favourite, bookmarked sites). This information is consolidated and makes it possible to create precise profiles of consumers. This leads to increasingly sophisticated consumer targeting options, and, as a result, to well-targeted advertising messages. The longer an internet user surfs on the web, the more s/he is inevitably encouraged to consume.

Added-value is created by the knowledge of groups of internet users themselves. All of the book reviews and suggestions made by readers-consumers on the commercial site *Amazon*, for example, contribute to produce added-value in the commercial strategy of this online book seller. We find the same process at work in the world of software, where, on some troubleshooting sites, it is the mass of users that offer answers to other users who are experiencing problems with software packages. It is these very same users that will make suggestions on how to improve these products. In this case, it is the logic of the world of freeware that is to be found at work even at the heart of the proprietary software industry.

C&S: Is it conceivable that new forms of social ties may arise on Web 2.0 platforms?

The advent of second generation internet technologies constitutes an accelerated evolution of the internet and the web. I would not talk of a revolution from a technology point of view. We are still following the same course of development set by the first wave of internet dissemination in 1995. In view of the last decade, I would not say that Web 2.0 constitutes a technological break: there is a constant evolution manifest in the growth of broadband networks, decreases in the cost of equipment and access to servers, the growing number of software packages at the disposal of internet users (more or less free of charge). However, in terms of the social usage of the internet, the hypothesis of a break is more tenable. As far as new forms of social links enabled by the operation of this socio-technical system is concerned, new IT tools contribute to the trend towards an exploding number of opportunities for individuals to voice their opinions in the global public arena.

With Web 2.0 any internet user can easily achieve visibility on a global scale. Encyclopaedias are being compiled collectively without recourse to the authority of experts and are available to anybody searching for information. However, perhaps something really new is in the process of being born. This democratisation of access to web tools promotes a significant intensification and acceleration of the trend towards the circulation of exchanges, transactions and practices of creating or adapting-appropriating existing cultural content to re-diffuse this content once it has been transformed. *Mass communication* assumes a new meaning in this context. New forms of communication are emerging: alongside interactions between individuals (telephony and email) and a

growing amount of group communication (chat, forums and discussion lists), new patterns are emerging thanks to these new social media; individuals can achieve instant visibility and can speak to the masses on a global scale. These phenomena become particularly visible during terrorist attacks or natural catastrophes: it is bloggers who are the first to transmit the first information and photos (taken with their mobile telephones) from the scene of events. Moreover, we are witnessing the intrusion by amateurs into the world of professional journalism. Web 2.0 should hail the communication of the masses, *communication by the masses to the masses*. **The concept of the majority** assumes new importance in terms of the authority of experts. Some media elites may be shaken by this explosive informational trend.

All this has made it possible to reach a new level in the paradoxical realisation of the utopia of universal access to knowledge formulated by some of the internet's founding fathers (I am thinking here of the first hackers close to the counter-culture movement). I say "paradoxical" because this explosion in the diffusion, distribution and creation of information (texts, photos, music and videos) may, at the same time, induce a feeling of incompleteness on the part of heavy users, with its invitation to the frantic and infinite search for information that is constantly being updated...and to which information can always be added, creating a search without end. I believe that intensive use of these second generation technologies may give rise to new phenomena that could be linked to problems of psychological dependence. In this case, this dependence would take the form of an insatiable desire to communicate (*Where are you? I'll call you back*) and to search for information that is apparently new, but in the end redundant. I would even go so far to say, like Todd Gitlin, that this hyper-mediatisation of social links and the influence of this magma of information could lead us to a diagnosis along the lines of: "*The message is: there is no message.*"

At the same time, hierarchies remain in the corporate world based on network technologies. Social media represent giddy economic opportunities and challenges; this meant that, fairly quickly after their creation, the heavyweight internet players (Google, Yahoo!, Murdoch and Microsoft) bought up the sites recognised as dollar-making machines at astronomical prices. *MySpace* was purchased by Rupert Murdoch, *Blogger* and *YouTube* by Google and *Flickr* by Yahoo! Only *Wikipedia* is left, which remains faithful to its utopian vision outside this world of capitalist acquisitions. But for how long?

Biographical note:

Serge Proulx is a sociologist and professor at the École des médias, at the communication faculty of the Université du Québec in Montreal (UQAM). He is also the director of a research group into the media usages and cultures (GRM) (<http://grm.uqam.ca/>) and of the Laboratoire de communication médiatisée par ordinateur (LabCMO) (<http://cmo.uqam.ca>). He is the author of a dozen works and over a hundred articles or chapters in scientific publications on the media, usages and communication technologies. His research interests focus on changes in media cultures and the social opportunities and challenges posed by information technologies and communication against the background of the transformation of contemporary societies.

Recent publications:

- *La révolution Internet en question*, Québec-Amérique, Montreal, 2004
- *Internet, une utopie limitée*, (supervision of the publication with F. Massit-Folléa, B. Conein), Laval University Press, Quebec, 2005
- *L'explosion de la communication. Introduction aux théories et aux pratiques de la communication* (with Ph. Breton), La Découverte, Paris, 2006
- *Communautés virtuelles, penser et agir en réseau* (supervision of the publication with L. Poissant and M. Sénécal), Laval University Press, Quebec, 2006.