

# Development 2.0 to catch up with web 2.0

Second generation  
web technologies  
open up new  
opportunities for  
the development  
and humanitarian  
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to reach out to  
millions of people



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Did anybody hear of the senior UN official who finally started blogging? He wrote perceptively and expressively – with some help from his speech writers – but a vital element was missing in his blog: no one could comment on his posts as he completely disabled that function.

Then there is the Red Cross chief who started her own Facebook but remained completely 'friendless' for months—because she didn't accept anyone seeking to join her social networking effort!

These are just two among many examples I have come across in recent months. They are all symptoms of a major challenge that development and humanitarian communities are grappling with: how to engage the latest wave of Information and Communication Technologies, or ICTs.

We have been here before. In the early to mid 1990s, as Internet access started spreading, and as telecom and broadcast liberalisation rolled out, we discovered new communication platforms and opportunities. Many of us who took our first tentative steps on a myriad of

electronic shores soon found ourselves riding the first wave of new ICTs.

web 2.0

Although that was less than half a generation ago, it's eons in the ICT field. Then, just when everyone thought things were settling down, the next wave emerged around 2004/05. Collectively known as web 2.0, this second generation of web technologies and platforms enhance information sharing, content generation and, most notably, collaboration among users.

The web 2.0 technologies include blogs, wikis, social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook), social bookmarking services (e.g. del.icio.us), video exchange platforms (e.g. YouTube) and online video games. Web 2.0 offers much higher levels of interactivity than the mostly passive websites or web portals. Meanwhile, accessing these web 2.0 enabled sites has now spilled over from personal computers to mobile, hand-held devices as well.

All this opens up new opportunities for us in the development and humanitarian



communities to reach out and engage millions of people - especially the youth who make up the majority in most developing countries of Asia. But it also challenges us as never before.

### 'Other Digital Divide'

This time around, it's much more demanding than simply engaging the original web. It involves crossing what I call the 'Other Digital Divide', one that separates (most members of) the development community from 'Digital Natives' - younger people who have grown up taking the digital media and tools completely for granted.

We're not just talking about kids here. While precise demarcations are not possible, it's a safe guess that in most societies, a majority under 30 are digital natives. Most members of development and humanitarian communities are on the other side of 30 - making them, at best, digital immigrants. To engage the natives, they all must cross the 'Other Digital Divide'.

This requires fundamental changes of attitude among digital immigrants, which may be summed up as four key challenges.

### Challenges

*(i) Leave the comfort zone of paper:* Old habits die very hard. There is still great attachment to paper in the development and humanitarian sectors. From field data gathering and documentation to various beneficiary communications, everybody is pushing paper - truckloads and planeloads of it!

The undisputed leader is the United Nations, a formidable 'paper factory' churning out millions of documents every year (over 700 million printed pages in 2005). They spend over 250 million dollars a year printing documents in New York and Geneva. The World Bank and European Union are not far behind.

What happened to the 'paperless society' that ICTs were going to usher in? A basic challenge is to reduce the addiction to endless bits of paper lying and flying around. Just imagine all the trees it can save, and all the planet-warming carbon emissions it will help avoid!

*(ii) Let go of control:* The development community - ranging from UN agencies and researchers to NGOs large and small - keeps talking about the value of participatory, two-way communication. Yet when it comes to actually practising communication, many are obsessed with retaining complete control. They edit text endlessly, fine-tune their messages to the last letter or soundbyte, and tightly regulate how and where the materials are disseminated.

So imagine how hard it would be for such organisations to let go their Complete Control over communications. But that's just what the new media, especially web 2.0, demand. It's not a choice but an imperative.

Engaging new media is not just setting up a Facebook account, taking a YouTube channel or opening a blog. All that's useful, but they represent only the first steps to the wide and varied new media world. As with the more established print and broadcast media, development organisations need a strategy and a plan based on adequate research, analysis and reflection.

A core value in new media is User-Generated Content (UGC). With the rolling out of broadband Internet and mobile phones, more people are beginning to create content of their own. These range from comments on blogs and home-made videos

uploaded to YouTube to whole virtual lives or worlds created on platforms like Second Life. They may not always be as coherent or articulate as content generated by professional journalists, advertising agencies or public relations companies. But this is the long-cherished two-way communication, so let's celebrate it...and join the fun!

*(iii) Invest less money but more time:* Anybody with connectivity and basic computer skills can start a blog these days, but as everyone who has tried it knows, it takes a great deal of time to stay on in this game.

Because of their high level of interactivity, the new media requires a lot more time and effort to engage an audience. This can stretch capacity within development organisations - and it is not always wise to outsource web 2.0 applications to PR companies.

But here again, the alternative is far worse. The million global conversations will continue and expand with or without us. Our choice: join them purposefully, or be sidelined by other, louder voices.

*(iv) Recognise information needs and wants:* Both development and humanitarian communities talk passionately about the information needs of their beneficiaries, usually defined in terms of survival, sustenance or relief. I find it hugely condescending. It is as if people in poverty or crisis situations are a sub-human species with a simpler set of information needs, but none of the information 'wants' that we, the more privileged, have in abundance.

This serious fallacy has distorted development communication for decades. I have argued that everyone - irrespective of social class or economic status - has not only information needs, but also information 'wants'. Development interventions and emergency relief would become meaningful only when both are addressed.

The information needs and wants of the poor can be as diverse as everybody else's. For example, a Sri Lankan survey of information needs of rural poor some years ago found a demand for information on health and nutrition, bank loans, foreign jobs and insurance policies. There was also interest in world affairs, national politics, as well as in newly released books, songs and movies.

So our challenge is to find out not only what beneficiaries or stakeholders *need*, but also what they *want* in information terms... and enable them to access and generate both.

### Using new media opportunities

Rapid advances in ICTs - including, but not limited to the rise of web 2.0 - have left the development and humanitarian communities lagging behind. Having passed the denial and dismissal phases *vis-à-vis* new media, they are now struggling to catch up. Some players have done better than the rest. There are inspiring examples of how some are seizing new media opportunities:

- Some humanitarian groups now use Google Earth online satellite maps for their information management and advocacy work, for example in Darfur, Sudan, and the Central African Republic.
- In an attempt to name and shame offenders, human rights activists are using YouTube to post incriminating video evidence of human rights abuses worldwide. The influential

*Foreign Affairs* journal in the United States recently called this the YouTube Effect

- Some conservation groups have started ‘colonising’ Second Life, an online virtual reality environment - a 3D digital world imagined and created by its residents, currently numbering more than 10 million, and counting. They have taken out ‘islands’ of their own, showcasing their content and messages.

### Need of the hour

We need much more experimentation, taking chances and learning by doing. No one has yet fully figured out what exactly the Digital Natives want and how to engage them on (and in) their own terms. Meanwhile, the social and humanitarian applications of new media are only limited by our imagination and courage.

There are no authorities on this fast-changing subject: everyone is learning, some faster than others. Neither is there a road map to the new media world. From Rupert Murdoch and Steve Jobs downwards, every media mogul is working on this challenge.

For those who get it right, there is potential to make corporate fortunes, and also to serve the public interest in innovative, effective ways.

The new media’s reach is not limited to their most visible users, the Digital Natives. Especially with the phenomenal spread of mobile phones, new media platforms are increasingly coming within reach of the poor, displaced, disabled and other disadvantaged groups. Charity and relief workers arriving in some of the poorest corners of the planet have been surprised to find communities swapping information with mobile phones. In some cases, early warnings of disease, drought or conflict are now spread not by radio or TV, but by SMS text messages.

The new media are changing the information and communication landscape beyond recognition. To remain relevant and effective, those in development and humanitarian sectors must let go of old habits and reorient themselves and how they practise their noble professions.

“To face challenges of web 2.0, we need to come up with development 2.0!” ■

## Web2.0: Opening up a new development paradigm

Web2.0 is an integrated technology that makes global information available to local social contexts. Web 2.0 offers flexibility to people in finding, organising, sharing and creating information, which is globally accessible. It is about new network structure that emerges out of global and local structures.

Web2.0 not only allows users to retrieve information but it also allows users to run software-applications through a browser. The term Web2.0 became notable after the first O’Reilly Media Web 2.0 conference in 2004. According to Tim O’Reilly: “Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform.”

The Web 2.0 technology includes server-software, content-syndication, messaging-protocols, standards-oriented browsers with plugins and extensions, and various client-applications. Web2.0 generally uses following techniques/ features:

1. **Cascading Style Sheets (CSS):** CSS is a stylesheet language which is designed primarily to ensure the demarcation between document content and document presentation. Using CSS, users can define the colors, fonts, layout etc. and can thus redesign and style the HTML (Hyper Text Markup language) or XHTML (Extensible Hypertext Markup Language) application. A single programme or multiple programmes executed in CSS language may either be embedded in an HTML/XHTML application or may be used separately.
2. **Folksonomy:** In Web 2.0, Folksonomy is a method using which the user can categorise and tag content. The method is also known as collaborative tagging, social classification, social indexing, and social tagging. Folksonomy gives the user the chance to access and modify content in certain web sites that support tagging. The metadata generated by the user to make a body of information easy to search, discover, and navigate over time.
3. **Rich Internet Applications (RIAs):** RIAs form an integral part of Web 2.0 technology. RIAs are typical web applications that are

client-based and support the user to retrieve information whenever necessary. RIAs run on an environment called sandbox and do not require software installation. A RIA carries an intermediate layer called the client engine which interfaces with the application server. While a RIA is executed in a client terminal, the client engine keeps a bulk of the data back on the application server.

4. **Mashup:** Mashup is an application that integrates data collected from multiple sources to create a unique service that combines the data and structures it. Integration of content is initiated through web feeds like RSS (Really Simple Syndication) or ATOM and Application Programming Interface (API). The Mashup framework consists of content provider, content manager and the client web browser. Mashups are generally available in three different formats: consumer mashups, data mashups, and business mashups.
5. **Blog:** One of the major interactive tools of Web 2.0 technology is blog. In a blog site, an individual user can create and update content and can maintain regular entries of commentary, events, or news. Blog sites may be maintained by a single individual, a group of individuals, a corporate body, an institution, social networking organisations etc. In most of the blog sites, users (also known as bloggers) share a lot of common information disseminated through audio, animated graphics and video files.
6. **Wiki:** Wiki is a tool that ensures better forms of public domain interaction and community involvement. Wiki, a collection of web pages, is developed so as to accommodate a wide array and content and accesses. Anybody can contribute or modify contents in a Wiki. Wikipedia, a web encyclopedia is one of the best known Wikis
7. **RSS:** RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a unique ways of aggregating content. RSS is a feed format that republishes content in a structured format. RSS uses a reader software (sometimes called a feed reader/aggregator) to read the updated content from other sites.