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Preface: A decade of Web 2.0 - Reflections, critical perspectives, and beyond

by Michael Zimmer and Anna Lauren Hoffmann

It has been more than 10 years since the publication of “What is Web 2.0?”, Tim O’Reilly’s influential declaration of Web 2.0’s practical and conceptual underpinnings (O’Reilly, 2005). In 2008, *First Monday* published a special issue on “Critical perspectives on Web 2.0” (Zimmer, 2008) bringing together a diverse group of scholars to “expose, explore and explain the ideological meanings and the social, political, and ethical implications of Web 2.0”. These contributions addressed issues of labor, privacy, exploitation, and broader conceptual and practical implications of participatory platforms and social production online.

Just as many of the practices and ideas subsumed under the “Web 2.0” label in fact preceded the term in important ways, so too have they outlasted it. Though use of the term itself has waxed and waned, its fundamental (if sometimes conflicting) ideals have spread outwards — winding their way through cultural and social shifts as well as subtle technological and economic reconfigurations — and continue to inform contemporary discussions of new platforms and practices.

For example, concerns over labor and social production have persisted in critical discussions of personal data ownership as well as the “sharing economy;” questions of exploitation and dominance are increasingly pressing in the face of the power and reach exhibited by companies like Google, Facebook, or Twitter; as knowledge platforms like Wikipedia have flourished, so have concerns over diminished critical thinking skills and the monopolization of knowledge; and, critical attention to the (often tenuous) relationship between democracy and participatory platforms remains vital to understanding the power of social media tools for facilitating social and political protest at the same time as it enables new opportunities for surveillance, political repression, and censorship (as through potential biases in trending news algorithms). In addition, while social networking sites and tools have provided unparalleled opportunities to connect, communicate, and share, they’ve also given rise to problems of identity management, cyberbullying, revenge porn, and (sometimes cruel) practices of trolling.

At first blush, it feels strange or dated to be talking about Web 2.0 again. Upon reflection, however, revisiting these ideals seems necessary and even urgent, as ideas central to early discussions of Web 2.0 have — under various guises — retained their relevance as online platforms and networked technologies continue to shape social, political, and economic opportunities while at the same time fostering resistance and controversy. In view of these (dis)continuities, we are excited to present this new special issue of *First Monday* — “A decade of Web 2.0: Reflections, critical perspectives, and beyond”. Put together, this collection of papers updates and extends previous critical assessments of online social and participatory platforms and practices.

This special issue opens with “Web 2.0 user knowledge and the limits of individual and collective power” by Nicholas Proferes, which revisits earlier critiques of Web 2.0 by examining how impediments to users’ technical knowledge about Web 2.0 platforms can affect user’s exercise of agency and power. Proferes details how users’ continued lack of knowledge about how Web 2.0 platforms function limits their understanding of how the technical environment shapes individual informational experience, thereby limiting the expression of forms of power within the social, political, cultural, and economic world the Web 2.0 environment encompasses.

Proferes’s concern over users lack of informational power within how Web 2.0 operates is shared by Jack

Jamieson, whose contribution, “Many (to platform) to many: Web 2.0 application infrastructures” hones in on how the hidden infrastructures driving dynamic Web applications — such as Ajax and XML — encourage a particular style of user participation that, while convenient, aids the widespread collection of user data by Web 2.0 platforms. Haimson and Hoffmann offer a similar investigation of the impact of hidden infrastructures within Web 2.0 platforms. Their important piece, “Constructing and enforcing ‘authentic’ identity online: Facebook, real names, and non-normative identities,” critiques Facebook’s so-called “real name policy” and reveals how the social network’s attempt to construct “authenticity” — through Mark Zuckerberg’s own discourse as well as the platform’s design and policy statements — works to exclude marginalized groups and non-normative identities. Combined, each of these papers presents an update to discussions of Web 2.0’s (sometimes hidden, yet always present) disciplinary power.

The liberating or empowering claims of Web 2.0 are further complicated by the contributions from Nemer as well as Klang and Madison. In “Rethinking social change: The promises of Web 2.0 for the marginalized,” David Nemer offers an ethnographic account of the use of social media by residents of favelas, urban slums in Brazil, revealing that while Web 2.0 afforded favela residents means to protest and cross social boundaries, it also engendered new forms of social exclusion and oppression against the blacks and poor in their neighborhoods. Klang and Madison’s “The domestication of online activism” discusses how the technological affordances of Web 2.0 shapes how we communicate, and thus the move towards Web 2.0-based activism has fundamentally changed the face of resistance and civil disobedience. Taken together, these pieces revive skepticism in Web 2.0 as inherently democratic or liberatory in nature.

The next three contributions focus on the complexities of how users engage with Web 2.0 platforms. In “The rise of speculative devices: Hooking up with the bots of Ashley Madison,” Ben Light introduces readers to the growing prevalence of non-human actors — a new form of “speculative devices” — within Web 2.0 platforms, and uses the dating site Ashley Madison as a case to explore their impact on user agency and ethics online. Scott Kushner’s contribution, “Read only: The persistence of lurking in Web 2.0,” reveals how, contrary to the prevailing discourse of participation on Web 2.0, lurking has become a dominant mode of existence online. As a result, Kushner argues, Web 2.0 platforms increasingly deploy systems of surveillance and penalties in order to combat lurking and stimulate steady user participation. And in “DIY videos on YouTube: Identity and possibility in the age of algorithms,” Wolf invokes critical algorithm studies to explore the exploring the entanglement of user search practices and the algorithmic underpinnings of YouTube, uncovering the ways Web 2.0 platforms actually work to narrow, rather than widen, information worlds.

Finally, the special issue closes with critical attention to perhaps the two most widely touted tenets of Web 2.0: creativity and production. In “Share wars: Sharing, theft, and the everyday production of Web 2.0 on DeviantArt,” Dan Perkel documents the ways in which online communities and technological possibilities contend with ideals of authorship, creation, and intellectual property through his examination of theft and sharing on DeviantArt, an artist social network. Alex Halavais’ contribution, “The blogosphere and its problems: Web 2.0 undermining civic,” looks back at the ways in which Web 2.0 both adopted ideas from and forestalled the development of the “blogosphere,” and closes with a call for the creation of “credible alternative architectures” to foster new online spaces for civil discourse and participatory culture in the spirit of the original blogosphere.

The contributions found within “A decade of Web 2.0: Reflections, critical perspectives, and beyond” provide a necessary update to the 2008 special issue, and we are appreciative that the contributors represent a diverse set of backgrounds, disciplines, and methodologies. Further, we are particularly indebted to our external reviewers who, through a double-blind review process, shaped this special issue in important ways. Their efforts helped ensure that the discussions presented in the following were both rigorous and relevant to contemporary thinking around online platforms and practices. 

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