



The ant society - The reign of average



The Xpragmatic View #80
 January 19, 2006
 by [Marc Buyens](#), Xpragma
marc.buyens@xpragma.com
[url: http://www.xpragma.com/view80.php](http://www.xpragma.com/view80.php)

In our previous View, we briefly discussed the deployment of Web 2.0 approaches in a business context. As explained, not all of it is always a guarantee for success. That's unfortunate, but for us individuals, Web 2.0 really brings the bright new world. Or not?

User provided and controlled

User provided and controlled content. Collaboration. Participation. Sharing. Free of charge. The user decides. The best information... these are some of the many statements applauding the advantages of the Web 2.0 revolution. However, are there any side effects?

Well, there are numerous Web 2.0 settings where the user will just find what he is looking for and where we do not have to raise any concern. Typical examples are the websites where you can share certain things, such as [Flickr](#) and [YouTube](#), or the sites that allow you doing certain things on the Internet without being locked to your PC, such as the on-line office tools of [Zoho](#) or your on-line address book at [Plaxo](#).

All of these are environments where you come to do your "own thing". The reasons for using these solutions or visiting these websites will vary, but in essence, you come there to look at the things that are of interest to you and to do the things you want to do. And that's it. No side effects.

Of course, your visiting "experience" will be influenced by the things that are presented as the "latest", or the "hottest" or the "most watched", etc. And often, you will be confronted with some ads or other forms of publicity. But, it doesn't really matter. It is all part of the game.

The Web with an opinion

However, things are a bit trickier when visiting websites where they collect "opinions" and "preferences" on certain subjects and especially those sites where they claim to provide us the "best" content. Here, to some extent, the visitor is hoping to be guided, to get some form of advice, not to say, "to be influenced".

For such environments, we do advise some more precaution. Indeed, we have to keep in mind that in a Web 2.0 environment the notion of "best" most often has to be interpreted as "what represents the average opinion or taste of the participants". There's nothing wrong with this average opinion, we just have to be well aware of this simple reality.

When an article makes it to the homepage of [Digg](#), it means that, for some reason, this article is of interest to a large number of people of the however, rather small group of "heavy" Digg

users. It is an average preference of a limited and not necessarily representative group of people. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Indeed, this so-called "wisdom of crowds" that we already referred to in previous Views is only able to deliver a "best" answer in situations where there is indeed an objective and correct answer possible, but where the complexity of the question exceeds the capabilities of the most intelligent individual.

A classical example of this is guessing the number of marbles or beans that are stored in a large recipient. This is the type of question no one can answer with certainty. However, when you take the average value of all the answers of a large group of people, this value will be very close to the exact figure.

In this example, it is essentially a matter of statistics. However, the rule also holds in vary complex situations where the diverse knowledge and experience of a large group allows examining the problem from various points of view, finally getting to the "best" solution.

In such situations, the group is indeed "wise" and gives you the best answer. However, in more subjective matters, such as choosing the "best" article, the answer of the group will only be representative for the average opinion of the group, without however any guarantee that it is also a sensible judgement on the real quality of the article.

Quality on the Internet

This issue of "quality" also exists in other forms. On the Internet, business oriented social communities such as [LinkedIn](#) are very popular. Depending upon your needs, they give you the possibility to get in touch with like-minded individuals, specialists, potential customers or partners, employers or employees.

Also these environments try facilitating your quest for the "best" contacts by introducing certain ranking schemes. In the case of LinkedIn, this is done by giving members the possibility to "recommend" other members. As such, it is an interesting approach. However, does it really tell something about the quality and expertise of the recommended person or is it more an indication for the willingness and the time spent of the person who registers the recommendation? With the introduction of their "Answers" functionality, LinkedIn has recently added another ranking scheme. Now, participants can answer questions that are raised by other members and when your answer is selected as being the "best" one for a specific question, you grow your status as "expert" for that subject category.

Today, the top position on their list of "experts" is an individual who has answered more than 100 questions this week. Again, does it tell something about the real expertise and competence of this individual or does it tell you something about his/her time spent on this network?

Google Hide

Of course, there are situations where average group opinions are important. When you have a product that targets the mass market, understanding the average preference is important.

However, things are quite different when you are looking for a very specific, high-quality or unique piece of information. In such situation, it is much less likely that the Diggs or the [Reddits](#) of this world will give you the answer.

Even worse, the ubiquitousness of this "average" opinion or information is increasingly clouding our view on the reality. Even Google cannot avoid this. Like the other environments we already discussed, also Google tries facilitating the quest for the "best". In Google's case, this is the quest for the best content on the Internet. Google does this by applying various complex algorithms that rank the quality of the content. A well-known example of such algorithm is the number of external links to a specific piece of content.

Again, this is a sensible approach that has the advantage that it can be fully automated, without the need for human intervention to provide a judgement on the quality.

Unfortunately, it is also an approach that makes that the Google ranking is increasingly representative for the average opinion and taste. Indeed, this ranking is heavily influenced by the ubiquitousness of some highly successful Web 2.0 initiatives and by the world of blogs. For various reasons (popularity, crosslinking...), both groups are very visible for the Googlebots promoting their content to the top positions.

A consequence of this is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find information that, in some form, deviates from the average opinion or view of the Web. Indeed, the result of your search will be a list of hundreds of references that are completely irrelevant for you. Therefore, your search will have to become increasingly complex, using very specific and unique "uncommon" search terms and even then, there is no guarantee.

Virtual realities

Web 2.0 has everything to do with "user provided and user controlled content". At least, that's the theory. Whether this is also the reality is quite another question. Behind every Web 2.0 user community hides a commercial organisation that is secretly hoping for the fast big win.


This set aside, fact remains that these virtual Web 2.0 environments are increasingly creating new realities. They bring us the message of openness and freedom of choice, but in reality they are deteriorating into even so many filters that blur our view, showing us an apparently more interesting and richer world, but in reality, a world of average.

About the author



Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

 LinkedIn profile: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/marcbuyens>

 Follow on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/mbuyens>

© 1999-2009, Xpragma bvba. All Rights Reserved.

Xpragma bvba - Mechelsesteenweg 254 - 2820 Bonheiden - Belgium
Tel. +32-(0)15-340 845 - info@xpragma.com - www.xpragma.com

 RSS feed: <http://www.xpragma.com/english/rss/xpven.xml>