

The Activist Web

Written by

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***Author's Note:** Many of the concepts presented within this report are both counter-intuitive and unfamiliar enough that I have decided to focus my energies in two general areas. First is in ensuring the clarity of those concepts to the reader. Second is explaining methods in which those concepts can be applied to real world situations so activists and nonprofit organizations may benefit from that knowledge. As such, many of the definitions and explanations have been pulled directly from Wikipedia entries, whose many authors and experts, in my opinion, have collectively done the best job of illustrating the still tenuous meanings surrounding online "best practices." All such blocks of text will be delineated from my own writing by italic font and indentation.*

The Activist Web

The web is sitting at a crossroads for both users and producers. Fundamental change is seeping into every market that depends on the web's content. Advances in programs, telecommunications infrastructure and other technologies play a part in this change, but aren't the primary driving force. It is the individual's evolving expectations that are spearheading the greatest advances. Most of the changes we (as users) are supporting occur without our being aware of its systemic effect. Instead, our seemingly natural adoption of online behaviors and traits that promote advanced interaction, communal content construction, collective trust, and decentralized authority are forcing producers to adopt these operational platforms just to maintain the market share they currently hold.

Implicit in this situation is the warning that we are at a key moment of opportunity for the nonprofit sector. Most of the major commercial power-hitters on the web – Amazon, Ebay, Google, Yahoo, iTunes, etc. – have already proven the viability of the technologies and techniques which will be explained in the following report. That means the non-profit sector, which typically does not have the human resources and financial flexibility to experiment indefinitely with new or emerging techniques, can ride the tail of the foremost wave in relative security, but it is imperative that these recommendations be applied as soon as possible.

Yesterday's web (what is now colloquially referred to as "Web 1.0") is driven by information dissemination. Web 1.0 uses a broadcaster-based business model, where web sites are seen as tools for sending composed and controlled information out to the viewer. Web 1.0 sites allow little or no interaction by or between visitors, much like traditional media sources such as periodicals and television. This model also bears hierarchical traits – assuming the disseminator is the "expert" and the reader is the "layman." As such, a Web 1.0 site's architecture

and production methods make it hard or impossible for a reader to change or supplement the (mis)information they find there.

In contrast, the collection of online practices, named "Web 2.0" by O'Reilly Media^[1, 2], allows for the advanced interaction, communal content construction, collective trust, and decentralized authority mentioned above. This model employs or otherwise mirrors several economic, social and marketing theorems including "Crowd Wisdom", "Crowd Gossip", "Red Queening", and "Network Effects". Emerging and established business models which have proven their sustainability share these and other beneficial traits in common.

Web 2.0 sites and applications are expected to function as a platform for user-defined experiences. As such, they must turn the tools of production over to the individual so they can reach those conclusions and meanings in their own way. To be sure, it isn't just youthful social-networkers on MySpace and Dodgeball who are making the most of these newly recognized technologies and tactics. Expectations for online experiences by users of all ages and backgrounds are changing.^[3] Mundane and established sites like Amazon and Ebay have been using most of these principals since their inception. This is important because unlike other high-profile web 2.0 sites such as those mentioned above, there is no "Logan's Run" effect involved in using the latter. In fact, at its core most Web 2.0 practices feel "natural" and validating, as they bring the online experience closer to the structure of a conversation.

This new metaphor for the web, particularly the decentralization of authority, has required several paradigm shifts by content producers. Evolving user expectations for what constitutes a trusted and truthful online experience has forced producers to put much more faith in the collective wisdom and knowledge of

the crowd. Allowing site visitors to supplement, if not create a site's knowledge base is increasingly considered more trustworthy than those sites which continue to operate under Web 1.0's authoritarian principals. Those sites which required the kind of control that would make it hard to make mistakes have given way to Web 2.0 sites which make it easy to correct them. Opening the door to all user's input, as Wikipedia does, is shown to make an individual's biases "look thin by comparison" to the aggregate knowledge of the group. Wikipedia and other wiki-based sites in effect make good use of a phenomenon and theory called the "Wisdom of Crowds," which will be defined later.

For the online activist community, we can take advantage of the new technologies and operational metaphors that compose Web 2.0, without forfeiting the back-catalog of Web 1.0 data. NPOs and other activist organizations can continue to supply the headline and core research, evidence and information; but the public/users can now supply supplemental and anecdotal information which both fleshes out that core and adds value to the site as a whole. Amazon does this, as does Ebay, IMDB, O'Reilly Media, and every day more sites join their ranks. The resulting composite of coupling expert and public consciousness is a major and necessary step for any activist organization interested in establishing themselves as a hub for their issues of interest, as well as laying the ground work necessary for mobilizing their base into direct action.

Sites modeled around hybrid 1.0/2.0 designs may in fact enjoy another advantage over those that are the pure product of either. Simply put, different users expect different things from any given site. While it is important in terms of increased interaction, community involvement and organic growth, many users will still want to use information-based sites simply for extracting data that comes from traditionally authoritative sources. A site whose core information is produced in this way, but accommodates supplemental systems directed by its myriad users effectively doubles the pool of potential clients who will view its content as trustworthy and "real."

In the long run, adopting models which incorporate best practices from the entire (albeit short) time line of the internet are imperative to the success of any site. This is because end-users will go through periods of searching and expanding their information resources,

but will settle on only a few for long-term dependence. As a result, if an issue or organization's site is insufficient or nonexistent at the time of a potential activist's search, they will not search again until the resources they do find fail them.

In the following sections, critical elements for the construction of a robust, adaptable and perpetually viable activist site will be discussed. First, by breaking them down into their respective niches of marketing theories and online tools, then recombined as an example of how they work together to make the whole machine work. The key elements of this model are:

- 1) Market Concepts, including the Long Tail market, Red Queen theory, Network Effects, Crowd Gossip and Crowd Wisdom.
- 2) Web 2.0 principal tools, including Aggregation Assistants, Taxonomies vs. Folksonomies, Forums, Wikis, User Ratings and MashUps.
- 3) Operational Model for Implementation, involving the progressive and contingent connectivity between the theories and practices listed above.
- 4) Practical and historic strategies for implementing and shepherding users through various caveats related to new technologies, as applied via the "Technology Adoption Lifecycle" theory.

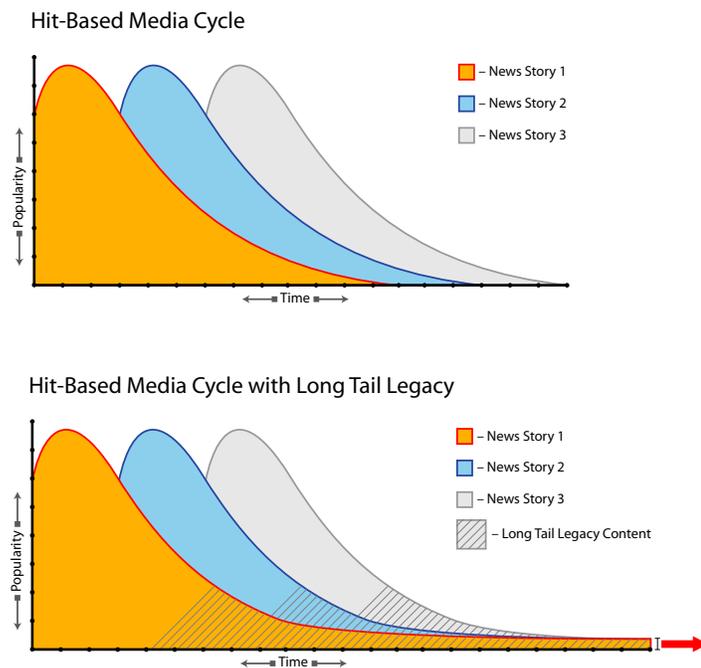
Following these four chapters, there will be an additional chapter dedicated to specific applications/designs of these principals for FTCCR.

Part 1
Market Concepts

The Long Tail Marketplace

An Amazon employee described the Long Tail as follows: “We sold more books today that didn’t sell at all yesterday than we sold today of all the books that did sell yesterday.” In the same sense, the user-edited internet encyclopedia Wikipedia has many low popularity articles that, collectively, create a higher quantity of demand than a limited number of mainstream articles found in a conventional encyclopedia such as the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Examples of successful Internet businesses that have leveraged the Long Tail as part of their model are: eBay, Yahoo!, Google, Amazon, iTunes, and Netflix. Beyond extending the applicable marketplace for traditional goods, the Long Tail market has established a stable and supportive environment for products and services which have not traditionally fit into conventional capitalist environments. YouTube’s content, comprised largely of low budget home videos, and iTunes’ podcasts are examples of this haven for amateur producers.



In a traditional marketplace, there are a few perennial forces which shape it’s basic structure; not the least of which is the Pareto Principal, or 80/20 rule. Simply put, 80% of effects stem from 20% of the causes. Implicit in that statement, when speaking of a conventional marketplace, is the need to identify and track the 20% of products or services which account for 80% of

sales. Include the variable of limited shelf-space for a finite variety of product, such as a brick-and-mortar music store, and the imperative of following the Pareto Principal becomes obvious.

The market pressure of finding, tracking, stocking and promoting only the top selling items is collectively what Chris Anderson, in his book *The Long Tail*, calls a “hit-driven economy.” Only sell that which sells most, and forget the rest. Anderson further states that “A hit-driven economy is a hit-driven culture.” Because of this, he argues, we have become accustomed to today’s headline overshadowing yesterday’s, even in cases when the latter is of lower quality or significance than the former. In other words, media companies hold their audience by stringing together a continuum of high-peak, short-term interests in order to maintain a legacy of repeat customers. As a result, non-profit and activists organizations are likewise forced into this cycle in order to leverage the mass-messaging capability of the news and entertainment media, even though it may serve as a detriment to complex legacy-based issues.

Anderson argues that in an online marketplace with infinite storage capacity, the masses of low-volume/low-popularity products can collectively make up a market that rivals or eclipses that of the comparatively few blockbusters. His research shows that when there is endless supply, the Pareto Principal no longer applies. In fact, using the online music store Rhapsody as an example, Anderson found that in any given month a full 98% of their million+ song library will sell at least one, if not a few copies. Furthermore, an unexpected behavior-pattern emerged among consumers – and this is what is important to activist organizations: When given the choice, they gravitate toward eclectic selections rather than sticking solely to the top 100 hits. That means the “hit” songs are no longer the focal goal for sales. For an online market, the hit is there to bring the customer into the site, which will then lead them out into the vast reaches of their catalog.

The means by which tastes go eclectic is supported by technologies such as wikis, folksonomic tagging and social networking; all of which will make discreet connections between a customer’s current interest and those jewels hidden deep within the system. For activists, this system represents a method by which individual events, transgressions, or movements can become interconnected, allowing visitors and researchers to see the greater whole. By connecting

today's hot-button article (hit) and its relation to past issues – both obvious and oblique, the Long Tail marketplace will allow media, organizations and the public to see as well as understand an issue's systemic legacy.

As intimated, the Long Tail has possible implications for culture and politics: "A hit-driven economy is a hit-driven culture." In markets where the cost of inventory, storage and distribution is high, only the most popular products can be patronized. In contrast, markets with low-cost inventory, storage and distribution, minority tastes can be catered to, and individuals will gravitate toward eclectic selections. As a result, a Long Tail model may lead to improvement in a society's diversity of culture choices, which is in turn a "good model" for the Wisdom of Crowds theory. (See definition below.) This is important for the nonprofit/activist sector because their sites can become increasingly powerful think-tanks as well as resource hubs with proprietary information for and from the public.



The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations

"The Wisdom of Crowds is a book written by James Surowiecki about the application of information in groups, resulting in decisions that are often better than could have been made by any single member of the group, regardless of their level of expertise. The book presents numerous case studies and anecdotes to illustrate its argument, and touches on several fields, primarily economics and psychology. The book relates to diverse collections of independently-deciding individuals, rather than crowd psychology as traditionally understood. Through a process of differential diagnosis, Surowiecki establishes the necessary components of constructing a "Good Crowd" (Composed of intellectually diverse individuals with a decentralized structure, but an available aggregator.) as opposed to a "Bad Crowd". (Subject to group-think, herding, hierarchical deference, and/or cronyism.) According to the Wisdom of Crowds, for a group to be smart, there must be three

conditions: diversity, independence and decentralization. The best decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise."

One of the more profound examples of Crowd Wisdom involved the disappearance of the navy submarine, Scorpion, deep in the ocean. The Navy spent many thousands of hours trying to find the vessel by relying on suggestions from four top experts on submarines, ocean currents, etc. After searching for over a year with no success, the Navy put together as diverse a group as they could, including mathematicians, submarine specialists, salvage men, and several Wall Mart shoppers. The Navy gave the volunteers all the facts and possible scenarios and asked them to offer their best guess as to where the submarine could be found. By combining the guesses, they came up with the group's collective estimate of where the submarine could be found. (Note: There was no hierarchy included in their opinions – "Expert opinion" did not carry more weight than that of the lay person's.) The submarine was found within 200 feet of where the group had determined it would be. It is important to note that no one individual, or even the subgroup of "experts" came anywhere close to the submarine's actual location.

Of the three basic types of crowd wisdom: Cognition, Coordination, and Cooperation – It is the last one that can be of benefit to online activist communities. Cooperation-based Crowd Wisdom determines how groups of people can form networks of trust without a central system controlling their behavior or directly enforcing their compliance. There are four elements required to form a wise crowd: Diversity of opinion, Independence, Decentralization, and Aggregation.

"Not all crowds (groups) are wise. Consider, for example, mobs or crazed investors in a stock market bubble. According to Surowiecki, these key criteria separate wise crowds from irrational ones:

- *Diversity of opinion – Each person should have private information even if it's just an eccentric interpretation of the known facts.*
- *Independence – People's opinions aren't determined by the opinions of those around them.*
- *Decentralization – People are able to specialize and draw on local knowledge.*

- *Aggregation – Some mechanism exists for turning private judgments into a collective decision.”*

This is exactly the model by which online discussion forums (defined in the next section) operate. Given the proper tools, users can generate strategies, conclusions to difficult problems and distribute the benefit of their participation to all other users, regardless of the individual's level of involvement.



Technology Adoption Lifecycle

The Technology Adoption Lifecycle model describes the adoption or acceptance of a new product or innovation, according to the demographic and psychological characteristics of defined adopter groups.

The adoption process was described originally by Everett Rogers and included as a subset of a self-titled theory in his book “Diffusion of Innovations.” Rogers stated that adopters of any new innovation or idea could fit into one of five categories: Innovators (2.5%), early adopters (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%) and laggards (16%). This distribution is typically illustrated as a classical normal distribution or “bell curve.”

Each adopter’s willingness and ability to adopt an innovation would depend on their awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption. Some of the characteristics of each category of adopter include:

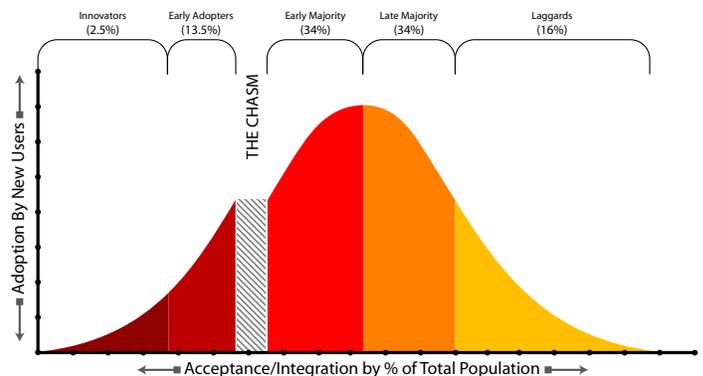
- *Innovators - venturesome, educated, multiple info sources, greater propensity to take risk*
- *Early adopters - social leaders, popular, educated*
- *Early majority - deliberate, many informal social contacts*
- *Late majority - skeptical, traditional, lower socio-economic status*
- *Laggards - neighbors and friends are main info sources, fear of debt*

Rogers also proposed a five stage model for the diffusion of innovation:

- 1. Knowledge - learning about the existence and function of the innovation*
- 2. Persuasion - becoming convinced of the value of the innovation*
- 3. Decision - committing to the adoption of the innovation*
- 4. Implementation - putting it to use*
- 5. Confirmation - the ultimate acceptance (or rejection) of the innovation*

In 1990 a variation of the original Technology Adoption Life Cycle was developed. It suggested that for discontinuous or disruptive innovations, there is a gap or chasm between the first two adopter groups (the innovators and early adopters), and the early majority. This variant of the original Technology Adoption Life Cycle was later described by Geoffrey Moore, in his book, “Crossing The Chasm.”

Technology Adoption Lifecycle, with the “Chasm”



Because Web 2.0 represents a “disruption” in the pre-existing idiom of the Web 1.0 world, strategies for ensuring Web 2.0 principals are readily adopted by a site’s users are necessary. In time, as more and more sites adopt these same principals, such precautions will not be as imperative, but failing to take the necessary precautions at present may lead to alienating an existing user-base, and dramatically increase the chances of losing them to a competitor.



The Red Queen Theory

An organization or a site is sustainable only as long as it is able to attract and retain people from the general populace at a rate that matches or exceeds their rate of attrition. This “constant threat of extinction” addressed by the “Red Queen” evolutionary (and later marketing) theory is taken from a line in the book *Alice in Wonderland*. The passage “You need to run as fast as you can just to stay in place,” frames the “Red Queen” theory, and addresses various coping mechanisms organisms and organizations take to stave off losing their niche in the environment from encroaching competitors.

Not the least of these coping mechanisms is adaptation. Web 2.0’s base supposition of increased user direction and involvement promises any such site can adapt at a rate commiserate with their user’s expectations. Consequently, Web 2.0 is here and its effects are spreading rapidly. Classically composed Web 1.0 non-profit organizations and activist sites which fail to heed this seachange are at grave risk of forfeiting their base to others who can supply the dynamically improved experience that Web 2.0 promises.

In online marketing, the Red Queen theory can be attributed to the rise of many Web 2.0 practices, including open-source programming, mashups, and – in the case of information hubs – folksonomic tagging, discussion boards and systems of external connectivity like permalinks. While mashups – a method of coupling sites to form a new data-set – reflect the Red Queen Theory in its most traditional sense, each of these practices serves as a beneficial cross-pollination of knowledge and ideas. Allowing for this kind of quick adoption of new traits and values will keep the site viable and valuable to the user. Furthermore, the cross-pollination process vastly improves the chances of generating a network effect (see below) which may constitute the most robust form of protection against extinction.



Network Effect (Positive Feedback Cycle)

The network effect is a characteristic that causes a good or service to have a value to a potential customer dependent on the number of customers already owning that good or using that service.

One consequence of a network effect is that the purchase of a good by one individual indirectly benefits others who own the same – for example, by purchasing a telephone a person makes other telephones more useful. This type of side-effect in a transaction is known as an externality in economics, and externalities arising from network effects are known as network externalities. The resulting bandwagon effect is an example of a positive feedback loop.



Crowd Gossip

The term “Crowd Gossip” is derived from the evolutionary anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s book “Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language.” Dunbar postulates that language evolved in our early pre-human ancestors as a way to groom more than one tribe member at a time. (In primates, grooming is performed only among trusted allies and consequently determines the maximum cohesive size any tribe can sustain.) The primary form of verbal grooming stemmed from gossip – a practice of establishing, validating, and reinforcing communal ethical standards.

Sites such as Ebay use Crowd Gossip through their user ratings and comments section. Crowd Gossip can be seen as a subset of Crowd Wisdom and is oftentimes a by-product of Internet Forums.

For activist organizations, integrating this simple and intuitive practice can grow to be a powerful tool in statistically polling the trustworthiness and ethical standing of any number of systems, including political, corporate and industrial organizations, as well as the quality or trustworthiness of a site’s users and information.

Part 2
“Web 2.0” Principals and Tools

“Web 2.0, a phrase coined by O’Reilly Media in 2004, 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.”

While Web 2.0 is an umbrella term, capable of manifesting itself in a multitude of ways. It is those manifestations most directly tied to expanding and facilitating user defined experiences, that can bring a sustainable benefit to the non-profit or activist organization. Examples of this may include:

- Users being capable of controlling the kind of data found on the site, such as on Wikipedia, Flickr and YouTube.
- Users being given the option of drawing their own associations between online objects and articles by way of tagging. Often referred to as “folksonomic” (rather than taxonomic) tagging systems, allow users to draw their own discreet connections between disparate elements, thus creating a much more robust system of interrelated topics. Flickr uses this organic tagging system to great effect.
- Users given the opportunity to supplement the site’s data with their own observations, stories and connections. Examples include the folksonomic tagging systems mentioned above, or in discussion boards and commentaries sections tied to individual articles.
- Extending online dialogs beyond the current string of discussion board commentaries by use of “permalinks.” This seemingly trifling little hyperlink in fact permits online discussions to contain and address topics in a historical sense, thus granting the weight of legacy to the issue at hand, as well as drawing on remote (and thus interconnected) sources.

The aggregate benefit of these sometimes subtle, sometimes overt capabilities is a web site that is organic in nature, evolving and perpetually contemporary in terms of context. Other than these user-centric practices, architects of such sites often describe the system-wide benefits of Web 2.0 as such:

- Focusing on data as the primary value of a site
- Utilizing the Web as a platform on which a user may define their own experience
- Supplying an architecture of participation which leads to robust answers, conclusions and innovations
- Making the most of collective programming and data by use of open source coding, thus allowing cross-pollination of ideas, services and best practices
- Usage of software development techniques, such as AJAX which allow for expedited response-time from online programs so they can perform with the same ease as their offline counterparts.
- Relieving the workload and overhead for large or otherwise broad sites by redistributing much of it’s maintenance to the clients who use it
- Leveraging the power of “Long Tail” market strategies by making use of infinite digital storage space and establishing methods for connections between products or discreet bits of information



Aggregation Assistants

Aggregators can be any site, program, or interface which collects connected, disparate or even arrhythmic information from a host of sources, including news feeds, search engines, or other site’s collections of articles and information. (Each in itself an aggregator.) As proprietary and deep data-pools become increasingly essential to the vitality of nonprofit organizations in a post-industrial economy, aggregation of information increases in its importance.

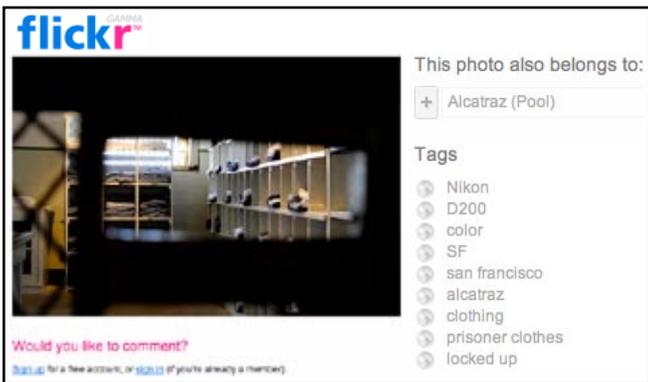
For the sake of delineating basic aggregators from those programs which assist users in sorting through the vast sums of data any site may hold, I have chosen the term “Aggregation Assistant.” The primary value of an assistant is that it offers the end user a way of receiving data of interest in a manner determined specifically by them – in as broad or narrow a range of parameters as they may choose.

The most obvious of Aggregation Assistants would then be a search engine like Google. But for activist-minded individuals, the results from a basic search such as “oil and the environment” would yield far too many results from competing sides of such a polarized and financially charged topic. Instead, that same individual could utilize the aggregated data from organizations which directly address their concerns and opinions; and use an Aggregation Assistant to collect and feed them data according to their own criteria.



Folksonomy vs. Taxonomy

A folksonomy is an Internet-based information retrieval methodology consisting of collaboratively generated, open-ended labels that categorize content such as Web pages, online photographs, and Web links. A folksonomy is most notably contrasted from a taxonomy in that the authors of the labeling system are often the main users (and sometimes originators) of the content to which the labels are applied. The labels are commonly known as tags and the labeling process is called tagging.



The photo-sharing web site Flickr allows users to define the associative words (aka Tags) for each image posted on their site. In turn, deeper and discreet associations between this and other images are available to every user. This image from Alcatraz prison includes tags describing basic image data, camera make and model, geographic location, and psycho-sociological perspectives.

As stated earlier, folksonomies are important in that they can both contextualize and connect loosely related issues, topics, pictures or otherwise in a manner that is sympathetic to the perspectives and experiences of the users, since they are the creators of the tags.



Internet forum

An Internet forum is a facility on the World Wide Web for holding discussions and posting user generated content. Web-based forums, which date from around 1995, perform a similar function as the dial-up bulletin boards and Internet newsgroups that were numerous in the 1980s and 1990s. A sense of virtual community often develops around forums that have regular users. Technology, computer games, and politics are popular areas for forum themes, but there are forums for a huge number of different topics.

Rank	Board name and description	Users	Posts	Members
1	Broadband reports Broadband adoption and high speed lines discussion Forum	6,618	1,734,339	76,652
2	Digital Spy Online digital entertainment community	4,948	1,230,004	187,043
3	Whirlpool Forums Australian broadband discussion	6,618	1,042,460	133,010
4	NGLR British video games forum	4,948	859,834	32,032
5	EMSE Web design and programming forum (in chinese)	6,618	723,811	18,180
6	Giga.de Computer and internet message board (in german)	4,948	691,468	112,943

As an aggregator of internet discussion boards and forums, Big Boards has become a hub of user initiated and controlled information. What it loses in formality when compared to a database such as Wikipedia, it more than makes up for with sheer mass of opinion, knowledge and sentiment.

A perfect example of the above-listed traits and their value in a post Web 1.0 world can be found in an O'Reilly Media blog entry by Jeremiah Foster discussing the announcement of a partnership between Apple and Zimbra:

“The potential for rich, dynamic applications that run through a browser and are hosted remotely is a key selling point for so-called Web 2.0. Now we are seeing some of the realization of that potential, and Apple looks to be positioned to effectively leverage these new applications. I offer Zimbra as a case in point. Zimbra is a company that has created a rich AJAX application allowing one to view vast amounts of disparate content easily.

Zimbra can see the usefulness of AJAX and has built a pretty impressive tool... This is shrewd since

it has recently been shown that Free Software and Open Source ... software have significantly fewer bugs than proprietary software.

The big deal about all this is that Apple recognizes this and is partnering with Zimbra. ... Apple also sees that this is a way to provide a rich client (and server) for the enterprise folks who want the kind of groupware functionality that Outlook provides. This way Apple has an Outlook-killer without having to develop it in house.

... As for the tipping point of Web 2.0, yeah, I think this is it. I think this is in fact the manifestation of a new type of software that will be hosted on the network, not on the desktop. This is the big paradigm shift in store for us for the next few years. So ditch Windows, install more memory, and forget about your hardisk because you won't be needing that anymore, its all already out there."

Scrutinizing the above example, many of the traits which define web 2.0 are exemplified: dynamic, web-based applications which can be shared with others for online collaboration but still run fast enough that they could feasibly replace existing offline programs such as Microsoft Office. Furthermore, the article notes the efficiency implicit in this partnership since, as an open-source program, Zimbra will require little if any development overhead from Apple since it will be improved and customized by it's users on an as-needed basis.

But the real value (to the public) and evidence of web 2.0 appears after the article. Up to this point, the article itself is a pure product of "web 1.0" principals: One author, posting content on a page and broadcasting it outward for anyone who navigates to it. Following this entry, however is a discussion thread. Key excerpts are:

"I looked at Zimbra news page and I don't see a press release saying that Apple is helping Zimbra. But I do remember seeing a press release saying that Zimbra will release a iSync plugin. Not being able to sync with Palms and cell-phones is a big problem for many solutions, like Zimbra and OpenXchange."

Pascal Robert | April 1, 2006 10:27 AM

"I'm also curious where Jeremiah heard the news that Apple is partnering with Zimbra. Or maybe he's slipping us an April Fools joke?"

sjk | April 1, 2006 04:11 PM

"See the Apple logo here:" <http://www.zimbra.com/partners/>

Anonymous | April 1, 2006 08:05 PM

"Thanks for the link. There's more mentioned here:"

Zimbra - Strategic Partners (http://www.zimbra.com/partners/strategic_partners.html)

sjk | April 1, 2006 09:26 PM

"Robert,

Zimbra has plans to release support for mobile devices as well. Watch out for the release sometime in April."

<http://www.zimbra.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2155&highlight=treo>

Anonymous | April 1, 2006 11:42 PM

This is the moment where web 2.0 technology and the promise of adopting its metaphorical platform intersect. An article's "comments" represent so much more than its simple name implies. Examine the discussion thread above again. What has happened is the original article's content has been both supplemented and improved with the addition of a series of hyperlinks supporting and extending the materials discussed. Furthermore, it allays fears that would have otherwise compromised or discredited the article's claims.

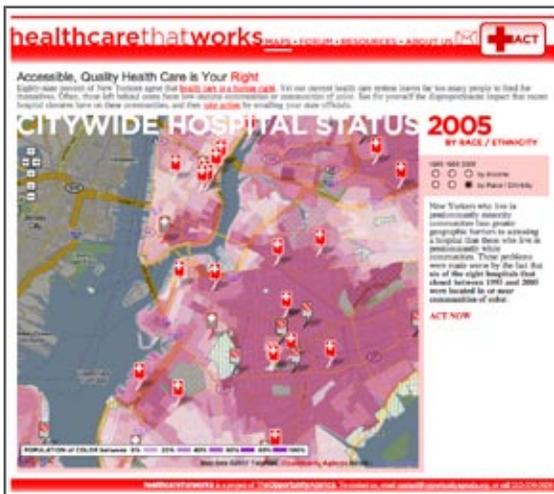
Discreet and oblique elements of related interest which normally wouldn't fit into such an article have now been given a context; and all without anyone at O'Reilly media having to type a single extra sentence. The customers who did the extra work, and benefitted from the doing have also improved their connection to the site by participating in the process of content creation. Pulling

back a bit and looking at the site as a whole, one can read this process being repeated for every article as a systemic Network Effect.



Mashup (web application hybrid)

A mashup is a web site or application that combines content from more than one source into an integrated experience. It is generally created as a critique or commentary on an existing work or product. Content used in mashups is typically sourced from a third party via a public interface or API. Other methods of sourcing content for mashups include Web feeds (e.g. RSS or Atom) and JavaScript.



Many individuals, organizations and companies have started coupling their own geographic data with the global mapping capabilities of GoogleMaps. This is an example of an activist organization doing the same to illustrate a string of hospital and clinic closures within low-income/minority neighborhoods in New York City.



Permalink

A permalink is a URL that points to a specific blogging entry even after the entry has passed from the front page into the blog archives. Because a permalink remains unchanged indefinitely, its use avoids link rot.

As the web and dynamic applications spread, perma-

links have risen in importance. Simple though they may be, permalinks allow discussion threads reach beyond the words typed. Much like a bibliography, they afford online discussions a method of historically referencing and reinforcing any point trying to be made.



Wiki

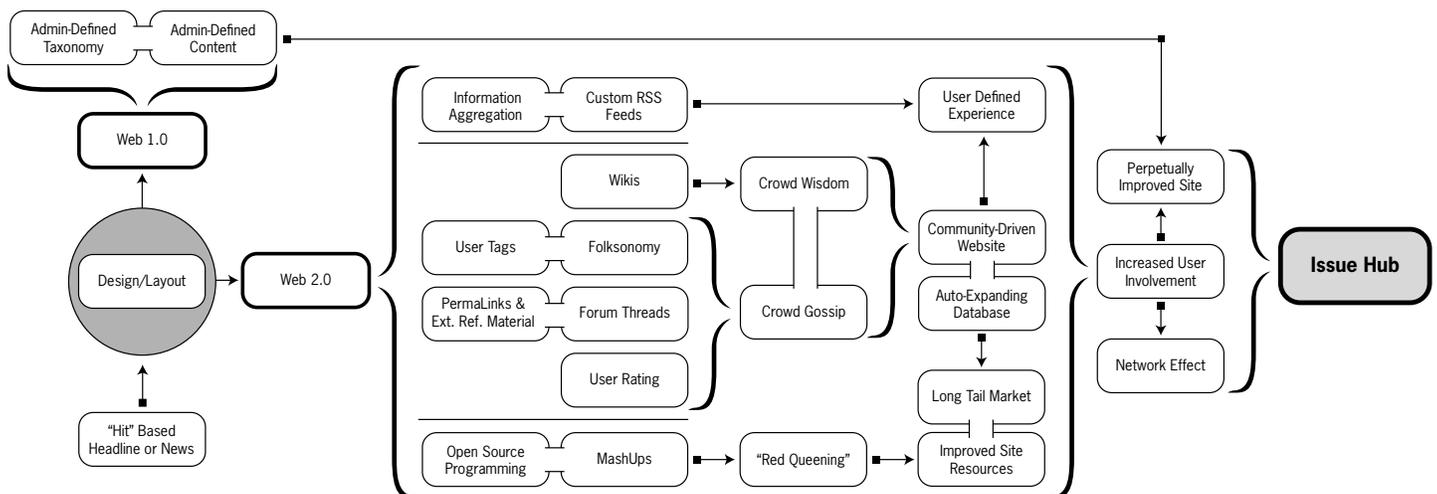
A wiki is a web site that allows the visitors themselves to easily add, remove, and otherwise edit and change some available content, sometimes without the need for registration. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for mass collaborative authoring.

A defining characteristic of wiki technology is the ease with which pages can be created and updated. Generally, there is no review before modifications are accepted. Most wikis are open to the general public without the need to register any user account. Sometimes session log-in is requested to acquire a “wiki-signature” cookie for autosigning edits. Many edits, however, can be made in real-time, and appear almost instantaneously online. This can lead to abuse of the system. Private wiki servers require user authentication to edit, sometimes even to read pages.

Wikis are generally designed with the philosophy of making it easy to correct mistakes, rather than making it difficult to make them. Thus while wikis are very open, they provide a means to verify the validity of recent additions to the body of pages. The most prominent, on almost every wiki, is the “Recent Changes” page—a specific list numbering recent edits, or a list of all the edits made within a given timeframe..

Part 3

Operational Model of the New Online Experience and its Benefits to the Activist Community



As is normally the case, NPOs and other activist organizations have vast sums of proprietary information which, when understood by the populace, can affect their choices and actions, including purchasing patterns, voting decisions and otherwise finding substantial reasons to take action. In application, a Web 2.0 enabled site can collect, grow, educate, galvanize and mobilize the public by continually capturing and building from the public's collective energy, knowledge and invention.

Many if not most potential activists become "activated" by an issue that "hits home" or when they have a personal stake in influencing its outcome. To set potential activists and patrons down the path of active involvement in a site, "hit" based news and media headlines should be used specifically to 1) give voice to latent or existing frustrations of the target audience, and 2) drive people to the site for more information.

In this initial activated state, site visitors will be seeking methods by which they can extend their vocabulary on the issue, make their own voice heard, and take steps that appear to be "making a difference." The site, using the most basic Web 2.0 functionalities, can act as a rain-catcher for such energies/efforts.

As always, the perceived legitimacy of any site is directly tied to its design and architecture. Intuitive and logically organized sites will hold a fundamental advantage over any site which addresses the same interests, but fails to organize its content in a way which is sympathetic to the user's experience. If a site has great information, but is designed without consideration for growth or user perceptions of clarity, most potential activists will leave within just a few frustrating click-thrus. For large and extensible sites, pre-planning connected arenas of core subject matter, as well as accommodating logical routes for growth are key to providing positive user experiences. Furthermore, such site's "skin" should be commiserately organized and intuitive by way of colors, icons/images and other visual textures.

Assuming design and aesthetics afford the user a level of comfort to move forward, and the initial issue that brought them there is of substantial concern; basic Web 2.0 functionality can impress these activated people into applying their energies into 1) learning more via administrator-assigned and user-tagged related articles, discussion threads, and wiki submissions; and 2) sup-

plementing the site's information by adding their own voice to the same systems.

This process will work to the organization's/site's advantage in two ways – extending and reinforcing the value of the site via long-tail market functions, and deepening, through personal investment of time and energy, that user's connection to the site and its interests. Furthermore, those same users may choose to take their experience with them via customized RSS feeds, which will keep them informed and in an active relationship with the site that has opened their eyes to an issue of interest.

Collectively, the Web 2.0 functionalities listed earlier should operate in concert, building a critical mass of new and compelling information, supplementary connectivity and unique solutions born out of a diverse, charged and opinionated (and thus "wise") community. Listed below are some simple, real-world applications of Web 2.0 principals for the activist community.

Aggregation Assistants (Long Tail Market)

As defined earlier, aggregation assistants will contextualize the vast sums of data any large site manages into digestible, and personally significant news "hits," which in turn will bring those users back into the site to gather more information, and possibly add to its knowledge base. For example, a parent who is concerned about the politically charged allocation of public education funds, can choose to receive any news clips containing the phrase "public school funding." Because of the personal stake that parent has to this issue, they will be much more likely to read the article and take action in any number of forms, including addition of their own knowledge/experience, raising as of yet unasked questions or even voting.

Wiki (Crowd Wisdom)

If an activist site is designed with Wiki principals, "visitors" can become "users." They do so by adding to the site's information by submitting as of yet undisclosed problems or practices regarding their issue of interest. By clicking an "add" button and typing out what they know or experienced, they can lay the ground work for others to identify it as a systemic or communal issue. Over time, if their initial claims pan out, site administrators can then add a formal assessment of the issue

and thus the total value of the site is increased. Addition to the site of new data in this way simultaneously minimizes the impact on existing staff and resources.

Folksonomy (Crowd Wisdom/Gossip)

In order for an activist site to function as a resource center for the public and the press, systems for exposing connections between various issues, their peripheral effects and/or a corporation's marketing/misinformation practices must be included. The "Related Articles" section can incorporate several techniques to do this, including administrators listing articles they know are connected; programming the site to search for and post keywords and phrases found in other articles, and by letting site users add their own word associations, employing Folksonomic principals.

Allowing users to add their own unique/personal associations to an article or issue can vastly improve the "Related Articles" function mentioned above. User defined tags can include anything the user deems important to their experience with the issue at hand, be it "nausea," or "denied petition" or "expensive" or "sale's tax". Other than the obvious extended participation on the site, such decentralized tagging systems will allow both users and administrators to make oblique or disparate connections between experiences and basic perceptions surrounding an issue, its participants, or the whole industry.

Internet Forum (Crowd Wisdom/Gossip)

Much like the Wiki mentioned above, a forum would be directed by users and follow any established/formal article on a dangerous drug, corrupt politician or oil spill; and allow users to ask pertinent questions and/or supply answers through their own knowledge-base or by linking to related articles on other sites via permalinks. Adding to the site's information pool in this way is a powerful addition as it is inherently contextualized, as well as personal enough to encourage others to participate in its development as an equal.

User Ratings (Crowd Wisdom/Gossip)

In its simplicity, user-directed rating systems can be applied in several ways to ensure the perceived legitimacy of the site, the organization and its claims. User ratings can be applied to anything from judging the value of an article, to keeping tabs on a politician's support of

environmental issues, to the trustworthiness of other users and the information they submit. The simplicity of a rating system can also serve as a "gateway" into the deeper levels of Web 2.0 interaction for those users who may be a bit more apprehensive about involvement with the new technologies.

MashUps (Red Queen theory)

Because no site is an island, and because any organization involved in using contemporary electronic media must compete for the attention of the populace, a site must be capable of adapting its resources at a pace set by the publics evolving interests. A site capable of combining it's data with complementary data from another site is to date the fastest and most efficient way to adapt to those evolving expectations.

As the earlier example of combining GoogleMaps with NYC hospital closings showed, the value of both sites was increased by the amalgamation, because both sites have delivered pertinent information in a unique manner to the public. In turn, because the public is then collectively dependent on that mashup for understanding the issue in context, both sites will be much less likely to loose their foothold in their respective markets.



The implementation of the Web 2.0 functions listed thus far should collectively grow in significance for such sites in two ways. The first will be initiated and controlled by the administrators; and will stem from architectural decisions about how and what external services, mashups and tools may be integrated into their site's functionality. As those tools improve themselves, so will they improve the site. Beyond allowing sites to quickly adapt to new features and technologies, the bring the added benefit of circumventing the restrictive cost and time associated with developing proprietary forms of the same services.

Second will be from users building dense networks of discreet inter-connectivity via those functions making use of Crowd Gossip and Crowd Wisdom. Their collective efforts will reach out into the knowledge base of the whole web and focus it according to the communities' needs. Furthermore, such involvement will include the users in an active and organic process of education

and problem solving. Aggregation Assistants will help ensure those same users stay focused on their issues of interest and protect them from unwanted data which constantly threatens to flood their media streams.

From the user's perspective, the total experience at such a site will appear as custom-tailored to their needs – clear, focused and informative. They will likely feel that they are witnessing, if not participating, in a communal effort focused on a shared interest; and thus will feel more obligated to ensuring its continued viability.

New users arriving at the site will be rewarded by the cumulative data and efforts afforded the site by others who preceded them. Thus, the site will be increasingly likely to contain the right amount or combination of resources to compel their participation in the same.

Should the above string of events play out, they would constitute a Network Effect, which will expedite the growth and value of the site over time. In Long Tail terms, all the site's past headlines, research and the ever-increasing organic connectivity of those discreet bits of information will culminate in a legacy of proprietary information. At this point the site can be considered a truly successful aggregator of proprietary information. It will hold value to not just the organization and its users, but to news media, politics, education and the public at large. Once this level of connectivity is achieved, a new tier of Network Effects may take hold, leading toward the site serving as a de facto "Hub" for the issue(s) of interest.

Part 4

Tactics for Managing the Technology Adoption Lifecycle, and Other Caveats

Keeping in mind the above-listed procedures and goals, it is necessary to address the caveats illustrated by the “Technology Adoption Lifecycle” theory and its “chasm” which must be bridged. Keep in mind, however that these procedures assume the base value of the site remains the information it contains. Without real content, no amount of interactivity or “community building” will compensate for that absence.

First, we should address the differences in the markets of free-to-the-public nonprofit organization sites, and the acquisition of technological “objects” which cost the user money. The TAL theory was based on users adopting technologies which cost money, and therefore represented a greater risk in the individual’s involvement.

Instead of assuming there will be reduced risk in adopting the free technologies which comprise Web 2.0, it may be wise to anticipate the potential of other perceived “costs,” namely the learning curve and associated value of time spent. The average person spends approximately 45 seconds on a web page before moving to another. Going back to the importance of site planning and design, those 45 seconds cannot be wasted by depending on the individual to orient themselves in a site which is dense and/or idiosyncratic. If, however, the user is faced with a clean, familiar structure which mirrors the best-practices and standards of other common sites, the bulk of that 45 seconds can be spent exploring the content and its systems of inter-connectivity.

The TAL theory clearly outlines the various roles people play, which determines where they are placed in the adoption cycle: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and Laggards. Each group, save the Innovators, will not adopt a new technology until the preceding group has done so. Therefore, it is important to identify those individuals or groups which represent

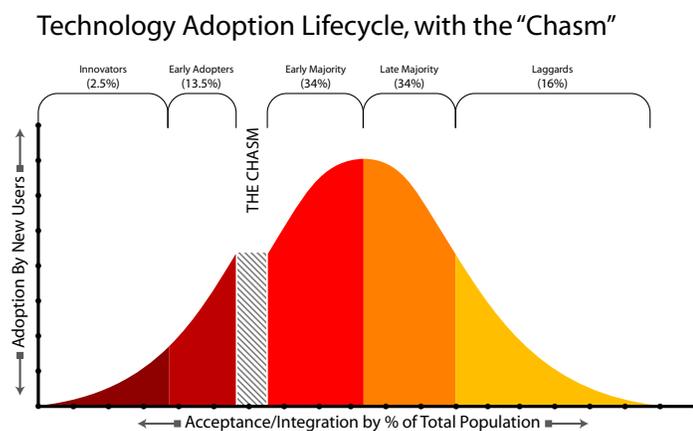
the highest potential for initiating and sustaining the cycle until it can be taken up by the Early Majority.

For free online services such as those supplied by nonprofit organizations, the employees and administrators of the site should play the role of Innovators. Implicit in this role assignment is another deviation from the original TAL model. The anonymity of the internet affords this duality in role, but simultaneously dilutes its effect enough that an increased focus on the Early Adopters must be addressed. Just as described in the Network Effect, the more organized and connected information a site contains when a new user encounters it, the more likely it is to be perceived as valuable by that user; and the more likely they will be to add their own knowledge to it.

Most nonprofit organizations or activist organizations will have an existing pool of members, as well as contacts within the press or even related nonprofit organizations. Given that all these groups have, in one form or another, already established their willingness to coordinate their efforts at the behest (or mutual benefit) of the organization, they could constitute the Early Adopters. As is often the case, changing behaviors – which adoption of Web 2.0 requires – may take some encouragement on a person to person level. The close connection between the nonprofit organization as Innovators and their first-point contacts within the greater community ensures that such efforts will likely be successful.

Assuming the nonprofit organization becomes the innovator, and convinces a substantial portion of their base and contacts to become the Early Adopters, the site’s level of participation through these new technologies will then be at the lead edge of where the chasm should be found. It is possible that, because of demographic makeup or because the principal technology surrounding Web 2.0 is becoming increasingly familiar, that there may be no chasm. If that is the case, administrators will simply see a fluid, uninterrupted increase in user participation – all the way through to the limits of the organization’s objective or geographic boundaries.

If, however, there is evidence of a chasm preventing the adoption of these interactive systems, it may require administrators to both redouble their efforts with promoting the advantages of doing so, and reexamine the site’s design and architecture to ensure the user’s experience is one that is conducive to participation.



Part 5
Applying Best Practices to
ConsumerWatchdog.org

Aesthetics and Its Effect on User Motivations

The current state of ConsumerWatchdog.org website is a mix of successes and modest failures. It is a huge database of articles, investigative journalism and opinion-leading information compiled and vetted over countless hours of toil – much of which is lost in the resulting density. Even with that, the site currently brings in three to four hundred-thousand visitors a month – which is no small feat for a non-profit organization of this size. Aesthetic and structural reorganization of the site very well may double or tripple that number.



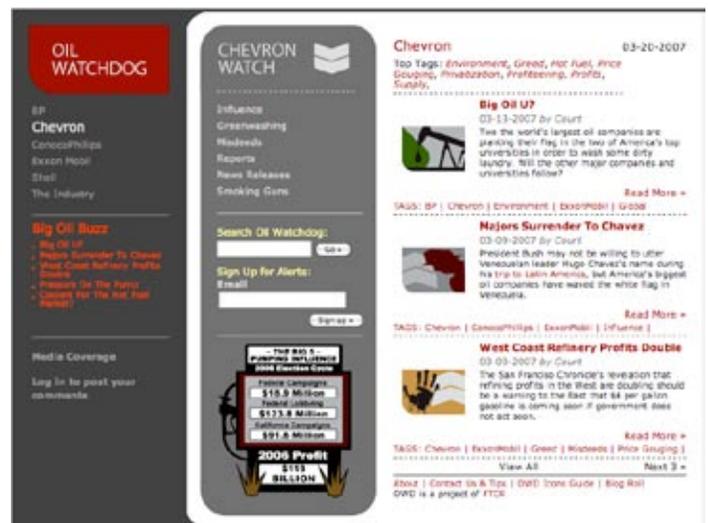
Review the blurred image of the Home Page above. (Blurring the image of the site allows you to focus on its over arching traits rather than the details.) Note how the eye is drawn – in the absence of detail – to areas of mass and color. The dark blue mast head is reflected in the lower-left column. That same column can also be seen as related to the lighter blue box in the upper right corner. Equally, there seems to be a visual similarity to the upper left box and the lower right column. Also note that there is no obvious starting point for the eye to begin. The patches of red are scattered, the dark blue column is massive and the white column is bright. This is the á priori experience of a new visitor when faced with the ConsumerWatchdog.org home page for the first time.

To be sure, the basic structure for a powerful and viable consumer interest site is there, but greater flexibility and expectations of user experience must be built into the site architecture if full advantage is to be taken of such a large database. When mining the site's data, a carefully planned color scheme, layout, taxonomy and growth pattern will augment every user's experience in a meaningful way. Failing to take these preplanning steps most often leads to sites which struggle to be heard against the volume of their own information. The most common manifestation of this phenomenon is when every available space on a page is filled. Art historians refer to this as “horror vacui,” or fear of empty spaces. Autonomic competition such as this tends to create a data deluge which is as unuseful as it is unaesthetic. The eye and brain – especially when attempting to sort and navigate detailed information – needs that empty space for resting and processing.

Review the design and structure of the home page for OilWatchdog.org, a site focusing on both the largest oil refiners in the U.S., as well as the greater industry and their anti-consumer practices of price manipulations, political control, and environmental degradation:

Note the difference in “weight,” moving the eye from left to right, the clearly defined roles for each column, as well as the horizontal dividers, contextualized icons, and a few measured changes in color which emphasize the functional arenas visitors can choose to explore. On the right side, which has the most open/negative space, contextualized abstracts for the site's research and articles are available three at a time.

This level of clarity is necessary when dealing with such large quantities of information. Limiting the amount



of data available on any navigational page ensures the visitor will consider finding the information they seek as a surmountable task. Furthermore, the “ease of use” implicit in this process goes a long way toward building the level of trust necessary to not only be considered a valuable resource, but to encourage the deeper levels of participation offered by Web 2.0 principals. In turn, that level of participation increases the probability that a larger percentage of the site’s visitors/participants will take direct and organized action to correct the offending issue in question.

While only a sample design, the layout below represents many of the steps necessary to sufficiently organize and visually control the data available at ConsumerWatchdog.org. Foremost in the design is the use of a

color palette which is diverse enough to sort and orient the vast array of sub-topics which represent the core value of the site. Furthermore, note the tabbed dividers which simultaneously label each arena, as well as conceal all data not specific to the chosen topic. Like OilWatchdog.org, any fully realized redesign of ConsumerWatchdog.org will need to include contextualized icons to reinforce the organizational structure imposed by the color divisions.

Note also that there is a centralized focal point, which also serves to evenly disperse all those elements which would otherwise simultaneously compete for the viewers attention and dilute their orientation.



SEARCH & CUSTOM RSS FEEDS:

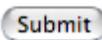


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Headline #1

Suspendisse rhoncus quam at nulla. Pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et malesuada fames ac turpis egestas. Curabitur semper

HOT ISSUES:

Hot Issue #1

Suspendisse rhoncus quam at nulla. Pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et malesuada fames ac turpis egestas. Curabitur semper

Attracting and Retaining New Activists

On any given month, there are an inordinate number of hits on subsections of ConsumerWatchdog.org when compared to the total hits on the home page. This suggests a large number of people are finding us via search-engine keywords related to specific topics such as “HMO” (found in ‘Health care’), or “Gas Prices” (found in ‘Energy’). In attempts to recreate these search-streams, it appears a great deal of consumer energy is spent just on finding FTCR articles, which are not the top search results for keywords such as “health care”, “AT&T”, or even “gas prices” and “junk health care”. If even a portion of that same frustration-fueled energy could be utilized within our site instead of finding it, we could easily have a rapidly expanding knowledge/user-base which would be ready and willing to take direct action which could affect public and political policy.

As stated earlier, many if not most potential activists become “activated” by an issue that “hits home” or when they have a personal stake in influencing its outcome. There is a large amount of evidence in behavioral/motivational psychology which suggests the best ways to influence people into action is through a mix of internal (“I’m making a difference.”) and external (“I don’t want to pay that much for gas.”) motivators, as well as providing them with structured and efficient steps they can take to achieve their goals.

Whether a person arrives at ConsumerWatchdog.org by one of the “Hit” headlines, or by diligently searching the web for answers to issues they face – once they arrive at the site, there should be a diverse array of methods by which they can take small, simple and immediate actions toward their chosen goals. Web 2.0 functions such as rating systems, folksonomic tags and comments can be the most useful tools in ensuring users immediately enjoy both internal and external benefits of their participation.

As intimated earlier, along with the design or “skin” of a site, the architecture and taxonomy will play heavily into whether a new visitor will recognize and feel capable of utilizing any interactive features which are available. To that end, ConsumerWatchdog.org will need to structure the whole site, as well as individual pages around ideas of connectivity, searchability, and most important – digestible amounts of information. Look once again at ConsumerWatchdog.org’s home page, and

at the diagram on the following page which maps out every link currently available for a user to choose from. Needless to say, the simultaneous availability of so many subjects and links, coupled with the non-hierarchical design makes choosing a path both taxing and seemingly arbitrary.



Furthermore, the current site attempts to dictate what is important, instead of asking the visitor what is important to them. Certainly, it is not possible to remove all vestiges of projecting issues out to the viewer, but since, as described above, most visitors arrive at ConsumerWatchdog.org by way of a contextualized concern, every page should be structured around helping them find the information, community or action they want to locate.

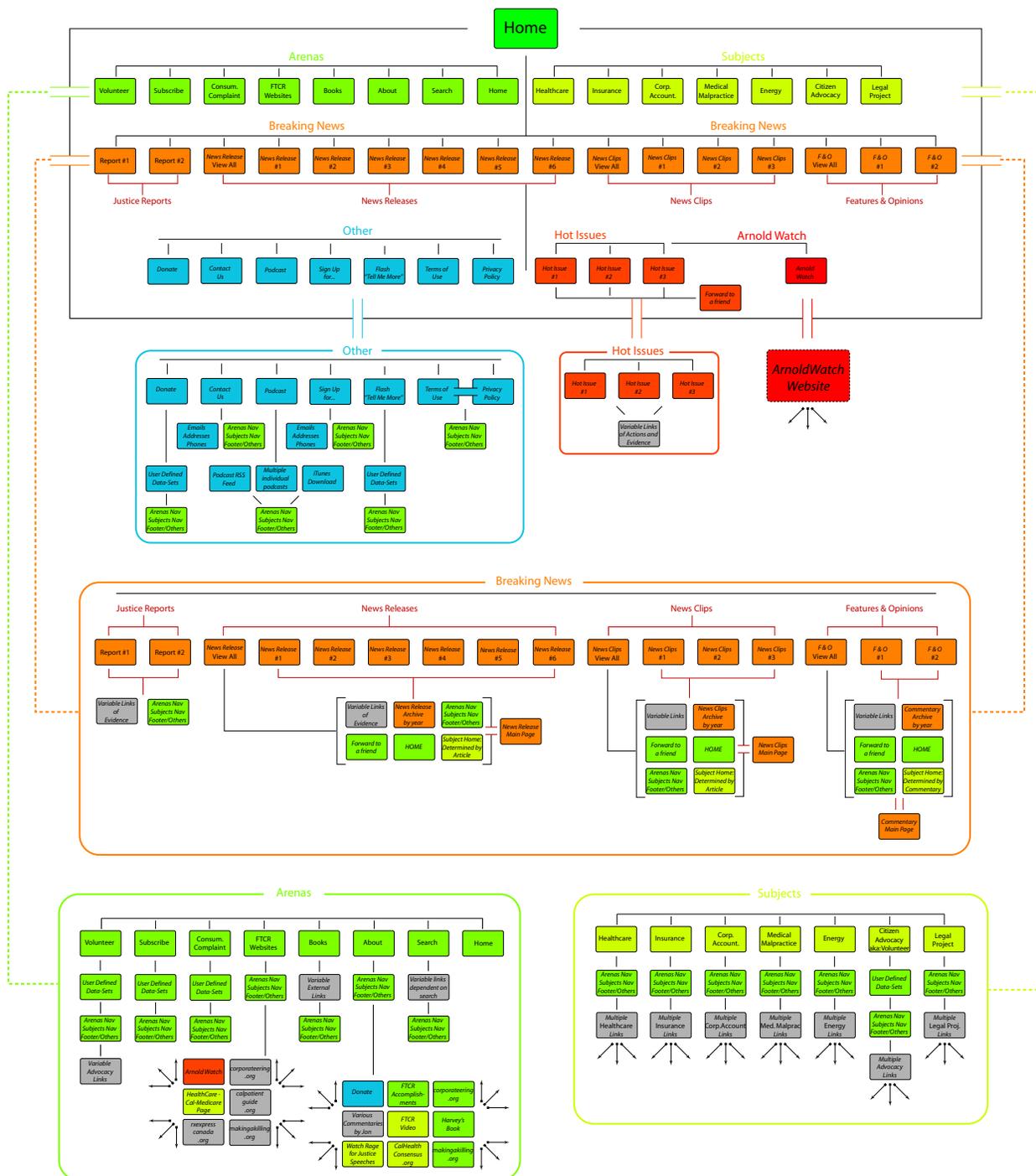
At this point, community based Web 2.0 functions can help capture and focus a new visitors energy into both finding existing answers from ConsumerWatchdog.org’s database, and supplementing it with their own information, questions and experiences. As stated earlier, this process will work to ConsumerWatchdog.org’s advantage in two ways – extending and reinforcing the value of the site via long-tail market functions, and deepening, through personal investment of time and energy, that user’s connection to the site and its interests. This, of course, leads once again to increasing the probability that

those same individuals will find the necessary justification and urgency to take direct action when called for.

As for specific Web 2.0 functionalities which can be beneficial to ConsumerWatchdog.org's site and goals – the full complement would have a purpose. Given the right structure, ConsumerWatchdog.org can supply each visitor an experience and level of interactivity tailored to their desires and expectations. From reading the formal reports and user comments, to using a simple yes/no rating system, to initiating information

through a discussion thread or wiki interface; a graduated level of available interactions can convert “users” into “participants” in a way that is neither technically or contextually alienating. Furthermore, easing users in to active participation by allowing them to set their own pace of participation, as well as within their own contextual interests, will greatly increase the probability that when it comes time to take direct action – a much greater percentage of users will understand the imperative of doing so.

Map of All Links Simultaneously Available from ConsumerWatchdog.org Home Page



In Conclusion...

The world wide web is changing as fast as it's growing, and user expectations are diversifying as fast as they encounter those changes. A major part of what I have attempted to illustrate in this paper is, first, the scope of this perpetual upheaval, and the imperative of accommodating the myriad expectations that follow, and second, our ability to do so in an organic and efficient way.

It has been my perception that most citizens stand at a precipice between action and inaction. People want to make a difference in their world, but are loath to usurp those systems with which they are familiar. As such, if pointed, clear and personally applicable justification for change is not presented, then there is no impetus to take that final step into direct action.

Compounding this unrealized potential is the hit-media cycle's language and story structure, which concerned organizations must use to leverage the mass media communication tools. In the nonprofit activist community, leveraging the power of mass media is fundamental for everything from building recognition and fostering trust, to informing and inspiring the public to act on behalf of their community and our world. Unfortunately, use of that language seems to generate a latent suspicion that we are trying to sell something.

For nonprofit organizations, naming a cause has never been a problem. The problem is and always has been how to communicate the underlying issue in a way that is personally significant to the person on the street, and untainted by partisan interests. The diversity of individual and shared experiences possible within the practices and philosophies of Web 2.0 can dramatically improve nearly every aspect of what one goes through online. For the activist community, allowing the masses of individuals to learn about those issues at their own pace, in their own way, and even with their own words is of immeasurable value.

The time for viewing the web as an evolutionary extension of TV and radio is over. The internet coupled with Web 2.0 practices transcends the one-way street that traditional broadcasters are bound to. What was once a lecture can now become a dialog. What was once a dialog between the few who could attend, now becomes a forum available to all, at all times.

In a market of infinite supply – such as that supplied by the internet – the bonds of a hit-driven media cycle can be broken. There is no need to fit into a broadcaster's time slot because the information can be delivered any time the individual asks for it; no need to accept the information given at face value, because the communication lines are open; and no need to keep every article an island, because even the most discreet and idiosyncratic connections can be made and shared.

Web 2.0 principals constitute the foundation of building a legacy from collective wisdom and self-perpetuated contextualization that can not only transform a site into an issue resource, but *the* issue resource for activist communities, the news media and the public at large. Building such a nexus from formally presented research and community participation can not only change the way society understands the issues we so desperately try to champion on their behalf, but afford each individual a personally significant reason to stand up and act.