

# Internet Next - An Indian perspective

The Web 2.0 dimension of the Indian Internet space is confined to a small subsection of its overall user base. These can be described as the ‘early adopters’ and they typically are technology workers.



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Technology is a gradual leaver; it gets created by a select, knowledgeable few, while remaining an enigma to others. Only when applications of that technology percolate down to the masses and start helping them do things faster, better, cheaper etc, then it becomes an agent of social and economic change. Consider the case of the computer. Fifteen years ago, the most commonly accepted definition of the computer was – “it is a data processing machine”. That definition while technically correct, has little practical relevance in today’s age, when the computer is a data cruncher, an entertainment hub, a communications device et al.

Similar is the case with the Internet. It started as a means of sharing information for academic & military purposes; however soon it became the backbone of business communications. Now the Internet is becoming social- people have taken the center stage and the technology has taken a backseat. The Internet is slowly but surely becoming an inseparable part of our lives, as it becomes our primary device for “ICE”- information, communication and entertainment. And a good indicator of this trend is the emergence of the new wave of the internet, often referred to as Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is like a refurbished version of the Internet. While Web 1.0 (or the erstwhile Internet of the late 1990s, early 2000s) was still focussed on technology, Web 2.0 is far more humane – it focusses on people and how they can collectively influence its developing character. Little surprise then, that the international person of 2006 chosen by the Time Magazine was “You” (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>), the individual at the center of the current paradigm of the Internet, who is gradually inscribing a ‘digital democracy’.

The Internet’s basic character is changing. And a good way of understanding this change is to delineate how Web 2.0 is different from its earlier incarnation (or Web 1.0). Consider the following shifts (explained in metaphorical terms):

**Read v Read/write:** Earlier, people could just read the internet. They were simply the viewers or the audience. Now people can easily write back content onto the internet - through blogs, forums, multimedia content etc, and this is a paradigm shift.

**User generated content:** Vast amounts of content is getting added to the internet through blogs, images, videos, and other kinds of media, and the majority amongst them is coming from amateurs and not professionals. The entry barriers for creating content are much lower than before and this is a major shift as well.

**Passive consumption v/s active participation:** The earlier version of the internet was characterized by surfing and browsing, whereas Web 2.0 is pivoted on connecting, collaborating and sharing.

**Expert voices v/s wisdom of the crowds:** The participatory nature of the internet can now be harnessed to precipitate the “wisdom of the crowds”. There is a multiplicity of views and opinions, but it is possible to isolate the most strident amongst them and use that within your own context.

**80:20 rule v/s the LongTail:** Much of human effort (personal or professional) is oriented towards serving the significant few (or the 80% at the expense of the insignificant many). But that’s changing with what is known as the “Long Tail”- technology advances are making it possible to isolate and service the teeming insignificant millions at the long tail of the internet’s normal distribution curve. The message is that “there is room for everyone

now". The content comes to you: Instead of you having to search and go to the content, the content can be made (through a technology called RSS) to come to you. This has huge implications in the way, the Internet content gets consumed by users, as also the amount of time & effort they have to spend searching for it.

It is important to understand that in the evolution of the internet as a medium, its different versions (1.0, 2.0 etc) co-exist along the same continuum. They simply correspond to different levels of maturity of the technology and people's familiarity with that technology at a given point in time.

In India, the Internet is gradually becoming ubiquitous (starting with the urban centers), though Web 2.0 is at an incipient stage. Given its characterising benefits (mostly free, on demand availability, convenience, unlimited storehouse of information etc), the Internet is being widely used for booking railway & airlines tickets, searching for jobs & matrimonial matches, searching for local facilities etc. But the Web 2.0 dimension of the Indian Internet space is confined to a small subsection of its overall user base. These can be described as the "early adopters" and they typically are technology workers. The internet consumption behavior of these early adopters can closely parallel that of the most advanced users in the West. This group is growing quite fast. While I don't have data to substantiate my thinking, my hunch is that the rate of growth of Web 2.0 in India (vis-à-vis Web 1.0) is faster than the rate of growth of the Internet itself.

Some of the areas where significant Web 2.0 activity has picked up in India are:

**Blogging:** Blogging has caught the fancies of lots of Indians. Thousands of new blogs are created daily. Most of the blogging is in the English language, though vernacular content is gradually picking up. People are using blogs as a means of personal expression, or a means of chronicling events. Many self employed professionals are building their digital identities around blogs. Blogs are playing a huge role in fostering debates about social and political issues.

**News & Social media:** One of the biggest impacts of Web 2.0 can be felt in the way, social media is influencing traditional media (print or online). Traditionally, news has always been driven by the "top down" approach - by news bureaus and through press releases. Now news (in many cases) is being driven "bottoms up" - by blogs and what can be described as "citizen journalism". The source of news as well as its broadcast is increasingly getting fragmented.

**Social networking:** Social networking websites are quite popular specially with the pre-teens, the teens, and the young adults. The need to connect with other like-minded people is universal and while that need itself has not grown, the use of the Internet in searching for casual acquaintances, friends or even life-partners is exploding. More than a dozen social networking websites that currently exist, are proof of this trend and the biggest of them all, Orkut ([www.orkut.com](http://www.orkut.com)), frequently comes up in parliamentary debates, though not always for the right reasons. And then there is the trend of cashing in on the popularity of social networking to make inroads into a specific area. There are special social networks for music lovers ([www.saffronconnect.com](http://www.saffronconnect.com)), for cricket fans ([www.sixer.tv](http://www.sixer.tv)) and for recruiting technical employees ([www.techtribe.com](http://www.techtribe.com)).

**Content centric communities:** Many online communities exist for users to share their multimedia content like images & videos. Digital cameras and camera enabled mobile phones have become cheap and ubiquitous. It is easy to take a casual or fleeting snapshot with these cameras and upload it to the Internet, for sharing with friends and relatives. While the most popular communities- Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) for images and YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) for videos are not India specific, they have very sizable participation (and content) from Indians.

**Services leveraging the 'Long Tail':** Many niche (or unique) online services are emerging, leveraged on the "Long Tail" characteristic of Web 2.0. Consider TempoStand, ([www.tempostand.com](http://www.tempostand.com)) a website where you can buy/sell independent Indian music with a Creative Common attribution. Or iFood.tv ([www.ifood.tv](http://www.ifood.tv)), which is a community for food lovers and food making. This trend

is likely to explode in future.

Spawning a culture of informal knowledge sharing: Something that exemplifies the power of Web 2.0 in spawning a network of knowledge sharing and open learning is the cult of unconferences (BarCamps: [www.barcamp.org](http://www.barcamp.org)) that

have happened in India recently. Unconferences are informal conferences (or meetings) that are positioned as an anti-thesis of traditional, big budget, formalised conferences. They are a huge rage across Indian tech centers and they have been propagated largely due to the influence of Web 2.0. While this has mostly happened for technology professionals, it is possible to replicate it beyond technology (in just about any domain).

Web 2.0 is not without its own criticisms. It is often described as "more hype than substance" and question are raised about the commercial viability of many of the websites that have sprung up. That perception, in my opinion, is only partly justified. For it is important to be understood that this is the new wave of the Internet. The Internet is being put to new uses and by definition anything which is new is unproven and hence initially not likely to have a robust business grounding.

Remember when the computer was invented and its critics theorised that there existed a market for 5-10 such machines. The issue of commercial viability of Web 2.0 is similar, though it is quite likely that some of our existing models of commercial feasibility may need rethinking in the process. ■

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Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Read	Read & Write
High entry barriers to creating content	Entry barriers lowered
Passive Consumption	Active Participation
Expert voices	Wisdom of the crowds
80:20 rule	The Long Tail
"You go to the content"	"The content comes to you"