

CREDIBILITY 2.0

Providing Context and Community on the Social Web

THIS ARTICLE IS the third in a series about the CulturAll 2.0 Network, a national multi-sector network funded by the Dept. of Canadian Heritage and led by the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre, developing innovative approaches and tools to ensure that everyone in Canada can participate in Canadian cultural exchange online.

The Web is becoming a truly *social* place, going beyond its focus on *information* to something much more interactive with a focus on *people*. Thanks to technology popularly referred to as “Web 2.0,” people can now engage one another in online communities large and small, with unprecedented opportunities for distributed collaboration and sweeping social change. Yet the added potential for rich social interaction has not diminished the important informational services the Web has traditionally provided – rather, Web 2.0 sites are frequently relied upon for important information.

The advantages and disadvantages of technology are often inextricably linked. Web 2.0 has lowered barriers to long-distance communication using a variety of modalities (speech, text, video, etc.), while simultaneously restricting the *context* associated with information we encounter. We often don’t know details such as: Who produced this? For whom? When? Where were they? What were the circumstances? Do we share common ground? Any competing interests? And so on. One benefit of an accessible Web 2.0 is that nearly anyone can produce content; on the other hand, a big challenge of Web 2.0 is that, well, nearly anyone can produce content!

CREDIBILITY & CONTEXT

When we see something interesting or informative, the degree to which it impacts us depends on a degree of trust – how credible do we find it? Context is

important here: The less “meta” information we have about something, the more help we need in assessing it. Recent research into how people evaluate the credibility of information they find on the Web has mostly been limited to: (a) a focus on visual cues (e.g., page layout), and (b) an information-based producer / consumer model of Web behaviour. As researcher partners in one facet of the CulturAll 2.0 Network, our goal is to go beyond this: With respect to information evaluation, we are interested in understanding and supporting the integration of other modalities in addition to vision (for example, experiencing the Web via a screen reader – software used by people who are blind that converts text into audio or Braille output), and especially in moving beyond the solitary model of an information consumer to a more social model that resonates with the more social Web.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN

Our first step was to perform a survey of persons who typically access the Web using a screen reader about their experiences with and attitudes toward credibility assessment, technology and the Web. We gathered responses from 60 such residents of Ontario, and found some interesting trends. First, not surprisingly, many in this group do not participate in interactive Web 2.0 sites, in part due to accessibility barriers.

Interestingly, even though our participants were of diverse age, education and expertise, they exhibited surprising uniformity in their frequency of Web access, the technology they use to access it (95% use Microsoft Windows, Internet Explorer, and JAWS screen reader) as well as method of finding information (100% use and trust Google search). We do not believe this uniformity to be merely an artifact of our sampling techniques; many social forces, including personal and impersonal recommenda-

tions by others, shape technology usage and information practices.

Furthermore, the importance of community for context is seen in the most dominant practices identified for credibility assessment, which included confirmation of the source, *consultation with friends*, and corroboration of facts with other sources. ***Credibility evaluation is a social process that requires a trusted community and social tools to support it.***

While analysis of the survey responses is still in its preliminary stages and our study continues, the findings thus far indicate that it would be worthwhile to develop a framework for community support for credibility assessment on the Web. Hence, with the help of people who experience the Web in diverse and alternative ways, we seek to develop an online community that will co-create this with us.

We are now in the design and implementation phase of the infrastructure, which will include an accessible, interactive website where members will be able to evaluate and discuss other websites and credibility in general. It will be possible for anyone to add links for the community to rate or evaluate, and discuss. We plan to develop supporting tools with and for the community as well, for example, an accessible browser plug-in for rating or inquiring about webpages. So far, we have had overwhelming support from the wider community. We are very thankful for this and happily look forward to more active participation as we seek to make the Web an inclusive place for all.

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For more information about this and other CulturAll 2.0 projects, please visit <http://culturall2.atrc.utoronto.ca>.