

FUTUREtakes

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From the Desk of Tim Mack, President, World Future Society



We are definitely entering a new world of interactivity, driven by what has been called the Web 2.0 revolution of information co-creation, utilizing a range of ‘social networking’ tools. With 100 million Web logs (blogs) worldwide, the ease and efficiency of building communities online has become extraordinary and so has the level of activity. For example, over the past year, the number of hits on the WFS web page has gone from 360,000 a month in January 2007 to 830,000 hits this last month, a healthy increase by any standard.

One critical trend here is the transformation of information generation responsibilities – not only is communication now largely dialogic, but formerly passive audiences are now empowered to become content generators (what is called a network effect)...and they are doing so in droves. This process is driven largely by the opportunities to offer new information of value and thereby replace existing structures with innovative ones.

OhMyNews in Seoul, South Korea, is an excellent example of this process in action. It was one of the first online media enterprises to bring citizens of all sorts into the news creation process as reporters (readers now generate up to 80% of the content). This has been so successful that the enterprise has held three international conferences on citizen reporting and has recently opened a ‘citizen journalism’ school.

The big issue in technology transformation is not Moore’s Law (performance does continue to increase), but the much slower ‘digestion’ process of new technologies within the marketplace. This digestion includes both cultural acceptance by consumers and management’s ability in business and government to utilize new capabilities effectively (or to put it more directly, the market acceptance of new technologies is a social dynamic). In a business setting, it centers around the interactivity of technology platforms and business models.

A second critical trend is the growing ability of technology to interconnect a skyrocketing range of individuals, activities and equipment, through GPS, RFID, and a number of other tools in development. Of the 30 billion chips in place worldwide, only a small percentage is presently Internet enabled. By 2012, there will be at least 14 billion Internet connected devices (Forrester). These interconnections will inform business decisions and provide a growing range of both overt and covert services. One major battle in the marketplace is over who will lead in the digital home market, but also involved is the connectivity of corporate truck fleets, citizen and consumer locations, and other potentially controversial capabilities. Once again, the acceptance of the technology is likely to be more problematic than its development.

Finally, there is the enormous acceleration that information technology has brought to organizations, the dramatic shortening of the time between information input and required decision. This also allows greater focus on specific topics at the same time the input expands to a much broader universe. In a recent foresight seminar with international business groups that I led in the Midwest, we were told that business decisions that took days were now being settled in global settings within mere minutes. While this ‘decision acceleration’ is enabled by new communications technologies, it also represents a significant culture shift and the growing role of automated expert systems in decision making. One critical example of that trend is program-driven trading on international stock markets, where multi-million-dollar decisions are made within seconds.

An intelligence officer recently noted that if the network of wikis and blogs that now interlace the US security community (including Intellipedia) existed in 2001, the 9/11 attacks would have had no chance of succeeding. As many will already know, the warning signs were already there, just not in a centralized platform where the relevant pieces of the puzzle could be assembled.

The Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communications System (which is only assessable to those with appropriate federal clearances) is built on the ARPANET technology and houses Intellipedia, which is also connected with other relevant networks. It is becoming one of the chief collaborative platforms in the federal intelligence community, in part because of culture changes brought by a new generation of young analysts comfortable with tools like social bookmarking and related ‘tag cloud’ analysis. As these Web 2.0 analytical tools mature, they are being picked by futurists, competitive intelligence analysts and strategic planners of all sorts.

As always, I am very interested in your thoughts and responses to my ramblings. I would be glad to get feedback and can be reached at tmack@wfs.org.