

Will the long tail wag the dog

James Carter gets in a tangle with new developments on the web.

'Web 2.0' is a buzz word in commentaries on the internet. Search Google for the phrase, and you'll find over 90 million hits. But there's no clear definition of exactly what it means, apart from the fact that it is not a new version of how the web actually works, in the way that new releases of computer programs are given incremental numbers. Instead, Web 2.0 is a way of referring to how the web, and the way people use it, is evolving. Some commentators suggest that it represents a maturing of the web: in its early years it mimicked conventional publishing, with all material controlled by the organisation that provided it; now the way the web works is beginning to be truly something new.

Much of that new activity is rooted in how the web allows users to collaborate and interact. Social networking sites like **Facebook** or **Bebo** are examples: sites that develop self-defining communities of interest, and where all the content is generated by the people involved. That concept of 'user-generated content' - stuff published, shared, argued over, and constantly re-invented by anyone who cares to take an interest - is a key feature of Web 2.0, and the one that has perhaps the most direct implications for interpretation.

The **article** in this issue of Interpret Scotland on how the East Lothian Museums Service used photo sharing site **Flickr** is one example of interpretation trying to tap into web-based communities of interest. Forward-looking marketing ventures have also seen Flickr's potential, using it as a source of imagery that has the 'magic dust' of user endorsement. **VisitAviemore** includes a gallery of images of the area drawn from Flickr, and has at times made a special feature of particularly good photographs. The site also taps into relevant blogs - online diaries - as well as material posted from **YouTube**.

Treasure Hunt

Geocaching is another phenomenon that could not have existed without the web. A treasure hunt for the satellite age, it involves hiding a small container containing a log book in a place that appeals to you, recording the location with a **GPS** receiver, and then publishing the details on a dedicated website. Other gamers try to find the container, and write up their experiences online.

The game has a direct interpretive potential: it encourages people to visit specific places, which can be interpreted both through the description in the record for each cache, and in the contents of the container. Shropshire County Council pioneered the activity as an interpretation tool with a **project** that loans GPS units to people wanting to have a go. But its real Web 2.0 character lies in the way ordinary people choose and describe the places where they hide their caches. Many of them use the game as a way of expressing their interest in an area's heritage, and their descriptions are clearly intended to interest others: the activity is a form of user-generated interpretation.



Finding a geocache is a small moment of triumph.

The Long Tail

Geocaching is a very effective way of persuading reluctant children to go for a walk, but it's never going to be a mass-market interest. It offers an appealing activity for a niche market, and in doing so it exemplifies another feature of Web 2.0 developments: the viability of 'The Long Tail'. This means simply that the demographics of the internet make it worth providing for the relatively tiny market that exists for specialist products or interests. It's the reason retailers like Amazon can make a profit from obscure books and music. If interpretation taps into Web 2.0, perhaps it can provide a far more diverse range of experiences than would be possible through conventional technology.

Podcasting is an example. A podcast - a small audio or video presentation that can be played on an mp3 player - is easy to produce, and can be published at no cost on websites where it can wait until someone who shares the interests of the author decides to download it.



Max Beckmann's *Family Picture* is one of the Museum of Modern Art's works interpreted through music on an independent podcast

Listening intently to a podcast © Thomas Hawk

Museumpods is dedicated to podcasts exploring museums, many of which explore subjects too specialised or detailed for any interpretation aimed at the majority of visitors. Programmes from the RAF Museum at Hendon, for example, include a study of a WWI battle in Palestine, a look at the lucky charms RAF pilots took with them on bombing runs, and 'part 1 of a series' about the technical development of the Spitfire.

It's not always clear that podcasts are designed as true interpretation, linked directly to an experience of the resource, but they do offer a remarkably open form of publishing. Most of the material at Museumpods has been developed by the museums concerned, but **Art Mobs** specialises in independent, 'unofficial' podcasts for New York's Museum of Modern Art. They include pieces of music inspired by the museum's collections.

That freedom, allowing interpretation to take forms no 'official' institution would ever produce, is one of the great strengths of Web 2.0. It's also its greatest challenge. If the web now allows anyone to interpret a place, however they like, and to make that interpretation instantly available for others to share, where does that leave the role of the managing agency?

Fully embracing the implications and potential of Web 2.0 means that organisations have to recognise they are no longer fully in control of how places are interpreted. In many ways, of course, they never were: independent guides and guidebooks have always presented their own points of view, and visitors rarely arrive as 'blank slates', without preconceptions or prior knowledge.

But Web 2.0 means that the range of different interpretations, the rate at which they can be developed and discussed, and the variety of media through which they can be accessed, are all expanding rapidly.

Some user-generated interpretation draws on conventional media for its inspiration: the description for the geocache at **Crystal Well**, on the River Tweed, takes both its facts and its theme from a plaque installed by the Tweed Rivers Interpretation Project. But the way is open for far more independent approaches, and some may be too outspoken for even the most liberally-minded agency to accept.

Wikipedia is a classic example of a Web 2.0 product, and has become the standard starting point for many people wanting to research a subject. Around 1600 hours on 7 November 2007, the page dealing with supermarket giant Tesco began: 'Tesco sells cheap and nasty food in unhygienic conditions. Scientists have discovered a bacterium unique to Tesco which lives in the cold dark and dirty spaces at the bottom of the freezer cabinets' and continued in a similar vein. By the evening, the page had been changed to the neutral-to-positive review you might expect.

Wikipedia is not strictly interpretation: its content is not designed to accompany and illuminate a visit to a site. But it is a commonly-accessed source of information about many places. Major institutions, or those dealing with potentially controversial subjects, would do well to keep a weather eye on how their sites are being presented there. They can edit Wikipedia to remove what some see as legitimate protest; others as vandalism. But they cannot control, or

in many cases even monitor, all the vast range of content that exists in the amorphous world of Web 2.0.

Policies established by social networking sites offer one way of addressing genuine concerns about what 'interpretation by anyone' could mean. Bebo, Flickr, YouTube and others all have clear terms of use that prohibit offensive material. They also allow any user to 'flag' content they consider in breach of these conditions; the content is then reviewed by a moderator, and if necessary removed. This seems a practical and effective way of dealing with offensive or inappropriate content: it also has the merit of matching a Web 2.0 solution to a Web 2.0 problem.

But if organisations really want to embrace interpretation in the Web 2.0 world, there are implications more far-reaching than the need to watch out for the hi-tech equivalent of rude comments chalked on the blackboard. All of the ventures we've looked at are based on the idea of users interacting, collaborating and sharing. The end result is the product of a community, and if organisations want to make the best of what Web 2.0 has to offer, they will need to dedicate time, creativity and enthusiasm to being active members of that community. What the community produces may be more diffuse, even less disciplined than what went before, but it has the potential to be more diverse, more individual, and more thought-provoking.

James Carter FAHI is an interpretation consultant and editor of this edition of Interpret Scotland.
james@jamescarter.cc