The Virtues of Finding *and* Forgetting

I'M not sure exactly when the cosmic shift occurred. … It was some time in 2008, I think, although industry observers had predicted it for several years. No, I'm not talking about the reversal of the world's magnetic poles. Rather, it is the migration from the web and into all the collaborative and interactive tools commonly referred to as Web 2.0. Ask anyone younger than 35 what their homepage is, and you will most likely get a quizzical look. "Homepage? I just go to Facebook to see what is going on in my world."

One of the most striking distinctions between the web and everything that has come since is the static nature of webpages and the dynamic nature of Web 2.0. At the Internet Librarian 2009 conference, I heard many discussions about how to find, deploy, and use information from everything from YouTube to mobile content to mashups. What struck me was that we still don't have the tools to filter the content and avoid the inevitable dross that turns up in the social web.

Multimedia, for example, is notorious for being essentially unsearchable. In order to make the content findable, speech-to-text recognition has to be reliable and accurate and image recognition needs to vastly improve. Links to YouTube videos spread virally, but there is no practical way to find videos on a particular topic. I am reminded of television in the preweb days—you could find out when a particular program was on, but you had no way of finding that documentary about Eisenhower or knowing when an episode of *Dragnet* was going to feature Leonard Nimoy.

Facebook, which has replaced the web as a source for information for many people, is even more problematic. You can search the status reports of your "friends" and of those exhibitionists whose privacy settings allow everyone to see their information, but most of Facebook is viewable only by those who have permission to see it.

Anonymity through obscurity worked in the early days of the web when search engine spiders weren't able to keep up with the explosion of webpages. However, as our disclosures have moved from personal webpages to blogs, Flickr, Facebook Groups, and Twitter, finding and aggregating tools have sprung up that make it easier to find out how people present themselves in various contexts. Services such as Spokeo even trawl Amazon.com to find public Wish Lists. Remember that intemperate remark you posted on a discussion group or as a comment in a blog? Is a potential employer going to find that picture of you with a celery stick up your nose or your Wish List in which you specify the Hello Kitty merchandise you're hoping to get for your birthday?

Unfortunately, while it isn't difficult to find your most embarrassing moments archived on the web, finding the gems within the tweetosphere and other streams of data is a challenge. One of the biggest complaints of much of the social web is that the signal-to-noise ratio is too low. People take Twitter's question "What are you doing?" literally and share what they had for breakfast.

Slowly, tools are emerging that let us find the good stuff. Now, Google and Microsoft both offer real-time Twitter searching, tools such as Twapper Keeper (www.twapper keeper.com) allow users to archive tweets by hash tag, and Twitter allows searchers to limit their searches to tweets that include links (`filter:links`), all of which enable us to better separate the gold from the dross. In a sense, Twitter is still where the web was before we had decent search engines—you know useful content exists, but it's hard to find within the noise of Lolcats.com and Michael Jackson tribute sites.

It's ironic that, while newspapers are falling by the wayside as they struggle to find a new, profitable business model, self-publishing has run riot. We are in a period of all talk and no listening; we have the tools to self-publish to our hearts' content, but we lack the ability to find what others have published. And tools such as Google Wave get me hyperventilating. Now, people I communicate with can watch as I type, which means that I've lost the ability to tweak my thoughts before they go out as a ping (Google-talk for an instant message). Even more disconcerting, the chats that we used to consider ephemeral are now archived and searchable on Google Wave.

As more of our thoughts and experiences are digitized and, alas, archived, we are losing the ability to forget. My dream is that we will eventually find the electronic equivalent of short-term memory loss, where our fleeting thoughts leave the infosphere without a blip while our real insights stick around.

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