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# Why there's no such thing as Web 2.0

7-8 minutes

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Proposed: There's no such thing as Web 2.0.

Well, that's not actually true.

Let me back up.

Here's what I think happened.

In the beginning, Web 2.0 was a [conference](#).

As conferences go, a good one -- with a great name.

The first Web 2.0 conference was held in the fall of 2004, and coincided with a large number of people in the tech industry (myself included) peeking our heads out from the fallout from the nuclear winter of 2001-2003 and realizing that the Web was not only not dead, it was thriving.

From there, it was easy to conclude that "Web 2.0" was a *thing*, a noun, something to which you could refer to explain a new generation of Web services and Web companies.

Many people have since pointed out that there is no clear definition of Web 2.0.

Tim O'Reilly, whose organization created the conference (and the term), [attempted to define Web 2.0](#) as follows:

"Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an "architecture of participation," and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences."

This is, believe it or not, the short definition.

The [long one](#) was much, much longer.

Tim's a wonderful guy, a friend, and a true pioneer, but if the creator of the term can't come up with a crisper definition than that, what hope do the rest of us have?

I believe the reality is this: what we have seen over the last several years is the Web itself coming into its own.

After an initial phase of the Web as a medium, in which lots of people attempted to make the Web look like a [newspaper](#), or a [magazine](#), or a [TV channel](#), we as an industry have recently been collectively developing a much clearer idea of what the Web is really like as a medium in and of itself.

This has led to broad realization of a set of [design patterns](#) for how Web services and Web companies often get built and used.

Which is great.

And of course, many of those design patterns are described by the sub-bullets of Tim's and others' multifaceted definitions of Web 2.0.

And if it is useful for people to refer to those design patterns collectively with a term, then Web 2.0 maybe makes sense.

Personally, I side with those who say ["it's just the Web"](#) -- that's matter of semantics and reasonable people can disagree.

But here's the problem.

Web 2.0 has been picked up as a term by the entrepreneurial community and its corollaries in venture capital, the press, analysts, large media and Internet companies, and Wall Street to describe a theoretical new category of startup companies.

Or a "space", if you will.

As in, "Foobarxango.com is in the Web 2.0 space".

At its simplest level, this is just shorthand to indicate a new Web company.

The technology industry has a long history of creating and naming such "spaces" to use as shorthand.

Before the "Web 2.0 space", you had the "dot com space", the "intranet space", the "B2B space", the "B2C space", the "security space", the "mobile space" (still going strong!)... and before that, the "pen computing" space, the "CD-ROM multimedia space", the "artificial intelligence" space, the "mini-supercomputer space", and going way back, the "personal computer space". And many others.

But there is no such thing as a "space".

There *is* such a thing as a *market* -- that's a group of people who will directly or indirectly pay money for something.

There *is* such a thing as a *product* -- that's an offering of a new kind of good or service that is brought to a market.

There *is* such a thing as a *company* -- that's an organized business entity that brings a product to a market.

But there is no such thing as a "space".

And, as far as startups are concerned, there is no such thing as Web 2.0.

What happens when startups start getting referred to as "Web 2.0 startups" -- or for that matter, "B2B startups" or "mobile startups" or "pen computing startups" -- or as being in the Web 2.0/B2B/mobile/pen computing "space" -- is that trends are getting mistaken for markets and products.

You can't build a company based on a trend.

Trends are obvious, and there's no startup opportunity in the obvious.

You have to build a company based on a new kind of product (or service -- I am using the terms interchangeably) and you have to take that product to a market.

It frankly doesn't really matter which trends, or design patterns, you incorporate into your product.

If the product is compelling to the market, it will succeed.

If the product is not compelling to the market, it will fail.

It's not much more complicated than that.

The hard part is creating that new and compelling product. (This is left as an exercise to the reader.)

Spending too much time thinking about trends and "spaces" is a great way for an entrepreneurial team to go right off the rails and bring another derivative product to market, which the market then promptly ignores.

I can't tell you how many pitches I've seen for startups that are chasing the latest trend and have no chance.

And I can't tell you how few pitches I've seen for new and compelling products.

As a result of the widespread adoption of language like "Web 2.0 companies" and the "Web 2.0 space" - and startups referring to themselves as such, most of which will fail -- you get a predictably cynical backlash from people who then dismiss the whole category as trendy marketing hype full of me-too wannabes and in the process throw out the baby with the bathwater and dismiss all the legitimately new and exciting products and companies that are being created all around us.

As an entrepreneur, I am frankly torn as to whether or not to even post this piece.

It may be in my best interest to have more of my fellow entrepreneurs off chasing trends and pitching their "Web 2.0 startups" to the latest enterprise software VC who is now "doing Web 2.0 deals" instead of building real products that might compete with one of my companies.

But I think there are so many cool new products and companies being created these days -- many of which have little to do with any conventional wisdom around buzzwords -- and I'm so excited about them, and so proud of them on behalf of my industry, that I can't help myself :-).