designing for the social web

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Joshua Porter

The Rise of the Social Web

A social and economic change that has barely begun

"The Web is more a social creation than a technical one.
I designed it for a social effect—to help people work together—
and not as a technical toy. The ultimate goal of the Web is to
support and improve our weblike existence in the world. We
clump into families, associations, and companies. We develop
trust across the miles and distrust around the corner. What we
believe, endorse, agree with, and depend on is representable and,
increasingly, represented on the Web. We all have to ensure that
the society we build with the Web is of the sort we intend."

—TIM BERNERS-LEE, WEAVING THE WEB[1]

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1   http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/Weaving/

The Amazon Effect

If you've ever watched someone shop at Amazon.com, you may have witnessed the Amazon Effect.

I first saw the Amazon Effect during a usability study several years ago. I was observing a person shopping for a digital camera recommended to her by a friend. As part of the testing procedure, I asked the shopper to go to CircuitCity.com and try to buy the camera. She started typing the URL, then stopped.

> **Shopper:** *Can I go to Amazon first?*
>
> **Me:** *No.*
>
> **Shopper (frowning):** *Well, I always go to Amazon first. I love Amazon.*

Unfortunately, our testing methodology didn't allow for that. We couldn't let people shop just anywhere. We were testing very specific sites at the request of our client. Though we were testing Amazon in the study, we weren't testing Amazon with this particular shopper.

> **Me:** *I'm sorry. I can't let you go there just now. But let me ask: why do you want to go to Amazon?*

Up to that point, we'd had a couple of people ask to visit Amazon in the test and had assumed they kept asking because they had accounts there. We figured they had previously shopped at Amazon and had a history with the company, had created wish lists and purchase histories there, and were generally more comfortable shopping in a familiar environment. We assumed the familiarity of Amazon was what kept them coming back.

But as with so many assumptions, it was wrong.

> **Shopper:** *I go to Amazon to do research on a product I'm shopping for, even when I plan to buy it on another site.*
>
> **Me:** *Even when you plan to buy it on another site?*
>
> **Shopper:** *Yes, of course.*

Wow! This wasn't what we had expected. People wanted to go to Amazon so badly to do *product research*, not because they had an account there. The magnetic pull of Amazon, what I like to call the *Amazon Effect*, was entirely different from what we had assumed.

People-Powered Research

So why the pull of Amazon versus, say, another online electronics retailer? Didn't Amazon have the same information as other sites? Weren't they basically all selling the same cameras? What does Amazon do that others don't?

The answer becomes clear almost immediately when watching someone shopping: *customer reviews*.

At Amazon, customer reviews act like a magnet, pulling people down the page. That's the content people want. The page loads, the viewer starts to scroll. They keep scrolling until they hit the reviews, which in some cases are up to 6000 pixels down from the top of the page! Nobody seems to mind. They simply scroll through screens and screens of content until they find what they're looking for.

During a test a few days later, another shopper exhibited a distinctive behavior. He went to the reviews and immediately sorted them to bring the 1-star reviews to the top of the list. This meant they wanted to see the negative reviews first.

> **Me:** *Why did you do that?*
>
> **Shopper:** *Well, I want to make sure I'm not buying a lemon.*

Another shopper, who exhibited the same behavior of going directly for the reviews, told me why they rarely look at the other content on the page — the wealth of content like the manufacturer's description and other product information.

> **Shopper:** *I already know what it's going to say, it's going to tell me how great their product is. Why would I need to read that? If I want to know the truth, I have to read what other people like me thought about it.*

There it was: a crystallization of the value of customer reviews. Customer reviews allow people to learn about a product from the experience of others without any potentially biased seller information. *No wonder*

The most magnetic content at Amazon is often four, five, or even six thousand pixels down the page.

Customer reviews

Figure 1.1 Amazon's product pages are extremely long, but that doesn't keep people from scrolling almost the entire length of them to find the customer reviews.

everyone wanted to shop at Amazon. They had information that no other site had: they had *the Truth*.

And that truth, interestingly enough, arose from simply aggregating the conversation of normal people like you and me.

Counter-Intuitive Economics

Let's take a bird's-eye view of what's happening at Amazon. Consider these peculiarities:

▶ **Amazon doesn't always provide the most valuable information on their site.** Instead, the people writing reviews contribute valuable information others are looking for. Amazon simply provides the tool with which to write the reviews.

▶ **People write reviews without getting paid.** There is no monetary reward for writing reviews. Yet dozens of reviewers have written over a thousand reviews each! These folks know they aren't going to get paid, but do it anyway.

▶ **People are not being managed in any tangible way.** This incredible outpouring of reviews is not being managed. Individuals are acting independently of one another and together provide an amazing resource.

▶ **People pay attention to strangers they'll never meet.** Yet, they still take the time to help out these strangers by describing their experience with a product.

▶ **People police each other.** In addition to taking the time to write reviews, people also help judge whether they found a given review helpful, thereby weeding out the bad (by pushing them to the bottom).

▶ **People openly identify themselves.** Even in this most public of places, where anybody could see what they're doing, most people freely identify themselves.

Given our common conception of how to get people to do work, many of these points are counter-intuitive. We've been taught that hard work is rewarded by an honest wage, yet people at Amazon are working for free. People aren't *supposed* to work for free. The value of customer reviews flies in the face of how economics is supposed to work!

The models that economists have created assume there must be an incentive for production, in plain terms *money*. So how could Amazon create such a large, stable, *valuable* system without paying any of their contributors even a penny for their efforts?

The conclusion we must reach is staring us in the face:

Amazon's reviews are about much more than money.

Indeed, the overwhelming success of Amazon's reviews is evidence of a way in which the web has produced a dramatic change in the world's economy. In traditional economic terms the mere existence of reviews just doesn't compute. Few existing economic models can accurately describe the value being given (or received) on Amazon.

Yochai Benkler, author of *Wealth of Networks*, a wonderful book describing these new economic changes in detail, notes:

> A new model of production has taken root; one that should not be there, at least according to our most widely held beliefs about economic behavior.
>
> It should not, the intuitions of the late-twentieth-century American would say, be the case that thousands of volunteers will come together to collaborate...
>
> It certainly should not be that these volunteers will beat the largest and best-financed business enterprises in the world at their own game.
>
> And yet, this is precisely what is happening...[2]

The Social Web

Of course Amazon isn't the only one designing for and supporting the activity of its audience in this way: it is merely one of countless examples of social design on the web. For the purposes of this book, we define social design in the following way:

Definition: Social design is the conception, planning, and production of web sites and applications that support social interaction

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[2]   Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*. Yale University Press, 2006.

personality. Sigmund Freud and his theories on the unconscious mind were in vogue. Most of the prevailing research assumed in one way or another that our inborn tendencies dictated our behavior.

But Lewin's research said different. He challenged the prevailing wisdom by formulating a simple yet profound statement to describe human behavior. The statement, which was expressed as an equation, of all things, thrust Lewin to the forefront of an emerging field. Indeed, Lewin is often called "the father of social psychology."

This is Lewin's equation:

$$B = f(P,E)$$

The equation says that an individual's behavior is a function of both their personality *and* their environment. While the classic nature vs. nurture debate asks you to take sides, Lewin's equation does not: it invitingly allows for both the person and their environment to affect what happens in a complex, yet profound, way.

From Environment to Interface Design

Lewin's equation highlights the tension between the individual and the environment. The environment, of course, is basically made up of everything that *isn't* us. That's an awfully big set of things to think about! However, we easily recognize several types of environments. One is the *physical environment*, which has a tremendous effect on what we do. When it's cold outside, we must put clothes on or suffer the consequences.

Other people and groups make up our *social* environment. And, perhaps even as much as the weather dictates how we dress, the actions of others affect how we behave. Imagine how many of our decisions are strongly influenced by what other people say or do. Just as the friend who made a product recommendation to our shopper on Amazon influenced her behavior, so we are profoundly influenced by the people we know and the groups we join.

In the software world there is even another kind of environment: the *software interface.*

The interface is the environment in which people work and play on the web. It is the arbiter of all the communication and interaction that takes place there. If there is an action available in an interface, then you can

perform the action. If an action is not available in an interface, then you're out of luck. While we are intuitively aware of this, just as we are aware of the weather, we rarely reflect on how much our behavior is determined by the interfaces we use. Almost all of it!

This sounds like the designers of the interface are in control! Not so fast. Designing an interface that evokes the desired behavior is a huge challenge.

If the interface is too confining, people won't use it.

If the interface is too flexible, people won't know how to use it.

In the middle, the sweet spot, interface designers can create powerful social software that supports the person and their personality, *as well as* the social environment and the groups they are a part of.

The Challenge of Social Software

Thus the challenge of social software is to design interfaces that support the current and desired social behavior of the people who use them.

Designing an effective interface has always been tough, even when we were merely designing interfaces for one person to interact with content we controlled. But when we add the social aspect, things get even more difficult. Though we can see glimpses, we have little understanding of the overall effect of social software going forward. In 1985, Howard Rheingold, writing about the nascent personal computer revolution, foresaw social software's massive challenge and potential for change:

> Nobody knows whether this will turn out to be the best or the worst thing the human race has done for itself, because the outcome of this empowerment will depend in large part on how we react to it and what we choose to do with it. The human mind is not going to be replaced by a machine, at least not in the foreseeable future, but there is little doubt that the worldwide availability of fantasy amplifiers, intellectual toolkits, and interactive electronic communities will change the way people think, learn, and communicate.[4]

Just as humans are social, so our software must be as well.

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4   Howard Rheingold's books are wonderful: Tools for Thought (http://www.rheingold.com/texts/tft/) and Virtual Communities (http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/). Though they were written in 1985 and 1993, respectively, they were *at least* a decade ahead of their time. Probably two.

Social Software is a Forced Move

The person shopping at Amazon in the opening of this chapter was relying on social connections to help her make a shopping decision.

She did this in two ways:

First, she asked a friend to recommend a digital camera. That friend, knowing her and her lifestyle, would recommend a camera based on his knowledge of her. Maybe the friend recommended a camera he had experience with. Or, perhaps a different model based on some difference he recognized between them.

Second, the person relied on an informal social network of people at Amazon who wrote reviews. She didn't know these people, yet she relied on them anyway, trusting them to deliver quality information. The trust in this case is present not because they are friends, as was true for the original recommendation, but because they represent the shared experience of shopping for a camera.

This study was merely the first time this phenomenon became clear to me. Since then, I have noted it in nearly all aspects of life. Voting, shopping, eating, reading, computing, driving… in these and all activities we ask others for help in making decisions. Relying on social networks is how the vast majority of decisions are made!

A Forced Move

This reliance on our social network is increasingly a *forced move*. Living in the *Information Age*, for all its benefits and wonders, is like drinking from a fire-hose. We have more information than we know what to do with, more than we could ever digest, and probably more than we can even imagine.

And a previous age, the *Industrial Age*, still has a strong effect as well. The ease of manufacturing at a large scale has caused a situation where we simply have far too many *things* to choose from. So now we not only have too much information, we have too many products as well. Often we don't have two or three options to choose from: we have *dozens*. And then there is a seemingly infinite amount of information about those products! There is simply not enough time to consider each option thoroughly.

To fight this deluge of information, we're turning more and more to trusted sources, whether they be in our own household or in other

social circles. Instead of trying to sort, filter, and weed through endless sources of information, we're focusing our attention on those we already trust, or those we have reason to believe might be trusted. We don't have much choice.

The Paradox of Choice

Barry Schwartz notes an interesting side effect of this problem: the Paradox of Choice.[5] He has found that when faced with such an overload we not only fail to make the right choice in many situations, but we often actually get paralyzed and make no choice at all! I remember a friend of mine was shopping for a digital camera several years ago, and decided to utilize several online price trackers to help him find the best model at the best price. He became paralyzed by the options. The paradox was realized: he ended up not getting a camera! He had to rationalize this by citing another reason (a change in financial situation) because on the surface, like any paradox, not choosing due to too much information seems irrational. It's not. It's human.

Ads, Ads, and more Ads

Another continuing effect of the Industrial Age is advertising, which is necessitated as the distance between the person with the message (often a business owner) and the person receiving the message (often a customer) grows. If you have a relationship with the person you're doing business with, your conversation with them (and their ability to help you) is all the advertising they need. But in an age where there is no personal relationship, no face-to-face contact, business owners need to get their message to customers in some other way, and that way is advertising.

Advertisers are always working harder to get our attention. It is said the average person sees anywhere from 500 to 3000 ads each day[6] and an average twenty-year-old has watched 30,000 hours of television.[7] It's hard to go anywhere and not see a plethora of advertisements: a few hours casual use of the web and TV per day and you'll easily see hundreds of advertisements.

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5   Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*. Harper Perennial, 2005.

6   There is considerable debate about how many ads people see per day, with the key issue being how many we notice vs. how many come into our peripheral vision. See more: http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?id=56750

7   http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue2_4/goldhaber/index.html

Bias, Bias, and more Bias

The problem with advertisements isn't just that they're distracting, it's that they're also *biased*: they don't represent a truthful view of the world. They're all about sell, sell, sell. When we see an advertisement, we're seeing an idealistic vision of the world that simply doesn't exist.

As the shopper on Amazon said in reference to the camera manufacturer: "I already know what they're going to say." This bias is simply unacceptable. To retain our sanity in a world of too many biased messages, we're being forced to rely on our social circles to give us sorely needed unbiased perspective. We'll go out of our way for an authentic conversation with someone we can trust. We don't want to know how excited someone is to tell us about *their* great new thing, we want to hear what *people like us* have to say. Just like the Amazon shopper.

The Attention Economy

Combine the increased number of items to choose from, the blitz of advertising, and the explosive growth of the web, and it's easy to see why we are swimming in information. Humans have never had to deal with such a situation.

In 1971, seeing the writing on the wall (and everywhere else), the insightful Herbert Simon described the inevitable outcome of this information onslaught:

> In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it[8]

Simon points to the real need here: we need to allocate our attention efficiently. In other words, we need to pay attention to what matters, and try to ignore what doesn't.

The *Attention Economy*, as it has come to be called, is all about the exchange of attention in a world where it is increasingly scarce. Much of what we do on the web is about this exchange of attention. To circle back to the reviews at Amazon, it is definitely about more than money: *it's* about *attention.*

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8   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attention_economy

A Many-Way Conversation (Social)

Next, as web applications became more sophisticated, designers tried
new feature sets. As people got comfortable interacting with them, and
as bandwidth increased and access became more pervasive, designers
started to enable *many-to-many conversations*. Feature sets evolved based
on which features survived in the new enviroment. Instead of just talk-
ing to the people who published a site, you could talk to all the other
people who visited it as well.

Early / static web sites

Characterized by static content
that people cannot interact with.

*One-way
communication*

Early web applications

Characterized by dynamic private
content that changes based on a
person's input. Communication
is solely between application and
person.

*Two-way
communication*

Social web applications

Characterized by dynamic
public content that changes
based on many people's input.
Communication is not only
between application and person,
but among people using the app.

*Many-way
communication*

Social web applications

Early web applications

Early/static web sites

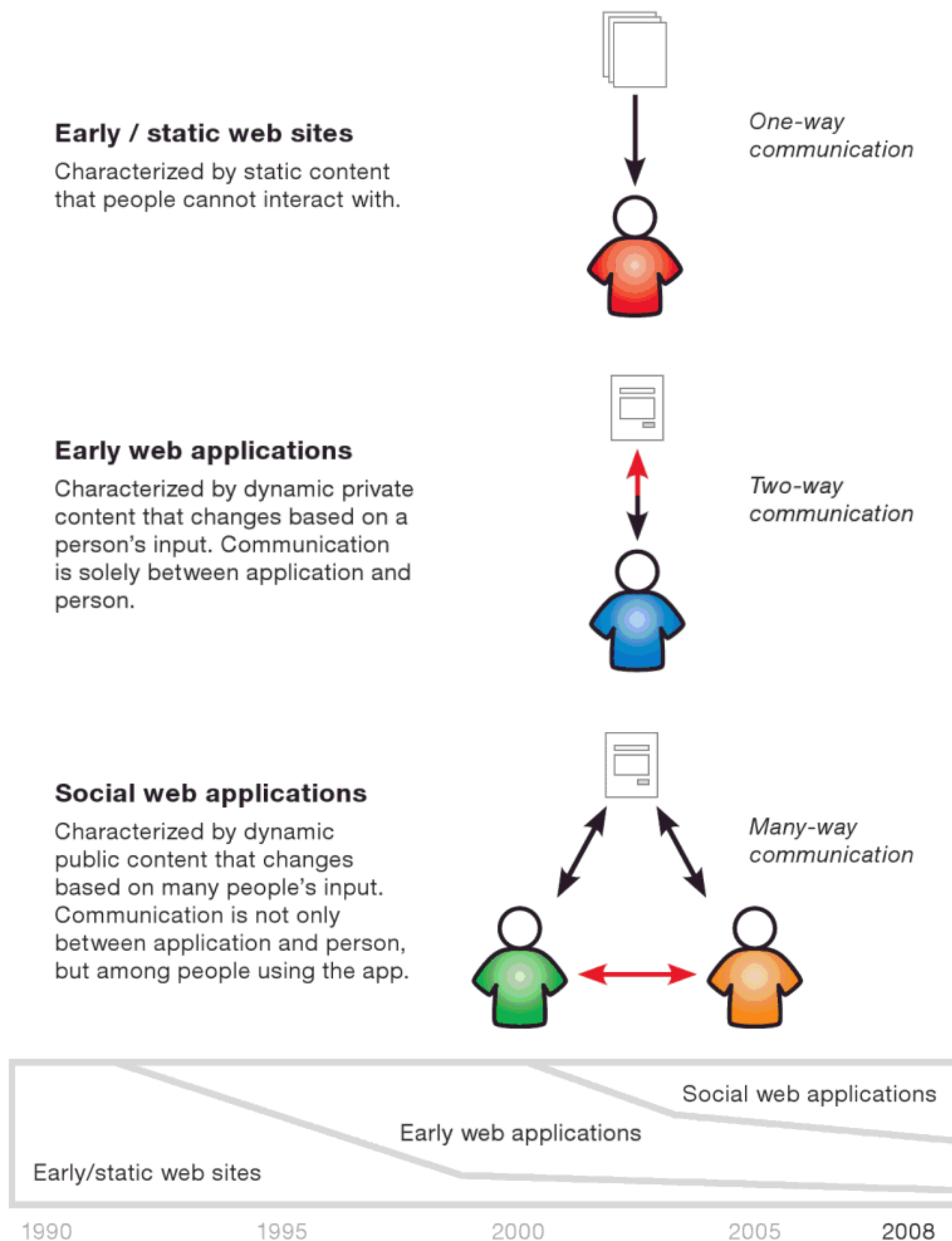1990   1995   2000   2005   **2008**

Figure 1.2 The evolution of communication from one-way to many-way on the web.

As the power and reach of the web became evident in the last part of the 1990s, designers started to refashion bulletin board systems for the web, taking advantage of the knowledge gained from those earlier attempts. One casualty of this porting was that the original BBSs largely faded away.

These many-to-many conversations were a small step technologically but a huge step socially. When you go from talking to one party (the site owner) to talking to many parties (other visitors) you enable, for the first time, *group interaction*. Group interaction is what separates a web application from a *social* web application.

Another recent step that has brought this change into clearer focus is *ego-centric software*. The rise of social network sites like Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook has put the person at the center of the software. While there has always been talk about *community* on the web, web software makes a much deeper set of social interactions available to us. You can friend people. You can follow them. You can even send people a kiss.

The biggest web properties are social

Social web applications are now everywhere. Consider the following list of names you know and love, all of which are in the top 30 most-trafficked web properties in the U.S.:[13]

▶ YouTube grew faster than any web app in history as **millions of people uploaded homemade videos**

▶ Wikipedia is a **collaborative encyclopedia** written by tens of thousands of contributors around the world

▶ MySpace is by far **the most visited social network property**, with 65 million people a month visiting in December 2007[14]

▶ eBay is an amazing ecosystem where **perfect strangers exchange billions of dollars** a year in auctions without meeting face-to-face

▶ The photo sharing site Flickr allows millions of people to **share photos** with friends and loved ones

▶ Craigslist provides a simple interface where people can interact easily and do things, such as post **classifieds**, that they used to do in newspapers

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13 According to Alexa, a useful tool for finding trends (but like all traffic measurement sites, any specific numbers from the site should be taken with a grain of salt).

14 http://siteanalytics.compete.com/myspace.com?metric=uv

▶ Facebook started on the Harvard campus by emulating an actual book handed out to freshmen (The Facebook) and grew into a behemoth of **social networking**

▶ IMDb aggregates the **movie ratings** of thousands of people to provide a helpful answer to the question, should I see this movie?

▶ Thousands of people on Digg, a social news site, **submit and rate stories** in an attempt to make it to the home page

▶ Google Search works by placing relevance on the **collective linking behavior** of the entire population on the web

▶ Yahoo's web-based Mail application is used by **hundreds of millions of people**

But those are just the biggest ones. Lots and lots of smaller social web applications are sprouting up as people get more comfortable with the idea of interacting socially. Here are some interesting ones:

▶ **Sermo.** A social network site that connects professional doctors in order to speed up information sharing and dissemination

▶ **PatientsLikeMe.** A social network site that provides support for people living with HIV, ALS, and others

▶ **Kiva.** A social network site that lets people in developed countries loan money to entrepreneurs in the developing world

▶ **Nike+.** An app for runners who can upload their personal exercise information and share with others

▶ **LibraryThing.** An app that allows you to upload and share your personal library and book ratings with others

▶ **RateMyProfessors.** A hilarious site that allows students to rate professors in a public forum for all to see

The Fastest Growing Web Properties Are Social

Social web applications are the fastest growing properties on the web. It's no wonder. Good social sites have social features that enable them to be shared easily. Their entire purpose is to connect people, and when they do that efficiently, they grow very quickly as a result.

YouTube, for example, streams over 100 million videos *per day*. One of its co-founders, Jawed Karim, notes very few people dispute that YouTube is the fastest growing web site in Internet history.[15]
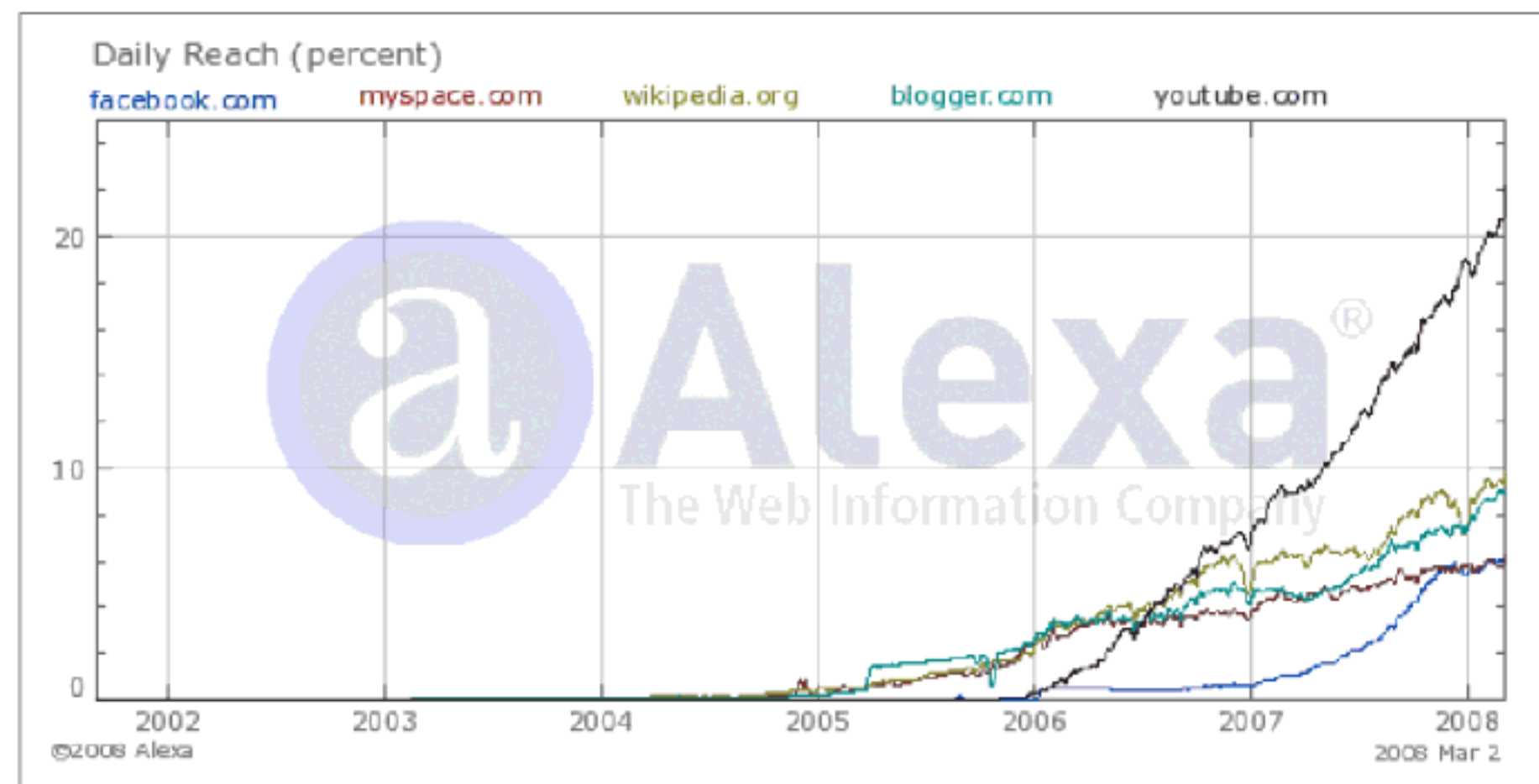

Figure 1.3 Social sites/applications/platforms are the fastest growing properties on the web.

Where Do You Spend Your Time?

Here's an amazing statistic:

In August 2007, over ten percent of the time Americans spent online was on a single social web app: MySpace.com.

With all the choices we have for where to spend our time, nearly twelve percent of all people's time is spent on a single site! In addition, a mere twenty web domains account for thirty-nine percent of our time online. Many of them are social web applications.

These numbers are startling for several reasons.

We are deeply attached. The average time per visit on MySpace is the length of a sitcom: twenty-six minutes.[16] And, since many people visit MySpace, Facebook, and other social network sites at least once per day, this lengthy stay is habitual. In other words, the social web is becoming a way of life.

We follow our friends. One of the more egalitarian promises of the web is that "every web site is equal." Any given site has just as much opportunity as the next one. But these numbers show that while this may be true in principle, in practice people strongly congregate where their social circles and their friends are.

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15 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nssfmTo7SZg

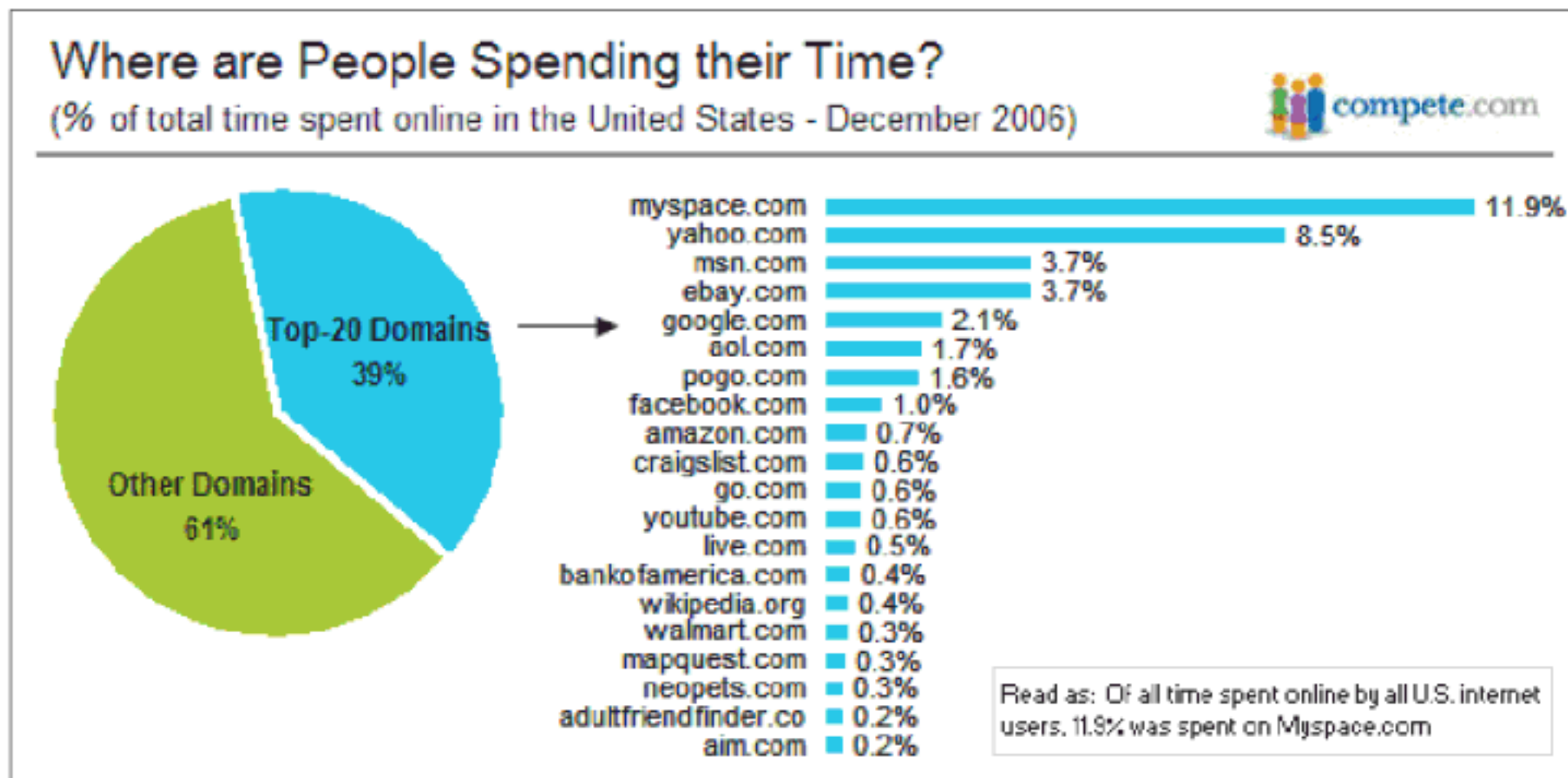16 http://blog.compete.com/2007/09/11/facebook-third-biggest-site-page-views-myspace-down/

Figure 1.4 This graphic from Compete, an analytics company, shows how mad people are about MySpace. 11.9% of all online time in the U.S.? That's insane!

Blogs!

In addition to the big name sites above, there are an estimated 100 million blogs on the web. According to the blog-tracking site Technorati, in March 2007 there were approximately 70 million blogs, with 120,000 blogs being added every day![17] By the time this book is published, the number of blogs on the web will be over 100 million.
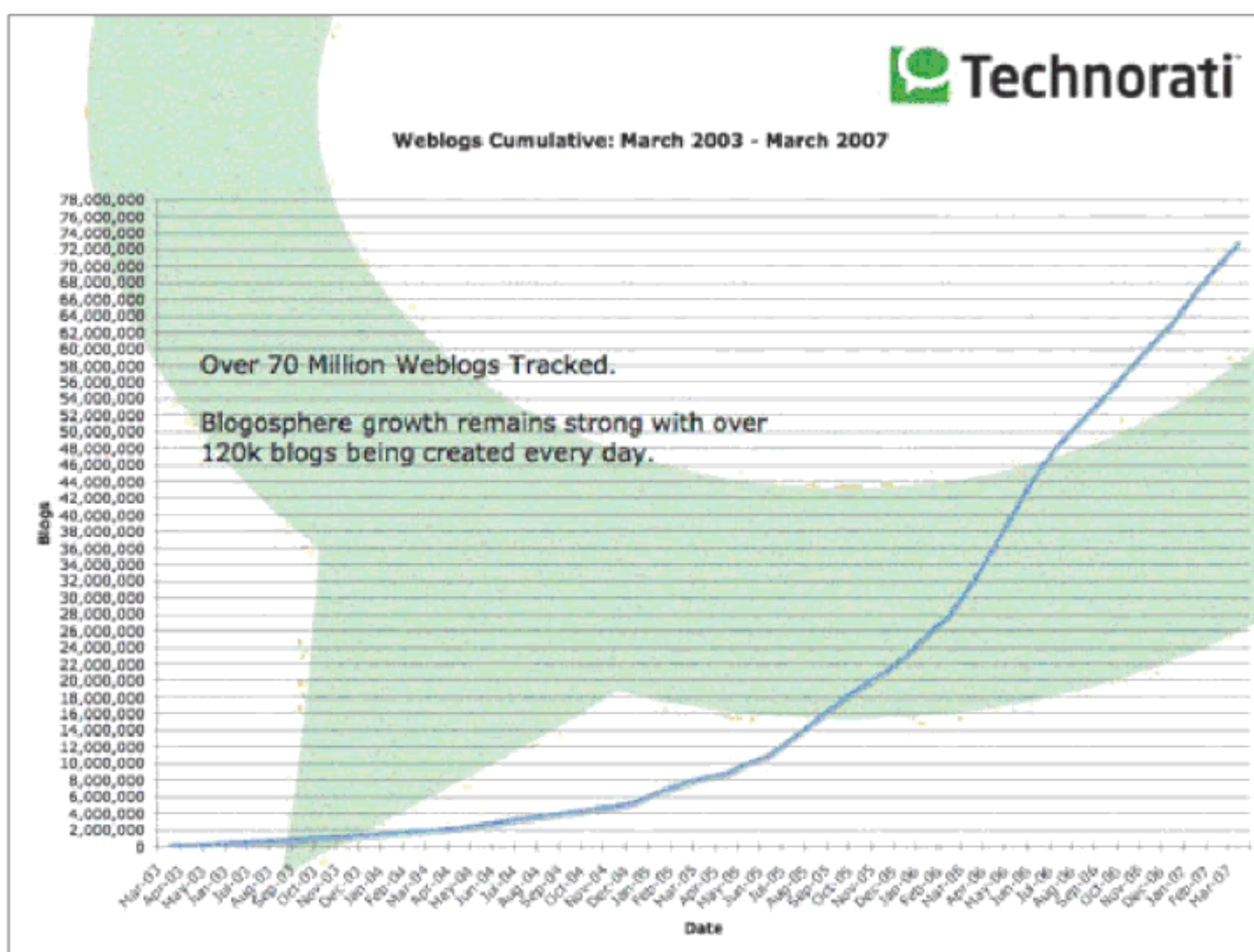

Figure 1.5 The number of blogs on the web is growing at an amazing rate, with no signs of stopping.

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17 http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html

To prevent feature creep, designers need to answer several questions early on in the design process. What is the primary activity our software is supporting? What features do we need to effectively support that activity? And, perhaps most importantly, what features can we leave out?

A lack of design focus can result from factors that seem, at first glance, out of the designer's control:

▶ **Competing interests**. Is marketing pushing one way, engineering another, and management yet another? When each part of a machine is geared to moving in its own direction, it hinders coordinated effort toward a common goal.

▶ **Political infighting**. Is arguing and disagreement stalling progress? Do team members disagree on major issues and refuse to budge? Do personalities clash?

▶ **Lack of audience clarity**. Do you know who to design for? Are you talking with them to find out exactly what their problems are?

▶ **Fuzzy strategy**. Does the strategic plan sound more like buzzword bingo? If you substituted someone else's strategy, would it change the way you do things?

▶ **No vision for success**. Do you know what success looks like? What has to happen to make you successful?
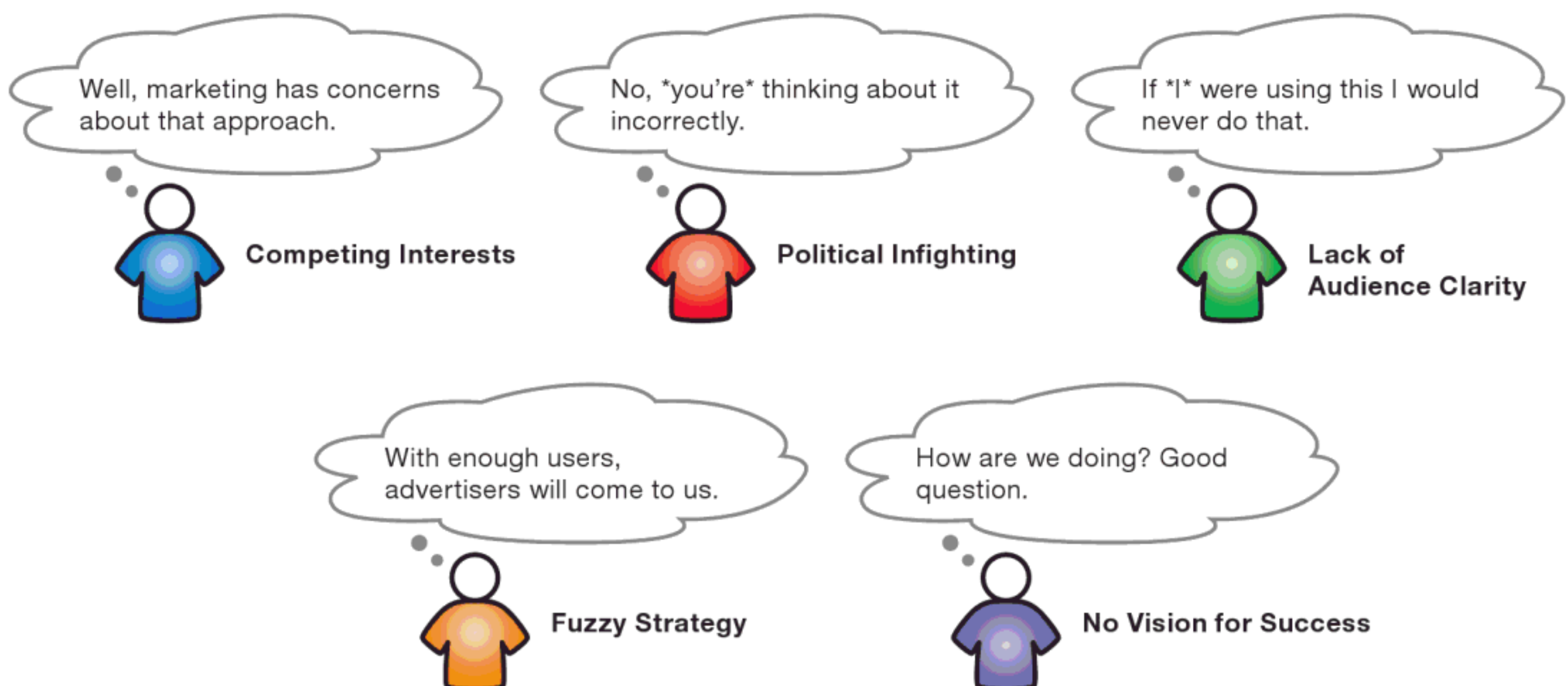

Figure 2.1 The issues that plague design teams come in many forms. A design framework can help focus a team on what's most important.

These issues constantly plague design teams. They serve to shift focus away from the design problem and cause frustration. Worst of all, they prevent designers from doing their best work.

A Prioritization Scheme

What design teams need is a way to prioritize and assess the value of proposed features. They need to know if a feature is worth the time and energy to implement and support. A prioritization scheme would help address the questions:

▶   Where should our design team focus its time and energy?

▶   What features should we consider adding? Improving? Removing?

▶   Will this feature set support our overall strategy?

▶   How do we get away from politics and competing interests and onto questions about the design itself?

The AOF Method

This chapter describes a simple prioritization scheme for designing social web applications that I call the *AOF Method*. AOF stands for **A**ctivities, **O**bjects, and **F**eatures.

The AOF Method is made up of three general steps.

1.   **Focus on the primary Activity**. The first question you must answer (and always abide by while designing) is: *What is your audience doing?*

2.   **Identify your social Objects**. Once you've got the activity down, you have to identify the objects that people interact with while doing that activity.

3.   **Choose your core Feature set**. From the activity and objects you can derive a core feature set, answering the question: *What are the actions people perform on the objects, and which are important enough to support in the web application?*

Focus on the Primary Activity

As a designer, it has been drilled into your head to "know your users." This sounds like great advice: pay attention to the people you're designing for. But when we actually start to do that, it becomes pretty clear that the number of things we *could* pay attention to is never-ending. If we were to actually know our users in the true sense of that phrase, we would have to follow them home, stay overnight at their house, and hang out with them on the weekend.

Del.icio.us Lesson: Personal Value Precedes Network Value

One of the earliest lessons I learned in designing for the social web was that personal value must precede network value.

What do I mean by this? We live in a networked world, with our software connected to the web for increasingly long periods of time. We can collaborate and share information in amazing new ways, ways that weren't possible even five years ago. With this new ability comes an excitement about the social value of what we're building. Network value is new and exciting.

In our excitement over new ways to connect, we must not forget that all software begins by providing personal value to the individual.

The social bookmarking tool Del.icio.us was the first site to implement the feature that has come to be known as tagging. With tagging, people add words or phrases (tags) to bookmarks, allowing them to easily refind bookmarks later. Tagging items allows the site to do really interesting things, like aggregate everyone's tags to surface what tags are most popular, as well as see what items are being bookmarked most often.

Early on in the history of Del.icio.us, much was made of the social value of tagging. I was swept up in the excitement, wondering how this new tagging thing would change the world. But, as Del.icio.us' founder Joshua Schachter repeatedly pointed out, the major value of the site was "memory first, discovery second." The personal value of saving stuff for later comes before any social value of discovery the site might provide. Without support for the activity of bookmarking, all of that interesting social stuff doesn't exist.[1]

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1   http://beth.typepad.com/beths_blog/2005/10/joshua_schachte.html

More important than knowing all about the *people* we design for, we should have a deep understanding of the specific *activity* we're supporting with our design. We should know all the steps taken in performing the activity, the decisions people need to make at each step, the influencing factors in those decisions, and what types of roles people are in when making them.[2] The time people spend using our design is the time they are doing some well-defined activity. The rest of their time on Earth, while interesting, doesn't affect our design very much.

For example, imagine we're designing software for photographers. What is helpful from a design standpoint are the similarities in what photographers do, not what makes them unique human beings. Many digital photographers want to upload and share their pictures immediately upon shooting. While they may each be shooting different subjects in different contexts, the activity of uploading and sharing is remarkably similar for each of them.

Thus the most important question we can ask is not "who is using your software?" but "what are people using your software doing?"

Only One Activity is Primary

Think about the software applications you use daily, the ones you rely on most. The most successful ones are focused applications that support one specific activity. Right?

Chances are you use email, chat, a word processor, a calendar, music player, photo editor, a spreadsheet, or some combination of those. You probably also use a web browser a lot. When you do go online, you probably encounter web applications supporting specific activities like banking, shopping, or managing your photos.

Simply put:

The applications people find most compelling allow them to excel at a single activity.

Consider the immensely popular site Flickr, which is focused on the activity of photo sharing. In personal terms, Flickr enables you to upload photos to share with family and friends. The designers at Flickr have added lots of features over the years, but they continue to focus on the same primary activity of photo sharing.

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2   Don Norman has advocated for activity-centered design, even suggesting that human-centered design is harmful: http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/humancentered_design.html

Another well-loved site is Etsy, which focuses on the activity of buying and selling homemade goods. Created as an antidote to eBay, the designers of Etsy focused on cultivating real relationships with the people who make the goods. All of the site's features revolve around that idea.

The more that sites like Flickr and Etsy focus on their primary activity, the more people seem to like them.

Kathy Sierra talks about this as the "I Rule" effect. The "I Rule" effect is when people start ignoring the software they're using and start to feel like an expert in what the software enables. You start to get a feeling like "I Rule!"

By focusing your software on a single activity, you make it much easier for the "I Rule" effect to happen. When your software is good at supporting its primary activity, like Flickr and Etsy are, then the person using it starts to feel great, not about your software, but about themselves. In Kathy's parlance, they become passionate users.

Identifying the Primary Activity

Unfortunately, identifying your primary activity isn't always easy. Try to answer this question:

What do people have to do in order for us to be successful?

If we were Amazon, we might answer: "purchasing goods." If we were Netflix, we might answer: "choosing movies to watch." If we were YouTube, we might answer: "uploading videos." These are the things that have to happen for these services to continue to be successful. But they are far from all that happens on these sites. They are critical tasks that make possible the larger activity. On Amazon, that larger activity is shopping. On Netflix, it's renting movies. On YouTube, it's sharing videos.

Goals, Activities, and Tasks

It is helpful to distinguish between goals, activities, and tasks. Goals are end conditions people are striving for. Activities are the set of tasks people do to achieve their goals.

Many times we focus too much on tasks instead of the larger activity. Instead of focusing on the task of "purchasing goods," it is more beneficial for design purposes to focus on the activity of shopping, as it better describes what's really going on.

Exercise: Researching the Activity of Shopping

Let's illustrate the value of research by doing an exercise. Let's imagine that you're building software that is going to support the primary activity of shopping. So start by writing down a description of the steps involved in shopping. Try to answer the question: what happens when someone shops? Don't read further until you have your list.

Actually make the list now.

A Normal View of Shopping

In describing the activity of shopping, most people will list four or five steps. Here is a list that I came up with off the top of my head. Let's call it the "normal" view of shopping.

▶   Recognize a need

▶   Consider the different choices of product that fulfills the need

▶   Choose a product

▶   Optionally, shop around for the best price

▶   Purchase the product

Your list will be slightly different, of course. But something like this is a basic shopping framework that most of us would come up with. Since most of us don't think about the activity of shopping in great detail, the steps we describe are high-level.

An Ethnographic View of Shopping

Ethnographers are people who study human activity. They know that you can't trust what people say, you have to observe what they do. They do *fieldwork* to understand what it is that people really do.

An ethnographer goes out into the wild and reports back. Here is what they might report when they observe someone shopping:

> We studied a woman (Betsy) who had several talks with her husband about upgrading their TV service to HD. He was all for it, but she was skeptical. Their conversations happened over the span of several months. She then heard about an HD TV from a close friend who had nothing but positive things to say. She started to seriously consider buying one, thinking that in addition to her husband's sports, an HD TV sounded like a better way to watch the nature shows that her children loved. She thought the product might be useful to her and her family. Betsy then decided that the family's 18-year-old TV had had enough. She and her husband made the decision to replace their aging TV with one of the HD TVs they heard about.