

## HEAR THAT? IT'S THE INTERNET IMPLODING.

It's also called Web 3.0. Over the next five years, the web will be less about individual pages and more about spinning trillions of connections between them. Metadata will allow information from one website to seep seamlessly into another. And the future of marketing will be won by the brands that can exist not just here, but everywhere.

If computer users of the distant digital future (say, five years from now) were to look back on us today, what would they think? They might refer to us digital neophytes as the "copy and paste" generation. That's because we are accustomed to working with web pages that have clearly defined boundaries. We go to a website of the restaurant where we want to eat. We find the address. We copy the address. We paste the address into Google Maps. We figure out how to get there.

The term "Semantic Web" was coined by the founder of the internet himself, Tim Berners Lee, all the way back in 1999. Tim envisioned a world where computers would, in his words, "become capable of analyzing all the data on the Web - the content, links, and transactions between people and computers. A 'Semantic Web' has yet to emerge, but when it does, the day-to-day mechanisms of trade, bureaucracy and our daily lives will be handled by machines talking to machines."

# EATING THE SEMANTIC WEB

## A MOUTH WATERING LOOK AT THE FUTURE OF THE INTERNET.

BY COLIN EAGAN - CREATIVE TECHNOLOGIST

Enter the Semantic Web. Increasingly considered the backbone of Web 3.0, the Semantic Web is a future vision for the Internet in which computers not only display data, but understand it. This allows information to flow seamlessly from one page to another based on contextual (or "semantic") similarities. Instead of needing to jump to Google Maps to enter your address, the Internet will already recognize the address on the restaurant homepage and automatically pull in a map to your house. And that's just Semantic bush league.

If we think about Web 2.0 of today, it is a bit like speed dating: webpages and users have a few minutes of face time, but that's it. Taken as a whole, there are no real connections between the people in the room. That's because computers are very good at displaying data, but not good at understanding the meaning behind it. When we do a Google search, the web server never really "knows" what we've entered, but simply looks for something similar elsewhere online. It's up to us to decipher the best match. As Plato observed, something may look like a chair, but it is only the intangible qualities we project upon it that give it "chairness."

The Semantic Web will give the Internet this more "human" ability. And we're already on our way there.

WEB 2.0 IS LIKE SPEED DATING. WEB PAGES AND USERS GET A FEW MINUTES OF FACE TIME, BUT THAT'S IT.

IPhones, for example, now recognize phone numbers in emails and turn them into clickable links. Similar features are appearing for addresses, where destinations are recognized and mapped. Many websites are beginning to add similar functionality using code called Microformats to tag specific content with pre-determined categories.

algorithms will help brands get a handle on who is saying what and how and why.

A second implication is much more personal – what brands know about you, the buyer. Soon we will each have unique identities that we carry around with us online. Facebook Connect is a good early example of this. Instead of reentering all your data on a new page, you can simply import everything automatically to a new location. Over time you can accumulate a digital footprint about tastes and interests. (Check out [Twine.com](http://Twine.com) for a good current approach).

This will provide a wealth of information for brands, indicating who are their most loyal followers, and who are the potential followers of tomorrow.

Of course, you're now asking isn't this getting just a bit too Big Brother? And the answer is, of course, yes. What's scarier is how semantic cognition will continue to evolve, and what personality it might take on. Austrian researcher Corinna Bath has even argued that as computers evolve intelligence they risk taking on a distinctly "male" persona, influenced unconsciously by male programmers (a similar bias to that found in the first phone books, which arranged information based on the male head of household.)

But the reality is that the semantic web is here, rapidly linking our 50 billion web pages. The question remains as to which brands will embrace the oncoming tide of information, and which will sit around, as *Clay Shirky* put it, "waiting for machines to become devastatingly intelligent."

Given the opportunity, would you take it?

The Semantic Web knew you were going to say that.

ON THE SEMANTIC WEB, COMPUTERS NOT ONLY DISPLAY DATA, BUT UNDERSTAND IT.

But what else could we do? Consider how the Semantic Web could help you save money online. Right now, before we buy something electronically, we might jump over to [CouponCabin.com](http://CouponCabin.com) or another site to scan quickly for a discount code. The Semantic Web, knowing what we are about to buy and where we are buying it, can automatically scan the entire Internet for any relevant code and input it for you immediately. No more blind searching on your part.

Or how about travel? If you're about to book a plane ticket the web can tell you not only if someone out there has a better price, but how prices might change based on historical trends, or changing gas prices, or the weather forecast. If you're about to buy a car, you can automatically see who has one for cheaper, and in what color. Anything on the Internet at any given point in time related to your search will immediately be brought to your fingertips.

So what does this mean to marketing and the brands who own it? Much. For one thing, the Semantic Web will finally allow brands to make sense of conversations taking place about them online. By wading through far-flung user-generated content, semantic

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