Berners-Lee calls for Web 2.0 calm

By Gavin Clarke in San Francisco
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Analysis Five years after the first internet bubble burst, we're now witnessing the backlash against Web 2.0 and a plethora of me-too business plans, marketing pitches and analyst reports exploiting the nebulous phrase.

Tim Berners-Lee, the individual credited with inventing the web and giving so many of us jobs, has become the most prominent individual so-far to point out that the Web 2.0 emperor is naked. Berners-Lee has dismissed Web 2.0 as useless jargon nobody can explain (http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/21/web_two_point_nought_poll/) and a set of technology that tries to achieve exactly the same thing as "Web 1.0."

According to this transcript (http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/podcast/dwi/cm-int082206.txt), Berners-Lee was reacting to an IBM developerWorks pod cast interviewer who'd categorized Web 1.0 as connected computers and making information available, and Web 2.0 as connecting people and facilitating new kinds of collaboration. Those who remember the empowering effects of Netscape and the moment email became more than just borrowing your mate's CompuServe account at work will also recognize such blanket assertions of historical revisionism for what they are.

Berners-Lee's words come as the hype around all things Web 2.0 reaches a zenith. Entrepreneurs hoping to become the next Google or Salesforce.com acquisition, marketing types desperate for a home run, analysts segmenting the market to sell research, and opinionated bloggers have, at the latest count, attached the phrase "2.0" to 12 other "concepts" or technologies.

We have: SOA 2.0 (http://www.infoworld.com/article/06/05/17/78420_HNsoa20_1.html), enterprise 2.0 (http://blogs.zdnet.com/Hinchcliffe/), grid 2.0 (http://www.beyondvc.com/2006/03/grid_20.html), VoIP 2.0 (http://www.voipnow.org/2005/09/voip_20_the_fut.html), voice 2.0 (http://iotum.com/simplyrelevant/2005/10/21/voice-20-a-manifesto-for-the-future/), BPM 2.0 (http://itredux.com/blog/bpm-20/), Office 2.0 (http://itredux.com/blog/2006/01/25/rules-for-office-20/) and - outside of pure technology - advertising 2.0 (http://www.paulbeelen.com/whitepaper/english.html) and marketing 2.0 (http://www.webmarketing20.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=Main.NewRulesOfMarketing) (both - naturally - taking advantage of Web 2.0's social networking technologies), business development 2.0 (http://www.unionsquareventures.com/2006/08/business_develo.html) and - subverting the genre - hidsight 2.0 (http://onstartups.com/Default.aspx?TabId=3339&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=800) and lunch 2.0 (http://www.lunch20.com/).

There are two common problems with Web 2.0 and its derivatives. The first is the desire to characterize Web 2.0 as unique technology with unique consequences for business.

Web 2.0 relies on technologies that have been around for years. Berners-Lee pointed out the things that drove Web 1.0 also underpin Web 2.0 - the document object mode, HTML, http, SVG, web standards and - because he's old school "Java script of course." Free Software Foundation chief legal counsel Eben Moglen recently concurred at this month's LinuxWorld, saying Web 2.0 owes its existence to software and development methodologies already established in open source.

"The phenomena of the empty buzzword called Web 2.0 can only exist because of the real layer for free and open source software underneath," Moglen said, letting the Web 2.0 crowd down gently.

Web 2.0 is, in Berners-Lee's definition, purely a blog and wiki thing. Reinforcing that idea is Andrew McAfee (http://ross.typepad.com/blog/2006/04/enterprise_20_1.html) of the Harvard Business School, who is actually credited with creating the phrase Enterprise 2.0. Enterprise 2.0 wraps up wikis, blogs, RSS and Ajax, according to McAffee. While the ingredients that makes this stuff have been lying around for years, what makes things so different is the way it's all coming together right now. Services are affordable, services are morphing to create social networks, and tools are helping filter blog and wiki content.

While enterprise software is indeed evolving thanks to blog and wiki technologies - well, at least so far as adding RSS to things like Microsoft Outlook and Windows goes - Enterprise 2.0 simplifies the complex history of, and relationship between, business and technology. Remember the PC revolution? Or what about remote working? Or e-commerce? Genuine milestones in the evolution of business because they fundamentally changed companies' structures and cultures. Yet these rate as incremental product version numbers somewhere between Enterprise 1.0 and Enterprise 2.0, apparently.

It's interesting to note Web 2.0 poster child Wikipedia may expunge (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enterprise_2.0) Enterprise 2.0 for a second time after the phrase was resurrected from the digital dead.

The other problem if you peak behind the Web 2.0 blog and wiki curtain is that you'll find the man pulling the levers is either an enterprise vendor or an analyst eager to sell to business customers. Of special interest to businesses should be SOA 2.0 and grid 2.0.

Weeding through the philosophizing on these buzzwords typified here (http://appside.blogspot.com/2005/08/patterns-for-soa-20.html) and here (http://www.gridtoday.com/grid/629435.html), you'll find some common themes: essentially that version 2.0 goes further than the original idea and also creates a greater degree of flexibility. Specifically, SOA 2.0 is about an event-driven architecture, not just a "client/server relationship", and uses "deeper semantics" pulled together "mechanically." Grid 2.0 is about sharing networks and storage resources, and data not just raw computing power.

While there is no single definition for SOA, the general thesis from the start was for systems to discover each other and work together reliably. That's why IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, Sun Microsystems and other companies large and small sweated through standards groups and the Java Community Process to devise the WS- specifications and Java APIs for asynchronous communication, secure and reliable delivery of messages, federated identity, and the development of enterprise services busses.

Grids have been around for years, mostly in academic and high-performance computing environments. Groups like the Global Grid Forum, backed by Oracle, Hewlett Packard, Intel, and AMD among others, and Globus Alliance have been working to make grids something businesses can also tap by devising standards, best practices, middleware and tools. The inherent problem with grid 2.0 is the philosophy behind grids has always been about harnessing distributed computing power. In other words, grid 2.0 is grid 1.0 because it re-treads an accepted concept by just adding more stuff.

What's really driving SOA 2.0 and grid 2.0 is hollow, buzzword-based marketing by companies trying to stand out in overpopulated and immature markets. On SOA, we have a general, high-level consensus in the absence of a single standards-based definition. Specifications for both SOA and grid are still being devised, and where specifications exist they are not fully implemented by all vendors.

This has therefore created a vacuum in which vendors and analysts make hollow and partisan marketing claims to stand out. So-far, only Oracle, backed - curiously - by Gartner believe in SOA 2.0. Systems heavyweight IBM, making its own hollow claims (http://www-03.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/page/SOA_Off_the_Record?entry=great_news_ibm_continues_to=) of having dominant market share in SOA, its number-one rival BEA Systems, and SOA cheerleader SAP do not appear to share the Oracle and Gartner view.

Judging by its staid LinuxWorld keynote, Intel is the only one banging the grid 2.0 drum. Oracle, the software grid champion, and possibly IBM would - you'd have thought - be among the first to recognize an evolution in grids if one existed. Not a chip manufacturer experiencing growing competition from grid evangelist AMD.

You should thank Tim Berners-Lee. Not just for giving us the web, but for articulating what's gone wrong in the lexicon and thinking of Silicon Valley. Hopefully, his standing in the web community will serve as a rallying cry for right-thinking individuals and true visionaries, and mean Web 2.0 is put in its proper context.®