

Will the development of Web 2.0 technology result in a preference for quantity over quality?

Over the last decade the world has experienced a rapid increase in the number of people using the internet for health information seeking and interaction. This increased demand for internet health information has led to the emergence of large volumes of unstructured and unregulated medical information found on the web. This web-based information is seldom the subject of systematic investigation for its accuracy and appropriateness for patients, highlighting the need for additional research into the field. The rapid development of the internet as a communication tool, and the accumulation of large volumes of information, makes locating valid information extremely difficult especially for those who lack ability to use computers and technology efficiently. A 1997 study examining 40 websites providing advice on the management of a feverish child found that only four of the websites adhered to published guidelines. These high volumes of unregulated internet health information are partly due to there being no agreed standard for the assessment and to ensure accuracy of information presented on the web. This paper addresses the issue of quality of online health information, and asks, as we move forward and develop technologies which emphasise content creation, will the issue of quality of online health information be exacerbated?

The emergence of Web 2.0 has facilitated many new online activities which could not have previously been achieved by the world wide web (Web 1.0) technology. Often referred to as the 'social web', it looks to increase social interaction by sharing content which is more easily generated and published by users. Many researchers believe this has implications for the future of healthcare, by enhancing the connection between patients, clinicians and health information. The use of blogs, podcasts and wikis can help to both communicate health information, and increase social support by providing a potentially anonymous space within which online interaction can take place. It also allows the information seeker to rapidly become the information provider, and share healthcare knowledge and experiences quickly and easily. However, this benefit of Web 2.0 technology may also be seen as a limitation when discussing information quality. For example, although health related Wiki's and blogs are an excellent way to share health information, their content can be added and edited by anyone, with a significant number being fuelled by lay users, most often with no professional experience of the health topic they are writing about.

This paper aims to discuss that while the benefits of using Web 2.0 to develop communication in healthcare and health education are clear, it is also necessary to consider potential issues, such as quality, which may be more present in Web 2.0's application to healthcare than other uses. This issue is made relevant due to the possibility of high volumes of inaccurate and misleading information being potentially disastrous within a health care setting, as it can be extremely distressing and potentially damaging for some health information seekers