Web 2.0 is a massive social experiment, and like any experiment worth trying, it could fail. There’s no road map for how an organism that’s not a bacterium lives and works together on this planet in numbers of excess of 6 billion. But 2006 gave us some ideas. This is an opportunity to build a new kind of international understanding, not politician to politician, great man to great man, but citizen to citizen, person to person.


Preface

‘Person of the Year’ is an annual issue of the American news magazine Time, featuring someone or something that “has done the most to influence the events of the year” [135]. The list of the last decade contains famous names such as Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin, Bono, and Bill Gates, just to name a few. However, in 2006, the honor went to ‘You’ [46]. Yes, indeed. You. If you did not invent a life-saving vaccine, or won the lottery that year and let everyone share in your gains, you are probably wondering what it is exactly that you did to deserve this...

The answer to this question lies with the ‘Web 2.0’, the umbrella term used most often to refer to the current generation of social web applications. The driving forces behind these applications are collaboration, interaction and information sharing; the key factor to their success being the users themselves, in other words: you and me. Without our enthusiasm and curiosity, the social networking site Facebook\(^1\) would not be so popular; without our movie ratings, the e-commerce giant Amazon.com\(^1\) or the movie rental system Netflix\(^1\) would not be able to recommend us a movie that we are very likely to enjoy; without our hotel reviews, only a few would think of consulting the travel guide TripAdvisor\(^1\) for their next holiday, and so on. The following quotation about the Web 2.0 sums it up nicely:

It’s a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It’s about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people’s network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It’s about the many wrestling power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.

The source of the quote is the cover article for the Time issue of December 2006. The authors decided that we had a great influence on that year’s events. You and me. Because we “control the Information Age”: thanks to our input, millions of users can freely look up information on the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, MySpace can make people wonder about other lives, YouTube becomes a way for common people to publish and distribute content online, etc.

But these are only a few examples. In fact, while looking up the Time article in preparation for this book, we came across several of the Web 2.0’s success stories: typing ‘2006 time magazine person of the year’ yielded over 18 million results on Google; the fourth and fifth hit were two influential blogs (online journals that are frequently updated) and the second one was a Wikipedia page, the textbook example of a wiki (a website where users can easily add or change content). The first hit was the magazine’s web page. On that page you could indicate if you wanted to share the article with your friends (on Facebook), if you wanted to ‘retweet’ it (via the micro-blogging service Twitter) or ‘digg’ the article (an application to discover and share content on the web). Clearly, the Web 2.0 experiment has not failed so far. On the contrary, four years after the publication of the Time article, social web applications are alive and very kicking.

Of course, not everything stemming from the Web 2.0 wave is wonderful and useful, and consequently the 2006 nomination caused some controversy. We, too, are skeptical about all these hip and shiny applications/toys/gadgets, but we are also convinced that it has brought us a lot of social applications that we can truly benefit from. In this book, we will focus on one such set of applications, namely social recommender systems. In particular, we will show how trust networks, a specific type of social networks, can enhance the recommendation experience.

This book originated from the doctoral thesis of the first author, which was successfully defended in June 2010. Encouraged by the enthusiastic reports of the committee members, we have decided to publish this book, and make the obtained results available to a larger audience. We are grateful to Etienne Kerre, Paulo Pinheiro da Silva, and Steven Schockaert for their comments and suggestions which have clearly influenced the results in this work. We also would like to thank the external members of the reading committee, Bart D’Hoedt, Enrique Herrera-Viedma and Ankur Teredesai, for their useful suggestions on the first version of the thesis, and Da Ruan for his help with the publication of this book. Thanks also

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³See twitter.com and digg.com
to Epinions.com and CouchSurfing.org for making their social network data available. Finally, we would like to thank the Institute for the Promotion of Innovation through Science and Technology in Flanders (IWT-Vlaanderen) for the financial support.