



humanizing computing

—by Ilse Genovese

Officially, the theme of the just ended O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference was the information glut created by computers and the Internet, and a trendy concept to solve it, "attention economy." Instead, adding human intelligence to computers, or, social computing, took center stage.

Social networking sites have been engaging people for some time, so what's behind the current trend of humanizing computers?

Created by another wave of start-ups, the new social media sites allow people to mix and match data from different Web sites and collectively organize what they find on the Web. In the process, people can forge new social connections online.

Aggregators such as Memeorandum, Netvibes, and Digg help people filter what they read and pull it into a central viewing area, often with a sharing component or group editing features mixed in. Other start-ups are putting to use data and software that the major Web players—Yahoo, Google, Amazon.com, eBay, Microsoft, and America Online—are now making available.

Yahoo, who has been the most aggressive in granting developers access to its services, recently added four more: photos, calendar, shopping, and bookmarks. That spawned all sorts of new services, such as Rollyo, a web site that lets people create personal Yahoo search engines. And with the launch of Yahoo Shopping's Paid Syndicated Program, a variety of creative superstores may pop up, presenting, for instance, a browsable boot display linked to songs in Yahoo Music.

Another quite startling mix-and-match Web site was launched, on trial, by Root Markets. Root [www.root.net] lets you grab your personal Web history from a variety of sites, including Amazon (your entire purchasing history), Google and Yahoo (your search history), and Del.icio.us (any bookmarks you save there). These data are stored by Root and displayed in an "electronic dashboard," along with every Web site you have visited. The dashboard becomes a detailed summary of your online activity, complete with their time and date, and a listing of "gainer" and "loser" sites, as well as the topics one pursues most often. As if this were not enough, Root also lets friends compare Web activity reports to see what each might learn from the other's online history.

The business model behind this social computing trend is still to be defined, but Root Market's founder, who calls the service "click-stream dating," has every intention to start the business by deploying Root as a sales-lead generator for mortgage and insurance companies.

[Based on "Web Tools Employ the Human Factor" by Leslie Walker, Business Section of The Washington Post, March 9, 2006]