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Keeping Up with the Web's New Lingo

With words being created, put to use, and accepted in the blink of an eye, they're becoming a challenge to the reference world's gatekeepers

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

The World Wide Web makes Tom Pitoniak's job harder. As an associate editor at Merriam-Webster, publisher of dictionaries and other reference books, Pitoniak must distinguish between words that legitimately should be in the dictionary and all that other matter sloshing around the English language: slang, industry jargon, onomatopoeic fillers, brand names, buzzwords, abbreviations, and the like. The new Web—flooded as it is with blogs, message boards, and Web pages containing the computer literati's conversations—is awash with such words. "It's kind of dizzying," says Pitoniak.

Telling the difference between a true word and a nonword was once as easy as reading. Time was, a cluster of sequential letters constituted a word if it appeared in printed sources a few hundred times or so over a few years and had an accepted meaning. Not anymore.

Wiki Wiki World

The ease and speed with which people publish their lingo online has diminished the ability to judge a word's worth by its written frequency. Within a few short months, a new slang term may appear on thousands—if not millions—of Web pages and blogs, Pitoniak says. Even a misspelled word can return thousands of Web pages on a Google search. "You have to make careful judgments and make sure that the word sticks around," says Pitoniak. "You do degrade the quality of the dictionary when you include words just because they sound trendy."

At the same time, Pitoniak and his colleagues must be wary of shunning accepted, commonly used terms. People turn to the dictionary for a host of tasks—from understanding the meaning of words they hear and read to settling Scrabble disputes. The book becomes dated if it lacks the ability to elucidate matters relevant to technophiles, even if they may seem arcane.

Hence, the inclusion of "wiki" in the latest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. The word, which stems from the Hawaiian phrase meaning "quick," now refers to a set of tools that enables online collaboration among groups.

New Language

Making judgments about terms related to new Web technologies and activities is particularly difficult. Online, tech industry, and marketing jargon easily spreads from the campuses and cubicles of the companies creating and promoting new Web products to the masses surfing the Internet. How much

of the lingo rises to the level of a commonly understood word is debatable. Does "vlog," the shorthand for "video blog," warrant inclusion in the dictionary? "Blog" is there, after all. How about "crog," a mash-up of "carefully researched" and "blog"? And for that matter, what about "mash-up," the term used to describe a combination of disparate software or Web-based applications, often from completely different sources (see BusinessWeek.com, 11/13/06, ["When Companies Do the Mash"](#)).

Pitoniak says a case could be made for all of these words. In fact, he might make the case himself if the terms remain in circulation and don't seem subject to changing styles. "You don't want to be too far behind the curve," says Pitoniak.

Erin Jansen, founder of online dictionary NetLingo, already has "vlog" and "mash-up" in her database. She updates the site every week with new techie terms and buzzwords that appear to have made the mainstream. The breadth of new words has made her feel as if she is in the midst of a language revolution. "People are writing more than ever and they like to use terms because it makes them feel like they are in the know," says Jansen. "It gives them a sense of empowerment that they are contributing to this new language."

No Popularity Contest

Though the language is new, people are not exactly slamming together random consonants and vowels to create terms. Many of the words have clear etymologies, arising in the same way words always have: by putting a twist on existing words or sounds. For example, "google" made it into Merriam-Webster's dictionary in 2006 as a transitive verb meaning to look up information on the Web using the popular, and massive, Google ([GOOG](#)) search engine. Google's brand name stems from the word "googol," which denotes the number 10 to the 100th power and was coined by the nephew of a U.S. mathematician in the 1920s. The verb "xerox" developed in a similar way from the Xerox brand copier. Xerox ([XRX](#)) got its brand name from xerography, a copying process.

"Astroturfing," another popular Web term stemming from a brand name, has an even longer history than "googling." The noun refers to the marketing practice of feigning an online grassroots movement to generate positive, seemingly-from-the-people publicity. It is a play on the Astroturf brand of artificial grass and the common expression "grassroots movement," which refers to a mass action by ordinary people. That term, in turn, stems from an analogy between grass, one of the most basic and fundamental plants to make up an ecosystem, and people, who are the basic building block of a society.

Other words are simply shorthand ways of describing new activities that previously took several words. Consider "IMing," the verb form of "instant message," so named because the messages written on IM services are seemingly instantly delivered to the recipient. "Blog" is just a truncated version of "Weblog," a phrase describing an individual's log of events or thoughts on the Web. The word "flu," short for "influenza," developed in a similar way.

An established pedigree, however, isn't enough to get a popular Web word in the dictionary either. There are higher standards. If all such words were included, "I would think the old 19th-century dictionary makers might be shifting a little in their graves, if not outright rolling over," says Pitoniak.

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