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29TH DECEMBER 2003

How the Internet has Changed Our Lives

It has been ten years since the Internet took its first steps towards becoming a mass medium in the UK, and five years since Nielsen//NetRatings started measuring online activity. It is almost impossible to overstate the extent to which the Internet has changed our lives in that time. Selected by Nielsen//NetRatings' European analytics team, the following ten websites and Internet applications are the ones we feel have had the greatest impact on the Internet and on society as a whole so far.

Google

This website is so successful it became a verb – search engine Google is not only one of the most-visited sites online, it is also the market leader in a fiercely competitive sector. Google's enormous coverage and speed of results has meant that the concept of search has expanded from looking for websites and reference material to hunting for personal details – 'googling' old friends or new ones.

What's next? The Google brand is expanding, buying web-publishing tool Blogger and launching a news service. But it is likely to face renewed competition in 2004.

eBay

What Google did with information, eBay did with things – pretty much anything you'd want can be found there, and the nature of online auctions means that the more people sign up to it, the more chance anyone has of finding what they're looking for. The result? eBay is now the largest e-commerce site in Europe.

What's next? We expect to see continued European growth – two-thirds of German surfers now use the site and the UK audience shot up during 2003. Other European markets are likely to follow.

Microsoft Outlook

No aspect of the Internet has changed the way we work more than e-mail. It's enabled 24-hour, global business to become a reality and it's revolutionised communication within companies too. Of all the things on this list it's probably the one hardest to imagine doing without. Unfortunately e-mail has its dark side – MS Outlook is the preferred carrier for unrequested spam e-mail and viruses as well as useful communications.

What's next? The war on spam will continue with international legal solutions being sought and increased popularity for software add-ons.

AOL Instant Messenger

Instant Messaging is being seen as the web's latest 'killer application' – a mix of online chat and mobile phone that's also speeding up and improving communications in the workplace. AOL was the pioneer in this sector, introducing most of the functions IM users now enjoy, though in Europe MSN Messenger is far more popular. IM's popularity is part of a shift away from the Internet as a public space and towards the web as a private communications tool.

What's next? All the major portals are looking to make money out of Instant Messaging. Also the current situation, with AOL users unable to communicate with MSN users, is reminiscent of mobile phones in the days before inter-network calls – some consolidation is likely.

Napster

Only time will tell whether Napster's newest incarnation as a paid download service is a success, but it's status as the original file-sharing network guarantees it a place in online history. Napster blazed a trail that Audiogalaxy and today's market leader KazaA followed. All the biggest file-sharing networks so far have



been dogged by legal issues but their impact on users is just as important as their impact on the record industry. Napster helped popularise the MP3 format and led indirectly to the current success of portable MP3 jukeboxes like the iPod.

What's next? The record industry will be waiting to see if any European sites can emulate the American success of Apple's iTunes in offering paid downloads. Napster will hope it is the one to do it.

Amazon

Despite some wild predictions, books themselves are much the same now as they were five years ago. But Amazon earns a place on this list for the way it sells them – Amazon, and other successful e-commerce ventures like Lastminute.com, have pioneered personalised selling, and sell hundreds of thousands of items through customised newsletters and recommendations schemes.

What's next? This kind of 'Social Software' is likely to become more sophisticated, so interactivity will be an even bigger selling point and sales driver than it is now.

Friends Reunited

If there's one site that changed the perception of the Internet in the UK, it's Friends Reunited. The Internet was suddenly no longer a geek's playground – normal people used it too, and not just any normal people: the people who you went to school with. The hugely successful formula has been used in most other countries too, and may be said to have paved the way for the wider acceptance of online dating and matchmaking services.

What's next? The idea of meeting people through the Internet is mainstream now and likely to stay that way.

Easyjet

Back in the days of the dot-com boom, e-commerce was talked up as an agent of revolutionary change in every business. But only in the travel sector did things really change. Easyjet's web-only business model and radical pricing structure led to a host of imitators and genuinely shook up the airline and holiday industry. Easyjet is still the number one online budget airline and the budget sector has prospered during a generally tough time for airlines.

What's next? More of the same – airlines have caught on to the potential of the Internet for filling unsold seats quickly and cheaply.

Kelkoo

Shopping comparison portal Kelkoo is one of the big European e-commerce success stories, helping millions of Europeans research and compare prices on a vast range of products and services at the best prices. Kelkoo is a great example of a service site that makes the rest of the Internet easier to use for the people.

What's next? As artificial intelligence grows more sophisticated, customised online 'companions' may play more of a part in people's web experience, hunting out the best deal or most useful information for individuals.

Blogger

Blogger is a tool that lets you publish your own 'blog', or web diary. The Blogger company was bought by Google this year, a sure sign that 'blogging' is moving further overground. Even if nobody you know has a blog now, in another year someone will. The significance of blogging is the way it allows communication on every level – politicians reach out to their public through their blogs, and the public 'blog' to share stories and pictures from their lives with friends.

What's next? The least mainstream of the sites on this list, Blogger is likely to move further into the limelight in 2004.



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About Nielsen//NetRatings

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