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The Digital Age

“The printing press sparked 600 years of ideology, scientific achievement, and discovery, all because it allowed for the exchange of ideas. The Internet is the printing press on souped-up steroids for superheroes” (Sterling, 2000; cited by Katz & Rice 2002, p2)

The Internet is the “physical network that links computers across the globe” (Chaffey *et al* 2006, p26) via wires, cables and wireless connections, similar to that of the telephone system (Strauss & Frost 1999, p4). This inherent interconnectivity of the Internet enables communication between computers worldwide on a vast scale (Chaffey *et al* 2006, p27). The World Wide Web (WWW; Web), a service made accessible via the Internet, is “the part of the Internet that can be surfed by following hyperlinks... with the click of a mouse” (Strauss & Frost 1999, p4) and was denoted by Bishop (1998 p126) as “a communications platform that operates over the Internet”. The WWW has transformed the Internet from a tool solely used by academics and technicians into an easy to use tool for everyone (Chaffey *et al* 2006, p26; Steinbock 2000, p225).

Gurval Caer (cited by Marketing Services Talk 2007) suggests that "during the past ten years, the evolution of the Internet has dramatically changed how organisations interact with customers". With the rise of Information Technology (IT) came the shrinking of the world, via the Internet and communications, resulting in a single global market for goods and services (Levitt 1983). This increasingly global scope and ever-increasing capabilities, achievable via the use of digital technologies, has not only created a platform that enables “businesses to interact with their market to an extent previously unwitnessed” (Haig 2001, p7) but, moreover, has changed “the way products and services are conceived, manufactured, priced, distributed and promoted” (Bishop 1998, p13).

The WWW quickly became the preferred interface for using the Internet, reinforcing its success by attracting “the commercial investment that fuelled its growth” (Strauss & Frost 1999, p4). It is accessed through Web browsers that create an interface with the information available on the Internet, enabling a user to display and interact with site content on different Web pages (Chaffey *et al* 2006, p27). Some of the most commonly used and currently available Web browsers include Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, Apple Safari, and Opera (DediPower 2008; Jesdanun 2008).

The Internet is still a relatively new medium - a ‘platform’ that “for the first time in our history... provides a medium through which written and spoken words, as well as images can be communicated and exchanged” (Castells 1996, p328). These “multimedia characteristics” (Palanisamy & Wong 2003, p15) create opportunities unavailable through prior communications media; a venue where interaction can occur, in an intimate setting (Strauss *et al* 2006, p9; Nicovich & Cornwell 1998, p148; Katz & Rice 2002, p13).

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