

# **How Does E-Reality Influence Behavior and Attitude Change?**

## White Paper Exploring on How Internet Technologies Are Shaping our Society

By Steve Lin, Intern and graduate of Harvard University

Edited by Ira Yellen and Alison Karam, First Experience Communications

### **What Is E-Reality?**

Throughout history, there has been consistent documentation of how nature and social forces impact people. What is more important to understand in this day and age, is how the Internet affects us as social beings.

E-Reality is the domain of influence the Internet has in determining what people believe to be true and how that impacts behavior and attitude. This white paper interprets the process of E-Reality by discussing recent developments in 1) how people communicate and exchange information and 2) how people form perceptions and opinions of organizations and institutions.

### **The Changing World and Web 3.0**

In the real world immediately prior to the Internet era, communication was a manageable activity. The extent of our inter-personal interactions were limited by the number of people we would meet up with or reach by phone during the day. Our knowledge base was also limited by what we would read about and see in the physical world.

With the Internet as the most pervasive form of media, the world is changing and changing fast. Web 2.0 describes this wave of Internet technologies that came about after the first dot-com bubble burst at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Compared to their Web 1.0 predecessors that mostly offered information and limited interaction, Web 2.0 platforms such as blogs, Wikipedia, and downloading resources like BitTorrent place the control and focus on the millions of Internet users and thrive off of constant and active participation.

Increasing numbers of Internet users and levels of interaction have clear implications for how people behave and generate attitudes online. The synergy of Web 2.0 interfaces that defined when the Internet creates a massive consolidation of space and time that allows for more communication to take place, more relationships to be made and more information to be shared than at any other point in human history.

This creates an information vortex, which people eagerly fuel by sharing their knowledge and opinions through collaborative information networks such as blogs, BitTorrent and Wikipedia. It is easier for people to contribute ideas to a global network and access the opinions of others throughout the world.

Now with Web 3.0 a supposed third generation of Internet-based services that collectively comprise what might be called 'the intelligent Web'—such as those using semantic web, microformats, natural language search, data-mining, machine learning, recommendation agents, and artificial intelligence technologies—which emphasize machine-facilitated understanding of information in order to provide a more productive and intuitive user experience.

### **How Does E-Reality Influence Behavior and Attitude Change?**

Now that we have discussed what E-Reality is and how the Internet is propelling globalizing and inter-connected societies, we can now begin analyzing the main question at hand: How does E-Reality influence behavior and attitude change?

In regards to the interactions of people with one another, there is now much more real-time communication and information exchange and that is essentially occurring 24/7. People in general now maintain all kinds of relationships, and have direct access to endless amounts of information.

While more may be better than less for some aspects of communication and information, the reduction of space and time to mere feet and seconds means that people are becoming more accustomed to faster and faster results and interactions.

E-Reality causes people to generally engage in less concrete and less tangible relationships that are ultimately becoming, in a sense less human.

Regarding the development of attitudes, people are increasingly forming perceptions of organizations and institutions based on what they come across on the Internet. With more communication and information sharing being conducted via the Internet, people are becoming less concerned with whether or not what they “see” on the Internet is actually “reality”.

Especially with features like blogs and Wikipedia, the Internet is fueling a trend in which the web interfaces allow for a bottom-up flow of credibility to be created, as opposed to the traditional top-down establishing of legitimacy by formal organizations and institutions. Without a doubt, people are now much more easily influenced by their peers.

E-Reality causes people to take more initiative in offering their insights and to give more credibility to collective information.

### **What Is E-Reality’s Impact on Real World Issues?**

While E-Reality is a growing and developing process in itself, it doesn’t mean that it cannot have clear consequences. E-Reality is a fairly subtle process to detect and understand, but it can cause some powerful things to happen.

In August 2006, Virginia senator George Allen called out a college student from a crowd by using a racial slur. That student happened to be filming all of senator Allen’s campaign speeches for a political rival, so as fate would have it, senator Allen’s derogatory use of a racial slur was documented on tape.

That video clip found its way onto YouTube, and the world knows about what senator Allen said to the student. As a result, senator Allen quickly became a target of public scrutiny and became a political liability, and was no longer being considered a 2008 presidential candidate.

In early September 2006, Facebook launched a real-time news feed that began documenting very detailed specifics of students’ activities on the website. Things like commenting on someone’s profile, befriending a classmate, and adding information to one’s “Favorite Music” list started becoming even more public and announced.

A Facebook-wide group called “Students Against Facebook News Feed” formed immediately, and membership grew to over 740,000 students in just half a week. In just about that much time, Facebook officially responded by apologizing and then explaining the new privacy controls that would allow students to control what actions they made on Facebook would be publicly documented on the news feed.

### **How Will People Decide What’s Trustworthy on the Internet?**

Neither the senator Allen scandal nor Facebook frenzy would have happened if not for E-Reality. The video surfaced and was viewed thousands of times because of the real-time, information-seeking Internet users driving the success of YouTube. A Facebook group comprising almost ten percent of the eight million total users would not have formed in a matter of days if students didn’t feel an imminent threat that the control over their own information was being taken away from them and handed over to the formal institution of Facebook.

From these examples, we know that YouTube and Facebook are two somewhat trustworthy Internet platforms. Viewers believed the video clip of senator Allen's racially insensitive comments, and students' strong reaction to the news feed revealed how trustworthy Facebook was before the trust was temporarily broken.

But for most websites on the Internet that don't necessarily have strong foundations of communities based on active user participation and interaction, how will credibility and trustworthiness be established? As interactions among people are occurring faster and more frequently and as attitudes towards organizations and institutions are increasingly being formulated based on tenuous perceptions, it is now more important than ever to understand E-Reality and how it can bring about both negative and positive results.

### **What Does E-Reality Mean for the Future? Is E-Reality the New Persuasion Tool for Marketing and PR Strategies?**

People are social beings. With the Internet making our lives more fast-paced and information-packed, our society is evolving more rapidly by the second. If someone e-mails you or comments on your website and you're slow to write back, will that person interpret your slow response as disinterest and apathy? If someone visits your website and experiences lack of relevant information and speedy interaction, will that person view your organization as negligent and irresponsible?

While figuring out how E-Reality influences behavior and attitude change, an equally and perhaps more important question is, "How aware are you of the new E-Reality?"

If you've read this position paper, you should now be able to state that you are aware of and concerned about E-Reality. Although it is a simple process compared to the biological and physiological processes that naturally govern ourselves, E-Reality is a very meaningful process that can be discovered by anyone willing to understand it. This new E-Reality of the Internet is a very real thing, but it will never completely replace reality as we know it, that is, unless it progresses faster than we can – or are willing to – keep track of and make sense of it.