Democracy in the decade of Google

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'This is the greatest explosion of access to information, the potential for creativity and the ability to connect and communicate the world has ever seen.'

 Steve Jobs, Chief Executive Officer of Apple computers, stands by a projection of the iTunes website as he launches iTunes in Great Britain, Germany and France, 2004. Photograph: Ian Waldie/Getty Images Ian Waldie/Getty

Try to think back to your life at the end of the last century. What was it like? Do you remember listening to music on CDs? Owning a phone primarily in order to make phone calls? Going to a library to search for information? Buying a map when embarking on a journey? Now compose a list of 10 ways in which your life has changed since. Here are mine:

**1**[**Google**](http://www.google.co.uk/) In 2002, this was still a bunch of visionaries without a business plan. In just under four years, it went from earning nothing to earning $20bn a year. It accounts for 70% of all searches for information in the world. In October 2006, it splashed out $1.6bn for YouTube, another company without a business plan that was itself barely 18 months old. YouTube now notches up 1 billion searches a day. During the first nine years of the 21st century, American newspaper revenues declined by roughly 50%. Google is on a grandiose journey to digitise just about every word, painting, note, street, mountain, stream, ocean, book, newspaper, animal, insect, photograph and email that ever existed. "Google" passed into common parlance as a verb in around 2002. You google, I google, we all google. It is the most revolutionary word of the decade.

**2**[**Wikipedia**](http://www.wikipedia.org/) How do I know that the first recorded use of the verb "to google" was 8 July 1998, and that Google itself initially used lawyers to discourage the use of the word-as-verb? From Wikipedia – the half-baked, crazy idea of Jimmy Wales (and others) launched in January 2001. How could such a stupid notion – an encyclopedia written by anyone and everyone – ever work? Whatever next? Short answer: the English-language version now has 3 million articles and 1 billion words (which is – according to Wikipedia – 25 times the size of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

**3**[**Twitter**](http://twitter.com/)Another really stupid idea. As if anything worth saying could possibly be said in 140 characters. Who are these sad people who want to know that some other sad person is waiting for a bus or has just changed a nappy? OK, so there are roughly 18 million of them, but what on earth do they talk about? Yes, people still write/say that. Smarter people recognise that Twitter is one stage on from Google – applying human intelligence and recommendation to the ordering of information… in real time. It makes algorithms look so 1990s.

**4**[**Comment Is Free**](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree) A plug for the home team here. Launched in March 2006, CiF inverted the traditional model of newspaper comment. That model went as follows: a small number of columnists opined on politics, culture and events. The readers responded by letter or email: a tiny proportion of that response saw the light of day. This assumed if you were, for example, a New York Times reader, that [Thomas L Friedman](http://www.thomaslfriedman.com/) was the one voice you wanted to hear on Venezuela, the Middle East, Russia, Rwanda, Italy, China and Afghanistan. Comment Is Free started from the assumption that – with intelligent editing and moderating – there were thousands of people with voices and opinions worth hearing and that something powerful, plural and diverse could be forged from combining a newspaper's columnists with those other voices. Millions read it every month; around 100,000 actively take part. Work in progress, but it's difficult to imagine ever going back to the old model.

**5**[**BBC iPlayer**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/)Launched at the end of 2007 and – again – already it's impossible to imagine life without the ability to view, or listen to, programmes in your own time. And, of course, that leads to the really radical thought that one day anyone will be able to access any BBC content created at any point in the last 70 years via the iPlayer… for free. Unless [James Murdoch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Murdoch_%28media_executive%29) has really got [David Cameron](http://www.conservatives.com/People/David_Cameron.aspx) and[Jeremy Hunt](http://www.jeremyhunt.org/) in some kind of headlock, in which case you'll have to pay for it. Assuming the BBC still exists in any recognisable form.

**6**[**iPhone**](http://www.apple.com/uk/iphone/) Launched in June 2007. Can you remember the moment when you first held one? The involuntary gasp as you saw what it could do? The touch screen, the rotating screen, the zooming screen! The satellite street view, the maps, the iPod and phone all in one slick sliver of beauty. And that was just the start.[Jonathan Zittrain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Zittrain), the enormously brainy Oxford-and-Harvard web guru, denounced the original iPhone as "sterile" – on the basis that it was a device that only Apple could improve or change. That was way back in June 2008, since when 1 billion iPhone apps have been downloaded and the only limit to what a mobile phone could become is human imagination itself.

**7**[**Craigslist**](http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites) Until 2000, this classified advertising database existed only in San Francisco. Come the new millennium, it expanded into nine more US cities. It is now in nearly 600 cities in more than 50 countries (thank you, Wikipedia). I remember a Guardian Media Group board meeting when one of our in-house digital gurus patiently explained its business model – essentially, free to both advertiser and reader. It then operated from a small building in San Francisco and had 17 employees. I sat there thinking, "This is the beginning of the end for local newspapers." Nothing has happened since to change my mind.

**8**[**Facebook**](http://www.facebook.com/) All the silly things people say about Twitter (see above), they said about Facebook. And still do. What a pointless waste of time! Who are these people with empty lives? Etc etc. It is so pointless that there are now more than 300 million people active on the site, doing their pointless things. But, really, to think that, you would have to think it was pointless to want to connect, to create, to share creativity or thought, to discuss, to collaborate, to form groups or to combine with others in mutual interests or passions. If you can't see the point of any of those things, you will not see the point of Facebook.

**9**[**iTunes U**](http://www.apple.com/education/mobile-learning/)Launched in May 2007 and still relatively unknown. The theory is that every university in the world – most of them benefiting from significant public funding – can share all their course lessons, lectures, language classes and laboratory demonstrations with everyone else. For those who haven't discovered it, you find it through iTunes itself. Tap in any search term you want, and it will deliver you content from all the partner universities, which you can then carry around with you on your iPod or iPhone (see above) to listen to on buses, at airports, on long car journeys or (if you are insomniac like me) throughout the night. Take the [Workers' Educational Association](http://www.wea.org.uk/) (WEA) and the [Open University](http://www.open.ac.uk/), and multiply by 10,000.

**10 [Spotify](http://www.spotify.com/en/" \o "Spotify)** Launched generally only eight months ago, Spotify is even more life-changing than iTunes, with a library of six million tracks, including a remarkable amount of really quite esoteric classical music. It is – at least at the time of writing – all free, providing you don't mind putting up with the occasional advertisement. Was there really a time when, in order to listen to a particular concerto or symphony, you had to either buy it or scan Radio Times to see if Radio 3 had scheduled it? Incredible to think of those dark ages. Now – so long as you don't mind not "owning" music – you can listen to more or less anything more or less any time. A small Eee PC, hooked up to your sound system, will cost no more than a mid-price tuner. A lifetime of musical exploration beckons.

I make no claims for all of these being the most significant developments in communication over the last decade. They are simply 10 of the inventions and launches that have most affected me. I would find it hard to imagine returning to a life without any of them. Between them they have created the greatest explosion of democracy; access to information; potential for creativity; and the ability to connect and communicate the world has ever seen. They are, each of them, profoundly disruptive and revolutionary, and with consequences that will ripple on through time future. Some (most?) may be transitory, to be replaced by even more transformatory innovations; some more permanent. In just under 10 years they – and millions of developments, technologies and websites like them – have changed the world profoundly.