

Wired youth

Helping young people use technology wisely



Designpics/Kristy-Anne Glubish

by Andrew Brubacher Kaethler

A thirteen-year-old boy sits in the back pew of church playing a violent video game on his PSP (PlayStation Portable) while the pastor preaches about forgiveness.

A fifteen-year-old boy is caught texting during a test at school.

A fourteen-year-old girl's parents require her to stay home for her younger brother's birthday party; she is there in body only, spending her time texting friends who are at the mall.

A youth pastor reports that some young men have confessed to being addicted to Internet pornography.

A sixteen-year-old girl breaks up with her boyfriend by setting her "Relationship Status" on Facebook to "Single."

These snapshots point to some important issues that require our attention, but there are three reasons we do not need to feel threatened by young people's embrace of technology.

Youth intuitively prefer face-to-face relationships.

The first is that youth are not the only ones who misuse technology. Teens are to the church and society what amphibians are to the Amazon—they are ecological barometers, early indicators of stresses on the larger ecosystem. It is true that negative aspects of adult life are amplified in youth culture, but positive aspects are as well.

Second, the problem is not with technology itself, but with people making bad choices when using it. Youth tend to use technology exactly for the purposes for which it is designed.

Third, when we narrowly define technology as electronics and communication devices, we fail to see the vast influence that all forms of technology have on our relationships with God, with others, and with creation. Electronic devices are merely passing artifacts of a culture that has long been shaped by technology.

How youth relate to technology

Most youth are not impressed with electronic technology. They are not wowed by PowerPoint presentations or iPods just as most older adults are not impressed with flush toilets or electric lights—also forms of technology. Like adults, however, youth are drawn to the novelty of gadgets and to the status associated with possessing them.

When problems arise with how youth use technology, such as for texting during church or class, we often assume that they are misusing technology. Youth, however, tend to be honest users of technology in the sense that they use devices exactly for their intended purpose. For example, many electronic devices are designed to be portable. That is the main point of PSPs and cell phones—to bring entertainment and communication everywhere. Whether church or school is the

appropriate time or place for the use of this technology is irrelevant in the design of the device.

Most communications devices are designed to facilitate remote communication. Social networking sites and text-messaging services are designed so users can communicate without being face-to-face. They are designed both to connect people who are far apart and to add distance between people who are near each other. The young person who ends a relationship by setting her Facebook status to “Single” is using the device for its intended purpose.

Most text-based devices are designed to minimize manual input. The more portable a communications device gets, the more conventions for word spelling and sentence structure that consume time and space become undesirable. “C u l8r” is the more desirable version of “See you later” because the device is designed to make it so.

We can create rituals like a weekly technology fast and spend time with family outdoors.

In spite of their interest in technology, youth intuitively prefer face-to-face relationships. They recognize the value of being together and of physical presence. Because of the physical changes they’re going through, teenagers are highly aware of their bodies and of the powerful feelings and desires that are core to being human. The identity that they are developing is continuous with as well as distinct from the identity of their parents and community. The developmental tasks of adolescence require real relationships and physical presence with adults and peers. There is no digital substitute.

Despite real concerns about Internet stalkers and relationships forged online, the vast majority of digital communication by youth is to facilitate gatherings and to maintain existing relationships with friends and family. In the extreme cases in which unhealthy relationships are formed on the Internet, there are almost always significant stresses in real relationships that drive youth to the Internet in search of connection.

Technology can become an idol, but youth do not need electronic technology. They only think they need a new cell phone or mp3 player when adults build an altar to technology and prostrate themselves to a consumer god. Parents who spend nonoffice hours working at the computer and checking their Blackberry compulsively, or who talk on the cell phone as they drive instead of talking with their children, are all complicit in perpetuating a culture in which youth think that technologically mediated relationships are the most desirable.

Technological patterns of relationships

Although youth are not impressed with technology because they take it for granted, technology makes an impression on youth in the way a coin press makes an impression on a piece of metal.

Efficiency is the mask that an idolatrous technology wears. In our consumerist culture, we seldom pause to ask if we are doing the right things, but we frequently ask whether we can do what we do more efficiently. Instead of changing our behaviors we simply adopt a more efficient technology. For example, as energy resources become rarer and more expensive, we are encouraged to buy more energy-efficient vehicles but not to live closer to work and to church.

One of the problems with living in a culture that values efficiency is that we apply this value to relationships as well. The truth, however, is that there is nothing efficient about relationships with each other, with God, and with the created world. Relationships are never easy; they take hard work. Relationships are never safe; they require vulnerability. Relationships are never quick; they take time to form and maintain. Relationships are not easily portable; they require commitment to a particular time and place. In the long run, the love of efficiency that is behind our embrace of technology weakens rather than strengthens our ability to worship God and to care for the earth and other humans.

Educator and philosopher Marshall McLuhan has observed that each time a new media or communications technology is introduced, four things happen: a human capability is enhanced or extended, a previous technology is made obsolete, an earlier technology is revived, and the technology reverses into itself, causing the opposite of the desired effect. E-mail, for example, extends human speaking, makes letter-writing obsolete, revives the telegraph, and becomes the opposite of efficient communication when inboxes become cluttered with unwanted messages.

McLuhan reminds us of two very important notions. First, the way we communicate is more important than the content of the communication. Second, with every technological development something is lost and something is gained. An entire generation of young people will date without exchanging letters, a form of communication that is more intimate and more expressive than e-mail and text messages and requires more patience. Fewer youth will play musical instruments because it is much cheaper to buy and use an iPod than to purchase an instrument and learn to play it.

Youth need to discern whether the payoff for a technological advancement is worth the price. Discernment will prevent them from blindly assuming that all technology is progress, that all progress is desirable, and that those who invent or manufacture new technologies are the best judges of whether they should be adopted. Youth need to know that just because we can do something doesn't mean that we should do it.

Because youth can readily adopt new technologies while they are at a crucial stage of identity and faith formation, they stand to lose the most from the distorting incursions of technology into relational existence. The aggressive marketing of communications technologies not only can distract youth from thoughts and practices that are of God, but can also shape young people into consumers of relationships as well as products. The risk is that relationships will be reduced to a means by which to fulfill personal desires.

Incarnational youth ministry

In stark contrast to the technological pattern of relationships in our time is the incarnational pattern that God offers us in Jesus Christ. There is nothing efficient about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' ministry was not easy; it was hard work calling and training the disciples and confronting both Jewish and Roman oppression. Jesus' ministry was in no way safe; it required vulnerability and cost him his life.

In the gospel, the medium and the message are the same. The medium of Jesus is also the message that God is with us. The medium of the church is also the message that the kingdom of God is near. The Good News never stands alone as mere words; it is always embodied, always shared in the flesh. Jesus is the word made flesh.

Youth need relationships and faith experiences that are as minimally mediated by technology as possible. The best thing we can offer them is worship experiences and relationships with peers and adults that are incarnational and rely on physical presence. Passing on the faith takes a lot of time. It takes all the time we have, from dawn till dusk, at home and on the road. There is no efficient way to do it. Whenever possible, we need to choose the more time-consuming phone calls or conversations at church over more time-efficient e-mails or text messages.

If the church is called to resist the principalities and powers, and if we count technology among

them, the church's task is to provide youth with the language and skills they need to recognize the false claims and idolatrous practices of technological culture. The church needs to talk about technology with youth, helping them notice and articulate differences between worship experiences and relationships that are technologically mediated and those that are not. We need to help youth understand that some burdens technology promises to relieve us of—such as hard work, patience, and persistence in learning a skill—are burdens we really should not be relieved of.

Finally, church leaders can encourage families to talk about the role of technology in home life. We can encourage families to establish clear boundaries for where and when technology such as computers, cell phones, and video games will be used. For example, they should be used only in public places in the home, not in bedrooms, and not after a certain point in the evening. Families can create rituals such as a weekly technology fast and use the time to engage in a family activity outdoors.

As a method of transmitting the faith, the incarnation is old but it is not obsolete. It is the way God intended the Good News to be shared. It is the way commended in Deuteronomy 6:4–12, where adults are commanded to remember the Lord and to pass on the faith to our children when we lie down and when we get up, when we pass through doors and gates and when we are on the road. Incarnational formation will always be the best way of shaping young people.



Andrew Brubacher Kaethler is director of !Explore, a theological program for high school youth at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana. He attends Belmont Mennonite Church in Elkhart.

