

OSV In Focus

Teen & Technology

CAN TEENS STAY CONNECTED WITHOUT LOSING TOUCH?



JUPITER UNLIMITED

Inundated with more technology than ever before, today's young adults struggle to engage life outside the digital realm

By Emily Stimpson

On a Saturday morning in April, a young girl — maybe 15 — sits in a crowded restaurant at a crowded table. Surrounding her are her parents, two younger siblings, and what looks to be an aunt and uncle. The family talks and laughs while they eat, jumping from one topic to another with ease.

But not the teenage girl. Slouched down in her chair, shoulders hunched, hands under the table, she doesn't seem to see or hear the chatter going on around her. Her focus is on the cell phone in her hands, not the people at her table. She types something. Waits. Then types again.

She is immersed in a digital world, a virtual conversation, and the real conversation, taking place in the real world, can nei-

ther capture nor hold her attention.

When the Internet went viral a decade ago, educational experts and social critics predicted it would make young people smarter, happier and more engaged with the world than ever before. With the advent of Web 2.0 — interactive social media such as blogs, texting, Facebook, etc. — the same experts repeated their praise. But the actual evidence — the hard data about

Tech time

A 2009 study by a British research group found that teens spend an average of 31 hours per week online. The breakdown includes:

3.5 hours instant messaging their friends

2 hours on YouTube

3 hours looking for homework help

9 hours on social network sites

1 hour looking for weight loss or beauty tips

1 hour and 40 minutes viewing pornography

and **1 hour and 40 minutes** downloading music

Source: www.cybersentinel.co.uk

American teenagers' academic performance and social lives — as well as the anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents, paints a somewhat different picture.

Virtual realities

Pick a study, any study — the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP), the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Kaiser Family Foundation Program for the Study of Media and Health, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute civic literacy surveys, studies by the National Bureau of Labor Statistics, the National



DESIGN PICS

Limited access

Contrary to what the culture says, parents don't need to turn their teenager's bedroom into a computer command center. In fact, they need to do just the opposite, said Dr. Mark Bauerlein, author of "The Dumbest Generation," and Christopher Chapman, a senior educational consultant for the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Our Sunday Visitor recently asked both specialists what parents can do to limit technology's harmful effects on their children. Their suggestions include:

Banning computers from the bedroom: Computers should only be used in public areas and with a parent's express permission, which both limits the time that can be spent in front of them and prevents teens from going where they shouldn't in the virtual world.

Require full access: Parents' should only permit their children to have a Facebook or MySpace page (or blog or website) if they have full access to the site. They also need to use this access regularly to monitor content and activities.

Filter, filter, filter: Take advantage of different software programs that allow you to filter Internet content and/or monitor where each user of the family computer goes when they're online.

Limit screen time: Set a time limit for computer use (and television watching) during the evenings and on weekends.

Have a required reading hour: Make it a nightly event. One full hour with no interruptions (that means no sending or receiving text messages).

Table calls at mealtime: Institute a cell phone ban at meal times and during family time.

Limited calling plans: When purchasing a cell phone plan for a teenager, if possible, make it an "emergencies only plan" (i.e., "pay as you go"). At the very least, have the phone's picture taking capabilities turned off and strictly limit the text messaging capabilities.

Plan intergenerational events: Invite grandparents and older neighbors over for dinner, so that teens are exposed to stories and ideas outside of their peer group.

Family time, unplugged: Spend time together doing things that don't involve technology. Go for a drive or a hike, play games, talk about current events, work on projects around the house and in the yard, or volunteer together at a local charity.

Be an example: Limit your own time on the cell phone and computer, modeling for your children what the balanced use of technology looks like.

Introduce them to Eucharistic Adoration: Drop them off at the Church once a week for one hour of silent, focused prayer. It's the perfect antidote to flashing screens, beeping phones and other noise-producing machines.

Endowment for the Arts, the National Geographic Society. They all say the same thing: The virtual worlds teens enter when they're texting under the table (or blogging, posting pictures online, leaving comments on people's Web pages, etc.) is harming them as much as, if not more than, it's helping them. Teens' "totally connected life" is shortening their attention spans, narrowing their worldview, damaging their ability to communicate, and leading some down a very dangerous path.

There are, of course, many exceptions. There are teens who use cell phones and computers wisely, teens who spend hours on the Internet researching religious orders or trying to understand the connection between Virgil and TS Eliot, teens who film video podcasts to spread the Gospel, and who still love curling up with a good book. But they are not the norm.

"It's not that this generation is less intelligent than previous generations," said Emory University professor Mark Bauerlein, author of *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. "And, of course, digital

technology can and does deliver good content to them. The problem is that's not what the vast majority of teens are using these tools for. They're using them for what 15-year-olds care about: Other 15-year-olds."

Constant connections

As Bauerlein sees it, social media has locked teens into a world where peer contact and social life no longer ends at 6 p.m. when it's time to join the family for dinner. Instead, it goes on 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via blogs, social networking sites and, of course, texting.

"When I was 16 and walked into my parents house, my connection with my peers was over for the day. I had to sit at the dinner table and listen to my parents talk about money or politics. Walter Cronkite was on in the background talking about the Vietnam War. I didn't care about those things, but I couldn't help but overhear them.

"Today's teens shut all that out," he continued. "They're text

messaging at the dinner table, then they spend the rest of the evening in front of the computer, posting on blogs or chatting with friends. Even when they're logged off, social life is still going on. Someone could be posting a comment on their blog or writing something about them online. There is no escaping their peers."

That never-ending peer contact leaves little room for learning about politics or reading Jane Austen. It also leaves little room for adult voices, the voices that, in the past, have taught teens the art of conversation, modeled maturity for them, and ushered them into the adult world.

"Teenagers can't grow up if their main contacts are with other 17-year-olds," said Bauerlein. "You grow up by modeling older people. They're the ones who teach you there is a bigger horizon than high school, a bigger timeframe than last week."

They're also the ones who teach you the difference between right and wrong. And with adult voices

increasingly drowned out by the voices of their peers, many teens are navigating the digital world with those peers as their only guides. Which has something to do with why 42 percent of children ages 10 to 17 have already viewed pornography online (according to a 2007 University of New Hampshire study). It also has something to do with the latest teen trend involving technology: "Sexting."

Dangerous trends

In a nutshell, "sexting" is sending sexually explicit pictures of yourself to someone else via text message. This trend first hit the headlines last summer, when a 17-year-old Cincinnati girl, Jessica Logan, hanged herself after a nude picture of herself that she texted to her boyfriend was sent on to the phones of hundreds of her classmates. "Sexting" resurfaced in the news again last month, when students at a Massachusetts junior high made headlines by "sexting" a video of two of their classmates having sex to half their school.

Unfortunately, those examples aren't isolated instances. According

to a study conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 22 percent of teenage girls — that's more than one in five — admit to "sexting" or posting pornographic pictures of themselves online.

Only in a world where the primary voices you hear are those of your peers, does anyone think it's a good idea to send naked pictures of themselves out into digital space. But, like Bauerlein, Father David Marstall, a high school teacher and campus minister in the Diocese of Wichita, said that is the world many teens inhabit.

"In terms of getting a message across, I have a lot of competition," he said. "As much as I try to teach students in the classroom or Mass, there are a lot of other people teaching them other ideas, ideas opposed to what we want them to have. And they're listening, accepting post-modernism and all that goes along with it."

Losing personal touch?

Father Marstall is no stranger to technology. He uses Facebook to get in touch with teens or post information about campus events. He posts podcasts of his Sunday homilies on his campus ministry website and recognizes social media's value to his ministry as a communications tool. But, he also recognizes that all the texting teens are doing (an average of 2,272 texts per month according to the Nielson Co.), as well as Facebook posting and instant messaging, is changing the way they communicate and understand friendship.

"They communicate more frequently, but less personally," he explained. "They struggle to express what's important to them and to organize their thoughts because they've grown accustomed to having conversations one line at a time."

Rebecca Arnold*, a mother of five girls, is witnessing that struggle firsthand. According to Arnold, her two oldest daughters — ages 23 and 14 — both prefer texting or instant messaging their friends to talking with them. And although she strictly limits 14-year-old Kathleen's computer use, (and encourages personal get-togethers and phone calls), her efforts are normally met with frustration.

"Phone calls last five minutes at the most," she said. "I'd be happy to get Kathleen a phone for her room, but at this point, she doesn't want one."

The reason why? Explained Kathleen, "I don't know what my friends and I would talk about."

Instant gratification faith

Beyond changing how teens communicate with one another,

Father Marstall also sees social media changing how teens communicate with God.

"Young people today have grown up with Google," he said. "They're accustomed to asking questions and finding answers quickly. But when they get to questions that they can't answer in a few minutes, they give up. And when it comes to the spiritual life, to discerning a vocation or understanding the mysteries of the faith, answers don't come quickly. Conversion is harder for teens today compared to 15 years ago."

It's not, however, just matters of faith that teens struggle to reflect upon. Studies cited in Bauerlein's book point to digital media's across-the-board impact on shortened attention spans.

The blinking, flashing screens, brief amounts of text, and hyper-linked information in the digital world "conditions minds against quiet, concerted study, against imagination unassisted by visuals, against linear sequential analysis of text," summarized Bauerlein.

And because their social life hinges on their participation in that world, it's not easy for teens to walk away and work on developing the skills necessary to counteract those problems.

"At 17, there's nothing worse than being excluded," said Bauerlein. "A kid can't risk not getting the message that everyone is meeting at Starbucks at 4 p.m. When a parent takes away a cell phone because it's getting too expensive, they see it as taking away their teenager's toy. The teenager sees it as taking away their life."

Hope for new media

Given all these problems and pitfalls, it might be tempting for parents or teachers to attempt a reversion back to the pre-digital age, issuing a ban on computers, cell phones and the like. But Eugene Gan, professor of new media technologies at Franciscan University of Steubenville, said Catholics need to be wary of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater."

"The Church has actually been very positive about these new technologies and about youth using them for the glory of God," he explained. "Every year on World Communications Day, we get yet another message from the Church talking about the good that can come from these tools."

The trick, of course, is using those tools wisely, and Gan conceded that the younger generation is far from mastering that.

"We have to look at what need young people are trying to fulfill through all the texting and sexting and posting on Facebook," he said. "That's where abuse of these



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Falling behind

Despite the billions of dollars invested by parents and schools in educational technology, American students still aren't making the grade:

On the 2005 NAEP tests: 53 percent of American twelfth graders scored "below basic" in history, 46 percent scored "below basic" in science and 27 percent scored "below basic" on literary tests — all results comparable to or worse than those from similar tests administered in 2003, 2001, and 1994.

According to a study conducted by the National Conference of State Legislators, only 10 percent of teens can name the current speaker of the House of Representatives. Sixty percent, however, can name the current "American Idol."

In the 2006 Geographic Literacy Survey, 63 percent of teenagers could not identify Iraq on a map.

In May 2007, ACT reported in "Rigor at Risk: Reaffirming Quality in High School Core Curriculum" that "three out of four ACT-tested 2006 high school graduates...are not prepared to take credit-bearing entry level college courses with a reasonable chance of succeeding."

The Internet may put a veritable Library of Alexandria at teenagers' fingertips, but most seem only interested in the magazine and music sections:

Only 7 percent of 18-29 year olds go online to read about political news and current events, says a 2005 Pew Research report.

The same study reports that 48 percent of teens visit social networking sites like Facebook at least once a day.

...and that 30 percent of teenagers host their own blog or Web page.

tools is coming in. And then we need to develop guiding principles for the use of these technologies, principles that can help us use them as the gifts they truly are."

Those principles, Gan continued, have already been laid out for Catholics in Church documents on communications. They include: using the media to facilitate, not replace, real world relationships; encouraging balance and moderation in use; always respecting the inherent dignity of the human person; and using the media to inspire a love of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

"Media has the power to attract people to beauty and truth and to inspire a greater desire to learn about the world," Gan concluded. "It really is a gift from God. The question is not: 'Do we use it?' It's: 'How do we use it?' We need to give young people a better map than we've given them so far. They're adrift in a sea of media, and if we're not careful, they'll be lost in it."

Emily Stimpson is an OSV contributing editor. *The Arnolds' names have been changed at the request of the family.

By the Numbers

32

Percentage of 18- to 29-year-olds who told Pew Research in 2006 that they "couldn't live without their cell phones."

2,272

Average number of text messages that teens send each month, according to Nielson Co. research

34

Percentage of employers who were dissatisfied with the oral communication skills of high school graduates, according to a 2005 report for Achieve



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THE CATHOLIC PARENTS' GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA

The world of social media has exploded lately, allowing for many forms of interactions not imagined just a few years ago. Here are the pros and cons of various forms of social media.



Broadcast Yourself™

Facebook & MySpace

What they are: Social networking sites where people post pictures, find old friends, send messages to members, and chat with one another.

Great for ... youth ministers and teachers who want to post information about events; friends spread out across the country; sharing pictures of family vacations, sporting events, etc.

Reasons for concern: If privacy controls aren't set correctly, strangers can view your teen's profile and chat with them. Inappropriate pictures are often posted by teens and adults, and inappropriate advertising should be expected. Gossip, rumors and plain old teen nastiness often spiral out of control on both sites.



Weblog

What it is: An online journal of a person's thoughts and opinions, as well their links to or commentary on the latest news about them, their family and friends or the world at large.

Great for ... aspiring writers and those in need of a creative outlet who want to learn to respond in a quick, cogent way to news, culture and life in general.

Reasons for concern: Once upon a time, teens kept private thoughts under lock and key in a diary. Now, they post them for the world to see. Teens often don't have the maturity to discern what information is not for public consumption. Some experts also believe blogs encourage a type of self-reflection that can lead to narcissism. Close parental monitoring can help guard against that.

Skype

What it is: A downloadable software program that allows people to make and receive calls within the U.S. for free and from anywhere around the world for a very low fee. For those with video capabilities, Skype also allows you to see the person to whom you're talking. Instant messaging is also offered.

Great for ... teens and young adults spending a semester abroad; children who live far away from grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins; or friends who've moved across the country.

Reasons for concern: If privacy settings aren't set correctly, strangers can invite your teens to talk. Also, if they fill out the information for a "Public Profile," anyone from anywhere can view their profile.



Cell phones

What they are: Everyone knows cell phones are for talking, but for most teens, they're more like mini-handheld computers, which give them the ability to text message friends, download information off the Web, and both take and send pictures and videos.

Great for ... parents who want a lifeline to their teen and who want their teen to have a lifeline to them.

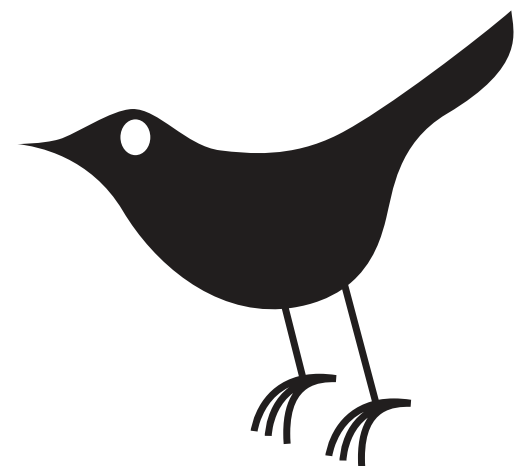
Reasons for concern: Teens often don't have the maturity to judge what pictures and videos should or should not be sent or to limit their text-messaging. Parents, however, can have the phone's picture taking capabilities turned off by the retailer and opt out of purchasing a text-messaging plan.

YouTube

What it is: A virtual video store containing free homemade movies, clips from television shows, scenes from movies, old newsreels and more.

Great for ... homeschoolers and teachers who want to introduce children and teens to important moments in history (for example, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech" is available), as well as for aspiring filmmakers who want to post their short films for friends to see.

Reasons for concern: Although the Hannah Montana YouTube video to which your daughter's friend sent her a link may be fine, when she goes to view the video, other links on the side of the page are likely to direct her to highly objectionable videos. There is no way to control what links, images and additional videos for viewing accompany even the best of YouTube's offerings, so parental supervision is advisable.



Twitter

What it is: Twitter is akin to "micro-blogging." Via their cell phones, users send "tweets"—brief messages up to 140 characters — to their "followers" (people who have opted to receive their stream of "tweets"). Tweets can be delivered to your cell phone or computer.

Great for ... communicating something fast to your nearest and dearest with the push of only one button, and keeping up to date, in a fairly passive way, on what's happening in someone's world.

Reasons for concern... The same as text messaging and blogging: Sending messages better off not sent and falling into the habit of thinking your every thought and action is worthy of being broadcast to those who call themselves your "followers."