

I love technology

By Dr. David W. Frazee

"I love technology." Those three words evoke images from the closing scenes of the now teenage cult classic movie *Napoleon Dynamite*. The words are from the song—if you can call it that—Napoleon's brother Kip wrote and sang as a tribute to the online dating service and technological world that made it possible for him to meet his new bride Lafawnduh. Maybe not to the level of making a true love vow through song, but today's culture is passionately embracing technology and all its gadgetry.

It is not just the young who are smitten by the technology bug. I was on an elevator recently and could not help but listen in on a conversation between a woman and her high school-aged daughter. With cell phones out, the daughter was explaining the use of various keys in relation to their text messaging function. I could not help but smile and comment to the confused looking mother, "Texting? Yep, teenagers text all the time." I am not so sure my words brought her any comfort as she struggled to comprehend the number of times she had to push a specific number key to get the desired letter of the alphabet. "I love technology?" Love it or hate it, technology impacts all of us and continues to change and to bring considerable change to the adolescent experience. For parents reading this article, we have gone a long way from "spinning the vinyl" to downloading the MP3 ... or MP4 for that matter.¹

I spend a lot of time with teenagers. As a result, I am constantly asking questions concerning the latest and greatest techno gadgets, and then get to witness first hand the impact such gadgets have on teenage culture. I read popular and researched articles, watch news reports, skim technological Web sites ... you get the picture. I am very intentional about keeping up with change. Still, I continue to struggle to keep my head above the waters of the next technological wave hitting the beaches of teenage America. For instance, just for fun, one of my student interns, Justin Tuley, mentioned I should visit the Trendhunter Web site.² Wow! This Web site is to technology what Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory is to candy. Anything imaginable or soon to be imagined can be found on this site. I found a phone with five fold-out touch screens, a bike powered iPod, digital coffee tables, a robot golf caddy, digital eating wearable to teach kids how to eat with utensils, and I even found a digital Bible key chain and a cross-shaped MP3 player. After touring the "Technology Trends and Gadgets" link for 30 plus minutes, I had barely made a dent in the 181 pages of content. Needless to say, I had to call it quits and move on to my day job. So, before the next wave hits the shore, let's take a snapshot look at two of the top technologies used by today's teenager.³

Social networking sites

"Hello, my name is David and I have a Facebook account." You respond, "Hi, David." Facebook, like other similar sights—MySpace and Digg, are just two examples— are places of real, social networking used by students and an ever-increasing number of adults.⁴ It is a place where you can post pictures from your latest adventure, talk smack about your favorite sports team, connect with long lost school buddies, join or create an interest group, support a cause or political candidate, play games, post announcements and communicate through instant message chat, person to person message exchange or comment on any of your "friends'" home page pictures or "wall" so all your "friends" can read and react.

As the introduction suggests, the world of Internet social networking can become rather addicting. For instance, if a student develops a connection with me during a speaking event and they discover I have a Facebook account, they will contact my account within hours after the event and ask to be added to my list of friends. Then, if I do not confirm them as friends soon enough, they get upset with me. Understand it is not because I am something special; it is because this is what teenagers do! Teens socially network on the Internet and take such interaction seriously. According to the March 2008 issue of *Current Health*, the top online activities of teenagers are networking on social-networking sites, reading blogs, watching videos and listening to podcasts.⁵ John, a teenager I spoke with recently said he believed that while online, teenagers spend "75 percent of their time on Facebook type stuff (Stuff included video and podcasting sites), while much of the Internet remains unexplored."⁶ John's comments are right on target with that reported by *Current Health* writers.

Setting aside the growing number of adult online social networks (By the way, my Facebook friends list includes college presidents and various professionals), some adults frequently respond, "What do these students do in the 'real world?'" Let me say this clearly, the online social network *is* part of a teenager's real world. Furthermore, the farther down the technological road we travel and the gadgets used to connect us in cyber space become faster and more user friendly, the stronger online social networking will become.

As with all technological advances, there is good and bad to consider. The good is found in the way teenagers are using social-networking sites to create community with those who want to stand against social injustice, poverty and social inequity. Teenagers are also using online communities as avenues of moral accountability and spiritual discussion. The bad—as online interaction continues to be a clearer reflection of face-to-face interaction—is seen in the increasing concern with cyber bullying, sexual deviance and predator like behavior found among some social-networking sites.⁷

A darker side of social networking does exist. While Facebook is one of the current "hot sites" for social interaction and is constantly monitored, there are other social-networking sites that can be accessed by teenagers that are not monitored by administrators, monitored infrequently, and/or monitored with adult audiences in mind. For instance, over the last few months, Juicy Campus—a site in which users can post, anonymous, slanderous, unverifiable comments for anyone to read—has received mainstream press coverage for the lawsuits being generated by universities, businesses and individuals against the content and procedures followed by the developers.⁸ Such sites have generated a lot of discussion on how far is too far when it comes to the lack of control present in certain social-networking Web services. Related—but different in presentation—are a number of image pages⁹ that make for interesting conversation starters and social interaction. One of my favorite sites, because of the dramatic way it has impacted pop culture, is Post Secret.¹⁰ This site

features a number of card size images with messages representing a secret participants want to anonymously share with the Post Secret social network. The cards are monitored and posted via administrators. It is interesting to see which cards evoke response and interaction from viewers who identify with a particular shared secret. In short, there are countless social-networking sites based on music, sports, schools, sexuality and just about any other topic you can imagine. Be warned and informed, not all of these sites are monitored and/or appropriate for teenage participants or any participants for that matter.

With that warning and in keeping with the usual online safety rules, the majority of teenage online users participate in relatively safe social exchange areas. So, whether I like it or not, checking my Facebook account has become more than a leisure type activity, it is something that I do frequently every day. Why? Because Facebook is a place teenagers use to contact me and begin life-changing conversations. Note that I said "begin." Teenagers who trust my presence in cyber land trust my presence in "real" land and typically carry on conversations with me face to face. So, "Hello, my name is David, and I am a proud Facebook user." By the way, if you want to wade into the waters of Facebook or another online social-networking site, join to authentically interact with teenagers. Veteran social networkers know how to protect their virtual turf. If they think you are networking to spy, they won't confirm you as a "friend" and/or drop you from their groups.

Video entertainment

I am going to assume you are aware and acknowledge the amazing advancements in portable video technology. If not, go to your local shopping complex, look in the electronics department and be amazed. Even though I do not advocate constant noise on trips (I prefer talking), such advancements have been the answer to many a parent's nightmare scenarios during long commutes and trips. However, you may not be aware of the explosion of online movies, commercials, political statements, satirical spoofs and wide array of advertising pieces flooding the online video market. The videos are produced and posted from a wide range of video expertise. There are professionally done videos and others that are creations of people simply messing around with a cheap camera and some low-grade video editing software.

Whatever the format, online video resources have changed the way consumers access and use the Internet. Advancements in technology have made it possible for someone to watch newly released movies from the privacy of their home as well as participate in board meetings, academic classes, political rallies and even church services from the comfort of a location of their own choosing—in *real time*—via video links. As mentioned earlier, the excitement generated by online video technology has made video entertainment a solid second place time grabber for teenage Internet users.

If "video killed the radio star," then YouTube killed *MTV*. At present, YouTube is one of the hottest video posting and viewing areas online.¹¹ Alright, do me a favor. Stop reading this article, go to www.youtube.com and look around for a while. No really, it's okay. Go look around. What did you find? Being an election year, you probably encountered a number of Obama and/or McCain political messages. More than likely, you noticed that not all the videos were created and endorsed by campaign officials. There were many videos produced by private individuals who have strong feelings for or against a given candidate. Through YouTube, anyone with a camera and editing software can voice their opinions. The goal of YouTube video posting is to attract viewers (score hits) so that it makes the recommended video selection list and/or the currently being viewed video list. Either way, the more people watch, the more attention is placed on the product, person or idea being communicated in the video. Entertainers such as Will Ferrell have brought a lot of attention their way by posting videos that are a little edgy and start a swell of online chat on, you guessed it, social-networking sites.

Advertisers have caught on to this and now frequently employ YouTube as a platform to launch viral advertising campaigns. According to Trendhunter, "the video, which is called 'Why every guy should buy their girlfriend a Wii Fit' has gone more than a Wii viral—it had 1,014,120" views in its first six days!¹² Did you pick up on that? Over one million viewers in six days! That is an enormous return for a crudely constructed online video. It is easy to see how the popularity of YouTube and similar online video Web sites factor into the program shifts being experienced by MTV, VH-1 and other TV video watching stations. You no longer have to wait for your favorite music video to cycle through network programming. Instead, online users can have instant access to their favorite bands via online video entertainment.

Like social networking, there is a dark side to be aware of with video entertainment. I am sure there have been pornographic selections prior to my discovery, but fairly recently, I began noticing blatant postings of pornographic video selections on YouTube. The content is alarming enough, but even more alarming is the simple "confirm you are over 18" type boundary that exists between a minor and explicit content. While YouTube's terms and conditions state that users must be over 18, emancipated, or gain permission from a guardian, etc., this may sound cynical, but anyone can lie. YouTube is an awesome entertainment area and avenue for evangelistic interaction. (Yes, I said and believe that.) However, the pull to sample explicit material has to be taken seriously. By the way, material that would be labeled *soft core porn* is accessible to all YouTube participants.

"I love technology." Those three words may evoke totally different images after reading this article. If you are a little—or a lot—alarmed at the dangers involved with social-networking and video entertainment sites, you are not alone. However, there are steps you can take that can help alleviate the fear and bring back the love to technology.

What should we do?

Same old song—Stay vigilant. I am still amazed that parents allow their teenagers to have a computer in their room.¹³ Parents, you have to encourage your teenager to practice safe Internet usage and hold them accountable to the standards you set. Chief among all Internet safety practices is to never provide identifying information. Remember, even innocent exchanges of information with a trusted friend on Facebook can be traced, leading to unwanted attention from predators.

Acknowledge the importance of and strive to remain informed of the important role social networking and video entertainment plays in the life of teenagers. A lot of fear is generated from a lack of education concerning the Internet and its use. Related to this is the tension caused when adults attempt to downplay the significance of the Internet with teens. Parents, even though it may not make sense to you, acknowledge that social networking occurs for

teenagers in cyberspace and attempt to remain educated on the sites your teenager is visiting. Education takes the fear away and gives you more control over usage.

Encourage your teen to take a technology fast. Okay, this has to be done by the entire family to work, but it really can be a blessing. Develop a plan and find a day or series of days in which all technology is declared off limits. It will be awkward at first, but imagine the peace and refreshment that will come from placing all phones, computers, TVs, radios, iPods, etc. in the off position.

Dr. David W. Frazee is a presenter for ParenTeen Seminars (www.parenteen.com) and for three years was the host of the weekly TV segment, "The Teenage Tightrope" (www.theteenagetightrope.com). He also served as the director of the youth and family ministry program at Lubbock Christian University for five years. Dr. Frazee currently works as the director of student ministries at the Richland Hills Church of Christ, while continuing his speaking schedule and teaching as a graduate adjunct professor of youth ministry and related studies.

¹ If you are confused about what a MP3 or MP4 is you can simply "Google" (Term used to describe putting a word or phrase in a search engine, such as Google, and follow the resulting "hits") each and find out more about these data formats.

² www.trendhunter.com (Caution, this Web site contains information that is not suitable for children and should be approached with a high level of accountability for any user.)

³ The sources used in the production of this article came from my own experiences with technology, academic journals, popular magazines, Internet sources, web site builders, cell phone associates, and a number of conversations with teenagers who live in cyberspace and cell phone land daily. Each source will be individually noted as appropriate.

⁴ For a great article on Facebook being the future of online social networking and how 35 plus year olds are the sites fastest growing demographic read "Why Facebook Is the Future." (2007, September). *Time*, 170, 54.

⁵ Pulse. (2008). *Current Health*, 34 (7), 4-5.

⁶ While 75 percent is a random number supported only through John's online experience, John is a teenager who spends considerable time online and works part-time in the field of video/online production.

⁷ A couple of articles that are interesting reads in this area of cyber world realities are: Chibarro, Julia S. (2007, October) School Counselors and the Cyberbully: Interventions and Implications. *Professional School Counseling*, 11(1), 65-67; and Kaveri, Subrahmanyam and Gloria Lin. (2007, Winter). Adolescents on the Net: Internet Use and Well-being. *Adolescence*, 42 (168).

⁸ www.juicycampus.com (Caution, if you choose to visit the site, know the material is often graphic and mature in nature.)

⁹ Image pages make use of pictures to communicate messages and stir up online conversation.

¹⁰ www.postsecret.com (Caution, this is getting repetitive, the *Post Secret* Web site often contains information not suitable for younger users. Note, the song "Dirty Little Secret," by All-American Rejects, was inspired by this Web site.)

¹¹ There have been religious offshoots like GodTube. However, YouTube remains king over all other video hosting sites and has a sizeable menu of religious selections.

¹² Sexy Fitness Videos? Is Hula Girl A Stealth Nintendo Viral? (VIDEO). *Trendhunter Magazine*. Retrieved June 4, 2008, from <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/nintendo-wii-hula-viral-girlfriend>. Note, this video is accessible to all age groups and does not require adult viewer authorization.

¹³ Check out Kaveri's article above for some of the latest information on adolescent Internet use.

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For more information on resources to help you understand today's rapidly changing youth culture, contact the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding.

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