

1

“Welcome to My World”

Technology and Youth

Much like the sensation of the Industrial Revolution, there has been a “revolution” of sorts in the technological world. VHS and tape cassette recorders, as well as analog televisions, are now considered antiquated as new digital advances continue to explode. Ingle (2005) describes our society as being transformed by “cyber-reality,” and claims we are approaching a paperless world. Weis (2004) further defines this as “digital or ICT literacy” as “using digital technology, communication tools, and networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information to function in a knowledge society” (p. 14).

To understand cyber bullying and what it means to be a cyber kid, it is important to understand how technology has blossomed into our daily lives, infusing its growth at all levels. Technology brings tremendous opportunities and the ability to connect the world in a more intimate way with the capacity to send information on a super highway to all ends of the earth. In 2005, it was estimated that 79 percent of Americans spend time online, averaging 13.3 hours a week (www.digitalcenter.org/pdf/Center-for-the-Digital-Future-2005-Highlights.pdf). In a survey conducted by the National Public Radio (NPR), the Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government (National Public Radio & Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000), the “love affair” between Americans and high technology was highlighted. In this study, it was found that almost all Americans under sixty have used a computer and are enthusiastic about technology, and that children were even more enthusiastic and comfortable with computers. One study revealed that Internet use rose

from two million youth in 1995 to seventy-seven million in 2005 (www.criminaljustice.state.ny.us/missing/i_safety/i_intro.htm).

With this great expansion of our world comes some responsibility and self-reflection to ensure that we, as a community raising children, practice what we preach, as well as teach respect for technology. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, we are raising cyber kids who are technologically savvy and keeping in step with technology's rapid expansion. Cyber is defined with words that include computers and information, while cyber space speaks of virtual reality. In this book, we have coined the phrase "cyber kids," and define this group as "youth who take information in and put information out using technology-based communication." Here is the start of our journey to understand how technology sets the stage for cyber bullying, and how cyber balance is the key to protecting our youth and exposing the hidden traps within this technology-based world. To provide some idea of the size of this issue, Netlingo reports that four million youth are posting content to the Web every day, and fifteen million are instant messaging (www.netlingo.com/statistics.cfm).

Next, we would like to explore some of the different forms technology and cyber communication have taken on over the past few years. Many new technological terms have become household words. Therefore, it is important for those of us who have not grown up in this technological era have some sense of their meaning .

Instant messaging. This started out being the latest fastest way for people to communicate using e-mail and chat rooms. People can type in their thoughts, ideas, opinions, or gossip and have it instantly appear on another person's screen. This allows for fast back-and-forth "conversations" to be held over the Internet. The biggest difference between an actual face-to-face conversation and instant messaging is impulsiveness and documentation. This form of communication allows the other parties to record, distribute, and even alter what you have said. Impulsive remarks often occur, as senders may not think before hitting the "send" button. Unlike getting your feelings out by writing a letter and then ripping it up, senders often regret not moderating what they have said via the Internet.

Blogging. A weblog is a Web site that contains dated text entries in reverse chronological order (the most recent first) about a particular topic. Blogs serve many purposes, from online newsletters to personal journals, to "ranting and raving." Written by one person or a group of contributors, entries contain commentary and links to other Web sites, and images and videos as well as a search facility may be included (www.answers.com/topic/blog).

Chat rooms. The term "chat room" is used primarily by mass media to describe any form of synchronous conferencing—occasionally even asynchronous conferencing. The term can thus mean any technology ranging from real-time online chat over instant messaging and online

forums to fully immersive graphical social environments (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chat_room).

Sexting. Sexting is the act of engaging in sexual activity via cell phone or computer, includes the exchange of nude photographs and videos (<http://im.about.com/od/glossary/g/sexting.htm>).

Text messaging. Also known as “texting,” this is the use of abbreviated terminology while typing messages to another party. Since technological lingo and abbreviations are frequently used, text content may be hidden to those who are less technologically savvy, such as parents. The table below shows a small sample of texting “lingo.”

Sample Terminology

Sample Text	Meaning
B4YNKI	Before you know it
[I will] BRB	I will be right back
CYT	See you tomorrow
POS	Parent over shoulder
TDTM	Talk dirty to me
TTFN	Ta ta for now
URYY4M	You are too wise for me
WYCM	Will you call me

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Many Web sites exist that detail this new type of language. For a more comprehensive list of terminology, readers may go to www.netlingo.com.

Twitter. Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read other users’ updates, known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters in length, which are displayed on the user’s profile page and delivered to other users who have subscribed to them (known as followers). Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow anybody to access them. Users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter Web site, Short Message Service (SMS), or external applications. The service is free to use over the Internet, but using SMS may incur phone service provider fees (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>).

While these forms of communication may seem fast and convenient, they are not without their problems. While many of these challenges are

further detailed in Part II, a few examples are offered here to put the readers in touch with the scope of the issues that have arisen. The use of such an abbreviated language chips away at our youth's communication skills creating new areas of concern for our cyber kid generation. How will the quality of our language and ability to use face-to-face communication be compromised as technology and our dependence on it grow? In addition, unlike schoolyard bullies, cyber bullies can remain anonymous and reach an endless number of targets with the click of a button. Old-fashioned "playing doctor" has taken on a serious new meaning, and breakup revenges have a threatening new face in the form of sexting. These images leave lasting footprints that are difficult to erase.

Parents, educators, and the legal system are racing to keep pace with the new challenges of technology, while both our youth and technology itself seem to stay just a few steps ahead. An additional pocket of concern is presented as the legal system works to make existing laws fit these new "crimes."

CYBER STORY

There was a recent story in the media of a young high school girl who began instant messaging a potential "boyfriend" online. The two never actually met in person, but continued to exchange information over the Internet. As the story unfolded in the press, you learned that there never was an actual young man but rather a mother and daughter posing as the potential suitor. The mother and daughter believed that this young girl was spreading information about their son/brother and decided to try to trick her into revealing information to support their claim. Because of the anonymity of the Internet, this young girl receiving the e-mails had no idea she was conversing with the neighbors down the street.

After continued exchanges, the mother and daughter decided it was time to break off the communication. What happened next shocked the community and left a family devastated. Instead of simply breaking the communication off, the two sent final e-mails cyber bullying the young girl with put downs, including comments that she shouldn't be living. Shortly after the last e-mail was received, the young girl successfully committed suicide, believing she had been rejected by her new "boyfriend," and not the neighbors down the street.

The parents of the young girl tried to press charges but, according to the state's attorney general, no law on the books matched the injustice that had occurred and so charges could not be filed. However, the girl's parents continued to pursue legal action at the federal level. The outcome has yet to be determined. Members of the family that was responsible for the cyber bullying reported that it had become impossible to function within the community, which was outraged by their actions.

Source: www.meganmeierfoundation.org/story.

We need to understand and agree on the basic premise that technology is moving at a fast pace, and that our youth need to be educated on how to balance this technology within their daily lives. We also need to understand what makes this cyber kid generation different from ours, yet basically the same. The actions of our youth and adults who are misbehaving have not changed as much as the means by which they carry out this behavior. As with most generational conflicts, often getting back to the basics and understanding the problem in front of us can provide the best form of insurance for avoiding or dealing with future conflicts. Cyber kids need to have clear, definable boundaries and an action plan to navigate this newfound cyberspace safely. Working on impulse and thinking later is not an option when recording our actions via this technologically based superhighway. How the reader may address these concerns more specifically will be discussed in Part III of the book, on cyber balance section. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of technology use.

Technology utilization appears to come as naturally as walking to children and youth in this generation. As Dubit (2000, p. 1) states, “our youth grasp technology like a native language.” There have been several comprehensive studies in which technology and youth have been the focus. In 2004, a study sponsored by Pew Internet and American Life Project involved telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,100 teens, aged from twelve to seventeen years, and their parents. Evidence for extensive technology use for this population was obtained:

- A total of 87 percent of U.S. teens, or 21 million adolescents, aged between twelve and seventeen use the Internet, up 73 percent since 2000.
- Some 51 percent of teenage Internet users said they went online on a daily basis, up 42 percent from 2000, when an earlier study was conducted.
- Of teen Internet users, 82 percent play games online while 76 percent obtain news.
- A total of 43 percent have made purchases, and 31 percent have found health information.
- Some 84 percent of all teenagers report owning at least one personal media device (i.e., a desktop or laptop computer, a cell phone, or a Personal Digital Assistant).
- A total of 45 percent have cell phones, and 33 percent are texting. (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005a)

Furthermore, in a report by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2005b), it was found that the majority of “tweens” and teens (aged eight to

eighteen years) spend some of their time media multitasking, and this usually is related to computer use. These statistics are not surprising in light of the growth of popularity and use of MySpace, blogs, iPods, and iPhones. Any parent with teenage children knows how difficult it is to gain their attention and have their child become “unplugged.” It is not uncommon for a recreational activity between parents and teens to be interrupted by numerous text messages and phone calls received by the teenager. As Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005b) indicate, cell phones and the Internet are the foundation for the daily rhythm of life in teenagers’ worlds. Cell phones now seem to be just another appendage for most teens.

The Center for Missing and Exploited Children, along with Cox Communications, conducted another broad-based survey, this time involving youth between the ages of thirteen and seventeen (www.cox.com/takecharge/survey_results.asp). The following results were obtained from this research on teens and risky Internet behavior:

- Some 71 percent of teens have established online profiles on sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, and Xanga.
- A total of 69 percent of teens regularly receive messages from unknown senders, and most don’t tell their parents.
- Some 64 percent of teens post photos or videos of themselves, while 58 percent post information about where they live.
- Nearly one in ten teenagers has posted his or her cell phone number online.

Furthermore, Lenhart and Madden (2007) have found that 55 percent of all American online youths aged twelve to seventeen use social networking Web sites, and have created their own online profiles. It is estimated that MySpace alone is associated with 87 million accounts, and approximately 270,000 accounts are added annually (Granneman, 2006). Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2008) indicate that one quarter of these accounts belong to minors.

This extensive technological involvement by youth is supported by the wide and easy availability of such products. Youth in this day and age live in a virtual candy store of technology. In a study by MTV and Microsoft Digital Advertising solutions (Reynolds, 2007), twenty-one technologies which impact on youth were identified and addressed: Internet, e-mail, PC, TV, cell phone, instant messaging, cable and satellite TV, DVD, MP3, stereo/hi-fi, digital cameras, social networks, on- and offline video games, CDs, HDTV, VHS, Webcams, MP4 players, digital-video recorders, and hand-held game consoles. In addition, the media are flooded with electronic marketing advertisements, ranging from the newest multimedia phones to texting as a multigenerational activity.

CYBER STORY

A group of high school students went on a weekend ski trip to another state. While on the slopes, one of the students fell, seriously injuring himself. Shortly after the fall, the lead chaperone and ski patrol arrived to administer first aid and assess the situation.

People skiing by stopped for a moment and were encouraged to move on by the ski patrol, who were securing the young man in the transportation sled. Several of the students from the school skied by and saw the commotion around their friend. The students began texting each other about their friend's mishap. One of the kids texted his friend back home, stating that he thought his classmate had broken his neck and was dead. Soon the text made it to the young boy's mother. Before her son had been brought down to the bottom of the hill, or the chaperone could contact her, she had been "notified" of his death.

The mother quickly called the chaperone to confirm the news that her son was fatally injured. By the time the chaperone received the call, he and the young boy were arriving at the local hospital where the injured teen was receiving treatment for his fractured collarbone. His life was never in danger and the chaperone was directing all of his attention to ensuring that the young man was safely attended to prior to contacting the parents.

Source: Personal communication.

Is it really a surprise, then, when data from Foehr, obtained from the Kaiser Family Foundation's 2005 study, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8–18 Year Olds*, showed 81 percent of these young people spend some of their time media multitasking in a typical week (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006a)? In this report, based on a national survey of 2,032 third through twelfth graders, and further analysis of the data of 1,205 seventh to twelfth graders, it was found that this media multitasking typically occurs when the youth are instant messaging (74 percent), surfing the Internet (74 percent) or playing video games (67 percent). In a related review (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005b), it was found that media use by this age group was approximately forty-four and a half hours a week, with an increase in video game playing and computer use over the past five years. In this same report, it was shared that 68 percent of this population had a TV in their bedrooms, and 49 percent had a video game player there.

CYBER STORY

A mother and her teenage son went out to lunch. The mom was treasuring the time they would have alone together to just "chill." Before the meal arrived, the son's cell phone constantly went off, announcing new text messages. He responded to each one. Finally, the mom was forced to pull out her own cell phone, which was rarely used, to place a call to her son. She reminded him that this was their time together and asked him to please turn off his cell phone.

Source: Personal communication.

Young children are not left out of this technological whirlwind. Early childhood television, computer software for toddlers, and video series for infants are just a few examples of marketing of electronic products to younger children (Center on Media and Child Health, 2005). It is difficult to walk through a mall without being bombarded by WebKinz and a plethora of electronic toys targeting preschool and elementary age children. In addition, Web sites such as Club Penguin are trying to attract a younger age group online. In a study involving a survey of 1,051 parents, it was found that these adults may be encouraging the use of electronic media in their children aged six months to six years as a means of coping with family life (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006b). Making use of such technology helped parents “keep the peace” and manage busy schedules, and assisted with daily routines such as eating and sleeping. Technology in the twenty-first century has provided many families with an “electronic babysitter.”

SUMMARY

As the study by National Public Radio and the Kaiser Family Foundation (2000) indicates, people over the age of sixty are only half as likely to have ever used a computer, with only 22 percent reporting having used the Internet. While this may make education and prevention work by adults more challenging, it does not excuse them from adequately preparing children and youth to properly use technology. It is essential that parents and educators alike continue to stay up to date with technological advances. A key part of this educational process is gaining an understanding of the variables that may impact on technological use; these findings are presented in the next chapter.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What are the major types of technology used by youth today?
 2. How do you play a role in supporting healthy technology choices?
 3. How do you play a role in modeling unhealthy ways to use technology?
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