



Taking Charge of Technology

by Paul Vitale

Throughout history, various types of revolutions have defined the formation and growth of generations upon generations. Today's society has instant, world-wide access through a variety of media advances that are easily accessible and generally affordable. Cellular telephones, video games, televisions, computers and personal handheld electronic devices have transformed the way our world communicates. It is safe to say, our youth today are riding the wave of a global technology revolution.

Simply defined, a revolution is a fundamental change in power or organizational structures that takes place in a relatively short period of time; the results of which include major changes in culture, economy and socio-political institutions. Although the telephone took 20 years to reach 50 million users, the Web took only four years, iPods three and MySpace two, while YouTube hit 50 million users in one year! How can this be? The iGeneration (those born after 1990) is driving these trends. Individuals in this group watch more than 100 YouTube videos a month, download applications, MySpace and Facebook (now verbs), and text the night away. They don't see technology as a tool. For them, it is just a way of life. Leading to the question: How does this affect the youth of today?

Where the Focus Is

As anyone who knows a teen or a tween can attest, various media are among the most powerful forces in young people's lives today. According to a 10-year KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION study, eight- to eighteen-year-olds spend more time with media than in any other activity besides sleeping—an average of more than 7½ hours a day (more than 53 hours a week). Because they spend so much of that time “media multitasking” (using more than one medium at a time), they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those 7½ hours. Older teens and Net Generationers spend more than 20 hours per day using all types of media, including cell phones. This is accomplished not by not sleeping but with considerable multitasking, which peaks at seven simultaneous activities for older teens.

Television shows, video games, music and the websites they visit are an enormous part of young people's lives, offering a constant stream of messages about families, peers, relationships, sex, violence, food, values and an abundance of other topics. A recent report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found there is a greater chance for obesity, smoking, violence and eating disorders in today's youth that can be directly traced to their media consumption. Understanding the role of media in young

people's lives is essential for those concerned with promoting their healthy development, including parents, physicians, policymakers and educators. Once we understand the scope of this revolution, we can begin to guide young people in exerting and maintaining control over technology, instead of vice versa.

Talking versus Texting

For starters, taking a firm hold on readily available mobile devices, the Net Generation (1980 – 89) and the iGeneration (“i” representing media such as iPods and the Wii, but also reflecting the “individualized” nature of the media) have turned the concept of communication inside out. It is now all about texting, IMing, Facebooking, Skypeing—pretty much anything but talking live.

Surely you don't have to look far to know that texting is the method of first choice for communicating among youth. Ironically, what would once be considered the easiest and most available form of communication has now become a device predominantly used for “chatting” without actually speaking. Cell phone ownership is nearly everywhere among teens and young adults, and much of the growth in teen cell phone ownership has been driven by adoption among the youngest teens. Three-quarters (75%) of teens and 93% of adults ages 18 – 29 now have a cell phone. In the past five years, cell phone ownership has become mainstream among even the youngest teens; fully 58% of 12-year olds now own a cell phone, up from just 18% in 2004.

According to Nielsen Mobile, in the first quarter of 2009, the average U.S. teen made and received an average of 191 phone calls and sent and received 2,899 text messages per month. By the third quarter, the number of texts had jumped to a whopping 3,146 messages per month, which equals more than 10 texts per every waking non-school hour. (At the beginning of 2007, those numbers were 255 phone calls and 435 text messages.) Preteens sent and received 1,146 texts per month. With numbers this astronomical, it's easy to see how practices such as sexting have become more prevalent among students; creating dangers they don't yet have the maturity to grasp.

World Wide Web

The past several years have seen an explosion in teenagers' use of the Internet. In response to the growing online presence of teens, a digital media culture has emerged that entertains, informs and connects teens to one another. This “virtual mall” is a place where teens go to socialize with friends, listen to music, do their homework,

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window shop, and follow the latest trends. Fully 93% of teens ages 12 – 17 go online, and 73% of American teens now use social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Youth who spend more time with media report lower grades and lower levels of personal contentment. Nearly half (47%) of all heavy media users (those who consume more than 16 hours of media content per day) say they usually get fair or poor grades (mostly C's or lower), compared to 23% of light media users (those who consume less than three hours of media per day). Heavy media users are also more likely to say they get into trouble frequently, are sad or unhappy and are often bored.

Hazards...and Solutions

The scientific and public health communities overwhelmingly conclude that viewing violence poses a harmful risk to children. Violent and sexually explicit images that are constantly streamed through video games, reality television, news shows and the World Wide Web serve to desensitize youth to what is acceptable behavior and what should be off limits.

On the other end of the spectrum, since 1980, the increase in childhood obesity represents an unprecedented burden on children's health. Thirty percent of children ages 6 – 19 are either overweight or "at risk" of being overweight. In addition, an estimated 80% of overweight adolescents continue to be obese in adulthood. What relation does this have to the technology revolution? Childhood obesity has been linked to media usage and its various forms of advertising.

During the period in which childhood obesity has dramatically increased, there has been an explosion in media targeted to children. Much of this media is laden with elaborate advertising campaigns that promote high-calorie, low nutrition foods such as candy, soda and snacks. It is estimated that the typical child sees about 40,000 ads a year on TV alone. Add to that the fact that more than eight out of ten (85%) of the top food brands that target children through TV advertising also use branded websites to market to children online.

From the standpoint of social development, where does the barrage of individualized media leave our youth? Quite possibly detached, isolated, unable to properly and fully interact face-to-face with others, and depending on their level of isolation, unable to relate to the needs of others or build lasting relationships.

How do we balance the influence of various media? When used properly and kept in check, technology can be a tremendous tool and asset to everyday living. The responsibility for controlling the methods and manner in

which youth use them lies in all of us by our example, discipline and common sense.

If you are a parent, create balance by watching media together. Those who spend time watching and using media alongside their child as well as talking about it are employing the most effective strategy parents can utilize to help children become selective and critical media consumers. Place parameters on how much time can be spent with various media and the manner in which it is used. Monitor young people's online interaction. Seize advantage of the tremendous amount of resources available for parents to police their children's media consumption.

It's safe to say that the global technology revolution is here to stay and its place in our lives will only expand, including innovations not yet created. Together let's take control of technology, before technology takes control of our youth.

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