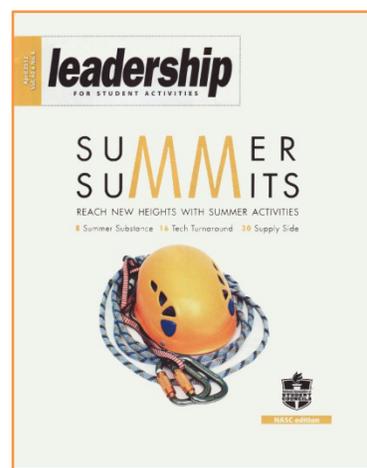
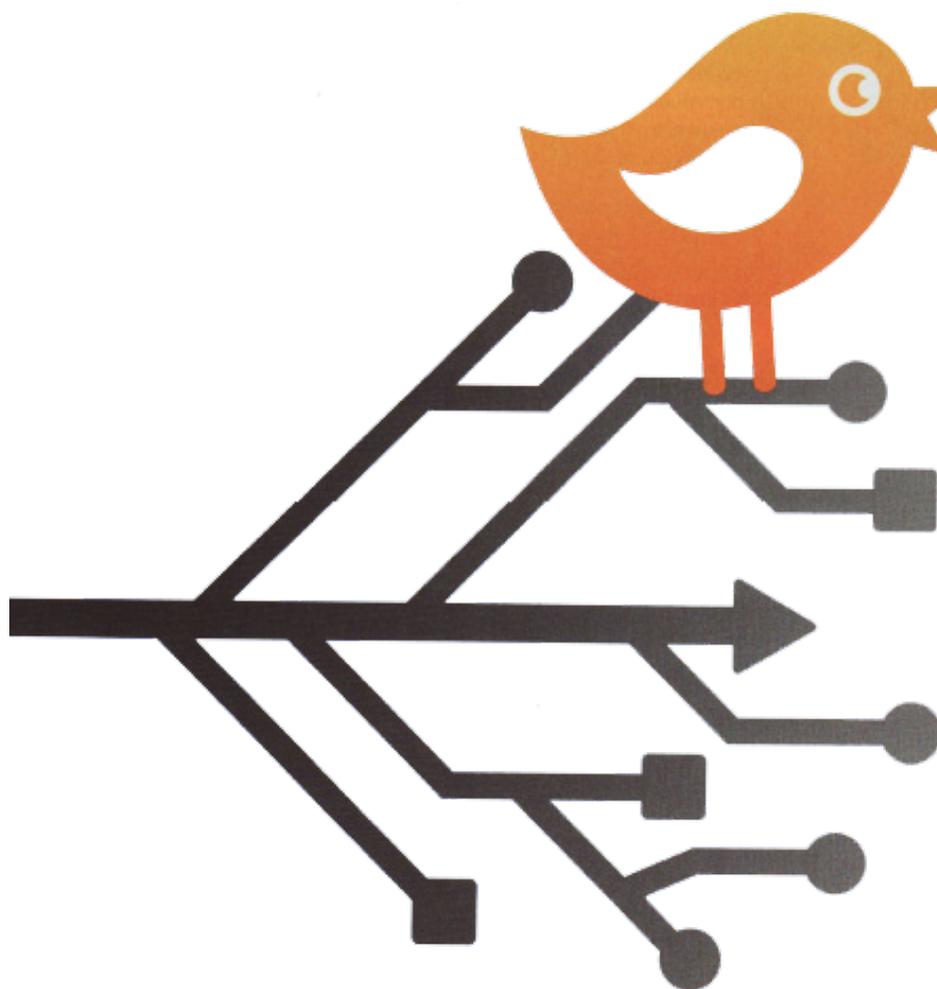


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Keeping Tech in Check

Teach students how to find balance between the temptation of technology and real life.
paul VITALE





Throughout history, various types of revolutions have defined the formation and growth of generations upon generations. Society now has instant, worldwide access through a variety of media advances that are easily accessible and affordable.

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, and text the night away.

They don't see technology as a tool. For them, it is just a way of life. So how does this affect our young people? The revolution has occurred and it is having a direct and forceful impact on our young people. And the results are not always good.

How might you use the summer months to plan a strategy to make these wonderful tools beneficial to your student leaders and their peers in the coming school year?

The problem

As anyone who knows a teen or a tween can attest, media can be among the most powerful forces in young people's lives. 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,” they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those 7½ hours. Older teens

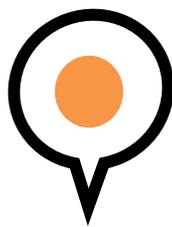
and Net Generationers spend more than 20 hours per day using all types of media, including cell phones. This is accomplished through considerable multitasking, with as many as seven simultaneous activities for older teens.

A recent report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found obesity, smoking, violence and eating disorders in today's youth that can be directly traced to their media consumption. It is essential that parents, physicians, policymakers, educators and others concerned with promoting healthy development in young people understand the role that media plays in their lives.

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, Skype-ing, FaceTime video chatting—pretty much anything but sharing the same space and talking in person.

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 keeping in close touch has now become a device predominantly used for “chatting” without actually speaking. Cell phone ownership is nearly universal among teens and young adults, and much of the growth 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

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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 US 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 nonschool hour. Preteens sent and received 1,146 texts per month. With numbers this astronomical, it's easy to see how practices such as sexting—and harassment—have become more prevalent among students; creating dangers they don't yet have the maturity to grasp.

The past several years have also seen an explosion in teenagers' use of the Internet. 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 (e.g. Facebook depression) and are often bored. Despite these cautionary statistics, teen usage is not likely to diminish.

The results

The scientific and public health communities overwhelmingly conclude that unmonitored online activity and viewing

violence through media pose a harmful risk to children. Violent and sexually explicit images that are constantly streamed through video games, reality television, news shows and the Web serve to desensitize youth to what is acceptable behavior and what should be off limits.

Childhood obesity has been linked to media usage and its various forms of advertising. 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.

How does the barrage of individualized media impact the social development of our youth? It can leave them 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. Teens and tweens must learn to exercise impulse control in an environment that is alternately a vacuum and a galaxy of possibilities.

Our job

How do we balance the influence of various media? When used properly and kept in check, technology can be a tremendous tool and asset. Digital literacy and online citizenship are critical skills parents and educators must instill in today's youth. Parents and educators are responsible for controlling the methods and manner in which young people use all forms of media and should lead by example, discipline and common sense.

Student leaders must be smart about their use of new media. It is important to

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get students to recognize the problem and see their own involvement—through logs of activity, pledges, or effective education.

These strategies can help to inform students and give them tools to help modify their tech habits:

- Give them good information, simply presented. Have each member of your group do a brief, through research report on one portion of the problem and have them provide it to the group in an interesting way. Vote on the best presentation and present them to the school.
- Hold an assembly with creative ways of presenting information about the host of problems related to new communications technology. Highlight cyber-bullying, texting while driving, time wasting, over-eating, or any topic related to the theme. Well-rehearsed skits can be very effective.
- Create an information booth for the whole school. Ask students to sign a pledge to commit to logging their usage of social media. Broadcast a weekly announcement about safety and good choices online. Have your students work on a series of warm-ups for various subjects that relate to the topics and that teachers can use.
- Get parents involved. Ask the PTA to help out with an evening program for parents on the topic. Feature students talking about how the problem affects them. Or have an

expert such as a school counselor talk about how widespread the problem is and its impact. The counseling office will likely be willing to help with any of these efforts.

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. With this in mind, together let's take control of technology, before technology takes control of our youth. ■

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