



THE INTERNET: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Opportunities and Temptations

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"Yes, I love technology. But not as much as you, you see."

- Kip's love song to Lafawnduh

Napoleon Dynamite

In 1450, Johann Gutenberg began churning out books and pamphlets from his cutting edge technology, the printing press. Who knew that he was starting an information revolution that would pull back the curtains on the Dark Ages, spark the scientific revolution, and fan the flames of the Protestant Reformation? While the press itself was neither good nor bad, it hastened the accessibility to both good and bad ideas—especially throughout university campuses.

Gutenberg's earliest income stream included the printing of certificates of indulgence for the Roman church. These indulgences granted full or partial forgiveness for sins, becoming a flashpoint of church controversy and corruption at the dawn of the sixteenth century.

In an ironic twist, the technology also paved the way for protest *against* indulgences as Martin Luther's 95 Theses (against the abuses of indulgences) gained widespread circulation and acceptance via the power of the printing press. Within months of this famous publication, both the Roman and Protestant churches leveraged printing technology in a long and ugly battle.

We live in an age that rivals the sixteenth century for information revolution. Gutenberg supposedly remarked, "Give me twenty

six soldiers of lead, and I shall conquer the world.” The Internet turns those twenty six soldiers into mercenaries, ready for deployment by anyone—yes, anyone—with Web access.

Just as the printing press has produced a full spectrum of books from the beautiful (e.g., the *Gutenberg Bible*) to the bizarre (e.g. *Backpacking for Shut-Ins*), the Internet has spawned sites and services that are helpful, hurtful, hateful and hopeful. While the technology of the Internet is morally neutral, it’s at best naïve and at worst self-deceived to approach the content of that technology with a presumption of moral neutrality. Without respect to morality, the Web is quickly digitizing all the content of this world...The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.

The Good

Once upon a time, students on university campuses physically walked down the hall of the dorm in order to hang out with fellow students—face to face. It was easy to find the happy diversions of foosball, pool and ping pong at the student lounge. To make a new friend, one simply left the door to the dorm room open between the hours of seven and midnight. Hallmates eventually crossed paths with one another, asked the same four standard questions of each other, and became fast friends.

Now, however, students face much greater financial pressures, which often require longer hours at a part-time job and longer commutes from affordable off-campus housing. The classic dormitory model of campus community has begun to give way to a virtual community of social networks, chats, forums and MMORPGs.¹

Given the constraints that limit community experiences, social networks can prove to be a good thing. The vast majority of college students now belong to social networks such as Facebook. For campus Christians, social networks offer the next best thing to being there. Despite persistent claims that Facebook is a harbinger

1. Massive multiplayer online role-playing game

ger of the Apocalypse, Christians have made it a place of encouragement. There's always a danger in writing about specific Web applications such as Facebook. If this chapter were written just ten years ago, it would likely consider the quaint online resources of AOL. Ten years from now, readers will certainly snicker as they wonder about Face-what? Until then, Facebook allows friends—more specifically brothers and sisters in Christ—to share encouragement notes, photographs, community quiet time journals, prayer requests, fellowship event reminders, scripture meditations, even video clips of preaching and teaching. As Christians reach out to new friends on campus, these seekers can experience a hint of their Christ community online. Campus ministries often form groups within social networks to better practice principles of fellowship.

Just as real fellowship functions more smoothly with certain protocols and etiquette, so virtual fellowship benefits from certain guidelines of *netiquette*. Here are a few suggestions to keep from becoming that “awkward” guy or girl:

- Request friends who actually are your friends or family. (Romans 12:9, 1 Peter 1:22)
- What's up with the “top friend” designations and “superlatives”? Either a few become “top friends” and many become disgruntled by your slight or everyone becomes a “top friend” and the designation is rendered meaningless. (James 2:1–9, Jude 16)
- Sensible people don't want to be bitten by a zombie, vampire, or werewolf. Chances are that the people you bite are thinking that you should get a life. Said another way, ditch the apps; they are a waste. You may think it's cute; it's not. Somebody had to say it. (Proverbs 15:21)
- Stalking is a dark perversion. You certainly wouldn't behave that way in real life interactions with brothers and sisters.

(Luke 8:17, Romans 2:16, Ephesians 5:12)

- To poke or not to poke, that is the question. Some of my friends like the whole poking thing; some feel violated. That's a wide and drastic spectrum. It's best to ask before poking. (Acts 24:16)
- Consider your responses to event invitations seriously. Some event planners will use the information to estimate purchases for the event. (Matthew 5:37)
- Some of the photos you upload may be hilarious, but are they compromising a friend's trust in you? Seek permission before sharing the questionable stuff. This is classic golden rule stuff (Matthew 7:12)...it applies widely.
- If you need to either resolve a conflict or confront a brother or sister, then make a real visit or pick up the phone. (Matthew 5:23–24, 18:15)

The Bad

Being a disciple of Jesus requires discipline. Being a student requires discipline. Here's where the Internet proves to be treacherous to a disciple on campus: it provides the ultimate escape from a disciplined life. Just as you agonize over a thesis for a research paper, an Internet banner for DRM-free music offers a welcome distraction from academic grind. And so you click...three hours later, you've found out the show times of all movies within a ten-mile radius of campus, tagged twenty-three friends in eighty-nine photos, shopped for the lowest price on sandals, answered eleven of ninety-one emails in your inbox, dropped another \$11.88 at iTunes, checked out the bird's eye view of your parents' house in three different map programs, and downloaded four freeware programs to improve your personal productivity.

Everyone tries to avoid the things they don't like to do, but what happens if you can't avoid those things (like homework,

exams, term papers, even prayers)? Sluggards continually try to find ways to avoid the tough tasks, while the diligent choose to do what sluggards hate to do. It's not that diligent students somehow like the tough tasks, but they choose to subordinate their dislike to their greater purpose (see Proverbs 12:24). Here's where the Internet proves to be "bad"; it offers an endless variety of compelling reasons to procrastinate for sluggards.

I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest—
and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man. (Proverbs 24:30–34)

The forbidden fruit of procrastination tastes sweet for a mere moment; in the end it's a bitter taste that lingers long. It enslaves students of all stripes. For disciples on campus, it also undermines their testimony (1 Timothy 4:12, Titus 2:6–8), removes them from fellowship and from the work of the Lord's harvest.

So how can you determine whether you are wasting too much time online?

Top Ten Signs That It's Time to Pull the Plug:

10. Your parents installed an invisible fence to tether the dog and a wireless home network to tether you to the house.
9. During a campus midweek meeting, you shared good news about achieving silver level status in a MMORPG.
8. What the Bible calls sin, you call a spyware infection.

7. Your parents learned about you becoming a sixth year senior when you updated your status in Facebook.
6. You're trying to establish a "locals only" surfing zone in the corner of your school's computer lab.
5. You're secretly convinced that a deposed Nigerian prince needs your seed money to access his immeasurable treasures.
4. Word association: your therapist says "stalker" you say "wall-to-wall."
3. iTunes just honored you with a Lifetime Achievement Award.
2. You are fearful that a serial killer will crawl into your back seat while you pump gas.
1. You made the radical commitment to fast for a week...in Second Life.

On a much more serious note, researchers for the American Psychiatric Association introduced a diagnostic questionnaire to provide a screening instrument for addictive Internet use.² I've reproduced it here:

1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous on-line activity or anticipate next on-line session)?
2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
5. Do you stay on-line longer than originally intended?
6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?

2. "Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Clinical Disorder." Kimberly S. Young, University of Pittsburgh at Bradford. Published in *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, Vol. 1 No. 3, 237-244.

7. Have you lied to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
8. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?

Respondents who answered “yes” to five or more questions were classified as addicted Internet users. If this applies to you, it’s time seek the help that can set you free.

If you fear that excessive Internet use looms on your horizon, confront the problem before it grows. Budget your time prior to going online. List the purpose and specific sites that you plan to visit before each online experience. Finally, share your plans with disciples on campus that can help you surf responsibly.

The Ugly

Escaping to the Internet is bad, but here is where things get really ugly. The Internet offers easy access to sin—especially sexual sin.

Once upon a time, there was a steep cost to count for accessing pornography. Young depraved men slithered into the corner store and asked to buy a pornographic magazine from a cashier who knew their parents and their grandparents. Even though one tried to diffuse the pornographic purchase with various other sundries, no amount of gum or baseball cards could dim the perceived neon arrow now pointing at the newest town pervert. Despite efforts to maintain anonymity with a low-riding baseball cap, one reasonably expected to be busted by an avenging patriarch within forty-eight hours. The risk-reward model simply did not pay out.

The Internet, however, alters the equation by slashing the risk and boosting the perceived rewards.

Where’s the risk in anonymously surfing over to a soft porn

Web site? Who's going to see—especially since no one checks your Internet activity? There's no paper trail, and after you surf away from the site, it's gone—right? And what harm is really done; it's a victimless sin—right? Wrong!

They say, "The LORD does not see;
 the God of Jacob pays no heed."
 Take heed, you senseless ones among the people;
 you fools, when will you become wise?
 Does he who implanted the ear not hear?
 Does he who formed the eye not see?
 Does he who disciplines nations not punish?
 Does he who teaches man lack knowledge?
 The LORD knows the thoughts of man;
 he knows that they are futile. (Psalm 94:7–11)

Not only has the Internet opened the door to unspeakable filth, it has exploited the suggestion that God "pays no heed." God watches...and weeps. He is the one who sees. He's the one to whom you will answer. Our anonymity is the delusion of a life lived by sight:

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps
 and punish those who are complacent...
 who think, "The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad."
 (Zephaniah 1:12)

The Internet offers a perceived reward, a limitless variety of titillation. This ends up being a portal into hell that stimulates the release of neurotransmitters inside your increasingly darkened mind. It is dangerously addictive. The next visit requires an even greater thrill ride.

But there is a path out of this dark pit. Bring the light in by exposing your darkness. Unless you make a plan, you will practice

a self deception that serves your baser desires and curiosities. Invest in Web filters; go only to sites that you've preplanned to visit; surf in public places; keep these scriptures ready on your lips:

I will set before my eyes

no vile thing.

The deeds of faithless men I hate;

they will not cling to me.

Men of perverse heart shall be far from me;

I will have nothing to do with evil. (Psalm 101:3-4)

Turn my eyes away from worthless things;

preserve my life according to your word. (Psalm 119:37)

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Technology has defined this digital decade. Let's redefine how students utilize this technology to serve God and his kingdom.

"But I still love technology...always and forever."

Questions

- 1. Do you feel entitled to use the Internet? If so, why? How can this undermine your ability to moderate your Internet use?*
- 2. What ways have you found the Internet helpful to you?*
- 3. Has the Internet contributed to procrastination? Have you ever justified it under the guise of "fellowship" via social networks?*
- 4. Have you used the Internet for lust, gossip or greed? If so, what excuse did you make to give yourself permission to sin deliberately? Expose this excuse with the light of Scripture.*
- 5. Have you hidden sins committed on the Internet? How can you best be set free from this darkness? How can you redefine your future use of the Internet to better honor God?*