SOCIAL NETWORKING

OVERVIEW

A number of different opinions have been presented concerning the effects of social networking. Some take a more-or-less positive approach while others move in a more negative direction. In the following essay, I will try to describe the polarity of views on this issue. I'll begin discussing the positives and negatives of social networking for youth themselves and then discuss its place in youth ministry. In conclusion we'll consider what social networking tells us about youth themselves, and offer some questions for reflection.

There are a broad array of positive perspectives on youth’s social networking (SN) in the digital or virtual world. First of all youth say SN keeps them in touch with their friends. SNS (social networking sites) are often only used because it is a glorified list of contacts and allows for greater ease in sending numerous messages with updates and information to different people. This also offers the more socially oriented youth a better springboard for connections they might not have had without SNS. Another common reason that youth use SNS has to do with an expression of their creativity. Many youth have few opportunities to express themselves in a manner that is truly representing their creative selves. SNS offers them another chance to express these gifts which does not include spray painting on walls illegally or vandalizing. Consequently, SNS also gives youth a tool to begin forming their own identity. With peers on their page/site, they explore ways in which they’d like to be perceived. In order to think about this, youth must begin asking questions of identity that they may not have asked. The last major positive that can come as a result of SNS has to do with a journaling stimulus that SNS offers youth who actively participate. As youth create pages, over time, they will be able to look back at comments, pictures, thoughts, and writings that they had had in the past. Because of this, youth are able to get a sense of their own history and start to make sense out of their own lives as they progress into adulthood.

As with most aspect of our lives, positives come with negatives as well. The following list of negative effects of SNS have been put forward at various times. A variety of privacy concerns come to the surface with this exhaustively wide web of SNS. In order to sign up for a facebook/myspace page, youth must agree to certain privacy stipulations that they might not even be able to fully understand the implications of. Tangentially, the past few decades have seen a great deal of concerns over sexual predators. SNS does offer another avenue for these predators to take advantage of information concerning vulnerable youth. This reality, keeps many parents enforcing strict regulations on their kids use of SNS. Another major reason has to do with an already overly egotistical generation of people. Many have dubbed the up and coming generation of youth
the "Me-generation." This title reflects the fact that youth are often more egotistical and self-centered now than they were many years ago. If this is true, many have inquired into whether or not SNS is a valuable enterprise as it merely offers one more platform for an already ego-centered people group to think about themselves.

Moreover, a number of different psychologists (Mary Pipher, David Elkind, etc.) have suggested that this generation of youth are already over-stimulated. Consequently, they suggest youth need more ways to un-wind instead of another stimulus to add to the great deal of stress they’re already feeling. The final negative effect of SNS is subject to a great deal of debate in the possibility of its encouraging anti-social behavior. This reality is disputed, however, by the fact that the more socially-oriented youth are often the ones who use SNS the most.

Having considered the value of SNS for youth themselves, we now turn to the specific issue of SNS and its effects on ministry. We’ll again consider positive and negative possibilities in its youth ministry use. Our position will point toward a mixed-bag of good as well as bad-things.

Beginning with the positives, many have first and foremost recognized the value of SNS for advertising. Because youth pastors are able to write up an invitation and send it to an entire group of people in a matter of minutes with a great deal of response to the invitation, SNS is quite helpful as an advertising aid to any programming. Moreover, as youth workers have the capability to market quickly to a great deal of students, they also have the potential to communicate with a great deal of youth in a shorter span of time. Calling forty or fifty youth every week might be quite difficult for a busy youth worker, but SNS allow youth workers to send quick messages to each one. SNS can also function as a window of understanding for youth workers with youth who may be difficult to get to know. As they might be shy in person, many youth have much about their lives, tastes, interests, and activities, on their SNS page. This information is easily accessible to an eager youth worker who would like to get to know this student more. Moreover, ministry is able to happen more on the youth’s home turf. As SNS is, in a sense, where "youth hang out" (at least virtually), the youth worker ought to be eager to hang out in the same area with these youth who are quite active on these sites.

Finally, a number of studies have shown that people are generally more open to opposing ideas and viewpoints on the web than they are elsewhere. (See Joshua Cooper Ramo, "Finding God on the Web," in Time [January 1998, pgs 60-69]) Because of this, ministry can effectively be happening on the web itself. Youth may be quite receptive to online discussion forums on issues of spirituality and religion. Youth workers can easily take advantage of an area of the world where
people are more frequently asking questions and are not as intimidated by the answers.

In light of the many potential positives for SNS’s use in ministry, the list of negatives seems comparatively small. First and foremost, SNS eliminates a great deal of privacy. This elimination of privacy happens both for the group and for youth workers themselves. Most youth workers are probably not excited about their entire youth group seeing every picture taken of them while they were in college. With SNS, all past lives could potentially be online and visible to all. Moreover, because of the interconnectedness of SNS, private matters within a group stay private for a much shorter span of time. Information can spread so quickly with SNS that youth have the ability to communicate anything to anyone, anytime. The final negative for ministry purposes involves a liability with SNS. Because identity theft and hacking are so prevalent today, youth workers might want to think carefully about the possibility of someone hacking their page and then sending something to their youth.

Regardless of whether or not the use of SNS is good or bad for youth or ministry, SNS tells us something about youth today. Namely, that youth are longing for community. Whether or not they are egotistical in their usage of SNS, they are still eager for someone outside of themselves to view this information. Consequently, we know from this that as individualistic as the "me-generation" might seem, they still want intimacy and genuine relationships. This should not come as any surprise to Christians at all. For the Bible speaks quite openly about the fundamental longing for relationships that all human beings have. This discussion begins at the creation (Gen 1:18) and carries throughout much of the New Testament as well (Eph 5, Phi 2:2-4, Col 3). SNS are telling us something about youth that the Bible has been affirming for a quite long time.

This consideration of positives and negatives invites questions and discussions important for youth ministry today.

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. In what ways can SNS be utilized for ministry purposes?
2. If you use SNS, why do you? If not, why not?
3. How may SNS change the face of ministry and the Church?
4. Do you regard these changes as positive or negative?
5. How might we embrace the good aspects of SNS for youth and ministry and avoid the bad?
6. Can SNS help youth as they develop their self-understanding and identity? How?

**IMPLICATIONS**

1. The Internet, Social Networking and the Virtual World is part of youth culture and cannot be ignored.

2. The only questions are: how can we help young people use these tools to their advantage toward the goals of healthy lives, relationships and growth, and, how can we take advantage of their virtual world to promote their real-world relationships in youth ministry.

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