

# Facing Facebook: Social Networking and Worldview

*Byron Barlowe digs beneath the surface of the various social networking phenomena like Facebook and Twitter.*

It seems like everybody is on *Facebook*! At 350 million members worldwide and growing exponentially, this social networking community would be the third largest country in the world! One hundred million Americans,<sup>{1}</sup> including 86 percent of American women, now have a profile on at least one social networking site, nearly double from a year earlier.<sup>{2}</sup>

“...Twitter has radically changed the face of online communication. This year alone [2009], usage has grown by 900 percent...”<sup>{3}</sup> But kids prefer the ever-popular YouTube video-sharing site. Two-thirds of Internet users around the world visit blogs and social networks, making it more popular than email. And older users are flocking to social sites. So this is about you and your friends, too, mom and dad!

So what is *social networking*? At a social site like Facebook.com, when you find another member, you click a button that says “Add as Friend.” Now, you and that person have a connection on the Web site that others can see. They are a member of your network, and you are a member of theirs. Also, you can see who your friends know, and who your friends’ friends know. You’re no longer a stranger, so you can contact them more easily. As the website Common Craft explains, “This solves a real-world problem because your network has hidden opportunities. Social networking sites make these connections between people visible.”<sup>{4}</sup>

“These applications have given users an entirely new dimension of interactivity on the Web, as people are able to share videos, photos, links, ideas, and information at a heretofore

unseen speed and with uncanny ease that enhances the Web experience of every Internet user.”[\[5\]](#)

But some push back. “It’s just trivia, a waste of time,” they say. Silly games and self-centered platforms where folks can parade their lives. There is some truth in that charge. But it’s important to understand such a powerful, widespread medium and seek to redeem it.

One commentator said, “Time bends when I open Facebook: it’s as if I’m simultaneously a journalist/wife/mother in Berkeley and the goofy girl I left behind in Minneapolis.”[\[6\]](#) But the accessibility and immediacy is not always good or profound. Be ready to have your life history, long-lost friends and personal ghosts pop up in unexpected ways through social networking. In the same way, the future could be at stake with each post and link you put up: Whatever goes online, stays online. One’s reputation will be marked for years to come by her online life for good or ill.

However, the meteoric rise of social networking has occurred for good reason. In Facebook, Xanga or MySpace, research shows that we *extend* current relationships online. It can all be very trivial or fairly meaningful, depending on how it’s used. In this way, social networking is not unlike meeting up at a coffee shop or at the back fence. Younger generations are known to be more conversational than older ones. In my middle-aged circles, many seem to have written it off prematurely.

We’ll explore some worldview implications of social networking through the insightful book *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*.[\[7\]](#) Using a grid introduced by media professor and technology prophet Marshall McLuhan that traces media’s culture-shaping influence, we’ll briefly assess how this technology enhances our capabilities, retrieves lost ones, makes obsolete other things, and reverses into unintended consequences. In other words, we’ll ask and partially answer basic questions like: What will this

blossoming media change? What am I giving up if I use it? How can I control it for myself and my kids? Will it end up controlling me—or has it already?

“Hanging out” online, for all its similarities to in-person conversation **is** fundamentally different. And those differences are sure to change not only our socializing, but our worldviews—maybe even our faith.

## **“The Medium is the Message”**

*McLuhan famously stated that “the medium is the message,” meaning that the content of media is overshadowed in its influence by the influence of the very medium (technology) through which it is communicated. Hipps believes media has been a fundamental change agent of culture, even faith. We’ll explain and explore a bit McLuhan’s grid of change and how it applies to social networking.*

In discussing social networking sites like Facebook and their effect on people, it’s helpful to look back at other media to see their culture-shaping influence. Note that I didn’t write “the content of other media,” but rather, “other media.” For example, before Gutenberg’s movable-type printing press, faith was passed down orally and through imagery like stained glass windows and church icons. The concrete stories from the synoptic Gospels ruled the day; the Apostle Paul’s deep, abstract letters were virtually ignored. Then, print technology unleashed a new way to think and even to believe—an emphasis on *individual faith* accessed through *critical reason*. This print phenomenon *retrieved* the abstract, doctrinally rich letters of Paul from the dusty shelves of history. This, in turn, ignited the Reformation, writes Shane Hipps. One result: the church transformed from a highly communal body into a mass of individuals and put religious mystery largely out of touch.

Hipps writes that, *in its extremes*, the influence of print

reduced the gospel to incomplete abstract propositions and made many Christians arrogant about what we can know with certainty. [This is what some in the emerging church conversation react against, but we cannot pursue that topic here.]

Perhaps less controversially, Hipps shares the maxim that any media-social networking included—changes its users in a similar way print technology did. Marshall McLuhan famously stated that “the medium *is* the message.” He meant that the medium itself does more to affect people than even the content that it carries.

The adage, “We become what we behold”[\[8\]](#) seems to hold forth in social science and neurology, as well. Brain scientists are finding that exposure to and use of media of any kind changes the brain’s wiring, so there’s more at stake here than just bad content or how we use our time.[\[9\]](#)

While writing this transcript, I had to fight to get alone and maintain focus. I consciously avoided the distraction and fragmentation my mind easily undergoes while *Twittering* (or “tweeting”) and *Facebooking* (see, social networking even spawns new verbs, like “friending”!). The social networking experience is like walking around at a party filled with friends in various conversations: lots of brief comments, retorts and jokes. My need for individual, abstract thinking was at risk at the “Facebook party.” (Ironically, I was in the abstract writing mode regarding a very different sort of medium: non-abstract, simplistic, disjointed, visually based, online digital “communities.”)

New media may bring us to and keep us more “in the moment” and in touch with real people, all good things. But so-called *virtual communities* may create very unreal relationships. Not to mention a loss of in-depth thinking, conversation and fellowship to build current relationships. Two years ago a commentator wrote regarding American youth on social networks,

“The rules of relationship are...being rewritten, and...are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.[{10}](#) However, things may be changing, at least among Australian youth, where “they want more connections with their friends that aren’t digital, that are tangible. They’re starting to question the authenticity of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. They want technology to assist rather than dominate the way they communicate.”[{11}](#)

David Watson is an entrepreneurial “pastor” exploring the legitimacy of online shepherding. He believes it’s a general relationship issue not confined to online participation: “Any time you are not fully present with whatever community you happen to be with—whether online or offline—you can hurt people... We just notice the online stuff more because it is new and people tend to spend lots of time with new things before they figure out how everything balances out.”[{12}](#)

So what’s the big deal? Most Facebook, MySpace or Orkut members aren’t changing their entire view of reality, truth, God or mankind based on interactions with online friends. No, it’s not the obvious pitfall of cults or wild philosophies that people usually deal with day to day anyway. Under-the-radar ways of being and communicating can incrementally change who we are. It’s the subtle way that our *view* of life changes that concerns me most. Are moment-by-moment Tweets dumbing us down in various ways? Have we come to expect meaning in 140-character bits? Twitter shows the flow of life in tiny chunks some call a lifestream. But are those snippets, especially when seen intermittently, meaningful?

Media swirls around us and we become immune to the white noise. But McLuhan was a master at stepping back to study what is going on with media to see how to cooperate with and thus handle the vortex. Churches and ministries love to jump on new technologies to share the old, old story—but before diving in headlong, we need to remember McLuhan’s warning: we become like the media that we use.

# Social Networking Redeems and Resurrects Good Things

*What is the technology of social networking enhancing and bringing back from disuse? What are some redeeming characteristics of this new phenomenon? They include renewed friendships and acquaintances, helpful networking made easy, ministry possibilities and relational fun. Mainly, it enhances real-world relational communities.*

McLuhan stated that new media always “enhances and retrieves” good things. For example, we long for the days of chatting with neighbors on the front porch. Social networking restores this dynamic to a surprising degree. One writer reflected, “It could be . . . that Facebook marks a return to the time when people remained embedded in their communities for life, with connections that ran deep. . . .”[\[13\]](#)

Reconnections frequently happen too. One former neighbor messaged me on Facebook, “Are you the Byron that lived beside us 25 years ago?” She was thrilled to know I was still walking with Christ and asked for prayer for her drug-addicted brother. She’d located me out of the blue a quarter century later and seven states away through the wonder of social networking.

Social networks have great potential for ministry. Yet Shane Hipps’ primary message for Christ-followers in *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* is that simply broadcasting the gospel message in an old style into this new medium will not be effective. The medium itself changes the way people perceive *and* receive the message.

Social media are *not* a kind of broadcast medium, but rather a *conversation medium*. Online social ministry pioneer Paul Watson tells incredible stories of fruit borne online. He shepherds groups who stay current on Twitter and Facebook. One online community of Christ-followers raised funds over the

Internet for a non-Christian tarot-card-reader to take her premature son to a hospital half a state away for medical treatment. A blogger, a practicing witch, warned her visitors not to harass Watson after he privately initiated prayer regarding her health issue.

Campus Crusade for Christ uses Facebook for campus ministry. They recently stated that 66 million students are active Facebook users. That's three times the population of Australia! In an outreach training video produced by Campus Crusade, the camera pans an empty library and the question "*Where are the students?*" flashes across the screen. Then it shows a computer lab chock-full of kids, most logged into Facebook, MySpace, Twitter or YouTube. Another banner reads, "The average college student spends three hours on Facebook each visit." Going where the people hang out is wise! But Campus Crusade knows you can't just post *The Four Spiritual Laws* tract on Facebook and be effective. Long-term engagement with a live person or social community is required to make a positive difference.

If relationships are healthy, they *can* be helped online. "A study published in 2007 in The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication suggested that hanging onto old friends via Facebook may alleviate feelings of isolation for students whose transition to campus life had proved rocky."[{14}](#)

A Christian apologist wrote regarding social networking and the Internet, "We should note well Thomas Morris's 'Double Power Principle'—'To the extent that something has power for good, it has corresponding power for ill.'"[{15}](#)Next, we'll discuss the downsides of social media.

## **Social Networking Makes Obsolete and Obscures Other Good Things**

*What is the technology of social networking making obsolete,*

*obscuring or obliterating? Taken to extremes, how might it make its users regress rather than progress? What other troublesome dynamics does it create?*

Studies show that people tend to continue and expand their real-life relationships online. But people can be fooled. Nothing replaces face-to-face contact. Hipps writes in *Flickering Pixels* about mutual friends of his who live very nearby but who had not seen each other in months. They communicate online daily, yet their relationship has deteriorated. Hipps commented on so-called *virtual communities*: “It’s virtual—but it ain’t community. . . . Meaningful, missional Christian community” should consist of several essential things:

*1. **Shared history or experiences** that help establish a sense of identity and belonging*

*2. **Permanence** or relational staying power—“it’s how you get shared history.” Members of a transient community never get shared memories.*

*3. **Proximity**—“you have to be with one another in order to create the kind of meaningful connections to have community.”*

*4. **Shared imagination of the future** —a sense of “We’re all going in the same direction.” Hipps says this is the one thing you get automatically with online social networking—people flock together who already share a future vision. But it’s not community just because of that. If online “friends” are not able to meet together over time and share life experiences as they work toward a common vision, then it’s just an online affinity group.*

“Electronic culture disembodies and separates [yet]. . . . most of us. . . believe our technology is bringing us closer.”[\[16\]](#) The Bible exhorts believers not to forsake group gatherings.[\[17\]](#) Why? Because corporate worship and teaching,



personal shepherding, mutual encouragement, even non-verbal signals are irreplaceable. We can take our cues on being physically present from the incarnation: God's most powerful gospel medium was the Man, Christ Jesus.

Technology always makes something obsolete. It seems probable that too much online use compromises our ability to concentrate and think abstractly and form a coherent argument. Given a steady diet of fragmented imagery and spontaneous status updates, a new generation is losing the ability to think through issues from a coherent framework. "Through YouTubing, Facebooking, MySpacing . . . people take in vast amounts of visual information. But do they always comprehend the meaning of what they see. . . ? They are easily manipulated as students, consumers and citizens." [\[18\]](#)

Another endangered characteristic is deep conversation. Within the space of 140 character status updates and Tweets, all hope of profound, meaningful dialogue seems lost. Instead, images rule. ". . . Image culture is eroding and undermining imaginative creativity" which is "extremely important to our functioning as healthy, creative people." [\[19\]](#)

Social networking can steal your time. A friend recently told me that his wife's use of Facebook is hindering their family time and communications. This is likely a widespread problem. "2.6 billion minutes are used daily by the global population on Facebook." [\[20\]](#) If you already struggle with addictive tendencies or wasting time, think twice about launching into this absorbing lifestyle change. Get help for your online habit if it's destructive as you would for any addiction.

## **Balancing Social Networking, Keeping a Christian Worldview in Mind**

*What are some more guiding principles for using social networking (and the Internet)? How do users balance their*

*lives and retain a Christian worldview in a social networking age?*

Remember Narcissus, the mythological character who was so enamored by his own image in the pool of water that it eventually became his undoing? Most people focus on his self-absorption. But the point Hipps makes isn't how stuck on himself Narcissus was, but rather his inability to perceive and control the low-tech medium of a reflective pool. He seemed oblivious to what was going on, as people tend to be regarding the media maelstrom that surrounds us. "When we fail to perceive that the things we create are extensions of ourselves, the created things take on god-like characteristics and we become their servants."[\[21\]](#) Media intake stealthily becomes idolatry.

The legendary Perseus, on the other hand, realized the power of a medium that if put under his control, could destroy the deadly effects of staring into the eyes of Medusa. Using a shield as a mirror, he deflected her deadly gaze and turned it into a chance to kill her. Even ancient Greek pagans understood the difference between these two fictional characters: Narcissus became enamored and then ensnared by a medium; Perseus, on the other hand, stepped back, realized the mirror was just an extension of his eyes, and so was able to master that medium. This echoes biblical commands to guard our heart and mind and not be conformed to the world.[\[22\]](#)

Remember, we're not really talking about what content goes *on* your Facebook page. Rather, it's the hidden power of the Internet and social networking that concerns us. Count the cost each time you use it.

One good use of the immediacy of Twitter is intercession. I got stuck in Delhi, India on a mission trip and *tweeted* a prayer request through my cell phone that in turn updated my Facebook page. Instant access and 140-character-long brevity can be good.

More advice from this worldview watcher trying to redeem social networking: read widely. Read deeply. Keep those parts of your mind and soul in shape while navigating the quick communications of social networking.

Guard your time like a night watchman. Guard your heart and mind like a jealous lover. Set “no unclean thing” before your eyes<sup>{23}</sup> and if others try to, take down that post or don’t follow them. Also, guard against not only physical but “psychological nudity.”<sup>{24}</sup>

Mix into everyday wall posts some meaningful thoughts, worthy articles and video clips that cause people to think. Become a fan at the Facebook or MySpace pages of organizations like Probe. Link to articles at Probe.org, Bible.org, or some good cause to help fund.

Balance is key: not everything is worthy of immediate broadcast or attention. “Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”<sup>{25}</sup> Trivia can be genuine but tiresome.

Reach out: post a Scripture, share your faith.

As Shane Hipps said, “The most important medium, the most powerful medium is you, you are God’s chosen medium to incarnate the hands and feet of God in an aching world. . . . The more we understand [the hidden power of media], the more we can understand how to use our media rather than be used by them.”<sup>{26}</sup>

## Notes

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## **MySpace: Parents and Kids Wisely Navigating Online Social Networking**

*MySpace and other social networking sites can be a great boon or a great danger. Byron Barlowe cautions Christian parents of teens to exercise discernment in educating themselves about this important part of life, and look for a redemptive view of this social technology.*

### **Very Big and Very Hip**

MySpace.com: *It's big, it's growing, it's controversial for*

*good reasons, and it's probably touched your family—and you may not even know it. In this section, we answer the questions, “What is it and why do you as a parent need to learn more about protecting your kids without cutting them off?”*

Is *MySpace* a harmless teen hangout or a treacherous trap? Should parents forbid your kids from using *MySpace* or similar social networking Web sites? Kids, do your parents, like, even have a *clue*? And could Christians legitimately use *MySpace* as a mission field?

Controversy about *MySpace* still abounds, even in the fast-moving online world.

Imagine this: Your straight-A, straight-laced teenaged daughter Lori met Aaron online when he visited her *MySpace* profile, a Web page about her. Now she wants to go to the concert with Aaron and his online buddy, “PartyCrasher.” “But mom, we’ve been ‘friends’ for weeks!” she whines. Mom and Dad, what do you do now?

This may not happen to your family, but something similar happened to a Michigan family whose previously trouble-free sixteen-year-old daughter sneaked a flight to the Middle East to rendezvous with a *MySpace* “friend”![\[1\]](#)

So, what is *MySpace*? According to one top ranking site, in August 2007 it became the sixth-most-visited Web site on the Internet,[\[2\]](#) with over 100 million accounts.

A “perfect storm”: millions of people—many of them in their teens and twenties—are connecting with friends, meeting new ones, producing Web pages and video and music, chatting, inviting back and forth to events—even doing business and art—all within virtual communities.

Think of it as a microcosm of the World Wide Web, only much

more easily connected and organized, even by kids. If the Internet was the Wild West, social networking sites—sites like *MySpace*—are becoming its boomtowns.

*Wired* magazine explains, “*MySpace.Com*, the Internet’s most popular social networking site...has helped redefine the way a generation communicates.”[\[3\]](#)

One digital culture watcher wrote, “Community-based websites are the fastest growing sites on the Internet. The teen social ecosystem *MySpace*” is the biggest.[\[4\]](#)

“According to some,” writes Connie Neal, author of *MySpace for Moms & Dads*, “*MySpace* marks a societal revolution as monumental as the industrial revolution.”[\[5\]](#)

*MySpace* owner Rupert Murdoch said, “The average person who is computer proficient is self-empowered in a way they never have [been] before.”[\[6\]](#)

It’s this newfound “empowerment” that rightly concerns parents.

Let’s keep perspective. It’s only natural that real life is replicated online. A Roper study found that “online communities represent a real and growing phenomenon, but one that is dwarfed by interest in *real-world* social networks . . . [like] extended family (94% interest), neighborhood or town (80%), religious or spiritual organization (77%), hobby/interest (69%)” and so forth.

The directors of *BlogSafety.com* have written a handy book entitled *MySpace Unraveled: A Parent’s Guide to Teen Social Networking*. (“Blog” is short for Weblog, an online diary or commentary page.) They write regarding the rapidly evolving topic of teens redefining blogging into more of a social interaction: “As we adults struggle to find the language that describes this phenomenon, teens are speeding ahead, making it up as they go. . . . To them, these sites are just another



tool for socializing.”[\[7\]](#) Online and offline distinctions blur into oblivion.

What does this mean for Christian youth and parents?

## Dangers and Solutions

*MySpace and similar social networking sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. Threats like malicious software, cyberbullying, and sexual predators render it risky for the unprepared and unsupervised. MySpace is being called to account and is responding, but it's primarily up to parents to protect their children.*

One thoughtful parent and Christian school educator responded to the topic as I first did: “Isn’t *MySpace* a waste of time or worse, a place where kids think they’re experiencing real relationships but are *only* getting a risky situation?” His observation was that the kind of kids who were drawn to *MySpace* already had deep needs that weren’t being fulfilled, primarily by parents.

As a parent of three pre-teens, I shared his skepticism. Yet, there’s a bigger picture, I found. There’s hope, too. Nonetheless, it can be scary, especially in light of greater autonomy for kids who naturally lack discretion.

Let’s pretend you find your thirteen-year-old son pacing after something hits the wall with a crash. He blurts out, “They put up a site about me with nasty pictures and said I’m fat! Now everybody is messaging about it. I’m not going to school.” He’s been cyberslammed and feels his young world crashing in.

The sense of public humiliation caused by cyberbullying is coupled with the danger that online threats can spill into real life. *MySpace* and similar sites can be intimidating, even dangerous places. As a parent, you may choose to forbid or restrict use of *MySpace* in your home. But I suggest you choose



in an informed, careful way.

Sexual dangers are the best known. Chatrooms and posted messages easily enable such temptations and threats. One recent trip to *MySpace* rendered solicitations to chat online with a sultry woman seeking American servicemen and a gang-type fellow with the screen name “King Pimpin’.”

In 2002, fifteen-year-old Katie Canton met John in a live online chat room. Since he lived far away, Katie felt free to send photos and flirt. Soon John was sending Katie gifts and e-mailing.

This story ended well: Katie testified at John’s trial where he got twenty years in prison. But it had taken Katie participating in a role-playing video game to realize that her behavior and that of her would-be abuser was becoming a classic case of online predation.[\[8\]](#) This is why parental education and supervision are crucial.

Again, some perspective is in order. It’s tempting to view sites like *MySpace.com* as a monolithic online ghetto. A more accurate word picture may be a high school campus. Enter on one side, see the “dopeheads”; enter another, see the “jocks” and cheerleaders. You can’t paint with too broad a brush in assessing it accurately. And students can privately stay in the “nice part of town.”

Concern is warranted, of course. The required minimum age for *MySpace* is fourteen. However, age verification is still technically impossible, largely due to lack of a public track record for minors—ironic, as many of them create public records openly on such sites.

Parents have sued on behalf of their abused daughters, and thirty-four state attorneys general are now demanding more age-verification controls.[\[9\]](#) Meanwhile, *MySpace* has reportedly discovered thousands of members who are convicted sex offenders. “The attorneys general of Georgia, Idaho, North

Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Mississippi and New Hampshire joined Connecticut in signing a letter to the company asking it to turn over information.”[{10}](#)

*MySpace* has responded. The company deleted two hundred thousand “objectionable” accounts.[{11}](#) (A similar move by networking site *Friendster* caused a mass exodus, a sad commentary on many of its users.) *MySpace* also began developing parental tracking software, seen by many as just a start.

After hiring a former prosecutor with experience working on sex crimes against children as chief security officer, in January, 2007, *MySpace* donated a breakthrough national database to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). It features the first-ever method to match faces and body features like tattoos to often-elusive sex offenders. Providing “a way to filter convicted offenders from younger *MySpace* members, the database combines the records of individual state registries, plus allows searches based on images, which the NCMEC said is important.”[{12}](#)

A new senate bill would require—for the first time ever—sex offenders to register their email addresses. Donna Rice Hughes, president of the watchdog/activist group Enough Is Enough, says, “While there is no ‘silver bullet’ for protecting children from Internet dangers, this legislation will help to provide another protective barrier for millions of children. . . . Parents must remain proactive and educated about the safety rules and software tools available.”[{13}](#)

Child safety experts agree: parental guidance should be the first and strongest line of defense. Technology continues to outrun ethical reflection in a culture marked by the philosophy, “If it can be done, go for it!” Pragmatism, the myth of progress as always good, lack of a biblical understanding of sin’s pervasiveness and seriousness and sheer greed, drive many of the developments like the *MySpace*

revolution.

But so do innately human needs and God-given desires to connect in a disjointed, wired world. Moral panic regarding teens and technology are nothing new. Doomsday prophecies—partially deserved—ensued with the advent motion pictures, television, and the Internet itself, as Internet researcher Danah Boyd points out.[{14}](#) Wise adaptation is always essential to being “in the world but not of it.”[{15}](#)

## **Hanging Out and Friending**

*Kids hang out on MySpace because virtually everyone they know does, even if they would prefer not to. Another big draw: shared interests. But teens need to appreciate the distinction between acquaintances and true friends, as well as appropriate vs. illegitimate public intimacy while being truly “real.”*

What can make young men cry? Take away their online “space.”

At a conference panel discussion on social networking, four ministry leaders shared nearly identical experiences. Their teens had naturally migrated to *MySpace* with their peers and created profiles there, unknown to these conservative Christian dads. After perusing the site, three of the four outright forbade use of *MySpace*. One by one, they told tales of begging and weeping. One boy sobbed, “Dad, it’s the only time I’ve ever felt cool.”

This is tricky. Parents’ gut reaction may be to minimize or dismiss such a notion. Yet, socialization at this age happens naturally, inevitably, even critically. But online? Here?

But part of the vital process of adolescent socializing is decoding cues about where you fit into the youth culture and *who* you are perceived to be. If kids are deeply grounded in the love of their God and family, it’s just another “place.” It’s when this grounding is missing that *MySpace* can easily

become a platform to present a false self.

Danah Boyd talks about the psychology of publicly viewable social networking: it's performed. "Showing face" becomes key, being "real" has its limits while "friending" online. Note the use of "friend" as a verb there.[{16}](#)

Author Connie Neal lists ways *MySpace* meets the needs of teens in uncanny ways, needs to:

- *Communicate with peers*
- *Try on different styles*
- *See what others are like*
- *Explore their generation's music, art, photography*
- *Hear, view, read stories through media*
- *Flirt*
- *Make friends*
- *Feel included in a group*[{17}](#)

For a time, *MySpace* also seemed unavoidable (it may be "like, so last year" at this point; *Facebook* is reportedly the social site of choice today among youth). Danah Boyd says, "For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life—they are [at *MySpace*] because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it's cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do.

Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Joneses."[{18}](#)

Social networking relies on clicking to "make" or invite

“friends.” In contrast, an ancient Hebrew proverb states, “A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”[{19}](#)

This leads to a deeper question: “What does the term ‘friend’ really mean?” Certainly more than a popularity contest, which many accuse *MySpace* of becoming. Stephanie Bennett, writing for *Breakpoint*, warns, “In many ways these technologies reduce relationship to a commodity—something one possesses rather than a jointly developed friendship.”

Bennett continues:

*Just as the practice of [slow-paced] courtship . . . gave way to dating and the now common practice of objectifying “the other” [or “hooking up” and casual sex], the rules of relationship are . . . being rewritten, and . . . are being shaped by a distinctly media-centered worldview rather than a Christian one.*[{20}](#)

Author C. S. Lewis wrote:

*Friendship arises out of mere companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.”*[{21}](#)

Perhaps herein lies the greatest appeal of *MySpace*—shared interests. This is not lost on teenagers.

In balance, as one participant in a CNN.com forum wrote, “True friends . . . need to learn when to stop blogging and go across campus to help a friend.”[{22}](#)

C. S. Lewis also wrote, “Eros will have naked bodies;

friendship naked personalities.”{23} The scantily clad girls parading on certain pages at *MySpace* reflect our culture. Sex is confused with intimacy nowadays; psychological nudity on the Internet is not so different.

Billed as a place to make friends and connect in community, *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Xanga* and the like may be having the opposite effect, according to one study at San Diego State. It uncovered “an attitude of ‘It’s all about me’” prevailing among college students, the *Chicago Tribune* reported, and “blogging and social networking are ‘playing a big role’ in this.”{24}

Nonsense, says tech educator Andy Carvin. Social networking largely entails “communities where people reinforce interpersonal relationships through sharing and creating content. . . . [They] want to be a part of something bigger than themselves.”{25}

Social sites should reflect and enhance relationships, not define them. Challenge the presumption of *instant-friendship-by-mouseclick* with your kids as necessary. Guard against not only physical but “psychological nudity.”

This presents one more important conversational topic for parents training their kids in a biblical worldview marked by serving others, not by parading themselves or sending false signals.

## Parents and Teens Cooperating

*Picture yourself or your child in a situation like this: “We’re sorry, Caitlyn, but we just cannot hire you. Your online history isn’t in keeping with our company’s standards.” A growing host of those among the Internet generation with online regrets have walled off their online socializing from prying parents and ended up miring their futures in controversy.*

Another problem with *MySpace* and social sites is what Boyd calls *persistence in digital publics*. Unable to envision the future, kids don't grasp the lasting ramifications of their youthful foolishness, often captured publicly and permanently in cyberspace. "Without impetus," Boyd says, "teens rarely choose to go private on *MySpace* and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they've "friended." They would just prefer [that] adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men."[\[26\]](#)  
Natural teenage feelings indeed.

Boyd continues:

*While the potential predator or future employer doesn't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanding complete control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.*[\[27\]](#)

While hers may sound like a throwback to the 1960s "Question authority!" mantra, Boyd raises a good point. She points out that nowadays adults control youth environments as never before due to fear of abduction and safety issues. "Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang outs like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7-11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents."[\[28\]](#) Balancing the imperative to protect against the need to let go is tough.

At the same time, parents, teachers, and youth leaders need to inculcate and model a biblical respect for God-given authority. When kids disrespect this, their Internet privileges should be at stake. Some practical safety tips for

parents:

- *Make sure your kids profile themselves online privately, only to well-chosen friends.*
- *Ask your kids to invite you online as a “friend”—but don’t embarrass them!*
- *Openly discuss your concerns about social networking with your child.*
- *Tour their online space and those of their friends.*
- *Be alert to kids who are very secretive about their Internet use.*
- *Use the computer in a common area of the house.*
- *Monitor mobile online use and set up accountability with meaningful consequences. Yet, too many rules could exasperate older kids.*[{29}](#)

Remember the story of the crying kids who had MySpace privileges revoked? One dad took a different approach. He entered into his daughter’s online world and began exploring how to safely navigate and do ministry outreach together. Connie Neal describes *MySpace for Moms and Dads* how she participates with her daughter’s willing friends as spiritual and relational advisor.[{30}](#)

The eventual goal of child-rearing is increasing autonomy and decreasing dependency. Social networking allows kids some autonomy, but they need to be careful in such a public arena. We as parents do well to act knowledgeably, not react out of sheer emotion.



## Redeeming MySpace

*MySpace* has effectively tapped into youth culture *and* human nature. Teens are riding a culture-wide wave of self-expression.

But adult audiences there—and especially at other networking sites—are even bigger. Companies are now glomming onto the model for business purposes. *AnimalAttraction.com*, a social networking site for people who love pets, started as a dating service. Now, you can create a tailor-made social network through services like *Ning*.

Up to ten thousand Virginia Tech students conversed on social sites the day thirty-two were murdered in a shooting rampage.[\[31\]](#) Presidential candidates are leveraging networking sites today.

Why is this idea so powerful? Could it be that self-expression is a sign of *imago dei*, the image of God imprinted into the soul of everyone? God spoke the world into existence, and we, his highest creatures, create ideas in much the same way. We seem to have an insatiable need to be heard, especially as we emerge into young manhood or womanhood.

What if we're really after much more—eternally satisfying relating that nothing on earth can compare to? For many folks, online “friends” or a bigger-than-life Web identity are just new ways to reach out for what's unreachable in this life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “If we discover a desire within us that nothing in this world can satisfy . . . we should begin to wonder if perhaps we were created for another world.”[\[32\]](#)

*MySpace* can be surprisingly redemptive. It served as a clearinghouse of mourning for Anna, murdered in cold blood while working at a McDonald's. A youth-led movement to help Ugandan orphans is building to huge proportions.

The head of Internet outreach for one of the world's largest

ministries encourages viewing *MySpace* as a mission field. He tells kids, "It's where your friends and *their* friends are already. Jesus called us to be smart, not safe." As Paul wrote to the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."[\[33\]](#)

If you decide that *MySpace* is not for your family, there are Christian alternatives created for fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship; [Meetfish.com](#) and [MyPraise.com](#) are two.

Rather than "circle the countercultural wagons," why not explore the frontier of online social networking with your child? In a few years, the choice will be theirs, and they will likely default to socializing online as well as offline. They need to learn how to:

- **Be discerning online**, asking things like, "Do I know and trust this person? Will this help me or hurt me?"
- **Reflect Christ online**: "How am I coming across? Does it honor my family and God? Am I teasing with moral compromise?"
- Ask themselves "Who seems lost, alone, afraid? Who needs the gospel?" **That is, see their online life as a calling of Christ.**

Dr. Kathy Koch of *Celebrate Kids* offers a real-life prescription for healthy self-esteem: "Parents and teachers who pay attention to children and teens for who they are and not just what they do, believe in kids' present value and not just their future potential, and encourage kids by celebrating them on more than their birthdays."[\[34\]](#)

Do this while teaching discernment and a thoroughly biblical worldview, and social networking may not be a problem. It could be a blessing in disguise.

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