

Youth Ministry for the Digital Generation

By Sherry Raspa



Introduction

As adoption rates for use of online technologies have continued to increase exponentially over the past ten years, so has the rhetoric about the intrinsic value of these technologies. Some in ministry believe we must embrace emerging technologies with seemingly wild abandon, letting the technologies lead us where they will. Others believe that adopting the use of online technologies is impersonal, shallow, and erodes the fabric of genuine human relationships.¹

I suggest a middle ground. In his *2009 Message for World Communications Day*, a message primarily addressed to young people as members of the *digital generation*, Pope Benedict XVI, acknowledges both opportunity and risk in engaging online technologies:

These technologies are truly a gift to humanity and we must endeavour to ensure that the benefits they offer are put at the service of all human individuals and communities...

We should be careful...never to trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship. It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop *on-line* friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbours, and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education, and recreation.

What seems logical then, is not to allow ourselves to be sidetracked by debating the merits and the risks of the medium. Instead, let us answer the question: **How can our ministry with young people encourage and equip them to bring the witness of their faith to the digital world?**

¹ It is the role of the local bishop or his designee to promote policies concerning safe technology use in the local diocese. Consultation of and adherence to these policies is recommended as best practice.

It's a Web, Web World

If there is any doubt that today's young people are, indeed, a digital generation, consider these statistics from the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (2009):

- 93% of teens 12-17 are active online
- More than 50% of teens 12-17 personally own multiple digital devices (MP3 player, PC, TV, DVD player, cell phone, stereo, game console, digital camera, etc.)
- 63% of online teens go online daily

If we, as pastoral ministers, are to inspire and empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today,² it is essential that we make every effort to understand the worlds they live in, both physical and digital.

What is Web 2.0?

In the earliest days of the Web, information was presented to users in a very controlled and directive form. The Web was a means of informing consumers. It was about getting the message out.

Enter "Web 2.0." Generally, the term Web 2.0 refers to a collection of software applications and functionalities that help people make connections with other people online. Where Web 1.0 focused on content, Web 2.0 concentrates on interaction:

- Web 1.0 was about message. Web 2.0 is about dialogue.
- Web 1.0 was about institutions. Web 2.0 is about communities.
- Web 1.0 was about consumption. Web 2.0 is about contribution.
- Web 1.0 was about information. Web 2.0 is about relationship.

In short, Web 2.0 creates the opportunity for online social interaction, thus giving rise to the terms "online social networking" and "social media."

Key Social Media Applications

In the past five years, we have seen an explosion in the number of services and applications available to help us connect with others online. Despite the overwhelming number of options available, most currently fall into nine key areas:

Blogs. The term is short for weblog. A blog is a website, usually maintained by an individual, a company, or an organization gathered around a single cause, posting entries on a regular basis. Blogs began modestly as online diaries – running accounts of the writers' personal lives. Today, blogs combine text, video,

² This is the first of three goals for youth ministry delineated in *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997.

and pictures tracking everything from the events and musings of personal life to marketing services and products to inspiring political change.

- For more information, see: [Blogger](#), [Word Press](#), [Live Journal](#), [Twitter](#) (microblog)

Media Sharing. Media sharing services make it possible to share videos, photos, and other content online, whether through traditional websites, social networking sites, or mobile devices like mobile phones.

- For more information, see: [Flickr](#), [iDisk](#), [IMEEM](#), [Photobucket](#), [Vimeo](#), [YouTube](#)

Podcasts. A podcast is a series of digital audio or video episodes released online. Three key features differentiate podcasting from traditional broadcasting: individuality, availability, and portability.

Individuality. In traditional broadcast, producers develop a slate of shows each season that they believe will be popular with their listeners/viewers. Consumers rely on what others deem production-worthy to determine our viewing options.

Because the technology required for podcasting is not very complicated – a microphone, a camcorder, and a computer – almost anyone can create and distribute podcast episodes on a topic of interest. This, of course, greatly expands the options from which the listener/viewer may choose.

Availability. In traditional broadcast, producers determine the day and the time that programming options are available to consumers.

Podcasting allows consumers to decide when to listen to or view their choice of programs. Because podcasts are available for download on demand, consumers are able to determine what viewing schedule best suits their schedules rather than shaping lives around a TV schedule.

Portability. Because podcasts are audio/video files that can be downloaded and transferred to a computer or any number of other portable devices (like MP3 players or portable game players), we can watch them not only when we choose, but also where we choose.

- For more information, see: [iTunes](#), [Podcast Alley](#)

RSS/Syndication. Commonly known as “Really Simple Syndication,” RSS is a tool that makes it easier to find out about the newest updates on favorite sites. Before RSS, if someone wanted to know about new information posted on favorite websites, each website had to be visited separately. This task had to be

repeated daily, and, for all the effort put forth, there may or may not have been anything new or different from the day before.

Now, thanks to RSS, Web users can subscribe to any number of digital tickers, known as “feeds” that provide automatic updates to a site’s followers when something new is posted.

- For more information, see: [Google Reader](#)
- Look for this icon: 

Social Bookmarking. Social bookmarking is a way to create, store, organize, search, and manage a list of noteworthy content. Most simply, bookmarking means noting a website’s address and saving it for future use. Traditional bookmarking is called browser bookmarking, and involves merely saving a web address to a list in an Internet browser.

Social bookmarking distinguishes itself from browser bookmarking in two ways: accessibility and shareability.

Accessibility. In traditional browser bookmarking, all noted pages are tied to a particular computer. Bookmarks created at work/school are not available at home. Bookmarks added at home are not available on the youth ministry computer. Social bookmarks are created in personalized accounts on a web server and are therefore accessible from multiple locations.

Shareability. By using tagging (below), social bookmarking also makes it quick and easy to share great links and information with others. Social bookmark accounts can be public, semi-public, shared only with specified networks, or only with specific individuals.

- For more information, see: [Delicious](#), [Digg](#), [Reddit](#), [StumbleUpon](#)

Social Networking Service (SNS). Commonly known as social networking sites, these services focus on building online communities of people. Many of these communities, though not all, bring people together around common interests, experiences, or activities.

Through use of contact lists, commonly known as friend lists, users are able to keep in touch with existing contacts, reconnect with former friends and colleagues, and develop new contacts, all online.

- For more information, see: [Bebo](#), [Facebook](#), [Friendster](#), [MySpace](#)

Tagging. Tagging refers to the labeling of an online article, photo, or video or other content with terms that describe the substance of its content. Tagging helps users find helpful content online. For instance, a YouTube video of Pope Benedict

may be tagged: Pope, Benedict, B16, WYD08. These tags, in turn, will help other users who may be looking for potentially useful material about Pope Benedict's interaction with young people at World Youth Day in Sydney, 2008.

- For more information, see: [7 Things You Should Know About Social Bookmarking](#) [PDF]

Texting (SMS). Texting or Short Message Service refers to the exchange of brief messages – text, image, video, audio – between cell phones and other mobile electronic devices. Texts can be person-to-person messaging, person-to group messaging, or commercial. SMS is used quickly and effectively for personal communication, large group notification, and for sales, advertisement, and contests.

Wikis. Wikis are simple web pages that can be edited by multiple users online using any web browser. Since the pages “live” on the Web, they are accessible from any location with Internet access.

- For more information, see: [Wikipedia](#), [Wikibooks](#), [Most Popular Wiki Farms](#)

A Final Note. Though each of these applications serves a distinct purpose in the world of social media, it is rare to see them as stand-alone services. For instance, Facebook employs many of these applications in its user experience: social networking, blogging, media sharing, and more.

The Church and Web 2.0: On Common Ground

What *does* the work of the Church have in common with Web 2.0 technologies? The answers are surprisingly straightforward: content, community, and communication. What distinguishes their missions, one from the other? The message and the motivation.

Pope Benedict addressed these similarities and distinctions in his *2009 World Communications Day Message*, stating:

While the speed with which the new technologies have evolved in terms of their efficiency and reliability is rightly a source of wonder, their popularity with users should not surprise us, as they respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other.

This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations. In the light of the biblical message, it should be seen primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family. When we find ourselves drawn

towards other people, when we want to know more about them and make ourselves known to them, we are responding to God's call – a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion.

While the Web is about gathering people together to share a message, ANY message, the Church gathers people together to share THE message – the Good News of Jesus Christ.

As we live out the mission of the Church to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations,” (Matthew 28:19) our evangelization and catechesis find us in uncharted digital territory. This does not mean that we come without tools for the journey. The Church, and youth ministry, in particular, has always understood the value of a good message, a good people, and a good story.

Using What We Know

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. (Luke 24:13-35)

In the same way that Jesus understood the power of meeting the disciples where they were on the journey, youth workers have long understood the value of engaging young people within the environments that make up youth culture. Just as Jesus realized the value of listening to the disciples tell their stories, so have youth workers realized the value of listening first and teaching second.

The same lessons apply when engaging the digital lives of young people. Youth ministry can provide a safe space that acknowledges the reality of young people's interconnected, online lives. Youth ministry can create an environment where young people begin to consider their lives online in light of Gospel values. Youth ministry can establish a climate where young people gain skills that better equip them to share their stories of life and faith, and where trusted adults can “encourage them to bring the witness of their faith to the digital world.”³

³ *Message of the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, for the 43rd World Day of Communications, Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2009.*

How can youth ministry do this?

- Provide a non-judgmental community of adults and peers that allows young people to consider both the risks and the opportunities present in online social networking.
- Help young people develop critical thinking skills that allow them to identify, analyze, evaluate, and respond to the messages in the media they consume (media literacy) and to compare and contrast those values with the teachings and Traditions of the Church.
- Create settings that allow young people to discuss together ways to develop and promote positive social networking behaviors, as well as methods for supporting one another in living out their faith and values online.
- Create an environment that helps young people see the faith community as a place that models the life skills necessary to be healthy, happy, and holy followers of Christ such as appropriate sense of self, balance between personal and community, investment in relationships/friendships, healthy boundaries, sense of compassion, and forgiveness for failure.

Because of youth ministry's particular understanding of youth culture and the developmental needs of young people, it is in a unique position to move beyond simply talking with young people about whether social media is good or bad. Youth ministry also has a key role to play in supporting young people to seize the opportunities and navigate the risks associated with social media. Moreover, social media itself can help with these tasks.

The Work of the Ministry

As youth ministers, how many times have we bemoaned the need to escape from the administration of our programs in order to do good relational ministry with young people? Fear not – help is on the way!

Contrary to the reports of many naysayers, social media CAN be a very useful tool. Used properly, with balanced and healthy boundaries, the tools of social media can enhance the quality of real life relationships. In pastoral ministry with youth, these tools can help to cut down on the amount of time needed to prepare, plan, and get the word out about youth ministry programs, events, and other offerings so that we can actually spend that time relating to the young people with whom we minister. Consider what your youth ministry might look like if:

- Your leadership team used a wiki to brainstorm a list of possible topics and speakers for youth nights in the coming year BEFORE they came to the team meeting.
- The list was transferred to an online survey application that allowed everyone in your program to vote for their top five topic preferences. Again, this takes place BEFORE your leadership team meeting.
- At the leadership team meeting, your team gets to work on dates, times, presenters, and lesson plans, rather than having to brainstorm and guess at what would most appeal to the larger group.

That is just one application. Other possibilities include:

- Start a “What’s New?” blog that allows you to post quick and relevant updates regarding your youth ministry – schedule changes, event reminders, due dates, good news about youth group members, parish news, prayer requests, etc. Add RSS to the blog and encourage young people to subscribe to the feed. Now, they will get updates as they happen!
- Need young people to review materials online before coming to a meeting, Scripture study, or catechetical session? Use social bookmarking, wikis, and media sharing to encourage them to come prepared!
- Set up a group social networking page and profile as a communication venue. This is a much safer and healthier choice than allowing young people to access your personal profile. Typically, people involved in a group page are not required to personally “friend” one another in order to participate. The activities of the group are more easily moderated – posts and uploads, events, conversations, etc. Because of these functional differences, the interaction is more transparent and the group is a safer online space for youth leaders and young people to interact.

The Ministry of the Work

Perhaps even more promising than the administrative, informational, marketing, and planning assistance that social media tools can offer youth ministry is the help it can provide for teaching, community building, evangelizing, and catechizing. Consider these possibilities:

- What might happen if you made use of text messages or an RSS feed that sent young people tips for saintly living throughout the day? Inspiration for living as a disciple that arrived in the middle of the school day or during after school sports or club activities? What if you used the same application to

remind youth of another group member's birthday or special prayer request? (Remember, you will want to be sensitive to school and family rules about access to mobile devices when considering a schedule for these messages.)

- Is there room in our understanding of gathered and non-gathered activities with youth for something that falls somewhere in between? Imagine an online social networking profile that IS your youth ministry Scripture study. A lesson or focus for the week is posted using a blogging feature and supporting materials like music and video are available using media sharing applications. Young people access the lesson as their schedule allows, comment, ask questions, post additional materials that support the lesson, even chat with other group members who may be online at the same time. As the moderator, you can not only assure that content and discussion remain appropriate, but you can also guide the conversation and answer questions that may arise. (Regular and consistent moderation is key.)
- Imagine using wikis as a tool for helping young people develop personal witness stories. Young people are rarely comfortable talking with their non-church peers about their values and the practice of faith. What if young people could work online together, and with trusted adults, to craft their stories of faith – giving one another language and tips on how and when to step out as everyday evangelizers? Moreover, what if when those stories were complete, young people could choose to post them as part of a youth ministry blog that chronicled their collective stories of faith?

A Word of Caution

From both an administrative and a pastoral perspective, the opportunities that social media afford youth ministry are seemingly limitless. Still, this type of engagement is not without risk. In order to maintain healthy boundaries, youth ministry leaders should consider the following:

Policy. Before using any social media application in youth ministry, youth ministry leaders are well advised to consult parish, school, and/or diocesan policies determining proper use of technology. These policies typically regulate the types of technologies and digital interactions that take place in pastoral ministry settings and between pastoral ministers and other members of the faith community

Relevance. Whether to employ social media applications or not, and, if yes, which applications to use will depend on the needs of the local community. Before enacting any new uses for social media in your ministry, listen to the young people and families, who are part of your ministry program. Make intentional choices, based on their needs.

A Look Ahead

In an April 2009 report for Forrester Research, *The Future of the Social Web*, Jeremiah Owyang termed the current era of online social networking as the era of social functionality. Owyang notes that in this era, despite the fact that we can “friend” others and interact socially online, our online personas are confined within individual sites. Identities do not transfer easily from community to community on the web.

Owyang rightly acknowledges, however, that during 2009, we are quickly moving into an era of social colonization. In this era, we will begin to be able to take our personas with us everywhere we go online. So, rather than a Facebook profile, a MySpace profile, and a Bebo profile, users can choose one profile that travels from site to site, even to traditional, non-social networking sites.

As with any new technology, this evolution brings great opportunity and great risk. Online connections will be more seamless and traveling the Web will be increasingly effortless as multiple identities, accounts, and logins will be reduced and eventually eliminated. However, with that ease of use comes the vulnerability of connecting larger and larger amounts of personally identifiable information to online profiles. Youth ministry’s role in helping young people to develop solid critical thinking skills, a sense of healthy boundaries, and an understanding of Gospel values will be fundamental to helping young people as they navigate these changes.

Websites and links in this journal article were accessed successfully on September 11, 2009.

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Resources

Print

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- Li, Charlene and Josh Bernoff. *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*. Harvard Business School Press, 2008.

Online

• Articles

- Davies, Tim and Pete Cranston. [Youth Work and Social Networking](#). Leicester, UK: [National Youth Agency](#), 2008.
- Ford, Brian. [Sharing Christ through Social Media](#). [YouthMinistry.com](#), 2008.
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- Thomas, Syler. [Connecting to the Network for Youth Ministry](#). [Youthworker Journal](#).

• Blogs

- Miller, D. Scott. [Not a Facebook Expert](#). [Catholic Youth Ministry Blog](#).
- Schmoyer, Tim. [Ideas for Using Text Messaging in Youth Ministry](#). [Life In Student Ministry](#).
- [Technology and Youth Ministry](#). [Youth Specialties Blog](#).
- [Facebook, Leadership and Safety, pt 2](#). [Digital Orthodoxy](#).

• Other

- [Catholic Tech Tips](#): Website created to help teens use new media technologies as tools for evangelization.
- [Common Craft](#): This website produces three-minute videos that explain many of Web 2.0 software applications in easy to understand language.
- [Collide](#): This magazine/e-zine for church leaders explores ideas, trends, and resources in visual media, music, technology, and the Web.
- [flockNote](#): Catholic web service designed to improve campus, parish, and diocesan communications using RSS feeds.
- [MyCatholicVoice](#): Catholic web service offering media sharing, social networking, blogs, and more focused on capturing and sharing the tradition of the Catholic Church.