

Social networking

By Timothy J. Myers

Social networking has taken the world by storm. The Internet has opened the door to blogs (web logs, or diaries), blog-rings (like Xanga), Facebook, Twitter, and others. Of course, there are the ever-present cell phones with their texting capabilities. People are communicating more than they ever have. Or are they?

About two years ago I was asked to give a presentation on blogs, from which the following thoughts are taken:

What is a blog? A blog (an abbreviation for weblog), is basically a diary on the Internet in which you can post text, photographs, video clips, music, or anything else that can be digitized.

As a means of communication blogging can be good, bad, or neutral. It has, however, some inherent problems. I would like to identify five. The examples I give are from sites with Anabaptist connections.

1. The semi-anonymity encourages a reckless revelation of things personal.

Blogs may contain personal thoughts and issues, like the woman who said, "I hope to soon be pregnant." There are some very personal photos.

2. Among Christians there are many expressions of one's dedication to God which seem very shallow. Some examples are "God is awesome," "God is #1." "I love God so much." The words sound good, but in the context of frivolity like slang, a party spirit, fan support for professional sports, love of contemporary Christian music, and discussion of movies it has a hollow ring.

3. The culture of blogging is that of boldly inviting people into your life with little reserve. It's a little like putting your photograph albums and diary on display at the public library. Of course many other people are doing the same, so that takes away some of the embarrassment. Although there are blogs that are tasteful, reserved, and sincere, they seem to be in the minority. Some appropriately have locks which prevent access to anyone who is not willing to sign in.

4. These social networking sites often have a form to fill out which tells about yourself in terms of popular culture. You are asked about your music, movies, or even sexual orientation, which reveals something about the general blogging culture.

5. Blogging can consume large quantities of time. Some people are addicted to it.

In conclusion, many (but not all) blogs reveal people who seem to be bold, insecure, and without much spiritual depth. While the medium is neutral, blog culture encourages people to shed their inhibitions and reveal more of themselves than is in good taste, or sometimes, godly. Blogs can serve as a way for families and friends to stay in touch, especially as we become increasingly global, but they can also be a means of drawing people into the wake of popular culture, accepting as normal that which should appall us. We should be careful of our associates, as well as those of our children, whether in our communities or on the Internet.

Two years later Facebook (a site where one can communicate by brief notes with others who have been selected as "friends"), and Twitter (where you answer the question, "What are you doing?"), and no doubt others, have risen to the fore.

Two articles which I received recently, as well as anecdotes shared by various people, have all raised concern about the proliferation of empty digital communication. These have confirmed that alarm is not narrowly confined to this editor's desk.

In the first article the editor of a secular fruit grower's trade magazine spoke of working in his garden, but in contrast to much of contemporary culture, he didn't tell anyone about it on the Internet.

He wrote, "... so far, I am utterly unimpressed with social networking. I recently took a small tour of Facebook pages. The comments I found there were ordinary, uninteresting, uninformative, banal and hardly worth keyboarding—and certainly a waste of time reading....when people email to say they'd like to 'follow me' on Facebook or Twitter, I wonder about the quality of their lives and whether they have some huge fear of solitude. Are they stalkers? Don't they like themselves well enough to be alone with only themselves for just a few fleeting moments?"

The second article, an editorial from *Alliance Newsletter* entitled "Tricki Complex", speaks of those who are spoiled and lack an understanding of Christian discipleship. He suggests that the cure lies in a willingness to do mundane Christian service in the setting where one is, and leading a disciplined life. In that context he addresses digital communication: "In your *limited* use of communication technology save your 'pearls' for special people rather than vomiting your life details all over the public face."

Both of these writers express the same concept: there are far more important things to do than to articulate the miniscule details of our lives and keep up with all those of our friends. It can become an obsession that is detrimental to family and other social relationships, to the fulfillment of the responsibilities that it replaces, and to our own souls as we expose ourselves to wrong influences.

Yes, people do the same thing on the telephone, and maybe even with the *Budget*. That doesn't make it good. Parents, leaders, be aware of what is happening. We are responsible for our homes and churches.

Communication is good—if it is good, purposeful communication. How can we judge whether or not our communication is worthwhile? Consider what the Bible says:

- ❖ We are justified or condemned by our words.
- ❖ We will answer to God for idle words.
- ❖ Our speech should not include filthiness, foolish talking, jesting, but instead thankfulness.
- ❖ A fool is characterized by the multitude of his words, their hastiness, and by uttering all his mind.
- ❖ A braggart is loathsome to God.

I don't paint all social networking with a broad brush; there are people who use it in a godly way. My burden is for those who fail to apply Biblical principles to their "posting." Rather than making it an extension of personal godliness, they slip into the pattern left by the world.

A friend wrote about the distinction we need to make between good and bad uses of social networking:

"Being far away from home, I loved the way it kept me somewhat informed about life at home, in touch with former students and co-workers, and abreast of Mennonite young people and their lives (for good or for bad). There were times when it really did give me an opportunity to speak into people's lives in a vital way, I believe.

At the same time, it is easy to run to something like Facebook as kind of a drug of choice to avoid dealing with the bigger issues at hand. I recently read an article called, "This is my Flattered World" which spoke about how 21st century technology is designed to make us feel so important (examples from Facebook could be: how many friends we have, somebody wrote on my wall, so many people 'like' my status, etc.)"

Are we really communicating more, or just using more words? Does it represent God's kingdom? Does our communication fit within the boundaries set in Titus 2:6-8? "*Young men like-wise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thysself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned...*"?

A sign posted to discourage loitering read, "If you don't have anything to do, don't do it here." Maybe we could paraphrase it for the Internet: "If you don't have anything to say, don't say it here."