

## MODERN MEDIA AND THE FAMILY

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The internet and cell phones have changed how we communicate and interact with the world around us. Facebook, Twitter, Skype, blogging, smart phones, apps, Google, and YouTube are now a part of our vocabulary. "Where are you going?" is no longer a question about physical geography. We now engage with one another through tweets, profile updates, blogs, and texts. We enter into each other's lives through a two-dimensional portal, and these connections are almost immediate. Whether we like it or not, the times (and the technology) are a changin'. Now we must ask, how much has it changed us, and how do we respond to these changes?

There are wonderful advantages of modern communication technology. Social media has allowed us to connect with friends and family in new and improved ways. Skype and other video conferencing technology have allowed us to visually enter places and relationships. Grandparents can "join" a family dinner with grandchildren several states away. Deployed military parents and spouses can interact with family via live video stream. A year ago, I was asked to consult with an orphanage in Haiti regarding attachment and bonding. Being that I am also a mother of three small children, physically going to Haiti for several days was not an option. Skype gave me the freedom to "see and tour" the orphanage and consult with staff without having to leave my office.

Research has indicated there are several sociological and cultural changes as a result of new technology. These changes include: 1) our expectation for instant gratification, 2) our loss in ability to empathize and be compassionate towards others, 3) the increase in envy of others and subsequent dissatisfaction with our own lives, and 4) how modern technology has led to addiction/abuse of the internet and texting. Over the next few weeks, I will be addressing how these changes impact our family and religious life. In addition, I will also address the need for boundaries and limits regarding social media, internet, gaming, and texting.

**We are losing the ability to wait. Our capacity for patience has shrunk.** We now live in a world of instant gratification. We send a text and anticipate a response within seconds. If the response lags too long, our anxiety increases. *Why have they not responded? Is something wrong? Do they no longer like me? Have I offended them?*

Cyberspace has offered the gift of instant connection. Post a status update or picture on Facebook and within moments there are comments. One can instantly feel less lonely and have a greater sense of belonging. But, if the attempt to connect with the outside world is ignored, there is an increased risk of feeling rejected or further isolated.

Instant gratification has also promoted an illusion of instant spirituality. We are coming to expect immediate results from our prayers and religious devotion. We have less tolerance to persevere and endure through times of spiritual darkness or bouts of suffering. We are losing the ability to notice the quiet whispers of God in our daily lives. Sitting in adoration appears boring and useless for there is no instant result or immediate answers. We are losing the ability to wait upon the Lord.

How do we respond? We must make an effort to increase our ability to persevere through difficulties. Life is full of challenges, and expecting instant results is unrealistic. Much of life requires commitment, even if "you are just not feeling it." The cultural response toward a demand for instant gratification has led to a lack of patience through the hard times. We are becoming

quitters! The cultural message of instant gratification shouts out, "If your marriage is lacking, find a new spouse. If your kids are acting out, give them what they want to avoid the whining. If you have not sensed God's presence in a while, skip Mass and stop praying." We must remain committed despite an immediate response.

**We are losing the ability to empathize. We can connect when it is convenient.** We learn what it means to be human and how to navigate our way through the world through human interaction. We demonstrate we care for one another by paying attention. Our wired society is finding it difficult to pay attention to one another. In a New York Times article (6/7/2010), Clifford Nass, a communications professor at Stanford stated, "Throughout evolutionary history, a big surprise would get everyone's brain thinking, but we've got a large and growing group of people who think the slightest hint that something interesting might be going on is like catnip. They can't ignore it."

We live in a society of multitasking – constantly checking our smart phones for texts, e-mails, updated statuses on social media. We are looking at our phones while eating, driving, and interacting with family members. While we may appear more productive due to our ability to multitask, the problem is we are unable to turn it off. Research is indicating that all this information overload is leading to distraction and an inability to focus our attention.

*A recent study of college students found that college kids today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts of 20 or 30 years ago. One possible difference is the rise of social networking. As one researcher put it, "The ease of having 'friends' online might make people more likely to just tune out when they don't feel like responding to others' problems, a behavior that could carry over offline."*

A lack of empathy is showing up in parents as well. Research has shown that feelings of hurt, jealousy, and competition are widespread among children of parents who obsess over cellphones and social networking at the expense of familial engagement.

We must be diligent set aside time for face to face interactions (without checking our cell phones).

**We are growing to believe the grass is greener on the other side.** The internet allows for instant affirmation – instantly feeling loved and connected. If family and married life is discouraging, the online community is appealing. We can grow envious of what we see in others. People utilize Facebook and other social media to typically display the highlights of their lives. It is less likely to see pictures of screaming children, fighting spouses, or sad faces. We are not exposed to the ordinary and mundane. We see the excitement in others and contrast that to what we perceive as boring lives.

We can become discontent with our family and social life. For adolescents especially, there is a hidden danger for the discontent to shift into a deep loneliness and even depression. There may be photos of a party, and the lonely adolescent realizes they were not included. They may wonder why others appear confident and surrounded by friends when they themselves feel lonely and insecure.

Modern communication has made it possible to reconnect with people with whom we had lost touch. We can connect with new people, exchange ideas, network for resources, and broaden our horizons. If one is dissatisfied with married life, there is an increased danger to reconnect with former romantic partners. The New York Daily News (Dec. 23, 2009) stated that a law firm reported 20% of divorce cases referencing Facebook in their court petitions. In personal

conversations with other Marriage and Family Therapists, we are all seeing a growing trend of affairs beginning through Facebook and texting.

If we notice we are growing discontent in our married life, talk about it. Be honest with your spouse and discontinue secret communication. Do not share emotionally with others what you would not be willing to disclose to your spouse. Do not be afraid to remove sources of temptation if the discontentment continues to grow (e.g. disable your social network accounts and remove texting from your cell phone).

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