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# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Virtual Community

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Ryan Burke, a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, invites his girlfriend from North Carolina State University to meet him at the Pit, a central meeting point on his campus, for a Valentine's Day surprise. She arrives and finds hundreds of students (some estimates top 1,000) whom he had invited via Facebook. Her boyfriend starts by introducing an a cappella group—not to sing some romantic melody, but the Dixie Chicks' defiant hit "I'm Not Ready to Make Nice."

When the song is done, Burke tells his girlfriend that she has been unfaithful and that he's dumping her. They exchange harsh words — several of them four-letter epithets — while the audience watches, laughs and jeers. ... Many of those watching have cameras and are filming throughout, and numerous videos quickly end up on YouTube, where in less than two weeks they have attracted more than 500,000 viewers — along with parody videos, Facebook groups pro and con, and much debate. (Jaschik, 2007)

In 2004, a Harvard sophomore started Facebook Inc., which, according to Liedtke (2007), is the Internet's second largest social networking site (p. C1). Facebook currently has over 70 million monthly active users (Facebook Press Room, 2008). MySpace, the larger and more commonly known site established in 2003, currently draws over 110 million monthly active users (Techradar, 2008).

The bulk of site members are drawn from high school and college populations. The Pew Research Center suggests that 54% of those between 18-25 years have used one or more social networking sites (Kohut, p. 6).

For those of us in Student Life, some personal decisions need to be made about the role we wish to take in responding to the technological changes being felt by the college student culture. Things are moving so quickly, particularly in the world of online social networking, that we cannot afford the luxury of sitting back and allowing events to shape and redefine our campus communities without our input. We have the opportunity to participate in shaping and understanding the implications of these changes.

## The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Virtual Community

By David Johnstone



Human nature tends to function in a reactive mode; I believe that we have the profound opportunity to structure the ways that online social networks (also called virtual communities) are used, viewed and understood by our students.

The last five years have redefined how collegiate student culture views community through the screen of social networks, virtual communities, and cyber-societies. There has been a radical shift in the ways that traditional-aged undergraduates view their relationships and the world around them. I desire to look at some of the implications of this technology, how these sites are used, and the benefits accrued by them. Further, I would like to begin a broader discussion of how students demonstrate, consciously or unconsciously, the value they ascribe to the essentials of a community. For lack of a better expression, I want to

explore "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of the virtual community.

### The Good:

Students have articulated that the advent of social networking has been of tremendous benefit to them. Along with the rest of North American culture, their internet and email has reinforced the truism that their "communities are transforming" (Boase, 2006, p. i). As researchers have observed: "The traditional human orientation to neighborhood—and village-based groups is moving towards communities that are oriented around geographically dispersed social networks" (Boase, 2006, p. i). The Internet's ease, speed, and convenience in maintaining contact with family and friends thousands of miles away is a tool which students seize aggressively.

Speaking to college seniors who are veterans of these sites, it is fascinating

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to hear some of their observations about how their lives are extremely busy and that social networking or virtual communities allow them to fulfill expectations and save time. Expectations to maintain relationships and contact with distant relatives, family, local, and distant friends, and even those they have never physically met, are a demanding part of their lives.

As they describe the process of maintaining connections, they frequently used the word "safety" to describe their virtual interactions. They further state that quick and short contact is acceptable, that it is alright to keep relationships at an acquaintance level, and that the emotional investment could be kept minimal if they choose; this freedom suggests it is a safe place to navigate. This "safety" was further increased knowing that "emotional rejection, when you put yourself out there, was not as intense." Thus, while previous generations would have to fortify and strengthen themselves in order to ask someone on a date, asking over the internet diminishes the risks of asking.

Mass or quick scheduling was identified as a standard occurrence for students. The ability to connect with a large group of friends quickly saves time. As in the Valentine's Day break-up story, a large number of people could be contacted and informed of plans in a quick way. The students spoke of scheduling events with an hour's notice and reaching a dozen of their friends over Facebook.

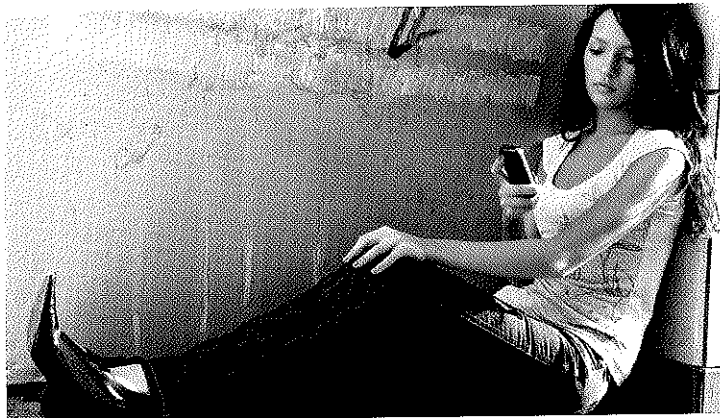
With a generation of students overwhelmed with the multiple demands of academics, relationships, work, faith, and finances, the Internet presents a lifeline to them, where they perceive that the use of social networks is increasing their discretionary time (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004, p. 35).

## The Bad:

The seamy side of social networking is tied to the extremes of its negative use. For example, in January 2007, a fourteen year old girl was raped by two men who had fostered a relationship with her over MySpace (Gorman, 2007, p. A1). It is not unusual to come across an article such as this in the daily newspaper which links these crimes to social networks. Unfortunately, most of these crimes tend to be linked with predatorial behavior with far reaching consequences. Deceit, deception, and manipulation are hardly unusual in our society. These actions are maximized and exploited on these sites. Social network sites such as MySpace designate almost a third of their staff to watch "for inappropriate material on the site as well as identifying underage members (MySpace prohibits those 13 and younger from joining)" ("Culture Clips", 2006). Concerns are recognized, but cannot be completely eliminated.

## The Ugly:

Last spring, the Associated Press, in a follow-up story to the Valentine's Day breakup, wrote that Ryan Burke and his girlfriend acknowledged that the confron-



tation was a stunt. In an attempt to demonstrate "the power of Internet communities," he also demonstrated the ease by which a hoax could be perpetuated on these sites ("Students Confess" 2007).

Distortion and fraud can be perpetuated; personal information can easily be abused. A few examples closely linked to

the college experience demonstrate the scope of this concern:

1. Last year across the U.S., housing officers began to encounter incoming students who were assessing and judging their potential roommates, not from emails, telephone calls or "face to face" meetings, but solely from their MySpace or Facebook profiles. University housing departments began receiving calls requesting and sometimes demanding changes based on information gathered or inferred from these sites (Farrel, 2006).
2. Campus judicial officers across the United States were required to address students posting photographs that displayed actions in violation of codes of conduct. Among some of the actions displayed were drunkenness, lewdness and criminal actions. A tangential concern was highlighted by actions taken by the NCAA when it began to suspend athletes for posting photographs linked to team hazing, which is against the organization's policies (Teicher, 2006).
3. Gossip on a college campus has always been present, but with the advent of social networks, this has morphed onto a new level. Unfortunately, slandering, maligning, and malice are not unusual to find on these sites. Comments posted on these sites enter the public domain with all of its ability and power to transform rumor into fact. The personal devastation and heart-ache due to misinformation and misrepresentation has taken a form which elevates the skills of manipulation to a degree where it could be equated with bullying.

The relational abuses are real in virtual communities. Members feel a sense of anonymity because they do not have to observe the instant facial reactions of the victims. They are able to ignore and deny responsibility for careless or even malicious postings. While the networks present valuable tools to students, they also can be used as tools for harming and destroying relationships in these "communities". It is helpful to begin to

identify the essentials of a community and discern if a "virtual community" is truly something to be embraced.

## Community:

McDonald (2002) states that a formal definition of community would include a "set of policies and practice that mark the distinctive mission" and "shared values and commitments held in common by institutional commitments" (p. 159). However, as many definitions of community are vague, it is often more valuable to identify what happens in a healthy community.

The first attempt to identify the characteristics and actions of a community is linked to its purpose. Stanly Grenz (1998), in his book *Created for Community*, observes that "God is at work in our world, we declare. And God's purpose in this activity is the establishment of 'community' – a reconciled people who enjoy fellowship with Him, with one another, and ultimately with all creation" (p. 23). A community, viewed through a spiritual lens, is highly interactive and relational. It has relationships that are not adversarial; they demonstrate a sense of joy and commitment amongst its members.

In terms of specifics, a community is perceived as having two essential elements required for a healthy life. A community needs to be able to provide the security which lies in intimacy and a sense of belonging (Parks, 2000, p. 89). This is an internal focus where the community develops a sense of knowing each other and individuals feel that they are known by others.

A second essential is tied to the sense of significance that an individual and group find in a personal or common meaning or direction. This provides a purpose to their existence and an external focus. The community and individual believe and identify that they have an impact and place in the scheme of events; yet, they also have found the security of relationships and belonging. Together they have developed a sense of meaning within the intimacy of relationships (Parks, 2000, p. 89). Both are critical for mental, spiritual and relational

health. In short, these are the foundations of a healthy community.

## Implications:

Twenty years ago, Boyer (1987) made the observation that: a student takes 16 credit hours, and spends 2 hours in study for each credit hour of instruction (a generous estimate!). That means 48 hours of the week are devoted to academics. If 50 hours are assigned to sleep, that leaves 70 hours in the student's life unaccounted for, a block of time greater than either sleep or academics. (p. 180)

With the development of social networks over the Internet, campuses and student culture are in the process of being transformed, with Christian higher education being no exception. While all

magnified and transformed by the Internet, compelling Student Life professionals to become aware of the changes.

These transformations have implications for training and preparation, particularly for professional residence life staff and student leaders. Traditional training to develop and foster community and relationships is no longer adequate. Understanding how to enter into the world of college students involves understanding the technology they use, whether it be gaming, social networks, video sharing, etc. Ironically, while there appears to be an increase in social interaction through these sites, many students are identifying a loneliness and dissatisfaction with these online relationships.

The shallowness and fleeting nature of these online communities do not encourage intimacy or a sense of belonging. The

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staff at Christian colleges should have a sense of the vocational call that expects investment in and care of students, Boyer's breakdown of time has a more focused suggestion. With the amount of time an undergraduate student spends outside of the classroom, it is clear that those professionals in Student Life have a large potential impact on these students. Further, if a college has a residential program, those in Residence Life have an even clearer responsibility. Social networks and all the technology that stimulates and fosters relationships are of general interest to the whole campus community. However, when students spend 100 hours per week outside of the classroom, their co-curricular world becomes the world of Student Life. All of the community issues which have existed throughout the history of higher education still exist; they have just been

potential for truly knowing an online friend is always tenuous and the ability to distort or falsify details is always present. It is not surprising that a tremendous sense of insecurity is created in these relationships. If relational security is paramount for a community, then the insecurity found on these sites undermines their sense of belonging.

Student Life professionals must also retool the ways they mediate and reconcile tensions between students which now originate through or spill over onto the computer. Many students do not have the skills for "face to face" confrontation, let alone confrontation defined by grace and respect. Campus legend has a story that describes two young women who were "screaming" at each other through instant messaging. While externally they seemed composed, they did not hesitate to use expletives in their harsh words to one another. The situation was further exacerbated because they

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were college roommates. Unfortunately, they were in their own residence room, six feet apart, and with their backs to each other, "fighting!" They could not reconcile. Whether the story is true or not, its details are familiar when compared to other similar stories. The dynamics faced in the virtual world are an important "reality" for many students.

It is important that we are reminded that what happens outside the classroom can have tremendous positive or negative

will look for these communities elsewhere. MySpace, Facebook, and other social networks provide a semblance of a student's need for connection and belonging. Social Network sites will continue to be created and transformed. MySpace and Facebook may not exist in two years, but alternative ways for students to connect with friends and develop new relationships (whether illusory or not) will continue to appear.

I believe we may be in the midst of a cultural and technological revolution with

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effects on the student's learning. On the surface, relationships online or off don't seem to have implications for academic success. Unfortunately, relationships powerfully affect a student's sense of belonging, intimacy, and security, which then impacts their learning. What happens in social networks ripples out to impact students and has an effect on their campus experience. Thus, community, online or offline, can be a powerful tool in the academic success of a student.

### Conclusion:

Virtual communities should not be considered "evil" unto themselves. In the community's need for significance and direction, students view these sites as useful tools. They are used to mobilize students in response to world issues. Information about the atrocities in Darfur, child soldiers worldwide, or the slavery in America is quickly disseminated over social networks. Students use these sites to rapidly define concerns and quickly find answers. Institutionally, these are phenomenal tools which can and are being used to benefit communities.

However, the core of the implications for a Christian campus is that social networks are an imitation of the connections longed for by students. If Christian campuses are unable to provide genuine communities that are characterized by a sense of meaning and belonging, then students

implications that are vast for higher education and, by association, Christian higher education. Social networking is the proverbial "uncharted territory" for many educators. However, there are many students familiar and comfortable within this strange terrain. For those of us in Christian higher education, I believe we will need to solicit the wisdom and counsel of these experienced guides in order to help us navigate through this new virtual community. I believe that in this world of extremely rapid change, those of us in Student Life have the possibility of prompting and priming our communities in defining how online networks can be viewed and understood. These actions may involve a shift in our pedagogical models and, in order to care for our students, we will need to understand and be aware of this new terrain. My hope is that this article will be another step in the development of some paradigms by which we seek to understand the virtual world through the lens of our faith. Soli Deo Gloria.

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