The Influence of the Digital Information Age on the Values of Young Adults

Stephanie Nance (D.Min., 2013)
Minister and Free-lance writer
Springfield, Mo

Introduction

The Church functions as a community that oversees the spiritual formation of its members. Even though technology continues to advance, changing the speed at which humans function, the process of spiritual development has not increased in speed. God has not become a Google God, simply downloading necessary information with clarity and speed to today's generation that previous generations had to process through contemplation and experience. The problem resides in the fact that individuals living with the values of the digital information often collide with the values of the spiritual life.

In recent decades, much attention has focused on how the use of technology in worship services affects the methods in worship practices; little attention, however, has been given to how technological advancements affect the younger generations and their values and how this affects their lives of faith. Vital to ethics, values are "the core beliefs that motivate attitude and action."[1] Today's young adults require intentional discipleship by a Church that understands their culture and the influence of technology on their lives. This article will look at how the digital information age influences the values of young adults and how they contrast with the values of God's Kingdom, which depends on a people willing to follow the Spirit's leading.

Young Adults in the Information Age

Overview of the Net Generation

The current young-adult generation holds various titles, such as the most widely known labels of Generation Y, Mosaics, iGeneration, and Millennials. Don Tapscott, author of *Grown Up Digital*, refers to these young adults as the Net Generation, representing individuals born between January 1977 and December 1997, give or take a few years.[2] Tapscott's label describes them well since the most significant changes affecting them have been the computer, the Internet, and other digital technologies developed within their lifetime.[3] The Net Generation has grown up with digital devices—digital natives—whereas previous generations have had to accommodate and learn to use them—digital immigrants. Leonard Sweet labels individuals from this generation as Googlers—those who feel at ease in the digital age and get to know others in life through the virtual world, absorbing themselves in the TGIF culture: Twitter, Google, iPhone, and Facebook.[4] Connected like no other generation, the Net Generation remains in constant communication via technology not only with each other, but also with various generations in their lives, much to the delight of their parents.[5]

Raised by "helicopter parents" in a "helicopter culture," the Net Generation experienced a hovering in order to keep them safe and remove risk from their lives.[6] Examples of such a protective, risk-free generation exist throughout culture today: toy, food, and packaging safety; plastic playground slides and jungle gyms replacing metal ones; smoke-free environments and laws; participation trophies to protect losing individuals from low self-esteem; green-ink grading to reduce possible injury to the psyche from red ink; child car seats and seatbelt laws; baby-on-board signs; and bicycle protection gear, including helmet and knee and elbow pads.[7] Ushered in over the last thirty years, such developments influence the way the Net Generation sees and experiences the world thanks to their Boomer and Buster generation parents "who are deeply risk-averse when it comes to their kids."[8]

Kyle Tennant, author and Net Generation member, suggests that one reason for his generation's preference for mediated communication—phones, texts, social media—resides in the desire for safety and control, a normal environment for them.[9] Such mediated communication outlets remove the risk and unknown of face-to-face interaction, allowing control over communication, which works well in the current matrix of digital information—the infomatrix.[10] Whatever the reasons, the Net Generation effortlessly moves about in a Google World, securely embedded within the infomatrix.

A Google World

In 1996, Larry Page and Sergey Brin launched their Internet search engine, Google, with the aim "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."[11] Until that goal can come to fruition, Google will settle for creating the perfect search engine, which they define as "something that understands exactly what you mean and gives you back exactly what you want."[12] With such a mission, Google assists the Net Generation in getting what they want when they want it. The Net Generation cannot "conceive of a reality in which instant worldwide communication does not exist. Yet just a few generations ago, having a real-time conversation with someone half a world away was only possible in the realm of science fiction."[13] The digital revolution thrust the information age into a reality that previous generations only enjoyed in the fantasy worlds of books and films.

A "Google world" is one in which the information age and the digital revolution combine to connect the world through the Internet using various technological devices. In a Google world, a phrase spoken by a Sunday morning preacher can be tweeted within seconds and retweeted around the world before the congregation gathers around a potluck lunch. A Google world provides an international platform for random cat videos to receive thousands of views within hours of posting on YouTube and shared via social media. Thanks to a Google world, dining friends who disagree over pop-music trivia can resolve the argument with their smartphones before appetizers arrive. In fact, people no longer need to research their own questions since Web sites such as Cha Cha exist, promising "fast, definitive answers—about everything!"—as paid employees sitting in their pajamas at home find answers to questions within seconds of submission.[14] An overabundance of information resides at digital fingertips in the infomatrix.

For generations, people have been living in an information-saturated world. In 1990, Neil Postman, twentieth-century media theorist and cultural critic, called the

information age "a deluge of chaos," stating that "we are glutted with information, drowning in information, have no control over it, don't know what to do with it."[15] Over twenty years later, with access to information residing in the palm-sized smartphone, Tim Challies echoes Postman, cautioning against gorging on information.[16] For the Net Generation, however, the infomatrix exists as a twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week reality of information availability. With an entire generation depending on information technology companies, fierce competition fuels the increased amount of access to information and speed at which it is available, changing brain function in the process.

Humans create technology to change the world in which they live; however, they often fail to recognize the technology they create changes them, too.[17] Challies states, "The brain of a person raised in the age of print, a person who learned from books and who reads books in time of leisure or study, has a brain that is markedly different from a person who has learned primarily from images or who has watched videos in times of leisure or study."[18] Studies prove such a transformation taking place. According to scientists, juggling various avenues of communication that offer interrupted bursts of information changes the way people think and behave, undermining the ability to focus in the present moment.[19] This means shorter attention spans in the infomatrix, which results in less time thinking deeply and listening intently to others.

Unfortunately, a biological component plays into the drive for more access to information. There exists a primitive impulse to respond to immediate opportunities and threats, stimulating excitement that often turns addictive.[20] Thus, a Google world responds with

counseling programs and rehabilitation centers. Ironically, the first such center opened in 2009 near the headquarters of Microsoft "to help people wean themselves from pathological computer use, which can include obsessive use of video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter and any other time-killers brought courtesy of technology."[21]

For Carr, the "Net culture" equals mainstream culture, not strictly youth culture.[22] Skeptical of individuals like Sweet and Challies, who emphasize the differences in "digital natives" and "digital immigrants," Carr points out that the brain changes from the digital information age affect people of various ages since all generations alive today exist in a Google world.[23] With the infomatrix in full force, businesses, government agencies, churches, families, and friends communicate through Web sites, texts, Twitter, Facebook, and smartphone applications, turning even the oldest of generations alive today into digital immigrants without much of a choice. However, Carr, a Pulitzer Prize finalist and voice on today's technological influence, remains hopeful that the impending backlash to a constantly connected society will come from the idealistic youth, as often happens.[24] The Church can assist the change by teaching Christian young adults that the values of their culture, while not necessarily all unethical, tend to conflict with the values of the kingdom of God.

Values

Young Adult Values

With the digital information age has come a new set of values, especially for young adults who have been raised in a Google world: access, speed, and interruption. The Internet, combined with digital devices allows easy, quick access to a seemingly infinite amount of information. Through

digital technologies, access is habitual and constant, developing an obsession with accessing anything and everything. Invented to keep business people in touch with family and work while traveling, the cell phone, now a smartphone, does exactly what it was created to do—keep humanity in touch— even when escape is desired.[25] Churches now display signs asking the congregants to silence cell phones during services, indicating Sunday services no longer exist as a sacred time and space. Access demands the price of constant availability, removing the concept of inaccessibility.

Google's director of user experience, Irene Au, articulates that the company's goal aims to "get users in and out really quickly;" thus their design decisions support such a strategy.[26] With Twitter's growth and popularity, Facebook revamped its site in 2009 with Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder and chief executive, assuring Facebook users that they would "continue making the flow of information even faster."[27] Carr argues that these strategies "promote the speedy, superficial skimming of information and discourage any deep, prolonged engagement with a single argument, idea, or narrative."[28] Researchers also point to the positive, explaining that imaging studies show Internet users more efficient when it comes to finding information.[29] Whether one sees the positive or negative, the Net Generation both relies on and expects speed. Tapscott explains:

> The Net Gen has a need for speed—and not just in video games. Real-time chats with a database of global contacts have made a rapid communication the new norm for the Net Generation. In a world where speed characterizes the flow of information among vast networks of people, communication with friends, colleagues, and superiors takes place faster than ever. And marketers and

employers should realize that Net Geners expect the same quick communication from others—every instant message should draw an instant response.[30]

With access to information at faster speeds, living in a Google world consists of constant interruptions. Internet users consider the ability "to monitor events and automatically send out messages and notifications a strength of communication technology."[31] Googlers desire the cherished commodity of information, so interruption brings something valuable; "to turn off these alerts is to risk feeling out of touch, or even socially isolated."[32] Continual interruption by texts, Facebook messages, Twitter updates, smartphone notifications, and other forms of digital interruption results in less time for dwelling and focusing in the present moment.

Referring to various communication devices, Challies asks,

> What if our consumption and use of these devices has trained us to assume that greater speed and greater capacity are universal virtues? What if we have transferred the virtues of digital devices to our own lives? … We recreate ourselves in the image of our devices, through the ideologies they contain within them.[33]

Tapscott indicates that Challies's concerns have already taken place with the Net Generation's expectations of instant communication with others.[34] One could argue that the purchase and use of digital devices reveal people inadvertently already place those values on themselves and others in their lives. Worse values could exist for a generation to hold in esteem; however, valuing continual information erodes the very foundation of the Christian life as God intended. The values of access, speed, and

interruption combined with young adults' values of security and certainty, opposes the values of the kingdom of God.

Kingdom Values

The Now

A benefit of a social-media-based generation is their ability to appreciate the activities of the moment. Willing to share their thoughts and activities, Facebook and Twitter provide a space for individuals to write about the "now" of life. Interaction, however, does not equal intimacy. Sweet cautions that constant digital interaction lacks an intimacy that results in people "treating those around them as objects to get past, not as subjects to pass through."[35] At any given moment, as a generation interacts through social media while at work or at dinner with family and friends, individuals miss the intimacy of the moment and the opportunity of participating deeply in the lives of those physically surrounding them:

> We now see cyberspace as a place but also as a state of being. Cyberspace gives us a place to be ourselves apart from our bodies. And in many cases the draw is irresistible. Often, we are led to view this as a superior alternative to the real world . . . because it is a place that allows us to break free of the limits of . . . our God-given circumstances.[36]

Here in the "now," the Spirit of God moves about the earth, using people to speak into one another's lives. Living in the moment has challenged every generation throughout time. Each person has to discover how to be in the now, living fully in the moment. As a seventeenth-century monk on kitchen duty, Brother Lawrence focused his efforts to live in the moment by practicing the presence of God.[37] Living as a twentieth-century missionary in the Philippines, Frank Laubach writes, "I am trying to be utterly free from everybody, free from my own self, but completely enslaved to the will of God every moment of the day."[38] Sherry Turkle, who studies the relationship between people and technology, acknowledges the difficulty of such a task for those in the infomatrix: "As we try to reclaim our concentration, we are literally at war with ourselves. Yet, no matter how difficult, it is time to look again toward … living fully in the moment."[39]

To dwell in the thickness of time is to participate intentionally in the present with those whom God places around a person at any given moment. The Divine dwells in the moment and its ordinariness, leading and guiding. As Mark Charles Steffen eloquently states, "The past will never be relived, and the future is, at best, a speculation. We only have now. Today, this event, this moment alone is, and the Divine is in it."[40] Jesus exemplified living in the moment as He stepped out of eternity into the moment of time, dwelling in its thickness as He lived a Spirit-led life, engaging with people to bring healing, redemption, and hope.

Risk and Trust

For modern humanity, adventure serves as something to do; it breaks up the mundane of the daily grind. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "adventure" as "an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks."[41] What most people consider adventure today is, in reality, a controlled, well-planned excursion to an unfamiliar location embedded in security. Irony of the modern way of life resides in how people do everything in their power to secure their lives by removing the unknown risks and then spend thousands of dollars on vacations to regain a sense of the adventure they eradicated.

A culture that values safety and protectiveness undoubtedly challenges the Church's ability to disciple the next

generation of Christians for living a life of risk and adventure, including laying one's life down for God's Kingdom.[42] Unfortunately, the Church can add to the problem. Mark Batterson questions if churches do to people what zoos do to animals—tame them within cages, removing the risk, struggle, and danger—a caged Christian.[43] Jesus did not promise His disciples a safe, risk-free mission. His mission for them did not entail arriving safely at death.[44] In fact, He warned them of the danger and persecution that would bring death to many of them (John 16:1-4). With the promise of the Spirit as a comforter and counselor, Jesus sent His disciples out to the four corners of the ancient world at a time when most people did not travel outside a thirty-five-mile radius of home.[45]

Jesus sent the Spirit to accompany His disciples on an adventure involving risk and uncertainty, and He continues to do so today to empower His followers for the journey. Today, Christ's followers often live in such a way that Spirit empowerment seems unnecessary. Francis Chan and Danae Yankoski ask an intriguing question worth consideration: "Why would we need to experience the Comforter if our lives are already comfortable? … Those who put their lives at risk and suffer for the gospel … most often experience His being 'with you always, even to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:20, NASB)."[46] When people value certainty, control, and security, comfort becomes the driving force of their lives, not the Spirit of God.

If the Church lacks action in the world today, it might result from the removal of risk from the Christian life, which God uses to propel humans into a life of motivation and commitment. Research confirms that if one removes the risk from life, the core motivation for action disappears.[47] A 2008 study reveals people who can tolerate

ambiguity and embrace the unknown possess a higher propensity for greater creativity and action.[48] God created humanity as risk-takers to adventure into the unknown, ready to follow His movement throughout the earth.

Jesus' disciples lived in circumstantial uncertainty, depending only on the Spirit's leading. In a Google world that fuels narcissism, Christians tend to live an "inverted Christianity," where they think they follow the Spirit, but in reality invite the Spirit to follow them.[49] Embracing the unknowns and allowing the Spirit to lead amidst uncertainty and ambiguity guarantees an adventure of God-sized proportions as one responds with commitment to God's mission in the world, advancing with trust in Him.

In the digital information age, smart-phones function as global positioning systems, offering clarity of location and direction at any given moment to remain in control of a person's whereabouts. Humans work hard to bring the world under control through technology; ultimately, however, God's mysterious movement in their lives hauntingly reminds them of its impossibility. In response, people use religion to create a controllable God:

It is not a deity we want but certitude, a tribal religion we can learn to manipulate. Religion generally says less about God and more about the human need for an ordered world we can understand. We don't want God nearly as much as we think we do; we mostly want control over our lives and of the world around us.[50]

Brennan Manning adds, "Craving clarity, we attempt to eliminate the risk of trusting God. Fear of the unknown path stretching ahead of us destroys childlike trust in the Father's active goodness and unrestricted love."[51] However, as people release their need for

absolute control, their hearts awaken to His trustworthiness, allowing rest where suspicion once resided.

Conclusion

The digital information age's obsession with information operates in tension with the values of the life of faith. Possessing information does not appear as God's priority for humanity. Since creation, God has continually placed His people in situations requiring they trust Him with the unknown. Trust not only implies something unknown will be present, but that the process will most likely not be speedy.

While the Net Generation's value for information and its access, speed, and interruption seems harmless, it can establish a foundation in one's life for making unethical decisions. If Christians place value in access and speed, decisions of moral concern will be based on those values. This proves why values reside at the core of ethics and why individuals must give attention to the values of the Net Generation.

Technology is not the enemy; the problem rests in humanity's discomfort with ambiguity that too often drives the constant pursuit of technological advancement with hopes that accessible information at greater speed will offer certainty that the unknown does not. The challenge for the Church resides in discipling young adults to live in the twenty-first-century while not being distracted or lured away from following the adventure-prone Spirit. Today's generation might be informed, but they tend to live in boredom because of their safe and secure lives. They long for a challenge—to be called to risk and trust. The Church must proclaim God's call for today's generation to explore the unknown by taking risks as he or she lives fully in the moment empowered and led by the Spirit.

---

[1] Ethics Resource Center, "Definitions of Values," http://www.ethics.org/resource/definitions-values (accessed 09/25/2012).

[2] Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 16.

[3] Ibid., 17.

[4] Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2012), Kindle e-book, locations 168, 396.

[5] Dan Schawbel, "The Top 10 Social Networks for Generation-Y," Mashable (January 30, 2009), http://mashable.com/2009/01/30/generation-y-social-networks/ (accessed December 22, 2012).

[6] David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Kindle e-book, location 1515.

[7] Ibid., location 1525. Kinnaman and Hawkins recognize this protective way of life "is, on balance, a good thing." They are simply showing how culture has changed, transforming a generation, and their parents, in the process.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Kyle Tennant, *Unfriend Yourself: Three Days to Detox, Discern, and Decide about Social Media* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2012), Kindle e-book, locations 383-84.

[10] I coined the term "infomatrix" to serve as an explanation of the matrix of the digital information age that lures people away from residing in the mystery of God.

[11] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2011), 152.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle e-book, location 320.

[14] Cha Cha, http://www.chacha.com/ (accessed November 18, 2012).

[15] Neil Postman, "Informing Ourselves to Death" (Speech, meeting of the German Informatics Society sponsored by IBM, Stuttgart, Germany, October 11, 1990).

[16] Challies, locations 2502, 2517.

[17] Dyer, location 548.

[18] Challies, location 661.

[19] Matt Richtel, "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html?pagewanted=all (accessed June 12, 2012).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Nicholas K. Geranios, "Addicted to the Internet? There's Rehab for That," MSNBC.com (September 3, 2009), http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32679167/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/addicted-internet-theres-rehab/#.UOUxeonjmLE (accessed December 23, 2012).

[22] Carr, *The Shallows*, 226.

[23] Ibid., 226-27.

[24] Carr, *The Shallows*, 227.

[25] Ibid., location 1000.

[26] Carr, *The Shallows*, 156.

[27] Ibid., 158.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Matt Richtel, "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html?pagewanted=all (accessed June 12, 2012).

[30] Tapscott, 36.

[31] Carr, *The Shallows*, 133.

[32] Ibid., 133-134.

[33] Challies, locations 2128-35.

[34] Tapscott, 36.

[35] Leonard Sweet, *What Matters Most: How We Got the Point but Missed the Person* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2012), Kindle e-book, location 511.

[36] Challies, location 1734.

[37] Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Spire Books, 1967), 5.

[38] Frank Laubach, *Letters by a Modern Mystic* (Colorado Springs, CO: Purposeful Design, 2007), Kindle e-book, location 109.

[39] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 296.

[40] Mark Charles Steffen, *Mystery in Life: Learning from Our Spirituality* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2010), Kindle e-book, location 274.

[41] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "Adventure," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adventure (accessed March 15, 2012).

[42] Kinnaman and Hawkins, location 1525.

[43] Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2008), Kindle e-book, locations 117-22.

[44] Ibid., location 223.

[45] Ibid., location 179.

[46] Francis Chan with Danae Yankoski, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), Kindle e-book, location 1226.

[47] Jonathan Fields, *Uncertainty: Turning Fear and Doubt into Fuel for Brilliance* (New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin, 2011), 18.

[48] Ibid., 19.

[49] Batterson, location 97.

[50] Jonathan Martin, "Distruptive Faith (Or Why We Choose Karma over Grace)," Pastor Jonathan Martin, http://pastorjonathanmartin.com/uncategorized/disruptive-faith-or-why-we-choose-karma-over-grace/ (accessed September 11, 2012).

[51] Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin's Path to God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2004), Kindle e-book, location 148.