

Media in the Lives of Young Adults: Implications for Religious Organizations

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Young adults, like other members of the population, need to find and experience authentic connection in their everyday lives. The media industries have capitalized on this desire for connection for a long time, as books, films, and television programs, and more recently mobile technologies and social network sites, enable young adults to communicate who they are and what they care about through the common language of the media and of popular culture.

Research shows that young adults spend more time online than any other age group, and most of that time is spent in social network sites. About 85% of young adults online visit Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter regularly. They also spend more time with music—and they spend more money on music—than those younger or older than they are. And while they devote less time to television and film viewing than they did in their younger years, young adults still spend an average of four hours a day watching television, and 36% of Internet users ages 18–29 visit a video-sharing site like YouTube on any given day. Additionally, 77% of emerging adults go to the cinema once a month and the same amount watch at least one DVD a month, making them among the box office’s most frequent consumers. But some means of communication are losing out: young adults now spend considerably less time than their elders with daily newspapers, books, magazines, or radio.¹

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Media as Enhancing Connection

Today's cell-phone-wielding young adult is part of a much longer tradition of young people who incorporate media into their everyday lives. Young adults were first seen as a distinct market for media and consumer goods in the 1920s, when young adults enjoyed films and jazz music after work hours or during their time in college. By the 1940s, when cars had gained widespread use among young adults, radio, recorded music, and DJs were a key part of young-adult culture, and the role of music in young-adult lives continued to grow in the postwar years through the Beatles era and beyond. These media became a key part of how young people formed relationships with one another, as sharing their favorite songs and artists with one another enabled them to express something about themselves among their peers. By the 1950s and 1960s, media had become an integral aspect of peer identity. Therefore, television and film catered to young audiences. Meanwhile, youth itself became something worth marketing, as those in Western cultures increasingly layered nostalgia and idealism on that time in life that was associated, often less than accurately, with fun and with greater freedoms.

By the end of the 20th century, young adults faced a sometimes-bewildering array of life choices, as marriage and childbearing were increasingly delayed and postsecondary schooling options multiplied. And popular media had by then become the central stage upon which the longings of a generation were played out, as films, television programs, and popular music echoed and reinforced these life experiences and played on older audiences' nostalgia for this time in life. Thus, even as life choices became more diverse, popular media became not only a source of entertainment, but also a window into the shared experience of emerging adulthood. Popular mediated stories create and articulate mythic themes expressing what it means to come of age in late modernity, and as such, they connect diverse members of common generations together through shared emotional experiences.

Beginning with *The Graduate* in 1967 and continuing with such 1980s classics as *Reality Bites* and *St. Elmo's Fire*, films about young adulthood captured the angst of moving from college into professional life (or from youth into military life in the case of *Top Gun* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*, also from the 1980s). A few years later, films such as *Clerks*, *Office Space*, and later *The Devil Wears Prada* skewered young adult

work life and celebrated savvy young adult resourcefulness, while the popular 1990s television program *Friends* and the 2004 film *Garden State* idealized close interpersonal relationships as a refuge from the more ludicrous aspects of adult life.² In the first decade of the new millennium, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Into the Wild*, and *Precious* also showed the rewards and challenges of embracing a purposeful life in young adulthood.

Music has similarly provided a soundtrack to the lives of young adults. And although iPods now make it easier to individualize one's listening experiences, there are still certain songs that speak to the longing for one's purpose and place in life. For instance, Ben Harper's "With My Own Two Hands" reminds emerging adults that they can change the world. Against Me!'s song "Reinventing Axl Rose" celebrates finding one's place within one's generation; its lyrics speak of listening to a band in a crowded performance space from which "Everyone would leave with the memory that there was no place else in this world. And this was where they always belonged." Additionally, today's emerging adults confront the dilemmas of coming of age in a voyeuristic world that celebrates the image and that has to live with both its ephemerality and its potential permanence. These themes are explored in Britney Spears's song "Circus," which notes that "there's only two types of people in this world, the ones that entertain and the ones that observe," and Radiohead's "Videotape," which comments, "When I'm at the pearly gates, this will be on my videotape."

As these mythic stories of young adulthood circulate, popular media continue to form an important backdrop and conversational point of connection for young adults as they seek to build and maintain relationships among their peers, while also providing cultural touchstones among a generation. As today's emerging adults age, these stories and sounds will serve to help individuals see themselves as related to others who came of age at the same time. They will also help these adults to recall their own emerging adult years, often with a wave of emotion and nostalgia.

Connecting through Digital and Mobile Media

Playing into the insecurities and changes that come with today's young adulthood, the media industries have continued to capitalize on the need for connection and identity

formation through digital and mobile media. College students of the first decade of the new millennium were the first target group for the Facebook social network, and they were largely receptive to this model of communication as it enabled them to both maintain important relationships over time and to form new ones quickly. Since then, most young adults have established accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and other sites, creating detailed online profiles where they find friends, post photos, share their statuses, forward news about favorite celebrities and musicians, and post messages on each other's online "walls." Emerging adults are by far the most active among overall users of Twitter, with about 20% of online adults ages 18–34 reporting that they use this and similar applications. While some emerging adults are peripherally interested in social networking sites, and check them every once in a while (once or twice a week), there are others who are on social network sites daily, and still others who check their social network sites and change their profiles a few times a day. For most young adults, however, their time spent on social network sites is somewhere in between an occasional once a week glance and multiple daily updating.

Young adults—especially male young adults—also form and maintain connections with one another through gaming, and young adults are more likely than any other age group to play games either online or with a console. The military funds a great deal of gaming research and supports both the Global Gaming League and the development of games such as *America's Army*, because they recognize that games are frequently used both explicitly and implicitly to recruit young adults into the armed services.³ Other games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* form connections among gamers, who may or may not know one another personally but may still play in "real time" while in differing locations. People can play online while they chat with their opponents and allies, they can go to meeting places to play with friends, or they can form new bonds with like-minded gamers at national and even international gaming conferences. Game creation is also increasingly recognized as a popular major in Western universities and is increasingly viewed as a potential catalyst for effective education.

We might wonder why young people spend so much time at social network and gaming sites. The answer lies in the need for connection and maintaining friendship. When danah boyd asked teens why they use social network sites so frequently, their

answer seemed obvious: “ ‘Cuz that’s where my friends are.”⁴ The same can be said for young adults. Some have suggested that social network sites have commoditized friendships and reduced relationships to 140-character messages.⁵ However, we feel that these sites are often a bridge that can help young adults create closer connections that are pursued offline as well as online.

Emerging adults do not use the Internet only for social purposes. They are also the most likely of any age group to use the Internet, specifically social networks, for political reasons.⁶ On some social network sites, young adults can discover who their friends voted for, they can endorse a candidate, or they can donate to a political party. The use of social network sites for political purposes further reflects young adults’ needs for a place to express themselves and to connect with their friends on issues pertaining to their lives.

People do not use media such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter only to maintain connections. The term *prosumers* has emerged to recognize that many young people approach today’s media not only as consumers of entertainment but also as producers of content.⁷ With the rise of sites such as YouTube and Second Life, some young adults are forming identity by making and sharing movies and building virtual lives. Young adults are the most likely of any age group to share videos with their friends and to comment on something they watched.⁸ Additionally, through online fan forums and blogs, they see themselves as more actively involved in providing feedback to creators in what were once the seemingly inaccessible realms of the Hollywood film and television industries.

Media Consumption among Emerging Adults

Whereas television viewing tends to wane during the young adult years, certain programs, particularly in late-night television, are mainstays in the lives of today’s young adults. *Saturday Night Live* first appealed to young adults with its 1975 debut, and late-night television personalities like David Letterman and George Lopez and shows such as Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report* continue that tradition of irony and irreverence. The same themes of irreverence and irony are evident in dramatic programming appealing to young adults such as *Seinfeld*,

Scrubs, *South Park*, and, more recently, *The Office*.

But the ways in which young adults consume these and other programs may be changing. Young adults are more likely than other age groups to watch television online and are believed to be television's most fervent online commentators. Of the 22% of American adults who have cut back on their television subscriptions in the last year, 32% say they've connected their computers to their TVs to watch Web video, and 20% of online video viewers say they watch less TV on a TV set because of their time spent watching online videos.

Some young adults have also expressed increased interest in multiple-platform storytelling, which might include a product that has expression through a television program, a video game, a feature film, and a series of sound tracks. The media industries understandably cater to such involved consumers of media. Additionally, and in a time of tight budgets for some traditional media outlets such as newspapers, media production can become costly. These outlets welcome the production of media by consumers, because it can help fill costly content needs while adding to content that already exists. Today, young adults can both listen to and create music on their computers, and can subsequently share it with their friends through iPods or MP3 playlists or through online networks. Websites such as MySpace and YouTube have become hubs for popular bands with large fan bases as well as for young artists struggling to make a name for themselves. Young adults can acquire much more music and for a lower cost than previous generations of young adults could, they can access their music collections from almost anywhere via mobile devices, and they increasingly view music recordings themselves as materials that can be sampled, remixed, or added to other media such as videos or podcasts.

Conclusion

Young adults utilize digital media for engendering and maintaining relational connections and sharing real-life experiences, and they continue to find their life experiences meaningfully articulated in popular media such as television programs, films, and popular music. Religious leaders can use these resources to create authentic connections but should also be aware that these are really only stepping stones into

young adult lives.

Because music is paramount, religious leaders need to be aware of how music shapes the lives of young adults and engenders conversation about contemporary issues. Using popular music within religious settings can have a powerful effect on young adults as well as other members of religious organizations. Music is certainly capable of bringing new meaning to timeless religious teachings.

Television and film, as we have discussed, provide important cultural scripts that young adults relate to on a personal level. Pastors and church leaders can use storytelling within television and film to initiate personal connection and conversation about real-life experiences.

This essay has surveyed the ways in which emerging adults strive for connection through the use of media. For emerging adults, while it may be that important matters of life and faith have not changed much, the modes in which they express these matters certainly have. While such changes may seem overwhelming or daunting, it's important to remember that the avenues through which young adults relate to one another are somewhat arbitrary and always subject to change. Emerging adults simply need a space to express themselves with others their age and an outlet that gives expression to their shared experiences. Creating and maintaining authentic connection is the most important component of young adult interaction, and utilizing the aspects of media mentioned in this essay can help create these spaces.

¹ See Amanda Lenhart (2009, October 8), The democratization of online social networks, presentation to the Association of Internet Researchers meeting, Milwaukee, WI; Ian Shapira (2009, October 15), In a generation that friends and tweets, they don't, *Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/14/AR2009101403961.html?sid=ST2009101500563; Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden (2003), Music downloading, file-sharing and copyright, Report of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2003/Music-Downloading-Filesharing-and-Copyright.aspx; Center for Media Design, Ball State University (2009, March 26), The video consumer mapping study, Center for Research Excellence, www.researchexcellence.com/vcmstudy.php. This study reports that young adults spend less than 2% of their screen time watching Internet or mobile-phone video. David Z. Mindich,

(2005), *Tuned out: Why Americans under 40 don't follow the news* (New York: Oxford University Press).

² See Carolyn McNamara Barry and Stephanie D. Madsen (2010), Friends and friendships in emerging adulthood, ChangingSEA.org.

³ For statistics on young adult gaming, see Amanda Lenhart, Sydney Jones, and Alexandra Macgill (2008, December 7), Adults and video games, fe01.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Adults-and-Video-Games.aspx. On the military's involvement in gaming, see Eugene Huang (2007, April). Anti-war groups protest U.S. Army's gaming league sponsorship, www.gamepro.com/article/news/109748/anti-war-groups-protest-u-s-armys-gaming-league-sponsorship/ (retrieved December 22, 2009).

⁴ danah boyd (2007), Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life, in David Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, identity, and digital media* (pp. 119–142) (MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Learning) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

⁵ See, e.g., Elizabeth Bernstein, (2009, August 25), How Facebook ruins friendships, *Wall Street Journal*, online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204660604574370450465849142.html.

⁶ See, e.g., the Pew Internet and American Life Project report, Aaron Smith (2009, April), The Internet's role in campaign 2008, www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/6--The-Internets-Role-in-Campaign-2008/2--The-State-of-Online-Politics/6--SNS.aspx?r=1.

⁷ Don Tapscott (2008), *Grown up digital: How the net generation is changing your world* (New York: McGraw-Hill).

⁸ Mary Madden (2007, July 25), Online video proliferates as viewers share what they find online; 57% of online adults watch or download video (press release, Pew Internet and American Life Project), www.pewinternet.org/Press-Releases/2007/Online-video-proliferates-as-viewers-share-what-they-find-online-57-of-online-adults-watc.aspx.

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danah boyd researches young people and social network sites. She especially looks at why they are appealing to young people and how they shape young people's sense of identity. She claims that social network sites are merely another place where young people can find and maintain friendships and other connections. She argues that, while social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace can make maintaining friendships and connections more convenient, this does not take away from the value of the preexisting connections that young people have.

Carey, James. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

This book introduces a way to think about the role of the media as part of a cultural ritual, thereby challenging the older metaphor of communication as "transmission." It therefore paves the way for a more fulsome consideration of how culture shapes the ways in which media come to participate in meaning-making processes of groups and individuals.

Clark, Lynn Schofield. (2003). *From angels to aliens: Teenagers, the media, and the supernatural*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Bringing together recent research in the sociology of religion with media and cultural studies, this book explores how religion and stories of the supernatural are understood in relation to the centrality of American evangelicalism in U.S. culture. It traces how young people from different and no religious backgrounds interpret popular cultural stories, and how those stories themselves relate to a long tradition of borrowing from the "dark side of evangelicalism" in the name of dramatic storytelling.

FisherKeller, JoEllen. (2002). *Growing up with television: Everyday learning among young adolescents*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

FisherKeller asks why young people are so concerned with television and why they communicate with each other about television programming. She is especially

concerned with how young people talk about TV with each other. Fisherkeller argues that television plays a key role in providing adolescents with a way of expressing who they are and what they care about when they are with others.

Gee, James. (2004). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gee argues that video games are not just for entertainment. An educational theorist, Gee understands that video games can be an instrumental part of learning. Furthermore, video games can empower young people in areas of politics. He suggests video games give young people a different kind of learning from their parents.

Ito, Mizuko, et al. (2009). *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out: Kids living and learning through new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

This book synthesizes more than 20 ethnographic projects exploring how digital and mobile media are playing a part in the lives of young people today. Tracing the experiences of hundreds of young people from various racial/ethnic, class, and religious backgrounds in the United States, the book argues that, rather than serving as a distraction from more desirable and educational activities, video games and time on the computer are reshaping not only how young people learn, but how education might be most effectively rethought for the next millennium.

Jenkins, Henry. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jenkins articulates young peoples' experiences as active participants in convergence culture, providing them with a positive perspective about how popular culture responds to their desires. He argues that antiquated forms of media will not necessarily die. Rather, older and newer forms will act together to provide new cultural trends and shifts. This shift occurs as consumers actively participate in integrating new media into their preexisting routines.

Loader, Brian. (2007). *Young citizens in the digital age: Political engagement, young people, and new media*. London: Routledge.

In this book, Brian Loader looks at the rise of political engagement among young people as well as the immense impact of media on political practices such as lobbying and elections. Media have transformed the way politicians work and engage people. Recently, young adults have been a large part of this change.

Peters, John Durham. (2000). *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

In this book, Peters takes a historical look at how cultural theorists and philosophers, such as Kierkegaard, Marx, and Hegel, as well as writers and poets, both past and present, have thought about the way societies and individuals communicate. Peters argues that we desire human connection and that with each mode of communication, there is an attempt to solve the problem of human separation and the need for relationships.

Wuthnow, Robert. (2007). *After the baby boomers: How twenty- and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Wuthnow argues that young adults today are much like their parents; however, there are a few differences that affect the way they think about faith. He notes that churches and religious organizations have a lot to offer married couples and families. And the average young adult often does not fit into these categories. Therefore, Wuthnow's major argument is that, because young adults tend to stay single longer, religious organizations have less to offer them. This and other factors will influence American religious institutions.