

SEPTEMBER 2003 No. 3

# REVOLVE



## TECHNOLOGY

By Vivianne Gloz Youth Research Officer

This issue of Revolve will focus on major trends in young people's use of technology and possibilities for using technology for ministry. Technology is undeniably a major part of many young people's experiences. Technology is "changing the macroworlds that shape adolescents' lives, the microworlds that many youth live in," and the life that many young people aspire to (Larson, 2002). It's also changing the way young people relate. Technology is a rapidly expanding area of our society that needs to be further invaded by a Christian presence. The Internet and mobile phones are particular technological arenas, or 'information and communication technologies' (ICTs), that offer opportunities for new ways of reaching young people for the purposes of the Gospel. However, it is also important to be mindful of the existence of a digital divide amongst Australian young people. Young people without access to technology are often disadvantaged, and excluded from the culture and experience that technology brings to many adolescents.

### THE FACTS

- 33% of 10-14 year-olds own a mobile phone. By 2004 this will increase to 55% amongst this age group (Wireless World Forum 2002, cited in Victorian Parenting Centre, 2002).
- 90% of SMS (Short Messaging Service) use is by children and young people aged under 18 years (Victorian Parenting Centre, 2002).
- Boys aged between 14 and 18 years are the heaviest users of SMS (Victorian Parenting Centre, 2002).
- Over 1.8 million young people aged 10-19 use a computer at home, equating to about 68% of this population (ABS, 2001).
- Over one in four young people own their own computer (Meredyth, Russell, Blackwood, Thomas and Wise, 1999).
- At least 75% of young people under 18 are accessing the Internet (Hillier, Kurdas and Horsley, 2001).

## MOBILE PHONES

A large proportion of teenagers in Australia are currently using mobile phones and predictions indicate this proportion is growing fast. This is supported by research that claims that mobile phones, specifically text messaging, are more addictive for young people than cigarettes (Mobile Youth, 2003). Mobile phone technology has a significant impact on the “shaping” of adolescence (Ling, 2000), and technology has created new styles of interaction (for example, SMS), which many young people are not only adjusting to, but are also thriving within. Ling (2000) describes *mobile phone technology as expressing various aspects of young people’s independence*, including their availability (stretching and reconfiguration of social boundaries), emancipation (stepping away from their parents), security and safety, and micro-coordination between peers (reducing the need to have meetings/outings pre-arranged). His research also found that *mobile phones act as symbols displaying young people’s notions of their identity and social status*.

A recent study that explored the major issues related to young people’s use of technology found that ICTs, particularly mobile phones, enabled young people to establish an identity and sense of belonging (Carroll, Howard, Vetere, Peck & Murphy, 2001). A girl in their study stated that a mobile phone is “a pre-requisite for a social life.” The study found however, that a reliance on this form of belonging meant that young people without a mobile phone were excluded, even to the extent that they appeared to be struggling to maintain their social links (Carroll et al, 2001). The study also described mobile phones as providing a way for young people to deal with parental or educational authority (for example, young people choose which calls they will answer, and can communicate in classrooms without teachers’ knowledge) and as enabling young people to achieve cohesion and deal with fragmentation (Carroll et al, 2001).

A major concern regarding young people’s use of mobile phones is the amount of debt they are incurring. Debts between \$10,000 and \$20,000 have been reported among young people, mainly due to their inability to pay their mobile phone bills (McKenzie, 2003). It is not uncommon for young people’s phone bills to be in excess of hundreds of dollars, and reports of young people receiving mobile phone bills for \$1,000 or more are not rare (McKenzie, 2003). For young people who cannot afford their bill because they don’t have the opportunity to work, and their parents are unable to pay it for them, they have no other option than to go into debt to pay their bills. This leaves them severely disadvantaged and has wide implications for their well-being.

SMS language has also been raised as an issue for young people’s literacy. Young people’s written communication often includes aspects of SMS abbreviations (GR8, XLNT, B4, etc). The long-term effects of this are not yet known. Adults raising these concerns fear that young people will have inadequate spelling, grammar and writing skills. However, young people’s use of such abbreviations is like their version of short hand, so as long as young people’s education still includes these literacy skills, these concerns may be premature and unsupported.

---

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



Mobile phone technology is an area that is largely untapped for Christian outreach. The Catholic church in the UK has experimented with SMS technology, translating The Lord’s Prayer (“Our Father in Heaven” = ‘dad@hvn’) and sending it to young people in the hope that it will get them to stop what they are doing, pray, and even share the message with their peers. They see this technology as an opportunity for creating new forms of “simultaneous virtual worship” (Catholic News, 2001). There are *many possibilities for using mobile phone technology and SMS for ministry, especially for building relationships, follow-up and encouraging young people we’re working with by a quick SMS message that might even include a scripture*. Remember that SMS is basically another language so to be relevant to young mobile phone users, *learn SMS!*

It is important for us to remember that the issue of rising unsolicited advertising to young people through SMS is in opposition to young people's desire to retain control of their ICT's, and their lives through their ICT's. Their phone is their space. We need to remember to *be responsible, and non-threatening*, in the way we communicate with young people. It's probably a good idea to *first check with the young person if it's OK to call/SMS them on their mobile*. The last thing we want is young people feeling "bible bashed" through their mobile phones! Asking them first also gives them the option of telling us that they may not be able to afford to reply and that they may prefer other ways of staying in touch.

Another downside of being in contact with young people through mobile phones is our constant availability if we leave our phones on 24 hours a day. This has implications for worker self-care. Sometimes it is appropriate to make sure we have our own, uninterrupted space. If we move into using mobiles for outreach purposes, it will be important for us to *establish and maintain boundaries around our times of availability*.

- Who would Jesus SMS? And what would he say?
- What are our attitudes to being 'always available'?
- How can we responsibly reach out through mobile phone technology?
- If ICTs are an expression of young people's need for developing their independence, identity and sense of belonging, how else can we reinforce this (promoting their spiritual identity, encouraging healthy independence and fostering belonging) in aspects of our programs?

## THE INTERNET

Currently, only 2-3% of the world's population has access to the Internet, although use by adolescents worldwide is growing rapidly (Larson, 2002, p.19). In Australia, estimates from two years ago stated that over 75% of young people are accessing the Internet regularly (Hillier et al, 2001). This figure would have increased significantly during this time, so we could assume even more young people are using the Internet today. It is also apparent that children and teenagers surf the Net more than their parents, to the extent that it has become a normal part of their daily routine (Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), 2001). Research into young people's Internet usage in Australia is not extensive. We do not know exactly how much time young people are spending online each week, or what specific sites they are drawn to. We know that young people use the Internet at home, at school, in Internet cafes, at work, at tertiary institutions and at friend's houses (Burton, 1999). Young people use the Internet for a variety of reasons:

- play or download games
- research for school and university
- browse or surf for fun
- create their own websites
- chat
- email
- find out about entertainment
- look for information on hobbies and personal interests
- get news
- research a product or service before buying it
- listen to or download music online
- check sports scores
- visit a site for a club that they are a member of
- visit sites where they can express opinions about something
- buy or trade online
- look for health related information
- and look for information on a topic that is hard to talk about (Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis, 2001).

It is clear that *utilising communication services like email, chat and instant messaging, and searching for information are the most common Internet activities for young people*. For instance in 2000, 47% of 18-24 year olds and 31% of 15-18 year olds said they used chat rooms; and 47% of 15-18 year olds and 32% of 13-14 year olds used instant messaging (ABA, 2001). These ICTs help young people to develop and maintain virtual communities of family, friends and other young people with similar interests (Carroll et al, 2001). Also very common among young people, particularly those aged between 15 and 18, was using the Internet to download music or games (ABA, 2001).

### **Close online relationships**

If using online communication services is most common for young people who are online, it is important to know the characteristics of their online relationships. Research by Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2003) investigated exactly this. They suggest that online relationships have become part of adolescent culture, and support the idea that online relationships are one of the most appealing aspects of the Internet. They found that *14% of youth (aged 10-17) reported close online relationships (equating to almost 300,000 young Australians)*, with the majority aged between 14 and 17. They found however, that a *disproportionate number of adolescents with close online relationships were highly troubled (experiencing depression or peer victimisation), reported low communication and high amounts of conflict with their parents, and were experiencing significant risks*. Therefore online relationships could be a source of support, comfort and advice for youth who are troubled or have poor relationships with parents (Wolak et al, 2003).

For workers who contact young people online (for example e-Disciplers) it is important to be mindful that youth who suffer from peer victimisation and depression are more vulnerable to conventional sexual and physical assaults and anecdotal evidence suggests that these young people are also targets of sexual offenders who use the Internet to make contact with victims (Wolak et al, 2003).

### **Pornography**

A recent issue in Australia regarding young people's Internet use has been the issue of pornography. Research into this found that *84% of boys and 60% of girls aged between 16 and 17 years have had exposure to Internet pornography* (Flood and Hamilton, 2003). 38% of boys and only 2% of girls say they have deliberately sought out sex sites on the Internet. Generally, young people find it very irritating to receive unsolicited pornography in their email accounts (Carroll et al, 2001). Flood and Hamilton (2003) conclude that anyone who uses the Internet extensively has a high probability of coming across sex sites when searching for something else or being sent pornographic links or images via email.

### **What does the Internet mean for young people and the experience of adolescence?**

Larson (2002) describes that *"...for youth, a comparatively marginalised and powerless segment of society, the Internet can be a vehicle of empowerment and opportunity..."* which has implications on many aspects of their lives, particularly their relationships and social interactions, education, health and well being, and their community engagement. The Internet provides so much for young people including information, people, virtual communities across the globe, organisations and institutions. It allows young people to participate, seek support, and find affirmation despite their age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, physical attractiveness or social standing (Larson, 2002).



---

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?

- We should support and further develop programs like e-Discipleship, as well as thinking about and *developing new ways to use the Internet in Gospel friendly ways* (for example, creating chat rooms and virtual communities).
- *Our websites should be positive and adequate alternatives* to the negative and harmful sites that young people are exposed to, teaching and modelling what the bible says regarding the need to fill our minds with what is pure and good. For example, considering that young people go online to receive information on issues that they may not be comfortable talking about (for example. sex, etc), we could provide online information on what the bible says about relationships, sex and so on (without being irrelevant and too “religious”).
- We should continue to *explore how the Internet impacts our relationships with young people.*
- Taking into account parents’ concerns regarding who their young people are talking to online, and the growing issue of “Internet stalking” we need to *be responsible and maintain boundaries appropriate for youth workers.*
- When communicating to young people online or through email, be mindful that they may be experiencing significant risks and dealing with a number of problems. Treat them how you would if they were a young person you actually see and work with (ie. if you promise to email them, email them; if you said you would meet them online at a certain time, make sure you’re there).

## DIGITAL DIVIDE

The digital divide is a term referring to “the discrepancy between people who have access to new information technology and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who do not” (Berdichevsky, 2003). This divide can also refer to gap between those who have the skills and knowledge to use technologies and those who don't. Our discussion thus far has highlighted the many benefits of technology for young people, yet *many young people in Australia are not able to access technology and are consequently excluded from the advantage and social advancement that technology provides*. In Australia, young people's access to technology is dependent on finances, whether they live in urban, rural or isolated communities, their ethnicity, gender, language and education. For example, indigenous young people in rurally isolated communities who lack economic means are often unable to access technologies and are therefore disadvantaged compared to white, middle-class young people who live in major cities.

---

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



It is important that our programs and ministries remain inclusive so that young people who do not have access to technology do not feel left out. Whilst it is important for us to remain in touch with young people through technology, we need to keep in mind the digital divide and *continue to provide ministries accessible to young people who are excluded from access to ICTs*.

## SUMMARY

Technology provides exciting new fields for ministry. Given that we need to remain current, relevant and up to date with young people and youth culture, we must be deliberate in pursuing avenues for ministry through technology. The rapid appropriation of technology by young people means that technology will become progressively more significant for young people's lives in the future. We therefore need to become increasingly technologically confident and harness ICTs in our service delivery.

## REFERENCES

- Australian Broadcasting Authority, 2001, *Australian Families and Internet Use*, Australian Broadcasting Authority. Accessed online (22-05-01) at [www.aba.gov.au](http://www.aba.gov.au)
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, *2001 Census Basic Community Profile and Snapshot – Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Berdichevsky, K. 2003, 'Young people's access to technology', in J. Arvanitakis (ed), *Highly Affected, Rarely Considered: The International Youth Parliament Commission's Report on the Impacts of Globalisation on Young People*, International Youth Parliament Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, Surry Hills.
- Burton, L. 1999, *What are Australian Youth Viewing, Reading and Listening To? A Review of the Literature and Studies Pertaining to the Media Use of Young People*, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.
- Carroll, J., Howard, S., Vetere, F., Peck, J. & Murphy, J. 2001, *Identity, Power and Fragmentation in Cyberspace: Technology Appropriation by Young People*, Department of Information Systems, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.
- Catholic News, 2001, *Mobile Phones used to Pray The Lord's Prayer*, Catholic News. Accessed online at [www.cathtelecom.com/news/102/18/php](http://www.cathtelecom.com/news/102/18/php)
- Flood, M. & Hamilton, C. 2003, *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the Extent of Exposure and Likely Effects*, The Australia Institute, Canberra.
- Hillier, L., Kurdas, C. & Horsley, P. 2001, *The Internet as a Safety Net for Same-Sex Attracted Young People*, Australian Research Centre In Sex, Health and Society, Melbourne.
- Larson, R. W. 2002, 'Globalisation, societal change, and new technologies: what they mean for the future of adolescence', *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, vol. 12, no.1, pp.1-30.
- Lenhart, A., Rainie, L. & Lewis, O. 2001, *Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and The Internet's Impact On Friendships and Family Relationships*, The Pew Internet and American Life Project. Accessed online (20-06-01) at [www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP\\_Teens\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Teens_Report.pdf)
- Ling, Rich, 2000, "'We will be reached": the use of mobile telephony among Norwegian youth', *Information Technology and People*, vol.13, no.2, pp.102-113.
- McKenzie, N. 2003, 'Level of teenage debt rings alarm bells', *The World Today*, ABC Online, 1/8/03. Accessed online (19-08-03) at [www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s915423.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s915423.htm)
- Meredyth, D., Russell, N., Blackwood, L., Thomas, J. & Wise, P. 1999, *Real time: Computers, Change and Schooling*, Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- Mobile Youth, 2003, *Text Messaging Replaces Cigarettes as New Addiction*, Mobile Youth. Accessed online (29-07-03) at [www.mobileyouth.org](http://www.mobileyouth.org).
- Victorian Parenting Centre. 2002, *Mobile Phones and Your Child*, Victoria Department of Human Services, Melbourne. Accessed online at [www.vicparenting.com.au](http://www.vicparenting.com.au)
- Wolak, J. Mitchell, K. & Finkelhor, D. 2003, 'Escaping or connecting? Characteristics of youth who form close online relationships', *Journal of Adolescence*, vol.26, no.1, pp.105-119.

# REVOLVE

Revolve is a quarterly document that provides an update on the current trends and issues pertinent to young people in Australia. Revolve provides an interpretation as to what the research means for YFC and Christian youth workers, which incorporates recommendations about how we can do our ministry and mission better. Revolve is a means by which we can be attuned to the issues and needs of Australia's young people so as to better meet and respond to them.

REVOLVE is an initiative of...



PRODUCED BY:

YFC Australia MARKETING DEPARTMENT

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTRE

PO Box 629 BOX HILL, VIC 3128

PH: 03 9890 2100

FAX: 03 9890 2177