Web sites fail to fill our interpersonal space

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(Center Valley, PA) -- Philosophers of old theorized that “nature abhors a vacuum.” Young people today seem to agree, as they seek to fill the void of social space with electronic communications. Through online chat rooms, personal blogs, and a variety of web shots, the domain of one’s life is no longer just my space. It’s fast becoming yours and ours and the whole world’s, too.

Last month, MySpace.com surpassed Yahoo and Google as the most visited web site in the United States. With 92 million users, twenty percent of whom are minors, it dominates the field of social networking. With a sale price of $580 million a year ago, it reckons to be a forceful presence in emerging media. With a world wide reach, it promises a virtually unlimited marketplace to advertisers and purveyors of all kinds of information.

Responding to this new and powerful presence, parents fear its insidious potential; in their never-ending quest to exercise vigilance over their children’s social habits, online diaries represent a new danger they cannot fully control, even with advances in computer security. Lawmakers seek to help and propose legislation to limit access to such sites, especially in schools and public libraries; but governmental protection can never adequately substitute for parental oversight, nor can legislation sufficiently replace common sense.

Why, then, do young people feel compelled to post information about themselves for all the world to see? What drives the apparent need to share their profiles and pictures with anyone and everyone?

Having raised these questions with university students, the most common answer I’ve received is: “why not?” I doubt this answer reflects their appreciation of Plato’s philosophy that there should be no secrets among people in a civilized society! But I do think it discloses a significant shift in our cultural understanding of interpersonal relations.

In the past, personal space was something to be guarded or protected. To invade another’s space meant getting too close, crossing a boundary between you and me that actually curtailed communication. To
be in someone’s face was rude, to say the least, and even threatening in some respect.

But now, through the marvels of digital imaging, faces, and even other body parts, become immediately present to anyone with a user account and password. Personal profiles are posted for friends to keep in touch with one another; but predators can blog, too, as they troll for victims or search for identities to steal. Photographs taken by young users reveal meaningful events in their lives; but employers view those snapshots, too, and an unflattering image now can lead to unemployment.

To adopt the world wide web as a popular place for social networking is not merely a functional tool for a new generation; it also offers an instructive metaphor with regard to the cultural shift affecting human relationships. The thin threads of a web suggest the superficiality of current interpersonal communication. Consider the recent study that reports a lessening of close personal friendships among people in our increasingly electronic world. And the tangle a web creates offers an all too accurate picture of the unintended or even malicious connections that online sharing can produce.

No one can rightfully deny the great advances made possible by current informational technologies. Computers give easier access to information and timelier conveyance of news. But the computerization of our lives also risks turning people into mere data and rendering them virtually anonymous. What is unique and particular about who we are can hardly be captured in a web posting.

Still, young people legitimately crave attention. They seek to find a place in the world they can call their own. What they have not yet mastered, and what social networking can never replicate, is the wonderful mystery of their own personal identity and the joyful interchange that takes place when actual lives, not just factual information, are shared through a living encounter with another. To quote the insight of the late John Paul II, the tools of computer technology increase the facility of communications, but “they above all do not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, between heart and heart, and which should characterize any communication at the service of solidarity and love.”

MySpace is now the place of the next generation. It no doubt helps to keep young people in touch with each other across time and place. But no amount of bytes and pixels will fill the vacuum of interpersonal relationships which all people long to fill in their lives. For that, only real, not virtual, friendship will suffice.

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