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### Reports from Inside the Wall: Rec Tech: A Report from Inside

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# REC TECH: A REPORT FROM INSIDE

By Andrew Ivers

**H**ello. My name is Andrew and I'm a 21-year-old student who just graduated from a university in a mid-western city and am heading to a university in an east-coast city this fall to further postpone being swallowed up by the American workforce.

I've been asked to give something of a review of my generation's recreational habits, specifically those enabled by new technologies. Along the way I'm supposed to explore the ways in which the youth of this country are disconnected from the rest of the polity.

Let me first give you an idea of my position on the digital landscape.

There are hundreds of songs stored on my laptop's hard drive, but I didn't download them there. I copied (or "ripped") them from albums—or, more recently, recorded them from vinyls. I e-mail my friends, teachers and co-workers all the time, but I also love to write them letters. And at school, with the plethora of Ethernet connections, I'm often logged on to one or another instant messenger service and kill a good hour or two a day tooling around the internet—doing everything from reading hard news to padding out the "Favorite Movies" category of my Facebook profile.

If I had to guess, I'd put myself

just a little behind the curve. I usually know all about new fads when they come out but it takes me a good year or so to get into the ones that stick around. In other words, if they gain any purchase with my friends, I'll usually check them out.

So, am I disconnected? Yes—but not any more than I would be were I born 30 years ago earlier than I was. Or, for that matter, 100 years earlier.

Sure, I can screen my phone calls a little better than my parents could when they were my age, but I can also search the O.E.D. faster while writing an English paper and making a copy of the new R.E.M. album for my classmate.

I can reunite with George Washington by reading his Farewell Address on a university Web site (which I did recently, looking for a quote from a book that I had left at home) and e-mail it to a high-school friend who might be interested in it by finding his address on his Facebook profile.

My question, I guess, is from whom are we supposedly disconnected?

I've read the same stories about kids cruising the internet instead of taking notes in lecture; heard from the teachers themselves the stories about students e-mailing them with questions that require lengthy, in-person responses; seen the sites where academic papers are sold like mere commodities.

## *From whom are we disconnected?*

I've seen it all. And to me it's not a matter of a generational gap so much as a maturity gap.

The first time that I asked a girl out on a date, I did it using instant messenger. Needless to say, this was a terrible idea. Given how young and uncertain I was, the conversation that followed would have been difficult enough to conduct in person, but it was even more impossible to know what was really being said because I had no facial expressions, bodily gestures or vocal intonations to rely upon. To this day, the conversation is a mystery to me; with only the memory of words on a screen—no colors, odors, sounds or location—it sometimes seems as if the conversation never even took place.

The experience taught me that we communicate with each other in many different ways, not just with words. It also enhanced my skepticism of the media that funnel colors and sounds and words into our lives each day. I'm not categorically opposed to computers and TVs—not to mention canvas, film and paper—but I am slightly cautious around them, if only because they are sometimes so much easier to deal with than our fellow humans. Our fellow humans, of course, being the most thrilling and infuriating creatures in this world. Our fellow humans, of

course, being our greatest source of hope and the greatest challenge to our unconditional love.

I think that often when technology seems to have failed us, we have merely misused it. We forget that all of these smart, little gadgets are merely tools that can be easily abused.

When we are not careful, we begin to think that the images on TV are the real world (when, in fact, they are small, square-shaped portions of it), that the pictures and quotes on our friends' profiles are actually our friends (when, in fact, they are mere bits and pieces of their public propaganda).

My hope—and the hope of our Jesuit universities—is that we are able to train ourselves to be more aware of our environment, to listen to it, engage it, so that we might better understand each other and argue with one another rather than shoot one another. (This, by the way, is a life-long process.)

So, are my peers and I more or less capable of achieving this understanding? Or is it just about as hard as it's always been?

My guess is that keeping friends is just as hard as it was for my parents and grandparents. It might be a little easier for us to make friends, given that we can research the interests of total strangers using online profiles, the most prominent of which among college students is Facebook. (As a journalist, though, I've always had fun doing it the old fashioned way as well: by sniffing out mutual friends.)

All you need is a university e-mail address and you can create a Facebook profile listing a variety of information about you—everything from your favorite books and music to your cell phone and dorm room numbers, if you're so bold.

What's interesting to me about Facebook is the way in which priva-

cy scares have forced its administrators to offer more and more ways for users to restrict access to their profiles. In fact, it's now possible for me to hand-pick (by hand-picking my friends on the site, that is) who is able to see my profile.

**T**his has created an environment where students don't so much meet new friends as play with their old ones. Usually my friends and I Facebook (yes, it's a verb now) to kill time we should be spending on homework, not meet new people. We entertain each other by posting ridiculous pictures in place of our mugs and leaving inside jokes on each other's walls.

In short, it's a way for us to catch little snippets of our friends—and keep in touch with those who have moved to different cities or are studying in foreign countries—without taking the time to meet up with them.

I can't speak for all of my peers, but I know that all of my friends know that these games are not replacements for friendship. If anything, they're merely preservers. Nothing is as satisfying as a hug or a handshake; nothing as exciting as inducing a laughing fit; nothing as fulfilling as seeing your friend's head nod slowly in quiet approval as he listens to the new CD you made for him—or seeing him jump out of his seat in disagreement!

If there is one problem we face that's unique to our time, I'd say it's that we can get too much of our friends. The college campus ensures a rather tight community to begin with. Generations of students before us have dealt with obnoxious neighbors and noisy parties. Outside of



Students studying at Regis University.

## Reports from Inside the Wall

your residence building, you see your friends at work, meals, on the quadrangles and, of course, in class. Add to this a cell phone in your pocket, a wireless laptop in your bag and internet access in every building on campus and you begin to get oversaturated with information about your friends.

In this sense, we're overloaded with human contact, not deficient in it. Is it surprising, then, that we sometimes prefer to drop an e-mail rather than sit down for a chat, to send a text message rather than answer the phone or to present ourselves through an electronic advertisement that we can control rather than a free-wheeling interview?

No, it's not surprising, but that doesn't get us off the hook. We all need places where we can hide when we're feeling overwhelmed. If it was the library and the movie house for earlier generations, it's the internet (as well as those other places) for mine. But the challenge remains the same: to use those tools but not abuse them.

Young writers are always eager to peddle their generation as tragically doomed just for a chance to distinguish themselves from their predecessors. (Think of Hemingway's Jake Barnes or the opening report of

*It's not a generation gap. It's a maturity gap.*

Ginsberg's *Howl*: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness."). It doesn't surprise me, then, that my own peers have cast us as hopelessly disconnected. One young



On the campus at Seattle University.

woman writing in *The New York Times*' Style section a few weeks ago seemed to pride herself on her social laziness, saying,

I'm 24 years old, have a good job, friends. But like many of my generation, I consistently trade actual human contact for the more reliable emotional high of smiles on MySpace, winks on Match.com and pokes on Facebook... I prefer, in short, a world cloaked in virtual intimacy. It may be electronic, but it is intimacy nevertheless. Besides, eye contact isn't all it's cracked up to be and facial expressions can be so hard to control.

She's right, of course, that it's harder to speak face to face with someone rather than through written messages, but growing up is about realizing that slogging through difficulty yields a greater reward than

skipping through mediocrity.

E-mailing or IMing with a friend in China is admittedly easier than writing him letters or talking on the phone. That's not the challenge. The challenge is when he's across the street or down the hall and you're tempted just to look at his newest Facebook pictures rather than drop by for a chat.

It's easy to get lost in this virtual world and reduce your friends to hyperlinks. But eventually those of us who are honest with ourselves begin to sense the absence of laughter and touch, and we crave it again and break out of our virtual cloisters.

A friend of Saint Louis University's late humanities professor Walter J. Ong, S.J. said at a conference last year that every time Ong got a

message from a friend he would reply promptly with a phone call. That a middle-aged man would single out an elderly man for such an admirable practice tells me that all of us, regardless of our age, struggle to give our fellow humans the attention that they deserve. I'm encouraged, though, when I think of my friends, and the way that they value their time together—even when they're just chatting over drinks or lounging around the office, scrapping over politics and putting off their deadlines.

They inspire me, everyday, to savor every ray of friendship that shines on me, even if it's a Facebook poke rather than a pat on the back. ■

*Andrew Ivers is a recent graduate from St. Louis University.*