The Virtual Vendetta: A Closer Look at Adolescents and the Internet

Summary:

Brent Staples’ *New York Times* editorial “What Adolescents Miss When We Let Them Grow Up in Cyberspace” discusses the apparent social drawbacks that result from the new-age of isolated technological identities and relationships. Staples uses a personal anecdote to juxtapose past methods of courtship to modern-day ones, deriving the idea that teenagers are no longer expected to partake in social rituals, which previously guided them into adulthood. He further compares the concepts of real relationships and virtual ones, explaining a sort of “replacement” which occurs as more time is spent frequenting the web and less with valuable friends and family. He ultimately concludes that the pseudo-identities which teenagers adopt online serve as coping mechanisms for the emotionally-writhing adolescent mind, where the fear of physical rejection and access to what they believe to be Utopian persona have ultimately driven the younger generations to a deeper electronic inevitabilities such as loneliness and depression.

Response:

In a world where nine-year-olds are given cell phones and social hierarchy is determined by Twitter followers, physically interacting with peers and colleagues has slowly become an item of frivolity. Waving to acquaintances in a hallway is not only unexpected, but deemed strange as it rarely occurs. As individuals constantly become more cautious and aware of their fleshly mannerisms, they have simultaneously become more revealing and open than ever when it comes to their online communications. And, though a person can very easily become aware of someone’s favorite bands, sports teams, and movies without even so much as a conversation, society’s overall ability to gauge behaviors and emotions has plummeted. So truly, just how close is the access to a person when their only evidence of identity is from a URL address?

The very term “friend,” as defined by Facebook standards, has been belittled to the click of a mouse. According to Cameron Marlow’s article “Maintained Relationships on Facebook” located on its ostensible site, the average number of “friends” of a given user is 120 (though these numbers have assuredly risen with increased activity since the article’s publication). And, yet as a person’s apparent number of friends is always increasing, mental illnesses reporting feelings of loneliness and distrust are consequently on the rise. In fact, a study conducted by the University of Leeds, England, which surveyed over one thousand internet users 18 to 51, revealed a direct positive correlation between an individual’s time spent online and their likelihood of depression and addiction. (“Link between surfing web and depression, study claims,” *The Telegraph*)

Brent Staples’ opening anecdote about meeting his high school interest’s father seems chillingly reminiscent of a black and white episode of *Father Knows Best* and a time so foreign to our modern-day minds. (“What Adolescents Miss When We Let Them Grow Up in Cyberspace,” *The New York Times*) The throat quivering question of “going steady” has since been reduced to a newsfeed notification of changed relationship status. But it is the actual relationships themselves which prove the most artificial. Dinner and a movie is no longer a first date, but a mere follow-up to the prerequisite of text messages and “retweets,” a feat which is often never reached. Individuals now fabricate companions based on overly-saturated profile pictures, never discovering more personal common interests or beliefs. Such deficiencies in relationship-building have undoubtedly transitioned into premature sexual encounters, marriages, and divorces as teenagers are led to believe that the speed at which their significant other texts them back is indicative of true love.

A misconstrued classification of trust and knowledge has deceived individuals into believing that these virtual relationships which they hold so sacred are up to par with their physical ones. One week of casual technological conversation constitutes friendship, but ten minutes of acknowledging the person sitting adjacent to you in the doctor’s waiting room is simply uncomfortable. While approaching strangers seems to be a risk worth avoiding, attaching a cell phone number to a social profile is hardly questioned. The degree with which individuals allow others into their lives is so warped by the gray area of the Internet that often genuine friends are passed up at the prospect of online infamy.

But these things are, in their most basic form, intangible and insubstantial. Just how well can you know 120 people? How often is an “LOL” backed by an authentic laugh, or a “<3” the result of true butterflies? And, is it possible that our relationship statuses might be far less “complicated” if they were verbally discussed? These artificial rituals are a swift escape from the pains of rejection and embarrassment, sure, but if these negative emotions are never achieved, how can one truly affirm the positives either? As adolescents struggle to balance protection from denial and formulation of adult relationships, one undoubtedly suffers. In this case, the absence of certain rites of passage as discussed by Staples prevents developmental and psychological growth.

But it seems that teenagers miss out on far more than emotional and physical experience when they subject themselves to a virtual lifestyle. They similarly resign the opportunities to obtain information and formulate their own opinions regarding issues of politics and consumerism. The Internet has presented those wishing to sell themselves or something else a whole new medium of influence, one which can exist undisputed. Teenagers are no longer required the process of extensive research or making logical connections, but rather are provided them in seconds. The quality of the information itself is further warped by blogging and the ever-popular Wikipedia, where facts can be posted at will without any requirement of evidential backing.

It all feeds in to the idea that online activities teach individual to merely accept. Accept the terms and conditions, accept the friend request, and accept the faulty advertising. It is a culture bred of blind faith—faith in a machine—to maintain its relationships, to shield it from pain, and to give it life’s answers. But in a world where we seek lifeless wires for support, these things simply do not compute.