

Growing Up Digital

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Cell phones, iPods, laptops, digital cameras...we are living in the digital age. The age of instant gratification. Hear a song on the radio and like it? Just download it from iTunes or other services right to your cell phone. Don't feel like driving to Blockbuster to rent a movie? Just order it on-demand from your cable company, or download it to your Xbox, or PC from Amazon.com, iTunes or Netflix. Some even get it for free through peer-to-peer torrents (but this is the illegal way to get it).

Living with such convenience and easy access to digital content has changed our behaviour, created new business models (and crushed old ones), and opened up new ways to communicate with anyone around the world.

So with this in mind, the idea for this article came to me the other day when visiting the family cottage up north. No cell phone coverage meant no texting, email or Internet access on my iPhone. In other words, no access to this endless supply of content and definitely no contact with the civilized world (there is no electricity or telephone service at the cottage).

Suddenly I was faced with the prospect of not being able to check Facebook, upload photos, or see what my friends were up to. But is this really a bad thing? It made me think about what it was like before the Internet and other technology so common today.

As a 30-something "young" professional, I still remember when the web and email were shiny and new – still at University (for my first degree) I remember being provided an email address, and logging into the Internet (world wide web to be exact – the Internet is just the network behind it) in the computer lab to see what this was all about. Not very impressive stuff in the mid-90's and I don't think anyone realized how far we would come in such a short time.

But kids and teens today take the Internet, email, texting, digital music and YouTube videos for granted. They have grown up in the digital age, and it is truly a part of their being.

If the thought of having no cell phone or Internet access for a few days unnerved me, I could just imagine what it would mean to today's youth.

My niece is part of "Generation Z" or the "iGeneration" (born mid-90s - 2000s), and just starting high school this fall. I know that she has embraced technology. She's had a digital camera since she was seven or eight, is attached to her iPod, got a laptop this year, and I think she has already had more cell phones than me!

When she's over for dinner, it's hard to say a few words without her phone buzzing away with a new text message. It annoys my parents to no end, but the thing is I get it.

I get that kids today are growing up with instant access to information, and instant communication through texting, instant messaging and Facebooking. I envy them in a way, but I sometimes wonder if all this technology makes things too easy, makes us too connected and makes our relationships too impersonal.

Why call someone when we can just text? Why ask someone on a date in person when you can send them a message on Facebook? Why research a topic at the library for a school essay when we can just Google it?

I remember writing papers in high school using books and encyclopaedias. Now today most kids will just look it up on the Internet. With all that information at their fingertips is it any wonder that plagiarism is on the rise in high schools, colleges and universities? Probably not all of it is intentional – they just don't know any better. According to a New York Times study, most students don't consider "copy and pasting" from Internet sources, without proper citation, as cheating.

Our world is changing and the older generations are just trying to keep up. If I wasn't such a tech junkie I might be in the same boat. We've come a long way since my first Atari computer, Sony Walkman, and camera with actual film!

Today we can shop, communicate, download movies and songs, share photos and learn about almost any topic on the Internet. We can hold tens of thousands of songs in our pocket. We can watch TV on our cell phones, and download movies right to our smartphones.

Technology is both fascinating, and life altering. Good and bad. Today's kids are the first generation where technology is widely used and accepted by both the parents and kids. Nothing will stop the stampede of technological progress, our evolving way of life. Let's just hope we don't get too caught up in it, and lose sight of the important things in life – our relationships with family, friends and loved ones. Because technology still can't replace that.

So looking back now at my weekend at the cottage. Being disconnected from the outside world, and spending quality time with the family wasn't such a bad thing after all. Sometimes it's a good thing to drop the techno gadgets and get back to basics for a while – if anything just to clear your head and relax.

I'll try to remember that next time.