

# Think Before You Post: Adapting to a Changing Technological Environment

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*I'm tired of hearing old people (half my age, even) moaning about changes in the standards and behaviour of younger people. We have a responsibility to our youngsters to help them avoid obvious pitfalls in the use of communications technology.*

In February 2013, an 18 year-old online gaming enthusiast called Justin Carter responded to insulting remarks in a Facebook posting that questioned his sanity. He responded, "Oh yeah, I'm real messed up in the head, I'm going to go shoot up a school full of kids and eat their still, beating hearts. LOL JK"

Another Facebook user reported Carter to local police in his home town in Texas. Local police arrested him for "making a terroristic threat" and locked him up from February 14 until March 13, which is when he was first questioned about his comment. After posting a request for support < <https://www.change.org/petitions/release-my-son-justin-carter-being-prosecuted-for-a-facebook-comment> > with the whole story and updates, his family has succeeded in having the young man released on bail (thanks to an anonymous donor of 10% of the \$500,000 bond) < [http://www.readthehorn.com/blogs/talking\\_heads/81043/op\\_ed\\_protect\\_our\\_freedom\\_free\\_justin\\_carter](http://www.readthehorn.com/blogs/talking_heads/81043/op_ed_protect_our_freedom_free_justin_carter) >.

As of this writing in July 2013, Carter is still due to be prosecuted. A search on his name using any Web search engine brings up a flood of hits.

I don't want to discuss the specifics of Carter's comments; there's plenty of thought-provoking commentary online already. What strikes me is the need to adapt our cultural norms to the reality of today's social networking.

As I have written elsewhere, < [http://www.mekabay.com/ethics/totem\\_taboo\\_cyber.pdf](http://www.mekabay.com/ethics/totem_taboo_cyber.pdf) > we need to integrate cyberspace into our moral universe – and that applies in particular to helping children learn what are new rules for older adults but should be norms for children and young adults. < <http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/2010/060710sec1.html> >

In the Parkerian Hexad, < [http://www.mekabay.com/overviews/hexad\\_ppt.zip](http://www.mekabay.com/overviews/hexad_ppt.zip) > the concept of *control* refers to how information *can* be shared, modified, sequestered or destroyed. The example I've used for years to distinguish between control and *confidentiality* is why we instantly recognize that if someone steals your new credit card in its sealed envelope from your mailbox – but doesn't open the envelope – they have not violated confidentiality. They still don't know your credit-card number. However, they *do* have the *ability* to do anything they want with your credit card. They can see it if they open the envelope, sell the number to the Russian Business Network, < <http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/sec/2011/032811sec1.html> > or cut it up and throw away the pieces. They *control* the information.

Children must be taught that anything they put online is out of their control – forever. Not only

are there archives of now-deleted Webpages,< <http://archive.org/web/web.php> > but anyone can copy text, save pictures, or keep a screenshot of whatever has been emailed or posted online. Once digital information has been made accessible to others, the original owners can do nothing in practice to stop its spread.

Sexting,< <http://www.networkworld.com/newsletters/sec/2011/072511sec2.html> > or sending pornography (even child pornography) by the Short Message Service (SMS) to mobile devices, has led to embarrassment, humiliation, bullying (sometimes even unto suicide) and prosecutions for violations of child-pornography laws. If parents and teachers accept that teaching children to keep (most of) their clothes on in public (apologists to nudists – no offense intended), it seems sensible to expand the training (OK, indoctrination) to include not sending pictures of one's naked self to anyone else – at least, not until the age of legal majority.

Yes, the same could be said of conversations in the playground and papers left in a room at home – but most children don't use digital recorders and cameras as a matter of course (yet – just wait until children start wearing Google Glasses< <http://www.google.com/glass/start/> > and future equivalents). We have to adapt to the reality of how computing and mobile communications have become central to young people's interactions.< [http://www.ted.com/talks/john\\_mcwhorter\\_txtng\\_is\\_killing\\_language\\_jk.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk.html) >

So instead of futilely bemoaning changes in cultural styles of communication as if anything younger people do must inherently be wrong,< <http://ideas.time.com/2013/04/25/is-texting-killing-the-english-language/> > we need collectively to adapt to reality (REALITY TRUMPS THEORY). Starting in infancy, children need to be taught over and over, in every possible way, to use their communications technology well and safely. Elementary schools – kindergarten – should be integrating cyberspace into the curriculum. Middle and high schools would do well to include explicit discussions about bizarre behaviour such as posting terroristic jokes on social networks and sending auto-pornographic photos to other teenagers (remember, the frontal lobes, responsible for rationality, are underdeveloped until the late teens or early twenties< [http://www.hhs.gov/opa/familylife/tech\\_assistance/etraining/adolescent\\_brain/Development/prefrontal\\_cortex/](http://www.hhs.gov/opa/familylife/tech_assistance/etraining/adolescent_brain/Development/prefrontal_cortex/) >). Colleges and universities must expand their ethics training to cope with the realities of today's technological and social environments.

Let's get on with it, folks: we've *got* to help youngsters learn how to be safe online.

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