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## Civility in the networked age

**Howard County's Choose Civility program explores the generational divide in how we connect with one another**

By Valerie J. Gross

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How many times per day do you check email and texts? How quickly do you expect a response? What about Facebook and Twitter?

In an informal survey conducted by the Howard County Library System (HCLS) this summer, answers ranged from "500 times per day" to "never." It's likely no surprise that Millennials (18 to 30) checked the most frequently, while Baby Boomers and members of the Greatest Generation (those of us who are 50 years old and "better" — and who still send an occasional birthday card via snail mail) checked the least.

Teens represent the leading edge of connectivity. Their use of technology often signals future changes in the adult population. Those of us 50-plus will therefore likely continue to increase our total smartphone glances per day and may even eventually switch to Facebook birthday greetings.

Although technology clearly adds convenience to our daily routines, we may be fooling ourselves into thinking that the quality of our relationships with our work colleagues, friends and loved ones has improved. We would like to believe that our smartphones, with which many of us are now inextricably linked, strengthen our connections with others as we "like" Facebook postings and respond immediately to texts. Yet this many not always be the case.

To illustrate, picture the following restaurant scene. Two lunch companions sit across from each other eating lunch "together." Neither is talking (or eating for that matter). Neither looks at the other. Cocooned in their own texting worlds, their eyes focus downward on their iPhones.

I smile and shake my head, while my Millennial son, who finds nothing odd about this scene, may not even hear my typical Baby Boomer comment as he concentrates on responding to an incoming text himself.

For parents, social networking presents a similar conundrum: how much communication is too much? While texting and online chatting allow parents and children to stay constantly up to date, children also need to learn how to operate independently. Among parents who have a child

between the ages of 12 and 17, two-thirds use one or more social networking sites. In 2011, 80 percent of parent social media users whose children were also users of social media had friended their child on the sites. The increased ability of "helicopter parents" to hover over their children's every move via social media alters the development of these relationships.

The experiences of the various living generations differ vastly, which affect our points of view and thus our behaviors and relationships. For example, I can remember when television meant NBC, CBS and ABC, with all three off the air at midnight. My son knows only 24/7 access — to whatever he wants whenever he wants it. My world began without computers. My Millennial son was born into the MySpace world, which then moved to Facebook (which now, brace yourself, has 1.15 billion users).

Given the prevalence and immediacy of technology and social media, have our ideals of civil behavior changed? Does a generational divide separate those who live and breathe new technology from those who use it to a lesser extent, if at all?

Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Yelp, Vine, Instagram and Snapchat have certainly altered the nature of our relationships. Facebook can reconnect us with long-lost friends and family members, and grandparents benefit immensely from Skype to form bonds with distant grandchildren. So in these ways, the immediacy of technology has improved our relationships.

At the same time, we no longer invest as much time connecting with others in person. The loss here is that only face to face communication, and also phone calls to an extent, affords us the opportunity to interact optimally, allowing us to respond to a verbal pause, puzzled look, questioning tone of voice, or smiling eyes. Also, hugs are not yet possible on Skype.

Missing over the Internet, these nuances assist in clear communication, minimizing miscommunications. In addition, when we speak in someone's presence, we temper our language, which we might not feel compelled to do when tapping on a screen or keyboard.

Indeed, the complexities of rapidly changing technology and social media require constant adaptation, affecting how we inter-relate.

This intriguing topic is at the center of the Oct. 9 Choose Civility Symposium at HCLS. Entitled "OMG to AARP: Bridging the Multigenerational Divide," the symposium will explore all of the above with a panel of experts. We hope you can join us! For details, visit [ChooseCivility.org](http://ChooseCivility.org).

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