

THE PERILS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Technological advancement is certainly to be desired. However, as technology changes our lives in many positive ways, it also exposes us to risks that we never knew before and probably are not even entirely aware of right now.

The internet and the ease of access to internet connections is a perfect example. We can now get internet access for pennies a day and even enjoy broadband speeds at home or wirelessly in cafés and bookstores, sometimes even for free.

Research on the internet is faster, broader and more efficient than it ever was before. No more do we need to search through dusty tomes, or peering at tiny print on microfiche or microfilm to find a copy of a newspaper. We can now search libraries around the world electronically in seconds. If we are careful, we can even assure the accuracy of the information we collect this way by cross-referencing multiple sources.

Many people now subscribe to internet editions of newspapers in their communities and in other areas that pique their interest. Many receive their music, movies and all forms of communication through the internet. Some even go further by having everything available to them on their smart phones.

Lately these technological advances have even extended into the way we socialize and interact with each other. Just examine teens and young adults and you will see them texting away at each other, sometimes even when sitting in the same room together.

Social media like Twitter, Face Book, My Space and others have also allowed us to interact in ways we never experienced before and to broaden the universe of our “friends” to people we have never met and who we may never meet.

However, as society becomes more interconnected, these technological advances are also making it easier for the less scrupulous to take advantage of the technology for their own less than honest purposes. We have all heard of phishing, vishing, hackers and Nigerian scams. But it goes even further than that.

It used to be that a burglar would have to physically “case a job” by spying on the behavior of the people who lived in a house they wanted to break in. Now, with people keeping track of their whereabouts on Twitter, Face Book or other similar sites, a crook can just become a “friend” using a fake identity to know where his victim is and when he/she is away and the place is vacant and available. They may find out you just got a nice engagement ring, or bought a new HDTV, or that your dog died last week. This is all valuable information that makes their life of crime so much easier.

Some people even broadcast their holiday and vacation plans on their Twitter or Face Book account, or in their Email account’s response.

Just think of the people using the iPhone's Twittelator app to let their "friends" know their location at all times. Or the people who use Google Buzz on their iPhone, Windows Mobile or Google Android phones. This application broadcasts your location every time you send a post, unless you specifically turn it off. How many people do you think will use it without considering the consequences? Another similar application is Loopt, which works on most smart phones, except those running Windows Mobile.

The latest and weirdest of these technological advances is Loopt. This great technological advantage – and I am being sarcastic – helps anyone using it keep track of where his/her friends are located at all times using the GPS capabilities of their communication devices. It even provides interactive maps. While the idea is to help people engage each other and connect to places, events and each other just think of the bonanza it represents for the criminally inclined among us.

You may be thinking, "That's all scary, but I won't use any of those applications, so why should I worry?" I understand, but think about this: **Do your children – particularly your teenagers and young adults – take similar care?** Almost all teenagers and many pre-teens are now armed with cell phones and many of them carry smart phones, iPhones, Blackberrys and similar devices. Shouldn't you talk to them about safety and the dangers of unrestricted socializing on the internet and through cell phone messages?

By the way, if you want to be able to track your children and they carry a cell phone, there is a company called AccuTracking that can track their cell phones in real-time and identify where they are. Google Latitude can do the same.

Scary, isn't it?