

COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD

Why I draw the line at texting



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I am typically an early adopter of new technologies. In the early 1980s, I readily adapted to personal computers. Today, I frequently read blogs, download music, upload videos to YouTube, use social technologies such as Facebook, and routinely use educational technologies in my Hope College classes.

Although I skillfully use communication technologies, I resist one: texting. Why? Because texting establishes social barriers between people and can be unsafe when used carelessly.

I first encountered texting during a trip to Japan several years ago. As with many new communications technologies, Europe and Asia are often ahead of the United States in adoption. I was perplexed while sitting in a packed Tokyo train where passengers of all ages earnestly bent over toward their phone while texting. With fingers flying and buttons clicking, each person might as well have been sitting in an empty room.

Texting has been salient to me this fall at Hope. I am currently finishing a course, "Technology's Impact on Everyday Life," for Hope's first-year seminar program. My course examines how technologies, which are invented to meet human needs, also impact society.

My students anxiously awaited our recent unit on contemporary personal technologies such as cell phones, Facebook, Twitter and music downloading. A recent class examined how texting impacts our everyday lives and interpersonal relationships.

My students were not surprised by the national texting trends. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 36 percent of American teens text-message their friends every day. Teens living in households with an annual income under or above \$50,000 are equally likely to text-message, talk on a cell phones, send instant messages and e-mail and communicate on social networking sites.

My students expressed pet

peeves about certain uses of texting, such as breaking up with someone. We viewed a video by "netiquette" expert Nicole Beland, who offers tips for relationship texting. "Don't be rude or break bad news [by texting]," Beland advises. "In a hyper-connected culture, a bad reputation can spread fast."

Still, the students overwhelmingly described texting's social impact in positive terms. All said they frequently text friends and family instead of telephoning them. They cited convenience, immediate access and mobility as the technology's benefits.

Our discussion also revealed the flip side to these conveniences. After I shared my experience on the Tokyo train, one student suggested that perhaps public texting was a good thing. "It allows you to focus your attention on something," the student said, "and it's fast."

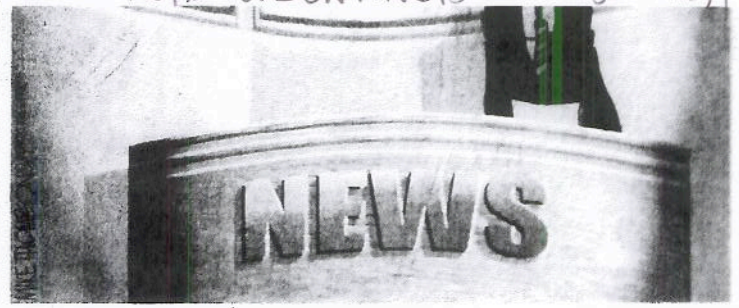
However, I often wonder if texting is altogether a good thing.

First, what information cues are lost when someone texts instead of calls? Receiving a telephone call is now almost akin to opening a handwritten letter. The textures of someone's voice remind me of handwriting, which is personally unique and carefully presented, a gift in today's online, text-driven world.

Secondly, texting has safety implications. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, nearly 50 percent of teens admit to texting while driving. In an astounding statistic, Car and Driver magazine reported in June that texters had slower reaction times than drunk drivers.

Sixteen states ban texting while driving. State Sen. Buzz Thomas, D-Detroit, proposed a Michigan texting ban in March. AAA is pushing for a nationwide ban by 2013.

All technologies have benefits and drawbacks. However, it is everyone's responsibility to use technologies such as texting in a thoughtful, respectful and responsible manner.



Forward in Afghanistan

President Obama should be commended for committing 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to root out al-Qaida and stabilize major portions of the country. I am far less certain about establishing a timetable, though the president did say it depended on conditions on the ground. This isn't like telling your college student he has so many months to stop partying and get his grades up or the tuition gets cut off. In this war, a timetable can only encourage the enemy to hang on until we depart.

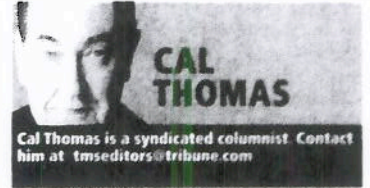
Mentioning the cost of the war is another caveat that ought to be less important than he made it. What was the cost of 9/11 in human and economic terms? What would be the cost of another 9/11, especially if it involved weapons of mass destruction? In such an instance, the argument would not be whether we spent too much, but whether we spent too little.

The president is likely to get more support for his decision from his critics on the right than his liberal supporters, who are still living under the misconception that we can stop wars by not fighting them. As the president said at West Point, we didn't attack al-Qaida; they attacked us.

Opinion polls, while volatile, continue to show that the public doesn't want to lose this war. According to a USA Today/Gallup Poll (Nov. 20-22), 60 percent of the public does not believe the United States made a mistake when it attacked al-Qaida in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001. Only 36 percent believe we did. According to a CBS News/New York Times Poll conducted in February 2009, 89 percent supported the war effort in October 2001. What is remarkable is that the support level has not declined further given America's preference for short conflicts.

There is a cautionary note in the polling. Only 30 percent in the USA Today/Gallup Poll think the war is going "moderately well." Forty-five percent believe it is going "moderately badly" and 21 percent think it is going "very badly." That is no doubt why the president laid down markers for the Afghan government to meet. But will it? Can it? We saw how long it took to train Iraqis to take over from U.S. forces. Afghanistan is not Iraq. It is far more complicated.

A CBS News Poll (Nov. 13-16) indicates support for the president's management of the war continues to decline. As recently as October, the president's approval-disapproval numbers were 42 percent and 34 percent. Last month's poll



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ON THE WEB

The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan has many similarities to the failed efforts of the Soviet Union 20 years ago — and many key differences. See holland-sentinel.com/opinion.

showed public approval had flipped with 43 percent disapproving of his handling of the war and only 38 percent approving of it. The surge could change that, as the Iraq surge changed President Bush's approval numbers.

The problem for the public and for political leaders is that there has never been a war like this one. We are making up the strategy as we go. Unlike our enemies, whose only focus is killing Americans, destroying our economy and imposing sharia law, we battle political correctness and the false notion that we can make terrorists like us by being nice to them. In fact, the only thing terrorists understand is power and resolve. They must be crushed, not accommodated, and not with kindness.

The failure of the Obama brand of diplomacy is on display in Iran. After several overtures to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and lots of speeches stressing diplomacy, Iran has announced plans not to dismantle its nuclear program, but to build 10 more nuclear facilities, ignoring U.N. resolutions and IAEA pleadings.

Democrats have a problem. Following 9/11 they supported the war, but when polls showed public approval declining, they criticized it in hopes of bringing down President Bush's approval numbers. The party's liberal wing is increasingly against the war, but now that President Obama has ordered more troops to Afghanistan than President Bush, the president and his party effectively "own" it. Which is too bad, because this war ought not to "belong" to one party or persuasion. It is America's war to win or lose. Americans of all political stripes should hope and pray the president's strategy works, not for any political benefit he might derive, but for America's sake.

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