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Don't Let Texting Get U :-)

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By Michael Gerson

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Regular readers of this column will know that I am suspicious of cyberspace innovations -- from [Facebook to MySpace](#) to [Second Life](#)-- that substitute the accumulation of "friends" for actual friendship and exhibitionism for genuine intimacy. So the related phenomenon of "texting" (a word officially recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary as of June 15, 2006, but still unknown to my spell-checker) would seem to deserve the harsh glare of conservative moral scrutiny.

Texting, for those stubborn few who still use their cellphones for talking, is a form of immediate, shorthand communication that has broken out among the young with the speed and resilience of acne. More than 1 billion text messages are exchanged in America each day -- and the parents of teenagers I know can be forgiven for imagining that this represents just their own cellphone bill.

The language of texting involves short, direct sentences; abbreviations such as "laff" for "laugh"; language puzzles such as "218" for "too late"; and something called emoticons such as ":-(#)" for "wearing braces." It's a social language, designed for brief, private communication. "POS," I'm told, means "parent over shoulder"; "gnblfy" is "got nothing but love for you." More disturbing, "TDTM" translates as "talk dirty to me."

As usual, this new form of language communicates the range of human experience. A poll of young Canadians found that 50 percent had flirted via text message and 25 percent approve of "text sex." At the other extreme, a new service allows prayers to be texted to Israel, which are then printed out and inserted into the Western Wall. I suspect that both these experiences lose something in the technological translation.

But the main controversy has come when texting collides with English instruction. Some trendy educational institutions have attempted to accommodate the phenomenon. In late 2006, the Scottish Qualifications Authority decreed that texting abbreviations would be accepted in school examinations. Prince Charles has disapprovingly noted, "It [has] been suggested in some quarters that people be asked to discuss the use of texting and instant messaging and whether such developments require a significant change to the teaching of English" -- demonstrating that his English might benefit from some brevity and directness.

Teachers I know are generally intolerant of the use of textisms, especially in exams and papers. They believe it undermines proper spelling and syntax. And as an opponent of most linguistic innovations since the King James Bible was first printed, I was initially inclined to agree.

But the (admittedly thin) research on this topic leads to different conclusions. A 2006 study by two professors at Coventry University in Britain found that 11-year-olds who used the most textisms were actually better at spelling and writing. A command of texting seems to indicate a broader facility for language. And these students seem to switch easily between text messaging and standard English.

Unfortunately for teachers, the research also suggests that many students who use texting in their schoolwork are disdainful of the alternative. They are intentionally showing disrespect -- as in, "I don't give a darn about your outdated rules of grammar and spelling, and you won't even understand my protest." Or incomprehensible abbreviations to that effect.

A teenager of my generation -- growing up in the 1970s and '80s -- might have wasted hours each night on the telephone. Now teens waste hours throughout the day tapping out thousands of words on tiny keyboards (much as a columnist does). The Internet, and texting in particular, has led to the return of writing. Not the elegant letter writing of Sullivan Ballou during the Civil War -- but writing nonetheless.

This form of communication has its drawbacks. The Internet, in all its forms, encourages the hasty expression of anger or amorousness -- the kind of words that are quickly regretted but can never be withdrawn. And texting does not expose children to the graceful subtleties of literary prose -- though it is hard to imagine that teenagers would be reading John Donne if they weren't writing to their friends.

But the rules of language -- a flexible, changing instrument of communication -- should not be confused with the changeless rules of morality. Challenging the dogmas of grammar and spelling -- if done consistently and broadly enough -- creates new dogmas, which are challenged in turn.

Noah Webster, of dictionary fame, is said to have criticized "even well-bred people and scholars for surrendering their right of private judgment to literary governors." With 1 billion texts a day, those governors have their hands full.

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