From the Principal

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Adjust the Frequency, But Listen to What is Playing

How many children does it take to tarnish the reputation of a school? Sadly, that is not the build up to the punchline of a joke. Sadder still, the answer is 'not many'. As a number of colleges across the State have discovered this past term. Despicable acts by a few students saw an unrelenting spotlight on a number of schools which were otherwise doing wonderful things for large numbers of young people, day in and day out. The repulsive behaviour certainly deserved condemnation and consequences were due. However, at times, I wondered whether the media and social media pile-on was proportionate. When the Premier and Prime Minister weigh-in with comments about a disciplinary incident in a school, a Principal is left with few options for balancing punishment with rehabilitation, and juggling individual rights against a duty to protect a school's standing in the community.

The day after one of the more egregious incidents, in which girls were ranked on a disgusting list by a handful of male students, I was having lunch with our own College Captains. "Convince me" I challenged them, "why that couldn't happen at St Leonard's?" Hearteningly, their answers were immediate and earnest. "Not only would our girls not stand for it, our boys wouldn't either", they replied. "Mixed friendship groups here are too close for anybody to think like that." Plus "There's so many ways to report concerns here – kids would call it out straight away". Reassuring, but just to press the point, all of the College and House Captains then took it upon themselves to stand shoulder-to-shoulder at assemblies over the following weeks, delivering powerful speeches to Senior and Middle School students, making a public stand against misogyny and all forms of disrespect.

Whilst the wider public debate was certainly helpful in prompting conversation about the scourge of sexist behaviour that still plagues parts of our society, it often got side tracked by laments about the supposed evils of digital technology. There is no doubt that social media and the emergence of AI apps played a part in those high-profile school cases, but I continue to argue that technology is usually the vehicle, not the driver. Therefore, banning it doesn't address the underlying problem of poor behaviour. To tackle that, we need to separate the motive from the mechanism.

It was ever thus. In 370BC, scholars believed that a new-fangled thing called "writing" was making people stupid (ironically, we know this today because their views were written down). In 1888, the new trend of reading things called "novels" was called a "mischief" and likened to the perils of drinking. In the Fifties, society anguished over teenagers' addiction to the newfangled telephone. By the Seventies, "evidence" purported to show that watching television caused brain damage. Then computers arrived, and reputable educators were warning that teaching children to program them would create a "culture of psychopaths" for a "meagre job market" (that was in 1984, so maybe George Orwell was right?). The point being that human history is awash with examples of new technologies being catastrophised. Yet technology is neither intrinsically good nor bad. It is agnostic. In truth, most technologies are simply amplifiers of existing human behaviour. Texting can spread a bully's poison further, but it can equally broaden the reach of a Good Samaritan.

Fortunately, the College's response to emerging technologies is not governed by media hysteria. Instead, we are guided by research and evidence-based studies. Staff stay abreast of the latest research into the impact of digital technology, and our practices are guided by science, not scaremongering. For example, a seminal report in the highly-regarded scientific journal Nature recently detailed a meta-analysis of the impacts of a wide range of factors on adolescent mental health. When it came to digital technology use, they found only a fractionally negative association with a child's wellbeing. So small, in fact, that the consumption of potatoes rated as having an almost worse impact.

The door of scientific evidence swings both ways though. We are also quick to share with students the findings of a National Academy of Sciences study that confirmed that social media use is not, in and of itself, a strong predictor of life satisfaction across the adolescent population. Yet the Black Dog Institute's excellent webinar on research into teenage screen use evidenced the benefit of online apps in promoting positive peer connection, fostering emotional regulation, and offering easy access to communities, support, and information. To return to the analogy, technology is merely an amplifier. Turning it off doesn't make for a better musician. Dial it down by all means, but it is only by correcting the underlying poor playing that we achieve greater harmony.

Back to the root of the problem then. There is no place for misogyny in our society, just as there should be no tolerance for sexism, racism, or any other form of exclusion or abusive conduct. Identifying and challenging it must always be our mission. By "our" I mean both teachers and parents, because there was one other important element in the recent cases of misogyny and online abuse that was perhaps a little overlooked by the media scrutiny and public discourse last term. Namely, that most of the offending occurred outside of the schools that the students attended. Usually in the privacy of a young person's home or bedroom. The schools concerned copped the brunt of outrage for allowing a toxic culture to exist on their campus, yet the behaviours mainly emanated elsewhere.

Which is not to try and shift the blame; schools have a moral and legal responsibility to educate young people to be civil, respectful citizens. We also have a unique opportunity to do so, using their attendance on our campus to model inclusion and call-out unacceptable behaviours and ideologies. But parents and close family members have equal, if not greater influence. And that means accepting that difficult conversations sometimes need to be had. It is infinitely easier to complain about cell phones, or agonise over AI, than it is to sit a young man down and talk about pornography.

Indeed, pornography is a great example of how best to tackle issues that are exacerbated, but not caused, by technology. Firstly, there is no point in tiptoeing around the facts. Research clearly shows that viewing pornography is strongly associated with the sexual objectification of women. And a 2024 Australian study showed more than 52% of men and 32% of women had reported viewing pornography by age 14. Hence, it is an issue teachers and parents should confront early. We could blame the internet and portable digital devices for increasing that exposure, but does that address the underlying need for education about respect for women? Trying to introduce age verification technology for adult websites is laudable but, in reality, would be nearly impossible to police. Teenagers are hard-wired to be both curious and creative; they will ferret out ways around it. The same is true for recent calls to age-restrict social media accounts. Even the nation's e-Safety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, has said that she does not support the proposal because of the fear it may push children online in secret. What we must do, teachers and parents united, is be ready to talk about the content rather than the container.

The College Captains did a good job in reassuring me that misogyny and sexist attitudes are not prevalent at St Leonard's. However, it would be hubris to believe that we are immune. That is why, amidst the usual busyness of the past term, senior staff responded to the national media focus on other schools by redoubling our efforts to deliver programs to promote respectful relationships and the appropriate use of digital technologies when young people are in our care. As the holidays commence and parents have a little more time than usual to spend in their children's company, I would encourage seizing those moments in the same way. By all means, try and adjust the frequency of screen time. But also take the opportunity to discuss which of your child's beliefs and behaviours are being amplified by the technology they use. It is only by taking an interest in their online life that you can help to tone down discord and turn up virtue.

*Those interested in some of the research referenced above can find them here:
The Black Dog Institute Webinar (PDF Transcript)
Social Media Age Restrictions Article – Safety Commissioner Comments

Social Media Bans Articles
Education Matters Article 1
Education Matters Article 2
The Educator Online Article