

The net generation, unplugged

Technology and society: Is it really helpful to talk about a new generation of “digital natives” who have grown up with the internet?



Totally different from previous generations—or just younger?

THEY are variously known as the Net Generation, Millennials, Generation Y or Digital Natives. But whatever you call this group of young people—roughly, those born between 1980 and 2000—there is a widespread consensus among educators, marketers and policymakers that digital technologies have given rise to a new generation of students, consumers, and citizens who see the world in a different way. Growing up with the internet, it is argued, has transformed their approach to education, work and politics.

“Unlike those of us a shade older, this new generation didn’t have to relearn anything to live lives of digital immersion. They learned in digital the first time around,” declare John Palfrey and Urs Gasser of the Berkman Centre at Harvard Law School in their 2008 book, “Born Digital”, one of many recent tomes about digital natives. The authors argue that young people like to use new, digital ways to express themselves: shooting a YouTube video where their parents would have written an essay, for instance.

Anecdotes like this are used to back calls for education systems to be transformed in order to cater to these computer-savvy students, who differ fundamentally from earlier generations of students: professors should move their class discussions to Facebook, for example, where digital natives feel more comfortable. “Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach,” argues Marc Prensky in his book “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”, published in 2001. Management gurus, meanwhile, have weighed in to explain how employers should cope with this new generation’s preference for collaborative working rather than traditional command-and-control, and their need for constant feedback about themselves.

But does it really make sense to generalise about a whole generation in this way? Not everyone thinks it does. “This is essentially a wrong-headed argument that assumes that our kids have some special path to the witchcraft of ‘digital awareness’ and that they understand something that we, teachers, don’t—and we have to catch up with them,” says Siva Vaidhyanathan, who teaches media studies at University of Virginia.

Michael Wesch, who pioneered the use of new media in his cultural anthropology classes at Kansas State University, is also sceptical, saying that many of his incoming students have only a superficial familiarity with the digital tools that they use regularly, especially when it comes to the tools’ social and political potential. Only a small fraction of students may count as true

digital natives, in other words. The rest are no better or worse at using technology than the rest of the population.

Writing in the British Journal of Education Technology in 2008, a group of academics led by Sue Bennett of the University of Wollongong set out to debunk the whole idea of digital natives, arguing that there may be "as much variation within the digital native generation as between the generations". They caution that the idea of a new generation that learns in a different way might actually be counterproductive in education, because such sweeping generalisations "fail to recognise cognitive differences in young people of different ages, and variation within age groups". The young do not really have different kinds of brains that require new approaches to school and work, in short.

What about politics, and the idea that, thanks to the internet, digital natives will grow up to be more responsible citizens, using their technological expertise to campaign on social issues and exercise closer scrutiny over their governments? Examples abound, from Barack Obama's online campaign to activism on Twitter. A three-year study by the MacArthur Foundation found that spending time online is "essential for young people to pick up the social and technical skills they need to be competent citizens in the digital age". But discussions about "digital citizens" run into the same problems as those about digital natives: there may simply be too much economic, geographic, and demographic disparity within this group to make meaningful generalisations.

After all, not everyone born between 1980 and 2000 has access to digital technology: many in the developing world do not. It is true that the internet can provide an outlet for political expression for people living under repressive regimes. But those regimes are also likely to monitor the internet closely. And in some cases there is, in effect, a new social contract: do what you like online, as long as you steer clear of politics. Government-controlled internet-access providers in Belarus, for example, provide servers full of pirated material to keep their customers happy.

Activism or slacktivism?

There is also a feeling of superficiality about much online youth activism. Any teenager can choose to join a Facebook group supporting the opposition in Iran or the liberation of Tibet, but such engagement is likely to be shallow. A recent study by the Pew Research Center, an American think-tank, found that internet users aged 18-24 were the least likely of all age groups to e-mail a public official or make an online political donation. But when it came to using the web to share political news or join political causes on social networks, they were far ahead of everyone else. Rather than genuinely being more politically engaged, they may simply wish to broadcast their activism to their peers. As with the idea that digital natives learn and work in new ways, there may be less going on here than meets the eye.

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