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Generational Myth

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Not all young people are tech-savvy

Consider all the pundits, professors, and pop critics who have wrung their hands over the inadequacies of the so-called digital generation of young people filling our colleges and jobs. Then consider those commentators who celebrate the creative brilliance of digitally adept youth. To them all, I want to ask: Whom are you talking about? There is no such thing as a "digital generation."

In the introduction to his book *Print Is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age* (Macmillan) last year, Jeff Gomez posits that young Americans constitute a distinct generation that shares a sensibility: resistance to the charms of printed and bound books. Gomez, who has been a sales-and-marketing director for a number of global publishers, has written a trade book whose title and thesis demands that we ignore it. Alas, I could not.

"The needs of an entire generation of 'Digital Natives' — kids who have grown up with the Internet, and are accustomed to the entire world being only a mouse click away — are going unanswered by traditional print media like books, magazines, and newspapers," Gomez writes. "For this generation — which Googles rather than going to the library — print seems expensive, a bore, and a waste of time."

When I read that, I shuddered. I shook my head. I rolled my eyes. And I sighed. I have been hearing some version of the "kids today" or "this generation believes" argument for more than a dozen years of studying and teaching about digital culture and technology. As a professor, I am in the constant company of 18- to-23-year-olds. I have taught at both public and private universities, and I have to report that the levels of comfort with, understanding of, and dexterity with digital technology varies greatly within every class. Yet it has not changed in the aggregate in more than 10 years.

Every class has a handful of people with amazing skills and a large number who can't deal with computers at all. A few lack mobile phones. Many can't afford any gizmos and resent assignments that

demand digital work. Many use Facebook and MySpace because they are easy and fun, not because they are powerful (which, of course, they are not). And almost none know how to program or even code text with Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). Only a handful come to college with a sense of how the Internet fundamentally differs from the other major media platforms in daily life.

College students in America are not as "digital" as we might wish to pretend. And even at elite universities, many are not rich enough. All this mystical talk about a generational shift and all the claims that kids won't read books are just not true. Our students read books when books work for them (and when I tell them to). And they all (I mean all) tell me that they prefer the technology of the bound book to the PDF or Web page. What kids, like the rest of us, don't like is the price of books.

Of course they use Google, but not very well — just like my 75-year-old father. And they fill the campus libraries at all hours, just as Americans of all ages are using libraries in record numbers. (According to the American Library Association, visits to public libraries in the United States increased 61 percent from 1994 to 2004).

What do we miss when we pay attention only to the perceived digital prejudices of American college students? Most high-school graduates in the United States do not end up graduating from four-year universities with bachelor's degrees. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2007 only some 28 percent of adults 25 and older had completed bachelor's degrees or higher. Is it just college-educated Americans who are eligible for generational status?

Talk of a "digital generation" or people who are "born digital" willfully ignores the vast range of skills, knowledge, and experience of many segments of society. It ignores the needs and perspectives of those young people who are not socially or financially privileged. It presumes a level playing field and equal access to time, knowledge, skills, and technologies. The ethnic, national, gender, and class biases of any sort of generation talk are troubling. And they could not be more obvious than when discussing assumptions about digital media.

As Henry Jenkins, a media-studies professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote on his blog last year, "Talking about youth as digital natives implies that there is a world which these young people all share and a body of knowledge they have all

mastered, rather than seeing the online world as unfamiliar and uncertain for all of us." Such discussions, he said, also risk ignoring the different ways young people use digital tools, from listening to compact discs to blogging to posting clever videos on YouTube to buying stuff on eBay.

In reaction to Jenkins's post, Leslie Johnston, now at the Library of Congress, wrote on her blog, "I have worked with faculty in their 60s who saw something in being digital decades ago and have worked in that realm for years. I have worked with colleagues — librarians and faculty — in my own age group (I'm 44) who hate all technology with a passion and others who embrace it in all ways. I have worked with students at three different research universities who could not care less about being digital."

On my blog, *Sivacracy*, Elizabeth Losh, writing director of the humanities core course at the University of California at Irvine and author of the forthcoming *Virtualpolitik: An Electronic History of Government Media-Making in Time of War, Scandal, Disaster, Miscommunication, and Mistakes* (MIT Press, 2009), kept the online conversation going: "Unlike many in today's supposed 'digital generation,' we learned real programming skills — with punch cards in the beginning — from the time we were in elementary school. What passes for 'media literacy' now is often nothing more than teaching kids to make prepackaged PowerPoint presentations." Losh also pointed out that the supposed existence of a digital generation has had an impact on education, as distance-learning corporations with bells-and-whistles technology get public attention while traditional classroom teaching is ignored.

Once we assume that all young people love certain forms of interaction and hate others, we forge policies and design systems and devices that match those presumptions. By doing so, we either pander to some marketing cliché or force an otherwise diverse group of potential users into a one-size-fits-all system that might not meet their needs. Then, lo and behold, young people rush to adapt to those changes that we assumed all along that they wanted. More precisely, we take actions like rushing to digitize entire state-university library systems with an emphasis on speed and size rather than on quality and utility.

Ask any five people when Generation X started and ended. You will get five different answers. The borders of membership could not be more arbitrary. Talking as if all people born between 1964 and (pick a year after 1974) share some discernible, unifying traits or experiences is about as useful as saying that all Capricorns are the

same. Such talk is not based on any sociological or demographic definition of a generation; it's based on whatever topic is in question.

Invoking "generations" demands an exclusive focus on people of wealth and means, because they get to express their preferences (for music, clothes, technology, etc.) in ways that are easy to count. It tends to exclude immigrants and non-English-speaking Americans, not to mention those who live beyond the borders of the United States. And it excludes anyone on the margins of mainstream consumer or cultural behavior.

The baby boom was a real demographic event. But what baby boomers share is Medicare — or at least they will soon. That's pretty much the end of the list. America, even in the 1950s and 1960s, was too diverse a place for uniform assumptions to hold true. It's even more diverse now.

Historical phenomena such as the Vietnam War matter to entire populations in complicated ways. Vietnam affected almost everyone in America who was 18 to 25 at the time. But it affected everyone differently. Let's not pretend that the war was not traumatic to those older than 25. Those who served did not share the zeitgeist with those who resisted. Women and men experienced it differently. The poor tended to serve. The rich did not. Remember how many people assumed in 1972 that there was some great generational mood or attitude that would pull voters to George McGovern in the first election in which 18- to 20-year-olds could vote? Why don't we ask President McGovern how that turned out?

By focusing on wealthy, white, educated people, as journalists and pop-trend analysts tend to do, we miss out on the whole truth. Generation X and the Greatest Generation are just the stuff of book titles. And they are not even good books.

The strongest argument against the idea of generations was raised first by the 18th-century philosopher David Hume. People are constantly being born and dying, Hume noted. So political sensibilities (to cite one phenomenon often assigned to generations) tend not to be cleanly associated with a single cohort. They change gradually. That's why human history has so few revolutions. And when there are revolutions, they tend not to separate generations.

I realize that by puncturing the myth of generations, I am pitting myself against one of the giants of 20th-century social theory, Karl Mannheim. In his 1927 essay, "The Problem of Generations," Mannheim answered Hume by positing that generations are not

demographically determined, but historically. Big events forge common identities. And proximity to an experience matters more than birth year. In other words, a Mannheimian generation might exist among all people who breathed in the ash and dust of the Twin Towers in New York City in 2001. But it might exclude people of the same age who merely watched the event on television from a comfortable couch in Madison, Wis.

Nor, Mannheim wrote, is a generation like an association, in which one claims membership or allegiance. Generation is a fluid and messy social category, not unlike class, he argued. As with class, members don't always know they are members. Members of generations, like classes, share "a common location in the social and historical process," he wrote, that predisposes them to certain modes of thought and action. A generation is one element of a fuller theory of cultural cohesion, mutation, and transmission.

Mannheim was arguing for an eclectic model of social analysis, one that does not rely too heavily on positivist principles of precision and accountability. He also wanted to use the concept of generation to delineate a set of human traits that biology alone could not explain. Finally, he wanted to establish that one's intellectual position in society is influenced by much more than class position, as orthodox Marxism of the day insisted. Thus generations were important explanatory mechanisms in his "sociology of knowledge."

By trying to do all that work, Mannheim's generations quickly crumbled. Generations seemed only to exist within nations, not across them; continuity existed between and among age cohorts; diversity of thought existed among members of a generation. Even if Mannheim's generations might have existed as a stable social category, they no longer do. Germany, Hungary, and England in the 1920s were hardly as diverse and globalized as those countries are now.

None of this means that nothing changes. Nor that we should not study youth, even privileged subcultures of youth, and their particular needs and problems. History is not static. Demography matters. But today's young people — including college students — are just more complicated than an analysis of imaginary generations can ever reveal. There are far better ways to study and write about them and their interactions with digital technologies than our current punditry offers.

A short list of the best of those who are studying and writing about the effects of digital media on youth must include Eszter Hargittai, a sociologist and associate professor of communications studies at

Northwestern University, who has received a major grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to study digital communication and youth. In a recent paper in *Information, Communication & Society*, "The Participation Divide: Content Creation and Sharing in the Digital Age," Hargittai and Gina Walejko conclude that the habit of creating digital content and sharing it across digital platforms correlates with a person's identity traits. When asked in an interview in the May 2 issue of *The Chronicle* which demographic groups are less Web-savvy than others, Hargittai responded that women, students of Hispanic origin, African-American students, and students whose parents have lower levels of education tend to have less mastery of the inner workings of digital technology than other groups do.

Hargittai explained why we tend to overestimate the digital skills of young people: "I think the assumption is that if [digital technology] was available from a young age for them, then they can use it better. Also, the people who tend to comment about technology use tend to be either academics or journalists or techies, and these three groups tend to understand some of these new developments better than the average person. Ask your average 18-year-old: Does he know what RSS means? And he won't."

A 2007-8 fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, at Harvard University, and a doctoral candidate at the University of California at Berkeley, danah boyd, has done a series of in-depth qualitative studies of young people's use of digital communication. In her paper "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life," published in a volume edited by David Buckingham, *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (MIT Press, 2008), she has observed how digital spaces give young people a sense of autonomy and control that, for example, planned access and limited loitering spaces at shopping malls do not. She has also sparked an online conversation, however, by noting how the migration of some young people from MySpace to Facebook reflects a strong class component.

As Susan Herring urges in an insightful article, "Questioning the Generational Divide," also in the Buckingham volume, we should move our gaze from dazzling technologies and two-dimensional exotic beings — so-called "digital natives" — to young people themselves.

Even in her unfortunately titled yet sharp book, *Generation Digital: Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet* (MIT Press, 2007), the American University communications professor

Kathryn C. Montgomery has criticized the news media for characterizing "all young people in monolithic and simplistic terms, defining them almost exclusively on the basis of technology."

But Montgomery is not alone in selling a book about a generation while undermining belief in its existence. The most prominent scholarly project aimed at making sense of the effects of digitization on young people remains invested in the notion that they "constitute a distinct tribe": *Digital Natives*, conducted at the Berkman center by its former executive director, John Palfrey. In August, Palfrey and Urs Gasser gave us *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (Basic Books), which argues that kids today are fundamentally different from the rest of us because their default modes of interaction involve mixing and mashing digital files and exposing (and rewriting) themselves through online profiles and avatars. That assumption bolsters the policy positions that the investigators already embraced: that the law should allow young people to remix and share bits of culture, while helping them respect and manage privacy. The policy goals are laudable. And the research is interesting. But Palfrey and Gasser did not need to render young people exotic to make their points. The concept of "born digital" flattens out the needs and experiences of young people into a uniform wish list of policies that conveniently matches the agenda of digital enthusiasts and entrepreneurs of all ages. Indeed, it is interesting that Palfrey and Gasser deny that their subjects constitute a "generation," conceding in their introduction that they are describing only the challenges of privileged young people.

Most alarming, Mark Bauerlein, a professor of English at Emory University, has recently written a jeremiad against young people and their digital habits, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes our Future* (Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008). Well, if there is one way to ensure that young people do not read more books than necessary, it is to call them dumb in the title of a book. The book is strongly argued, but the voices of those who concern the author are curiously absent.

There is much to admire in the book. Bauerlein assembles impressive evidence that American youth are terribly served by our current educational system. He deflates the grand folly of strategies like putting computers in the classroom and assuming that students will learn skills by sitting in front of them. But in blaming the digital moment for the problems of education, and government in general, he is off the mark.

Yes, young people may favor social-networking sites to the exclusion of political, news, or in-depth intellectual or cultural-commentary sites. But if the form is different, the malady is old. After all, Neil Postman, the late New York University professor who originated the anti-media jeremiad with *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Viking, 1985), blamed television for restructuring our thought patterns and retarding our ability to think complex thoughts.

If the concept of a generation is unenlightening at best and harmful at worst, why do we persist in describing cultural, historical, and social change as generational? Sociologists have subsumed Mannheim's generational declarations within sophisticated theories of the "sociology of knowledge" and the "collective memory" of inherited culture. And professional historians rarely employ generations as historically determinative categories. Still, sociologist-sounding consultants like Neil Howe and the late William Strauss have built nice careers publishing shallow primers — like their books on millennials — on how to market goods and services to cartoon versions of various generations. They have pretty much owned the generations field to the point where real scholars will even cite their definitions of when baby boomers and Generation X begin and end. Howe and Strauss go to show you that you'll never go broke in America marketing to marketers. Or marketing to those who claim membership in particular generations. Journalists like Tom Brokaw invoke generations to forge rickety generalizations about people who were young in the 1940s and 1960s. Americans love thinking in generations because they keep us from examining uncomfortable ethnic, gender, and class distinctions too closely. Generations seem to explain everything.

But there is more to it. People fervently declare and defend generational identity. They clearly get something out of it. Perhaps it's the same satisfaction that one gets out of other tribal identities, what Émile Durkheim called the "collective effervescence" of performed rituals. Feeling part of the "Woodstock generation" must generate some sort of warmth, comfort, or false nostalgia for those who caught the 1970 documentary film but missed the bus to the festival back in 1969.

We should drop our simplistic attachments to generations so we can generate an accurate and subtle account of the needs of young people — and all people, for that matter. A more responsible assessment would divorce itself from a pro- or anti-technology agenda and look at multiple causes for problems we note: state

malfeasance or benign neglect of education, rampant consumerism in our culture, moral panics that lead us to scapegoat technology, and, yes, technology itself. Such work would reflect the fact that technologies do not emerge in a vacuum. They are subject to market forces, political ideologies, and policy incentives. More important, such work would not use young people as fodder for attacking wider social problems.

Too often we reach for easy, totalizing explanations for cultural phenomena, constructing cartoons of digital youth that have a tone of "gee whiz" or "shame, shame" to describe these new and odd creatures. The Who may have started this whole mess by recording an anthem steeped in the collective effervescence of "My Generation." But the Who also assured us that "The Kids Are Alright."

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