Born digital

J. Palfrey and U. Gasser

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Childhood in the Digital Age

Born digital: Understanding the first generation of digital natives (extract)

J. Palfrey and U. Gasser

From Chapter 1, 'Identities'

To be sure, the Internet doesn't change the notion of identity altogether. Nor are all of its effects new or unfamiliar to us. In some ways the nature of identity in the Internet age resembles what it was in the agrarian past. Personal identity is much the same now as it was then. And despite the changes in the dynamics of social identity that are now taking place, in some ways even these dynamics remain the same.

From the perspective of a Digital Native, identity is not broken up into online and offline identities, or personal and social identities. Because these forms of identity exist simultaneously and are so closely linked to one another, Digital Natives almost never distinguish between the online and offline versions of themselves. They establish and communicate their identities simultaneously in the physical and digital worlds. The sixteen-year-old might be bound to being a tall Irish American girl in the physical world, while in digital space she can experiment with self-representation, sometimes in modest ways and sometimes dramatically. Her multiple representations inform her overall identity.

A sixteen-year-old girl can now create a new identity and go into an online environment where people do not know who she is, at least for a while. She might create a profile of herself in a new social network. She could present herself in a way that is strikingly different from the way she presents herself in real space. She could even create an avatar in a virtual world, such as Gaia or Club Penguin, or in a gaming environment, such as World of Warcraft, as a way to try out an identity that is not tethered to any other identity she's had in the past. Someone would have to do some serious digging on her to tie these multiple identities together. In this sense, our Digital Native could reinvent herself many times over without leaving her bedroom, much less her village. And she need not explore these identities successively over time; instead, she can create them all in one day and explore them simultaneously.

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Just as young people always have done, Digital Natives try out different aspects of identity in experimental ways, both online and offline. One of the long-standing debates in the literature of identity turns on the question of multiplicity. Some sociological theories suggest that young people have multiple selves; others argue that these multiple forms of representation come together into a more or less unitary self-construct. The common thread among the many competing theories of identity is that

people tend to have multiple self-representations – different levels of both personal and social identities – that together form a whole. In focus groups and interviews, most Digital Natives revealed that they had multiple selfrepresentations.

Where they disagreed was on what these multiple selfrepresentations meant for identity: Some saw themselves as having one or more 'identities' in the converged online and offline worlds, whereas others perceived themselves as having only one identity that was expressed in both contexts.

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Young people – among many others – are using the Internet to share more personal information about themselves than ever before. This trend is a source of consternation to many parents and teachers, especially if the adults in the equation spend much less time online than their children or students. (Just to be perfectly clear: Young people are by no means breaking this new ground alone. Often, adults are exposing more about themselves, particularly if they participate in online dating, than their children.)

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These intentional digital contributions to identity – in the form of inputs of shared personal information – are central to a Digital Native's emerging identity. A sixteen-year-old girl, within limits, has the ability to shape her identity with care and to change it over time to incorporate new ideas about how she wishes to be perceived. Through these many means, Digital Natives are much more willing than their grandparents were in their day to share personal information with others – both friends and people they haven't met face to face – in a public forum, which for a Digital Native is the Internet.

For Digital Immigrants, this is one of the greatest puzzles: What drives Digital Natives to post so much information about themselves in digital publics? *Why* do Digital Natives share all this information about themselves online?

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Psychologists have developed what they call the 'disclosure decision model' to explain why a sixteen-year-old might reveal so much information to others. The underlying assumption is that people decide what personal information they will disclose, how they will disclose it, and to whom they will disclose it based on their evaluation of the possible rewards and risks. According to this model, the disclosure of personal information – say, a sixteen-year-old's posting of her hobbies online, or information about where she lives or about her tastes in music – is intended to achieve certain goals. Those goals might include social approval, intimacy, or relief of distress, among other things. Or they might include more mundane objectives, like saving money or time (for instance, disclosing a credit-card number to order a book online), or pleasure or altruism.

According to the disclosure decision model, individuals examine – as rational actors – whether the disclosure of information in a given situation is indeed a good strategy for achieving desired goals in particular situations, and whether the expected benefits outweigh the risks. But people, alas, are not purely rational, particularly not young people: There is reason to believe that young people systematically underestimate the risks of disclosure.

There are no data to suggest that young people, whether Digital Natives or not, disclose more information than other people who spend large amounts of time online, but the risks they run are nonetheless substantial.

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You can see the whole book online at:

http://pages.uoregon.edu/koopman/courses_readings/phil123-net/identity/palfrey-gasser_born-digital.pdf