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John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, **Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives**, Basic Books, 2008, 375 pp., $25.95 (hardcover).

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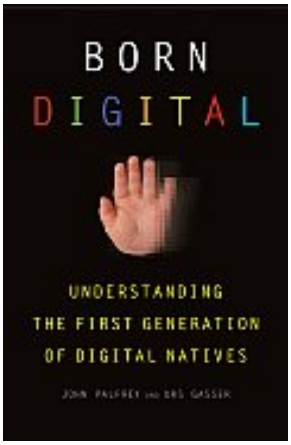

John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, both of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, merge technology, sociology, and policy in their generational study, *Born Digital*. By building on Jenkins's (2006) work on media literacy, Benkler & Nissenbaum's (2006) exploration of peer-production, and Lessig's (2008) study of "remix" culture, the text valiantly attempts to survey concerns of the digital age characterized by a shift in agency where consumers become producers. Palfrey and Gasser embrace the optimistic vision that new technology will breed virtuosity, collaboration, and creativity, given that digital tools are used to their full potential. Their prescriptive text creates a critical dialogue between parents, teachers, software developers, regulators, and "digital natives." Careful not to alienate their audience, Palfrey and Gasser treat modern problems with traditional solutions balancing creativity and control. They conduct focus groups with digital natives and their peers to identify issues and resolve tension, all in hopes of addressing the fear that new media will irreversibly disrupt professional, economic, and cultural climates. Given the technologically-driven text, the authors provide a lucid argument and timely, valuable lessons.

Born Digital addresses the gap between these groups of varying digital competency. Palfrey and Gasser revive Prensky's (2001) term "digital natives," defining it as a "population" (p. 14), a subset of generations born into the wired culture of the 1980s. While "digital settlers" pioneered the transition from analogue to digital, and "digital immigrants" utilize only the most basic bytes of Internet (e-mail), digital natives are characterized by their fluency in technology. For them, digital tools are "second nature," not "learned behavior" (p. 4). These categories function effectively within the book's context, but the blanket term of "digital native" obscures the vast inequalities in the Internet forum.

The digital divide is two-fold: There is both a rift between the "haves" and "have-nots," as well as an incongruity between simple Web access and the skill set needed to navigate platforms. At times, *Born Digital* assumes that access translates into literacy, when the gap is actually much greater. Palfrey and Gasser do touch upon these disparities (p. 15), but mostly, they explore the digital natives' defining characteristics instead of investigating how to bridge the gap.

Palfrey and Gasser's research indicates that the native's identity is trapped between on- and offline worlds and consequently riddled with contradiction. Their identity is indelible, as their "digital dossiers" (p. 39) haunt Internet users long past log-off. Their relationships also are perplexing: interactions are intimate, yet transitory. Privacy is diminished, and commitment is undermined by short attention spans. "Constantly connected" (p. 5) natives rely heavily on digital technology to mediate their

social relationships, as communication via portals is naturalized. Information also takes on pliant properties that allow digital natives to dismantle, reassemble—or, in Lawrence Lessig's words, "remix"—culture, often in ways that infringe on traditional copyright laws.

The authors often evade the most contentious issues. They are cautious not to admonish the young, or to encourage illegal behavior. Instead of ineffectual wrist-slapping, the authors focus on examining structural inhibitions. They avoid directly scolding digital natives for piracy by asserting that copyright is at "odds with the dominant social norms of the generation" (p. 132). Critics might take issue with their non-confrontational stance, but the authors want to provoke a dialogue, not a duel, between alienated youth and regulators. They view file-sharing as a form of Schumpeterian "creative destruction" that will force the overhaul of a broken business model, favoring, as a replacement, a new model that embraces instead of eschewing emerging technologies (see Digital Natives Blog, http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/digitalnatives/).

Although digital natives often underestimate their roles as creators, Palfrey and Gasser redefine the meaning of the term in the 21st century, as the ability to "build on the shoulders of others," not just to invent (p. 127). Again, they are careful to reassure parents and regulators that newly created content will supplement existing material, not supplant it. They forcefully argue that there is wealth in diversity, and that freedom will be strengthened as the control of information becomes ever more decentralized.

At this juncture between creativity and obstruction, Palfrey and Gasser stage what social media expert danah boyd calls a "cultural intervention" (2008). The authors allude to Lessig's four constraints (2000) on an individual, suggesting that markets, norms, code, and law must be used "in concert" (p. 181). They proceed to develop their own paradigm of online responsibility that operates from "digital native" outward—to family and friends, teachers and coaches, software providers, and at the periphery, government officials and legislators. In effect, this model acts as a "call-to-arms" to digital natives who are situated at the center of a concentric circle. This group is endowed with the agency to control their online identity or to surrender their rights, safety, and creativity should they ignore the complexity of their online personas. Although the authors' strategy to empower the digital native is a valiant reminder, one remains skeptical as to whether the "constantly connected" crew is actively listening.

Unlike their predecessors, who operated alongside and within governmental structures, digital natives possess the technological tools to forgo hierarchy and easily assemble their own bottom-up movement. Palfrey and Gasser's consideration of "activists" recalls the 2008 Kenyan elections, the images of which were documented by ordinary citizens and then transmitted via mobile phone and Internet to international audiences, a process which they call "responsive politics" (p. 256). But the authors acknowledge that this grassroots activism may not change outcomes. Although the Internet can disseminate information widely, there is little conclusive evidence that digital natives are using it to their full advantage. Palfrey and Gasser maintain that on-and-offline behavior is complementary, asserting that technologies, when used in conjunction with traditional strategies, can be effective. For example, campaign fundraising has boosted online donations tremendously.

Although natives appear more intimately connected, their media intake is more privatized. This incongruity can make or break the Internet as a robust public forum or a hollow echo chamber. Drawing on the work of Jenkins, Palfrey and Gasser advocate a digital native's "active" citizenship in a "participatory culture." In the digital era, natives—no longer passive recipients—have the ability to shape information and, in turn, social, economic, and political ecologies if they employ their agency wisely. But this sense of civic duty requires media literacy, a vital skill set in an age of "debilitating" excess (p. 186).

Users, overwhelmed by the abundance of information, often need to proactively "pull" information, instead of passively receiving it. Parents and regulators' first reactions may be censorship. Palfrey and Gasser prescribe an alternative, media literacy, as the most valuable remedy. They view education as the best way to enforce media literacy, which extends beyond rudimentary reading and involves analytical thinking and cross-referencing skills. Media literacy, they suggest, must be tailored to each individual's learning style, so that he or she can most effectively filter excessive information.. More important, media literacy cannot rest solely in the hands of educators. The teaching of media literacy also relies on the availability of wide range of public broadcasting and other Web sites, often provided by or subsidized by government, as well as on parents monitoring their children's browsing habits. The authors note more than once that the Internet should not be blamed for the dearth of quality and accuracy—concerns that are *not* unique to the Internet space. Their constant paralleling of past and present is an effective tool as it provides a continuity in a chaotic era, and consoles digital immigrants that natives are, for the most part, evolutionary.

Palfrey and Gasser temporarily relinquish their facilitative role in the final chapter, opting instead to include e-mail exchanges. In an informal but reflective tone, they write candidly to members of the digital generation who are most likely "skimming" (p. 275) their book while simultaneously Facebooking, navigating news blogs, and downloading the latest podcast. They share their hopes for a more progressive, participative future, as well as their fears about the malicious use of such open platforms. They worry that "the gap in access, literacy, and participation" (p. 279) will inevitably grow wider. It is in these candid exchanges that the real conversation begins. Palfrey and Gasser switch from even-handed suggestions to persuasive pleas that parents should referee online content, and that technology companies should cultivate trust by accepting increased responsibility not only for distribution, but also for product implementation The authors' rhetoric, taking the form of "we need" and "we can," is more aggressive than in the proceeding chapters. Suddenly, the audience is captured by the compelling argument that eludes them for most of the book. Finally, they assert: "Listen to these Digital Natives. They are the future . . . a force to be reckoned with—or better yet, to be brought into the fold in constructive ways" (p. 284).

Listening is certainly a start, but is it enough? Although Palfrey and Gasser ambitiously attempt to profile a population, they tend to over-simplify digital natives for their audience. Their research aims to scour the globe are noble; however, the methodology remains vague, and readers interested in the specifics of sample selection and interview transcripts may have to search the book's corresponding Web site for satisfaction. Since the book is less scientific in approach and more narrative in tone, this oversight may be forgivable; however, the reader looking for a more comparative study of digital natives across the globe—in particular, of their roles in developing countries—may be disappointed. To truly understand this

population, various sub-groups must be identified. *Born Digital*, although attempting to incorporate global perspective, remains primarily West-centric in its solutions, placing technology at the helm of social change while a host of other issues are relegated to the periphery of the debate. It can be a persuasive and valuable text if this perspective is reconciled within broader social, political, and economic ecologies.

Palfrey and Gasser practice what they preach, and they use their book as a foundation for their ongoing study on www.digitalnative.org, a social-networked site conjoining their book to, among other things, a blog, a wiki, a Twitter feed, and a Facebook page. The Web site elaborates on critical topics that are not covered at length in the book, such as the digital divide, civic engagement, cyber-bullying, aggression, and innovation. New media surveys tend to have a short shelf-life; however, the authors, using the resources of the Berkman Center, are doing their best to keep their text up to date and relevant by treating it as an ongoing "remix," "iteration" (p. 274), and "invitation to a conversation" (p. 274), rather than as a definitive study that is set in stone.

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