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Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives

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John Palfrey and Urs Gasser’s *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


*Born Digital* is simply a wonderful book for anyone with even a casual interest in the impact of the Internet. I believe that it will dominate the discussion of a wide number of Internet-related topics for at least the next year. Many discussions will begin or close with the equivalent of "Well, Palfrey and Gasser say..."

The excellence of the work is no surprise. Palfrey is Faculty Director of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, and Gasser is the faculty director of the University of St. Gallen's Research Center for Information Law. Both men, in addition, are attorneys and widely published with an abundance of contacts among those who work in or study the information industries. For all of their experience and erudition, and despite the fact that between them they have read and understood most significant studies bearing upon their topics, the book is written in the open and light-hearted style necessary in discussing topics that attract passionate audiences ranging from adolescent twitch gamers to (ahem) mature scholars.

The focus of the work, as the subtitle suggests, is "Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives." The authors' thesis is that those born after 1980 have grown up in a networked world and are different, in sometimes mysterious ways, from those born before them, no matter the depth of that older generation's participation in digitally-enabled activities. In Palfrey and Gasser's view, the digital natives promise to make extraordinary contributions to mankind, but also face daunting
problems. It is the authors' view that we must do all we can to enable the progress of Digital Natives while trying to create the institutions and values necessary to protect them from the threats that they face, if we are to eventually reap the unforeseeable riches of their potential contributions.

This summary of the future impact of the contributions of Digital Natives may seem high-flown, even idealistic; more often, discussions of the future are conducted in breathless terms by those pointing with alarm, or by those viewing the apparently endless possibilities for profit through the lenses of naked self-interest. It is the authors' gift to put these discussions into clear, objective prose. In their words, "The purpose of this book is to separate what we need to worry about from what's not so scary, what we ought to resist from what we ought to embrace." [1]

The authors properly remind us that the digital natives are by no means a "generation," but rather a select "population," because of the gap between the digitally enabled wealthy and the very much more numerous poor. [2] The work focuses, of course, on this fortunate minority.

The work makes major contributions to both an intellectual understanding of important issues, and to setting the terms for the dialogues required to confront them. Many of these topics will seem familiar ones: identity, privacy, piracy, learning, political activism, etc.

Yet the authors are able to sum up previous works and to lead us into an appreciative understanding of the topics so that they seem fresh and new, and we are able to view them in a rounded perspective for what may seem to be the first time.

Each of the work's thirteen chapters merits an extended discussion, but this is a review of the work, not an attempt at a full synthesis. We have asked some of our contributors to write upon such sections as bear upon their own disciplines, and in coming weeks those comments should appear in our soon-to-be comment-enabled journal. The authors also
have created a WIKI which is itself certain to be a focus of continuing discussions. [3] Here we pull out only several topics which have particularly attracted our own interest.

The last chapter, "Synthesis," is interesting both for its content and for its methodology. The chapter consists of a series of email exchanges between the two authors, mostly written while traveling, in which each discusses a topic relating to the book's contents or its origins, then closes by inviting the other to discuss a new topic. We see, then, both the origins of the work and its major conclusions simultaneously. This gives the chapter a very fresh and intimate feeling, almost as though it were an interactive synchronous event rather than a conventional work. We learn that the audience was intended to be parents and teachers of Digital Natives, though we think the book is valuable to a much wider group.

We also learn that the authors do not really expect Digital Natives to read this work so much as to "skim" it, reinforcing their argument that this group does not learn poorly so much as they learn differently. Earlier they describe the research process common to those born to the WWW as "grazing," a process of sampling information sources, often followed by a "deep dive," that is, an intensive reading of selected sources. Then comes the truly characteristic learning process of this population, "interacting," in which the researcher enters into a "feedback loop" in which they pass the news on to friends, comment upon it positively or negatively in blogs, perhaps prepare podcasts or web pages, etc. [4] This latter process, of course, as every teacher knows, ultimately "constructivist," much enhances learning.

Sadly, however, although the Digital Natives are capable of very sophisticated research and learning, they also have some systematic problems. Characteristic of the group is constant multitasking that gives them perhaps the illusion of broad learning. But the research is now adequate to demonstrate that multitasking is inappropriate for new materials or those difficult to grasp. One should not, for example, try to learn foreign language vocabulary or mathematical formulas while multitasking, although many Digital Natives do so.
Digital Natives are also impatient, wanting to get their content in quick, short chunks. Longer classical works of literature are of little interest to them, and as Rachel Dretzen's PBS documentary "Growing Up Online," demonstrated, many Digital Natives have become very sophisticated at getting just enough information from WWW materials to appear knowledgeable without having engaged with an actual book. [5]

There are many additional issues. Digital Natives tend while younger to be very uncritical users of electronic materials, making decisions as to what to read online on the basis of the formatting of the site rather than judging the value of its contents. By the time they are in high school, however, they seem to have themselves worked out the standards for evaluating quality. They also believe that information is free, and they freely cut and paste, ignoring intellectual property rights, authority and authorship, origins of materials, while creating what is to them a satisfactory pastiche.

The authors also give thoughtful advice as to how best to deal with the Digital Natives as learners. First, they tell us, as parents and teachers, we ourselves need to be familiar with the technology. Not just by reading about it, but by engaging with it to the point where we can "do" it. [6] Then, they tell us, we need not to have teaching and learning driven by the technology, but the technology selected to compliment the pedagogy. Traditional tools such as discussion and lecture still have their place in the classroom, and many tasks are not enhanced by technology, but may even be diminished.

We close with an analogy from the last pages of the work. By the time that a Digital Native turns twenty years old, they will have been actively on the Internet for ten thousand hours. This is the equivalent of practice necessary to become a concert pianist. [7] Of course, not all them are going to play the digital equivalent of Carnegie Hall; but as a group they have a great deal of experience which they are undoubtedly going to deploy regularly in their lives and careers, and it behooves us all to understand the strengths and weaknesses that the impact of the Internet
has given them. This work is the best place to start that exploration of any single source of which I am aware.


