

Chapter 8

The Media Diet of University Students in Italy: An Exploratory Research*

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ABSTRACT

Developments in information and communication technologies have raised the issue of the intergenerational digital divide that can take place between “digital natives” and “digital immigrants”. Despite emphatic claims concerning how educational systems must take into account the specific characteristics of “digital natives”, sound empirical research on these topics is lacking, especially for Europe. This paper presents the results of research performed during the course of 2008, studying how university students in Italy use digital technologies. The research is based on a survey of 1086 undergraduate students at the University of Milan-Bicocca, complemented by focus groups and in-depth interviews. The results of our research show that, even if university students are familiar with digital technologies, the general possession of high level skills in accessing and using the Internet should not be taken for granted.

INTRODUCTION: THE “DIGITAL NATIVES” DEBATE

It has become sort of a common sense to think that the new generations of students, that are currently entering into the school system, present

some characteristics that contribute to make them completely different from their parents. This has to be reconnected, as it is well known, to the fact that the accelerated rate of technological progress is deeply changing our world. The “Net generation” (Tapscott, 1998) indeed, is the first generation to grow up in a world where the presence of things such as personal computers, mobile devices, the

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World Wide Web and so on does not represent “something new”, but is part of the normal, everyday life. In a couple of well known papers, Mark Prensky (2001a, 2001b) referred to the generation born after 1980 by defining them as “digital natives”, as they are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001a, p. 1).

The diffusion of new digital technologies was defined by Prensky as a *singularity* – an event that introduces so great a discontinuity with the past that no coming back is possible. Educational systems throughout the world urge to find a way to cope with this type of change: “... *the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language*” (Prensky, 2001a, p. 2). Following Prensky, the intergenerational divide that separate digital natives from “digital immigrants” (i.e., all those people who did not grow up in a digital world, but still embrace many aspects of it in their work and their everyday life) has become a popular subject for discussion, not only in the scholarly literature (Gaston, 2006; Long, 2005; McHale, 2005), but also on mass media (1).

As a recent critical review of all the “digital natives” debate reports (Bennet et al., 2008), notwithstanding the great popularity of the topics, sound empirical basis in support of the idea that young people *in general* are marked by strong familiarity with digital technologies still is largely lacking. Indeed, the number of studies in the literature is quite limited, and the available data are quite ambivalent. Research on post-compulsory education performed in the United States (Kvavik et al., 2004) and in Australia (Oliver & Goerke, 2007; Kennedy et al., 2006) seem to show that, even if digital technologies are widely diffused among university students, a significant proportion of the overall population may not have such high level skills as may be expected. In particular, even if personal computers and mobile phones are

of common use among young students, activities such as having an own blog, using social-networks sites and creating new content for the Web seem to concern only a limited proportion (around 20% on average) of the sample considered in the different studies. As the authors commented:

In summary; though limited in scope and focus, the research evidence indicates that a proportion of young people are highly adept with technology and rely on it for a range of information gathering and communication activities. However, there also appears to be a significant proportion of young people who do not have the levels of access or technology skills predicted by proponents of the digital native idea. (...) It may be that there is as much variation *within* the digital native generation as *between* the generations. (Bennet et al., 2008, pp. 778-779)

In this paper, we try to contribute to the current debate on digital natives by presenting the result of an empirical research on how university students in Italy access to and use the Internet and the related digital communication technologies. This study was based on a survey on a sample of 1086 undergraduate students of the University of Milan-Bicocca (2). The survey was performed between January and May 2008 by the Observatory on New Media “nuMediaBios” of the University of Milan-Bicocca, as part of a broader research program that seeks to provide on a regular basis data on the diffusion and use of new media among university students (at the time we are writing this paper a second survey, based on a similar approach but concerning a different sample, is going on; further details can be found on the website of the Observatory: www.numediabios.eu) (3). The paper is organized as follows: in the next paragraph we present the general framework that is at the basis of our approach, by making references also to the available literature. It follows the section where we present the methodology and the results of our research; at last the paragraph focusing on the lessons learned and on suggestions for future research follows.

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