

Chapter 38

Swedish Students Online: An Inquiry into Differing Cultures on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

Results from a major survey among Internet users at Swedish universities indicate fundamental differences in patterns of usage. The “Web 2.0 culture” is socially driven and characterised by interactivity and participation. In the “Web 1.0 culture”, the Internet is considered more of a tool for the rationalising of duties and tasks in everyday life. A strong age element can be observed in the sense that a majority of the Web 2.0 culture adherents have grown up in a digital environment with broadband access while those belonging to the Web 1.0 culture generally adopted Internet as adults. However, the findings do not support the claims made by early commentators of a “Net Generation”, or “Digital Natives”, with a set of common characteristics. The considerable variations within the age groups indicate that the process of appropriation of the Internet by the individual is far more complex than what is embedded in the generations approach.

INTRODUCTION

Open-Ended Technologies

A main characteristic of information and communication technologies (ICT) is their open-ended nature. In contrast to many other technologies ICT is neither determined in design and development nor in consumption and use (Silverstone, 2005).

The particular complexity of ICT lies in the double articulation as both objects of consumption and as media of consumption. As key technologies in social and individual actions of everyday life ICT is socially constructed in the sense of being continuously defined and redefined through the human capacity to create meaning and order in the world (*Ibid*).

To claim open-endedness is to consider present expressions of ICT as something provisional, something that will undergo continuous develop-

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ments by the actions of the users. The subjects of technological change will switch from individual innovators to the user communities, resulting in unintended directions and consequences (*Ibid*). We are left with a genuine feeling of uncertainty about future user patterns of ICT and what kind of effects on the already established ways of organising our societies – if any – that will be brought about. The traditional way of governments, major companies and journalists to turn to technical experts for visionary outlooks and forecasts is not a solution this time. Then, who will provide an understanding of the network society of tomorrow? The answer is as always: those with most experience. Who are they?

The Generation Approach

In early 2000, Marc Prensky, a specialist in digital game-based learning coined the terms Digital Natives/Digital Immigrants (2001). He used a language metaphor to illustrate the idea that the (younger) generations that grew up with computers, video games and the Internet, “the Digital Natives”, master the digital language in a way that older generations never will be able to do. Those of us who were not born into the digital world but at some later point in our lives adopted the new technology are, and always will be, “Digital Immigrants”. The importance of the distinction is this: As Digital Immigrants learn – like all immigrants, some better than others – to adapt to their environment, they always retain their “accent”, that is, their foot in the past.

Prensky is neither the first nor the only one to identify those having grown up with digital technologies at home as a key user group. A few years earlier, Don Tapscott published *Growing up Digital* (1998) where he concludes that with the Net-Generation – or N-Gen –, the children have become the authorities over their parents for the first time. The idea of a web-generation creating its own culture or lifestyle through, and by means

of, ICTs has also been suggested by several other authors (for an overview see Hartmann, 2005).

Among the new qualities of those having grown up with access to ICT is the parallel – or hypertextual – processing in learning activities, compared to the step-by-step linear approach of their parents. Closely related to these abilities is the assumed advanced multitasking capacity (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998). Another feature is their superior networking skills. Additionally the N-Gen members are characterised as open-minded, tolerant and inclusive, and after years of intense practicing, with full control of the “netiquette” and social codes. At the same time they are considered impatient with respect to slow responses and what they conceive as lengthy procedures (*Ibid*).

Both authors predict revolutionary consequences for the traditional educational systems. This is partly due to fundamental changes in the abilities and attitudes among the youth, partly due to failure of adaption among traditional educators. In addition, when the N-Gen culture is extended into society according to Tapscott, every institution will have to change. As N-Gens prefer networks, conventional business companies will have to transform into less hierarchical and bureaucratic forms, the same holds for governments as well. A new openness will infuse the marketplace, as power and authority will shift to web knowledgeable consumers with new online tools for comparison of product and services offerings.

The Swedish Situation

The Digital Natives metaphor also has expanded into the Swedish arena of public debate, although with some delay. A search on “Digital Natives” translated into Swedish provided 17 900 hits, the earliest in 2007 (Google, 2010). However, young Swedes online activities are of an earlier date and can be traced back to the early 1990s. At that time though, very little attention was attracted to the phenomenon from the world outside the group of

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