No such thing as the Net Generation

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The propagandization of a Net Generation adds nothing to our understanding of the digital behaviour of young people. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the whole concept of a Net Generation rests on incorrect assumptions. Hence, arguments based on a Net Generation are not only irrelevant and misleading but precarious as well. Precarious in the sense that they are mobilized as a decisive means of engineering change, not least in education policy. Only when we stop thinking in terms of the Net Generation can we form a more astute vision of when the deployment of digital learning aids will have a realistic chance of success.

The term 'Net Generation' is just one in a whole panoply of nomenclature that is commonly used to describe the youth of today: Nintendo generation, generation C (content), screenagers, Einstein generation, Internet generation, digital generation, dotcom generation, joystick-generation, messaging generation, homo zappiens, generation M (media) and so on and so forth. But beneath these epithets lurk assumptions about the behaviour, motivation and intellect of the said generation. 'Lurk' may not be the most apt expression in this context, given the frequently explicit claims regarding the unprecedented smartness, speed and sociability of this generation, not to mention its non-linear thought processes, multitasking skills and perfect understanding of media manipulation (Boschma & Groen, 2007; Wijngaards, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). The literature portrays the new generation, without exception, as critical, active, motivated, adept, visually-oriented, exploratory, inquisitive, intelligent, multitaskers, social networkers, teamworkers et cetera. In fact, the Net Generation is so unprecedented that Marc Prensky says we should think in terms of a digital 'big bang' which sets it apart from the older *digital immigrants* in every way, up to and including the cerebral structure.

Thinking in terms of a Net Generation is, however, largely irrelevant

and founded on flawed assumptions. Irrelevant in the sense that it does not help us to actually enrich our understanding of the behaviour of young people, school-goers and otherwise. Flawed in the sense that recent research – to put it mildly – has painted a more balanced picture of the digital and other behaviour of the younger generation. But besides being irrelevant and intrinsically flawed, the Net Generation mindset is precarious – precarious in the sense that the Net Generation is deployed as a decisive argument to engineer change, not least in the classroom: the Net Generation exists _ergo_ we must adapt our education system. Such adaptation is essential in order to rescue young people who have become 'alienated' from education. Well, perhaps the education system is ripe for reform, but the arguments of the generation thinkers fail to offer a sufficiently robust foundation for change and innovation. Only when we have shed the whole concept of the Net Generation can we form a more astute vision of when the deployment of digital learning aids will have a realistic chance of success.

And there are plenty of good reasons for shedding the concept of the Net Generation. In publications such as _Generatie Einstein_ (Boschma & Groen, 2007) and, more recently, _Grown up Digital_ (Tapscott, 2009), which propagandize the Net Generation in every which way with labels like 'smarter, faster and more gregarious', hard facts and convincing arguments are thin on the ground. The evidence in both books is merely anecdotal and illustrative, there is little or no objective substantiation, and criticism is defused in advance ("too generalized") or even rejected out of hand ("fear of the future"). People who raise doubts or questions about, say, _digital natives,_ are said to be 'in denial' while teachers who fail to adapt their methods are, according to Prensky, simply lazy. Any empirical data that has already been collected is discarded as the product of very dubious research techniques. When we read _Grown up Digital_ by Tapscott, we get to know Niki and Alex – Tapscott's own children – very well because it is largely down to them to prove the existence of the Net Generation. And the distribution of questionnaires among Internet-literate youngsters and the extrapolation of the results to an entire generation is a technique that would be spurned even by a first-year student. Tapscott's description of himself as a 'student of research methodology' is as arrogant as it is inaccurate (see Van Vliet _et al_., 2009). The argument

revolves around repetition. There is no substantiation and – as concluded by Bennet, Maton & Kervin (2008) – much of it consists of empty rhetoric:

> "Much of the current debate about digital natives represents an academic form of moral panic. Arguments are often couched in dramatic language, proclaim a profound change in the world, and pronounce stark generational differences. Such claims coupled with appeals to common sense and recognizable anecdotes are used to declare an emergency situation, and call for urgent and fundamental change" (p. 8).

But, at the end of the day, couldn't one just describe all of this as 'hapless', and concede that the authors do, after all, have a point? No, not really. And to illustrate this point we need look no farther than the 'hapless' usage of the generation concept. To begin with, a distinction should be drawn between the existence of a shared frame of reference for societal developments on the one hand and the way in which it shapes individual opinions, behaviour, norms and values on the other. The Cold War could result in political radicalization to the left or the right and a youth culture could, within the same timescale and under the same economic depression, fall apart into punks, mods, hippies and the rest. It almost goes without saying that World War II was experienced differently by the urban population and the rural population, by Jews and non-Jews, and so on. Hence, though we speak of a 'war generation', the war itself had different effects on the people within that generation. The same argument might be applied to the effects of the information society: in other words, the fact that a generation grows up in an information society does not necessarily mean that all young people are media-literate. There is a multitude of ways in which young people can and do use the instruments of the information society (Van Dijk, 2003).

Secondly, there is a risk of tunnel vision. It is somewhat paradoxical to say, in the same breath, that generations can be typified by a momentous event *and* that this event makes its deepest impact exclusively on the youth. Take, for instance, crucial developments that became anchored in the societal landscape such as the Industrial Revolution, the Sexual Revolution or the current Digital 'Revolution'. These forward leaps, precisely because they are so radical and universal, have an

inexorable effect on _everyone_ in society: we either accept change or we resist it. Tax returns must be submitted electronically, television programmes can only be received digitally, parking meters only take chip cards, our medical data is stored in an Electronic Patient File… Where people go wrong is when they behave as if it is only members of the younger generation who access and assimilate these changes. In effect, the _digital immigrants_, like the _digital natives_, also live in a digital world and it is only a matter of time until they adapt their behaviour to fit in with the new environment (see below).

So, the core message is that just as many differences can exist within generations as between generations. A genuine interest in the Net Generation should express itself in an ardent quest to discern the differences and similarities within that generation and in relation to the one that went before. Anyone desirous of looking into _the_ head of _the_ Net Generation should be prepared to meet a polycephalic creature.

We also need to ask whether there is any empirical legitimacy for the epithets assigned to the Net Generation. According to Onstenk (2007), the picture painted by the scientific data is more differentiated:

> "It is clear that not all students have the same digital experience. Not all young people in vocational education belong to the 'Internet Generation' in quite the same way' (p. 14).

This picture is confirmed in a study by Kanters & van Vliet (2009). In recent years doubts have subsequently been expressed about the claims regarding the Net Generation. Bennet, Maton & Kervin (2008) point out that statements which assert that an entire generation possesses extensive knowledge and skills relating to new technology are not borne out by empirical research. Nor has it been demonstrated that the members of this generation pursue their own style of learning. Recently, three studies have been published which have shed more light on the scientific tenability of various assumptions surrounding the Net Generation.

The British Library study (Ciber, 2008) looked at the way in which the Google Generation, individuals born after 1993, uses digital sources and ascertained whether it deviates dramatically from the way in which the older generation uses them. The findings indicated that young people

have only a very limited understanding of their own information needs and therefore develop poor search strategies, spend very little time determining the accuracy, relevance and reliability of the information, glance at information online and click fanatically on hyperlinks. All of this flies in the face of Tapscott's claims (2009) that the Net Generation is populated by 'superior scanners', 'sophisticated readers' and in his own words: "After all, they're not just clicking" (p. 113). Ciber maintains that the so-called 'information literacy' has not improved with the wider availability and accessibility of technology. The study exposes specific myths surrounding multitasking: "There is no hard evidence" (p. 18), and the notion that young people are expert information searchers: "There is no evidence in the serious literature" (p. 22). It does, however, confirm that young people are more operationally competent with technology, and that digital sources are re-used time and again ('cut-and-paste'). The study concludes that there is nothing to be gained by applying labels like the 'Google Generation': only 27% of young people fall into this category, while the majority (57%) use only basic technology for simple communication needs and entertainment purposes. The rest even try to avoid technology whenever possible: these are known as the *'digital dissidents'*. Meantime, older users are gaining ground and closing the supposed gap between themselves and the younger generation:

> "Much writing on the topic of this report overestimates the impact of ICTs on the young and underestimates its effects on older generations. A much greater sense of balance is needed." (p. 21).

Schulmeister (2008) examined the scientific basis for the assumptions that appear in many books and articles on the Net Generation. He split these into two testable statements: 1) the existence of a Net Generation implies the existence of a group in which computer and Internet use are dominant, and 2) it further implies that this group possesses characteristics which distinguish it from the previous generation. The first statement remained unconfirmed after an extensive analysis of international research. Worldwide, the television is still the medium for young people. Here is what Schulmeister had to say about the second statement:

> "There are no essential differences between the attitudes and

preferences of the current generation and those of previous generations." (p. 28).

Ito *et al.* (2009) published an ethnographic report on the use of new media in the US youth culture and thus provided a welcome addition to the often predominantly quantitative material (OfCom, 2008; Van Vliet *et al.*, 2009). The researchers placed the use of new media in a broader socio-cultural context – a conditioning factor that is frequently neglected even though it is patently obvious that the ways in which young people use new media will be influenced by the social activities that they engage in (Van Vliet *et al.,* 2009). On the basis of the study findings the researchers refuted the notion of a digital generation that differs radically from other generations because of its use of new media. They discerned patterns which showed that young people use media to various degrees for various reasons and in various situations. They identified two key drivers ('friendship' and 'interest') and three levels of intensity and complexity ('hanging out', 'messing around' and 'geeking out') in which young people freely indulge: "We find that youth will often engage in multiple genres of participation in ways that are situationally specific." (Ito *et al*, 2009, p. 20).

The generation mindset may be good for book sales, but the true state of affairs is far more complicated than is portrayed in the pages of some publications. One crucial fact that needs to be taken on board is that generations are not homogeneous. There are whole groups of youngsters who have no affinity at all with technology or who possess only the operational skills that they need for daily communication and contact. Not all young people are blessed with these so-called information skills (search, select, assess) or strategic skills (using information to achieve an objective). Another crucial fact is that the digital world is not exclusively reserved for the people who grew up in it, regardless of how 'naturally' they respond to it. In a nutshell, one cannot conclude that just because people have grown up in a particular culture, they are totally on top of its technology while others still have a very long way to go.

There is therefore no evidence of a radical departure. Of course, young people live in a new environment of social network sites, online

games and video-sharing sites, not to mention gadgets such as mobile phones and iPods, but the issues that preoccupy them are essentially the same as those which preoccupied earlier generations: the formation of personal identity, growing up and becoming independent. There is also an underlying practicality in the evidence, i.e. what matters most to young people is contact with friends and (new) media are used mainly for this purpose. This goes some way to explaining the consistently high scores for the use of IM, chatrooms and social networks. In the broader context of socio-cultural traditions and the patterns in which new media operate it is equally evident that technology alone does not set the pace of change:

> "While the pace of technological change may seem dizzying, the underlying practices of sociability, learning, play, and self-expression are undergoing a slower evolution, growing out of resilient social structural conditions and cultural categories that youth inhabit in divers ways in their everyday lives. (Ito *et al.,* 2009, p. 2; also Van Vliet, 2008).

The deployment of digital learning aids should be studied and assessed in this meta-context if we are ever to build up a realistic estimate of its added value.

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