

Two generations of digital natives

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Abstract

From surveys, interviews and observations in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, we assert that there are two generations of digital natives (ND): young people 1.0 and 2.0. Although both share common characteristics, the 2.0 has particular characteristics: they are a post-mail generation, often growing up around digital environments and they tend to share intimacy aspects in an online mode. These personal images and texts, which they share with their peer group through social networking sites, express a new conception of privacy that we can call “multimidad”. Also, we divided the ND 2.0 according to their level of digital literacy, conditioned by its technological environment, its cultural capital and their uses of ICT, with the aim of providing analytical tools to help improve public policies of digital inclusion.

Keywords: Digital Natives. Adolescents. Young People. Social Sectors. Digital literacy.

Introduction

Just as the nineteenth century was marked by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of new nations, the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century are characterized by the irruption of new information and communication technologies (NICTs). In this context, those people who reached adulthood before the mass use of these technologies may be labeled as “digital immigrants” (PRENSKY, 2001), like the people who came off ships to live in an unknown country.

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On the other hand, contemporary youth, who have spent thousands of hours using technological devices for communication, entertainment and information-processing are called “digital natives” (PRENSKY, 2001) (hereafter, DN). Young people find in NICTs a place for meeting friends and sharing experiences with peers, together with an unprecedented autonomy from adults. By means of these technologies, they learn about a great many issues through gaming, social networking sites (SNSs), by exchanging queries with peers, engaging in forums and online tutorials (CASSANY; AYALA, 2008). Thus, the introduction of NICTs in their everyday lives entails new forms of learning, sociability and representations (MOYA, 2007).

Adolescence and youth are normally periods in which profound changes are undergone and meaningful identity configurations adopted, both at the bodily and the cognitive levels (KRAUSKOPF, 2010). Based on the empirical evidence gathered, we claim that both children, and adolescents and youths¹ share a series of generational characteristics regarding their relationship with technology and with social relationships mediated by NICTs which we synthesize in a new sensitivity to the digital world (CASTELLS et al., 2007). That is why we call them digital natives and other researchers call them “Generation Y” (PISCITELLI, 2009), the “Network Generation”, “Generation @” (ORTÍZ HENDERSON, 2011), the “Thumb Generation” (BROOKE, 2002) or the “Multimedia Generation” (MORDUCHOWICZ, 2012).

1 Even if some organizations such as the Observatorio de la juventud [Youth Observatory] (2010) define young people as being between 15 and 29 years old, in this paper we use the term adolescent to mean someone between the ages of 13 and 18 years old, and youths, between 19 and 29 years old. This lower limit is taken as the beginning of adolescence, as this is the average age in which adolescents generally start secondary school, which implies a more active sociability. These age limits are useful to us in terms of our analysis, but adolescence and youth cannot be defined only based on age, since they are cultural phenomena cross-cut by social sector, territory, historic period, generation and the particular *ethos* of each population (Urresti, 2008).

Children live a media-saturated childhood, with an increasingly independent access to it, in the context of a media culture which is becoming more and more diverse (...) which many adults find difficult to understand (BUCKINGHAM, 2008, p.28).

All areas of human activity have been transformed by the interstitiality of the uses of the Internet. New, emerging socialization and sociability modes are evidenced by the ease with which youths and adolescents experience their continuous going on and off SNSs in their everyday lives. Now, what are the common characteristics of DNs? Firstly, they have a heightened sensitivity for the manipulation of technical communication devices when compared to adults. Secondly, they conduct simultaneous tasks on a daily basis (multitasking), which is intrinsically associated to the ability to engage in multiple conversations and activities in digital environments (PISCITELLI, 2009). For instance, they divide their attention fluently between the activities and dialogues co-existing side by side in the various windows of their computer, mobile phone and music-playing device. Finally, they are normally both producers and consumers of contents (prosumption) (URRESTI, 2008; RITZER; JURGENSON, 2010).

In this paper, we have focused on the practices relating to NICTs of adolescents and youths from low-income (LIS) and medium income sectors (MIS) in the City of Buenos Aires. Our hypothesis is that there are two generations of digital natives, which in turn may be differentiated according to their degrees of technological literacy.

Methodology

This study uses mixed-methods and has an exploratory-descriptive purpose (SYMON; CASSELL, 1994). The methodology employed consists of quantitative techniques such as surveys (n: 450 and n: 200), Facebook profile contents analysis (FB) (n: 500), and qualitative, 36 in-depth interviews, and virtual and face-to-face observations of adolescents and youths residing in the City of

Buenos Aires. With this aim in mind, we have worked with two intentional samples grouped according to social sector.

The adolescents and youths from LIS² share three characteristics: 1) their parents have not graduated from secondary school; 2) their parents are unemployed or are in precarious employment³; and 3) they live at homes lacking at least one residential public service and one neighbourhood service. On the other hand, MIS youths and adolescents present some distinctive characteristics of their own: 1) their parents have finished secondary school; 2) their parents are in stable employment or have incomes which allow them to cover the basic food basket, or a monthly remuneration above the minimum wage; and 3) they live in homes not lacking residential or neighbourhood public services⁴.

The interviews and observations have been conducted in the street, schools, digital inclusion centres, community centres, cybercafes, bars, public transport and fast food restaurants. In order to contact the adolescents and youths, in many cases we have resorted to the “snowball” strategy. Also, in order to complete our fieldwork, we have done “virtual ethnography” (HINE, 2000), consisting in the creation of a purpose-built FB profile. This profile currently runs up to 2,700 contacts between Buenos Aires adolescents and youths. The choice of this type of virtual ethnography to complement face-to-face contact was useful at this stage of the research, in which our focus of analysis points to technological uses and skills.

² When we refer to low-income sector adolescents, we do not include those from marginal sectors. These share housing and economic characteristics with popular sectors, but present a higher degree of unsatisfied basic needs.

³ Most of the menial jobs in the sample occur in construction, retail, restaurants, transport and cleaning. The most frequent job is that of domestic help, one of the most vulnerable occupations there are, given its high level of social vulnerability and work instability (OIT, 2010; LUPICA, 2010).

⁴ This classification of socio-economic level was corroborated with closed questions and is supported by indicators of the Statistics and Census National Institute [Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos] (INDEC, 2012).

Two generations of internauts

The first generation of internauts lived through their adolescence during the 1990s in the days of Internet 1.0. Instead, the second generation was weaned on Internet 2.0. By Internet 1.0 what is usually meant is the first decade of the Internet, the 1990s. In these years, the Net consisted of thousands of websites, mainly text-based. By Internet 2.0 is meant the second decade, the 2000s. As from these years, SNSs began to become accessible to all, until they became central to the lives of most internauts. At the same time, multimedia was developed and made economically accessible, which enabled millions of people to have access to a computer with an Internet connection, gaming consoles, smart mobile phones and digital cameras for the first time. Whereas the first generation of youths spent their adolescence with Internet 1.0, the second generation did so with Internet 2.0. Based on this argument, this paper describes the similarities and differences encountered between these two generations: the one of those born between 1980 and 1994, whom we call “digital natives 1.0” (hereafter, “DNs 1.0”), and the generation of those born between 1995 and 2000, whom we call “digital natives 2.0” (hereafter, “DNs 2.0”).

If each society constitutes itself based on and by means of the specific technology there is available in its historic time, this is still more relevant for youths, historically avid consumers of technological innovations (BALARDINI, 2004). DNs 1.0 have been the original creators and users of the first Internet platforms, i.e. the pioneers of the Web, as it was the first generation to attain their secondary socialization on this type of technology. In this way, DNs 1.0 are responsible for the most relevant technical communicative achievements which gave rise to Internet 2.0.

Whereas DNs 1.0 obtained a great deal of their self-taught technical communicative training through chat programmes such as mIRC, ICQ and MSN, DNs 2.0 have FB as their main operations centre. As a result, it could be said that DNs 2.0 are “children of the cloud” and SNSs, since most attained their primary

or secondary socialization manipulating various wi-fi devices and interactive platforms hosted in Web servers that permit ubiquitous access and use from any device connected to the Internet.

Nowadays two generational communities coexist, one of youths—even children—and another of adults, which, even if they share one mobile, multimodal information technology, use it and transform it in different and distinct ways (CASSANY; AYALA, 2008, p.55).

Notwithstanding the contribution of pioneering research, it is in order to mention that it is common for the categories “children”, “adolescents”, “youths” and “digital natives” to operate as theoretical concepts which effectively make the differences invisible with a view to the construction of a research subject. The generational differentiation proposed here originates in the mass use of technological changes beginning in the 1990s which fuel the conglomerate of NICTs: DVD, MP3, digital cameras, PCs and videogame consoles. These devices, among others, are making their way into children’s and adolescents’ everyday lives. As a result, the chosen classification lends greater force to the argument that DN 2.0 exclusively are the generation born and raised with segmentation, personalization and proliferation of ubiquitous, ever-present NICTs. Below, we describe the specific characteristics of DN 2.0.

- 1) They were born and raised with NICTs: contemporary adolescents, because they were born in the second half of the 1990s, tend to have attained their primary and secondary socialization in digital environments. This gives rise to differences in uses and sensitivities compared to the previous generation, who – in most cases – started to inhabit their everyday life in digital environments as from their adolescence.
- 2) They are a post-email generation: in most cases, they have not and do not use email, except for sending or receiving job proposals. They normally communicate with their friends, family and schoolmates through SNSs and instant

messaging. Electronic mail they are just not interested in because they do not find it functional, unlike the previous generation, for whom email is –or at least has been until recently– a fundamental tool (Linne, 2013).

- 3) Greater online/offline overlap: they normally overlap their virtual and face-to-face spheres in most of their everyday life. In this respect, they function not unlike some of their previous-generation peers, even though among adolescents this continuous overlap is even more common and less questioned. For example, in order to take advantage of “dead time”, like waiting for public transport or in order to entertain themselves during school breaks, they deploy various strategies by means of portable digital devices which most carry on them.
- 4) Expressing intimate aspects and aesthetic-emotional experiences on social networks: they share a new type of intimacy as a matter of course, which we may call “multimacy”⁵, since through SNSs they express and exchange meaningful aspects of their everyday lives in a multiple and semi-public way, generating digital intimacy among peers. This has two consequences: “collective narcissism” (MENDELSON; PAPACHARISSI, 2010) and an “ongoing reality show feeling” (CIPPOLINI, 2013), marked by watching and being watched, as well as by constant speculation and competition relating to own and others’ publications.

As they are the generation most immersed in SNSs, DN 2.0 often express greater concern as a social collective over popularity competition and monitoring among peers, over the constant self-presentation media performances and the omnipresent interaction by means of digital devices. To adolescents, being popular is one of the most valued dimensions (MORDUCHOWICZ, 2012), as

⁵ This term is in line with Sibilía (2008), who calls a new kind of contemporary intimacy, or “extimity,” which unlike the modern concept weakens the introspective aspect as a value and passes to a new paradigm in which online exhibition of everyday aspects is valued by the community of peers.

it means having many friends to share time and privacy spaces with, both virtual and face-to-face.

Partly because of the imperative of sharing intimacy in order to be popular, DN's 2.0 recursively express transformations of their intimacy which occur at an epochal and generational level by means of NICTs, e.g. self-portraits taken in their bedrooms and posted online; postings where they evidence their aesthetic-emotional experiences; FB status updates on what they felt on meeting someone, fighting a friend, family member or partner, seeing a film or listening to a song. In turn, they express their intimacy through NICTs because they often develop an intimate-affective relationship with these mobile technological devices, which they hardly separate from and with which they associate a meaningful part of their identity and status.

Young people consider their mobile phone to be an identity-defining feature, as they allow them to reflect what they like and to appear to be unique, individual, to have certain status, and to be related to a certain brand. Mobile phone offers young people autonomy and connection, and allows them to evade parental and adult control.

The permanent connection is tangible proof that with mobile phones young people may transgress rules, controls and social authority. Young people like to share, even their intimacy, to promote an open attitude. The mobile phone combines the public and the private worlds (LAZO, BARROSO; COVACHO, 2013, p.188).

Together with the development and growth of NICTs in everyday life, adolescents have re-elaborated their intimacy by means of mobile devices and SNSs. These technologies are such as allow them to manage their continuous social availability in a most efficient and satisfactory manner – which becomes greater personal visibility – with the deployment of a new intimacy removed from adults (CASTELLS et al., 2007). For adolescents generating their intimacy among peers is closely related to perceiving these technologies as “being at home” (ARORA, 2012).

The social matrix on which the subjectivity of these digital natives was built is different; therefore, their subjectivity is different. The new generations have abandoned pure rational logic, they have incorporated an affective, ludic dimension (PEIRONE, 2012, p.109).

The required intimacy offerings needed to be a part of this tribe seem to be constant publication of personal images and texts. This obligation and fascination with paying homage to the exhibition of intimacy in social networks is characteristic of digital natives (especially, 2.0s). Instead, adults (digital immigrants) were socialized in a different type of intimacy more linked to the private sphere, where personal matters must not reach public status. School, family, the mass media, their partners, their families and their group of peers have taught them that what is right is being discreet and reserved. Contrarily, the new generations of adolescents exhibit their intimacy in a covert and performatic fashion through FB, Twitter and other SNSs.

The computer has succeeded television in its totemic condition, but with the peculiarity that digital natives find a different meaning in it and project onto this device a great many expectations linked to play, experimentation, learning and sociality, to the extent that they regard computers as part of their identity (ALBARELLO, 2011, p.38).

Unlike most adults, the experiences of adolescents are cross-cut by instantaneity, multitasking, hyperconnectedness and the permanent exchange of stimuli with their community through SNSs and instant messaging. These exchanges have a high degree of efficacy, to a great extent because they are rapid and brief (CASSANY; AYALA, 2008). As a graphic summary highlighting the main characteristics of DNs 2.0 as an ideal type⁶, here is a chart where we present each with an illustrative example.

⁶ By 'ideal type' Weber (1969), is meant the construction of archetypes based on sets of meaningful characteristics identifying a given phenomenon. With this method, the German sociologist sought to reduce reality to "ideal types", thus simplifying the characteristics and contexts of a given phenomenon in order to illustrate the described processes.

Chart 1. Main characteristics of digital natives 2.0

Characteristic	Definition	Examples
Being an adolescent during Internet 2.0. and mass use of SNSs	Born after 1995	Adolescents organize initiatives, tools, groups and parties through SNSs.
Online aesthetization of emotions, bonds and meaningful experiences	Need to Express what happens to them and what they feel by means of visual contents posted online on SNSs	Everyday preeminence of multimedia contents most adolescents publish on social networks.
Digital ethos	Their identity, affectivity and intimacy are linked to NICTs and spend most of their time online, where they feel "at home".	Both their mobile phones and FB profile and other SNSs are part of their lives and presentation before others.
Multitasking	Ability to perform different tasks at once in various screens and interphases.	Chatting as they listen to music and do their homework using Google.
Prosumption	Being at once contents producers and consumers.	Observing and commenting –as they edit and publish– multimedia contents.
Multimacy	Developing affective bonds with others through the exchange of intimacies in digital environments.	Producing personal images and texts that constitute their identity through intimate shared performances between peers.
Living in an offline/online continuum*	Not establishing divisions between the real and the virtual.	Having an online chat and browsing FB as they chat offline.
Online/offline configuration of ludic spaces	Creation and maintenance of sociability spaces where online and offline practices overlap.	Getting together with friends and family to play online, chat or see videos as they have lunch and talk.
Digital addiction	High dependence on NICTs.	Becoming anxious if they spend too long offline.

Source: elaboration based on fieldwork and review of the state of the art.

* One way of seeing the spatio-temporal configuration of adolescents is by means of the topological figure of the Möbius strip. This figure was developed by mathematician August Möbius, and it symbolizes a circuit where the “in-out” distinction is indiscernible.

These examples are based on scenarios repeated at millions of homes all over the world and in Buenos Aires as well. This generation of adolescents that we call DN_s 2.0 relates less and less to the traditional mass media such as the radio, the press, books and television, and increasingly to the media complex of their mobile phone, their digital camera, the Internet and SNSs. While adults perceive NICTs as tools, adolescents “live” in, with and for them, and it is from that everyday coexistence that they build a media-digital environment which configures their world vision.

Different levels of technological literacy among digital natives 2.0

Some authors claim that LIS adolescents are digital immigrants. On the contrary, based on our fieldwork, we can hold that both MIS and LIS adolescents are digital natives 2.0, as they normally perform skillfully in SNSs. On the other hand, the true digital immigrants, i.e. adults, find greater difficulty on these platforms. Naturally, this must be matched with variables, such as educational level, cultural capital and technological environments.

However, do all of them have the same skills? Do different appropriations amount to different types of digital citizenship? Does having advanced knowledge of, for example, English, writing, audiovisual design and programming make them any more digital natives than those from the same generation not possessing such knowledge? In line with other research (BUCKINGHAM, 2008; DEURSEN; DIJK, 2013), we have found empirical evidence that the digital-educational gap gives rise to different technological experiences at the “skills” level.

Based on the classification proposed by Phillippi y Peña (2012), we can in turn divide DN_s 2.0 into “experts”, “advanced” and “newbies”, depending on their level of digital literacy. Also, Albarello (2011) classifies adolescents as “inforich” and “info-poor”, depending on their everyday contact, or lack thereof, with at least one meaningful part of the great wealth of information available through NICTs. Thus, within the “inforich”, an adolescent who masters IT language would be an “expert” whereas

one who conducts satisfactory searches for information and is capable of discriminating diverse sources of information would be “advanced”. On the other hand, an adolescent who cannot conduct these information searches would be “a newbie” and “infopoor”. Having said that, we claim that the large majority of LIS adolescents are digital natives, ludic-communicational DNs, but natives all the same. MIS and high income-sector adolescents are, mostly, expert DNs 2.0, as they deploy more complex uses apart from ludic-communicational ones. This is so because they normally have available a greater cultural capital and a more varied technological environment, which results in relatively more diverse uses of NICTs.

In keeping with these categories, we have established two sub-categories within DNs 2.0: “digital literate”⁷ and “digital underliterate”. Can we think, then, about a digital NICTs accesibility gap 1.0 and a 2.0 gap of different skills relating to usability and various levels of prosumption? Are in any way LIS adolescents in a “digital limbo” between literate DNs and digital immigrants? According to this model, the most complex Internet tools and applications would be the *Paradise* of the overliterate who live in the “digital cloud”, whereas FB and the rest of SNSs would be the *limbo* of the underliterate – apart from recreational and sociability space for the former. Lastly, Internet inaccessibility due to incompetence, lack of skills or possibilities would be the *Hell* of the digital immigrants.

Communication and entertainment practices are increasingly mediated by NICTs in similar ways for everyone, but differences appear when we inquire into school uses. The socio-cultural and educational paths of each person will be conditioned by his or her digital abilities to solve school NICT-related demands more or less skillfully (LINNE; BASILE, 2013).

⁷ Somehow, the under literate/literate categorization is a by-product of the condensation of the techno-scientific zeitgeist in which aspirations, especially among youth sectors, are built around the figure of the “hyper literate”, an IT-technological expert who operates as a hacker, a new scholarly version of a macreader (LINNE, 2013).

The technological environment of the under literate DNs 2.0 tends to be limited, since they possess one or two personal digital devices: in most cases, they have a smart phone and share a computer with their immediate family. In the cases of the lowest home technological environment, the parents do not often use the Internet and the teenage children usually frequent a cybercafé in the area. Instead, in the case of literate DNs 2.0, they often have a wider technological environment, made up of a smart mobile phone, a desktop computer, a laptop computer, a tablet and a videogame console (most of personal use).

As regards cultural capital (BOURDIEU, 1990), it is normally lower in the case of under literate DNs 2.0, as they have less knowledge of languages, social sciences, exact sciences and IT, whereas the literate tend to possess a greater cultural capital, as they often have wider knowledge in these areas.

Finally, use of the Internet is often more reduced in the case of the under literate, since they are mostly concerned with using FB, games, streaming sites and Youtube. Beyond these uses, the literate tend to conduct other more strategic ones, such as bibliographic and job searches, consultations of forums and tutorials on IT programs and periodic enquiries to news sites through the Internet.

In brief, the greatest differences regarding experimenting or not with NICTs are found among adolescents (DNs 2.0) and adults (digital immigrants). This differentiation lends greater support to the claim about the existence of a generation gap. Nevertheless, beyond some nuances, we can establish common features according to the characteristics of each population under study. Digital natives 1.0 are a generation between DNs 2.0 and digital immigrants, as they share characteristics of either group and constitute a transitional generation between these two world configuration modes.

Chart 2. Differences between under literate and literate DN 2.0

Key aspects	Under literate DN 2.0	Literate DN 2.0
Technological environment	Limited	High
Cultural capital	Lower	Higher
Internet use	Confined to ludic-communicational (FB, games and Youtube)	Diverse (advanced) Strategic (experts) (FB, games and Youtube, but also other more complex sites)
Access to information sources	Lower (do not visit informative blogs or online papers and magazines)	Higher (visit informative blogs, online papers and magazines)
Types of digital natives	Infopoor, newbie and ludic-communicational	Inforich, strategic and advanced or expert

Source: elaboration based on fieldwork and review of the state of the art.

Conclusions

We have found sufficient empirical evidence in our fieldwork to confirm our hypothesis: there exist two generations of digital natives, the 1.0s (born between 1980 and 1994) and the 2.0s (born between 1995 and 2000). While both generations share multitasking and prosumption, they differ in that the 2.0s, having been raised in digital environments, are a post-email generation, deploy a greater overlap of online/offline moments and express intimate aspects and aesthetic-emotional experiences through SNSs recursively and on a daily basis. In turn, DN 2.0 develop a new intimacy. For them, it is as much a wish as a social duty to participate in this digital intimacy between peers, removed from adults, which we have called “multimacy”. By means of identity performances, which they publish in the form of texts, images and personal videos, adolescents tend towards the anesthetization of social relationships. In addition, this generation often experiences everyday life as a *digital face-to-face circuit* where they do

not register differences between the online and the offline worlds. Lastly, they tend to replace traditional media consumptions with cultural consumptions on the Internet. In this way, they watch television shows and films online, unlike previous generations, for whom consumption through the traditional media, such as radio, television and cinema, is still important.

As we have seen, educational and technological-environment gaps are those that most condition the development of NICT-related competencies. Also, appropriations of NICTs vary depending on age, technological environment, social sector and cultural capital. In this connection, DNs 2.0 can be called digital literate or under literate, according to whether their technological environment is limited or more evolved, whether they have a higher cultural capital and whether they use the Internet in a limited or diverse manner. These two types of digital literacy are often linked to their socio-economic level. It is the duty of the government to heighten the technological literacy of the underprivileged so they can have better social inclusion and job opportunities. By means of public policies for the stimulus, follow-up and development of strategic uses of technology, adolescents and youths from more vulnerable sectors will be able to improve their educational paths, which will result in greater digital social inclusion and, therefore, in greater social integration⁸.

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⁸ This research looks into specific characteristics of contemporary adolescents, differentiating them from youths and adults. For this, two categories are proposed to divide “digital native” generations. The author is a Social Sciences Ph. D. candidate and CONICET scholar. He has done a Master’s Degree thesis in Communication and Culture on the uses of Facebook in adolescents, is finishing his doctoral thesis and has published various scientific articles in indexed magazines on NICT-related practices of adolescents.

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