University of St.Gallen

"Born Digital" essential reading for parents, teachers

"Born Digital" is a vital book, recently released and co-authored by Professor John Palfrey, Harvard University, and Professor Urs Gasser, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, which helps readers understand the first generation of digital natives — children born into and raised in the digital world —giving a pragmatic insight into the digital generations' relationship to the Internet and the opportunities it offers, serving to allay parent's fears who see the medium as a threat.

Palfrey and Gasser, both teachers in law, fathers and affiliates of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, remain optimistic and excited about the incredible opportunities that the Internet offers for learning, innovation, civic engagement, political participation (on-line chat rooms, blogs), social networks (facebook, MySpace, flickr) as well as online creativity (YouTube).

Professor Urs Gasser, Director of the Research Center for Information Law at the University of St. Gallen, says that the impetus to write the book, published by Basic Books and released in the United States in September, came from his experience as an academic looking at the regulatory and legal aspects of Internet and its impact on society over the last 10 years, as well as from a personal desire being a father of two children born into the digital age.

"At some point it became clear that there were vast differences between the digital native generation, those born after 1980, and those who did not have access to digital media growing up, or digital immigrants as we call them," he explains. "Kids born digital relate to information in different ways than digital immigrants, and they communicate with each other in a way that is different from previous generations."

"The goal of writing such a book is to give people a better sense of what kids are doing and how much we need to worry about in reality. We have arrived at a pinnacle or peak in the use of the Internet where we now need to make choices — users, parents, teachers, law makers, regulators, companies — in fact society at large."

He said that the underlying thesis of the book is that we see the emergence of a global culture of digital natives. Children the world-over communicate with each other in the same way, they play the same computer games, are on similar sites.

"It is safe to say that Chinese children, by and large, do the same things on the Internet as British children, but this is one of the results of this book that we need to further test, so we need to widen the empirical evidence for this hypothesis."

While the authors take a sensible approach in attempting to dispel the myths surrounding the Internet, they also recognize that dark sides to the medium do exist, but argue that these negative effects, such as cyber-bullying, stalking, pornography, are factors which are present in the wider realms of life, taking place just as frequently off the Internet.

As the book states (p93): "The dynamics of bullying are the same whether the bullying takes place online or offline, and bullying can move back and forth in either direction. 'Cyberbullying' is not all that different from 'bullying'; it's just put on the record in a more permanent way."

More importantly, says Gasser, is that parents should look for any unhealthy signs in their children such as Internet addiction, depression which may indicate mobbing, or evidence of brutal video games.

"Parents really should learn about the technologies their children are involved in. Let your children show you what they do on the Internet, ask questions and engage in conversation, and do this as early as possible. Let your kids help you with problems you may have with the Internet. If it is too late to start conversations, and parents have missed the train, look for warning signs and intervene if necessary. For example, if you see that your kid is playing brutal video games, you as a parent needs to intervene, that is your obligation, to set the rules, say, by reducing the amount of time spent online."

Gasser says that what he still "personally wrestles with" is that there is little awareness amongst digital natives of assessing the quality and origin of information on the Internet. He gives Wikipedia as an example saying that most digital natives do not realize that the information on Wikipedia can be edited by anyone.

Digital natives also experience a blurring of reality when it comes to their digital life and their real experiences, so-to-speak.

"The Internet is part of their daily life and how you present yourself and what company you keep online are as important as how you dress," he says.

Having online profiles can present a range of challenges, as the authors describe in the book (p31):

"Among the many changes in what it means to form an identity in a digital age, two stand out as likely to have the most impact over time: instability and insecurity…instability, in this context, means that one's identity in the digital age changes frequently, and not always through the volitional acts of the person whose identity is at stake. A young person in a digital age faces a decrease in his or her ability to control identity as others perceive it…

"The identity of a sixteen-year old is characterized by instability: It can change frequently…It is hard for a sixteen-year old girl in a wired society to control who can access or make changes to her identity. It would be impossible for her to secure her digital identity at any given moment, even if she wanted to. It would be nearly impossible for her to know who was able to access information about her identity, to control who could see that information, and to prevent that information from being changed by others."

The long-term implications of such issues are generally not considered by digital natives more keen to share their online profiles with peers than protect their personal privacy.

"Digital natives have difficulty perceiving the long-term implications of placing photos on the Internet that show them in uncompromising situations which could be accessed in the future by prospective employees. That said, in the interviews we conducted, girls were very aware of stranger danger and would never share photographs with people they did not know on the Internet," Gasser says.

Ownership of material and the relationship with intellectual property law is another area where the opinions of digital natives and digital immigrants may differ.

"Digital natives think that the sharing of content of the Internet is a given right where they believe it is fully okay to share music, clips etc., so they need to be made more aware of copyright law. The industry is pushing copyright, but the reality is that ownership of material is perceived as being different on the Internet," Gasser says.

This is where schools need to intervene, Gasser suggests, to help communicate vital messages regarding the Internet.

"This is very important and in my opinion not enough is being done. What we propose is that media literacy programmes are formulated to teach principles which are imparted in the books. However, skills knowledge for children, especially with regards to the Internet, must be carried out in a new format with a focus on peer learning where opinion leaders within the group are used as teaching aids.

"For example, if one opinion leader in a group uses a privacy setting which excludes strangers for privacy reasons, then others will also use privacy settings, so children need to be taught how to become more savvy about using such tools. Kids who have had bad experiences should also go to schools and talk about them to their peers so that everyone becomes more aware of the problem from a human perspective," Gasser says.

So where does the law stand with these issues? Gasser says that European privacy information laws, which originated with the advent of mainframe computers in the 1960s, offer strong protection but that society needs to be certain that the old privacy laws can be applied to new problems, and if not, amendments would need to be made to existing laws. The enforcement of such protection is another unresolved challenge that the legal system faces.

"Given the limits of what law can achieve in cyberspace, it is important that companies involved in the Internet take a lead role in ensuring that stringent codes of conduct concerning issues like child safety are implemented. Most companies work towards sustainable business models so it is in their interest to make the Internet safe," Gasser says.

"The time for simple answers to complex problems is over with the Internet. The onus is on parents and teachers, companies, lawmakers, and society as a whole to make sure that the Internet is safe, but let's not overreact when it comes to legislation and control."

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To receive a complimentary copy of the book please ring the above number.

Links:
www.borndigitalbook.com
www.digitalnative.org

University of St.Gallen
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