

Digital natives and the three divides to bridge

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While we use the term ‘digital natives’ to describe the generation born after roughly 1980, not all young people fall into this category. Digital natives share a common global culture defined less by age than by their experience growing up immersed in digital technology. This experience affects their interaction with information technologies and information itself, as well as the ways they relate with one another, other people and institutions.

Reaping the benefits of digital tools, therefore, means more than just being born in a certain period or having access to a laptop. For adolescents to realize the full promise of new technologies, three divides must be bridged. The first has to do with basic access to these technologies and related infrastructure, such as electricity; the second involves the skills needed to use the technologies once they become accessible; and the third stems from our limited understanding of how young people navigate the online world. Each of these divides exists in every society, but their effects are felt most acutely in the developing world.

Over the past decade, access to the Internet, mobile devices and digital media has increased at a rapid rate. Approximately a quarter of the world’s 6.8 billion people have access to the Internet, and 86 per cent can connect to the world’s communications networks through mobile devices. Yet such access

remains highly inequitable, with rates in Africa, for instance, far below those in Europe.

There are signs that committed investment may shrink the access divide. For example, Botswana is developing one of the highest rates of technology penetration in sub-Saharan Africa; the Communications Ministry stated in 2010 that there was “over 100 per cent” mobile coverage (though broadband household Internet access continues to lag behind). Meanwhile, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda has committed to making his country a leader in economic development through investment in new technologies and Internet infrastructure.

While necessary, such efforts are not sufficient. There is also a participation gap between those with sophisticated skills in using digital media and those without. In the developing world, many youth rely on mobile devices rather than fixed line connections with faster speeds. Basic literacy is also an issue.

Digital literacy – the ability to navigate a digitally mediated world – further separates youth who are likely to benefit from digital technologies from those who are not. Young people who do not have access to the Internet at home or in schools – and who lack the support that comes from teachers and parents equipped with strong digital skills – will not develop the necessary social, learning and technical skill sets

for success in a wired global economy. Without the opportunity to become familiar with electronic media, adolescents may have trouble navigating social interactions in online communities or recognizing biased, unreliable information.

The third divide is the lack of knowledge about how young people use digital media across societies. In some countries – such as the United Kingdom, the United States and parts of East Asia – both quantitative and qualitative data exist about the ways in which young people use new technologies, and these data have begun to reveal how electronic media are changing practices among youth. Beyond basic information on access, however, such data are scarce in most parts of the world. One challenge is that youth technology practices have only recently become subjects of research, especially outside of a few parts of the world.

It is clear, however, that engagement with digital technologies is transforming learning, socializing and communication among youth who are able to access and use them. For these individuals, activities like content generation, remixing, collaboration and sharing are important aspects of daily life. Many of these activities are ‘friendship-driven’, serving to maintain relationships with people already known offline. Others are ‘interest-driven’, allowing youth to develop expertise in specialized skill sets such as animation or blogging. In either context, the casual,

frequent use of new media contributes significantly to the development of both technological and social skills. Electronic media also provide an opportunity for intense, self-directed, interest-driven study.

The benefits of far-reaching digital technologies extend beyond learning to promoting creativity, entrepreneurship and activism. Adolescents and young people are using these technologies to express themselves through videos, audio recordings and games. They are creating inspiring political movements, watchdog groups and new modes of organizing that combine the online and the offline. As they become young adults, some of them are inventing new businesses and technologies that create jobs and opportunities. They teach one another as they build out into the global cyber environment.

Our challenge as a global society is to design and build online experiences for adolescents that help them seize the opportunities – while mitigating the challenges – of life that are partially mediated by digital technologies. If the three divides of digital access can be bridged, new interfaces and experiences will expand adolescents’ minds, connect them to people around the world and enable them to participate in the making and sharing of knowledge in the information economy.

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