Journal of Children and Media
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rchm20

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Nishant Shah

Version of record first published: 18 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Nishant Shah (2012): Deconstructing digital natives: Young people, technology and the new literacies , Journal of Children and Media, DOI:10.1080/17482798.2012.697661

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2012.697661

BOOK REVIEW

Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technology and the New Literacies
M. Thomas
2011, Routledge, New York
ISBN 978-0-415-88993-3

Deconstructing Digital Natives: Young People, Technology and the New Literacies is an anthology that revisits the debates and scholarship that have arisen around youth and technology in the last decade or so. It is a timely intervention that invites some of the most influential scholars who have contributed to and shaped the discourse around "digital natives" to come and revisit their original ideas from the last decade. The term "digital native" probably bears witness to the strident discourses that, more often than not, fall into the trap of exotically glorifying or despairingly vilifying young peoples' engagement with digital technologies. As Buckingham points out in his foreword to the book, these conversations either take up the language of a "generation gap [that] entails a narrative of transformation and even of rupture, in which fundamental continuities between the past and the future have been destroyed" or they guise themselves in an "almost utopian view of technology—a fabulous story about technology liberating and empowering young people, enabling them to become global citizens, and to learn and communicate and create in free and unfettered ways" (p. ix). The essays seek a point of departure from these tried and tested arguments in order to provide a "balanced view" on the topic. And so we have a distinguished author list from the world of digital natives scholarship, coming together not only to ponder on their own contributions to the field and how those ideas need to be upgraded, but also to provide new contexts, concepts, and frameworks to understand who, or indeed, what, is a "digital native," often in tension with their earlier work.

In its ambition of revisiting existing debates and providing a "research-based approach by presenting empirical evidence and argument from international researchers in the field," the book succeeds unevenly (p. xi). Despite its efforts to chart a point of departure, some of the essays end up falling into some usual traps. For example, despite the fact that the oldest digital natives are probably in their thirties, they are thought of as being young. They are defined only as "students" within formal learning institutions without looking at the radical potential of learning outside organized education, embedded in their everyday practices. The digital natives remain an object of research and the peer-to-peer structures that are supposed to shape them, but do not feature in the methodologies of researching them. This notwithstanding, the essays still offer a historical and social perspective on the debates around digital natives in certain developed pockets of the world.

In the first section, "Reflecting on the Myth," Thomas' essay "Technology, Education and the Discourse of the Digital Native" introduces a tension between the techno-euphorists and the "digital luddites," which replays itself through the rest of the contributions. While Thomas places himself between "technoevangelism" and "technoskepticism," Prensky, who coined the term "Digital Natives" in 2001, then introduces to us a new binary of "digitally wise" and "digitally dumb" (p. 4). Prensky reviews the responses that his opposition of

Journal of Children and Media, iFirst article, 2012
ISSN 1748-2798 print/1748-2801 online/12/030001-5
 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2012.697661
Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"digital natives" and "digital immigrants" have produced over the last decade and emphasizes that his coinage was at the level of a metaphor, and was not to be taken seriously. Prensky agrees that the earlier opposition might be discarded because it evokes too many simple responses based on skills with technology. Digital wisdom, for Prensky, is in the ways in which digital technologies enhance the human brain "to anticipate second- and third-order effects to which the unaided mind may be blind" as the world becomes too complex for the "unenhanced human brain" to cope with it (p. 23). Typically, Prensky's argument creates a dichotomy of those who can (and will) and those who will be outside of this web of digital enhancements. His analysis tries to complicate the idea of human wisdom by looking at questions of ethics and agency, but the final formulations appear clichéd, merely re-creating the older tensions rather than thinking through them. Jones' following essay on the "Net Generation" is more persuasive, where he argues for dismissing the idea that "nature of certain technologies ... *has affected the outlook of an entire age cohort* in advanced economies" and instead should unpack how "new technologies emerging with this generation have particular characteristics that *afford certain types of social engagement*" (p. 42).

In the second section, titled "Perspectives," the essays take up two different tones. The first is about looking at digital literacy, skill, and fluency in everyday practices of digital natives, and how they shape our contemporary and future sociopolitical and cultural landscapes. Banaji, in exploring the EU Civic Web Project, echoes Jones' ideas. The presumptions within education about an entire generation as "born with technologies" has consequences in the field of civic action, where programs for citizen action are designed with expectations that the young people will have core digital competencies and literacy. She does not push that argument further, but in her study of the two Scottish e-initiatives, one can see the promise of a radical reconstruction of civic engagement movements, where the young participants are not going to be satisfied as mere participators, and will demand a space for their voice to be heard.

Takahashi's essay on the *oyaubibunka* ("thumb culture") mobile generations in Japan stands alone in its analysis of an Asian context—though many might argue that Japan, with its developed economy, can hardly be counted as a typically "Asian" perspective. Takahashi is rooted, both in practice and discourse, in youth and technology in Japan, where the youth often experience close-knit community experiences through mobile interfaces, in their otherwise alienated modern habitats. Almost as a response to Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011), Takahashi shows how collaborative and cocreation cultures ranging from the mobile novels on Mixi to everyday interaction on Social Networking Systems is bringing in new kinds of social spaces of belonging. The essay, however, resists simply celebrating this space and works in complex ideas of freedom, control, risks, and the tensions between traditionalization and modernity in Japan.

Zimic and Dalin, writing from a similar heavily connected Nordic region, pose a different set of questions in their essay, "Actual and Perceived Online Participation Among Young People in Sweden." For Zimic and Dalin, in a space where connectivity can be taken for granted, the further question to ask is not whether digital natives participate online or not, but whether they participate in ways that are expected of "a digital citizen in the information age" (p. 137). Through empirical data and case studies, the essay shows the different kinds of activities that youth engage with and also concludes that though engaging in civic issues is important to the young people's sense of belonging to participatory cultures, using the Internet does not provide an "automatic guarantee"

toward participation, and "assistance is required in order to engage them in relevant activities" (p. 148).

The second set of essays in this section all cluster around the digital native as a student. Locating the digital native within educational institutions, they look at the ways in which the ideas of learning, pedagogy and engagement with the text are changing with the rise of digital technologies. Levy and Michael look at two case studies involving students in Australian high schools, to "facilitate a deeper understanding of products and processes in multimodal text construction," which they think is core to interactive communication technology literacy skills (p. 85). The data is rigorous and rich, but the conclusions are a bit of a disappointment: digital natives need to better manage their time and resources and they need to learn traditional skills in order to cope with their educational environment.

The trend of an exciting hypothesis and conclusion, which do not necessarily leave you with anything more than what you already knew, continues in this section. Erstad sets out on a journey to see how digital literacy posits challenges to educating the digital generation and ends by suggesting that the digital divide should address questions of "how to navigate in the information jungle on the Internet, to create, to communicate, and so forth" (p. 114). Similarly, Kennedy and Judd want to unravel the mystery of why "students, who are so clearly familiar and apparently adept with Internet tools, are at times so poor at using the Internet academically" (p. 119). Through empirical research and interaction with students, they end up making an argument against the Googlization of everything (Vaidhyanathan, 2011), suggesting that "satisficing strategies" of information search, defined by a need for instant gratification and not looking beyond the first information sets, has produced "a generation of students that has grown up with Google [who] may over-value expediency when locating and selecting appropriate scholarly information" (p. 132). On similar trends, Levy proposes to question the assumption of whether all "young children are inherently 'native' users of digital technology" for implications on our future pedagogy within the new textual landscape (p. 152). The case studies and the frameworks built are interesting, but they reveal nothing more than the claim that the essay begins with by Marsh et al. (2005) and Bearne et al. (2007) that "young children are immersed in 'digital practices' from an early age and that they often develop skills in handling screen texts even when they are not exposed directly to computers at their own homes" (Levy, 2011, p. 163). The implication is clear: change our schools to accommodate for these new textual practices and help children capitalize on their digital competence and develop "digital wisdom." But it is a recommendation that has been around for at least a decade, if not more.

The third and concluding section of the book, "Beyond Digital Natives," is possibly the most promising part of the book. Bennett and Maton seek to look beyond "nuanced versions of the idea" and move the debate on to firmer grounds of how the rise of the digital natives is going to affect the policies around educational technology" (p. 169). They engage with a body of work that is specifically oriented toward building empirical evidence-based frameworks for understanding the potential role of technology in education. With a fine conceptual tool that makes distinctions between access and usage, they systemically dismiss the "academic moral panic" that characterizes conversations around youth-technology-change.

For Bennett and Maton, the object of inquiry is not the digital native but the body of discourse that surrounds this particular entity—and they make a plea for research rather

than imaginings, showing how the influential work in the area has been plagued by unsupported claims, unevidenced observations, and futuristic imaginations, which paint a poetic picture of digital natives but offer very little in terms of furthering the argument. It is also noteworthy that they do not flinch from critiquing the colleagues who also feature in the same book, as an idealizing and homogenizing group that has shown "diversity rather than conformity" (p. 181).

Palfrey and Gasser, whose *Born Digital* (2008) has been the guide for lay readers to understand the nuances and complexities of the area, in their essay, begin by acknowledging that "digital natives" is an awkward term. However, they argue, it is still a term that resonates deeply with parents and educators, and that this resonance should not be taken lightly by researchers. Their decision was to use this term, albeit with caution and discretion, strategically to refer to a small subset of young people and the gamut of relationships and engagements they have with digital technologies. The suggestion is to use the term and in every usage, look at the unevennesses and awkwardness it creates, thus actually unpacking an otherwise opaque relationship which is reduced to "usage" or "access." Their concerns are more about the quality of information and access, infrastructure for critical literacy and digital fluency, and making legible these everyday practices to larger implications for a future that they posit is bright and hopeful.

Deconstructing Digital Natives is an interesting revisit of a term that has grown in different ways through the first decade of the new millennium. However, the book still remains located in the same geopolitics in which the early discourse of digital natives were grounded—developed, privileged locations where connectivity, affordability, and ubiquitous digital literacy are taken for granted—reminiscent of the frantic cries one hears in piracy markets in Bangkok, "same, same, but different." The revisiting does not seem to feel the need to explore other contexts. A few essays talk about factoring in local and contextual information in understanding digital natives, but the scholarship reinforces the idea of how technologies shape and are shaped by identities in some parts of the world, and that these identities can be heralded as universally viable, with a little nuancing.

The questions that have emerged in this discourse in the recent years, remain ignored. What does a digital native look like in the Global South? Can we have new concepts and frameworks which emerge from these contexts? Is it possible to produce accounts in languages and ideas that are embedded in everyday practices rather than forcing them to become legible in existing vocabularies? One would hope that the next book that deconstructs digital natives would also deconstruct the prejudices, presumptions, and methodological processes that are embedded in this field.

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Nishant Shah is the Director-Research at the Bangalore-based Centre for Internet and Society. He is the principal researcher for a Global South inquiry into digital natives and sociopolitical change, and recently edited four-volume book, *Digital AlterNatives with a Cause?*, which is available as a free download at http://cis-india.org/digital-natives/blog/dnbook. Correspondence to: Nishant Shah, Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore, India. E-mail: nishant@cis-india.org