

Position Papers

# Digital Natives with a Cause? Thinkathon

6 – 8 December 2010, The Hague  
Museum for Communication



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# Preface

The emergence of digital and Internet technologies have changed the world as we know it. Processes of interpersonal relationships, social communication, economic expansion, political protocols and governmental mediation are all undergoing a significant translation, across the world, in developed and emerging Information and Knowledge societies. These processes also affect the ways in which social transformation, political participation and interventions for development take place.

The Digital Natives with a Cause? research inquiry seeks to look at the potentials of social change and political participation through technology practices of people in emerging ICT contexts. It particularly aims to address knowledge gaps that exist in the scholarship, practice and popular discourse around an increasing usage, adoption and integration of digital and Internet technologies in social transformation processes.

The programme has three main components. The first is to incorporate the users (often young, but not always so) as stakeholders in the construction of policies and discourse which affect their lives in very material ways. The second is to capture, with a special emphasis on change, different relationships with and deployment of technologies in different parts of the world. The third is to further extend the network of knowledge stakeholders where scholars,

practitioners, policy makers and the Digital Natives themselves, come together in dialogue to identify the needs and interventions in this field.

In the late summer of 2010 two workshops, in Taiwan and South Africa, brought together 50 Digital Natives from Asia and Africa to place their practice in larger social and political legacies and frameworks. The 'Talking Back' workshop in Taiwan looked at the politics, implications and processes of talking back and being political and the 'My Bubble, My Voice and My Space' workshop in Johannesburg looked at change, change processes and the role of Digital Natives in it.

For the Digital Natives with a Cause? Thinkathon that will be held in The Hague, The Netherlands from 6 to 8 December 2010, Digital Natives from the workshops in Taipei and Johannesburg have provided us with their take on social change and political participation in the following position papers. They look at issues of: what does it mean to be a Digital Native? What is the relationship of people growing up with new technologies and change? What are the processes by which change is produced? Can you institutionalize Digital Natives with a Cause Activities? How do you make it sustainable in each context?

We hope you will find the Digital Natives with a Cause? position papers inspiring, thought-provoking and challenging.

[www.digitalnatives.in](http://www.digitalnatives.in)

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# Knowing a Name: Methodologies & Challenges

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## A rose by any other name...

When we first began our research inquiry into Digital Natives discourse, practice and policy, the first thoughts were about Shakespeare. If one is persistent enough, one might be able to prove that William Shakespeare actually coined the term but the dubious claim to fame goes to Mark Prensky who developed 'Digital Natives' as a way of identifying a new demography for markets to focus on. According to him, and then many others who mistook his description as definition – 'populations born after the 1980's' at face value — have contributed to the growing discourse on Digital Natives. They haven't always used the phrase 'Digital Natives' – Generation Y (Stanat, 2005), Strawberry Generation (Shah, 2009), Born Digital (Gasser and Palfrey, 2008), Wired Generation (Kot, 2009), Mobile Maniacs (Sweeny, 2009), Techno-tots (Turkle, 1998) – the litany of names is long and each one has a particular set of expectations and anxieties around a group of people who are growing up with new technologies (largely digital and web based) and recalibrating existing human-technology-society relationships in ways that almost always seem novel and unprecedented. And yet, as Shakespeare wrote, that we call a Rose, by any other name shall smell as sweet, or stink as much!

And that's what has happened with the Digital Natives. Instead of focusing on the semantic and epistemic problems with the name (splitting code and hair), I begin with looking at 'Digital Natives' as a placeholder; an umbrella term that accommodates all the different characterisations of a generation that is Growing up Digital (Tapscott, 2008). Because, despite the difference in naming, the methods of understanding/ analysing these populations and the frameworks through which they are understood, remain unchallenged, and often contained in vocabulary and perspectives which are analogue and unable to account for the succession of changes that the rapid evolution of Information and Communication Technologies have produced across the world, in varying degrees, in the last decade. In the initial study *Digital Natives with a Cause?* (Shah and Abraham, 2009) that initiated the research project, we found that despite the many books, articles, editorials, policies and approaches taken to understanding the usage, adoption, deployment and integration of digital technologies by young users in their everyday life, the core group of ideas was startlingly homogeneous. Almost all discourse – whether in theory or practice – concentrated on a few select stories (the names changed, the locations changed, but the stories remained the same) and that these stories were inadvertently located in a small White, English speaking, yuppie population that had extraordinary access to digital and Internet resources even when compared with peers in their own countries. These super star narratives produced

a set of non-dialectic dichotomies that put the young users in a bind. On the one hand were narratives of euphoria, where every new gadget, new tool, new instance of adoption and ab/use was celebrated as the ringing in the new, the ushering of the age of dawn; the euphoria almost couched in the language reminiscent of the promise of the Revolution in the early twentieth century. These superstars are going to change the world, reconfigure the universe, live in digital data streams and cure all that is wrong with our society. They are the champion of causes, they build new economies, they overhaul societies and they produce new, active, involved humanitarian governments. Researchers, scholars, practitioners, parents and governments have all celebrated the growth of this population that is always painted as liberal, progressive, passionate and committed with a cause on their sleeve.

The euphoria narrative is countered by the growing tales of despair. Disciplines as varied as sociology, anthropology, youth studies, media studies, education, neuroscience and medicine have now vigorously produced stories of apathy where again, a bunch of superstars (notorious but with star value nonetheless) stand in for the deep and dire dangers that these young generations are in. They are addicted, distracted, lack political consciousness or empathy, and are so seduced by immersive webs that they are neglecting their apportioned role in societies. Parents lament about how their teenagers no longer talk to them and prefer to 'escape' in violent video games. Teachers give sound bytes about students with falling grades, who lack concentration powers and spend their time reading things on the Net rather than burying their noses in the thick volumes of Huckleberry Finn that they should be consuming. Governments are worried that the lack of control they have over the remix and piracy cultures that most of the young technology users are involved in, is leading to a stage of anarchy. The Screenagers (Tapscott, 2008) are on the brink of an apocalyptic world which will be run by Multinational Information Organisations which cater to their information and gratification needs and keep them dissociated from all sense of reality and politics.

Both these narratives propel the discourse around Digital Natives in predictable ones. They help form policies that are pro-censorship and surveillance. They inform practice, at a meta and an everyday level, which is geared towards rehabilitating the Digital Native to an analogue world. They force the Digital Natives to be productive and a part of the neo-liberal economic paradigm that ICT enabled globalisation is championing and seeks to eradicate down-time or leisure. At the heart of both these very contradictory approaches, however, remain a common set of concerns. *The Digital*

*Natives with a Cause?* Knowledge Programme identifies these common concerns and in there, recognise the problems, both in methodology and frameworks which have been used to study, understand and analyse the field of Digital Natives.

The first and most significant problem is that most of this discourse is produced by people who make no claims (or have none) to be Digital Natives themselves. Scholars, practitioners and policy makers who are not only unfamiliar with the technologies but are often confounded by the usage and adoption, produce their anxieties/euphoria based on their imagination of the technologies rather than an understanding of the relationships that these technologies foster. The approach has always been one of finding extraordinary tales, using older devices of 'fact finding' and 'story telling' as means of accessing the unintelligible and the incomprehensible, making it into a population argument rather than accepting it as a personal problem of understanding. Uncharitable as this position sounds, it is one that needs to be taken, especially when one hears constant narratives of addiction, danger and escapism. Even a cursory look at history of technologies tell us that these are not newfound arguments; that 600 years ago, during the print revolution, same arguments were made about the abundance of mass-produced books, or that more than 2000 years ago, these were the kind of arguments that Plato captured in his imagination of performative and imitative arts. And yet, the cacophony of anxiety ridden narratives, produced towards self-glorification, as the saviour of this new population, continues to populate popular media. The evidence is always based on a small sample of users who are not even, often, representative of their own peer groups.

This ties in, immediately with the second problem: that the young users who become the 'native informants' for these projects remain only that – bearers of information and practice which is heavily mediated by political agendas. It is very rare, for a young user of technology, with his/her own Point of View (POV) to be a strident voice in this field. Sure, there is a huge effort at including the young in these processes, but most of the times, they become mimics to find legitimacy, or simply tokens of participation without any significant power or voice. Like in earlier 'native' studies, the Digital Natives find themselves subject of research, placeholders for abstract ideas which do not relate to, connect with or try to understand their everyday practice and relationship with technology. Subject to buzzwords like access, adoption and usage, they remain contained only as people who 'use' technology, instead of people whose lives are structured around the new paradigms of technology.



The third problem around which this position paper is structured is then, about what constitutes a Digital Native and why we chose to stay with this category, despite the problems it offers so easily. The problem is manifold. On the first level, it deals with the questions of authorship and ownership, of legitimacy and power because the existing definitions of Digital Native are actually descriptions which favour a very small percentage of the population that is online. On the second, it probes at the 'causes' that Digital Natives espouse. Is any user of technology a Digital Native or is there a way of mapping transformation – both at the level of subjectivity and the social – where a Digital Native becomes one? In other words, can we start escaping the age bound, youth-centric discourse (though it is possible that it will be the young who dominate the discourse) and think of the Digital Native as intrinsically bound to the idea of a cause? The third, and more at the level of identity politics and philosophy, can we define the condition of 'Being Digital' as transcending the interface ideas of access, clicks and high tech and start focusing on how the politics and aesthetics of new technologies have material consequences which help us better define and understand what it means to be a Digital Native. Especially, one with a cause.

It is this discourse – found in scholarly publications, appearing in popular bestsellers, and often sprouting up in popular media as editorials – is what this paper finds itself responding to. An exhaustive account of all the different interlocutors is impossible (perhaps futile), and is not being attempted. Instead, it is focusing on some of the common, unquestioned presumptions and positions that the discourse has taken. In the process, it shall also look at the learnings from the *Digital Natives with a Cause?* Knowledge Programme and how an alternative framework of understanding this field, combined with new processes of producing knowledge might help us in looking at the relationships between young users of technology (as opposed to young people who use technology) and the changing notion of change in a rapidly digitising world.

## Dilemmas of a Found Name

*'Don't stand chattering to yourself like that,' Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, 'but tell me your name and your business.'*

*'My name is Alice, but --'*

*'It's a stupid name enough!' Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. 'What does it mean?'*

*'Must a name mean something?' Alice asked doubtfully.*

*'Of course it must,' Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: 'my name means the shape I am -- and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.'*

**Lewis Carroll, *Through The Looking Glass*, 1872**

In an ideal world, names are coined by the people who claim the name. In regular world, most names are coined by people who need to make sense of people who are different or not like them. Digital Natives is no different. Over the last decade, the name Digital Native (or a variation thereof) has been bandied around by many different stakeholders to refer to a plethora of populations and practices. There has been some critique made of the name: The name obviously exoticises the users of technology. It produces a very clear digital divide (which is never very clear, really) and favours those who have unlimited and privileged access to high technologies. It does an even bigger disservice to the 'immigrants' who were actually the people who shaped and designed the early Internet. It reduces the user of technology as merely a consumer (or a prosumer, if we want to keep up with the marketing lingo) with more interest in the content and the networking rather than in fundamental issues of privacy, openness, etc. There were, in fact, more reasons to search for an alternative name rather than stick with this particular nomenclature. In fact, some of the spaces that have championed and indeed popularised the 'Digital Native' idea have already moved in search of another name that will be more 'neutral' and describe the population that they are trying to study and understand.

However, there is a certain politics of disengagement that made us uncomfortable.



To disengage is to try and pretend that the term does not exist, that it has not been in vogue since at least one decade now. To disengage is to gloss over a legacy and fail to see the basic problems with the nomenclature and usage and to move on to something else. Most problematically, to disengage was to go and search for yet another name which would, in due time, produce equal amounts of problems. We decided to recognise that there is violence in epistemology. To name is to identify, but to name also means to contain, to set limits, to define and then try and make intelligible the object being named. It seemed to be a double loss then, because to disengage would mean to dissociate from the history, which, with all its faults and problems, still informs our contemporary understanding of Digital Natives. It would also mean that we would be searching for another name that the population we are trying to engage with will not contribute to, because the need to name is the need of the researcher or of the practitioner or policy maker and not of the person who is being studied. Hence, any other name, like the rose, would only stink as much.

In order to repeat the process of epistemic violence (lessons learned from gender and sexuality rights history), we decided to stay with the name Digital Natives. We were already reflexive about three things:

1. This is not a name that a majority of the Digital Natives are going to use for themselves.
2. That it is a name that has a problem; but all names have problems and
3. That the name has a legacy, but we would rather engage with the legacy than disown it.

From this condition, an interesting discursive realisation and process started. We started looking at the very presumptions that go into the making of a Digital Native. The discourse is filled with descriptions of who a Digital Native is (it is more oriented towards what a Digital Native does, but we can extrapolate) and there were a few common presumptions that emerged. The Digital Native was necessarily young. The Digital Native was supposed to 'grow up' with digital technologies, creating a mythical world where analogue technologies are not a part of their psyche. The Digital Native had linguistic, cultural, economic and geo-political resources to be constantly connected, on the information highway, creating multi-verses and forging networks and staying in a parallel, if not an exclusive immersive web environment.

This was the baggage that the found name came with. And it was this baggage that we

decided to unpack. Instead of leaving it in the academic archive of lost-and-found, we decided to start dismantling these presumptions and layer, nuance, question, stretch, and morph the found name with meanings that were not necessarily present in the earlier descriptions. It was a way of reclaiming and appropriating the name, this time producing an epistemic violence, not on the people the name was tagged to, but to the name itself, forcing it to open up to new interpretations and processes of meaning making.

Instead of beginning with an idea that "X is Digital Native" and then going out in search of technology superstars to fit the bracket so that X marks the Digital Native, we began with a different process. "Digital Native does not mean anything in particular" but who are the people who find resonances with that name and how do they relate to it? What are their imaginations of a Digital Native about being a Digital Native? What happens when somebody finds a found name, that is not of their own coinage that has (perhaps) negative connotations, but still holds something of value for them? What is this value? How will they interpret it? And more importantly, if the 'found name' is not a definition, but just a placeholder, how will they claim it to mean what they want it to mean? Drawing inspiration from Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty who told a bewildered Alice, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less" we decided to use the found name, Digital Natives to see what we can choose it to mean and find partners on the way.

The two workshops and the umpteen conversations, online and physically, have all pondered upon this question. The politics of the Found Name and the ability to reinterpret it led to some interesting ideas about what it means to be a Digital Native if you don't have to be a Digital Native. Through the two workshops held in Taipei and Johannesburg<sup>1</sup>, with 45 participants from more than 25 Asian and African countries, many different answers and suggestions came in<sup>2</sup>.

A Digital Native is not perhaps just a user of digital technologies, but a person who has realised the possibilities and potentials of digital technologies in his/her environments. There was a need to stop talking about the Digital Native as anybody who has access to technologies and start imagining it as a privileged, conscious and reflexive identity. This particular crafting of the Digital Native identity was clearly linked to the idea of a cause. It suggested that the Digital Native needs to be defined by his/her causes. However, this is not an exclusionary position which demands that only the young who can validate themselves as agents of social change (the superstars we talked about earlier)

who can carry the legacies of existing social movements be identified as Digital Natives. These causes do not have to conform to any one definition of good or bad. They can range from something as personal and leisure time as collecting rare edition books and scouring for them on ebay<sup>3</sup> to bringing about huge social change in the condition of minorities. The cause is just a site where the subjective transformation resulting from the presence of digital technologies and an integral relationship with them, leads to recognition that their lives are significantly (re)structured because of the relationship. Such an idea defies the youth-centric, age-based, discriminatory discourse of those who are 'Born Digital' and instead offers an alternative about those who are 'Being Digital'.

Being Digital talks of a condition of 'Digitality' where it is the integration of digital and web based technologies – the aesthetics, the politics, the processes – into everyday life that is important. Such an understanding also helps break the rhetoric of access and infrastructure that surrounds Digital Natives debates. Almost all discussions of Digital Natives in the South or in emerging information societies, eventually boils down to better infrastructure, bandwidth and computing power so that the young in these geo-political contexts can become like the 'true' Digital Natives that exist in the North-West. Such an 'uplift' approach only marks the activities and processes of Digital Natives in emerging contexts as inferior and in need of help. However, as the various conversationalists suggested, it is not about high technology, but about strategic use of technology that makes one a Digital Native. A Digital Native doesn't necessarily need the latest ipads and high definition mobile interfaces. It is about how they can mobilise and utilise the technologies at their disposal, and more importantly, how they use the lessons learned through technologies to augment the causes they espouse.

This also puts to rest the old Virtual Reality – Real Life debates that have haunted cyber cultures theory and practice for almost four decades now. It seems common sense that these kind of artificial divisions would have been dropped by now, and while they are not ostentatiously talked about, they do resurface, every now and then in disguised forms. The latest has been in a series of well intentioned editorials by Malcolm Gladwell (2010) whose recent 'Why the Revolution shall not be tweeted' stands in example for a whole lot of less impressive writing which introduces the problem of VR and RL repeatedly. Gladwell, in that much circulated editorial talks about a student movement of 1960s against racial discrimination where the denial of service to one black student in a restaurant in the USA led to a massive mobilisation of black (and non-black) people to come out in protest. Gladwell uses that as an example of a 'real' revolution as against the 'Twitter revolution' in Tehran. While Gladwell's point of how just being on twitter is

not going to lead to a revolution is well taken, one almost thinks fondly, that had he been around in the 1960s, when the 'real' revolution took place, he would have written an editorial on 'Why the Revolution shall not be written / talked'. His current position seems to suggest that the Digital Natives only tweet and that nobody actually participates in material practices of mobilisation, protest and subversion.

The problem with the kind of position that Gladwell and all the cronies he stands for, is that they imagine a surgically cut world where the clickers on the web and the marchers on the streets are two different people. They confuse the tools of mobilisation (Twitter) with the site of protest (the physical geo-political context). And hence, come up with positions which not only fail to understand the role of technology but also add to the smug idea of the Digital Native as a slacktivist who only exists in digital realms. One wonders why Gladwell cannot imagine how much more powerful, how much more far reaching, and how much rapider the 1960s revolution would have been if the original sit-in student protesters could not only mobilise their own communities on twitter but also inherit the massive support of networks through Friends Of A Friends (FOAF) structure.

Another Gladwellian presumption is that social movements only operate on 'deep ties' of trust, belonging and personal relationships as opposed to the 'weak ties' on Facebook and Twitter where you don't 'know' half the people on your list. This idea of the social movements as being run and orchestrated by a small set of superstars does great disservice to the everyday supporter who actually becomes the wealth of the movement because there is strength in numbers. He fails to understand the power of networks, the strength of lurkers, the possibilities of tapping into people who might not be like us, who we do not know, but can still be mobilised to support a cause and hankers about a nostalgic (romanticised) past where wars were won by generals and not the teeming armies. This is the baggage that the name has come with and it is time to unpack it; it is time to let go of this demand to only identifying champions and time to focus on the Everyday Digital Native.

# The Everyday Digital Native

In order to understand the Everyday Digital Native, I am going to take a theoretical underpass. I do this because the phrase 'Everyday Digital Native' seems too commonplace and commonsensical – something that we might read casually in a newspaper without pausing for a thought. However, I do not use it to mean an 'average' or a 'typical' Digital Native; far from it. In fact, I present to you, an 'Everyday Digital Native' as a materially understood identity, which, while being similar to the 'Digital Native', fundamentally challenges the ways in which the Digital Native has been framed and understood. The Everyday Digital Native offers insight into the knowledge gaps and lacunae that inform the superficially robust scholarship on Digital Natives and retains its relationship with this category, not to accrue meaning but to foundationally subvert the existing discourse on Digital Natives and their practices.

Michel Foucault (because in each life, some Foucault should fall), in his extraordinary pronouncements on language and the end of the sovereign philosopher<sup>4</sup>(1980), makes an observation that perhaps captures the essence of the quest for an everyday Digital Native. Foucault, writing about the inadequacy of contemporary language to account for a historicity that has now escaped us, through processes of denial, disavowal and distance, says,

This age of commentary in which we live, this historical redoubling from which there seems no escape, does not indicate the velocity of our language in a field now devoid of new philosophical objects, which must be constantly re-crossed in a forgetful and always rejuvenated glance (41).

He seems to suggest that the quest for the superstar, the messiah, the saviour or the eternal hero in the contemporary who will provide us both with a closure of the past and a hope of the future (thus constantly producing dialectics and becoming the yoke that holds the two twines together), is a futile one. Because, embedded in that quest is an over-determined importance of language which seeks to substitute the lack of an object of inquiry or interest that can make sense of the contemporary. To make this train of thought more concrete and to place it in our discussions around Digital Natives, Foucault's argument would be that the quest for replacing the 'Digital Native' as a foundational category of investigation with another category is redundant. Moreover, the selected (often privileged) people who are forced to become the pall bearers of this category, which is simultaneously mired in hope and despair, leads to a negation of

everybody else who forms a part of this everydayness which gets posited as the abstract.

And for him, this particular mode of research and inquiry point to the 'inadequacy, the profound silence, of a philosophical language that has been chased from its natural element, from its original dialectics, by the novelties found in its domain (42).' Following this argument, the quest should not really be to replace a problematic category – Digital Natives – with another, which would only be a linguistic replacement in a language system which is non-representative of the category being examined. The quest, instead, should be to look at the silences, the gaps in knowledge, and the resilient reticence of voices that are present in their silence, or absent in their articulation. Or to put it more simply, instead of attempting to go and search for exceptional stories of Digital Native triumph or failure, the inquiry should try and look at the problems in the frameworks that have been used to define Digital Natives. Because it is in this process that we find a philosophy (or rationale) 'which regains its speech and... finds itself either in a purified metalanguage or in the thickness of words enclosed by their darkness, by their blind truth (44).'

This slight detour through some fairly dense theory and philosophical observations, for me, is important, because in many ways it explains the Everyday Digital Native, not as a naturalised Digital Native or simply a non-super star Digital Native. The Everyday Digital Native is not intended to be a non-important or a non-active identity. Instead, it helps me posit the Everyday Digital Native as essentially that which is neglected, ignored, glossed over or made invisible in the current practices of Digital Natives scholarship and research, which subsequently informs the practice and policy in the area.

Most scholarship and research methodology around Digital Natives has appropriated a language that is dissociated from the realms within which Digital Natives operate. The language of choice is one that is either borrowed from social and civic action legacies or from developmental agenda. In the process, the kinds of engagement that the Digital Natives have with their everyday technologies (and the paraphernalia that come with them) find intelligibility in languages and articulations that do not account for their own subjective and affective ambitions and desires. The frameworks that are deployed pre-define what it means to be political, what the processes that lead to change are, and what the role of an individual is in effecting social transformation. These frameworks capture the Digital Natives in an unchanging political landscape, ignoring the new ways in which they naturalise their own practice and engagement with their

immediate environments and constantly producing narratives of inadequacy, loss and non-engagement for the Digital Natives. In the distancing of the language from the practice, a robust silence (a knowledge gap) gets produced, which becomes increasingly difficult to fathom or bridge.

The everyday Digital Native, then, is the subject that the knowledge gap does not even recognise because the gap does not have the language or the framework to acknowledge his/her existence. The lack of vocabulary combined with the forced matrices of intelligibility result in the everyday Digital Native as a category of exclusion, erasure and invisibility. This is why, almost all Digital Natives discourse (in theory or in practice) always revolves around a handful of people and stories which can validate the older language references. This is why, the more nuanced questions of what it means to be a Digital Native, what it means to have a cause, and what are the new avenues of political participation and engagement that the integral relationships with digital and Internet technologies are producing, remain not only unasked but also unacknowledged. It is an ambition of this Knowledge Programme to start asking this question about the everyday.

However, to ask this question, one also needs to re-appropriate and recalibrate, not only the language but also seek the new terms through which this object of inquiry needs to be approached. As Foucault writes,

This separation (of the language from the object of inquiry) and real incompatibility (between the frameworks of meaning making and the actual material practices) is the actual distance...that we must focus our attention (45). (Parentheses Mine).

Because this absence does not yet have the power to give rise to a new language, and hence the language and framework we build should draw from existing discourse but learn to morph and extend the meanings of existing vocabulary till new and strong concepts emerge, which are natural to the practices (of the Digital Natives) being studied, to give an account of the contemporary through a dialectic understanding of the past and the future.

And the last question that needs to be posed in this philosophical debate is, for Foucault, the question: '[W]ho is the philosopher who will now begin to speak?' Do we continue to put our faith only in the philosopher who has realised 'we are not everything', learned the inadequacy of his/her own fluency in a language that is now

separated from him/her? Or is it time to find new spaces of knowledge production – spaces with new voices (perhaps the everyday) that strive, and resiliently, tentatively, produce new perspectives, grammars and alternatives to imagine the landscape of Digital Natives and their causes?

This need to find the Digital (alter)Natives is at the heart of the Knowledge Programme, as it seeks to not only bind theory and practice in a discursive trope but also to excavate through fissures, abrupt descents and broken contours, misshapen and crag-like language forms that are possessed, manipulated and articulated by the Everyday Digital Native, instead of the earlier process where the Philosopher (researcher /practitioner / policy maker) only used his/her unnatural language to account for the Digital Native that would become either a saviour or a degenerate entity, always separated from his/her material practices because the language was unable to account for it. And thus, in an attempt to discover these languages (which are not really languages but articulations and ideas), the programme invited Digital Natives (or people who claimed to be DNs) to start a conversation to re-articulate what it means to be a Digital Native with a Cause.

## Digital (alter) Natives<sup>5</sup>

What then emerges, from our journey so far? It is obvious, as we had presumed that Digital Natives are only Digital Natives in as much as they engage with a found name that is offered to them, and try it out for size. It is also obvious, from our conversations that there is no one-size-fits-all coherent Digital Native and that the causes they espouse and the ideologies they subscribe to are even more varied. The similarities, if one were to forcefully look for them, are not even in the platforms and gadgets that they occupy and deploy. The relationships with technologies, the strategic use of different technology solutions and the integration of technology as central to their lives is equally varied, subject to personal skills, desires, contexts and causes. Age, education, language or class, while they do bolster a feeling of flocks of a feather, are not the necessary common points either. Given this almost individualistic relationship with the digital and Internet technologies (something that the emergence of Web 2.0 aesthetics have fore-grounded) and the insistence on interpreting processes like mobilisation, representation, politicisation, and change as fiercely subjective, it almost seems futile to try and consolidate a Digital Native identity and think of the roles that they might play in processes of change in their immediate environments.

When first faced with this post-modern landscape of fractured, broken, and disjointed identity, there were days of despair. The earlier questions of what constitutes a Digital Native identity, how we understand them as e-agents of change, what are the ways in which they engage with and relate to technologies, and how they can be supported as active stakeholders in processes of change, seem to collapse. While we did get many answers, instead of the expected harmonious chorus, we were faced with a cacophony of voices, each rooted in its own practice, its experiences, its expectations and its processes. It seemed to us that the 'found name' was becoming a forced name and that it might not have any coherent placeholders or material embodiments even as the world turns digital.

And yet, from this fractal frustration, emerged a pattern is informed, partly by our own realisation that we were asking the wrong questions, and partly by the common core that bound the Digital Natives, in their very varied self-articulations, which remained unanswered by the questions we posed, but emerged in the questions they asked of themselves. Hence, we learned to tweak our own framework, and we also quickly learned to facilitate open spaces of discussion, crowd-sourcing the research, by creating spaces of dialogue rather than scripted narratives of question-answer patterns. The other papers that accompany me in this book, will tackle these questions which I only briefly chart out in their transitions:

YiPing (Zona) Tsou from Taiwan and Simeon Oriko from Kenya tackle the question that we began with, "**What constitutes a Digital Native identity?**" This quickly took the form of "**How do I relate to this found name – Digital Native?**" It was a new way of looking at the discourse – not to squabble about whether or not one is a Digital Native and who is or is not. Instead, it led to new ways of understanding relationship with names and processes by which they can be re-appropriated to include people who were previously kept outside the fold.

The focus on how we understand *the relationship between change and technology* became more nuanced as the people who claimed a **Digital Native identity, re-defined what change means** and how they envision it. Cole Flor from Phillipines engages with this, refusing to take on the mantle of expectations which are thrust upon them and instead started to explain what change means to them. Dialogue, discourse, exchange, responsibility and change were all firmly linked together and they showed new ways by which conditions, processes, ambitions, impacts and measurement of change need to be significantly re-visited in the light of Digital aesthetics that they embody in their everyday lives.

Our earlier concern about locating **Digital Natives as e-agents** of change led to their discussion on **what it means to be political and how they engage with their causes** without necessarily identifying that process as political. Eschewing the idea of broadcast based political movements and civic action (one superstar and a hoard of followers), they proposed Politics as inherent to their ways of networking, collaborating, P2P learning and harnessing of distributed powers – what Howard Rheingold (2001), so cryptically called, 'Smart Mobs'. They also emphasised that the mainstream legacy movements concentrate only on larger structures and often preclude other affective parts of being political, such as empathy, care, exchange and negotiation. Prabhas Pokharel from Nepal and Nonkululeko Godana from South Africa, explore this idea in their papers, looking at everyday practices within Web 2.0 realms to envision the role that Digital Natives play as agents of change from within their own contexts.

The initial questions around what structures can be created to inspire the youth to participate in processes of change as active stakeholders, found a more nuanced understanding: That many young people are already stakeholders in processes of change, that political and social subjectivities are leading to new discursive cloud-based change, and that the efforts have to be about consolidating the processes rather than mediating their expectations and ambitions of change. Amine Taha from Morocco unravels how the need is not to identify particular areas of change (because change, like politics, is personal and subjective) but to recognise the processes by which change can be brought about and discuss the logistical, financial and intellectual infrastructure which can be developed to facilitate and augment their strengths while connecting them up with other peers and mentors to think through more difficult problems.

Our older conversations about other relevant key-players and stakeholders in the field of youth and transformation elicited a strong response against institutionalisation which seeks to impose top-heavy frameworks and models of working which more often than not, destroy the impulses, momentum and the passions that first motivate the Digital Natives to espouse a cause. Maesy Angelina from Indonesia explores the idea of looking at the mashed-up processes of networking, belonging and working that the new digital technologies produce, as new models of collaboration: Collectives and Communities over Institutions and Organisations.

# A Space in search of a Cause

*I call our world Flatland, not because we call it so, but to make its nature clearer to you, my happy readers, who are privileged to live in Space. Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and other figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it, very much like shadows — only hard and with luminous edges — and you will then have a pretty correct notion of my country and countrymen.*

**Edwin Abbot**, *Flatland*, 1884

Different Digital Native stakeholders – practitioners, researchers, students, activists, bloggers, tweeters, educators – have contributed to the ideas that I have consolidated here. This position paper comes as a culmination of this long journey, of posing questions, of learning to pose them differently, of finding answers that lead to more questions, and charting the field of Digital Natives and Change, in new, unexpected and (sometimes) startling ways.

I want to posit these questions, not in an abstract theoretical form (though they are informed by abstract theoretical forms) but as concrete, material queries that need to be fleshed out more. And to do this, I am going to imagine a space like Flatland that Edwin Abbot described in the eponymous novel. I use the Flatland example because space has been of significant crisis in Digital Natives discourse. From flights of fantasy which locate the Digital Natives only within digital and virtual spaces, to the idea of global citizens and hyper-territorial activism, the idea of material Space or the lack thereof, has been a part of the field. The many efforts at trying to anchor these Digital Natives have been at building physical spaces – organisations, institutions, local groups, etc. in order to make sense of their practices from the vantage point of traditional development paradigms.

However, in our conversations, we have learned that it is better to imagine the Digital Natives landscape as a Flatland – not to indicate that they have no dimensions, or that they reside only on the interface – but to imagine a free floating space, which is at once improbable and real, and where the different elements that constitute older forms of change processes, are present but in a fluid, moving way where they can reconnect, recalibrate and relate to each other in new and unprecedented form. The idea of such a space serves at least two valuable purposes.

First, it allows us to recognise that despite their many points of departure and newness, the elements that form a part of Digital Native processes of change are not necessarily new. Mobilisation, Awareness, Representation, Campaigning, Strategic subversion, protest, empowerment – the ideas remain the same. However, their relationship, both with the tools used and the ways in which people participate in these processes, have undergone a radical restructuring. Which means, that the apocryphal generational gap which is being codified between Digital Natives – Immigrants – Settlers – Outcasts, is not as unbridgeable as it sounds. If we imagine a space that Digital Natives activities can occupy and work from, we realise that the older generations and stakeholders have a significant role to play in helping build these ideas and evolving them in interesting ways.

Second, it roots the Digital Natives in a context and series of material practices. It recognises the power of remote mobilisation and access but also identifies a need for a knowledge hub, an incubation space for social ideas if you like, which does not put out prescriptive models of working for Digital Natives but instead offers a space that facilitates their processes through intellectual and infrastructure collaboration. Within such a space, new questions can find a voice and a solution, which is not alienated either from the practice or from the contexts of origin. It enables knowledge networks to develop which feed into practice, that furthers the knowledge about Digital Natives, their causes, and the processes by which they materialise these ambitions for change.

And it is this Space that we hope to build as the Knowledge Programme unfolds.



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<sup>1</sup> The workshop in Taipei titled 'Talking Back' was conducted in collaboration with the Academia Sinica and the Frontier Foundation; The workshop in Johannesburg was conducted in collaboration with The African Commons Project and the Link Centre, Witwatersand University.

<sup>2</sup> The proceedings from the workshops are available at <http://www.digitalnatives.in>

<sup>3</sup> One of the most popular auction sites online that allows users to bid for a range of items to purchase them.

<sup>4</sup> Mistaken by some as the end of Philosophy and hence meaning itself, though that is definitely not what Foucault is charting out.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this phrase from Nonkululeko Godana, who coined it on a Twitter message at the Johannesburg workshop. Godana is one of the contributors for this book.

(Re)formatting  
Social Transformation  
in the Age of Digital  
Representation:  
On the Relationship  
of Technologies and  
Social Transformation

YiPing (Zona) Tsou

# Introduction

To write a position paper without a definite, fixed position is hard; however, since I was born in between the pre and post digital revolution, witnessing the best and worst scenario, I'd like to argue that being in-between as a potential position for examining the transformation and engaging in change.

Technically speaking (according to Marc Prensky's definition of course), I was more of a digital immigrant than a digital native. Or rather, I'd call myself a being-in-between in this digital phenomenon since I was born in the so-called digital age and yet the digital revolution didn't in effect exert its all-encompassing influence upon Taiwan until the late '90s. In school, I was required to use computers to produce all of my reports, papers and presentation and turned in assignments via email or uploaded them to a certain platform such as 'Blackboard' while hand-written reports were simply unacceptable. It was like a reprogramming process that I've been undergoing along with my peers in this society.

## 0.0 The Social is Personal?

I can't help but wonder, since when the use/literacy of digital technology has come to constitute our "I" identity? How (or more curiously, why) do we identify with this newly assigned label "digital natives"? The dominant discourses about digital natives are defined mostly by age, denoting a new generation born after the advent of digital technology. Do they assume only the youth are deeply affected and formatted by these new technologies? If this is related to the behaviour, I have witnessed the previous generation, the ones who are designated as "digital immigrants" yet are more radically transformed by digital technology. Take my mother for a most palpable example: instead of the TV set, the centre of her universe now is the PC. The first thing she does every morning is to turn on her PC, watch video clips on Youtube, monitor the stock market and update her blog where she makes net-pals via message board and learns from them how to encrypt html and embed flash images to beautify her webpage. She forwards Internet jokes and links to her friends all the time, and actually spends more hours online than in bed. When her computer crashes, she screams "No No No! My memory! My life! Oh, everything is gone!"

Of course, I believe there are some differences between the digital users, but perhaps, the age is not the only factor. Or perhaps it is more related to the mindset towards digital technologies? Instead of unpacking what makes a digital native, I am going to propose that the phrase is everything and anything, devoid and denuded, infused and installed with new meanings. When the judgment of this name itself is temporarily suspended here, the phenomenon of this happening, this desire to name surfaces for exploration, for in fact, the very act of naming entails there is something new in emergence, unaccounted for, be it a concept or an actual individual/group/entity, a proper name is called for its surfacing, hence confirming its existence.

The rise and spread of the Internet, the ongoing digital revolution, and the changing global context have altogether reconfigured the conventional concepts of readership and writing in particular. For a growing generation of "users" rather than simply readers or writers, we are not only rewriting the concept of a text on the Internet but also constructing new spaces of dissemination and reformatting engaging modes with every edit and hit of a webpage online. The Internet and digital culture are virtually transforming reading practices and textual politics by shifting reader response from interpretation to appropriation, and thereby liberating the reader from the authority of the text and turning reading from a relatively passive act of consumption into a far

more active engagement with any work as both a site and an incentive for actions that are not just transgressive but often creative. The once clear-drawn line between author/reader is now in flux, constantly sliding in between.

## 1.0 Poetics of B!ing-in-Between

It is in this awareness of moving-in-between that I realize how the Web has not only virtually reprogrammed the way we think, talk, act and interact with the work but also reformatted our understanding of everyday life surrounded by all sorts of digital technologies. In an age of information overload/overflow, messages are almost already mediated through the Web, and we grow accustomed to a chain of thought that draws on "keywords" as a point of departure, and in the process, this non-linear structure of connectivity, point-to-point leap of association, is so embedded in our logic routine that it serves not merely as a method for searching online, but transforms our default mode of thinking in and about everyday life, which is extremely poetic for me and inspiringly artistic for the video artist, Po-Chih Huang (Bobo), who initiated a collaborative project "Soft Revolt", a revolt, I would argue, best exemplifies a new type of revolutionaries and activists of today<sup>1</sup>.

### Behind this Revolt

Drawing on the mode of network interconnection, Bobo gathered a group of individuals working in different fields, each having his/her own doubts about the dominant institutions or systems, and through our communication, we reached a unifying "keyword" that connected the dots/nodes. "B! Poetry: Be Poetry, Poetry to Beep" comes into being from our overlapping key concepts: Chien-yu Huang's discontent with modern consumerism manifest in global shopping malls, Po-Chih Huang's desire to probe into the barcode system that entails a global logistics network, and my obsession with such routinized act of representing the physical objects by digital barcodes, translating into corresponding numerical or letristic symbols on screen, which is, by design, a radical divide that alienates us from material objects and transforms not only our daily necessities but us into commodities as well.

## Within this Soft Revolt

With the introduction of grand shopping mall: be it Costco or Carrefour, the traditional, local market as we knew it have been gradually wiped off the cityscape. Grand shopping malls, the proliferating hybrid of modern Minotaur in this carnivalesque age of globalization, are siren's songs we can hardly resist. With the melodic gospel of commercial jingles airing in the background, it is hard not to fall in love with this prosperous, harmonious scene that bespeaks world peace while dictating us to be at peace with this great chain of BUYING. No matter which corner of the globe we dwell in, there are universal standards to check on types of pastas and sizes of apples to cater to our needs. "When you weep, you will never weep alone": there happens to be just these ten brands of tissue papers, neither more nor less for us to choose, waiting around to console our sorrow.

What makes this possible is the invention of barcode; like our "identity card number" for citizenship, it is not only a unique identifier for trade items but also speaks a "universal language" that enables smooth circulation of commodities in the international market, transcending limits of different linguistic contexts as well as constraints of national boundaries. In our activity of translating the physical objects into digital barcodes, labelling goods under neatly classified categories and putting a price on each and every item, the world has integrated in unity when everybody lines up and forms continuity. After the beep, we pay our bills. Clerks check and scan the items in a wink and customers pay in cash or with credit card, one by one, all in line, we perform this daily ritual of consumption in perfect coordination, enacting the supreme order of capitalism.

### The world has thus divided into two...

In the chain of global shopping mall, everything is so much in order as long as the barcode is in place, all is put into its place: we all line up to pay and nobody seems to challenge this order. Unable to see the screen from where we stand, we wouldn't even suspect what if the barcode were wrong and we were actually paying for a different item. The reality that stands is that there's no room for bargaining or arguing with the numbers shown on the screen.

... words belong to that invisible half, the half that is on the screen and behind the counter...

When the words are not longer in presence, the objects they represent have lost their names. We cannot see the vast logistics market operating behind the inventory management system enabled by barcode apparatus; what remains right in front of our eyes is the numbers. In this field of vision, all material objects we see are priced commodities, and moreover, one by one, we, as clerks or customers, all turn into pieces of goods, tagged with corresponding prices: hourly pay, monthly salary and insurance premium—all summed up equals a person's social status, a fixed being in our society while all these numbers determine our mobility and identity. To be or not to be is no longer the question in vogue; what defines "somebody" is whether s/he has enough in the pocket to meet all the needs and desires for consumption: **I beep, therefore I am.**

Indeed, there are many predecessors who were keenly aware of this trend, such as the activists and artists who initiated the project Re-Code.com, inspired by the design and slogan of Priceline.com's "name your own price" shopping site. They set up a website that invited shoppers to "recode your own price" by making their own barcodes using the site's barcode generator and then swapping the barcodes on the item to be purchased so as to literally "name your own price", to only pay for what you think is worth<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, this act of recoding and swapping still operates within the commercial and numerical logic which, in a sense, reinforces the dominant ideology that numbers matter more than anything else. For this and for many other reasons, we imagine the intervention of poetry.

In order to quietly disrupt this highly-conditioned consumer behaviour, we come up with "*B! Poetry: Be Poetry, Poetry to Beep*". By appropriating the code 128 in use, we convert our poetic ventures into encrypted codes to generate certain critical commentary in disguise of barcode stickers and then put them on the merchandise in shopping malls. Thus, our version of "Soft Revolt" enacts/envision a scenario in which someone lining up to pay witnesses a verse line or two flashing on the screen when the barcode reader scans our pseudo-barcode that unsettles the original numerical database, replacing the price with a poetic text in hopes of provoking a sense of momentary transgression as well as a rupture within the system that not only challenges our routinized daily life but leads us to reflect upon our being in the instant when our to-be-purchased items go *beep!*

## Beyond Soft Revolt

In one sense “B! Poetry” is a live/life performance mediated through the digital technology. By re-coding the digitalized item of actual, physical goods that are now so commonly regarded as commodity rather than daily necessities, we’d like to create a rupture, a chance to stimulate the consumers to pause from everyday experience and routinized ritual of buying, but come to notice the physical object itself, and perhaps the story behind the merchandise to be purchased. When the unexpected happens, it becomes a happening, a live performance in a flash performed by people in their uneventful daily life in this highly urbanized city where we can hardly think *outside the box*.

This is exactly where we begin to fathom and format our “Soft Revolt” when we realize there is no way to think outside the box, the only way is to stay within yet remain in-between... As Naomi Klein quoted a passage from the *Hermeneutic Zine* in her *NO LOGO*<sup>3</sup>:

Going to Disney World to drop acid and goof on Mickey isn't revolutionary; going to Disney World in full knowledge of how ridiculous and evil it all is and still having a great innocent time, in some almost unconscious, even psychotic way, is something else altogether. This is what de Certeau describes as “the art of being in-between,” and this is the only path of true freedom in today's culture. (78)

As Klein further observed in her later chapter, whenever there is a trend of subculture/counter-culture, the sweeping capitalist logic is always quick to appropriate all these available fringe cultures, turning youth reactionary rebellion to their own advantage and produce products that seem to embody such rebellious spirit, such as ripped jeans of the Beat Generation are now merely a trendy, hippie look. Hence, instead of affirming a stance which could easily be pinpointed, we venture to look for a more ordinary yet habitual state of constant sliding, a transformation in motion, and an everyday practice as a form of peripheral resistance initiated by individuals from within the systems. In this sense, our revolt exactly resides in the (im) possibility of being-in-between, staying-in-between and forever playing-in-between.

## 2.0 Digital Natives with/out a Cause

In the all-encompassing power of digital representation of our day, even though we do not claim or avow to be digital activists who aim for a radical, social reform, we are, in effect, thinking/acting within the parameters of technologies. It seems not only our identity is mediated through the digital literacy, but our concept of activity/activism is being radically reformatted. Then, perhaps, the question to be asked is: what kinds of transformation are we witnessing, or even (re)formatting through digital representation?

One obvious fact is that the Web has undoubtedly reformatted our access to information and, by extension, our concept of knowledge formation. In other words, the tool we invented to help us to access the information has revolutionized the way we make sense/use of information and knowledge. When virtually all the information is accessible and searchable at our fingertips, knowledge—or more precisely, knowledge as (re)presented/embodied by the institutionalized authorities (mainly denoting certain individuals who are granted with verifiable, institutionalized credentials and expect to make a living through their (re)production and distribution of knowledge as a commodity)—seems to have lost its time-honoured aura. When knowledge can no longer be traced back to a single origin, to the ultimate referent/transcendental signified, (when it becomes distributed – captured in a term that is quickly gaining currency, ‘wisdom of the crowds’), what exactly do we get to know when we no longer look up to/look for the ONE?

## 2.^O^ That Thin Line between Knowledge & Gossip

It is not unheard of that “the wisdom of the crowd” could verge on “the noise of the mob”, which is probably best manifested by the innumerable edit wars on Wikipedia talk page where people engage in heated discussion about certain edited page yet end up in fierce verbal swordplay and personal attack. And this is not an uncommon scene and in fact happens quite often on other platforms as well. Here, instead of looking at

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poetics  
the politics of  
"being in-between"

this phenomenon from a global view, I'd like to shift my focus to a more regionalized context in Taiwan where, in preference to Wikipedia or any other http-based platforms, PTT (arguably the largest terminal-based bulletin board system in the world still in operation) founded by students in 1995, remains the main information-sharing, knowledge-disseminating and communication portal for the local digital natives.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the encyclopaedia paradigm employed by Wikipedia aimed for a knowledge-based community, or social media sites such as Facebook designed for personal connection network, PTT is by default a public forum for the youth (college and grad students in particular) engaging in public discussion to voice their concerns and opinions on a variety of issues. Meanwhile, while other social media and digital networks such as Facebook have been taken up by public figures and employed as their new marketing and campaigning tools, PTT remains relatively autonomous partly owing to its unique operating system.<sup>5</sup>

Oddly, albeit the fact that this kind of forum is not designed to produce knowledge based on consensus, the propensity for looking for the "truth", the desire for "true knowledge" seems to dominate the discourse on such public discussion forum even on the board entitled *Gossiping*. Gossiping board, as the title suggests, incorporates all sorts of unconfirmed information, news, tidbits and gossips and hence draws more following and popularity among over 200,000 boards on PTT. It is estimated that during peak hours, there could be over 150,000 users online, and according to the PTT Record system, Gossiping board is among the top most frequently-visited boards, and whenever there is any controversial issue going on (ranging from celebrity scandal to typhoon emergency rescue measure and policy making related news such as the abolishment of capital punishment, the debate over whether we should sign the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement with PRC), the real-time record often indicates more than 5000 users lingering on board, reading, posting and or responding to each other either via an one-on-one chat onboard or through a series of reposts [推文] in the same article or under the same title<sup>6</sup>. And this voice of the crowd has been growing stronger while the audience's opinion/submission/response that used to frequent the mainstream media such as newspapers or call-in shows raises little resonance these days. On the other hand, many heated online debates and discussion have often caught mainstream media's interest to the extent that many insider-jokes and hot issues on PTT often frequent our newspapers (even headlines). Moreover, this voice of the youth sometimes even draws the attention of our government and

authorities concerned that they feel compelled to respond to and deal with all the dissidence and dissonance.<sup>7</sup>

When the mass media and public figures lament and condemn the youth for being apathetic for "politics" (in their sense, the voting population of youth is decreasing and few would be willing to devote to the party politics as in the old time), could it be that they are looking at the wrong direction? Could the lively chitchat on boards such as gossiping as opposed to often languid discussion on boards such as politics on PTT be seen as an indicator that politics of today no longer fit for the old-time perception of a life-and-death struggle as many of revolutionaries and martyrs from the previous generation firmly believed in? In other words, are we witnessing a (re)formatting of the concept of participatory politics? Or even the transformation of the concept "politics" itself?

The channel for the youth to voice their stance is, undeniably, shifting from the established mass media to the emergent digital platforms. Instead of approaching the issues through formal public forum and colloquium, the youth no longer feel it is the only way to discuss politics and policy-making from an angle that is detached from our daily life, but prefer to engage it in a form of gossip, chitchat, and informal mode of communication to voice their concerns. But what concerns most is that, do these digital natives have a cause? When they chitchat on Twitter or Facebook, could it be just *that*, signifying nothing else? Or even when they are gossiping about policy or the social reform, do they mean to act upon it? Or simply click on the "like" on Facebook is good enough for them to feel they are involved in the civic movement or the campaign to save \_\_\_\_ (whatever you like, feel free to fill in the blank)? In other words, for this new form of participatory politics, do words speak louder than action? Or perhaps, their words *are* their action?



## 0.2 Out of Many, ONE

Take a recent case for example, as the controversial ruling of the disqualification during the mid-bout of a Taekwondo contestant Yang Shu-chun from Taiwan when she was leading 9-0 at the Asian Games on 17 November 2010, the whole wired world in Taiwan had been immediately flooded by indignant posts and many started to investigate the “truth” by gathering information from different sources, uploading live recording of the match online.<sup>8</sup> Their coverage of the story appeared online almost instantaneously, if not faster, than all the mainstream media reports in Taiwan and overseas.<sup>9</sup> When our official association and government were slow in reaction, many digital natives initiated campaigns on Facebook and some even went into length to translate the incident into English to spread the word out.<sup>10</sup>

While all voices chanted in unison, targeting at the Korean judge and Chinese officials, the dissidence stood out: a student posted remarks on his Facebook, declaring that he was “totally supportive of Korean’s ruling” and that he “felt great since Korean judge’s hard-line dealing would give Team Chinese Taipei a good lesson.”<sup>11</sup> The reaction was immediate and sensationalized. The online community soon proved the old saying still goes: “Unity is strength” by executing the Human Flesh Search to dig out every bits and pieces of his personal information and post it on PTT. In no time, his blog was inundated by furious posts accusing him of being a “traitor”, his cell phone kept receiving foul text and voice messages, and he claimed to be stalked when he walked home. Eventually he shut off his Facebook account, agreed to be interviewed and warned those who had harassed him that he had the freedom of speech and would file for a lawsuit if they did not stop harassing him.<sup>12</sup>

As Wikipedia suggests, this so-called Human Flesh Search (Chinese:人肉搜索; pinyin: *Rénròu Sōusuǒ*) originally is a primarily Chinese Internet phenomenon of massive researching using Internet media such as blogs and forums for the purpose of identifying and exposing individuals to public humiliation, usually out of Chinese nationalistic sentiment, or to break the Internet censorship in the People’s Republic of China.<sup>13</sup> It is generally deemed as a double-edged sword, cutting through the line between good and bad.<sup>14</sup> Digital natives in Mainland China claim they’re doing this for a cause, and a noble one in their sense, to find out and stop/punish the immoral, but exactly who lays down those rules and standards to judge and evaluate the “morality” and “integrity” of someone who we may never even meet in life? Who has the right to

decide who ought to be searched or punished? How do we know whether the cause is justified and wouldn’t turn into an excuse?

When the multitude of voices becomes ONE, it could be a dangerous sign. Even though most of us start from the “right” side, it is hard to say we would never end up on the other side. Thus, I believe if I have to take a position, being-in-between is the only place to be. And what matters to me is not whether the so-called digital natives have determined to change the world or whether digital natives are with/out a cause, but the change is happening NOW, radically remapping/reformatting our conception of the conventional, established boundary...

And the possibility for this change lies in the sliding/slipping line between the public and private, the political and personal, the real/virtual, physical/digital, native/immigrant when the centre no long holds. Just like the Web, the digital age opens up a network based on a more resilient structure where there’s no singular centre but anywhere can be a centre and anyone can be a member of “we” that is connected through the Web and to organize without an organization...

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<sup>1</sup> Artist’s Statement: <<http://www.vtartsalon.com/eng/pages/exhibition/200908/state.html>>

<sup>2</sup> The original instructions: <http://www.data-browser.net/01/DB01/Carbondefenseleague.pdf>;  
The mock ad made by Re-Code.com [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-szBlrEtzs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-szBlrEtzs;);  
News report: <http://www.salon.com/technology/feature/2003/04/10/barcodehttp://vimeo.com/14430954>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sl2qe3qpBc>

<sup>3</sup> No logo: taking aim at the brand bullies. Naomi Klein, Flamingo, Hammersmith, London, 2000, 490 pp.

<sup>4</sup> PTT has more than 1.5 million registered users. During peak hours, there are over 150,000 users online. It has over 200,000 boards with a multitude of topics, and more than 40,000 articles and 1 million comments are posted every day. <<http://>

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PTT\_Bulletin\_Board\_System>

The statistics shows that the average age of PTT users is 24 years old. <<http://ppt.cc/keLi>> Screen shot taken on 2010/11/22, 12:09:56.

- <sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, any proposition to set up a board has to go through a voting process, which is quite elaborate, for the proposal has to be supported by enough qualified users (from 25 to 40 or more, numbers varied depending on the rules of the subgroup) who have been registered for a certain period of time (from three to six months), logged in over 100 times and posted over 100 valid articles and stated legitimate reasons for their support of setting up a new board. While everybody (including unregistered guests) can browse through the public boards, only registered users can initiate or participate in a discussion thread. Meanwhile, it has an article rating repost scheme that allows users to commend (by giving it a “push” [推tuei], adding a point and would show) or critique an article (or a “hush” [噓hsü], subtracting a point) so newcomers would see the rating indicated by colored-coded figures shown in front of the article before pressing enter to read the main article (For illustration, see <<http://ppt.cc/w9sX>>). The red-coded word爆[blast] shown in the screen shot indicates more than 100 reposts commending the article, which usually would spur an interest to check out the contents and trigger even more responses under the same post.
- <sup>6</sup> When the online users are over 100, there will be a popularity indicator changed to show the board as “HOT” and when there are more than 1,000 online viewers/discussants, it will display a Chinese character “blast!” 爆! More than 2,000, the character will be changed into red爆! When the record reaches 5,000, it will then change the color into a blue爆! (See screenshot<<http://ppt.cc/In9y>>
- <sup>7</sup> According to the news, the National Police Agency have focused on PTT Gossiping Board and even deployed officers online to address all the hot issues asked by the so-called “countrymen/villagers” [鄉民], the heavy-users of PTT. United Daily [聯合報] 2010/03/08, 蒐輿情部會委外看政論節目 <<http://udn.com/NEWS/NATIONAL/NATS1/5460365.shtm>> or <[http://www.cdnews.biz/cdnews\\_site/docDetail.jsp?coluid=141&docid=101086065](http://www.cdnews.biz/cdnews_site/docDetail.jsp?coluid=141&docid=101086065)> The news article mentioned how the Ministry of Education intended to “regulate” the sensitive criticism on political issues on PTT Gossiping Board. <[http://mag.udn.com/mag/newsstand/storypage.jsp?f\\_ART\\_ID=282371](http://mag.udn.com/mag/newsstand/storypage.jsp?f_ART_ID=282371)>
- <sup>8</sup> Just to list a few videos with English subtitles or commentary:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09Ht711Jdkg>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgiAx-zDpIQ> ;  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9drPmoXTKE&feature=related> ; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydZh9It7Wds&feature=related>.

- <sup>9</sup> Since most of the news are in Mandarin, here I only include reports in English: “Taiwan taekwondo athlete in Asian Games sock sensor row” (17 November 2010, Last updated at 15:30 GMT) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11775465>>; “Taiwan fury after athlete’s Asian Games disqualification in China” (November 17, 2010 -- Updated 20:50 GMT) <<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/SPORT/11/17/asian.games.china.taiwan/index.html>>; “Taiwan taekwondo storm casts cloud over Games” (Wed, Nov 17 2010) <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-52974420101117>;
- <sup>10</sup> Here is a partial list of Facebook pages for reference: <http://www.facebook.com/AntiRogue#!/Justice.For.Taiwan.Yang.ShuChun>; <https://sites.google.com/site/dirtytaekwondo2010/>. <http://www.facebook.com/AntiRogue> <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=161214030582670>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/zhi-chi-yang-shu-jun-wo-men-ting-nai-dao-di/140944652624862?ref=ts&v=wall>; <http://www.facebook.com/pages/yang-shu-jun-shi-ge-shi-jianqing-zong-tong-fu-li-ji-xiang-zhong-guo-biao-da-zui-zui-zui-qiang-lie-de-kang-yi/169393219756510>
- <sup>11</sup> Screenshot of his Facebook page taken by a PTT user: <http://img408.imageshack.us/img408/7568/facebookqs.jpg>
- <sup>12</sup> “學生臉書PO文挺韓 網友人肉搜索” <http://video.chinatimes.com/video-cate-cnt.aspx?cid=10&nid=42491>; “po文失格大快人心 挺韓網友引公憤” <[http://www.ctitv.com.tw/news\\_video\\_c14v22957.html](http://www.ctitv.com.tw/news_video_c14v22957.html)>
- <sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_flesh\\_search\\_engine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_flesh_search_engine)  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/07/magazine/07Human-t.html>  
[http://technology.timesonline.co.uk./tol/news/tech\\_and\\_web/article4213681.ece](http://technology.timesonline.co.uk./tol/news/tech_and_web/article4213681.ece)
- <sup>14</sup> The news report about how Mainland Chinese netizens use human flesh search engine to keep corrupt political figures in check and punish the husband who cheated on his wife, which led to her suicide. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PU1i2X8VnCk>>

Digital  
Alternatives  
...What Being  
A Digital Native  
Really Means...

Simeon Oriko

# Introduction

There is a growing focus on how different people and groups use and relate to technology. Out of this, a popular discourse on digital natives has arisen.

The idea behind digital natives is derived from an analogy of a native of a country “for whom the local religion, language, and folkways are natural and indigenous”. This suggests that a person’s natural response to stimuli in their natural environment quantifies them to be a native of that environment. This can be compared to the opposite case of being an immigrant where a person has to adapt to the environment they find themselves in.

Digital natives therefore can be defined in the scope of their natural behavior and or response in the technological environment that is ever growing in today’s world. This is however not the popular view on this subject.

Most people view a digital native as a person who was born during the general introduction and implementation of digital technology and to whom the same is a central piece in their daily lifestyle. Many also agree that this group of people have a similar familiarity with technology and that they embrace it as a central part of their daily lives.

This view derives from it a number of qualities of a digital native which I’d like to focus on in this paper; the most notable one being age. Popular scholarship on digital natives holds that this group of people is mostly young and born in the digital age which refers to the period of time when digital technology was being implemented. A number of scholarships go ahead to specify this period as beginning from 1980.

A number of arguments have arisen from this assumption including that of people who are familiar with digital technology but were not necessarily born after 1980. This argument has led to the classification of technology users under various categories besides digital natives. Some of these include:

- digital immigrants – those who are adapting to the present changing technological environment
- digital pioneers – those who are directly responsible for the general introduction and implementation of digital technology
- digital outcasts – those who are slow or are unable to adapt to the changing technological environment for one reason or another.

The argument each of these categories hold are based on the premise that technology use and adoption in the context of digital natives is not necessarily based on a person's date of birth. Each outlines a number of factors, regardless of age, that reflects how people use and relate to digital technology.

I agree with those arguments.

If age was a determining factor, then we would brand everyone born after 1980 a digital native...but that isn't the case. If anything, there is a larger proportion of this generation that is not familiar with digital tools and technology. If they do, it is to a very small scale and not entirely sustainable in practice.

There is also the other view of people who are, to a great extent, familiar with digital technology but were born way before the digital age began to take shape. What category do we put these people in if we can't categorize them as digital natives according to age?

I believe that being a digital native means that you recognize the value of technology and the opportunity it presents to you in your daily life.

I hold in my argument the view that being a digital native has to do with personal experiences in using technology and how these experiences define your relationship with technology.

Many of us have been using technology for a very long time, for various purposes and for various reasons. Personally, I have been using technology since the fourth grade when I opened my first email address. Every interaction I've had with technology since has been based on trial and error which has provided a valuable learning experience and a strong foundation for my present use of technology in my daily work and life.

This learning experience, for me, shed light on a number of issues, techniques, tools and technologies that now form the basis of my present relationship with digital technology.

An example of an experience I've had that has shaped my view of and defined my relationship with digital technology is how I use my mobile phone. My mobile phone has been my primary means of connection to the internet and I've always pushed the limits as to what I can do with it. The most memorable experience is when I used the native browser on my mobile phone to set up, configure, customize and manage a BuddyPress site. This experience helped shape the mentality I have about the possibilities and many opportunities that mobile phones have to offer.

It is out of such experiences that our relationship with technology is defined. I believe that the use of digital tools and technology in itself does not make you a digital native regardless of the work you do, your date of birth or the amount of time you've spent embracing these tools.

I believe all digital natives come to a point in time when they undergo a transformative moment in their lives in which they understand the value of technology; based on their relationship as defined by their experiences with it.

I think it is important for me to mention here that time has nothing to do with experience. Allow me to illustrate.

I once met a girl who was very passionate about piloting and had a dream of becoming a pilot one day. In my discourse with the young lady I discovered that she had no idea how to achieve her dream and I offered to help her with it. I used my mobile phone to Google for information that could help her. We were able to find a piloting school near where she lived and all the necessary details about obtaining a license to fly.

For this young lady, the experience she went through of using digital technologies to search for relevant information is what defined her relationship with technology. I say

this because after meeting up with her a few months after this incident, she clearly outlined concrete plans of how she was going to achieve her dream of being a pilot. What struck me the most was how she was able to use digital technology to unearth all the information she had. It occurred to me that this young lady had gone through a transformational moment when we first started googling for a piloting school.

She understood, from that experience, the value of technology in her own context and that defined her relationship with it.

This young lady did not have to go through a buffer of time to recognize and understand the value of technology in her own life.

In my field of work this theme keeps recurring from time to time.

I work with African high school students to teach them how they can use digital technology to effect change in their community and to achieve their objectives. In my country, Kenya, most of these students have a basic of knowledge of technology that comprises mostly of definitions and historical backgrounds. This is majorly because it is outlined in the national education syllabus. We normally conduct digital literacy camps where these kids are made aware of the digital tools available to them and how they can use them to effect social change in their communities and to achieve their own objectives.

One thing I've noticed is that there is a very large gap between the basic inferential knowledge of technology and the experiential knowledge of its value. Very few students are able to make a connection between what they are taught in school and the practical aspect of applying that knowledge. For most, a simple demonstration of basic arithmetic operations on the Google search bar is way beyond the possibilities they are made to understand in their classrooms.

This 'gap' is the determining factor that defines what a digital native is and I believe that it can only be bridged by undergoing a transformational moment that defines the relationship one has with digital technology.

Besides recognition of value, I'm also of the opinion that digital natives are able to recognize the many opportunities offered to them by technology as a direct result of understanding its value. By this I mean that a digital native has the capacity to seek out

and effectively make use of various tools to achieve their own objectives; be it for their own benefit, or for the benefit of their own communities.

A good example of this is the increasing growth and adoption of the Free and Open Source Software. FOSS, as it is commonly referred to, is based on activities, principles and values of digital natives that some scholarship recognize as being part of the digital native identity. Some of these principles include the value of freedom, tolerance and co-existence, collaboration and innovation, mobilization and participation, cross-cultural production and interventions. The list is possibly endless.

In Kenya, the growth and popularity of the Ushahidi platform, an open source crisis reporting software, is a testimony to the character of digital natives and their ability to utilize the opportunity technology presents to make a difference in their society. The Ushahidi Platform allows anyone to gather distributed data via SMS, email or web and visualize it on a map or timeline. Its goal is to create the simplest way of aggregating information from the public for use in crisis response.

Ushahidi was initially built by a group of Kenyan volunteers to map out incidents of violence and visualize the information. The platform in its initial deployment was a mashup of various technologies including Google's mapping service, SMS aggregation software, open source web development tools and API's from popular social networks such as Twitter and Facebook.

I strongly believe that each member of the development team had a previous experience with either of the digital tools that now make up the platform, understood their value and sought out the opportunity in implementing it into the platform. This process of experience, understanding value and seeking out opportunity was instrumental in building the Ushahidi platform from mashup status into fully fledged software.

And this is just the development team. Considering the 90/10 rule in technology where the technology is the 10% and the human effort the 90%, a lot of low tech and non development related work has gone into making the Ushahidi platform a success. These efforts in my opinion stem from the same process of recognizing the value of technology and seeking out the opportunities in implementing it to achieve some common objective.

I believe the same is true for a number of open source projects. Most contributors go through the process of understanding the value of technology and seeking out opportunities in implementing technology to solve problems. Solving problems is a fundamental concept in software development.

From a broader perspective, we begin to see the character of digital natives; the principles and values they uphold and stand for in their daily interactions with digital technology; the value of freedom, tolerance and co-existence, collaboration and innovation, mobilization and participation, cross-cultural production and interventions. All these and more are directly responsible for the growth of the open source movement. These values define the norms in the natural environment digital natives are accustomed to; the digital environment.

In the framework of “digital natives with a cause?” a digital native is able to conceptualize the value of technology and building on this to effect whatever form of change or impact they seek in their context. This creates a framework for effecting social change that merges the use of technology and strategies of translating that use into offline access.

Thus, the role digital natives play in various causes is not necessarily a hands off approach but more of a facilitative role in that they seek out ways of achieving various objectives using the tools and techniques they are most familiar with: digital technology. I strongly believe in the power of digital technology to create an impact in various fields. I’m however reserved to the fact that these tools need to be combined with a certain mental frame for a desired impact to be achieved. This mental frame is what I have described in this paper. A digital native with such a mental frame is in the right capacity to create a desired impact in their community.

Borrowing from a fellow coworker in my field and a good friend, I would like to propose the use of the term “Digital Alternatives” as those who possess the mental frame described in this paper. This group of people is not separate of the broader digital natives category but possibly are a small self actualized niche of people to whom strategic use of technology is a priority as compared to being a part of the digital revolution that currently exists in today’s world.

I also propose an in depth analysis of the processes of process of experience, understanding value and seeking out opportunity in relation to a digital natives strategic

use of technology to achieve their objectives. Attention should be given to the details concerning the values that these people hold both from an individual level and from the greater community of digital natives.

In doing this I believe that we can develop frameworks for understanding the work of digital natives and perhaps even a model for effectively using digital technologies for the same.

I Can't Sing but  
I Dance: The politics  
of being digital  
from an apolitical  
point of View

Cole Flor



# Introduction

What does it mean to be a digital native? How about being a digital native with a cause? Digital natives can be someone 'borne into' the age where information is accessible and where lifestyle, routine, education and careers are coupled with digital devices. It doesn't mean that everything<sup>1</sup> they do is digital but the possibilities of what they can do are highly influenced by the use of technology as their primary means of communication, learning and recreation. However, there is the general perception that digital natives are somewhat indifferent from the talks of societal problems, issues and concerns, politics, power and civil involvement. They suggest that being wrapped up in their respective online accounts had made them escapists; completely detaching themselves from community problems. Perhaps, these suggestions are correct, that digital natives or as BBC puts it as *Homo Interneticus*<sup>2</sup>, are mere young users of digital devices without social responsibility—in the same manner that young users of analogue technology did not create their own causes throughout history.

This position paper engages in the perception of apathy and the indifference of digital natives. Are they really politically-detached? Or are they just not what society and norms expect them to be?

## Reluctance

Long before, I was never oriented with the whole concept of politics, power, negotiations and dialogues. The politics that I knew was about our administration and government because I heard the words 'politician', 'politics' and 'policies' as part of the reporters' vocabulary out in the *Malacanang Palace*<sup>3</sup>, *EDSA*<sup>4</sup> and municipal halls. The tags, 'mayor', 'congressman', 'vice president' and 'president' would always mean 'politically-oriented-news' for me. The headlines of the newspapers about Manila and siege, rallying, protests and political killings had that one particular effect on me – detachment.

At home, it didn't bother me whenever my brothers kicked me out of the TV room while watching soap operas, so they could play Nintendo. I thought it was just the way it was, no questions asked—just do it. In school, I didn't participate in elections or voting for a place where we would hold our year-enders. Even if I wished for the opposite idea, I just went with the flow.

In college, where our university was filled with activists and social movements, I didn't bother participating whenever they invited us for picket-dialogues, class-walkouts, and mobs. I voted for the elections, campaigned to vote for the elections—but never held impromptu campaigning for a party. It was not because I did not care about their platforms and what they were fighting for; I was just not passionate about being vocal. That time, I had no idea what I was passionate about. But I knew university, community and government politics were not it.

I was fully aware about how strong people's voices can be, they can oust presidents, for one. But I was not convinced about getting involved in large-scale issues and concerns due to the belief that I can share my thoughts, my statements in more ways than the streets. I argued that I didn't need to hold a megaphone to make my point. However, getting caught in the middle seemed harder than taking sides. As much as I was passive in the real world, my virtual world was coloured with blog posts, photos, comments I wouldn't normally say up front, confessions, series of rants, and opinions on local and national issues. Perhaps, I found talking online a safer harbor for my thoughts because it eliminates feedback from an aggressive audience such as violent reactions and interruptions. Being digitally-active didn't need much explanation from me and I didn't feel like I had to explain myself for being so. I found myself stating that I am apolitical because

I don't devote myself in getting heard literally, I focused my articles on other social issues; at least that's how I believed I was before the *Talking Back*<sup>5</sup> workshop this year.

## Reorientation

My narrow understanding of politics, power, control, dialogue and negotiations accompanied by my political indifference upfront, had me breaking in thoughts and reflections during the *Talking Back Workshop*. It was also the first time that I encountered the term *Digital Natives*, but there was that moment wherein I came up with my own definition and understanding of the term and imbibed it, to say the least. I defined it as "growing up with silver spoon in my mouth, only that spoon is multi-functional." There are little things that I can do without the aid of devices; I couldn't imagine myself being without them.

I met this amazing set of youth who have established campaigns and careers in the world of the digital. And that, for me, debunks the whole idea of digital natives being escapists. They got causes and campaigns and well, they understood politics in a whole different light. I was feeling reluctant to speak up because I was afraid they might bite my head off not because I did not know what to say but because of what I had to say. I never had an idea what it was like to be political even from my own blog and online participation. They did bite my head off as soon as I opened my mouth—when I said I was not interested in *anything* political. They asked me if I were aware of my influence to my readers; I answered that I wouldn't know because I rarely get comments from readers. Most of my comments are from my friends—really close friends. This time around, I wanted to explain where I was coming from. Social issues concern me, but the thing with it was, I didn't consider my practice as a political intervention.

Questions started racing in my head that caught me off-guard: "Was I the only one, hyperactive online, who never understood politics?" "Why can't I articulate what my particular political legacy is?" "Why don't I see any political legacy in my practice?" and the most disturbing question of all that I was afraid to ask, "Is there something political in my practice?"

During the discussions and blog writing, I had my perception of the Internet trembling. I turned to the Internet before as my avenue for expression, my outlet for growing up pains. But this time around, I had myself questioning about my use of the Internet. I love writing, yes. I love my *Facebook*<sup>6</sup>, my *Twitter*<sup>7</sup>, I like it when my friends *like* my post, one *retweet* and I become overwhelmed. But I did not see anything political or any form of power distribution in my participation. I was not joining the race for becoming highly influential to the point of being quoted and linked by famous people. Receiving comments after every post was all that I was working for. Getting to know that my readers picked up something from my experience was all that I wanted. But I guess there was more to blogging than just writing and little more than commenting for every post. My nerves slightly relaxed when I learned through the course of the workshop that politics doesn't always equate to activism, street rallies, protests and the likes. There is politics of language, dialogue and change<sup>8</sup>—change, from which I finally can relate to. From shutting my mouth, which defeats the purpose of the whole workshop, I found my way of trying to study what is political in my practice as a blogger, or lack thereof. I learned there was something more than being a digital native. I thought we are inherently political because we have been provided the access to information that our analogue predecessors have worked in the past. In this Information Age, information is politics; access to information is power. I didn't realize this until I saw how my blog has given me the opportunity to share, to suggest, to advise my readers where to go and what to do in one of the countries that I visited. I may not shape communities to a better state, but I chose to harness what I am capable of—if I wasn't built to speak up for women, children and the marginalized, perhaps, I was built to write about the understated travels and well, voice them out, thus empowering the cultural aspects of a country and travellers alike.

We need not to be an activist in the light of being leftist or rightist, but of our own cause, our purpose, or our beliefs and realize how strong a statement being apolitical is. After the workshop, the interesting thing about a digital native, I believe, is the diversity of avenues and outlets to be political—and in the same manner, contribute to a larger cause and participation.

## Recreation

I created a travel blog called The Cole Walkabouts<sup>9</sup> and it is turning one this December. I am proud to have maintained a blog this long. Usually, I put one up and forget all about it after two to five posts—I had it all, review, rants, self-pity posts, and then I get tired of writing one's school starts. It was just one lazy afternoon at work, I was done with all the materials my boss wanted me to give him and I was just surfing through my usual websites. I stumbled upon a classmates' fashion blog<sup>10</sup>. You may think it's just fashion and not exactly a direct social cause, wherein she posts photos with an ensemble she designed herself. However, the thing that struck me the most was her passion and dedication in mixing and matching new and *thrifed* items and uploading them before our eyes. She also writes well and her ensembles are accompanied by her travel stories. Her influence was in the form of inspired posts, colours and creativity.

I reflected on my own participation online. I started going over the rigmarole of finding my purpose in the context of social media. I was talking to my brother that afternoon and he said that I got a camera, I write and what do I think I should do? I wanted to share my experiences and my photographs, like my classmate's blog. But what will make my blog dear to me? I thought "What am I passionate about?" I also wanted to call something my own, and be of a good read among the millions of travel blogs existing. My passion for travel, photography and writing helped me realize my beat: culture. What I want to be: A story-teller.

It was like a light bulb moment. I love traveling, meeting new people, exploring territories and the fact that my friends think Laos is an uninteresting country, I felt responsible in showing them that it was not. I named it the Cole Walkabouts —splicing it into its root word, "about Cole's walks" —and that because I love walking literally because I do not know how to drive, much less how to ride a bicycle.

I started blogging about my personal experiences starting from the shock of the lifetime—that six days after my graduation, I got on the plane to Vientiane for a job interview. Then when my travels started to double and my blog hits came with it, I became more conscious with my captures and my angles. I wanted to give my prospective readers something different, something that will make them see the places for themselves. The Internet is already cluttered with photos of countries, famous attractions and the same

itinerary. So I posted stories that a tourist of a few days wouldn't normally experience, hoping they would, after a once-over at my site. Every week, I write pieces about my travels adding my personal reflections, just in case. Apart from trying to show the world that Laos is a wonderful country, I wanted my accounts to be properly documented. I do not own photo albums, my previous journals have gone into ashes, my old short stories were formatted from our former computers—but I have my blog and my web accounts as memories that will last until the last connection existed. From personal reasons to a restless urge to make people see how vibrant one place is, my blog motivated me to explore and discover more the world outside the digital. I want my readers to be able to travel with me and perhaps encourage them to write about their experiences as well and not be limited in digital cameras.

I deem my blog is for social change for it aims for understanding one's culture and we are aware that misunderstanding is one of the root causes of conflicts in our society. My blog may not tackle on religion, government intrigues and economics but I highlight tourism, in its truest form and that is showing uniqueness and verve of a place that are usually unaccounted.

Lao PDR is a small landlocked country in the middle of the Greater Mekong sub-region. It was often a pit-stop for South-East Asian travellers. Its temples, structures and famous restaurants are available online. The country gives importance to tourism by opening hotels, guesthouses, tour operators and agencies. I thought of writing what they would not. I featured weddings<sup>11</sup>, nightlife<sup>12</sup>, clothing and even working environment. My readers, or okay, friends, shared that they never thought Laos could offer such. Some of them wanted to get the *sinh* (Lao skirt)<sup>13</sup>, one of my readers even thought of having a Lao wedding when she gets married. My friends back home are now inquiring for rates, routes and destinations and even asked if they can stay at my place. The latter went a little overboard, but it's totally fine, I am proud to show Laos—I have no idea why, but I believe it deserves more than what travel guides can offer. My former instructor also commented "It's like I am travelling when I'm reading your post," which is my goal in the first place, and I couldn't be any more motivated after that.

My cause is for global understanding through virtual travelling; it may not be as huge as most of the causes of today, but I strongly believe that having a sense of one's culture is a step closer in resolving conflicts of interest. If we know what to wear when visiting temples, then I guess no tourist would be left outside wearing cut-offs and tank

tops. I do not rally in the streets to invite travelers to visit Laos, or some undiscovered place in the region or even my country, but I post. My arguments are presented in the form of experience and captures, my dialogues are in the form of comment boxes, my negotiations are in the form of invitations that post a challenge to experience out of the ordinary. I didn't need professional tour guides; today's technology has given us, independence to learn on our own, to create and to empower our minds not only with information but with understanding.

I can say that I am a digital native with a cause; I may not be political in the context that I engage myself in groups that help out communities, for or oppose policy-makers, or devote my time in writing about controversial social issues and concerns. But I am ideological, and I believe in causes, the essence of communicating what we know and what we want to know, sharing and interaction. Culture is perceived to be not "political in nature", but it transcends politics; tradition, religion, values, history, practices and language are all part of politics. If talking about them online doesn't show being political, then I am apolitical but that doesn't make me apathetic. And just because I can't articulate my thoughts in a confident manner, that doesn't mean that I don't have a say, a stand. I found another way to become an effective speaker for change and that is through writing. The change that I have always wanted to achieve in non-conformist ways could not be as compelling as alleviating poverty, government transformation and the likes. But, global understanding through culture and travel, for me, is my contribution in social development.

## Responsibility

Digital natives are not apathetic and indifferent. If we take deep look into their initiatives on and offline, within other forms of media, they channel being political in means other than the conventional. It doesn't make them passive to social issues and concerns because our world expands and ideas diversify. Sticking to one form of political intervention and transformation and labeling such defeats the purpose of having a world with countless ways of interacting. The coming together of individuals from all over the world, a diversity of careers and perception of the value of digital devices in this Information Age, we have already created a society that is equipped with full access to information. The ability to transform and articulate information has empowered small groups, organizations, communities and societies that yielded

desirable results over time. Users go online to know something, may it be about people, gossip, news, public affairs, consumerism, capitalism or personal development thus educating us outside a curriculum and/or an institution.

Digital natives and immigrants at that, as we call today's generation, has become inherently powerful in a sense that what the previous generations lacked in technology, education and information, are now being provided in the form of devices. Aspects our predecessors wished to control such as multi-tasking, immediate communication in all parts of the world and massive people involvement can be under a click or push of a button. We have moved on from the years where knowing was only for the curious, today even though we are not interested in knowing—just one click of the browser, it's already information-overload.

But we, as digital natives, must realize our capacity to communicate. Two generations before us, a rocket scientist named Norbert Weiner<sup>14</sup> argued that as human beings we have the best ability to communicate and thus have the power of control compared to all other living creatures on earth. Today, we, digital natives hold the distinction of having the highest ability to communicate among our species and potentially the greatest power to control. The least that we can do is to use this gift to achieve something beyond us.

We observe, we feel, we experience things for ourselves. When we gather, we choose, we decide, we question, we inform, we oppose, we conclude, we compromise; we try to make sense of everything around us. We develop and/or adapt perspectives, ideologies, culture and religion of all sorts in shaping our personalities and way of life. We try to understand, construct and deconstruct, create and recreate states, realities and meta-realities. We listen, we respond, we interact, we communicate. The difference is that now, we can do all of these digitally. And, this for me is the beginning of being a digital native. This ability to be digital (not only because we use digital technologies) but because we are learning our processes of communication, correspondence, dialogue and negotiation with both, the centralized power structures, as well as the power positions that we individually embody, is the genesis of a digital native identity.

Movie cliché but true but *with great power comes great responsibility*<sup>15</sup>. Capturing other aspects of societal transformation other than the traditional view of politics doesn't make us indifferent; it makes us stronger because we seek more ways on which we can help. If we cannot negotiate like assertive speakers can, then we must exert

more effort in coming up with compelling stories, articles and content that will suffice. We, who were given access to information, should study more ways in from which we can transform information to knowledge, into a product—may it be another device, a campaign or a post. Today, there are more ways to communicate, more aspects and issues to engage in discussions with, more problems to be concerned about. We already have the means, but motivation has to be intensified. We already have a whole spectrum; number of outlets and avenues from which we can get involved, there is no longer an excuse not to.

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- <sup>1</sup> [http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-The\\_Emerging\\_Online\\_Life\\_of\\_the\\_Digital\\_Native-03.pdf](http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky-The_Emerging_Online_Life_of_the_Digital_Native-03.pdf)
  - <sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00r3qhg>
  - <sup>3</sup> The Republic of Philippines Office of the President
  - <sup>4</sup> Epiphanio De Los Santos Avenue, Ortigas, Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines | Main location of ousting two of the country's Presidents
  - <sup>5</sup> Talking Back: Digital Natives with a Cause (?) Workshop , Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan | Aug 16-18, 2010
  - <sup>6</sup> Facebook | <http://www.facebook.com>
  - <sup>7</sup> Twitter | <http://www.twitter.com>
  - <sup>8</sup> <http://digitalnatives.in/conversations-self-and-other-voices-my-head>
  - <sup>9</sup> The Cole Walkabouts: <http://colewalks.com>
  - <sup>10</sup> Flavors of Style: <http://flavorsofstyle.blogspot.com>
  - <sup>11</sup> <http://colewalks.com/2010/06/02/a-lao-wedding-photo-album-tribute-to-the-june-brides/>
  - <sup>12</sup> <http://colewalks.com/2010/09/23/i-love-the-nightlife-vte/>
  - <sup>13</sup> <http://colewalks.com/2010/06/14/a-beautiful-sinh/>
  - <sup>14</sup> Wiener, Norbert. 1957. *Cybernetics: The Human Use of Human Beings*. New York: Pocketbooks.
  - <sup>15</sup> Spiderman (2002)

# Talking Change (And Not Just Campaigns)

Prabhas Pokharel

# Introduction

This paper is the result of a request to articulate a position around the question “What is the change that digital natives (with causes)<sup>1</sup> produce?” As a “digital native with a cause” myself, I found that popular ways of thinking about digital activity and change were hopeless in letting me analyze the kinds of change I (or for a better example, my friend Barshaa) “produce”. This kind of activism, an online “discursive activism”, is both valuable and (quantitatively) significant, yet hardly talked about. I hope to convince the reader that this value and significance, along with the large number of unanswered questions around discursive activism online, beg for different ways of talking about digital activity and change online.

The paper proceeds by articulating popular positions of digital activity in digital change, describing my case study (my friend Barshaa), describing how the change Barshaa creates or does not create is not addressable by the popular positions I describe, formulating this activism as “discursive activism”, establishing the value and then the (quantitative) significance of discursive activism, and finally a call to start thinking about digital activity and the change digital natives create by looking at more than just campaigns.

# Popular Conceptions of Digital Activity and Change

In thinking about evaluating the kinds of changes that I and “digital natives with causes” around me produce, I found three popular positions that I was repeatedly comparing myself against<sup>2</sup>:

Clay Shirky, in various interviews and in a talk entitled “Rethinking Representation”, has argued about the Internet’s democratizing potential, and pointed to campaigns such as the *Ushahidi* deployment in Haiti, the *Pink Chaddi* campaign, and various cases where citizens have banded together to control online votes to show the power of organizing online.

Evgeny Morozov, in an essay about “The Brave New World of Slacktivism”, talked about slacktivists: myriads of digital citizens who join Facebook groups, or sign and forward petitions, but do scant more to help the campaigns they claim to support. His worry is that these slacktivists in fact feel a sense of fulfillment (having done nothing but click a button with minuscule value to the campaign), and then don’t participate in more valuable activities.

Malcolm Gladwell, in “Small Change”, talked about online social media being unable to sustain intense campaigning that deep social issues require. His claim was that social media works on weak (decentralized) ties, which are great for propagating low-cost actions, but that these media are not useful for encouraging high-cost actions that deep social issues require addressing.

But the kind of digital activity that I (and many around me) enact is not describable in the terms and frames of these popular positions. These three frames of thinking on digital activity all focus on actions and campaigns facilitated (or hampered) by digital activities. What I find increasingly relevant to the world around me, however, is not campaign-based activism, but instead “discursive activism” of people fostering discussions around issues they care about. There are no campaigns around these discussions, simply individuals or communities that act as the fuel, and conversations that act as the vehicles of change.

## Barshaa

I want to start with the example of my friend Barshaa, whose online activity is similar to mine and that of many around me. She is a young Nepali, progressive and socially conscious, and “wants to do something” about Nepal. I noticed that her friends call her *rastra bhakta* on her Facebook wall. *Rastra bhakta* translates to “nation worshipper”, and the meaning of the phrase lies somewhere between that of the literal translation and “patriot”. Her friends, increasingly disenchanted by corruption, crawling rates of progress, and government inaction in Nepal<sup>3</sup>, use the word to tease her. To be a young *rastra bhakta* is decidedly not hip.

Barshaa’s online activity is interesting because it repeatedly engages her group of friends in discussions about the state of contemporary Nepal. I was friends with Barshaa in Kindergarten, and had remained out of touch until we found each other on Facebook about a month ago. A day or so later, I posted a picture of pollution in Kosovo, and Barshaa commented to remind me of the incredible pollution in the capital of the country I come from. I noticed soon after a comment she had made about poor road conditions in Nepal. Following her more closely, I could see much more activity and discussion about issues of contemporary Nepal. She had posted a link from the Economist which praised Nepal’s success in increasing Human Development indicators during the last decade. Following the link was a brief discussion about whether these numbers were made up—and comparisons to life on the streets of Kathmandu. A few days before that was a joke about how paying taxes in Nepal was like pouring water on a sand dune, again followed up by a brief discussion.

Each one of those actions, taken individually, is small and insignificant. But through each post, Barshaa has gotten people in her social circle to think and engage in issues around Nepal’s contemporary issues. The little conversations she hosts, whether they are about corruption, load shedding, or pollution, form a small sphere of discourse around the issues of contemporary Nepal. The discussion is non-partisan, which is welcome in a place where “hyperpoliticization” of the public sphere is identified as an issue (Gautam 2009). The discussion is also a mix of positive and negative interactions, another change from the disenchantment that many youth are feeling with is the seemingly impossible political situation of Nepal.





But how do I think about this (perhaps little) change Barshaa or digital natives like her create? Evaluating the change through the lenses of popular perspectives presented at the beginning of the paper take me nowhere.

## Barshaa According to the Three Positions

Barshaa is not Morozov's "slacktivist" clicking on a like button (or posting a link) and disappearing from the scene afterwards. She clicks like buttons day after day, posts links and hosts and participates in small discussions time and again. Morozov was concerned about armchair activists that participate in virtual campaigns (that have little direct effect on political or social causes), and then move on to other activities unrelated to the "cause". Barshaa may participate in one or many of those campaigns, but that is not what is incredible about her. What is incredible is that she hosts small discussions and participates in small campaigns *day in and day out*. Morozov's concern was slacktivists with a sense of false fulfillment eschewing participation in more impactful activities. But it is unclear to me that Barshaa's persistent actions make her more rather than less likely to participate in "more impactful activities". I see a yearning for impact rather than false fulfillment in Barshaa. I have a feeling she might even be able to drag a few friends to "impactful campaign activities", if and when she finds them.

She cannot be thought of as a successful (or unsuccessful) organizer or participant in a campaign of the sort Shirky likes to present, either. Most of the time in Barshaa's "activism", there is no campaign to speak of. Even if she participates in some, looking at her participation through the angle of success or failure of a specific campaign is really not seeing the whole picture; her participation and actions exist without campaigns and between campaigns as much as they do during campaigns. And with or without a campaign, there is no community of people that Barshaa has mobilized or organized, either.

Gladwell's discussion of strong and weak ties has little relevance as well. He talks about weak ties and low-cost actions that are often successful in organizing fast online campaigns, or highly organized offline activity that contribute to high-impact activism. Both are irrelevant to Barshaa. If anything, Barshaa creates and re-creates strong ties with her peers. She introduces the context of engagement with contemporary Nepal's issues to her social life, with many and repeated low-cost interactions. And even with

those interactions, there is no concrete "action" to speak of: she is simply adding engagement about Nepal's contemporary issues into her relationships.

## A Different Kind of Activism

Barshaa engages in a different kind of activism. She challenges discourse in Nepal in both the adult and youth spheres, and tries to create a different nature of talking. Instead of giving up on change like many youth in Nepal, she refuses to stop talking about both the progress that has been made and the issues that remain. While the adult public sphere, broadly classified, is busy arguing in favour of one party or another, she engages in the discourse of a "rational deliberative democracy"<sup>4</sup> largely absent in Nepal.

Barshaa's activities are close to the "discursive politics" of 1980s feminism. For Katzenstein (1995), "[discursive politics] is the politics of meaning-making. It is discursive in that it seeks to reinterpret, reformulate, and rewrite the norms and practices of society and the state... Discursive politics relies heavily but not exclusively on language. Its vehicle is both in speech and print—conversations, debate, conferences, essays, stories, newsletters, books." Barshaa's vehicle is online conversations, and she tries to reinterpret, reformulate and rewrite how those around her talk about Nepal. However, gently, she repeatedly and gently provokes her friends' sensibilities about how they talk about their country and its issues.

She does this by creating a small forum of participation and discourse on her Facebook wall. Part of it is by design: each action Barshaa makes on her Facebook wall is the potential start of a discussion. But much of it is not. By posting about contemporary Nepal's issues over and over again, Barshaa actively points the discussion to issues she cares about. A forum is created<sup>5</sup>, revolving around the individual and her "cause" (critical engagement on issues that contemporary Nepal faces). To emphasize, in a country where the (adult) public sphere is hyperpoliticized, and the (youth) public sphere is highly negative as a result of deep disenchantment, Barshaa's bubble of a Facebook wall is a space for a different, and valuable, kind of discourse.

Now I do not want to overemphasize Barshaa's (creation of alternative discourse where none existed) as the only kind of discursive activism; there are many. Other digital natives carry out similar activities at different stages of having and not having "causes". Some, like the friends that engage in discussions with Barshaa, may not have the same cause but read what Barshaa writes, opine every once in a while, and share what

Barshaa says if they happen to agree. Others may enter with interest in a given topic (contemporary Nepal, for example), but without a particular position or “cause” related to the topic. Others may enter with ideas about evaluating particular perspectives. And yet others may simply be re-creating discussions and activity somewhere else closer to home and closer to their social life<sup>6</sup>.

What is common between all sorts of activities is that the “change” being produced is in the conversations. People are engaging in digital activities that are changing the where, the how and the ‘what’ of conversations and discourse. Change through participating in campaigns that are trying to make more tangible changes to socio-political situations are not the only change that digital natives are making.

## The Value of Discursive Activism

The clearest value of this kind of activism to me is the creation a sense of personal empowerment. When Barshaa posted “where does the tax collection money in Nepal go” to her Facebook wall, a brief discussion ensued about how many people in Nepal pay taxes, hinting at the vicious cycle of tax-evasion and corruption acting together. The particular discussion may not have taught Barshaa anything new, but it is hard to think that Barshaa remains unchanged after many repeated discussions about issues around similar topics. For me, a young Nepali emigrant, the discussions hosted by friends around me provide an essential link to Nepal and issues facing Nepali youth. The sorry state of Nepali media<sup>7</sup> and the increasing amounts of time I spend on social networking sites mean that it is through friends like Barshaa that I engage with issues about Nepal.

Value also arises for the nature of the space of discourse that Barshaa and others host: a space of leisure and socializing. Facebook is not a “serious” space, or rather not *only* a serious space. It is a space where the frivolous and the serious mix and mingle. Between the posts about contemporary Nepal on Barshaa’s Facebook wall are photos she has taken and wants to share with her friends, friends leaving notes to keep in touch, and other social activities. In fact, many of these posts feature more discussion and engagement than the more serious posts; the space’s essence of leisure and socializing are highlighted in other ways as well. The forum for “activism” (or participation or change if you prefer those terms) that Barshaa is hosting is not primarily a forum for “activism”; it is a forum occupying many other parts of Barshaa’s digital life. Entertainment, communication, and friendships mix with activism.

The space hosting this kind of activism, I will argue, makes the activism itself a more accessible and engaging experience. Barshaa remains a *human being* on her Facebook wall, not a “radical, semi-crazy person who just cannot deal with any form of authority.”<sup>8</sup> And the individuals come back not just for her serious talk but also so that they can remain friends with her, so they can revisit the kinds of leisure that she creates.

## The (quantitative) Significance of Discursive Activism

The mix of leisure and activism also opens up activism to more participants. In fact, discursive activism is becoming a significant way in which people are engaging in their political circumstances online. I find it illustrative to quote the definition of activism from <http://activism.wikia.com/>. The article, whose authorship I can only attribute to “some digital native(s),” says the following about activism:

*(Retrieved 21 Nov 2010)*

According to “some digital native(s)”, everyday acts are how many people look at activism today. Barshaa’s joke about corruption in Nepal, her comment reflecting on another person’s discussion about pollution of Kosovo with contemporary Nepal, and her discussion about human development indicators in Nepal are all everyday acts that make her an “activist in her own way”.

In fact, in “Beyond apathetic and activist youth”, Harris et al. show that participation in “little” ways (not traditionally recognized as political participation) is how a majority of youth today articulate themselves politically.

While there are significant and well-founded concerns about youth disengagement from electoral politics, conclusions about this phenomenon have tended to position young people as lacking knowledge and interest regarding politics; in other words, as apathetic in their outlooks. Our study demonstrates instead that many young people have social and political concerns, but eschew traditional participation because they do not feel heard. Rather than rejecting representative politics wholesale, however, they continue to value recognition by the state and continue to appreciate rational, discursive, deliberative democracy. The research also illustrates how they take up more individualized and everyday practices in efforts to shape

society. In doing so, they are part of a shift to modest and 'ordinary' political practices, what Mandy calls 'do(ing) my part', that is consistent with the conditions of insecurity, risk and individualization that are redefining possibilities for citizenship more broadly. However, they are by and large not participants in emergent activist and protest cultures, but opt for more ordinary ways to act on their political and social concerns.

And what are these ordinary acts that Harris describes? While recycling, donating money to a cause, and signing petitions, youth in the study also "discussed social/political issues", "made a statement through art, writing, or music", or "made a political/social statement online". Part of many people's conception of political participation is happening on online social networking websites like MySpace (for the population Harris studied), Facebook (for Barshaa and others around me), and more. The paper describes the view of one particular Australian youth:

Like Sally, [Chiara] described the value of online social networking for the discussion of political and social issues amongst young people, noting that 'MySpace is such a young thing. Even people reading your blog, whether they care or not, it sticks in their heads ...' and says that she uses it to 'inform (people) of little issues ...'

It is exactly this information of little issues that Barshaa performs and provides on her Facebook wall. It is similar to the activity of countless digital natives, young and old, that periodically pass by my Facebook wall.

## Beyond Campaigns

So one of the changes that (many) digital natives produce can be thought of as a creation of new spaces for discourse and discussion. As I have argued, this change is both valuable and significant.

But there is much room for elaboration on what (online) discursive activism creates or does not create, or what it may, may not, should or should not lead to. In the midst of a long response to a question about how her Facebook activity had affected her (after having read a draft version of this paper), Barshaa said, "it definitely has got me thinking (I wish it gets me working as well)." I have argued in this paper that Barshaa having gotten (or keeping) herself and others around her thinking and discussing is a significant act in and of itself. But many things are not clear to me. I think there is very

much an opportunity here for scholars to discuss the differences between *working* and *thinking* in this way. Does Barshaa need to get working at all? Is the role of an energizer, or someone who gets others to think (another way Barshaa describes some of the impact of her activity) important or frivolous? Does she need to agitate to be effective?

There is perhaps even more of an opportunity to study the *kinds* of discursive activism taking place online. As I mentioned in a brief paragraph above, some digital natives commence digital activity with a political statement or position already articulated, others participate in the discussions around positions others have articulated, some stumble into causes online, and others recreate discourse and conversations happening in different social and digital spaces. It would be fascinating to have a deeper study of the kind of actors and "discursive activisms" online.

I'm sure there are even more interesting questions to ask about this kind of activism; the few I have asked here only scratch the surface. What is essential is that we ask questions without the lens of campaigns or tangible actions. It is not enough to ask what campaign effectiveness Barshaa has had, because there is no campaign to speak of. She is instead inspired by the desire "to do something to make Nepal however "little" better than I can." I think there is a great opportunity for scholars to delve into how digital actors approach such intangible (perhaps not yet fully articulated) causes with possibly indefinable goals.

Sasha Constanza Schock's response to Gladwell gets the closest, among literature I have come across:

Overall, I think he offers a useful corrective to techno deterministic ideas and reminds us that the key force in social movements has always been strong personal connections (f2f friends and family). Anyone who has participated in serious social movement activity (civil rights movement, LGBTQ movement, environmental movement, anti-war movement, global justice movement, etc.) knows this. However, Gladwell fails to understand that social media is mostly used to extend and maintain f2f relationships over time and space.

Schock, Lina Srivastava and others who request a focus on the "activism" as opposed to the "digital" when talking about "digital activism" are much closer to the mark than the more oft-quoted positions that I explored in the beginning of this paper. However,

when “activism” is placed first, the focus turns to well-defined movements such as the one Schock lists, or campaigns with defined goals.

With this paper, I hope I have argued that somewhat of a different approach is needed for understanding activists like Barshaa, who act at the level of discourse, and with often intangible goals.

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*[Email conversations and Facebook messages with Barshaa Paudel, unpublished, 2010.]*

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Barshaa becoming a "global publishing medium." Even if she publishes her activity for "everyone" to see and access, in practice only a small number of her friends will see her activity (as far as I conjecture from my own experiences, and a brief description of the algorithm that powers the Facebook newsfeed in "EdgeRank: The Secret Sauce That Makes Facebook News Feed Tick." TechCrunch. Retrieved 21 Nov 2010 <http://techcrunch.com/2010/04/22/facebook-edgerank/>)

- <sup>6</sup> Some of these perspectives are reflected in comments on <http://digitalnatives.in/prabhas/blogs/questioning-name-part-ii-cause>. Others are drawn from personal exposure.
- <sup>7</sup> I find traditional Nepali media to be a bore, and most public discussion around media coverage to suffer the same fate of hyperpoliticization I mentioned earlier.
- <sup>8</sup> A popular conception of an activist, according to <http://activism.wikia.com>. See more in the next paragraph.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am not interested in questioning the term "digital natives with a cause?" I will simply talk about the digital activity of individuals who have a "cause" in the broad sense of a desire for some political or social objective.

<sup>2</sup> These are not the only positions on digital activism; there are many more. However, these three ways of thinking about digital activity and activism have framed the popular discourse that I (as a digital native with a cause) was exposed to in the recent past. (This is especially true when one removes "regime change", and "Internet freedom" from the conversation. I am not interested in either topic at present.) These frames also provide a flavor of the landscape of conversation about digital activism presented in Joyce 2010. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that these positions are not the only ones that corresponding authors take on digital activism.

<sup>3</sup> The constitution of the new "Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal" is being written, and was expected to promulgated in May 2010. However, the deadline was extended to May 2011, and little progress has been made since as the government has been involved in a series of political maneuvers that have left the cabinet empty for months now.

<sup>4</sup> Phrase borrowed from Harris 2010.

<sup>5</sup> And here, I will happily note that the forum is small; I make no grandiose claims about



NEXT > FEB 20  
BANGALORE

Change is yelling:  
Are you listening?

Nonkululeko Godana



# Introduction

This paper sets out to explore the role Digital Natives play in processes of social transformation. While this looks like a big question, I want to nuance it by bringing in, the ideas of context, location and politics that inform much Digital Native practice geared towards social change. The paper looks at particular instances in South Africa, where I draw from both, my personal experiences but also, significantly, popular and public discourse. While the information (anecdotal and practice based) is rooted in a certain geo-political context, I hope that the processes that these seemingly de-territorialised Digital Natives have initiated in one region will also have resonances and synergies with a lot of the other parts of the world. The paper posits that while there are certain tools and platforms that are globally viable, these are also fiercely localised and that the focus should be on not only what people do with these tools, but also on how they invest their own passions and reflections into them. Also, instead of looking at a reductive model of how people use technologies instrumentally, I hope to demonstrate how technologies are an essential part of a Digital Native make-up and that there is a specific relationship (which is multilateral) that Digital Natives have with digital and Internet technologies.

## A cry and a Tweet...

To begin with, I'd like to relate a story that affected me and a lot of young Digital Natives in my circle of influence. I have watched how the story spread on social network and eventually led to a campaign that has received a lot of support and is slowly starting to unzip the tight mindsets of the society I live in..

Her outcry came as a result of a big story that broke out on the news in South Africa. On 10 November 2010 a girl was gang raped at a Johannesburg high school (on the school field) by a group of boys from the same school. The boys were let off the hook as the National Protection Association of South Africa claimed the boys were in the midst of exams and there wasn't enough evidence — despite a video taken by another group of kids of the heart-wrenching act; which went viral amongst the schoolkids,

around the country and is being sold for R10 online! The incident eventually led to a bizarre conclusion that all parties involved should be arrested for statutory rape – including the girl who was alleged to be drunk (or drugged).

The story sobered the country up once again to the alarming statistics of violence against women and the growing number of young girls getting raped (those who report the incident). Traditional media and the social media was abuzz with the 'progress' of the case - hash tag #JusticeforJulesRapeSurvivor started trending from Twitterville, people engaged in conversations about the failing justice system, the ignorant educators, the violation of women, the risky society that girls (and boys) were growing up in and so on.

A couple of (real life) friends I follow on Twitter, Akona (@akona1) and Lebogang (@Ltdn) started a conversation around what it would take to turn all the Twitter talk on the #JusticeforJulesRapeSurvivor into action. Akona said that she had no delusions that it would be just a conversation and not doing but was convinced that 'activism and social change can be achieved through twitter.' Lebogang argued that the Twitter conversations would just remain that, Twitter conversations and not translate to real action; and that real action needed to engage the physical space and then Twitter – and not the other way round. He referred her to Malcolm Gladwell's views on using social media to drive social change vs lobbying people on the ground.

Lebogang's argument was that Twitter/ Facebook timelines are fickle and don't always have a permanent link (which people could refer to) or a strong tie that they could be strongly driven by. He suggested to Akona that she become a strong tie that becomes the catalyst for some impactful action; that she breaks the cycle of just discussing action by actually acting.

It was intriguing seeing this transformation happen...

She read like an open book (vulnerable)... "Maybe I'm just a girl standing in front of the virtual world asking it to help me find the real world." (An almost shrug). To which Lebogang responded, "We live in times that require strength; you'll have to tap into what makes you a strong woman and march us forward."

And so the story goes....

Akona logged off for a while, cigarette in her one hand, the other hand that grabs the laptop -trembling. She starts purging on her blog – [HYPERLINK "http://www.akmosaic.com"](http://www.akmosaic.com)

blogspot.com" [www.akmosaic.blogspot.com](http://www.akmosaic.blogspot.com) . "It was January 23 of the year 2000, six months after the passing of my beloved mother. I was 15 and in seventh standard (ninth grade) of high school...."

As a visitor reading her page, your mental alarm goes on an overdrive by these lines: "About halfway through the drink, I wasn't feeling good at all, dizzy and nauseous... so I excused myself and went inside the house to the bathroom...R led me inside and suddenly the door shuts with a bang and he was in there with me...the room was spinning, my heart was hammering at my chest and my legs were about to give in when I was jolted into shock, as he reached under my skirt and frantically tugged at my underwear... 'No' wasn't getting me anywhere...I said it again...He pushed me to the ground in the corner of the bathroom... I was ever so grateful for the pain on my back which was helping me not to concentrate on the burning sensation coming from him entering me...minutes passed and he got up, zipped his pants, bent down and kissed me on the forehead.... I went to school the next day and didn't say anything to anyone about what happened..."

Akona recounts the #JulesHighRapeSurvivor story and concludes her blogpost by calling out 'let's march, let's shout, let's petition, whatever! Let us please do something....' and tweets the link to her 2000 followers.

Says one of the followers (an actress): "# ISaidNo is the first time I'm taking initiative. I've just grown tired of feeling impotent and decided to use momentum created by Akona. I managed to get website for the campaign, sponsored by a hosting company." Something clicked.

## Finding the Bonds

The motives of the people's sudden involvement, while they are significant are not really relevant to this argument. It is more important to note that people were moved, somehow. People who had lightly engaged in discussion with her before, now formed a stronger bond – beyond the retweeted backpats of encouragement. They started conferencing with her in real life about how to implement the change; she got some ideas from people even emailing thoughts and offering to help. She drew together a voluntary task force (effortlessly) from her Twitter followers, including well-known South African media professionals and personalities of influence. Joining her on championing the cause was @Tendajoe – a social media consultant and homeless people's rights activist.

It became apparent that what Lebogang said to Akona about tapping into the kinds of bonds you have with people and forming a far more invested movement on the strength of these bonds, was the correct direction to go in.

On the 19 November 2010 they hosted an #ISaidNo Twitterthon (60 hours of non-stop tweeting against sexual violence), calling out for sponsors. 1440 Twitpic poster views later, the steady-growing campaign has a theme-song called #Powa that a well-known South African poet-mcee, Tumi Molekane recorded and performed to a live music TV show - on South Africa's leading channel. The song is available on a few websites for free downloading. The campaign's received the attention of traditional media. Word spreads.

## Stories that Change

So what is the role of stories in society? South Africa is a society with a heavy legacy of apartheid (racial injustice), as well as a plethora of social ills (like a lot of societies – poverty, HIV/AIDS, unemployment, huge gap between haves and have-nots, imbalanced educational resources); riding on the back of a dark horse called democracy – towards a future of economic equity, strong justice system, healing and reconciliation.

I believe that the narratives that we tell about our country now will become the backbone of how we view South Africa in years/decades to come. Stories of freedom were discussed long before the teargas stench and bloody massacre of Soweto students protesting against the use of the oppressor's language (Afrikaans) as a primary medium of learning. For some who led from the front, only their deep blood-stained footprints were left as 'memes', trailed and recounted by those who were followers at the time. Even that story had a catalyst; those who re-told the story identified amongst the deepest footprints to belong to Hector Pieterse. That story has been going viral around the world for decades.

The story of a man, who took a 27 year walk to freedom, from the confines of a jail cell, still re-tells at the highest rate. And he still has the largest number of fans around the world. #StoryofMandela

Often stories aren't the actual change but a catalyst / cause that can spurn people into affecting the change.

For a lot of witnesses on the stand at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, the torture of their past couldn't be masked by the recounts. Being able to choke on, cough out their story was a beginning of the healing process. Re-story is restoring. Back in the days, natives relied on subliminal messages injected in the powerful form of radio drama, transmitted in different languages (including indigenous) to masses of people. For that amount of time (about 20 minutes), they generously lend their attention to the narrative. Radio drama is still played on various South African radio stations across all official languages. I'm willing to bet that the biggest mass action would prevail if these stories were to be discontinued. For a lot of listeners this form of infotainment counts a lot to their collective identity, sense of belonging and even a sense of unity/ power in numbers.

Radio drama format however, doesn't have the same effect on a younger generation, who have their attention generously invested in mobile technology. The generation that forms the most amount of users of mobile technology in South Africa. As well as amongst the highest senders of text messages and chat messages. They also download the most amount of content (both useful and obscene).

A lot of the content can be quite destructive, as in the case of the #JusticeforJules-RapeSurvivor video; which was spread faster than a rash and opened wounds of rape survivors country wide (world wide).

I think that, important to the process of change, is the fact that, even for a moment, a large portion of the country was listening/ reading/ downloading/ scanning/ sharing the same story – a burning issue. Something clicked. The rape crisis centres / trauma lines were jam-packed with traffic; parents got restored awareness of their children's heartbeats. Some parents rode the momentum and opened the lines of communication with their own children.

In essence:

1. Digital natives have at their disposal, whether they are aware of it or not, powerful tools that can be constructive and destructive.
2. At the core of every culture is storytelling
3. Every revolution, social movement started with a story.
4. Other people's story can be a great incentive for some kind of change (even on a subjective level)
5. The digital community has the power to reach outside to their real life communities and influence behaviour in a positive way.

I find interesting the prominent forms of communication that govern the younger generation and older generation (in South Africa). As mentioned above, the older generation still relies a lot on broadcast (radio / tv) for their stories, whereas the younger generation tends to rely more on online media.

While this segregation is not surgically divisive, it is true that the new stories, and sometimes even the old stories, find their voice in new technologies. Often, the traditional structures of filtering, suppressing or containing stories need to be challenged and questioned. Often, it is through the digital media that these challenges can be posed.

The narratives take on a different approach too. The older generation tends to listen more closely (receiving end), whereas the younger generation feels more of a need to express themselves/share more (transmission end). It is said that the most revolutionary people in the younger generation, would be the ones who actually listen before succumbing to the desire to share their own experience. Perhaps if we listened more we'd take a moment to reflect on the impact of our own stories (constructive vs destructive) before blogging, tweeting or updating status.

Perhaps if we listened more, we'd take more time to read other people's stories; engaging them on the potential impact of their narratives they may not be aware of. By asking questions and finding out what the other actually means, we may find we are helping them co-author a narrative that will form a more solid base for their personal transformation – and perhaps that of their own communities/ networks/ worlds. If Lebogang didn't engage Akona on her stance in the #JulesHighRapeSurvivor story, Akona's story may have remained more exasperated/ defeated than hopeful/ purposeful.

Still on a positive note, South African youth initiatives like Yoza, a mobile storytelling platform have found resonance with some young people who are looking for richer content online. The beauty lies not only in the ability to read stories by other young people... but to also comment on the effect of the story on you. Dialogue.

Towards  
a new relationship  
of exchange:  
Thoughts On  
Supporting Youth  
And Technology  
Initiatives From The  
Case Of Blank Noise  
In Urban India

Maesy Angelina

# Introduction

The relationship between youth and new media technologies has been a popular subject among policy makers and practitioners for the past decade. A recent report from the Open Society Institute (OSI)<sup>1</sup> identified it as one of the emerging priority areas for donors in the international youth sector, most of which are interested in funding initiatives that use technology to engage youth in some form of civic participation or for socially useful purposes. Most of the donors, for instance the OSI Youth Action Fund<sup>2</sup> and UNICEF Innovations Lab Kosovo<sup>3</sup>, provide small funding for projects or start-up initiatives and prefer not to fund salaries or logistical purchases – a common practice for funders of youth initiatives.

The assumption made by these donors in creating the funding scheme is that most digitally savvy young people are not yet active as actors for social or political change. This is understandable, considering that the rise of new media technologies is a fairly recent phenomenon, but the accompanying assumption that simply introducing youth to these tools will result in activism seems to disregard the myriad other factors in young people's decision to take up social causes. Moreover, it demonstrates that the changes caused by young people's engagement with the technologies are not yet clearly understood – a fact which is highlighted in the report. Hence, it is crucial for donors to gain an understanding on the emerging forms of activism by these young people –who we refer as Digital Natives – who are already actively organizing for social change.

Through this paper, I would like to contribute to this process of understanding by exploring how an existing digital natives movement approach social change, organize itself and think of sustainability and relationship with donors. The exploration is grounded in the case of Blank Noise<sup>4</sup>, a youth-led collective that has been addressing the issue of street sexual harassment for the past seven years in urban India. Today, Blank Noise exists in nine cities in India and consists of over 2,000 volunteers, most of whom are women and men (i.e., 16–35 year-olds), and well known for its street art interventions as well as its online campaigns using various new media platforms.

The collective has received various national and international media attention and was named as one of the most outstanding autonomous citizen activism in India<sup>5</sup>, but it started as a nine-person project in 2003. By sharing the evolution of Blank Noise as a movement and reflecting on relevant point for donors, I am hoping to trigger a discussion on the kinds of relationship and support that a stakeholder could provide for youth activism related to new media technologies.

## Blank noise: the evolution of a movement

### The Origins: Dealing with Victimhood

Blank Noise started in 2003 as a final year art project of Jasmeen Patheja, then a student in Srithi School of Design, Arts, and Technology in Bangalore. Jasmeen arrived in Bangalore at the age of 18 to study art and realized over time that many women around her, including herself, experience sexual harassment in public spaces on a daily basis, which ranges from staring, catcalls, to groping, etc.

The harassment is widely ignored by people in the society. It is termed as “eve teasing”. The term, an Indian–English euphemism, both trivializes the issue by calling it “teasing” and places the blame on women through its play on the biblical Eve, a temptress who lures men into teasing her. Eve teasing as a term is not formally recognized in the Indian Penal Code, but women could file a report under sections 292 and 298 that criminalize any actions that make women a target of obscene gestures or violate women’s modesty<sup>6</sup>. However, police rarely takes action unless it leads to violent death or fatal injury, and eve teasing is often portrayed as being a romantic gesture as shown in Bollywood films.

Disturbed by the normalization of street sexual harassment, Jasmeen decided to take up eve teasing as the topic of her final project. She initiated a series of workshops with eight other women that explored personal experiences with public space and street sexual harassment. Being interested in art practice that provokes public dialogue and participation, Jasmeen translated the testimonials gathered into an art installation that included video, sound, and photography.

At this stage, Blank Noise stemmed from feelings of frustration and anger caused by experiences with street sexual harassment. It started by exploring victimhood and

looked at the issue from an all-girls perspective. This perspective started to shift when Jasmeen decided to further expand the idea of Blank Noise.

### Going Public: Taking It to the Streets

In this second phase, Blank Noise is envisioned to shift from a more victim-oriented perspective into ‘...a participatory, public art project where she could take the issue to the streets, while including a wider base of participants’<sup>7</sup>. The desire to go public is based on Blank Noise’s analysis and understanding of the issue. Based on my conversations with 13 people in the collective, I discovered that all of them shared the following articulation of street sexual harassment.

Firstly, they denounce the myth that only provocatively dressed young women are “teased”. Women of all classes, age, and manner of dressing have undergone street sexual harassment so often that most have coped by remaining silent and devising strategies to avoid the incidents. The strategies range from walking faster or always having a male companion when traveling at night, but all of them limit women’s freedom in public space. Reporting incidents to parents or spouses have resulted either with an advice to ignore or restrictions like increased curfews, so many women preferred to keep silent.

Blank Noise also rejected the perception that street sexual harassment is a women-only issue. Men also experience it, although in a much lesser extent, but the main reason why it is a societal issue is because the normalization of harassment by men and women is the root of the problem. While not all men are perpetrators, many reacted to reports of harassment by offering to beat up the perpetrator and thus do not solve the problem. Victims also perpetuate the normalizing mindset by deeming themselves responsible, for instance by thinking that they ‘ask for it’ by the way they dress. The root of the problem lies at the mindset of every member of the society.

Hence, Blank Noise refuses to name a particular opponent, or an entity responsible to take action to solve the issue. Other than calling everyone equally responsible, Blank Noise also acknowledges that the grey area in the forms of harassment, like staring, made it difficult to be regulated by the state.

Based on this framing of the issue, Blank Noise articulates two objectives: to raise public awareness on the issue, but more importantly, to empower people to take action against street sexual harassment through their engagement with the collective. Blank Noise aims for a cultural change by creating personal changes at the individual level. Its intangible goal is shared by many other movements, but others usually also formulate intermediary concrete aims like passing legislations as indicators for progress.

The approach used is creating thought-provoking public conversations through art interventions. Like so many other movements, Blank Noise started engaging with the public by doing interventions on the streets. One of its most popular street interventions is called the 'I Never Ask for It' clothes collection campaign, which is a street exhibition of various clothes contributed by women who have been harassed by wearing them. It tackles the notion that women are to blame for the way they dress, for the clothes collected have ranged from tight shirts to a saree. There is no slogan like 'Stop Eve Teasing' or definitive messages of the type, but volunteers engage passers-by in conversations about the clothes gallery and the issue of street sexual harassment.

### 'I Never Ask for It' Clothes Collection Drive in Bangalore

It is fair to doubt what kind of impacts created by such an intervention; after all, Blank Noise does not have any means to contact and check whether the passers-by undergo any changes after the one encounter. This difficulty is also acknowledged by the members, but I discovered later on that the main changes are experienced by those participating in the action.

All of the people I talked with, regardless of the length and intensity of their engagement in Blank Noise, felt that they underwent personal changes. Some realized how much their bodies are disconnected from the public space, many felt that they explored more dimensions of the issue through conversations with passers-by, and others feel empowered to deal with street sexual harassment. The discussion and debates raised from the public dialogue help Blank Noise volunteer themselves to learn more about the issue, reflect on their experiences, and give meaning to their involvement.

For Blank Noise, cultural change starts from the personal. With this kind of approach and aim to allow personal empowerment of those within the collective, having as many volunteers as possible is crucial for the collective. Blank Noise conceptualizes its volunteers as 'Action Heroes', agents and stakeholders that have the capacity

to take action and influence their surroundings to address street sexual harassment. Blank Noise made its main blog with the intention to announce events, attract volunteers, and archive their interventions. Today, the online presence is added with three community blogs, a Facebook group and user profile, and accounts at YouTube, Flickr and Twitter. Other than for the aforementioned functions, Blank Noise also uses its online presence to create campaigns. However, the transition was not intentionally directed by the core team in Blank Noise but rather a result of a series of unintentional events.

### Going Cyber: Engaging with Diverse Public Spaces

The previous one-way communication in the Blank Noise blog changed after two events that I call 'the digital tipping point', the point where the communication shifts into an interactive joint content-production with other Internet users. This mode of communication has been noted by scholars, such as Manuel Castells<sup>8</sup> and Clay Shirky<sup>9</sup>, as being the characteristics of the twenty-first century society – where people are used to being producers and not only consumers of content.

The first was when Jasmeen started uploading photos of her harasser, taken by her mobile phone, to the blog in 2005. Comments immediately flooded, raising questions about the nature of the violation, whether such actions are warranted, and the ethics of the action given that the man is of the lower class and have no access to the Internet. The discussion resulted in Blank Noise deciding to blur the photos. This is when Blank Noise first realized that the cyber space is also a kind of public space that can give shape to the public conversation it imagines.

The second was the blogathon proposed by one of Blank Noise volunteers to commemorate the International Women's Day in 2006, which asked bloggers around India to write about their experiences with street sexual harassment and link it to the Blank Noise blog. The blogathon received massive responses, perhaps both due to the frustration on the silence around the issue and because blogging just recently became a major trend at that time in India. Eve teasing became an urgent topic on the cyber space and the success triggered the creation of Blank Noise's community blogs, in which the contents are contributed by other Internet users. The tipping point was when the nature of Blank Noise's web presence changed due to its interaction with other web users. It took place when Blank Noise jumped into actions entirely dependent on the public response to be successful.



The most famous of the community blogs is the Action Hero blog<sup>10</sup>, which hosts the stories of women's encounters with street sexual harassment and how they reacted. After speaking with a woman who contributed a post in the blog, I discovered that the anonymity granted by the Internet and the supportive environment in Blank Noise's blog compelled her to write. She further shared that reading others' stories and receiving comments for hers made her feel less alone and helped her healing process. Blank Noise's cyber presence became a virtual support group for many women affected by street sexual harassment.

Other than engaging with the virtual public through the community blogs, Blank Noise also started conducting online campaigns. One of them is the online version of the same 'I Never Ask for It' campaign in February 2010, which asked Twitter users to tweet about their experiences with street sexual harassment and provided posters that can be used as Profile Pictures or Twitter background.

### One of the Posters for the Online 'I Never Ask for It' Campaign

The online boom also helped Blank Noise in attracting more public engagement. Almost all of the people I interviewed found BN through the web. Some found BN via popular mailing lists or blogs and others through their friends' status update in Facebook or Twitter. They then visited the BN blog, which archives all the interventions, hosts online activities, and announces upcoming street interventions. BN's online presence is more than being a virtual support group; it is also a vehicle for BN to attract and mobilize participation from the public. This occurs through the unintentional viral spread of BN by the virtual public's use of social media, which turns to be more effective in garnering the attention of digitally savvy youth than the mainstream media. Blank Noise's online presence has also led Internet users outside of India to the collective. In its blog, BN list the websites of other initiatives to address street sexual harassment in other parts of the world, such as *Hollaback* in New York.

### A Look inside the Collective

In the words of Kunal Ashok, one of the male volunteers, the collective consists not only of "people who volunteer or come to meetings, but anyone that have contributed in any way they can and identify with the issue." In this sense, Blank Noise today consists of over 2,000 people who signed up to their e-group as volunteers.



## Blank Noise's 'I Volunteer' Button

How does a collective with that many people work? Firstly, although these people are called 'volunteers' for registering in the e-group, I would argue that a majority of them are actually what I call casual participants – those who comment on Blank Noise interventions, re-Tweet their call for action, promote Blank Noise to their friends through word of mouth, or simply lurk and follow their activities online. In the offline sense, they are the passers-by who participate in their street interventions or become intrigued to think about the issue afterwards. These people, including those who do the same activities without formally signing up as volunteers, are acknowledged to be a part of Blank Noise as much as those who really do volunteer.

Blank Noise is open to all who shares its concern and values, but its volunteers must go beyond articulating an opinion and commit to collective action. However, Blank Noise applies very little requirement for people to identify themselves with the collective. The main bond that unites them is their shared concern with street sexual harassment. Blank Noise's analysis of the issue is sharp, but it also accommodates diverse perspectives by exploring the fine lines of SSH and not prescribing any concrete solution, while the latter is rarely found in existing social movements. The absence of indoctrination or concrete agenda reiterated through the public dialogue approach gives room for people to share different opinions and still respect others in the collective.

Other than these requirements, they are able to decide exactly how and when they want to be involved. They can join existing activities or initiate new ones; they can continuously participate or have on-and-off periods. This is reflected in the variety of volunteers' motivations, activities, and the meaning they give to their involvement. For some people, helping Blank Noise's street interventions is exciting because they like street art and engaging with other young people. Many are involved in online campaigns because they are not physically based in any of the cities where Blank Noise is present. Some others prefer to do one-off volunteering by proposing a project to a coordinator and then implementing it. There are people who started volunteering by initiating Blank Noise chapters in other cities and the gradually have a more prominent role. Some stay for the long term, some are active only for several times before going back to become supporters that spread Blank Noise through words of mouth. The ability to personalize volunteerism is also what makes BN appealing, compared to the stricter templates for volunteering in other social movements.

Any kind of movement requires a committed group of individuals among the many members to manage it. The same applies to Blank Noise, who relies on a group of people who dedicate time and resources to facilitate volunteers' and think of the collective's future: the 'core team'. Members of the 'core team', about ten people, are credited in Blank Noise's Frequently Asked Questions page and are part of a separate e-group than the volunteers. In its seven years, the core team only went for a retreat once and mostly connected through the e-group. In this space, they raise questions, ideas, and debates around BN's interventions, posters, and blog posts. Consequently, for them the issue is not only SSH but also related to masculinities, citizenship, class, stereotyping, gender, and public space. However, there are also layers in the intensity of the team members' engagement.

The most intense is Jasmeen, the founder and the only one who has been with Blank Noise since its inception until today. Jasmeen is an artist and considers Blank Noise to be a part of her practice; she has received funds to work for Blank Noise as an artist. Thus, she is the only one who dedicates herself to BN full time and becomes the most visible among the volunteers and the public eye. According to Jasmeen, she is not alone in managing the whole process within Blank Noise. Hemangini Gupta who joined in 2006 has slowly become the other main facilitator. "It is a fact that every discussion goes through her. I may be the face of it, but I see Hemangini and me working together. We rely on each other for Blank Noise work," Jasmeen said.

Hemangini, a former journalist who is now pursuing a PhD in the United States, explains her lack of visibility. "Blank Noise could never be my number one priority because it doesn't pay my bills, so I can only do it when I have free time and my other work is done." The same is true for others in the core team: students, journalists, writers and artists. Unlike Hemangini who still managed to be intensively involved, they have dormant and active periods like the volunteers.

The core team's functions as coordinators that facilitate the volunteers' involvement in BN and ensure that the interventions stay with the values BN upholds: confronting the issue but not aggravating the people, creating public dialogue instead of one-way preaching. This role emerged in 2006 when the volunteer applications mounted as the result of the aforementioned blogathon. They have also initiated or facilitated the growth of BN chapters in other cities. Although some of them have also moved to other cities for work, they remain in touch online. Together, the core team forms the de-facto leadership in BN.

## Arriving at the Next Phase: Questions of Sustainability

After seven years, Blank Noise has expanded in the number of volunteers or cities due to its virtual presence and allowed many volunteers to become empowered through their engagement with the collective, but it also created a wider impact to raise public awareness on street sexual harassment. While media coverage on street sexual harassment barely existed in 2003, the issue has since often been covered by the mainstream national and international media ranging from the *The Times of India* to *The New York Times* as well as various alternative web and print publications. Through the media, Blank Noise's efforts to denounce eve teasing are brought to a wider audience. The issue has become a public attention and there are now more initiatives addressing the issue in India, such as Jagori's Safe Delhi campaign<sup>11</sup>. However, this comes with several challenges.

Firstly, while the Internet has become valuable for Blank Noise to attract public engagement, the members also acknowledged that the public are mostly young, urban, English speaking – the fortunate minority of the digital divides in India. Since street sexual harassment is an issue that cuts across class, it is also important for Blank Noise to accompany their online efforts with street interventions. Members of the core team also recognize that the physical public space is also classed and there are efforts to go to the less elite parts of the cities and use local language. However, while the interventions might be in a non-elite space, the main actors remain those from the middle class. Considering that the main aim and impact of BN are at the personal level, this does mean that the empowerment Blank Noise facilitates is contextual to the privileged youth of urban India. Digital divide is an injustice that needs to be taken into account, but the case also demonstrates that all public spaces, virtual and physical, have a classed nature. Thus, I would argue that the class issue is more related to methods of engagement than the sphere of action per se. How can Blank Noise overcome the gap?

Secondly, the individualized approach to volunteering has resulted in Blank Noise having members with many different interests and many different stages. Those who just recently joined the collective are at their excitement to try out various interventions, but those who have been involved for a few years are eager for new, exciting methods and the core team has yet to find a strategy to accommodate this need.

Thirdly, the core team's energy and resources has been dedicated mostly for volunteer management over the past few years, which present two challenges. Firstly, the growth in the number of volunteers required more time than what the core team could commit

to given that their involvement in Blank Noise is not full time. Secondly, the focus on volunteer management is done at the expense of innovating new ways to address street sexual harassment from multiple perspectives.

All three challenges are important to be resolved for Blank Noise to be sustainable, which means, in Jasmeen's term, having an uninterrupted flow. As a collective, Blank Noise has gone through active and dormant periods given that nobody except for Jasmeen works full time. Consequently, they haven't been able to commit to many events and partnerships. Thus, at the moment, Blank Noise is looking at the possibilities of registering itself as a non-profit organization (NGO) in order to have a full time team, receive funding, and become accountable.

In terms of funding, Jasmeen and Hemangini both shared what Blank Noise would like to receive donor support for. There are specific events in mind, such as a four-day 'Action Hero' workshop for its many volunteers across India. Blank Noise would also like to receive funding to scale-up some of its campaigns, for instance the aforementioned 'I Never Ask for It' clothes campaign, for which Blank Noise has received many requests for collaboration both within India and internationally. They would also like to receive seed funding to create merchandises that can be further sold and replenish itself. Most importantly, they would like to receive funding for studio rent, salaries for full time team, travel and operational expenses. At the moment Blank Noise recognizes that there are many different types of donors, ranging from foreign aid agencies to individual contributors, and intend to build different types of relationships accordingly.

## Monday morning questions: reflection points for donors

The experiences of Blank Noise have presented interesting insights about how stakeholders could think about youth activism with new media technologies. **In this section, I would like to crystallize some points that may be important for donors to consider in supporting digital natives activism.**

After elaborating on the experiences of Blank Noise, I would like to share several points and raise questions that may be important for donors to reflect upon in thinking about how they could support initiatives around youth and technology.

## A New Theory of Change?

Blank Noise so far does not aim at concrete structural change, such as in the form of a legislation or service provision; it does not even identify a concrete opponent. The aforementioned OSI report pointed that this is a discontent among many youth donors and suggested the development of a more concrete evidence-based evaluation or a compliance mechanism. While the need to see impact is clearly important, the first step is to recognize *what* kind of change a youth movement aims to achieve and it is articulated as such.

Blank Noise's intangible approach is not arbitrary, but rather based on a sharp analysis about the nature of the issue they are taking up and the dilemmas around formulating a tangible objective. It identifies the mindset of the society as the issue, thus it aims for a cultural change that is achieved by facilitating changes at the individual level among those who participate in the collective. The projects take many different forms, some initiated by the core team but many are the proposals of volunteers implemented with the team's facilitation.

This kind of approach to social change is difficult to be contained in a logical framework mode that is based on the assumption that change could be planned and takes place in a linear manner. Although it may seem weak for a donor, the approach has actually been successful in mobilizing many young people and bringing the issue into the public fora through a media; these are rather unintended impacts from the various ways Blank Noise does its interventions.

The case shows that such an approach to social change has its value. The question is how could donors adjust this intangible approach employed by many digital natives with its need for accountability and impact assessment? What kind of theory of change could capture the new ways youth are approaching social change?

## Recognizing Projects and Meta Projects

With the track record Blank Noise has, I have no doubt that it would be successful in fund-raising for its event and campaign-based projects. However, I consider its need to receive core operational funding will be much more challenging to meet, given many donors' resistance to provide such funding especially for young youth organizations. I would argue that one needs to recognize movements like Blank Noise to consist of both projects and a meta-project. It consists of projects: the campaigns and interventions initiated by the core team and volunteers. But, overall, it is a meta-project

where as a collective it facilitates its volunteers to become agents of change and initiate their own interventions. If we talk about outputs, a meta-project's output is not how many people are taking part in an intervention, but how many new initiatives are proposed by volunteers that are able to take place. This is a character of many digital natives, who are used to produce and share content rather than only consume through their interaction with new media technologies. Consequently, the authorship and ownership of a meta-project is challenging to be pinpointed only to several individuals. They may have initiated it, but it is the participation of others (often anonymous) that made the content and intervention successful.

Being a meta-project allows Blank Noise to realize its vision of having volunteers as active agents and is crucial for it to reach its goals; thus, a donor interested in supporting the vision of Blank Noise should also support the processes that allow this to take place. For one, this means that donors should acknowledge that the traditional way of understanding authorship, ownership, and broadcast of information is changing in the digital space and hence, the logic of campaigns is also shifting from the traditional mode.

What does this mean practically? As a start, it means that one should recognize that funding processes is a form of supporting networks to maintain itself. The projects proposed by volunteers so far are relatively low-cost and could be shouldered by the volunteers themselves, but the time and resources used to facilitate such proposals to materialize is done at the expense for the core team's time to innovate and resolve the challenges identified in the previous section. Funding processes means concentrating not only for mobilization, but providing salaries and infrastructure support to allow the facilitators dedicate themselves full-time and manage the process. Of course, there are risks involved, and I would suggest giving this kind of support only to a network with a credible track record like Blank Noise. However, the more important question to grapple with is: what are the strategies to support processes beyond providing operational funding?

## The 'Digital' As a Space

Contrary to the way adults think of Internet technologies, digital natives consider these technologies not just as a tool to organize and mobilize, but as a space where they could anchor their existence in the absence of a physical office. More importantly, it is a public space where people can interact and build a community. It is not completely separate with the physical space; the cyber space is a part of everyday life.

However, in the case of many developing countries where digital divide is rife, the flow between the two spaces is not completely seamless. The points of disconnections from the classed nature of the cyber public space are acknowledged by many middle class youth who are the main actors, but the case of Blank Noise shows that maintaining street interventions do not solve the class issue either. The issue is not related to the space per se, but to the methods of engagement. While middle class activism is positive for engaging youth who are usually considered apathetic, it needs to transcend to all groups of people to really create a social change.

This point is a trigger for donors to raise questions about how youth projects on technology view the virtual public and how they could be engaged rather than only questioning what the technology proposed can be used for. This may also be a trigger to support initiatives that integrate both the cyber and physical public spaces. But ultimately, it triggers the question: what kind of approaches, both on the cyber and physical spaces, could transcend the classed nature of many digital native activists?

### A New Model of Organization?

Blank Noise does have to register as a NGO to receive external funding, develop its activism, and being accountable for it. Yet, institutionalization of any movement comes with a demand of formulating an organizational model and managing both financial and human resources. The transformation is not easy in any case and many donors have provided more assistance to help new organizations become more established.

So far, Blank Noise has attracted a large volunteer base due to a highly individualized approach enabled by its intangible analysis of issue and goals and maintained by volunteers' personal satisfaction gained from their involvement. What will happen once it becomes institutionalized? If Blank Noise received funding for a certain project, it means that only those involved in the project obtain financial compensation. How does this impact other volunteers outside the project? If Blank Noise one day decided to advocate for concrete changes like passing a law due to funding pressure, it would have to identify concrete opponents and propose tangible solutions on a grey issue, which would definitely divide people. Would Blank Noise still have its large volunteer base then? If Blank Noise manages to sustain core funding, would the small core staff still be able to be creative or will their energy be absorbed to learn financial management, log-framing, and reporting? Would it then become dependent on the source and its sustainability becomes threatened?

These are the common challenges in most civil society movements turned into NGOs and I have seen many falter during this transition period. This is why initially I hesitated when Hemangini shared that Blank Noise is going to register as an NGO. But then again, Blank Noise's approach to social change and ways of organizing are different from most movements. Hence, it may not follow the same organizational model. It will be interesting to see how Blank Noise addresses these challenges and perhaps form a new organizational model. How could donors support and facilitate these processes instead of directing them towards a template that may not fit?

## Towards a new relationship of exchange

Digital natives approach and conduct activism differently from many existing social movements. Consequently, donors and any other stakeholders interested in supporting their initiatives should also reflect on their assumptions and innovate new ways to engage with them. While this paper hopes to trigger discussion leading to such innovations by presenting the challenges identified, I would like to close by offering an idea for a concrete way forward.

When I asked her about what kind of relationship does Blank Noise wish to have with a donor, Jasmeen said that she would like to explore the possibilities of Blank Noise and the donors to have a relationship of exchange. She also shared that she is currently thinking about what exchange means beyond the 'money for publicity' model. Being triggered through this conversation myself, I have been thinking along with her about what possibilities there are.

Thinking about the uniqueness of Blank Noise and its future trajectory, I am most interested in seeing the process of its transformation to become institutionalized, how it overcome the challenges, and what kind of organizational model it comes up with. The interest goes beyond my personal attraction to Blank Noise, but also because the dynamics of the collective is echoed by many other digital natives organizing for change. Thus, in exchange for post-mobilization support or core funding, Blank Noise could also document and reflect upon these processes. The insights and learning points gained will certainly be valuable for similar initiatives, donors, and other stakeholders. Since navigating new forms of organizing will

require collaboration between stakeholders and the actors, why not start with this to find a new relationship of exchange?

## Acknowledgements

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# Biographies

# Authors

## Nishant Shah

Nishant Shah has done his Ph.D. doctoral work from the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore. He has worked diversely as an information architect with Yahoo, Partecs, Khoj Studios and such diverse companies, looking at questions of digital communities, identities and cultural productions online. He was a Research Analyst for Comat Technologies, on issues of e-governance, design and accessibility. Nishant has designed and taught several courses and workshops on the aesthetics and Politics of New Digital Media, for undergraduate and graduate level students in different universities around the world. In 2006-2007, he was invited as a visiting scholar at the National Central University, Taiwan, where he bolstered his interests in comparative work across Asia. A recipient of research grant from the Asia Scholarship Foundation (2008-2009), he spent time at the Shanghai University, looking at policies and histories that shape Information Technology Cities in Asia.

As the Research Director at the Centre for Internet & Society, Bangalore Nishant manages a portfolio of multi-disciplinary projects on Histories of the Internet, Wikipedia and the Critical Point of View, Technology mediated education, Digital Archives and Memories, and e-Governance. Nishant's current research collaborates with the Hivos Knowledge Programme (Netherlands) to explore Digital Natives and the potentials for social transformation and political participation in India and other developing countries in the Global South.

## Yi-Ping (Zona) Tsou

Zona graduated from the department of National Taiwan University Foreign Languages and Literatures, and completed her M.A. Thesis entitled "The Pleasure of the Work— Making Senses of Hsia Y.'s Poetry" in the Graduate Program in English at National Central University, Chungli, Taiwan.

Interested in poetry and translation, she studies poetics within different cultural contexts and forms. Since she has written her M.A. thesis on an avant-garde poet in Taiwan who utilizes the Internet technology to make a transparent pseudo-bilingual poetry volume (wherein all the phrases were culled from different English blogs and rendered into Chinese by the machine translator), she has turned on to these new textual practices enabled and mediated through digital technologies.

Even though she is more a digital klutz than a cool digital native who knows how to tinker with computers, her primary research objective is to understand how poetry of our day is being transformed by this digital revolution and what affects the Internet is having upon our practice of reading and writing poetic texts. She is particularly fascinated by the way the permeation of virtual space has impacted the mode in which readers engage poetic texts both online and in print, and at the intersection of digital and physical space, especially in the case of this collaborative project "B! Poetry."

## Simeon Oriko

Simeon is currently a senior student at the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton (<http://www.ueab.ac.ke>), pursuing a Bachelor of Business Information Technology. At the University, Simeon has served as the chairperson of the Baraton Information and Technology Student Association (BITSA) and focused on creating partnerships between BITSA and major technology industry players including Microsoft and SEACOM.

Simeon's contribution to the African tech scene include a research on Mobile Cloud Computing that was presented at the African Gathering Nairobi (<http://vimeo.com/10156783>) in December 2009. He is currently developing a platform based on the same concept.

Simeon is also the founder and director of The Kuyu Project (<http://www.thekuyuproject.org>) which is a digital literacy initiative aimed at teaching African high school students how to use social media to make a positive impact on their communities.

## Cole Flor

Cole Flor is a 22-year-old communication specialist/travel writer based in Vientiane, Laos. She graduated cum laude with a degree in Bachelor of Science in Development Communication and a major in Development Journalism from the University of the Philippines at Los Banos.

Her brainchild The Cole Walkabouts is a travel and culture-oriented blog which features stories and captures from her adventures. It turns one this December. [Colewalks.com](http://Colewalks.com)



## Prabhas Pokharel

Prabhas Pokharel currently works at MobileActive.org, a global network of practitioners using mobile phones for social impact. At MobileActive.org he leads the Mobile Media Toolkit project, developing and aggregating tools, how-to articles, case studies, and other resources to help reporters, citizen journalists, and media organizations use mobile technology in their work. He writes for MobileActive.org's blog, and uses Twitter to advocate use of mobile technology in the developing world for greater social impact.

Prabhas Pokharel is also a member of Nepal Ko Yuwa (Nepal's Youth), a movement that connects Nepali youth doing innovative work around the world. He helped start a movement in Boston that enabled Nepali youth to become active citizens of their home country by becoming engaged in the constitution writing process of Nepal. A group of 20 youth researched and debated thorny issues being addressed in writing the new constitution, gathered a mass of 150 Nepalis in the Boston area for debate, and produced a 4-page opinion piece regarding what they felt should be in the constitution. The group used technology and on-line tools actively in their work. Prabhas carries the spirit of that movement—enabling Nepali youth outside of Nepal to become engaged with sociopolitical issues facing Nepal—forward in advocacy through his Facebook page.

Prabhas Pokharel holds a Bachelor in Computer Science from Harvard University. His past projects have ranged from finding cheaper ways for embedded devices to communicate using the mobile phone network, training children and teachers in Peru to better utilize laptops manufactured by the One Laptop per Child project, trying to improve privacy in text-message communication by using steganography, to using online tools to help curb resource waste in dormitories at Harvard. He speaks English, Nepali and Spanish.

Prabhas Pokharel is deeply interested in technology's role in furthering civic participation and education, particularly in the developing world.

## Nonkululeko Godana

A lively citizen of the 'information society', writer and cultural activist; Nonkululeko Godana has become a consummate media personality over the past 8 years; having successfully explored radio, print, citizen journalism and new media. She is also a social entrepreneur and youth workshop facilitator working on creating bridges between community storytelling and digital space. She currently co-ordinates digital citizen journalism/ storytelling sessions with youth in Khayelitsha, Cape Town (and soon Tembisa, Johannesburg), <http://www.studentsforhumanity.com>. She is chairperson of the Human Rights Education Centre.

She also performs as a poet and facilitates poetry sessions/ writing groups, while working on publishing a novel and poetry anthology.

Nonkululeko recently provided content and strategy for Instant Grass (Youth marketing collaborators), as well as Who's Who of Southern Africa. She currently provides content to various creative and media platforms through her company, Well Said Communications (<http://www.wellsaid.co.za>).

## Maesy Angelina

Maesy Angelina, a Chinese Indonesian, has been involved in various citizen initiatives and development projects related to youth, gender, women, critical thinking, and environmental issues in Indonesia and Timor Leste for the past decade. Having been involved in these issues as a trainer, facilitator, and project manager, she started wearing a researcher's hat when she pursued her MA in International Development, specializing in Children and Youth Studies, at the International Institute of Social Studies – Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Her MA thesis, a part of the Hivos–CIS Digital Natives with a Cause? Knowledge Programme, explored the new forms of contemporary youth activism due to the use of Web 2.0 based on the case of Blank Noise, a collective addressing street sexual harassment in urban India. She blogs about her research journey under the 'Beyond the Digital' series on CIS and the Hivos Knowledge Programme websites.

Sources for the image in Maesy paper "Towards a new relationship of exchange; Thoughts on Supporting Youth and Technology Initiatives from the Case of Blank Noise in Urban India" are the Blank Noise's Facebook Group <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2703755288>

## Colophon

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