

## Chapter 6

# Online communication tools leading to learning, identity and citizenship for digital natives

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Digital Natives are communicating differently: email, IM, chat! ... Digital Natives are sharing differently: Blogs, webcams, camera phones. (Prensky 2004)

### **DIGITAL NATIVES AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION**

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) play an increasingly significant role in young people's lives. But it is important to understand these new forms of communication and to employ them for positive purposes as ICTs are a defining feature of modernity in the digital era (Bauman 2004). Terms such as "digital natives", "Net Generation", "Google Generation" or "Millennials" have been used to highlight the significance of these new technologies for younger generations. "Digital natives", for instance, mainly refers to those born in the last two decades, who had the opportunity to interact closely with the new technologies, and grew up speaking the digital language of computers (Prensky 2001).

Research conducted so far has defined digital natives through their date of birth or their level of exposure, experience or expertise with new technologies (Helsper and Eynon 2009). Some of this research has considered the concept of neuroplasticity, studying the effect of ICTs on the brain's ability to form new neural connections. But only a limited number of studies are looking at the challenges generated by the use of ICTs in young people's lives. Digital natives challenge teachers to use different tools corresponding to their new educational needs; employers, by asking for different working conditions corresponding to their new communication needs; and community and state structures, as they use virtual forms of participation extensively.

Research on the use of the internet by young people varies from a focus on the ICTs employed to create new instruments for social inclusion, freedom from discrimination and violence, and access to resources, to studying how young people use online communication tools to disengage from traditional structures and create new communities (Wyn and Cuervo 2005). Digital natives are using the internet to communicate rather than just to get information (Prensky 2001). The exchange of e-mails and of instant messages has become the preferred mode of communication. The primary factors underlying the youth preference for online communication

tools are their availability, the experience of social presence, their use as a personal log and using these tools to learn social norms (Stald 2008). However, access is still unequal and critics claim that this preference exposes young people to harassment and other risks. Others have addressed the lack of capacity of young people to choose appropriate virtual spaces, as they are still developing critical thinking skills (Stald 2008; McKay et al. 2005).

Young people choose different forms of online communication for specific reasons. For information on the internet, Google is the first port of call. For engaging with friends, over 82% of young Europeans have profiles on social networking sites (Eurostat 2015) and prefer using Facebook, mostly ignoring the advertising displayed (Barefoot Creative 2008). Mobile instant messaging (MIM) applications have also gained considerable importance for young people. Consequently, applications like WhatsApp or Viber that allow digital natives to send real-time text messages both to individuals and groups at no cost have essentially changed the preferences of young people, determined by low cost, intent, community, privacy, reliability and expectation. This change is perceived as having improved communication within the youth group. In addition to co-ordinating with friends and peers, young people use these tools to exchange wishes and “gifts” via text message (Church and de Oliveria 2003).

Three related themes are oft-discussed with regard to the preference of digital natives for online communication tools: identity, citizenship and learning (Stald 2008; Wyn et al. 2005), covered in the following sections.

## **Learning**

The Net Generation, split between “ICT haves” and “ICT have-nots” (McKay et al. 2005), has the opportunity to develop new skills and competences (for example related to communication or communication in a foreign language). Having grown up in an era where the nature of social interaction has changed, this generation can learn these skills through the use of online communication tools (World YOUTH Report 2003). Social behaviour has become about socialising online. Even if cyberspace exposes young people to hate speech and discrimination and in some cases online violence transfers to the offline world, most young people still prefer to use synchronous forms of chat and online discussion. This preference is mainly determined by the fact that in the online world what you say and what you produce is the basis of the judgment of others, while “lookism” remains highly rated in the offline world (Prensky 2004). Their learning process is definitely influenced by media culture but together with their peers, they get to build new communities. These online communities have been defined as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 1993). Communities of gamers, social activists, bloggers and so on have different boundaries, but users of specific communities, no matter where they are situated, can contribute and support the other members.

Young people, in mastering online communication tools, thus create online communities that transcend traditional class and gender boundaries in a non-physical

space. They are able to get involved, find opportunities to participate, and be part of international movements for human rights, social rights or environmental protection, as well as other communities of interest. Consequently, the online approach brings them closer to the theories of maximal citizenship in offering them new means of political involvement and active citizenship. Essential for the online communities is the fact that young people see them as spaces where they can learn, both sharing information and acquiring knowledge. Accordingly, some youth organisations and initiatives have begun to train their members using online communication tools. For example, MaYouth Civic Education Initiative is a training platform developed by the Global Leaders Network of Zimbabwe, training youth leaders aged 16 to 35 through WhatsApp.<sup>39</sup> The platform uses open-source material of documents and videos, sharing them on WhatsApp groups, and aims to increase youth civic participation through knowledge empowerment leveraging.

## **Identity building**

Internet and online communication tools ensure access to youth, and introduce them to new ways of expressing themselves – even introverts can be heard in cyberspace. Young bloggers and vloggers are followed by thousands of young people and influence policies and processes worldwide (Wyn et al. 2005). As with online communities, the new cyber-identities that are being built through online communication tools are global and dynamic, essentially determined by other types of interaction that are happening in the online world. Online communities allow young people to link among themselves and build up an identity based on belonging to a wide range of groups, with access to international movements or youth-led campaigns across the world. This is an opportunity that was not open to generations prior to that of the digital natives.

## **Citizenship and participation**

Using messaging, e-mails, blogs and websites, the Net Generation is able to create new forms of political participation and civic engagement. Young people often use the internet to build up meaningful social networks. Using synchronous forms of chat and online discussion allows young people to discuss subjects that haven't been invested with great interest by the "offline generations". These digital natives meet in discussion groups, and are able to co-operate and plan activities that can decisively contribute to social change.

If "Europe's future depends on its youth" (EU 2009), then it is high time for European countries to focus on encouraging the social and political participation of young people. Different measures and policies (such as the "structured dialogue" mechanisms) have been put in place to ensure dialogue between decision makers and young people and a few of these mechanisms permit online dialogue and offer online communication tools that the latter are keen on using. Most of the national working

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39. See [www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/2016-lab-8-digital-education-for-democracy](http://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/2016-lab-8-digital-education-for-democracy), accessed 26 February 2018.

groups involved with the structured dialogue processes, in order to involve as many young people as possible in shaping European priorities in the youth field, have set up online consultation mechanisms, including online questionnaires to reach out to and gather responses from young people. In Germany, participants' posts were immediately made available to the other participants and the best contributions were voted on by their peers, while in Estonia young people were motivated to participate through rewards for respondents (over 800 young people responded to the questionnaire in just 20 days) (European Youth Forum 2012).

In the digital era, where young people are constantly present in the online space through video streams, chat rooms, blogs or social media, their exposure to risk is inevitable. In this context, the way risks are managed is of concern for decision makers. The No Hate Speech Movement<sup>40</sup> has been an excellent tool for raising the awareness of young people and promoting equality, dignity and diversity in online space. With all the concerns regarding the isolation and disengagement of young people in the digital era, it is essential for practitioners, policy makers and the adults around them to understand that the digital natives have different preferences for communication tools from that of previous generations. Young people communicate differently, build up identities that allow them to be in several places at the same time, and create and develop online communities through new modes of participation based on online participation and click-activism. Consequently, digital natives' preferences for new communication tools call for a new approach to youth policies and new mechanisms to involve them in decision-making processes.

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40. No Hate Speech Movement, see [www.nohatespeechmovement.org](http://www.nohatespeechmovement.org), accessed 26 February 2018.

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