

BOOK REVIEW

Palfrey, John, and Urs Gasser. *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. New York: Basic, 2008.

In 1996, Nicholas Negroponte's best-seller *Being Digital* was one of the first books to proclaim the end of the analog era and the beginning of the digital era, exuding great confidence in technology's ability to bring about human progress. With utopian promises of global harmony, enhanced intelligence, and unprecedented levels of creativity, it celebrated the impending demise of libraries filled with dusty books, identities and relationships constrained by time and space, and hierarchical systems of governance and administration.

Twelve years later, *Born Digital*, by John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, is a different kind of book, but often not as different as one might hope. Like *Being Digital*, Palfrey and Gasser's recent publication is a book about "firsts"—a first generation of "Digital Natives" born after 1980, who have grown up with and taken for granted both access to and sophisticated uses of social digital technologies. Written for the broader audience, *Born Digital* targets parents and teachers concerned with the online dimension of young people's lives. Seeking to quell the fears commonly generated through media hype about the radical changes and menacing threats that the internet and digital technologies introduce to contemporary life, Palfrey and Gasser set out to consider sensibly which tendencies of Digital Natives and

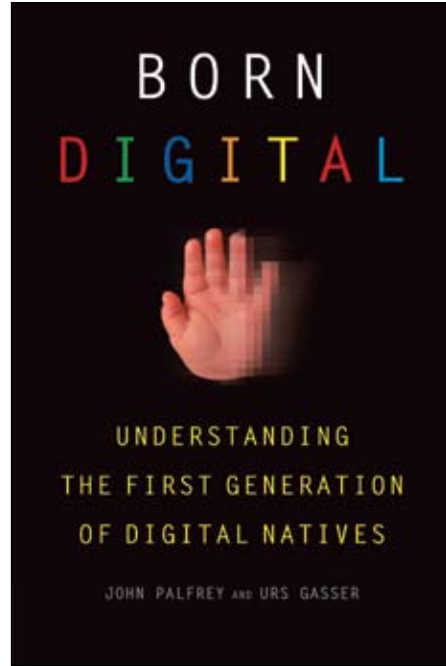
which aspects of online life are worth worrying about, and which deserve support and encouragement.

While Palfrey and Gasser are both professors of law affiliated with Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, they write primarily as parents who have synthesized an enormous amount of research on topics from privacy to digital piracy, online safety to information overload. They hone in on a number of issues that vex and confound most parents and teachers today: Why do Digital Natives easily disclose information about themselves so publicly online? Is it healthy for Digital Natives to spend so much time online socializing? What can parents do to protect Digital Natives from being exposed to cyberbullying or the unwelcome attention of strangers? In the process of addressing these questions, they sketch a composite picture of Digital Natives that is a pastiche at best: on the one hand, they are creative, innovative, and active; on the other hand, they may be vulnerable to internet addiction, acts of aggression, and harassment, and prone to disregard copyright law, uncritically accept information that they receive online, and multitask in an apparently permanent state of distraction. Besides reviewing the salient scholarly research on each of these topics, Palfrey and Gasser familiarize their readers with concise summaries of watershed moments that have influenced internet culture, such as the history of *Napster* and the rise of iTunes, the teenage suicide that resulted from online deception and harassment on *MySpace*, and the heralded instance of user-based activism that *Facebook* encountered when a privacy-threatening feature was introduced.

While the quality of their explorations and assessments can be rather uneven,

their legal and scholarly expertise shines most brightly in the chapters on privacy and safety. After probing the flexible constructions of identity online common to Digital Natives, Palfrey and Gasser bring to light the ways in which concerns about online privacy ought to focus less on the social norms of self-disclosure and more on the implications of having unprecedented amounts of information given up and exchanged online in return for the digital conveniences of services and entertainment. They argue that the concrete realities of corporate surveillance, identity theft, and online hacking are legitimate threats, as “digital dossiers” are constantly being constructed for individuals who not only distribute information about themselves and their practices online, but also find information about themselves disseminated by friends and family—from ultrasound pictures to wedding day memories—and third-party sources such as hospitals, schools, banks, employers, and insurance companies who store (and, in some instances, exchange) personal information in networked digitized format. According to Palfrey and Gasser, we as consumers and technology users are forfeiting control over our information as these growing structural realities of digital dossiers create the risk of a “Digital Pearl Harbor”—where information about medical conditions, credit card use, or other critical life necessities can fall into the wrong hands. In this way, *Born Digital* often moves beyond assessing circumstances that only Digital Natives face and addresses risks that parents themselves need to figure out how to negotiate.

In their discussion on protecting Digital Natives from harm, Palfrey and Gasser demonstrate not only how online



exposure to pornography, cyberbullying, and sexual harassment is merely a new iteration of an age-old problem, but also how Digital Natives are often trying to negotiate the complex dynamics that digital technologies introduce to their lives. On the issue of young people posting sexually provocative pictures of themselves online, for example, one junior-high girl expresses her own attempt to reconcile what she knows is appropriate with the social dynamics that are at work online: “Like a lot of people they put, like—some girls will be like in like bikinis or booty shorts and all that. And then you’ll be like that’s like—it’s ridiculous, but then you’ll see like how many comments they have.... And that’s what you want to get is a lot of comments” (96). Concerning his parent’s rules about monitoring his profile in social networking sites, one boy admits, “well, I kind of feel like [my mom is]

invading my privacy, but I know that she really is not because she just wants me to be safe” (102). Drawn from interviews and focus groups that Palfrey and Gasser conducted on a global scale with one hundred young people, these quotations are valuable windows into what Digital Natives think and why they do what they do. It is unfortunate that such quotations are not employed throughout the book more frequently. Overall, Palfrey and Gasser’s approach to addressing various parental concerns is to debunk the belief that the internet exposes their children to dangers and threats that previously did not exist. While they acknowledge the ways that digital technologies stretch and blur traditional understandings of identity, privacy, and property, they frequently argue that these new tendencies can be channeled to productive ends.

Admirably, Palfrey and Gasser believe that concrete steps can and should be taken to make sure that the safety and privacy of Digital Natives are preserved, and that their best potential on the internet can flourish. They propose a number of practical solutions that involve digital technology companies and the state, such as instituting rating systems for websites and video games. Addressing the possible legal recourse that can be taken to confront many of the social ills affiliated with digital technologies, Palfrey and Gasser’s use of their legal expertise is surprisingly limited to somewhat basic overviews of information law and the rights and responsibilities of individuals and corporations on issues of privacy and safety. One of the key arguments in *Born Digital* is that calls to legally ban certain technologies or their uses are mostly misguided and ineffective. The authors only occasionally take advan-

tage of the fact that their collaboration offers a uniquely comparative perspective as Palfrey and Gasser (who resides and teaches in Switzerland) are at their best when they compare American and European approaches to law. For example, in comparing the perspectives on information and safety, they show that American laws that tend to protect the rights of corporations over individuals could learn from European-style privacy laws, which put individuals in control of their own personal data.

Most prominently, Palfrey and Gasser have confidence that Digital Natives themselves, with the guidance of their parents and teachers, are the source of possible solutions. Unfortunately, the suggestions that they propose in this area are the most wanting part of the book. *Born Digital* fails to offer conceptual tools that can help parents unlock the puzzle of how to negotiate the public nature of the internet—including the ever-increasing role of digital companies and commercial entities—and the private nature of their children’s and young people’s lives. Simply calling upon parents and teachers to help Digital Natives understand how to negotiate the dangers of surveillance, for example, seems rather unrealistic when many adults are equally confounded by these challenges at best, and far less familiar with the internet at worst. Unwavering in their optimism, Palfrey and Gasser suggest that these digital challenges can function as “a time for dialogue” or an opportunity for children and parents to “listen to each other and to establish shared, positive norms” (63–4). These good intentions can sound like empty platitudes when parents may already be struggling to sustain open lines of communication with their children

on well-worn topics like sexual behavior and alcohol, drug, and nicotine use. Ultimately, their advice seems to gloss over the more basic question of how parents should manage their relationships with their children in a realm in which the children themselves are often more savvy, well-versed, and experienced.

One of the biggest drawbacks of this book is that its authors neglect the fact (and thus fail to remind parents) that Digital Natives are not merely “born digital,” but that they are born into communities and an entire matrix of social institutions that hold the potential to formatively guide their uses and experiences online. While Palfrey and Gasser speak of teachers and librarians as representatives of a communal approach to seeking solutions, these agents are discussed as individuals rather than members of religious, educational, ethnic, or local neighborhood communities that should have an interest in collectively defining which elements of the internet are worth nurturing and which elements of Digital Natives’ tendencies need more hands-on guidance and instruction. And insofar as most teachers and parents are bewildered about the new digital terrain, these organizations and communities have the potential to function as sites in which parents—who share an awareness of their particular community’s values, vulnerabilities, and needs—can first learn and discuss between themselves the complex issues surrounding digital technologies and young people, and then rely on the community to help them guide their children accordingly.

In the end, this book may function best as a primer for concerned parents who have little or no digital experience and have been so paralyzed by fear that

they have yet to begin intervening in the online activities of their children. Through impressive syntheses of scholarly research that few parents could assemble on their own, it effectively introduces the reader to the waters in which Digital Natives swim (or surf). While little is new or innovative in this book, *Born Digital* might serve as a conversation starter for parents who share concerns about the trends and implications of digital technologies, or as a useful resource for communities and organizations seeking a starting point for understanding and feasibly engaging the habits of the heart found among Digital Natives.

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