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Digital Natives and Digital Nomads — New Tribes of the Internet Age

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Observers of cultural change in America have assumed for some time now that the vast technological advances of the digital age would shape the worldviews of coming generations. That future is our present as the generation of youth and young adults now shaping the culture of business and higher education is in full technological overdrive.

Writing in *The Times* [London], Fleur Britten tells of a class of "Digital Nomads" who dwell in coffee shops and wherever wireless hotspots are found. These new workers are a professional class that needs no office and have nothing but a digital address. They simply do not need the superstructure of the old economy.

Ditching the office is the most modern way to operate these days, it seems. Punchin culture is out – a surgical attachment to a laptop and a mobile phone, and a willingness to travel, are in. So, as BlackBerry sales surge and the WiFi cloud swirls around the country, public spaces are increasingly sprinkled with computers, business-speak and spiralling caffeine habits. Meanwhile, the really successful are being referred to as the "kinetic elite", a term coined by the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas for high-net-worth individuals who work out of hotel lobbies, airport lounges and their expensive briefcases.

So the "kinetic elite" live and work in a digital environment, armed with technology and creature comforts. They can work anywhere WiFi access will allow. That intense person working beside you at a table in the local coffee shop may well me working on contract with a firm in London about a project in New York that will be funded out of Dubai. Welcome to the world of the Digital Nomads. They can live and work almost anywhere, but tend to be concentrated in larger numbers in locales where the so-called creative class is also concentrated — in large metropolitan areas and in university towns.

Similarly, John Palfrey of the Harvard Law School has been working on a project to consider the "Digital Natives" — the generation of younger Americans who are perhaps more at home in the digital world than in the "real" world around them.

Writing with co-author Urs Glasser, Palfrey suggests that these Digital Natives represent a generation that thinks in terms of the Internet and associated technologies as a default mode, and their on-line personas are as important to them as the persona they project in face-to-face contact.

As "Born Digital," a *Harvard Magazine* article explains:

One of the digital native's primary traits is an extensive on-line persona. "[Their] identity is expressed through both off-line and on-line media," explains Palfrey. "And there's not much of a distinction in the digital native's mind between these two." Digital natives pick photographs for their on-line personas on social-networking sites with the same care with which they pick their clothes each morning. They go on line to reveal rather than conceal themselves.

The revealing rather than concealing dynamic is something most observers seem to agree is genuinely new. As Palfrey observes, "it's the extent to which they reveal themselves that baffles the uninitiated, most of whom–with different attitudes toward personal privacy–would never think of publishing their phone numbers or home addresses (let alone a photographic record of a Saturday-night bender) on the Internet."

These Digital Natives are young — some are *very* young — and there is a widespread concern that they need both direction and protection.

There is also a sense that older generations are not even aware of the extent to which many young lives are lived on-line:

Palfrey points to parents and educators, rather than legislators, as children's best guides to the often hazardous terrain of the digital world. But parents and educators, to be effective, must engage with that world and understand how young people behave in it. For instance, while conducting a survey of study habits, Palfrey was unable to find a single digital native whose first step, when assigned a research paper, was toward a library. Instead, students typed their topic into a Google search bar, scrolled down to the reference in Wikipedia (an on-line encyclopedia edited by its readers), read the entry, and then followed the links to learn more. "The only variant I've heard to that," says Palfrey, "is typing en.wikipedia.org and going straight to Wikipedia." Whether or not Wikipedia is a credible source, teachers need to know that their students consult it before they can present alternatives.

There is a huge and important observation here — one with a high-magnitude meaning for higher education. Look carefully again at this sentence: "For instance, while conducting a survey of study habits, Palfrey was unable to find a single digital native whose first step, when assigned a research paper, was toward a library."

This statement alone should represent a wake-up call to older generations. The idea that information dwells foremost in a library is a dated assumption. The Digital Natives look first at the Internet and digital sources. Then they may go to the library, but that may be increasingly unnecessary in their view and experience.

The rise of the Digital Nomads and Digital Natives as new tribes of the Internet age will mean big changes for higher education, for cities, for employers, and for institutions and organizations of every kind. These tribes represent the future, and Digital Natives are as likely to be playing Little League as sipping lattes at Starbucks. The digitalization of life starts at younger and younger ages it seems.

The Digital Natives and Digital Nomads also represent a significant missiological and evangelistic challenge for the Christian church. These groups are not easily impressed, nor are they as likely to be reached by some of the more traditional evangelistic approaches used by many churches. Newspaper ads mean nothing to a generation that never touches newsprint.

One major study published in recent years indicated that one of the main factors tied to numerical growth in churches was the strength of a church's Internet presence. "Snail mail" addresses may be less important at first than a Web address, and increasing numbers of those in the digital generations assume that if an organization has an insignificant Web presence, it must be an insignificant organization.

These groups assume that entire categories of information now flow most naturally through digital means and technologies. They simply take this for granted as an assumption.

Then again, you are probably reading this article on-line, which means that you just might be a Digital Native yourself. In any event, you will find them all around you. Just listen to the clicking of the keys.

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