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ONLINE DATABASES

Reaching the Net Gen

By Carol Tenopir

IT'S TEMPTING TO CHARACTERIZE all young people as wired digital masters who use technology in mysterious ways. But broad generalization can be dangerous, and I was especially glad to see caution urged by several speakers at the 2009 annual meeting of the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services (NFAIS), titled "Barbarians at the Gate? The Impact of Digital Natives and Emerging Technologies on the Future of Information Services," held February 22–24 in Philadelphia. Yes, the "barbarians" in the conference title referred to the net generation, but research results prevailed over hype as librarians and publishers prepare to serve this new generation.

Socioeconomic skewing

Opening keynote speaker John Palfrey (faculty codirector, Berkman Institute for Internet and Society; professor, Harvard Law School; and coauthor of *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*) warned that "one [wrong] perception...is that all young people use technology in the same way and that adults don't use technology." There is a group of young people who use technology similarly, but it is a group, not a generation. Use of technology by the digital natives (defined by Palfrey as those born after 1980) is highly skewed along socioeconomic lines.

Sabrina Manville, strategic services analyst at Ithaka, who ran focus groups of college students using JSTOR, agreed that "*digital natives* is not a term that demarcates a generation but an experience." Clearly, "not all young people are the same," but, in general, college students know a very small pool of quality resources. Within this pool, they don't differentiate much. They find search to be a challenge. Their primary criteria for quality in research resources is finding things "their professors won't laugh at," but as these stu-

dents mature, Manville suggested, their motivations will change.

Ian Rowlands (managing director, Centre for Information Behaviour and Evaluation of Research [CIBER], and director, Research Centre for Publishing at University College London) categorized the somewhat different "Google generation" as those born in 1993 or later. He similarly cautioned against stereotyping a generation that is "complex socially and culturally." In any age group, there is some slowness in adoption of new technologies,

accustomed to turning the information tap on when they need it but lack a clear understanding or mental map of how the systems function.

Carrying forward

With these impressions in mind, I came away from the NFAIS meeting confident that librarians and publishers have a crucial role to play in helping future users become more analytical searchers and informed consumers of high-quality information, even if those roles aren't yet perfectly defined.

Use of technology by the digital natives is highly skewed along socioeconomic lines

which may have "as much to do with psychology and personality factors" as it does with age. Still, what characterizes young people with the economic means and supporting infrastructure is that they have grown up in a world of information and technology abundance.

The information tap

Within the young, tech-aware group, Palfrey pointed out certain concrete and distinct patterns of information-seeking behavior that signal real change. Because members of this group see their digital identity as merged with their total identity in a "converged environment," they can toggle easily between physical and virtual interactions. Rather than multitasking (where attention is divided and all of the tasks suffer), they may instead do many things well in rapid sequence.

Still, despite high self-confidence in their tech skills, many in the Google generation may have difficulty formulating searches, thinking of alternative search terms, or understanding how search engines work. When they do find information, they typically don't spend much time evaluating it. According to Rowlands, they have become

The key for information providers is to figure out if there are long-lasting differences in the ways highly tech-savvy young people interact with information that are likely to translate into the workplace. Are tech-savvy kids early adopters just because they have more leisure time and opportunity? Is their use of social media coupled with constant connectivity merely a case of teenagers doing what they've always done, while availing themselves of the latest tools?

To determine whether patterns of use will change as these kids mature, we first have to figure out how much of this perceived technology disparity is just phased adoption and if it's likely that people in every age group will eventually catch up. If the gulf is genuine, then we will need to determine exactly which behaviors are age-appropriate, enabled by technology, and which behaviors are truly different, carrying new information perceptions forward into adulthood.

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