

Life in the digital era

Author's masterful analysis explains impact of 'Net Generation,' lambasts Luddites

The world many of us grew up in is evolving in ways that, only a short time ago, most of us could not have imagined. Everything is fundamentally changing and, to quote a favorite "Star Trek" line, resistance is futile.

That is the basic premise of "Grown Up Digital," Don Tapscott's latest attempt to help us understand what is happening before it is (figuratively as well as literally) too late. To this end, Tapscott clearly and convincingly demystifies the intricacies of the interrelationships between the economy, employment and education as the Net Generation accelerates its execution of a paradigm shift of unprecedented proportions.

Along the way, he also manages to explain how members of the Net Generation typically process information, how they prefer to be educated and employed, how their growth and development has been facilitated, and how they are almost congenitally engaged in political and social reformation.

Since there is no universal agreement regarding the terms used to describe the demographic categories Tapscott alludes to throughout the book, some preliminary definitions are in order. He defines the Net Generation as anyone born between January 1977 and December 1997, which sandwiches this group between "Generation X" (which began at the end of the "Baby Boom Generation" in December 1964) and "Generation Next" (which began in January 1998).

Statistically, the Net Generation consists of 81.1 million individuals — even larger than the Baby Boomers. The Net Generation's sheer numbers, Tapscott asserts, should be sufficient motivation for acquiring a better understanding of the way they are influencing almost everything.

The book is based on a qualitative study conducted by Tapscott and his research team. Employing a rather innovative and sophisticated data collection strategy, the researchers set up a community on the popular social network Facebook — "Grown Up Digital — Help Me Write the Book," consisting of more than 200 individuals who helped solicit and compile viewpoints and stories from members of the Net Generation. They also interviewed a variety of experts on the various themes represented in the book, which includes an extensive set of footnotes for each chapter, as well as an exhaustive reference section.

"Grown Up Digital" is organized into three sections. The first part, "Meet the Net Gen," consists

of five chapters outlining Tapscott's characterization of the members of this demographic group. The second part, "Transforming Institutions," is made up of four chapters in which Tapscott describes how fundamental societal institutions are evolving as a direct result of their collective influence. In the final section, "Transforming Society," Tapscott spends three chapters discussing how the changes being driven by the Net Generation can ultimately serve to revitalize our political, economic and cultural systems.

Tapscott is especially passionate when attempting to dispel many of the myths he believes are being wrongly perpetuated about the Net Generation, usually by those who simply do not understand the intrinsic nature of the immense changes they are precipitating. He is particularly adept at pointing out what is often overlooked by many commentators who seem threatened by the rise of a technologically enhanced communication-based culture.

In any event, a significant portion of "Grown Up Digital" is spent deconstructing a number of misconceptions about the Net Generation. These include the widely held stereotypes that, compared to previous generations, young people today have lower social skills, less shame, a more dysfunctional work ethic, and are essentially more violent and narcissistic than their predecessors. Tapscott sees these characterizations as symptomatic of widespread ignorance and an almost irrational allegiance to cultural, political and economic structures that are becoming less and less relevant.

The myth he seems most interested in debunking, however, is the idea that the Net Generation is somehow less intelligent than its counterparts from the past. Tapscott observes that some authors have even gone so far as to suggest that they should be more accurately described as the "Dumbest Generation" because "they spend so much time staring at the screen, the young people forfeit the ability to think deeply or creatively." Tapscott notes that there is absolutely no substantive evidence to support such an erroneous characterization.

The real problem, Tapscott explains, lies not with the members of the Net Generation per se, but with educational policies and practices that are out of touch with the new reality. As an example, he alludes to the fact that many classroom teachers have not been specifically trained to facilitate learning for the Net Generation;

"Demonstrates the world-changing power of the Net Generation. If you want to understand their impact, read this book."
—Eric Schmidt, Chairman and CEO, Google

grown up digital



DON TAPSCOTT

bestselling author of *growing up digital* and *wikinomics*

"Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World" by Don Tapscott. New York: McGraw-Hill Books, 2009. 368 pages, \$27.95.

i.e., they are using techniques and strategies that were developed for students who were not raised in the Internet era. Tapscott is dead on when he notes that "the Industrial Age model of education will be hard to change." Anyone who has even a rudimentary understanding of the reactionary nature of educational institutions would be hard-pressed to disagree with him.

It is obvious throughout "Grown Up Digital" that Tapscott is much more interested in describing the Net Generation in terms of "what they are" as opposed to "what they are not." Following this more positive orientation, he lists and describes eight "norms" that collectively define the group. These can be summed up as: 1. a strong preference for individual freedoms; 2. an inclination toward customization and personalization; 3. a belief in complete transparency; 4. a desire for corporate integrity and complete openness; 5. a need to have entertainment and play woven throughout their work, education and social lives; 6. an affinity for collaboration and relationships; 7. an intolerance for anything that is not real-time; and 8. a compulsion to constantly innovate.

In one of the better chapters in "Grown Up Digital," Tapscott argues persuasively that the Net Generation is decidedly less narcissistic than previous generations — as a group, they are not the "self-centered risk-takers" as some have portrayed them. This stereotype, according to Tapscott, is reflective of a lack of understanding of what

actually drives members of the Net Generation to succeed in the modern world.

Near the end of "Grown Up Digital," Tapscott offers some valuable insights and advice for the members of the Net Generation based on the results of his study. These include recognizing: 1. the heightened value of a college education; 2. the efficacy associated with being more patient at work; 3. the central importance of family life; 4. the virtue of having more respect for experience; 5. the inherent advantages of living a "principled life of consequence;" and 6. the supreme importance of perseverance in the face of adversity.

In the final analysis, Tapscott is overwhelmingly optimistic about the future and manages to end the book on an upbeat note. After laying out all the relevant issues and ideological imperatives, he comes to the inevitable conclusion that "this generation will change the world. They are already bringing and implementing radical views regarding the way business should be conducted and about the process of democratic governance."

Ultimately, Tapscott succeeds in defending his primary thesis that we are not in Kansas anymore. Perhaps we never were. In any event, it is a safe bet that the Net Generation is indeed changing the world in ways that would have seemed incomprehensible only a few years ago. And yes, resistance is futile.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, counseling and student affairs, Western Kentucky University.