

Digital Natives and Media Literacy: New Report

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Not the digital youth

This is my introduction to a [series of papers](#) on the subject of the 'myth of digital natives'. They were given at a Polis event last autumn, you can read them in full [here](#). They attempt to dispel the idea that young people of the Internet generation are naturally gifted at using online resources and seek to find ways to enhance everyone's ability to benefit from digital communications.

Myths can be useful ways for societies to tell stories about themselves. They can help us preserve our values and cope with change. So the idea that young people are particularly, even naturally adept at using new media technologies is comforting and perhaps even exciting.

Even if older adults find digital devices and processes challenging we can reassure ourselves that the next generation will take to them effortlessly and creatively. I regularly hear from middle aged digital enthusiasts as well as the technophobes how their teenage children can do amazing and/or disturbing things online.

They blog, game and network on a variety of platforms, often multi-tasking, producing sophisticated and rich patterns of communication and expression. This is wonderful and quite often true. But as the evidence

and analysis of this report shows, it is a myth that this kind of youthful dexterity and literacy is somehow inevitable or ubiquitous. And this matters.

As Professor Livingstone says, if we don't understand the reality of young people's use of the Internet, then we won't realize how important it is to them and how vital it is to provide the skills and resources for them to make the myth a reality. The fact is that young people experience the same opportunities and challenges as everyone else who uses digital technologies.

The cultural and social barriers to conventional literacies appear to replicate themselves online. A young person who struggles to read a book will quite likely find online navigation difficult, too. There may be magical things that we can do online, but there is no miraculous power that changes intellectual frogs into digital princes.

Those people growing up over the last decade or so may well be more familiar with a world of virtual and networked culture and communications. However, individual youths have not been endowed by some freakish evolutionary process with exceptional technological powers.

It is very appropriate that this report and the event that it is based on was inspired by the Polis Silverstone Scholar Ranjana Das, a PhD student at the LSE Media and Communications Department.

The Polis Silverstone Scholarship is awarded to support an outstanding student who is working on an area of international media research relevant to the ideas of the late Professor Roger Silverstone. Roger was the Head of the Media and Communications Department and the founding spirit of Polis.

Polis was set up in 2006 with the purpose of examining journalism and society at this time of extraordinary change and significant impact for the news media. Central to the work of Polis has been the idea of media change and its political and ethical relationship to citizens and the state.

Ranjana's work alongside the research of the four contributors to this report may help kill the unhelpful myth of the digital native. But more importantly, their analyses offer ways of understanding how we can all benefit by greater investment in digital media literacy.

I am very grateful to everyone who took part for giving us such an entertaining and stimulating evening at the LSE. And by publishing this short collection of their papers I hope that we are helping to replace the myth with a message.

The message is that media are critical to our understanding of the world, but also to how well we can live our lives. As Roger Silverstone said, media are now 'environmental'.

I would argue that all media are in some way, digital. So natives or not, we all need greater online media literacy if we are to fulfill our potential as individuals and citizens.

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