

AoW 1.11.10

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The Children of Cyberspace: Old Fogies by Their 20s

My 2-year-old daughter surprised me recently with two words: “Daddy’s book.” She was holding my Kindle electronic reader.

Here is a child only beginning to talk, revealing that the seeds of the next generation gap have already been planted. She has identified the Kindle as a substitute for words printed on physical pages. I own the device and am still not completely sold on the idea.

My daughter’s worldview and life will be shaped in very deliberate ways by technologies like the Kindle and the new magical high-tech gadgets coming out this year — Google’s Nexus One phone and Apple’s impending tablet among them. She’ll know nothing other than a world with digital books, Skype video chats with faraway relatives, and toddler-friendly video games on the iPhone. She’ll see the world a lot differently from her parents.

But these are also technology tools that children even 10 years older did not grow up with, and I’ve begun to think that my daughter’s generation will also be utterly unlike those that preceded it.

Researchers are exploring this notion too. They theorize that the ever-accelerating pace of technological change may be minting a series of mini-generation gaps, with each group of children uniquely influenced by the tech tools available in their formative stages of development.

“People two, three or four years apart are having completely different experiences with technology,” said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project. “College students scratch their heads at what their high school siblings are doing, and they scratch their heads at their younger siblings. It has sped up generational differences.”

One obvious result is that younger generations are going to have some very peculiar and unique expectations about the world. My friend’s 3-year-old, for example, has become so accustomed to her father’s multitouch iPhone screen that she approaches laptops by swiping her fingers across the screen, expecting a reaction.

And after my 4-year-old niece received the very hot Zhou-Zhou pet hamster for Christmas, I pointed out that the toy was essentially a robot, with some basic obstacle avoidance skills. She replied matter-of-factly: “It’s not a robot. It’s a pet.”

These mini-generation gaps are most visible in the communication and entertainment choices made by different age groups. According to a survey last year by Pew, teenagers are more likely to send instant messages than slightly older 20-somethings (68 percent versus 59 percent) and to play online games (78 percent versus 50 percent).

Larry Rosen, a professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills, and the author of the coming “Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn,” has also drawn this distinction between what he calls the Net Generation, born in the 1980s, and the iGeneration, born in the ’90s and this decade.

Now in their 20s, those in the Net Generation, according to Dr. Rosen, spend two hours a day talking on the phone and still use e-mail frequently. The iGeneration — conceivably their younger siblings — spends considerably more time texting than talking on the phone, pays less attention to television than the older group and tends to communicate more over instant-messenger networks.

Dr. Rosen said that the newest generations, unlike their older peers, will expect an instant response from everyone they communicate with, and won’t have the patience for anything less.

“They’ll want their teachers and professors to respond to them immediately, and they will expect instantaneous access to everyone, because after all, that is the experience they have growing up,” he said. “They should be just like their older brothers and sisters, but they are not.”

The boom of kid-focused virtual worlds and online games like Club Penguin and Moshi Monsters especially intrigues Mizuko Ito, a cultural anthropologist and associate researcher at the University of California Humanities Research Institute.

Dr. Ito said that children who play these games would see less of a distinction between their online friends and real friends; virtually socializing might be just as fulfilling as a Friday night party. And they would be more likely to participate actively in their own entertainment, clicking at the keyboard instead of leaning back on the couch.

That could give them the potential to be more creative than older generations — and perhaps make them a more challenging target for corporate marketers. “It’s certainly no longer true that kids are just blindly consuming what commercial culture has to offer,” Dr. Ito said.

Another bubbling intra-generational gap, as any modern parent knows, is that younger children tend to be ever more artful multitaskers. Studies performed by Dr. Rosen at Cal State show that 16- to 18-year-olds perform seven tasks, on average, in their free time — like texting on the phone, sending instant messages and checking Facebook while sitting in front of the television.

People in their early 20s can handle only six, Dr. Rosen found, and those in their 30s perform about five and a half.

That versatility is great when they’re killing time, but will a younger generation be as focused at school and work as their forebears?

“I worry that young people won’t be able to summon the capacity to focus and concentrate when they need to,” said Vicky Rideout, a vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation, which will release a sweeping survey on the technology and media habits of children and teenagers this month.

Children my daughter’s age are also more likely to have some relaxed notions about privacy. The idea of a phone or any other device that is persistently aware of its location and screams out its geographic coordinates, even if only to friends, might seem spooky to older age groups.

But the newest batch of Internet users and cellphone owners will find these geo-intelligent tools to be entirely second nature, and may even come to expect all software and hardware to operate in this way.

Here is where corporations can start licking their chops. My daughter and her peers will never be “off the grid.” And they may come to expect that stores will emanate discounts as they walk by them, and that friends can be tracked down anywhere.

“If it’s something you grow up with, you have a completely different comfort with it than someone who has had to unlearn something about the world,” said Mr. Rainie, of the Pew project.

It’s not yet clear whether these disparities between adjacent groups of children and teenagers will simply fade away, as the older groups come to embrace the new technology tools, or whether they will deepen into more serious rifts between various generations.

But the children, teenagers and young adults who are passing through this cauldron of technological change will also have a lot in common. They’ll think nothing of sharing the minutia of their lives online, staying connected to their friends at all times, buying virtual goods, and owning one über-device that does it all.

They will believe the Kindle is the same as a book. And they will all think their parents are hopelessly out of touch.

By Brad Stone/ *The New York Times*/ January 9, 2010