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A NEW CULTURE

The inventor of the expression "digital natives" says that the children of the internet age form a generation that thinks along new lines, and does not give so much importance to the privacy threatened by Facebook

Interview of Marc Prensky by Maria Clara De Aquino Vieira

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Seventeen years ago, Marc Prensky, an education expert, created the terms "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" to differentiate those who were born in the internet age from those who had to adapt to it. Since then, the natives have multiplied and grown to the extent that, according to him, there are currently no digital immigrant students in classrooms in the United States. Author of several books and a sought-after speaker, Prensky, 72, who studied at Harvard and Yale universities, agrees that there has been an excess in recent use of Facebook's personal

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information for election purposes, but wonders that privacy in these times may no longer be as relevant. He spares no criticism of current teaching methods, which he considers to be out of step with student and market needs. "We need our young people to write fewer articles and essays, and to accomplish more in the real world," he said in an interview with VEJA during a visit to Brazil.

VEJA: The recent discovery of the use of personal information captured via Facebook for election purposes and disclosure of fake news has reignited the privacy debate on the network. Is there a way to preserve at least some of this privacy?

MP: The point is to know what is worth worrying about. It's like moving to a big city---we know there are dangers, but we really want to live there, so we accept the risks and take precautions. Access to personal information is not harmful unless the information is used maliciously. That's the only issue. The rest is silly secrecy, like the insistence on keeping salaries confidential. I see the current generation moving towards a much more open society in terms of information.

What can be learned from this scandal involving Facebook?

The case is not as scandalous as the press makes it seem. We are, in fact, at the very beginning of a vast experiment in defining what is private life in the virtual world. Many questions will arise, as happens whenever pioneers explore new places. The difference is that now we are more than 2 billion individuals exploring together. This means that problems come up faster and we can find solutions sooner. In the long run, the lesson of this "scandal" is the same one we learn from democracy: always be vigilant."

Your article on digital natives was written in 2001, and the children there cited today are teenagers. What has changed since then?

We are seeing the emergence of a new culture. Being a digital native does not mean automatically knowing everything about technology; it means that, because they have always lived with technology, our children see the world differently. A good example of this cultural change is the privacy issue. The people of my generation find the preservation of a private life to be a non-negotiable and extremely important asset. They are afraid to expose their lives online and often tell younger people to be careful what they post. There are some dangers, it's true, and no one should have access to all your information without appropriate filters. But the value of privacy itself is no longer the same.

Is it no longer relevant?

Not as it was in the past. Young people born in this new culture are not afraid to be seen. If a person grew up in the pre-digital era, valuing privacy and has had to adapt to the new times, he is an immigrant into the new, digital world. If you were born and raised in the world of digital technology, however, you are a native. Now, of course, it's a metaphor. You can not classify

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natives and immigrants by the year they were born. The question is whether or not we have been through digital adaptation. It's almost as if the two groups lived on different planets.

Besides familiarity with the networks, what else is typical of digital natives?

They have great ease of sharing and so often work better in teams. They also have a broader world view because they communicate easily with people everywhere. I have noticed that young people, especially those who understand technology well, are practically the same everywhere. I often say that digital natives form the first worldwide "horizontal" generation.

How does this show up?

When I talk to children and adolescents, whether in Brazil, Japan or New York, everyone shares similar ideas. They want to have more power, they want to connect and act in a group very early. There was the time when adults could control children and require them to repeat tricks taught, as if they were pets. I can no longer completely control my son's actions, as was common in the past. If something in Syria catches his attention, for example, he can easily contact someone there to talk about what is happening. It is a powerful generation that wants to, and can, take actions that we never took at their age.

Are there risks in this revolution?

Yes, but the risks are bigger for the immigrants. If young people were in charge of nations, I believe many ministers of education and educators would be unemployed, because what is being taught today is not what today's students want or need. There is no escaping the revolutionary changes taking place in the lives of the new generations. But the kids will work it out--and they will do so sooner and better if we adults mostly stay out of their way, provide guidance from time to time, and stop worrying so much about what young people are doing.

Are not digital natives losing valuable lessons when they stop listening to their elders?

Not necessarily. When life was lived in a less accelerated way, what older people knew was valuable for a long time. Now, much of their knowledge and advice gets outdated quickly, and much no longer applies to their kids' world. College is an example. Many older people believe that having a college degree is essential to gaining a good and successful career, and often cite statistics that "confirm" this. But those numbers are from the past, and nothing guarantees that they will be valid in the future. Many companies already give much more weight to the experience than to the diploma. They're looking for people who solve problems, get involved with work, make things happen—and that's not taught in college.

What adjustments do you think are necessary in education?

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Education, in my view, is the process that transforms children into young people and young people into good, effective, world-improving adults. The school system we have—even with the marginal reforms we are making in many places—is no longer able to achieve this goal. An examination such as Pisa, which ranks the students of the world on their knowledge of mathematics, language and science, reflects an outmoded teaching model.

Are you in favor of eliminating the traditional disciplines of the curriculum?

I think they should be very minor. The amount of stuff that everyone needs to store in their head in advance, in our times, is very small. The problem is that escaping from the known model is a risk, and neither teachers nor parents are very open to new experiments in the field of education.

Is Google making memory expendable?

I do not think memory will become dispensable, but we have to decide what is worth keeping in our heads, and what we delegate to machines. Children and adolescents memorize a lot of information for no reason. Of course, it is important they have some skills and knowledge, but in fact very little really matters to everyone. The important thing is to understand what is important in the big picture, to have an overview, to be able to understand concisely the essential history of a place—Brazil, or the U.S., for example—in only a few sentences (or tweets). For more detail than that, anyone who cares is going to search the Internet.

Does this not promote mental laziness?

Socrates thought writing would create lazy minds. Fortunately, he was wrong. It was precisely by applying the new technology of writing that Plato was able to preserve the thoughts of his master for posterity. Every generation thinks *they* were so industrious and their kids are so lazy! I, for one, am glad I no longer have to put in the effort to memorize something someone else wants me to, but I do remember lots of things—from names, to facts, to quotes, to poems—that are important to me. As educators, we can and should help kids understand what is valuable for them to think about and keep in their heads. This will be different for each individual.

Several surveys point to increasingly anxious and depressed young people. Do digital natives have any disadvantages compared to other generations?

They only have advantages compared to the past. They are anxious because we live in an anxious world.

Another criticism of today is that young people only know how to connect virtually. It is true?

It may be, but there is nothing that guarantees that talking face-to-face is the best form of communication in every situation. Still, there will always be a need to learn to relate and to form bonds, both personally and on social networks.

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Nobody comes knocking on the door or screaming in a virtual fight. Is not there a loss in terms of emotion?

Whoever thinks this disregards all the power of literature, which expresses deep emotions without the involvement of any kind of physical contact. When the phone was invented, people discovered how much emotion can be transmitted using only the voice. Now, in the case of the phone, there are applications that allow you to see the other person's face. Yet often we do not want to see that, which we can turn off virtually, but it is much harder to turn it off in person. Emotion will never disappear, but there are many ways to demonstrate it. Text messages are now accompanied by emoji, icons, pictures, videos, sounds. Soon, we will be able to transmit our emotions by projecting them on our avatar faces. And remember, many people, when they talk face to face, go out of their way to disguise their emotions. Face-to-face communications are often overestimated, in a knee-jerk reaction.

It is difficult to distinguish between truth and lies on the internet. Will not the digital natives have even more trouble?

I do not believe this is true—they will have the same difficulties as the rest of us. The people who learned to drive when the car was invented had the same problems as a young man who first picks up the wheel these days. But we have to be careful what we teach our young people. In the conversations that I have around the world, I have been told many times by students that they are taught that “one should not believe anything on the Internet.” It is absurd to be teaching this.

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*Marc Prensky is an internationally acclaimed speaker, author, and “practical visionary” in the field of education. Coiner of the term “Digital Native,” Marc currently promotes “civilization-level change” in global education, championing an emerging paradigm of “Empowering Kids to Better Their World.” that more directly benefits all of us. Marc has spoken in over 40 countries, authored seven books, and published over 100 essays; his writing has been translated into a dozen languages. Marc is currently the founder and Executive Director of the **Global Future Education Foundation and Institute**. His latest book, **Education to Better Their World: Unleashing the Power of 21st Century Kids** (Columbia TC Press, 2016), won the FOREWORD INDIES 2016 Book of the Year Awards in Education. To learn more about the New Educational Paradigm, check out bettertheirworld.org | btwdatabase.org | global-future-education.org and marcprensky.com . Contact Marc at marcprensky@gmail.com.*