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Immigrants not Natives

by Sally Wyatt — last modified Apr 30, 2012 06:27 PM

Sally Wyatt reviews the four-book collective, *Digital AlterNatives with a Cause?* edited by Nishant Shah & Fieke Jansen.

Review of *Digital AlterNatives with a Cause?* edited by Nishant Shah & Fieke Jansen, Bangalore: Centre for Internet and Society/The Hague: Hivos Knowledge Programme, 2011:

Digital AlterNatives with a Cause? (2011) is the product of a series of workshops held in 2010-11 in Taiwan, South Africa and Chile. The aim was to bring together a different cohort of 'digital natives' than that which had hitherto been assumed in the popular and academic literature, namely white, highly educated, (mostly) male elites largely to be found on and around US university campuses. The workshops brought together 80 people who identified themselves as 'digital natives' but with very different backgrounds, and who came from Asia, Africa and Latin America. The four booklets which have been produced on the themes of 'To Be', 'To Think', 'To Act' and 'To Connect' provide many fascinating and thought-provoking insights into the possibilities for reflection, action and interaction available to this group.

In my review, I focus on the editorial comments provided by Nishant Shah and Fieke Jansen in the Preface, the Introduction, and the sidebar text running alongside most of Book One, *To Be*, in which they provide the context for the workshops and the books, and in which they reflect on the concept of 'digital native'. Shah and Jansen recognise many of the limits of the concept of 'digital native', and reflect upon those limits and possible alternatives. They and the contributors keep the term, while at the same time challenging it, refining it and reclaiming it. It is to this ongoing process of reflection and definition that I would like to contribute, and I do so by thinking about my own position as a user and an analyst of digital technologies and as a Canadian-born child of immigrants.

I was born in 1959 so there is no chance of me being mistaken for a 'digital native' (often defined as someone born after 1980). Yet I was programming when I was a student in the late 1970s, and I have lived in a house with a computer in it since 1984, though I didn't acquire home internet access until 2002, relatively late for a person living in north-western Europe with my income and occupation. One feature of this life, not at all untypical for someone of my age and background, is that I experienced digital technology before it was black-boxed, when to operate a home computer required a certain level of engineering skill, and when the sleekness of today's devices was still a dream. Maybe I am what the editors refer to (ironically and with affection they claim) as a 'digital dinosaur' (p.15). I would never claim to have been part of the cohort who created the internet, though maybe I am part of the group of social scientists who began analysing the social aspects of digital technologies, in both their production and their use, sooner rather than later.[1]

I'm also of a generation deeply affected by second-wave feminism. One of the most important books for us was *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, in which she wrote, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1949, p.267). This sentence, reproduced on countless posters, coffee mugs and t-shirts, neatly encapsulates the idea that gender is socially constructed, that there is nothing essential about the category of 'woman', nor of any other category. I would like to suggest that it also applies to digital natives – they are not born, they are made. Just because processes of socialisation are subtle and powerful, and one no longer has to poke the mother board with a paper clip to make the computer work, it does not mean that digital natives arrive fully formed as such in the world, nor that the identity will remain stable over time for them individually or as a group.

I read these volumes while in Canada in early 2012. I was born and grew up in Canada, though I have lived in Europe for all of my adult life. Canada and other settler societies use 'native' differently from Europeans. It was a term often used by colonisers to describe Indigenous communities such as the First Nations people in Canada, Aboriginal people in Australia, or the Māori in New Zealand. 'Natives' were not respected by the colonisers, and these groups continue to suffer disadvantage and discrimination. Moreover, the term 'native' is not used by Indigenous communities to describe themselves.

And because 'native' has different connotations, so does 'immigrant'. I have lived for the past decade in the Netherlands, where to be an 'immigrant' is not comfortable, as attitudes and policies towards immigrants have become harsher, and the official definition of 'native' more exclusive. It is different in Canada, where the state of being an immigrant is almost the norm. Most people (except the First Nations people) are immigrants themselves, or have immigrants in their not too distant family histories. Canadians are comfortable with hybrid identities – there are not only French Canadians, but also Chinese Canadians, Greek Canadians and Chilean Canadians. I attended an international sporting event while visiting, and many of the spectators brought two flags with them to wave, depending on who was competing; or they had superimposed the maple leaf (the symbol of Canada that appears in the middle of the national flag) onto the flag of another country. There are many advantages to being an immigrant, apart from a wider choice of sporting heroes. One is that we know that identity is performance. Immigrants are constantly 'becoming' - legally, bureaucratically, linguistically and culturally.

Another advantage of being an immigrant comes from understanding the possibilities for re-invention. Many immigrants come for the promise of a better life for themselves and their children. It can be difficult and painful, but also exhilarating to start a new life, without the baggage of the past, whether one's own youthful indiscretions or the burdens of expectation of the 'old country'. I wonder whether 'digital natives' will ever experience the excitement of a new start. What will happen when they reach middle age, and the digital traces they have been creating since childhood cannot be erased and continue to follow them wherever they go? How will they cope when a younger generation arrives with a newer technology offering other possibilities for social transformation, because we can be certain that there will be newer technologies and that they will be accompanied by promises of social change?

It is too easy to assume that 'native' is a superior identity position to 'immigrant', or that natives always have advantages compared to immigrants because of their greater familiarity with the norms and codes of a way of life, digital or otherwise. In this volume, the project of reclaiming and expanding the reach of 'digital native' suggests that the editors and contributors see it as the preferred identity. Both 'native' and 'immigrant' are constructed categories, but 'immigrant' (from my particular historically located subject position) often feels like a more dynamic and reflexive identity position.

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I will conclude by further performing my middle-aged curmudgeonly identity (and it is somewhat frightening how quickly one can slip into this as one passes 50). On many occasions in recent years, I have heard digital natives say – without shame – that they do not read anything that is not available online. Sometimes this is for understandable reasons, such as the cost and scarcity of printed versions, especially in countries where the workshops were held. But sometimes they seem genuinely unaware that many books and sources are not available digitally. One problem with only reading material that is born digital or has been digitised (sometimes badly) is that one becomes desensitised to grammatical niceties. Nishant Shah and Fieke Jansen are the editors of these four volumes, and an executive editor is listed in the colophon. I am reluctant to criticise people who might not be native speakers of English, but there is at least one language mistake in almost every paragraph. The paper books of Digital (Alter)Natives with a Cause? are beautifully designed and produced. The production values of this project were high. It is unfortunate that more effort was not expended in language editing. Copy editors are in danger of suffering the same fate as the bison of the Great Plains, but this time not at the hands of settlers but at the hands and keyboards of digital natives.

[1]. See Wyatt (2008) where I discuss at greater length the relationship between information society debates and feminist analyses of technology, and include elements of my personal relationship to those debates.

References

1. de Beauvoir, Simone (1949/1989). *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books.
2. Wyatt, Sally (2008) 'Feminism, technology and the information society: Learning from the past, imagining the future' *Information, Communication & Society*, 11,1: 111-30.

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