

“No, they’re not digital natives and they’re not addicted”: An Essay Critiquing Contestable Labels

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Introduction

Reducing complexity is often our focus when we explain new phenomena. However when we label things in simplistic ways, we may be in fact causing harm, in fact performing symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1998) by using and promoting essences of the phenomena in question. This essay gives examples of these simplistic, inappropriate categories that essentialize people into inflexible boxes, and argues that labeling is a simplistic practice, which gives us (mis)certainty. To me, there is a need for nuanced understandings of phenomena versus reductionist suppositions. We need insight rather than generalizations and essentializations. Many (mis)assumptions are based on a lack of evidence. This short essay argues against the constant complexity reduction apparent in popular (and to a certain extent academic) discourse. It highlights the ‘good’ of a society shaped by and shaping the Internet. It draws together the two labels of digital natives and Internet addiction to provide examples of how symbolic violence is being inflicted.

Two Problematic Labels

Currently I have two major problems with accepted popular (and supposedly academic) discourse. It seems that the rise and frequent use of these two contestable labels are increasing and are being reinforced in a variety of forms and through a variety of media. First, take the popular categories of digital natives and digital immigrants as introduced by John Perry Barlow in 1996, and made famous by Marc Prensky (2001). Prensky claims that digital natives ‘think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors’ (Prensky 2001:1, emphasis in the original), due in part to how they have grown up and always been exposed to computers. He argues that digital immigrants are those who have been introduced to technologies (which tends to include Generation X, murkily classified as those born between c. 1961 - 1981, and the baby boomers, Gen X’s parents, those born post World War II, as well as older people), and that they are in some way not as readily able to take up use of or learning from these technologies as well as digital natives. These simplistic categorizations are readily taken up as truths. A critical perspective of digital natives and digital immigrants would find these categories to be inaccurate and unfortunate, as they encourage acceptance of binaries, which promulgate essentialism and simplicity. Categories are often harmful and unhelpful, and these ones do not allow for movement in and between them.

Secondly, as the author of *The Multiplicities of Internet Addiction: The Misrecognition of Leisure and Learning* (Johnson 2009), I argued that frequent, high usage has often been framed negatively, that is, as Internet addiction because it is ‘not what we used to do in the good old days’. Digital immigrants are encompassed by a moral panic (Bennett, Maton and Kervin 2008) and assume dysfunction, unhealthy practices and morbid communication will

occur, that is, they believe heavy users will become addicted.

Many researchers seek to understand and classify things and practices through testing models, cycles, frameworks and processes in a bid to impose order on the world. They hope to reduce complexity and simplify the 'difficult'. This is fraught as our simplifications are not always accurate. While they may at times be helpful to frame our thinking, they can in fact harm what is and exists in its richness. Models, cycles and processes do not apply to everyone. Descriptions of categories only have limited usefulness. Not everyone is the same.

At an international conference I attended in 2009, a keynote speaker claimed that Generation Y were unhappy, rebellious and discontent. This appeared to be neither accurate nor based on research, but also seemed to box hundreds of thousands of young people negatively. It is incredible that such a simplistic understanding and categorization of a colorful, complex, interesting and diverse international group could be positioned in this way by an academic, supposedly one that is educated. To make supposedly factual statements about a generation of people other than the years when they were born is to make sweeping remarks indicative of thought preceding the enlightenment (for a critique of the literature surrounding the 'digital natives', see Bennett et al 2008).

Labeling is a simplistic practice. Labeling gives us (mis)certainty. The tendency or compulsion to categorize and box people is a basic part of stereotyping. Gen Y, digital natives and being addicted to the Internet are taken to be truths but each of these notions is harmful, misused and inaccurate. These derogatory terms are crude, yet many research findings are claiming that we should respond to these phenomena. We may be in fact missing out on fascinating, insightful knowledges if we endeavor to use labels, classifications and categories that presuppose or assume the continued existence of presumed essentializations. We are doing ourselves a disservice by using generational categories and claims that limit groups of people. Digital natives are a poor construct to describe a vibrant, complex and diverse group of individuals.

You're an Internet addict

Another example of the 'simplistic categorization of a complex phenomena' is the inappropriate usage of the phrase or phenomena Internet addiction. Internet addiction disorder (IAD) has multiple names including Pathological Internet use, Problematic Internet use (PIU), Excessive Internet use, and Compulsive Internet use. There is a move towards accepting PIU as an impulse control disorder within the forthcoming American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistic Manual 5 (due May 2013).

I consider that Internet addiction is an ambiguous term based on a false (or questionable) premise. Understandings of the phrase are multiple. Performances of detrimental Internet use are also multiple. 'Addiction' is thrown around and used meaninglessly in everyday conversation so the word's importance and ramifications are limited. Medical doctors (O'Brien, Volkow and Li 2006) and drug addiction researchers (Keane, Moore and Fraser, 2011) continue to debate the politics and ethics surrounding the terms 'addiction' and 'dependence'. Internet addiction was coined as a spoof in the 1990s by Ivan Goldman and was popular in the early 2000s, but it has now been superseded by 'problematic internet use' or 'pathological internet use', which are far more accurate and represent medical implications for their existence. 'Addiction' is reserved for excessive patterns of drug use by clinicians and researchers (Liu and Potenza 2010). It should not be used in relation to technology. Previous work has explored discourses of addiction (Johnson 2009; Heyman 2009; Keane 2002) and neuroscientific (disease) and behavioral models of addiction (e.g. Keane and Hamill 2010; Seear and Fraser 2010). These scholars have highlighted that there is an inappropriateness in applying medical models of addiction of drug use to sex and the Internet, etc. Regarding the world wide web, it seems to be more helpful to explore notions of 'habit' and 'obsession' and how they are constituted, rather than seeking to apply ethics from healthy living discourses to compensate for a moral panic, especially a disorder of choice (Heyman 2009). The use of the word 'addiction' is inaccurate and shouldn't be aligned with those that suffer terribly from gambling addiction, alcoholism and drug addiction. Flyaway glib comments about addiction are not appropriate when describing everyday ways of operating, and should be demarcated from describing detrimental behaviors. As I have argued before, in many cases, Internet 'over-use' is a misrecognition of leisure and/or learning (Johnson 2009).

Internet addiction is based on presumptions, namely, that changing our leisure interests and learning pursuits from what we used to do before the Internet to the many electronic and virtual forms currently available is bad. While there are people who have unhealthy obsessions with Internet pornography and online gambling for instance, for many people they are able to create and maintain huge amounts of social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) on the Internet, which are not available to them in their everyday biological lives. Their virtual lives become

more important and to a certain degree, this is a human right to choose how they want to live their life (whether real or virtual). The Columbia Pictures film *The Net* (1995) positioned Sandra Bullock as an Internet user helplessly and hopelessly addicted to (or dependent on) her modem. Texts like these do not allow for the notion that these users are exercising choice and agency in how they utilize these technologies. Positioning heavy Internet users as 'addicted' or presuming their eventual addiction also demonstrates foolish interpretations of something that is predominantly used positively for leisure and learning (Johnson 2009). While problematic Internet use produces detriment, it seems that further qualitative research into the area is required so that we can determine if problematic Internet use can really be attributed to the Internet or if those with predisposed tendencies for obsession are enabled to take up their unhealthy interests via the environment of the Internet. Obsession can be detrimental, but this does not just pertain to Internet and technology. We each have practices that we prefer and choose to do. These online connections can be significant personally, work wise, and for our leisure (be it an interest, or as part of an online community). In my book I argued that while our natural reaction is to disparage so-called 'overuse' of the Internet, many 'over-users' are in fact gaining exceptional skills and knowledge in various areas. Therefore, their usage is a very powerful source of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). Their 'obsession' can have very positive spin-offs.

It seems that values about health and behavior need to and should be challenged as the Internet is continually shaped by societal needs and wants. The labeling of heavy Internet use as negative is a response of moral panic because it does not constitute what some people understand to be a positive and healthy lifestyle. The fall back position or knee jerk reaction is that high Internet usage will lead to addiction, therefore children and people of all ages will be unhealthy and this will miss out on 'normal' existence. Those who argue for treatment of Internet addiction claim that high usage of the Internet is bad, and will lead to damaging engagement with cybersex, pornography, gambling, dependence on those who are not real, and that online relationships are not as worthwhile as face-to-face ones. This suggests that values about what constitutes 'health', 'well-being' and 'culture' are being imposed on society. An example of this was when I watched the Australian television breakfast show 'Today' (February 5, 2009) when the 'Technology Editor' came on. What was the topic? Of course, Internet safety. The top tips for children's use of the Internet were, 1) avoid social networking sites, 2) always supervise children's Internet use, and something about privacy filters not actually working. There are so many good things that the Internet offers that the mindset of looking for the bad, and making blanket statements about every child's usage, invokes a sense of frustration in me. Yes, we need to educate our children about online predators, and teach them what are appropriate sites and what the dangers are. This is paramount, but never letting your child go on the Internet unsupervised seems to be a simplistic (and for many parents) an unmanageable solution. Banning social networking sites would probably make some children want to use them more and hence look for ways to disobey parents' instructions, especially if 'all' their friends use them. What wasn't mentioned was the increasingly sophisticated privacy filters that one can choose for one's profile (available both on Facebook and MySpace). My stepdaughter – previously a frequent user of both sites – has never had any problems because she has these private settings. Despite recent international controversy about Facebook's blanket privacy settings, more education about the helpful and various filters available needs to be provided rather than stating that the solution is to ban sites and disallow unsupervised usage. Essentialist notions of 'normality' include that children should 'get outside and play', talk face to face with their peers, and be 'typical' and 'natural'. If children are on the Internet and not doing what their parents used to do for leisure, then it has been questioned and positioned as undesirable.

The Internet Addiction Test (IAT) devised by Young (1998) seems not to take into account our dependence on email and the Internet for communication and daily existence.

Questions on the IAT include: 'How often do you check your email before something else that you need to do?' (1998:31) or 'How often do you find yourself anticipating when you will go on-line again?' (1998:32), or 'How often do you lose sleep due to late-night log-ins?' (1998:32). If I applied these questions to myself it is likely that I would be categorized as addicted to the Internet because the personal expectation of friends and family and the expectation of my vocation is that I need to be up to date with my email communication. Ten years ago this was neither a choice nor an expectation. If we applied these IAT questions to watching television, an art or craft, reading, playing board games, an invigorating hobby or exercising, the answers might simplistically suggest we are addicted to anything and everything. (Johnson 2009:10)

The IAT has been taken up readily by some psychological researchers and used as surveys in their subsequent, quantitative studies (e.g. Chang and Law 2008; Morrison and Gore 2010; Ni et al 2009; Spada et al 2008). For many of us, the Internet is an inherent part of our daily operations. If our vocational work networks crashed, many of us would not be able to do any work. Being dependent on technology in the digital age does not mean that we are addicted. We are dependent. Weren't we dependent on the horse and cart some years ago? Aren't most of us

dependent on our car nowadays? Almost all of us are increasingly dependent on our mobile (cell) phones, but are we addicted? We cannot function as we would like without these things. We have made a choice to use these technologies. Technology has shaped us and we have shaped technology (Wajcman 2004).

If the Internet is being used in a problematic way, it is not the Internet itself that is to blame. The Internet is an environment. If a person is constantly viewing pornography online, or gambling online, it is not the Internet that they are addicted to (despite the Internet being a very powerful actor within society), it is what they are doing with the Internet that is the problem, and thus, how it effects their relationships and responsibilities. Perhaps it is more accurate to say they are addicted to sex, or to gambling, not the actual Internet itself. As I stated previously (Johnson 2009), overuse of the Internet in a harmful way can actually be a sign of other problems in our lives, and using the Internet excessively may be a symptom of other, deeper problems (or possible co-morbidity). Consider if you had an obsessive-compulsive disorder, using the Internet would be one way that you could feed and increase the problem to be all consuming. As I found out from Professor Tao Hongkai, who treats Chinese Internet over-users through rational counseling, when many young people stop playing online games (such as World of Warcraft), they have nothing in their real lives, they are bored, they don't have any friends (or social contacts), so of course, it is no surprise that they go back online to at least have some value and purpose. Many people are replacing their unhappy biological lives with meaningful virtual ones, which to me is only a concern if they are no longer functioning as a member of society. Just because it's 'not what we used to do before' doesn't mean it is 'bad'. It is a complex issue, which will only be increased as we continue to become more and more dependent on the Internet in our everyday lives.

I have recently purchased a house and land parcel (8 acres) with my husband. Our sense of agency and empowerment stems almost solely from the Internet. From there, we have been able to identify the appropriate amount of time before letting our 6 hens roam free to reach the status of 'free range hens'. The formal gardens we have inherited are cared for based on our research of rose bush pruning and maintenance. The four paddocks (fields) for our horses are weeded and maintained by what we have found on the Internet. Needless to say, the abundance of eggs has inspired me to bake and cook, therefore the Internet recipes posted by others are invaluable (especially when we need to use the leftover egg whites). My husband and I do not need to contribute to the other Web 2.0 digital insiders' (Goodson et al 2002) posts; we very rarely author and contribute to others' forums, however we benefit enormously via our research, that is, our data-gathering, sifting, and discernment of previously published posts that represent the experiences (knowledges) of others.

If we lived in this same situation prior to the Internet, we would be struggling. We would be more than over-dependent on our neighbors and (most probably) upon my parents and even my grandmother (who are farmers and gardeners, respectively) – none of who are close by. I acknowledge that many city-dwelling readers may find what I am writing as bizarre and foreign, indeed, our location is very private; the neighbors (though friendly) are distant – the atmosphere at night is completely dark and quiet. But, despite my remote locality, I am connected. We are connected. We have the infinite power of the Internet at our fingertips; we are in an ideal space and place (for us). We have the exponential knowledge embedded within cyberspace, but we are located in a provincial, small acreage – a place of little significance to anybody else within the world.

We both depend on the Internet – most predominantly for email whereby we communicate with work colleagues, friends and family. However, it is our escape into current affairs (locally, nationally, internationally). The Internet enables us to share the horrors of natural disasters, the excitement of music, the stimulus of international sport, the banal of daily trivia, yet it allows a degree of sophistication as we both use it to 'map online discourses of knowledge and power' (a 2010-11 research project on which we both work). If this is what we are experiencing in the early stages of 2011, it seems inevitable that the power of the Internet will only continue to become more significant in the everyday lives of people and society in general.

What I have endeavored to picture are lives that are empowered and benefited by the Internet. Through agentic use by critical users, the Internet is significant and an actor within society, which is not only avidly utilized, but is ardently desired. It gives us freedom and flexibility, it gives us a realm and breadth of knowledge, it gives us access to artistic and cultural practice.

We are not Internet addicts. We are Internet dependents. And yet we are empowered because of this use. We are contributing to virtual democracy (Agger 2004).

Consider the virtual social contact and acceptance available to the social outcast within the physical world. An awkward, unpopular individual that does not 'fit' into mainstream society is enabled to be part of a virtual part of society that they wish to inhabit. Their connections, interests and associations are available to them via the world wide web. They are permitted to 'belong'. The cyberself (Agger 2004) can live a 'better' life because of the Internet; yet complexity still remains surrounding the nexus between Internet use and wellbeing (Campbell, Cumming and

Hughes 2006). Nonetheless, those Internet users who create and inhabit safe, virtual spaces enable the physically lonely and dejected (yet technologically-enabled) to challenge stereotypical acceptance only available in physical society through their acceptance and sense of belonging in the virtual one.

Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence has been aptly defined as the

...violence which is exercised upon individuals in a symbolic, rather than a physical way. It may take the form of people being denied resources, treated as inferior or being limited in terms or realistic aspirations. Gender relations, for example, have tended to be constituted out of symbolic violence which has denied women the rights and opportunities available to men (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002:xvi).

The Internet does not perform symbolic violence; language does, institutions do. The Internet does not deny resources, it does not treat anyone as inferior (except perhaps those who are digital outsiders), and it does not limit anyone (though certain governments block specified types of websites). While there are hazards that arise as part of any new medium (phishing and identity theft come to mind), the Internet itself is not the problem itself. It is only what we do or not do with the Internet that determines its morality.

Those who do not (choose to) use the Internet or who do not have access to the Internet are the ones who are marginalized. The former are able to make an informed decision.

Consider the recent societal uproar in Egypt (early 2011). Freedom of speech and the ability to communicate virtually to organize physical gatherings was brought to a halt when the Internet was shut down. This represented an attempt to disempower the Egyptian people(s) and their challenge to existing monopolies and information.

Those digital natives who have always been surrounded by the Internet and computing technologies (including Internet-enabled mobile phones) are quickly becoming more savvy, more astute, and more discerning in their critical uptake. They are the ones who will most strongly shape the future of the Web 3.0 Internet, yet this is available to those of us who are digital immigrants. The Internet of the future will enable, empower and make possible even more than we can imagine, giving local insight within global perspectives. They are the digital insiders, the digital explorers, the digital innovators, and the digital shapers.[1]

It seems to me that the use of these two labels that have been the focus of this essay – digital natives and Internet addiction – are actually two current examples of essentialization that inflict symbolic violence on those that some are positioning as 'deviant' or deficit. A thoughtful and critical approach to the everyday language we use is needed.

Endnotes

1. I did consider including 'digital capitalists' here, but that may be another paper.

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