

The more things change ...

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It's hard not to be a little nervous about the Google generation, what with kids these days. Look at them, charging off into one discomfiting trend after another – their YouTubing, their texting, their wanton social networking. To read the news, you'd think they were hiving off into a subspecies, raised with data ports in their heads meant to be plugged into Facebook at the age of 6, from which point on they will expertly recite the collective wisdom of Wikipedia with a steely look in their eyes.

Hyperbole? Only somewhat. Conventional wisdom is fairly explicit on the fact that today's youth are the most Web-savvy that have ever existed. Think you know something about doing online research? Prepare to have an Internet-enhanced eight-year-old run circles around you! It never gets old, generational phobia. Twenty years ago, I was that eight-year-old myself, part of the generation that grew up addled by video games, raised after the generation that grew up addled by television. The rhetoric around this latest generation might be a little more optimistic, but it doesn't appear to be any more correct.

According to a clear-eyed study just released by the British Library, the “Google generation” isn't actually composed of plugged-in child geniuses after all. Not only do children born since 1993 – the year the Web was invented – fail to conform to their stereotypes, but the jittery research habits that are often attributed to them are showing up across the entire demographic spectrum.

“The Google generation is ageless,” library spokesman Lawrence Christensen says. “The Google generation is just as much about what we in the U.K. call ‘silver surfers.’” The library had started out looking for ways to better design its growing digital collections, so, in conjunction with University College London, it spent years poring over its online resources' visitor logs to determine how young users were behaving. They discovered that – surprise, surprise – kids might not make the best researchers, even with a Google assist.

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“Digital literacies and information literacies do not go hand in hand,” the report says. “A careful look at the literature over the past 25 years finds no improvement (or deterioration) in young people's information skills.”

In other words, the fact someone might be at home on the Web doesn't necessarily give them the skills they need to wring knowledge from it. For one thing, getting the most out of Google requires language and processing skills that young kids are often still working on.

Even clever search engines like Google require some coercing to work properly. Users have to translate the natural-language questions in their heads into the often disjointed search terms that give the best results.

Then they have to pick through the results, categorizing and contextualizing what comes back – which can be doubly challenging, since young users tend to hone in on results that use the exact wording they are looking for.

What's more, it's not enough to read off Google results as if it were a magic box of answers. To understand what the Web is telling them, surfers first have to understand that the Internet is a network of independent entities, all of varying authority and reliability.

Most important, though, the report makes the point that exposure to the Internet is changing the research habits of all users, regardless of age. The fact that online readers show a preference for short, quick blurbs of information over in-depth articles is not a function of impatient children.

Everyone, from kids to academics to retirees, is showing what the report calls “horizontal, bouncing, checking, viewing” behaviour – the art of flitting across huge numbers of Web pages, spending little time on each before moving on to the next.

“The popularity of abstracts among older researchers rather gives the game away,” it says. “Society is dumbing down.”

If it is (and I'm not sold on that idea, since quickly filtering large amounts of data is always a prerequisite to doing detailed learning), then it's incumbent on us not to blame the kids. As the report points out, these issues aren't new: Fifteen-odd years ago, my generation faced the same challenge with the first CD-ROM encyclopedias (whose primary use, I seem to recall, was justifying the purchase of a CD-ROM drive to balking parents).

The British Library study argues against the utopian evangelizing that seems to accompany every new online advance, the kind that implies that the arrival of a new medium will somehow impart improbable abilities upon its users. The availability of blogs did not give everyone something to say; the rise of Wikipedia did not make everyone an expert with a desire to contribute; the advent of YouTube did not turn everyone into a videographer.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that having Google as a birthright doesn't give rise to a generation of superb information analysts. Technology changes behaviour, but when presented with a new technology, people will still behave within the framework of their abilities and desires. Children who grow up with a search engine in the family are children first and slaves to the Internet second – just like their parents. Plug that into your data port and smoke it.

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