

Book Review: Generational Use of New Media

by Blog Admin

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***Generational Use of New Media** examines and contrasts how younger and older people engage with new media. This book critically examines the gap that is assumed to exist between younger users of new media and older non-users, and considers how to lower levels of exclusion and combat inequality in access to technology. **Catherine Easton** finds a rich, critical analysis of key issues.*



Generational Use of New Media. Edited by Eugene Loos, Leslie Haddon and Enid Mante-Meijer. Ashgate.

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Generational Use of New Media is an edited collection which seeks to evaluate and challenge assumptions surrounding age and how it affects interaction with technology. The debate around the digital divide has historically addressed access in terms of its impact on determined categories: men/women, old/young, rural/urban. *Generational Use of New Media* delves specifically into the age classification to provide essential insights in an area of new media research which has suffered from oversimplification. The book takes an international and empirical focus with a presentation of primary research carried out in the EU, USA and Hong Kong. The editorial team is suitably international with a high level of expertise in technology, ageing, youth and sociological research methods. This text challenges the homogeneity inherent in the categorisation of the old and the young and, as such, provides much needed layers and nuances to steer research on the information society towards more realistic, worthwhile avenues.



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The book is divided into three sections which address: young people and new media; older people and barriers to access; and a contrastive analysis of younger and older people using new media. In the first section David Herold presents an examination of the concept of digital natives, seeking to dispel some of the accepted notions surrounding young people's uptake of information and communication technologies. He challenges the assumptions surrounding those whom Prensky identified as digital natives; the younger generation whose lives are completely immersed in technology. Herold examines this notion, drawing the conclusion that increased employment of technology does not lead to increased proficiency in its use, producing a worrying skills gap. His empirical work focused upon undergraduate students studying at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and, in summary, found lower levels of argument and judgement skills in a cohort of digital natives than in a similar cohort ten years earlier. A key factor in this was deemed to be the tendency to rely on technology as a short cut to accessing relevant information at a superficial level. The danger lies in creating a generation of technology-dependent "babes in the wood" who are relying upon powerful experts who are leading them not towards empowerment but further layers of exclusion.

In the section on older people and barriers, Dana Chisnell and Janice Redish present research leading to a model for designing accessible websites for older people. They evaluate key statistics relating to older people's use of technology and highlight access as a multi-faceted issue which encompasses ability, aptitude and, importantly, attitude. With age joining these factors, they then comprise their 4As model which is put forward as a lens through which to examine past and future research in the area. Towards the end of the chapter they present a list of heuristics as a best practice guide to designing barrier free websites for older people. While the authors argue that "just thinking about old age as a collection of disabilities is old business", the work could have included a critique of accessibility standards such as the Worldwide Web

Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and how they stand in relation to supporting access for older people. The authors argue for a focus on diversity when addressing older people as a group but do not fully engage with an evaluation of the move towards embedding universal access principles into website design, seeking to achieve access for all.

In the final section, which focuses upon contrastive analyses of young and old people's use of new media, Alexander van Deursen examines the complex relationship between technology and the emphasis placed on skills development. He highlights the definitional and evaluative difficulties in this area but divides "internet skills" into four categories: operational, formal, information retrieval and strategic. Van Deursen then presents and evaluates research employing performance tests and conducted among the Dutch population, focusing upon the identified categories of internet skills. He found that in the medium-related skills, the operational and formal, older people experienced the most problems. The operational issues included difficulty saving a file and filling in online forms. Formal skills-based issues included problems returning to a website's homepage from a deep link. In the content-related skills of information retrieval and making strategic decisions van Deursen found problems occurring across all age groups. A very interesting observation in relation to information retrieval was the unquestioning acceptance of the online sources located without an analysis of its veracity or authority. However, the author concludes that while the younger generation have a higher level of skill in relation to use of the Internet as a medium, the content related skills were found to improve with age. The analysis which follows is balanced and insightful, including an examination of low levels of self-esteem in relation to older people's evaluation of their capabilities and the notion that the ability to negotiate the Internet at a technical level does not automatically lead to the development of strategic, information processing skills. In a conclusion, reflective of Herold's earlier discussion, an emphasis is placed on the need for inclusive education, which is deemed the most important factor in addressing inequality in access to technology.

This text provides a rich, critical analysis of key issues relating to age and the use of new media and, as such, is to be recommended as an extremely useful work for anyone involved in critical media research and policy development. As a collection, this empirically-focused work brings timely and necessary insight to a debate which often lacks tangible political responses due to a lazy focus on blunt categorisations.

Dr Catherine Easton is a lecturer in Lancaster University's School of Law. In 2010 she completed her PhD on access to the Internet, citizenship and disabled people. Her research interests include Internet governance, domain name regulation, intellectual property, access to technology and human/computer interaction. In 2012 Catherine was awarded an HEA international scholarship to carry out research on educational technology in the USA. [Read more reviews by Catherine.](#)