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Digital Natives: Two or three things I know about them

To whoever wants to study the encounter between young people and new technologies, Internet, mobiles, games..., in an attempt to describe and to understand youthful digital uses, their contexts and their impact, several hypotheses can be proposed. We will elaborate on these hypotheses that can bring light on the terms and the stakes of creative and expressive digital uses among young people. For this, we will address several sets of problems: "user turn", "digital natives" and "expressive individualism" within the frame of field studies carried out on P2P, blogs and user generated contents.

User turn or it did not all started with 2.0

Before analysing and describing some youthful digital practises, it can be useful to give a statistical idea of it and to put it within the context of the deployment of *user turn*, which originated, as a cultural and digital practise, with P2P.

User turn and User Generated Content: some figures

On the Internet, many circulating figures concerning User Generated Contents (especially young users) are commented by Internet users.

According to a study from *Research and Markets*, the number of User Generated Contents (UGC) in 2007 has come to 22,4 milliards contents, which increased by 70 % (13,2 milliards in 2006). In August 2007, the socializing website Facebook contained 100 million pages and Myspace contained 200 million pages, and specifically 13 million Skyblogs were listed in France in January 2008. Flickr, a photo management and photo sharing website proposed more than two milliard photos in November 2007 and had 54 million visitors each month all over the world. On Youtube, 10,000 videos were uploaded every day; in the second semester of 2008. Michael Wesch, a teacher in cultural anthropology in Kansas State University, has carried out an ethnographic study with his students.¹ As a result, more than 50% of all subscribers are aged between 20 and 35, the most uploaded videos are "home videos" but most of them are only watched a hundred times and 15% of videos are remixes or remakes from other videos shown on Youtube (*Charlie bit my finger*, *Soulja Boy*, *Numa numa*, etc.).

Concerning youthful practices in particular, several data can be quickly compiled.

¹ The results, presented in a video, are available here:
<http://mediatedcultures.net/ksudigg/?p=179> .

Among teenagers (12-19), 89% are connected to the web and 61% own an Mp3 player (study G2 Paris, January 2008). 71 % of young people aged 16-20 use several medias simultaneously to see which one is the best, to communicate and give their opinion (study G2 Paris, January). Out of 9 million blogs counted in France, 85% are owned by young people aged 15-25. "For 34% of them, it's a daily task. For young people aged 16-19, the figure drops to 23%". According to another study, (G2 Paris, January 2008), 82% of people under 24 claim to have already created a blog, including 40% on Skyblogs.

Finally, according to the data given by AFOM (French Association of Mobile Phone Operators), the rate of young people aged 12-24 who own a mobile kit lied between 71 % and 97% in 2007.

These practises and uses are generally part of the development of a web animated by its users' involvement, as shown in the study carried out by TNS Sofres in November 2007: 68% of Internet users visiting 2.0 sites have also contributed to it; 35% on discussion rooms such as community sites; 33% on forums; 30% on photo or video sharing sites; 29% on chat rooms. 18% from them contribute to blogs, 9% in virtual worlds, and 3% on wikis.

These figures must be contextualised twice within an analysis of these data.

First, regarding the history of innovating technologies, one must take into account the radical primacy of the logic behind their use, which gives rise to a sort of "Revenge of the purged ones", these hobbyists who, for ages, have experimented, tested and improved the technological propositions until the process of industrialisation finally reduced them to the role of public and simple amateurs. Take the mobile for instance, in the relation between technologies and human societies, between technical objects and daily life, we have here an interesting case of a mass consumption product whose content and look is decided by its user in the end, whose designer is its user to some extent. In the history of technological innovating techniques, Internet and the mobile are vivid examples of what we call *user-turn*, which involves the user in the innovating process. It's a marketing strategy, which relies on the users' sense of poetry and creativity.

It is necessary to have a second contextualisation that takes into account the history of Internet itself. This "User Web" is called 2.O.² Let's claim it one more time and forever: a whole set of economical (the lack of costs), aesthetic (the jeopardization of the auctorial system...) and sociological problems (exchange, sharing, files transfers) at work in Web 2.0 have been tested out with the development of P2P, and all of this since 1999, when Napster emerged. This *peering* matrix still exist, its downloading techniques have become one way among others to access culture, thus redefined as a culture of exchange. In 2007, 34% of French people have downloaded music and games, according to the figures given by Credoc (Research centres of habits and customs in France). For generations who grew up in

² Web 2.O, as named by Dale Dougherty, Craig Cline and Tim O'Reilly during a conference in October 2004, represents an important turning point of Web. Using this term, they wanted to emphasize the underlying transformation of Web as a "shared data platform, via the development of networking applications resulted from the essential contributions of users to the creation of contents, publication formats (blogs, wiki...). Web 2.0 means the latest moulting of Internet as a communication platform, of social exchanges via expressive data coming from its users. "What Is Web 2.0 ? Design Patterns and Business Generation of Software", 30 September 2006. About Web 2,0, see Mediamorphoses n° 21, « 2.0? Digital Culture, Expressive Cultures" supervised by Laurence Allard (in collaboration with Olivier Blondeau), Armand Colin/INA, 2007.

a digital universe, culture will never be a mere consumer good anymore. People online exchange files, which they download and transfer via their mobile. This culture of exchange, resulting from the availability of works online, declines into a culture of transfers (via *Bluetooth* technology) on a mobile. All of this happening independently from the latest trendy appellation of web and Internet. This shift from a culture of marketing distribution of material good to a culture of immaterial goods originated with the technological device that is P2P and not with Web 2.0.

User turn and peering matrix

The possibility for Internet users to upload music and video files marked the shift from a “culture as possession” to a “culture as connection”. It is a culture of exchange³ with two meanings. First, the aim of these digital and cultural practises is to exchange and interact, they are harboured and harbour social dynamics, they erode a certain sociability and several identity performances. Then, P2P technologies bring about a shift in instituted cultural roles, a reversibility of roles such as author/diffuser/programmer/spectator. Exchanges and sharing practises have thus enabled an experimentation of singularizing technologies of cultural consumption. From the coding phase that enables one to select a type of sound or image, the spectator/ripper does more than just copying a film. This is why these unique film objects can be defined as “films in receiving”, “interpreted films”, in short “spoken films” like the “Book Men” in *Fahrenheit 451*, especially since not only films are shared through P2P. Many things can be found there, such as .srt or .ssa files, which are subtitles files, and not only for Japanese animated mangas provided by *fansubbers* teams.

In a study on the different uses of P2P⁴, we had found an unusual object among the many shared files. “Mammadou from the 93rd” (93rd is the number of a district in suburban Paris) has translated Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* which he uploaded with a file containing another file entitled “Read Me” warning “anyone from Gaul who will find this file.”

“Please do not delete this file so as to keep a trace of my work because this is what sharing is for.

Made by: Mammadou (yes, there is such a thing as an immigrant from the 93rd who doesn’t steal, masters both French and English and more, I swear).

To you, my friend from Gaul, take this subtitle files and be kinder with a Mammadou next time you see one, it could be me :)

Find enclosed French subtitles for Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* in different formats.

This version is longer than the one released in cinema.

You can read these subtitles with ZoomPlayer and insert them in the film using VirtualDub”.

³See “The new forms of cultural exchange”, Seminar acts Po-Paris 3-L’Exception, supervised by Sylvie Lindeperg, Frank Beau, Jean Michel Frodon and Laurence Allard, 2005, available here: <http://griom.lautre.net/nfec>

⁴ See Laurence Allard, “Express Yourself: blogs, personal pages, fansubbing: a ordinary and techno-cultural aggregates” in *Penser les médiaculture*, supervised by Eric Maigret, Eric Macé, Dominique Pasquier, Hervé Glévarec, Marie-Hélène Bourcier and Laurence Allard, Armand Colin, 2005.

An expressivist preconception: The hypothesis of an expressive individualism

When we try to typify these youthful digital practises, by looking for instance at *mangafansubbers*, these young people who sub mangas, sometimes in a tacit agreement with Japanese or Korean editors who take it as an opportunity to check the French market, it becomes obvious that certain oppositions such as “professional/amateur” need to be questioned.

Amateurs or digital natives? That is not the question anymore.

When they insert explanatory notes on top of the page, manga fans work as interpreters. In the *peer to peer version* from *Ghost in the Shell 2*, where one of the characters talks in quotations, they have found and written the many references, which was not the case in the version released in cinemas. They sometimes put the subtitles in different parts of the screen, according to the position of the speaker... In the end, they reinvented the art of subtitling, making professional codes look a bit shallow.

By describing the art of making *mangafansubbers* according to the “amateurs/professionals” dichotomy, the asymmetrical character of the relation between these two categories is renewed. As judiciously noted by both linguistic ethnomethodologists Harvey Sacks⁵ and Lena Jayusi⁶, what we have here is an “asymmetrical pair” or an “asymmetrically categorising device” in which “the categorization of asymmetrical members brings two categorical elements into play, each one being a part of the whole, and this asymmetry brings back to the relationship between both elements of the pair and shows a constative organisation of rights and duty and/or of skills/knowledge between them.»⁷

The analysis of the linguistic mechanism of the categories “amateurs”/“professionals” clearly shows the conceptual limits provoked by the unquestioned use of the notion of amateur: youthful digital practises are not fully described since they are approached with a lack of “professionalism”.

If these teenagers are not exactly amateurs, how can they be categorized? Can they be called “digital natives”? to use the expression written by Marc Prensky in his book *On the Horizon ?* published in 2001. This is how Marc Prensky explained this notion: “Nowadays’ students speak the digital language of computers, games and Internet quite naturally. They are digital natives. And those who were not born in this digital world are digital immigrants.”⁸

The history of this successful notion brings one back to one of the eldest practitioners of Internet, John Perry Barlow, who, in his *Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace*, published in 1996, points out the ongoing moral panic regarding young people and their media. He wrote: « Our children terrify us since they were born in a world in which we will always remain immigrants... And being afraid, we delegate our parental responsibilities to bureaucrats.” The notion of *digital natives* gives rise to numerous debates and discussions, in which Henry Jenkins, specialised

⁵ *Studies on Social Interaction*, ed. Sudnow ed., 1972

⁶ *Categorisation and the Moral Order*, Routledge, 1984

⁷ Lena Jayusi, p.84.

⁸Text available here: <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing>

in *fanscultures*, has contributed in a pertinent and synthetic way: « Talk of "digital natives" helps us to recognize and respect the new kinds of learning and cultural expression which have emerged from a generation that has come of age alongside the personal and networked computer. Yet, talk of "digital natives" may also mask the different degrees access to and comfort with emerging technologies experienced by different youth »⁹. What Jenkins proposes here is a stimulating context for questioning, which does not force one to label these practises in a definitive and reifying way.

In order to avoid this categorical dilemma, to avoid the multiplication of categorizations, any solution – admittedly radical – calls for an epistemological approach and supposes a change in paradigm and the renunciation of “zombie” (Ulrich Beck) categories, such as amateurs, professionals...

This is what we propose here with what we’ve termed an “expressivist preconception”. First, this expressivist preconception calls for a research approach, which intends to remain enthusiastic when addressing young people’s ordinary creativity in their use of merging digital technologies. Secondly, this expressivist preconception is in line with an explicative hypothesis regarding the social and identity backgrounds of these practises. In reaction to the notion of “moral panic” regarding media and new technologies, instead of speaking for teenagers, the idea is, with humility, to stand next to them and to observe what they do and to listen to what they have to say about it.¹⁰

Express Yourself! The expressive work at work

Digital technologies, from Internet to the mobile through video games of all kinds, represent a good observatory and a good catalyst of social and identity backgrounds that sociologists call reflexive individualism, which means the possibility to reflect “who” one wants to be. Our hypothesis of an expressive individualism, which put the emphasis on the way people express their identity through an expressive work, relies in particular on propositions from several authors such as Ulrich Beck in his book *The Risk Society*¹¹, Charles Taylor in his study of the expressivist turn in his book *Sources of the Self*¹² and Anthony Giddens and his concept of a “reflexive modernity”¹³. These writers pointed out the contingency, the detachment and the reflexivity of individuals regarding models and social roles. They put the emphasis on this contemporary and more reflexive moment of individualisation when one is asked “who?” one wants to be. Their diagnostic: since the great institutions that work as identity suppliers (family, the wage system etc.) have been un-traditionalized, personal identities are not allocated through a natural process anymore, nor are they blindly reproduced. They partly result from an expressive work with which one, endowed with a certain identity, fashions one’s own biography. Communication technologies serve as a support for these individuals’ expressive work through which they perform this reflexive individuation. By expressing themselves online via forums, blogs, social media, and creating little

⁹ « Reconsidering Digital Immigrants », 5 December 2007 available here: <http://www.henryjenkins.org/>

¹⁰ Concerning this position of a “modest witness”, see Donna Haraway’s work, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York; Routledge, 1991)

¹¹ Aubier, 2001.

¹² Le Seuil, 1998

¹³ *Modernity and Self Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991.

expressive multimedia objects such as MMS, videos, photos, playlists, individuals fashion their subjectivity, show it and have it validated by these different "Technologies of the Self", as termed by Foucault¹⁴.

Skyblogs and a post-colonial expressivism

During the November and December 2005 riots, the corpus of skyblogs has set up an impressive exercise field that were the obvious articulation of this expressivist preconception, both in its method and theoretical hypotheses. Those riots took place after a verbal aggression from Nicolas Sarkozy, then Interior Minister, who had claimed his wish to have the suburbs freed from "scums".

In order to put an end to the "ventriloquist" talks with which both journalists and intellectuals commented those media riots, a question was abruptly asked, the same question asked before by the provocative post-colonial theoretician, Spivak, when discussing Indian subalterns: "Can scums speak?"¹⁵ The answer could be seen in skyblogs whose number always impress foreign searchers specialised in Internet. This blog service, the second most visited website in France, proposed by the radio Skyrock (Rap & R&B) can be wittingly approached following the set of problems found in Anglo-Saxon *post-colonial studies*, which means in the study of transcultural and symbolic layouts that hinge on a "third enunciative space", a space proper to a postcolonial subjectivity that resulted from an ambivalence and an interdependence developed between colonized individuals and their colonists.¹⁶ Through a strange sort of process that tends to "essentialize" a postcolonial identity, as highlighted by Paul Gilroy¹⁷, the cultures of hip-hop, rap and R&B represent a deposit of identifying resources. They create identity-expressing performances, made by the children and grandchildren of immigrants cooped up in the poor suburbs of big and small French cities. These performances are therefore naturally and massively done on Skyblogs, building a sort of "home", "a room of one's own" for these young people and all their "pals" at school or in the neighbourhood. Since 2002, when Skyrock radio proposed its captive audience to have a blog service with some ads and no unionization before end of March 2007, high schoolers found themselves enrolled in a game of "lacher de com" (*Let go of coms*), which are famous commentaries used as a cultural commodity money, on Skyblog more than anywhere else. The layout of a third enunciative space, particular to postcolonial subjectivity became a primary way to enter the fields of French suburbs.¹⁸

¹⁴ Foucault, *About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self: two lectures at Dartmouth*, (ed. Sage, Beverly Hills, 1993, vol. 21, no2, pp. 198-227)

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism & The Interpretation of Culture*. London: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Eds., Macmillan. 1988

¹⁶ Cf Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge Classics, 1994)

¹⁷ *Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) "Black identity is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires." The hybridity which is formally intrinsic to hip hop has not been able to prevent that style from being used as an especially potent sign and symbol of racial authenticity." P. 107

¹⁸ In 2005, there were less than 5 million Skyblogs. In August 2008, there were 17,312,812 blogs, 587,518,207 articles and 2,588,253,490 commentaries. The official denomination, following a lawsuit, has become since 2006 "Skyrock Blog".

During the autumn riots of 2005, a traffic of 500,000 connections was measured and a million contributions were put online everyday.¹⁹

As it is usually the case with *blogging*, the “textual fabric” of a Skyblog «is completely heterogeneous, using hybrids of personal expressions and productions made by someone else, with the possibility to post on one’s blog someone else’s posts or to export music or videos (*embedding*)²⁰. The several posts on Skyblogs about the riots had a composite nature, since they were made from telegrams from AFP (French News Agency), excerpts from newspapers’ front page (Le Parisien...), pictures of fire, often taken behind the police and the firemen.

There was a mass of information, images and stories, all derived from mass medias or sources posted on the web and reorganized in one’s Skyblog as a contribution to this national event. Unsurprisingly, the “digital scums” have also watched TV whose media accounts, images and chronology they made their own without reassessing the events and actors’ own identity etc.

Copying-Pasting the media, the audience of these “digital scums” overexposed its own news and performed acts of bravery, such as showing pages with lines of burning cars.

As if for once, the media scene, which is reconfigured by the texts and images found in posts, offered a representation ratified by those who had been stigmatised by Sarkozy under the provocative term “scums” and had been bruised by Bouna and Zied’s death, their neighbours.

Excerpts from TV reports have been singled out through different processes of reinterpretations (title, subtitles, soundtrack) and sometimes published simultaneously by Arabs and Jews, nationalists and Muslims.

A curious atmosphere of “semiotic democracy” came out of this corpus. And these practises which consisted in re-codifying media accounts of the riots were not unlike the clearly identifiable tactic called “re-meaning”, they echoed Felix Guattari’s who, when speaking of the Gulf War as a media fiction, expressed the wish to call for “a reshuffle of the mass media powers, which crush any contemporary subjectivity, and for a new post-media era, that is to say, for a collective and individual take over all interactive uses made of information, communication, intelligence, art or culture.”²¹

The limits of the Skyblog community

The dangerous games between the police and the young people were replayed on another stage, since “cybercops” working for Skyblog censored 6,500 articles and deactivated a dozen blogs per day. Without any syndication, which enabled readers to post their entries on several sites, to subscribe to other blogs, thanks to different web feeds called RSS, to be informed of updates and of the current censorship.

With a syndication process, a blog is more an “External Diary” than a secret diary, to which it is often compared, in the same way Myspace is usually compared to a teenager bedroom, with this bright idea called a musical *auto-run* which starts when some pages are displayed. In the 18th century, the secret diary was the favourite

¹⁹ Philippe Crouzillacq, "Blogs in the turmoil of urban violences ". In *01net*. Paris: article published on 08 November 2005, available online at: <http://www.01net.com/article/294423.html>

²⁰ see Laurence Allard, “Digital Anthills or blogs as aggregating technologies of the self” in *Multitudes 21. Subjectivisation of the Net: post media, networks, pooling*” Exils ed.

²¹ “Towards a post-media era”, October 1990, available here: <http://biblioweb.samizdat.net/article26.html>,

support of inner questioning, as developed by Hannah Arendt²² and Jurgen Habermas in their theories on public space, the blog is the space of those “Able to Say”, of their quest and of the experimentation of the different ways to connect with others.

This social aggregation built by blogs, forums, socializing sites etc., this articulation of subjectivities and the formation of an aggregate “audience”, as meant by John Dewey²³, and these individuals brought together by something they’ve identified as a problem, a cause in need of mobilization and regulation, all of this created a sort of *fanactivism* during the conflict that opposed American majors to the authors of films called *Stargate SG-1*: “More generally, you can see the fans are deploying such social networking sites and web 2.0 applications as MySpace and Flickr as tools for identifying potential supporters and pulling them into the cause. They also recommend using Bittorrent and other peer-to-peer technologies to identify fans that are downloading the series and solicit them for the cause.”²⁴ In France, when the law DADVSI was voted in December 2005, to introduce a new European directive applying the law on royalties to new P2P technologies, an aggregate audience fought it, from freeware militants to manga fans, through consumer associations.

These are therefore punctual and plural causes to which individuals affiliate, which bring them together as an interconnected cultural audience. This crucial techno social procedure known as syndication which sees the formation of an audience, the articulation of subjectivities, was absent from the Skyblog sphere, so it’s via another form of expression that a new political and postcolonial voice could be heard: the language of videogames.

Politics of remix culture: from user generated games to French Democracy

One of the features of expressive practises has been termed by Lev Manovich, a specialist in new media: remixability.

“The most interesting aspects of Web 2.0 are new tools that explore the continuum between the personal and the social, and tools that are endowed with a certain flexibility and modularity which enables collaborative remixability, a transformative process in which the information and media we’ve organized and shared can be recombined and built on to create new forms, concepts, ideas, mashups and services”²⁵.

Other studies, in addition to the one quoted above concerning YouTube, which showed the pregnant number of *remixes* that uploaded videos contained, have highlighted the different transformative practises found in videos posted by users.

In a survey carried out in January 2008,²⁶ several remixing practises have been typified: Satire and parody; Negative and critical commentaries; Positive

²²see among others *Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man*, University Of Chicago Press; 2 edition (December 1, 1998).

²³*Public & Its problems*, (Swallow Press; 1 edition (June 1954))

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, “Downloading for the Cause”, 29 August 2006,

http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2006/08/fan_activism_in_a_networked_cu.html

²⁵Lev Manovich, “Remix and remixability”, posted on 16th Novembre 2005 on the discussion list called Nettime:: <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0511/msg00060.html>.

²⁶ “Recut, Reframe, Recycle: Quoting Copyrighted Material in User-Generated Video”, Pat Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi, “Law school’s Program on Information Justice and Intellectual

commentaries; Quotations open to discussion; Illustrations or examples; Accidental Usages; Personal notebooks; Filing and Overdraft and Pastiche or Collage. At the end of their survey, the authors speak in favour of a *fair use*, a pedagogical exception in the use of copyrighted material for establishing creative and critical exercises on the language of pictures. This exception, planned in the American constitution, does not exist in France.

A field of observation on the virtues of a *remix culture* regarding the pedagogy of images is represented by Users Generated Games. (UGG). What we have here are masters of remixability, who have been copying and pasting computer codes since they were kids. With the help of games engines, which enable one to code events or actions, young players now develop their own games. Aged between ten and twenty, boys and girls get together on forums with evocative names (“From banality to the imaginary”) in order to work on some projects about the *Pokemons* or *Naruto*. When they create these games, teenagers do not just recreate characters, they do more than just using their graphic or musical skills, by including the sounds they like in a game, they also develop real IT skills. For whoever is interested in the learning process, what we have here is an original case. Players exchange *scripts* to improve the events planned within the game engine. These teenagers are not *hackers*, they are rather code “copyer-pasters”. They can read a programming-oriented language quite recent called *Ruby*. They can read it, they can rewrite it, without having learnt how to write it. The learning process of an IT language follows the order required to learn one’s mother tongue – talking-reading-writing. One must insist on social, graphic, linguistic skills showed by these young people who are sometimes able to read tutorials in English, without having really learnt this language at school. They do not feel amazed by the game, but they develop criticism: they can see that behind a game hides a code, a language they can learn how to master.

Through this language that digital natives speak fluently, a discourse can be developed regarding referents other than cultural and fictional ones. This is the case for Alex Chan, aged 22, during the riots of Autumn 2005, who used the game engine *Machinima*²⁷ to create 3D settings. In *French Democracy*²⁸, he explains the events, according to his point of view. This civic use of the language of games gives hope since these kids, these “digital natives”, can have a committed and distanced relationship with their time. They are able to master a discourse and a language in order to express their point of view concerning the events around them in which they partake as young citizens.

Property”, Center for Social Media School of Communication American University. Survey available here: http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/publications/recut_reframe_recycle

²⁷ According to *Wikipedia: Machinima* a Portmanteau of machine cinema,[1] is a collection of associated production techniques whereby computer-generated imagery (CGI) is rendered using real-time, interactive 3-D engines instead of professional 3D animation software..

²⁸ Available here: <http://www.machinima.com/film/view&id=1407>