

# Book Review of Don Tapscott's *Growing Up Digital—The Rise of the Net Generation*

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*Book Review of Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* Author: Don Tapscott  
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The first sentence of the book exclaims the arrival of the "Net Generation," a force of 80 million youngsters ranging from diaper-clad toddlers to the tender age of 20 who are well-versed in the Digital Revolution of computer software, video games, e-mail, and the Internet. This group constitutes 30 percent of the population, surpassing the baby boomers' by 1 percent.

Through the book's thirteen chapters, author Don Tapscott presents a well-defined profile of N-Geners with the hope that the rest of us may come to understand them and accept the cornerstone of their culture by "embrac[ing] the new media." As we acknowledge their technology, we will more readily accept the inevitable changes that their Digital Revolution will bring to practically every sector of society. The author believes that those refusing to accept the digital media are destined for a collision course. To avoid the ill fate, Tapscott summarizes his philosophy of unconventional wisdom in the last statement of his book: "Listen to your children."

*Growing Up Digital* is an informative and enjoyable book for those over twenty years of age. It presents a most favorable portrayal of young people who use the new digital technology. The book was written on the Internet with the collaboration of hundreds of adults and N-Geners, the latter representing cross sections of societies across six continents. These young people communicated their ideas and experiences to one another, to the monitoring adults on Tapscott's team, and to the author, himself, through online *Growing Up Digital* forums. As a means of having the reader begin listening to children, Tapscott included their comments throughout the book.

Accompanying the book is a Web site, [www.growingupdigital.com](http://www.growingupdigital.com), which expounds upon the author's themes in terms of information, links,

discussion groups, and activities. It is a site for all ages to enjoy.

Tapscott, who has a degree in educational psychology, is a staunch supporter of children's use of the Internet. He repeatedly denounces cynics who claim that online material depicting violence, racism, and sexual content are responsible for corrupting youth and assures parents to relax and not to worry about their children as they surf the Internet. The author encourages adults to establish an "open family" with their children by freely discussing features of the new media and by having all family members reach an agreement about what materials are appropriate viewing for each child depending upon age and maturity level. Acknowledging that parents should be aware of what their children are seeing on the Internet, Tapscott notes that trust in the open family is most important. After all, parents can not always be looking over their children's shoulders.

To demonstrate how critics have overstated the amount of lascivious online material, the author points out that the number of sites making up unsuitable material for children comprises less than 0.5 percent. He explains that it is common for cynics to protest when they fear something or do not understand an unknown phenomenon. With amusement, Tapscott references the early condemnation of the first English novels, the telegraph and telephone, the Three Stooges, and the introduction of comic strips in the newspaper. He believes that much of the current criticism of the Internet is a result of the baby boomer

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generation's fear of becoming "obsolescent" or its mere attitude of "sour grapes."

As a means of preparing the reader to accept the new media as a beneficial tool for enhancing the learning skills and self-esteem of young Internet users, Tapscott frequently contrasts the new media with television programming. The TV broadcast is passive, requiring no mental effort. It is a controlled medium, regulated by only a few networks. Its system is inflexible; its organization, centralized.

The Internet, however, is an interactive media, allowing one to join forums, shop, play games, and read. It is malleable and not owned by anyone. Everyone is free to learn by exploration and discovery. Children develop social skills by playing video computer games that require multiple players. Many games and activities on the Internet require individuals to think critically and solve problems. Young people learn how to compose and synthesize their thoughts as they e-mail their cyber-friends who may live anywhere in the world. They establish a sense of self by engaging in chat groups, forums, and Multi-User Dimensions. When conducting research, children learn self-reliance as they investigate and evaluate the content they interpret on the Internet. Many N-Gens, also called the "Lap Generation," who have never used an instruction manual or even know the meaning of the phrase, possess an authority of digital knowledge unknown by past generations. Thus these digitally savvy youngsters who assimilate the new media "like the air" can hone their teaching skills with parents and teachers as they help these adults understand how to use software. Artistic and creative skills are also nurtured as many N-Gens create their own Web pages for fun and design pages for others. N-Gens who are chronically ill can find comfort and self-esteem by corresponding with new acquaintances on sites such as Ability Online. Tapscott reminds the reader that in addition to the children acquiring valuable skills through their use of the new media, they are also having fun. When Tapscott asked N-Generations why they used the Internet, their overwhelming response was the same: "It's fun!" This litany of positive attributes no doubt allows most parents and educators and perhaps a few

grumbling technophobes to feel less anxious about the young people using the Internet. Tapscott's style is quite persuasive.

As the author develops his theme of "listen to your children," he notes some of the institutions that the N-Generations will be changing. Most governing powers who are unwilling to change will be altered to a certain degree, while others will bite the dust, or as Tapscott kindly phrases it, they will become "generational displacements."

Marketers are warned to take note of the new digital purchasing power of e-commerce in the making. Although the children do not have much money to buy merchandise off the Internet, they do have influence over their parents who may have substantial buying power. As the youngsters surf the Net for desirable products, they compare the items' specifications and prices to the letter. A few clicks of the mouse immediately presents a myriad of options, giving them all the information they need to make a sound decision regarding the best buy. They relate the findings to parents who then may purchase accordingly. For marketers to be successful, Tapscott advises them to cite accurate information about the products, provide many options, allow for immediacy, and structure advertising to attract the young Net users.

Another institution destined to change is the university and other associations of learning. Virtual universities are quickly spreading across the country as are corporations such as Xerox, IBM, and Motorola who are getting into the education arena to train their current and future employees. The author quotes Peter Drucker who stated in 1997, "Thirty years from now big university campuses will be relics." The Digital Revolution will also be changing the traditional curriculum in the public schools. The N-Generations are having fun learning by collaborating, exploring, and discovering over the Internet. Tapscott assures the reader that they, too, will want their children to learn in a similar fashion.

Through many dialogues with the N-Generations, the author finds that young people are not impressed with executive titles or the procedural operations of state and federal governments or large corporations—other institutions facing an impending but gradual makeover. Youngsters sense that big government and corporations

attempt to manipulate them. There is a strong sense of mistrust. Even Tapscott himself does not once mention the name of Microsoft's browser but references Netscape's browser repeatedly. He cautions all corporations that the young people are interested in productivity, innovation, straight answers, immediacy, and the sharing of knowledge, all of which are often bogged down by inefficient bureaucracies. These N-Gens also prefer a flat organizational structure where much business can be conducted in "worksapes," which are virtual office networks consisting of all the current digital technology, and, in time, will include real-time audio and video.

Tapscott describes a few businesses operated according to the N-Gens criteria: Chad and Ryan Steelburg's customized advertising Internet company called Imgis; Adrian Scott's Internet marketing and publishing company named Aereal; and Michael Dell's customized computer mail and Internet order company, known as Dell Computer.

Whether or not we "embrace the new media," the digital kids will be the leaders of the future. Although they may differ in their races, religions, and national cultures, Tapscott finds their N-Gen culture is similar. They share many of the same anxieties such as AIDS, drugs, violence, broken families, polluted environment, teenage suicide, and an uncertain global economy. The author postulates that they attempt to escape these unsettling thoughts by acquiring material things which they think are essential, such as designer clothes and accessories, software, movies, and magazines.

From his interviews with the young people, Tapscott also has found a pattern of N-Gen values. They believe they must be self-reliant and not dependent upon any organization or governmental agency to help them have a good future. These youngsters desire a good education. The right to privacy and the right to speak out are equally important to them. They expect to be treated fairly. Censorship is not tolerated. Racial discrimination and cultural differences are not issues. They perceive parents as their emotional support system and appreciate their friends and virtual communities. They acknowledge the necessity of civic responsibility.

In his study of the N-Gens, Tapscott also recognizes another group of young people who are growing up on the other side of the "digital divide." These children have no access to computers or to the Internet at home or in their schools. The author fears that these "have-nots" quickly become the "know-nots" who then become the "do-nots"—a play with words but a play that sears an unsettling image into our society's consciousness.

Accompanying the digital divide is a growing division of wealth. The author indicates that in the United States, 80 percent of the country's wealth is found in 20 percent of the family households. Generally, the classes of wealth are those who are digitally literate. In contrast, the author notes, "Poverty causes digital impoverishment, which in turn contributes to continued povertization."

Being an optimist, Tapscott believes governments and corporations can help in several ways. FreeNets and computer community centers can be installed in malls, laundromats, and libraries. Corporations can loan out computers to the families of all employees and allow employees time off from work to volunteer as computer trainers at the local computer community center.

Returning to the bitter realities, the author points out that the economic and digital divisions extend worldwide between the developed and the developing nations. The developed countries that have greater access to the digital technology will continue to grow richer in wealth and information while the developing ones will become poorer.

Thus, collision courses are set in motion. There are the digital "have-nots" to collide with the N-Gens; the world's impoverished to collide with the wealthy; and the baby boomers who refuse to "embrace the new media" to collide with the N-Gens.

Tapscott issues a wake-up call to all who have not or will not accept the new media. He advises everyone once again that it is our responsibility to accept the new technology, to accept the N-Gen culture, and to allow the N-Geners to develop their dreams. Those people and nations who *listen* will survive and win, resulting in a new partnership for the new century.

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