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DISCOURSES OF THE DIGITAL NATIVE Use, non-use, and perceptions of use in BBC Blast

This article emerges from a long-term project investigating the BBC initiative 'Blast' – an on- and offline creative resource for teenagers. Designed to 'inspire and equip' young people to be creative, the research interrogates the assumptions behind such a resource, particularly in terms of the so-called 'digital native', and tests such assumptions against the populations actually using and engaging with it. It finds that the conception of a 'digital native' – a technologically enthusiastic, if not technologically literate – teenage population, which is operationalized through the workshop structure of BBC Blast, rarely filters down to the teenagers themselves. Teenage delegates to the Blast workshops rarely validate interest based on technological facilities, enthusiasm or competency. Instead, it is peer groups and social alignments which shape declarations and, more importantly, enactments of interest. This suggests that while the concept of the 'digital native' may be pertinent for generational comparisons of technological use, or is a useful concept for the operationalization of creative media workshops, it is simply not recognized by teenagers to whom it refers, nor does it adequately define use. Further, technological competency and enthusiasm sits uneasily with social and cultural peer group norms, where certain (and very specific) technological competency is socially permitted. This means that the concept of the 'digital native' is problematic, if not entirely inadequate. Focusing on the BBC Blast workshops therefore raises some critical questions around teenage motivations to become technologically literate, and the pleasures teenagers articulate in such engagements per se.

Keywords digital native; creativity; teenagers; BBC; Blast; UGC

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Discourses of the digital native: ‘Blast’-ing the assumptions and perceptions

This article emerges from a long-term project investigating the BBC initiative ‘Blast’ – an on- and offline creative resource for teenagers. Designed to ‘inspire and equip’ young people to be creative, the research interrogates the assumptions behind such a resource, particularly in terms of the so-called ‘digital native’, and tests such assumptions against the populations actually using and engaging with it. It finds that the conception of a ‘digital native’ – a technologically enthusiastic, if not technologically literate – teenage population, which is operationalized through the workshop structure of BBC Blast, rarely filters down to the teenagers themselves. More importantly, our findings suggest that the assumptions and qualities associated with the term ‘digital native’ work to mask, rather than unveil, actual use not least because, as van Dijck (2009) reminds us, ‘it’s a great leap to presume that the availability of digital . . . technologies turns everyone into active participants’ (p. 44).

Focusing on BBC Blast raises some critical questions around teenage motivations to become technologically literate, and the pleasures teenagers articulate in such engagements *per se*. What emerges is a wider need to investigate use, sustained use and the motivations for engagement. Starting initially with a brief description of Blast and the research project as a whole, we then address the conception of the digital native in order to offer a wider critical context. The findings we offer here relate to the rhetorical and discursive constructions of the young people involved in Blast, addressing how and why such constructs are produced. Finally, we explore possible reasons for the non-use arguing that a deeper understanding of motivations, negotiated practices, and perceptions are needed.

Engaging with BBC Blast

Launched in 2002, BBC Blast is an on- and offline resource aimed to ‘inspire and equip young people to be creative’ (see www.bbc.co.uk/blast). As part of the wider public service remit of the BBC, and seen as a flagship resource for bringing together creativity and learning, BBC Blast was supposed to be *the* output which spoke to the teenage population in the UK. Eight years later, Blast is facing closure and a unique critical and reflective space has opened up. The website is a live resource for teenage creative media practitioners who can upload work, comment, and view other uploaded work, get involved in competitions, and comment on the message board (to name a few). Divided into strands which encompass a range of media (film, music, writing, dance, games, fashion, art, and design), the website includes a showcase section, a message board section, blogs and short clips from industry experts, competitions, tips and tools, and advice and resources. The offline resources include film showcasing and workshops at the BFI and

workshops in the BBC hubs (Salford and London) all year round, but mostly consist of the eight-month long UK tour. The tour, in which a convoy of Blast trucks, equipment, and facilities ‘visit’ towns and cities across the UK, offers workshops sourced mainly from local youths arts and based on creative media and arts.

For BBC Blast, ‘digital native’ does not necessarily (only) refer to proficiency: it relates to interest and enthusiasm. As BBC provided resources increasingly rely on digital competency, interactivity, and user-generated content (UGC), it would seem pertinent to understand use and non-use before developing resources that rely on these abilities and concepts. Considering this, this article is based on off- and online findings in order to give a greater sense of the BBC Blast initiative as well as actual participation. The online (for the more competent) and offline (for the less competent, but enthusiastic) provision *suggests* that the Blast initiative does *not* overtly support the concept of the ‘digital native’, but accommodates a range of competencies. However, as we discuss below, the pervasiveness of the concept in part emerges from the interwoven constructs producing it, as well as the qualities the digital native is assumed to exhibit. For the Blast website, the concept of the ‘digital native’ is related to digital literacy, competency, and interest. For the Blast workshops, the concept is aligned to assumptions of enthusiasm and learning progression. Despite offering two resources that *seem* to accommodate a range of investment and levels of competency, the presumption of ability or enthusiasm by the organizers and designers ultimately work as a barrier to actual engagement. Indeed, we find that teenagers either use the resources in unintended ways or simply do not engage at all.

Methods of engagement

The overall project, from which this article emerges, was interested in a number of complimentary strands around learning, creativity, and identity. It is worth detailing the relevant interests and methods here, not least in order to outline the broader methodological context. Key members of Blast were interviewed (particularly those in charge of content, design, and the Youth Panel, the tour, and the workshops). These interviews and questionnaires offered information about how the adults conceived both their roles, and the young people involved in Blast. The message boards and showcase sections of the website were logged weekly for an eight-month period between November 2007 and July 2008 and once a month between July 2008 and July 2009 in order to track sustained use and dialogue from the 856 logged contributors. Here, the discussions were analysed in relation to topic, iterative dialogue, discussion, frequency, and exchange. The main idea was to analyse whether there was any development of discussion, which could be seen as having a learning potential. One hundred and eighty-nine users of the website filled in an online questionnaire, and the UK members of the Youth Panel were interviewed during their bi-annual face-to-face

meeting. This consists of 10–15 people who agree to offer feedback on a range of BBC resources. We aimed to address the more frequent users of the online resources in order to correlate their perceptions, motivations, and pleasures with those assumed by the adult demographics. Statistical data from Blast were incorporated, particularly around the length of time on the website and locations from which users came to Blast, and cross website comparisons of just under 30 similar, non-BBC, educational, creative, and social websites were recorded, particularly in relation to UGC and evidence of learning and creativity. Here we hoped to position Blast within a wider market of ‘creative learning’ in order to address design issues, navigation issues, and ultimately address why users were not investing adequate time on Blast to produce iterative dialogue or to create content. For the purposes of this article, the findings presented are concerned with issues regarding sustained and initial use of the resources and technology and perceptions *about* the resources, particularly in relation to access and investment (for a discussion of the above findings, see www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/bristol.pdf).

As our project was concerned with creativity, learning, and identity, and considering the limited amount of data available from visible content online, we also ethnographically investigated the tour element of Blast. Over 400 group and individual interviews were conducted with delegates across the UK between the ages of 12 and 18. These group and individual interviews occurred between 2007 and 2009 before, during, and after workshop sessions at a small number of the total tour locations across the UK chosen to reflect the geographical spread of the tour (Telford, Salford, Leeds, Glasgow, Scunthorpe, Portrush, Belfast, London South Bank, Bristol, Derry, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Great Yarmouth, Liverpool). Between 10 and 40 delegates were interviewed at each location, usually in groups of three or four, but occasionally individually. They were asked about perceptions of Blast, motivations for attending, further plans for involvement, wider media interests or hobbies, and general accounts of their day. Interviews with teachers, tour facilitators and work experience (18–25 years) people were also recorded in order to attain a wider sense of perception as well as practice. As these data were collected during the tour, the collection was more ethnographic in nature and combined with observations of the workshops. Again, as suggested, they are data relating to sustained and initial use of the resources, which are of interest here. Having briefly offered a methodological context for the research, we now discuss the theoretical context, particularly around the concept of the ‘digital native’, and the various ways this has become utilized in the youth arts, creativity, and learning sectors.

What digital natives?

Despite much work to the contrary (Livingstone 2002; Facer *et al.* 2003; Buckingham 2006[2002], 2007, 2008), the myth of the teenage digital native persists.

This myth that the younger generation have both ‘familiarity with and reliance on ICT’ and live lives ‘immersed in technology’ (Bennett *et al.* 2008, p. 776; for discussions of the concept, see also Tapscott 1998; Prensky 2001) encompasses not only knowledge but also enthusiasm and pleasure. Although the concept is not a ubiquitous model, it is a sustained one and emerges here through the structure of the Blast resources and through the social and cultural considerations of the adult organizers and the work experience teenagers. This suggests, in turn, that the concept is not only complexly enmeshed in the organizational structure of Blast, but that the qualities associated with it are also becoming increasingly ‘common sense’ to the point that it emerges in the dialogue and assumptions of those involved in Blast. Indeed, while the myth of the digital native is explored below, it is also important to emphasize that it goes hand-in-hand with three complimentary concepts. In turn, these complimentary concepts sustain and nuance the notion of a ‘digital native’, so that although it may not be a ubiquitous model, it is nevertheless a powerful and persuasive one. For Blast, the digital native is, then, not an overt construct, but it is clearly embedded in the very structure of the initiative, perhaps because it borrows so strongly from wider youth arts sectors and pedagogy. Considering this, we briefly detail how the concept emerges in some of the wider policy, pedagogy, and youth arts sectors, in order to outline the various embedded ways ‘digital native’ has been operationalized.

The first concept is that technological provision is sufficient for uptake, and this has found a major foothold in the discourse and practice of policy. Indeed, such a concept can be seen at local pedagogical levels and wider policy discourses. To discuss a few of these initiatives: BECTA’s (the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency) ‘Harnessing Technology’ project¹ provides monetary grants for local authorities with the assumption that provision of technological resources will necessarily relate to educational improvement (BECTA 2009a). The grant should be used to purchase technology and digital software to ensure ‘significant benefits for children and young people and for school improvement’ (BECTA 2009b; see <http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=41338>). Seen alongside the New Media Consortium’s (2009) ‘Horizon report’ which details which technologies will ‘impact’ onto education and practice on an international scale,² the Future and Emerging Technologies (FET) press release (<http://europa.eu/rapid/>) detailing EU investment in ICT technologies to ‘improve peoples lives’ (20.04.2010) (for full report see http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/fet/2009/documents/fetcom.pdf) or the Higher Education Academy’s (2009) ‘Transforming Higher Education through Technology Enhanced Learning’ Report;³ the concept of the digital native becomes even more pervasive. While there is a high degree of homogeneity in terms of assertions of technological impact *per se*, the financial and political significance of the concept is clearly more heterogeneous. It is not only the initiatives, however, which exacerbate the concept of the digital native: we can also see it embedded within the rhetoric. A recent online report for

BECTA, for example, claims that changes in behaviour and learning are attributable to the technology itself (Underwood 2009, p. 8). Indeed, the current 2008–2014 joint BECTA/Futurelab (Sandford *et al.* 2006) initiative not only takes the notion of the digital native for granted, it also enmeshes the concept with that of the consumerist, neo-liberal user who can ‘harness technology’ to fit their educational aims and desires.⁴

The second concept of the digital native is an understanding of technology as the agent of improved interaction, creativity, or learning. This concept can be seen clearly when we investigate the wider youth arts sector (and pedagogy) more widely. Taken together, these dual concepts tend to see the teenage and youth demographic as the ideal and homogenous recipient of such technological advancements. In the wider youth arts sector (especially initiatives such as hub4, go4, Artswork, 21CC, and the Media Trust, for example), opportunities are provided for young people to engage creatively and/or educationally with new media. In a similar vein to BBC Blast, the youth art initiatives (some in conjunction with Blast) highlight technological provision as key to the mobilization of ‘youth’ because it directly speaks to their ‘natural’ enthusiasm or engagement. Hub4, for example, was a three-year project (2006–2009), which aimed to develop the assumed teenage interest in arts and media and re-direct it towards a more educational goal (see <http://www.artswork.org.uk/projects/hub4>). For hub4, the supposition is not only of familiarity, but also interest *per se*, and the educational development (like in wider pedagogy, for example) is built into this presumption.

Blast, hub4, 21CC, Artswork (and many more youth arts), not only utilize the concept of the digital native, then, they also figure the digital native within a discourse of progression. This is the final construction of the digital native and it is here, arguably, that the counterpart of the digital native – youth-at-risk – is felt. The technologically enhanced and supported *journey*, not only emerges within the youth arts initiatives detailed above, it is also emerges within our research. Constructing youth as synonymous with a journey and progression supports wider ideologies of individualism, youth, and adulthood to which the digital native also speaks (see, for example, Gadlin 1978; Barker & Petley 1997; Livingstone 2002, 2009; Buckingham 2006[2002], 2007; Hodkinson & Deike 2007). It also, as Hodkinson (2007, p. 1) suggests, constructs youth as a ‘liminal’ period of time where such explorative, creative, and investigative journeys *can* safely be executed. Further, if, as Buckingham (2006[2002], p. 77) argues, the ‘digital native’ and its counterpart ‘youth-at-risk’ go hand-in-hand, the onus becomes on protecting that ‘liminal space’ of the teenager as a space of curiosity and experimentation. The policy documents detailed above, for example, each include sections about online safety and security, which work to protect those ‘liminal’ spaces of childhood online. Like the ‘digital native’, then the concept of ‘youth-at-risk’ also emerges through this project especially for the organizers of the Blast events who see their work as providing safe opportunities for young people’s creative journeys.

Indeed, the concept of a ‘creative journey’ is at the very heart of Blast. The tour was initially meant to feed into the website, encouraging and marketing the website as the space for teenagers to progress beyond the introductory workshops. The creative journey envisioned was one where teenagers would be introduced to media through the offline workshops, but as they became more competent, they would continue to develop their media and creative skills through the online resources which would be more tailored to their individual needs.⁵ What has emerged instead are two distinct populations and little sense of technological or creative progression or journeys. What is interesting for this article, however, is that despite this, the rhetoric of a progressive journey continues to be produced discursively by the organizers. Indeed, there is a widespread assumption that having attended a workshop, a fundamental change will have occurred, and the teenager will have become newly enthusiastic and creative. While it is important to note that many of these issues have been raised through this research, they demonstrate the inherently problematic structure of Blast specifically and the problem of attempting to operationalize the concept of the digital native more generally. As this research demonstrates, engagements with technology have little to do with technological *provision* or presumptions of digital natives. Considering this, we address how the concept of the digital native is discursively produced by those organizing the Blast workshops, before considering the actual motivations teenagers offer for attending them.

Rhetorical constructions and self-perceptions of a demographic

What is initially interesting about the concept of the ‘digital native’, then, is *how* it emerges, particularly for the adult populations involved in the research. Employed on a maximum of a year contract (but usually for the duration of a single event), the event organizers detailed below work across the youth arts sector and are employed specifically for their local knowledge and contacts. Although they are speaking within the specific remit and context of Blast, their comments often reflected their wider comparable experiences within the youth arts sector, as well as the aims, objectives, and rhetoric of the BBC. In what follows, accounts by the event organizers and teenagers are considered in relation to the term, ‘digital native’. The term means little to the demographic to which it refers, which is unsurprising (of course) given that it is imposed onto them. By comparison, Blast event organizers use the concept as a means through which to recollect their own past and discuss the teenagers relatively:

You get to know what young people are responding to at the moment, whether that’s VJ-ing or music production . . . and all this massive user generated content and you know, that’s an explosion that’s happened in the last

three years really, so I think nurturing that, communicating through that and giving them a chance to get as much out of that is a key thing. It's their language and that's what's important.

(Event Organiser, Middlesbrough, 2008)

Although we see some ambiguity around the concept of a homogenous or fixed group, as well as skepticism in terms of the 'trends' such as UGC in the account above, the young people are nevertheless understood as having technological knowledge and experience. Here, the 'young people' are initially conceptualized as responding to technological and creative movements rather than necessarily initiating them (VJ-ing, music production, UGC). Further, it is a two-way communication where the differences (which are based in technological and cultural capital) can also be identified for the benefit of the adult demographic ('you get to know what young people are responding to') who can then communicate accordingly. By comparison, the account below similarly constructs Blast as the paternal enabler of change, but a careful distinction is drawn between technological competency and artistic or creative skill. Here, although the young people are more homogenous than the account above, they can learn individuality through creative processes facilitated through the technology:

I think they're learning to open their minds and think outside the box! For example you give a young person a camera, whether it's a video or a stills camera, and they know how to use it, but probably they would just take the archetypal video or photograph of head and shoulders lets say. When really creative media is about getting a different angle on things and using that camera to the extreme, to the limit, and pushing what you can do with it because that's where things become exciting and people take an interest.

(Lead Facilitator, Liverpool, 2009)

Despite these differences, both accounts claim technology as the means through which to accommodate the young people, and there is an explicit assumption that teenagers use and are familiar with these technologies ('it's their language', 'they know how to use it'). The claim that young people had technological knowledge was the most frequent assertion of the adults interviewed for the project. However, it is the way this claim was asserted – as common knowledge, as taken for granted – which is notable here.

For many of the organizers, it was the premise of the BBC initiative (to reach disenfranchised groups), which was attractive and they clearly identified with a (constructed) demographic which is ignorant of the (technological) possibilities and facilities available to them. Indeed, as one of the event organizers suggested, her event was significant because of the transformation of teenagers from a demographic who were 'intimidated', 'unexcited', 'reluctant', and who found the concept of participation 'alien' into productive and creative authors:

We're trying to engage thirteen to nineteen year olds who are notoriously the hardest age group to engage in these sorts of activities. Unless it involves cider! Or you know the park, or deviates from their normal routine. The only thing I think which is a massive barrier is the whole on-line booking and encouraging people to go on the website . . . I think that the people who are going to do that are already the ones who are interested in the arts and possible have been brought up within an arts-happy family. Which is much rarer up here I think – I mean, I wasn't brought up like that, but I'd have still enjoyed this.

(Event Organiser, Newcastle 2009)

The event organizer cited above recognizes both the stereotyped traits of a teenager as 'reluctant' and the premise of technological facilities as 'alien'. But her articulation of the teenage demographic is also a narrative of progression through the technological facilities and creative environment of the event. As with the account below, technology and facilities are cited as key factors in fundamentally shifting the attitude of a stubborn (and stereotyped) teenager from one of reluctance, to interest and even creativity:

There's so many opportunities for young people to do things like this. The problem is that most of them just aren't interested. So they might think 'why should I come along to this one' but when they get here it's a different story, they get involved and they get creative.

(Event Organiser, Salford, 2008)

The presumption that the workshops *do* have a profound or tangible affect, then, is also evidenced here. In the cases cited above, although the teenagers may demonstrate initial reluctance, the technological facilities and events provided ensure that these initial traits are soon overcome and the 'true' curious and creative teenager emerges complete with the discovery of their 'natural' aptitude for technology. While Blast is not alone in the youth arts sector for operationalizing the notion of the digital native insofar as an initial enthusiasm and knowledge is assumed; what is interesting is the extent to which such concepts have become discursively familiar.

As suggested above, the lurking counterpart of the digital native – that of youth-at-risk – also emerges in the accounts of the young people above. Here, the youth are constructed as at risk if they *do not* participate in the workshops, and the comparative activities of drinking or hanging around in the park are constructed as both unproductive and non-progressive. Indeed, the anxieties and promises highlighted by Buckingham's (2006[2002], 2007) research around children and technology can also, therefore, be seen in the responses of the event organizers. Here the teenage demographic are simultaneously conceptualized as victims of social, economic, and technological circumstance (and therefore

needing the paternal and guiding resources and experiences provided by the BBC) and as a homogenous age group to whom they are communicating via the resources and language of that demographic. In turn, this constructs the teenagers as simultaneously victims of circumstance and as potential authors of their own narrative. It is an interesting construction that works to position the technology and facilities as the powerful force in the narrative: either it is a skill, which the teenagers learn to utilize and thus become enfranchized, or it is a means through which they express their always-already creative aptitude. In either scenario, the technology provides the means through which the teenager develops qualities of individualism, creativity, and autonomy – qualities which, as Gadlin (1978, p. 236) reminds us, are necessary for the entrance into adulthood. None of these accounts, needless to say, are recognizable to the teenagers themselves, who neither recognize the homogeneity on which the narrative is constructed, nor the representation of themselves as victims, authors, or even technologically proficient. Indeed, the easy incitement of the digital native by workshop facilitators seems to indicate a wider socio-cultural embeddedness of the term *in the face of* unawareness or objection by those demographics (offline and online) to whom it refers.⁶

Indeed, neither authorship, nor technological proficiency played a part in motivating young people to attend workshops. When the teenagers were asked why they had chosen a particular workshop, two issues emerged: the first was that teenagers rarely chose their own workshops, but were assigned a workshop depending on their curriculum options. We return to this issue in the final section. The second issue is that where choice was allowed, young people chose their workshops, not based on individual pleasure, or interest in a particular skill/technology. They chose workshops mainly through peer negotiation:

I: So were you interested in photography before you came?

G1: I was just following these two. I wanted to do VJ-ing but then I thought 'No, it's a bit nerdy'.

G3: I wanted to do Street Dance but I didn't want to be a social widow!
(Telford 2009, 17-year olds)

I: So why did you go to this workshop then?

B1: Coz he (points to friend) wanted to go so we came with him

B2: I want to do the radio and the music one so we're gonna come back and do the radio one tomorrow, listen to some tunes.

(Middlesbrough, 2008, 14-year olds)

G1: Um, well mostly I would like to do photography but Ciara and Amy said that the TV one would be better and a back up and like knowing cues and knowing how to use a camera in TV, which is something new. So we came to this one instead.

(Portrush, 2009, 16-year olds)

While admissions of interest do not necessarily relate to actual practice, it seems clear from these extracts that an initial social consideration is in place before any engagement with the technology occurs. In turn, this suggests, contrary to the assumptions articulated by the organizers, that even if there is technological knowledge or enthusiasm, it does not necessarily or transparently relate to practice. Perhaps we should see these responses in line with Livingstone's argument that while mediations with technology may be increasing, such mediations continue to be mediated, in turn, by everyday experiences:

Young people's lives are increasingly mediated by information and communication technologies, *yet their use of these technologies depends in turn on the social and cultural contexts of their daily lives.*

(Livingstone 2002, p. 30, emphasis added)

To a certain extent, then, these social considerations at the very least undermine the concept of a creative journey prompted by technological knowledge. Further, if knowledge does not straightforwardly produce engagement, then questions are raised around why such a concept is used as a foundational model for websites or other youth arts initiatives.

Meaningful engagement: the mythical rewards for being digital

Turning to the online resources, one of the most frequent myths of the digital native – that not only do they actively contribute content, but are also having consistently rich and meaningful interaction online – comes under scrutiny. Drawing on the online results, the research suggests that 'meaningful interaction' is infrequent. For iterative and meaningful interaction, users have to return to the website and read comments in order to respond to them. In this scenario, sustained interaction refers not to the duration of presence on a single visit, but continued and repetitive returning to the website over time. Instead, and in a similar vein to the offline teenagers, online users were also more concerned with establishing 'social alignments' (Moores 2005, p. 98) than discussing or interacting online. In other words, comments were mostly statements of opinion or preference. They were neither discussions nor interactions, but read as a series of stand-alone assertions:

Budgiedust: Gladiator. No competition.

Alanaaa: My favourite films would be ... Amelie, Pan's Labyrinth and Van Helsing. Yes, weird choice, i know, but i really like them ... even if 2 thirds of them are in a different language! xD

pcbpcb2: its gotta be Forest Gump for me :D

- Laaaa: My Fav Film Is Requiem For A Dream
 crescentpics: The Pianist
 (Film message board, 2008)
- permalink: the best video game i have ever played is call of duty 5 world
 at war on my xbox 360
- Mysti: I think the best video game I've ever played is Mario Kart Wii
 It's great fun, especially multiplayer
- Games Host: I've heard that COD 5 is good. What do you particularly like
 about it, AndyCo? I've just finished Half Life 2: Episode 1 and
 Episode 2. Really loved them. Left 4 Dead is up next.
- ButterflyEdge: Mine would be BioShock. Absolutly superb!
- Anon: Shadow of the Colossus on the PS2.
 (Games Message Board, 2010)

It could be claimed that the comments represented above do serve a purpose of establishing commonalities between users and creating a sense of 'online community' or to use Gee's (2007[2004]) perhaps more appropriate phrase, 'affinity space' (p. 5). In the extract from the Games Message Board, we can see the Games Host unsuccessfully attempting to redirect the conversation so that opinions are explained and clarified. Instead, further expressions of preference are listed. Along with the workshops, then, these findings suggest that online interaction and offline workshop experiences are rarely experienced in the way they are conceptualized by organizers. Online users rarely post iteratively, rarely engage with previous comments, and rarely offer information or rationale, which could be discussed. Of course, visible online tracking does not account for browsers and we cannot therefore comment on interactions, which may have occurred when browsers read these comments. Statistics provided by the web team, however, suggest that the average length of time users spend on the website is only three minutes. This is hardly enough time to locate, read, and respond to recent comments to your own post and is perhaps the most useful statistic in terms of undermining the notion of *consistent* or sustained interaction (although the statistic only represents time spent on this particular website and consequently does not include any other websites). Contrary to stereotypes of the 'digital native' then, these findings suggest that the online teenagers are sporadically documenting preference, rather than engaging in interaction.

The *uploading* of content was also sporadic. Indeed, the research suggested that (again) contrary to the myth of the digital native, who is 'team-orientated,' 'immersed', and 'interactive' (Bennett *et al.* 2008, p. 776), qualities which suggest a level of communication, confidence, and consistency online, it is only when 'real' incentive is offered that teenagers productively contribute. The online questionnaire asked users what would motivate them to post content. The main reasons respondents suggested (access to the experts, the

quality of feedback, and the competitions) demonstrate that motivation is required if users are to post content. By comparison with the myth of the digital native, these users are neither consistently making content, nor are they happy to upload any or all content they do create.

Taken together, the comments from the online questionnaire respondents also undermine the assumption that it is *technology* which is the 'agent of social change' (Murphie & Potts 2003, p. 11) when respondents claim that, regardless of the facilities available, they need deadlines and incentives in order to create work. Consequently, and in a similar vein to the workshops, it is not primarily or solely the technology facilitating content production, but the socio-cultural and educational practice of submission to a deadline and the promise of recognition potentially in the form of a prize. Members of the youth panel went further when they suggested during discussions that it was not the potential prize but the *deadline*, which ensured the production of work. This suggests that *pressure* and incentive are needed. Again, this suggests that it is (peer) pressure to produce content, rather than the facilities to showcase or create, which prompts the uploading of UGC.

Across a range of technological facilities, then, online and offline teenagers continue to emphasize social and cultural relationships beyond what the technology alone can provide. It is neither their aptitude, nor the facilities, which are premised. Instead it is the more traditional notions of feedback, commentary, and access to experts. For the BBC web team, the teenagers are celebrated, not necessarily for their level of interaction or quality of discussion, but for the *quantity* of content they provide.⁷ However, as Loveless and Taylor suggest, what is important about creativity is not the quantity of material or even the tools used (which perhaps can be identified in the finished product), but the *processes* behind it (rarely be identifiable in the finished product):

It is the representation of meaning that is the key that elevates production to a position beyond the merely decorative This takes time and a continuation of intention and cannot be achieved by ad hoc projects based on mechanical processes.

(Loveless & Taylor in Banaji *et al.* 2006, p. 47)

The processes Loveless and Taylor emphasize (duration and iteration) are precisely the processes absent in the presentation of UGC on the website or in the relationship between the tour and website. Considerations of use and practice are undermined somewhat through the emphasis on the provision of resources and showcasing of finished content. In turn, this seems to directly feed back to the assumptions critiqued at the beginning of the article that the provision of facilities would automatically lead to some sort of tangible advancement (either in terms of education or skill).

Converting the digital native?

The teenage participants of both the online and offline resources provided by the BBC demonstrate that there is much more at stake, then, than the provision of resources for guaranteeing sustained use.⁸ Indeed, some tour organizers explicitly raised this as an issue for the tour element, suggesting that Blast needs to do much more than ‘land’ in a particular town and assume interest. The first comment below explicitly states that what is needed is social validation (‘word of mouth’). The second comment argues that it is the brand that creates a barrier to participation, as the teenagers did not identify with anything the BBC was embodying:

It’s not enough to just drop into the city and expect the BBC name to be enough because it isn’t and we can do loads of publicity and it counts for nothing with young people, it has to come through word of mouth.

(Event Organiser, Great Yarmouth, 2009)

I just think it’s so intimidating coming in and seeing all this you know. There are the computers and the signs and especially the BBC brand. . . And I think it’s just quite an alien concept to a lot of them.

(Event Organiser, Salford, 2008)

It is not the case, then, that the conceptions of youth or the digital native are ubiquitous. It is clear that some organizers are aware that appearing a town to provide a resource for which there is an assumption of interest is also problematic. Indeed, some organizers clearly see a disjuncture between the aims and objectives of Blast enterprise and the young people to whom it is supposed to be engaging. While it has not been our intention to argue for ubiquity, it is our contention that the concept of the digital native has become deeply embedded in both the organization of Blast and in the discourses of those working for Blast. As with the organizers cited above, the qualities associated with the digital native – of enthusiasm, of investment, of creativity, of ‘natural aptitude’, and of technological knowledge – are increasingly common sense and mobilized in a range of different ways. Even in the discussions with the organizers cited above, the major critique was of the BBC brand: there was still an assumption of interest and technological knowledge on the part of the young people.

The discursive use of the concept ‘digital native and the embeddedness of the term were also notable when we talked to the work experience people: 18–21-year olds who volunteer and participate in the marketing and running of the Blast events. In this final section, we want to explore the comments of the work experience populations particularly in terms of the language of ‘creativity’ and ‘confidence’ which were the two most-used terms during the research and the way they reiterated the organizers in terms of their construction and conception of the younger teenagers. In one sense, the work experience people are an

already-converted audience in that they are actively seeking to impress the BBC and open up possibilities of future work either with the BBC or as a result of the experience. They seem more susceptible, then, to the particular rhetoric of BBC Blast and also seem more concerned to demonstrate their interest and investment as this selection of quotes indicate:

BBC Blast is such a fantastic scene, and you know, it's so unique in the sense that it really, really tries to draw young people into it the way it does with the Youth Panel and with opportunities like this. All of this is completely free and you know, they really do reach out and you know. It's brilliant . . . I wish there had been something like this as well when I was younger you know, but there wasn't.

(Work Experience Female, 21 years, Portrush, 2009)

I think it's that it's all creative stuff and just for people my age and younger. Like a lot of the younger kids in my town are just drunks and take drugs and stuff. It's nice to have things like this for young people coz we don't get it a lot so I mean, I think that attracted me to it, coz it's something I'd like to do. But it's just a nice thing for them, it's positive and it gets them out!

(Work Experience Male, 19 years, Scunthorpe, 2008)

In both of the extracts above, what is most noticeable are the ways the work experience people construct the teenager participants in ways that echo the adult organizers. The work experience people quoted above are all between 18 and 25, and they would theoretically fit into the demographic Blast is aiming to attract. Most work hard, however, to associate themselves with the BBC over the teenager participants and they do this by using the language of 'creativity', 'choice' 'accessibility' and even nostalgia. The first extract echoes the adult organizers and parents discussed earlier when she tells me that she wished there 'had been something like this . . . when I was younger'. Her emphasis is on the free nature of the project (public service) and the fact that the BBC offers opportunities to young people. In a similar vein to the way technology has been discussed in terms of the provision of resources and facilities on offer, this work experience person also constructs the BBC in this way, giving the BBC the agency and power to affect people's lives.

The last comment is perhaps the most interesting because this work experience person draws direct comparisons between himself and the participants. He recognizes that he is the target audience along with the participants in the workshops, but is careful to draw further class and social distinctions by constructing himself as different from the local teenagers. By comparison with most of the teenagers in the area who are 'drunks and take drugs', he is making the most of this opportunity to 'get out'. Here the BBC is offering opportunities to a poorer, disenfranchised, and disillusioned population, offering positive

possibilities for those few who are proactive enough to take them. Finally, what is demonstrated through all these accounts, then, is the way the BBC is constructed variously as a saviour, an authority and a provider of opportunities. In these constructions, it is the BBC, then, rather than the technology *per se*, which is the ‘agent of social change’ (to repeat Murphie & Potts phrase 2003, p. 11).

Final considerations

Concentration on, and celebration of, the provision of resources over actual use clearly masks the social and cultural intricacies of being an active technology user not only in terms of conception and what it *means* to be an active user, but also in terms of understanding everyday practice.⁹ The wider implications of this research suggest that provision will neither secure interest nor sustain it. While technology clearly does impact on, and shape, behaviour and learning, such an unbalanced approach rarely considers sustained use or non-use; nor does it clarify the notion of impact beyond a measurable academic one. In this final section, then, we want to think through some design and discursive issues affecting non-use, ultimately arguing that, as the event organizer suggests above, what is important is social validation, not simply individual interest or assumptions of technological knowledge.

Considering the importance of social validation, one of the major organizational factors affecting the offline workshops, is the close association with the young people’s schools or college. Although acknowledged by some of the organizers as a problem, associating the event with the school at least ensures workshops are attended, which is a constant issue for the organizers:

The recruitment’s very good here because we’ve worked directly with schools and directly with agencies and one of the things that we’ve really got to build on because there’s been quite a lot of stuff going on that hasn’t had people in workshops, low numbers and stuff, and I think that’s all to do with brand awareness I think... Youth Arts is so popular now, people are doing those things in their own time: why come to us when they’re already doing it? So we’ve got to work out those ways of being that added value

(Lead Facilitator, Salford, 2008)

As suggested above, the workshops rely on local school relations to source the teenagers as well as local youth arts to run the workshops. For the teenagers, these relations label the workshops as *educational* rather than creative, and teenagers tend to see the tour as a school trip, rather than creative or explorative spaces. This has a number of implications for both the teenagers and Blast itself. First, the perception of the workshops as school-related events damages

awareness of the entirety of the Blast project. At Telford, for example, the entire day was booked out through one school that had received a grant to invest money in new technologies for new media GCSE option. The tour was used, as the teacher explained, to give them an insight into the possibilities for their new curriculum. All the students at the Blast event were potential candidates for the GCSE: all had media experience or interests, which ranged from youth arts (dance, drama, TV) to individual interests (DJing, filmmaking, photography). However, when we talked to the students, none of them related what they were doing during the workshops with their own media interests or even knew that it was an event provided by BBC Blast. As our research suggests, teenagers consider the workshops as school initiatives for which they have little enthusiasm. Rather than making them 'think outside the box' (to quote the event organizer earlier), this had the effect of closing down potential 'creative journeys'. Second, the lack of enthusiasm is little helped by the fact the students themselves rarely choose which workshops to attend. Instead (and as with the hub4 initiative), the school decides – often based on overlaps with school curricula. For those teenagers who *are* interested in media, there is little autonomy for them to explore workshops in connection with their own personal activities. Taken together, this means that the potential 'creative journey' beyond the tour is somewhat undermined. Further, the organization of the workshops is premised on a concept of individual autonomy or creativity (as well as the notion that teenagers have technological knowledge which can be redirected). Placed into the familiar social group of working with usual friends, it is peer and social relations which dominate. Exacerbated by the fact that individuals rarely choose their own workshops, young people conceptualize the event in normal, everyday, social terms: rather than as a unique space to explore individual creativity.

More generally, there is clearly a disjuncture between the perceptions of motivations for young people and the organization of resources. A critical understanding of own interests, abilities, and progressions is assumed: teenagers are approached as if they have a sense of what they are good at and how they want to progress. But actually, creative media-related activities are far less tangible for many of those teenagers we interviewed – who see such activities as social (rather than creative). In a discussion with a delegate for a filmmaking workshop, it emerged he mixed his own tunes and uploaded some of them (after consulting friends) to Bebo. There are two issues worth considering here. The first is the careful negotiation undertaken before uploading content – which suggests social/peer validation is important even for more 'anonymous' or virtual products (and could also perhaps explain the low amount of uploaded work to Blast). The second issue is the careful navigation around how he conceptualized his activities: he was not a DJ, it was not widely considered a serious interest, and he was careful to disassociate himself from it. But he mixed tunes, for personal interest, and because they reflected him personally, he wanted them to be good:

- B1: It's not DJ-ing, not really. It's just, like mixing. It's not like, hard core, just mixing.
- I: How long have you been doing that then?
- B1: dunno, ages but probably seriously bout a year
- I: Okay and what do you do with the tunes you've mixed?
- B1: some are just scrap, like, some are just remixes or just playin. But, erm, put it on my Bebo
- I: your Bebo? Not to Blast or YouTube or somewhere else?
- B1: no my Bebo – coz it's me innit? My page, my stuff.
- I: And what makes you decide what stuff you want to upload and what you don't want to?
- B1: me mates. Some is just messin, most is just messin. Like it's just mixing, just me messing. But it's just what other people think of it
- I: so you show it to your friends?
- B1: yeah. If they say then I'll put it on my Bebo
- (Telford, 2009, 15 years)

The teenager above, like many who were interviewed, found it hard to articulate his own personal interests. He expressed himself haltingly, and mumbled many of these responses: he was clearly embarrassed to speak, despite talking in familiar group. This is not someone who is 'immersed in technology' (Bennett *et al.* 2008, p. 776), nor someone who confidently produces, and claims the authorship of, content. Instead, this is a teenager who in turn distances himself from, and associates himself with, his work in an oscillatory and complex way. Adult organizers of Blast, the web designers, wider policy initiatives, youth arts, and pedagogy, all seem to assume a straightforward relationship between technological knowledge and the production of content. They also assume a confidence, a desire for visibility (usually based on the fact that some content is visible), for recognition, or at the very least, a desire to create. What we see in the extract above is, arguably, a digitally competent teenager who attempts to explain a complex relationship with the technology and techniques ('it's not DJ-ing, it's mixing'), which variously produces content. And, in keeping with the findings from the online questionnaire, even if the content is produced, users are not necessarily happy to upload it. Further, these are negotiations to which the teenager is personally and intangibly invested. At the very least, this suggests that terms such as use, non-use, or sustained use are inadequate for explaining very complex negotiations. Further, these are negotiations not just with the technology, but with peers, and perhaps more importantly, they are negotiations which arc beyond the immediate production of any specific media content.

Finally, then, we argue that what is needed is an understanding of motivations and conceptions of media and technology, which may in turn explain non-use and sporadic use. Indeed, this research suggests that the term 'digital native' is perhaps better thought of as a tool through which certain top-down initiatives

are operationalized, rather than an explanatory concept for actual engagement or use. Instead of assuming interest, our findings represented here suggest that deeper understandings of motivations, negotiated practices, and perceptions, are needed. This is the only way such resources can be made effective. Such understanding could actually inform design and policy issues in ways that will actually facilitate uptake, rather than simply add to the noise.

Notes

- 1 [www.becta.org.uk, http://partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=sa&catcode=sa_te_ha_03](http://partners.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=sa&catcode=sa_te_ha_03)
- 2 <http://wp.nmc.org/horizon2009/chapters/technologies/>
- 3 http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/learningandtech/transforming_he_through_technology_enhanced_learning
- 4 <http://www.futurelab.org.uk/projects/teaching-with-games/>, <http://www.futurelab.org.uk/projects/harnessing-technology>
- 5 In the initial years of the tour, mobile connection to the Blast base at White City was problematic which meant that teenagers did not see their tour content appear online within the time frame promised. Content had to be burned onto disk and posted which involved a lot of resources and time. The Blast team suspect this led to a lack of interest as workshop attendees checked the website and then became disinterested. When interviewed, however, the tour delegates rarely articulated knowledge about the website, which also suggests that the connection between the workshop and the website was not being made explicit. The mobile connection, piloted in 2008 and working in 2009 went some way to alleviate this issue. However, only competed work was uploaded, and while there are plans to create a 'work in progress' section on the website, this has still not been resolved. Awareness of the website was encouraged through the establishment of an extra truck facility, which allowed delegates to go online and see the website. However, teenagers observed and interviewed in 2009, were using the Internet connection for personal exploration and could not see the attraction of the Blast website for them.
- 6 Although unsurprising, we nevertheless asked delegates if they recognized the term 'digital native' as we felt it important to ascertain the extent of non/recognition. Below are a few extracts from the interviews.

I: And one final question – digital native? Does that phrase mean anything to you?

Chorus: no

- B1: never heard of it!
 I: ok. Thanks guys. (Telford 2009, 13 years)
- I: Just one last question, if I say 'digital native' to you – does that mean anything?
 G2: Digital native? Like what? Born digital?
 G1: digital native?
 I: have you heard it before?
 G2: no
 G3: no. Does it mean something? (Newcastle 2008, 17 years)
- I: so would you consider yourself good with technology?
 B1: err. Not really. Well I'm good at gaming and this music stuff
 G2: he's a total nerd
 B1: what?
 G1: you are.
- B1: not this stuff. This is just school stuff.
 I: have you heard the term 'digital native before'?
 G1: is that what he is?
 B1: no. (Leeds 2008, 15 years)

- 7 As a member of the web team commented: 'we don't judge it in terms of their talent or skills. So it doesn't matter what you do, we put it live as long as it doesn't break the house rules and that's just basic things like taste and decency'.
- 8 Especially if, as a recent article in the *Times Higher* suggests, students are coming to university in the UK (aged 18) illiterate in terms of text-based media, but transliterate in terms of technological competency (Attwood 2008, pp. 31–34)
- 9 Indeed, one of the Games workshops in Glasgow was fully booked for the day through the online booking system. However, none of the teenagers who had booked online showed up on the day, leaving the workshop empty. Although it was eventually partially filled by some teenagers who had attended the morning sessions, the non-appearance of the delegates raises a number of issues. The first is that despite the provision of resources, there is no guarantee of interest. The second is that socio-cultural factors powerfully affect interest. When the event organizer contacted those delegates who did not appear, she discovered that one of them had forgotten, one was not given parental permission, one was 'in bed', and another had simply decided not to come. This suggests that social, familial and everyday factors are far more relevant in terms of affecting interest than the actual provision of resources. Indeed, it also suggests that alongside those who use the resources, we also need to investigate those who *do not*.

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