

# 1.1 DIGITAL NATIVES AND THE RETURN OF THE LOCAL CAUSE

by

Anat Ben-David

ESSAY

## Prologue

In December 2010 I attended a conference titled *Digital Natives with a Cause? Thinkathon*. It was organised by Hivos and the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) in The Hague<sup>1</sup>. During the event there was much debate amongst the participants around the current definition of a digital native. This got me thinking. Is a definition necessary? If yes, does it encompass the current phenomenon of young people who are engaged with digital technologies for promoting social change? Do all digital natives care about social change? Does it exclude other types of actors who share similar practices but are not considered digital natives? Does the definition entail that there are practices unique to digital natives, which justify this distinct ontological and epistemological group? When the *Thinkathon* concluded, some of these questions remained unsolved, and I was still puzzled by them. A few weeks later, an idea of a possible answer came from an unexpected quarter.

I was walking in our neighbourhood in Tel-Aviv with my four-year-old daughter, when she suddenly asked me why there was so much graffiti on the streets. "Graffiti?" I asked, puzzled, since I had not noticed any graffiti in our neighbourhood before.

She had noticed the graffiti as the small fences were just her height. From a taller point of view of an adult, I had only noticed the blooming hibiscus bushes that grew above them. Then she asked, "Don't you think graffiti makes our streets very ugly and dirty?" "Yes, it's very ugly," I replied, amused by her environmental concerns. Then she asked me to post a message on the internet on her behalf, calling for people to demonstrate against graffiti. At first I laughed, but she was very serious about it. Amused by her request, I took her picture standing next to the graffiti and posted her cute request on Facebook, which received 'Likes' and comments from the usual suspects in my immediate social network .

But she was more serious than that. When we arrived home, she started preparing signs for demonstration, asking if people were already coming and if the roads will be blocked with traffic. At that point it was clear that it would be difficult for me to realise her fantasy for social change. I explained that in order to organise a mass demonstration we have to ask for a permit from the police. "Ok," she said, and together we wrote a letter to the police (which I never sent, of course ). Days passed and nothing happened, but she kept on asking whether they had replied and when the demonstration was going to take place. She is still waiting for it to happen.

To me, this story serves as a frame of reference for understanding digital native practices. As uncomfortable as I may feel about the current definition of digital natives and the connotations attached to it, I follow Nishant Shah's position that it might be better to accept the "found name", rather than to replace it, while at the same time attempt to unpack the baggage of presumptions attached to the current definition and reload it with new meanings (Shah, 2010, pp. 18-25). If we must accept the term as such and the demographic dichotomies it alludes to (i.e., natives as opposed to non-natives, digital as opposed to analogue, young versus older users of digital technologies), then the story about my daughter is a story about an "everyday Digital native", who is, as Shah described, "not perhaps just a user of digital technologies, but a person who has realised the possibilities and potentials of digital

technologies in his/her environments” (emphasis mine) (Shah, 2010, p. 19). The emphasis on the immediate environment, or the situated location – the granular cause, as seen through digital native eyes — is perhaps one of the lacunae often ignored in the current discourse about digital natives. Accordingly, this chapter conceptualises the term ‘digital natives’ in a way that attempts to reload it with new meanings about digital native practices as such that have a commitment to grounded places and situated knowledges. By tracking the parallel developments both in digital technologies as well as digital activism in relation to place, this chapter wishes to reintroduce the meaning of ‘the native place’ into the discourse on digital natives.

## Introduction

The term ‘digital natives’ consists of an adjective and a noun, whose connotations, taken both separately or together, periodise the point in time in which the term emerged. It was coined by Marc Prensky in 2001 to refer to a young generation of students who “are ‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet (Prensky, 2001, p. 1)<sup>2</sup>. In its original context, thus, both ‘digital’ and ‘native’ refer to language – the language of these technologies is digital, and those native to it speak it fluently. However, the choice of words has broader implications. The ‘digital’ in digital natives also refers to the current evolutionary phase of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Had Prensky coined the term ten years earlier, digital native would have probably been called ‘Cyber Natives’, ‘Virtual Natives’, much alike other prevalent terms of that time, such as ‘Cyber Activists’ or ‘Virtual Communities’<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, the ‘native’ in digital natives connotes things other than fluency in a native language and the natural process of acquiring it. The literal definition of the noun, rather, refers to being born in a specific place<sup>4</sup>.

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptually unfold the broader meaning of the term ‘digital natives’ both by a historical contextualisation of the ‘digital’, as well as by a discussion of the geopolitics of the ‘native’. The terminological analysis, grounded

The *Thinkathon* at the Hague, was an attempt to bring together different stakeholders who work with digital natives, in a conversation around and with digital natives. The three day ‘unconference’ helped us gain a few insights into the larger field of youth, technology and change. Some of the key-learnings that have also helped us form the structure of this book are:

1. It is not only naive but also counter-productive to think of digital natives as only engaging in peer-2-peer networks with other digital networks. We need to start contextualising them in larger histories and legacies to see the connections that they can establish with other actors in the field.

2. Digital natives do not wear that name as a primary identity. For most of them, it is one of the several hats that they wear. It is possibly more fruitful to understand digital natives as a lens that allows them to systemically renegotiate with existing structures that they occupy.

3. There are more similarities than differences in the ambitions that digital natives and traditional activists have for social change and political participation. The apparent schism is often the result of difference in vocabulary and tools. Processes to bridge the conversations between the two would lead to more enduring efforts at producing civic change.

4. The place and context of digital natives is crucially important in understanding their role and engagement with processes of change. Affective states of personal transformation are often guided by desires, ambitions, aspirations, emotions that are deeply located in the geo-political locations of the digital natives.

5. Change is defined only by identifying the existing conditions. Change is not universal and can be recognised and executed only in relation to the status quo. This is why the questions of ‘where and when?’ are as important as the questions of ‘how?’

Anat’s essay draws from and adds to all these different learnings and provides insight into the mechanics and approaches that researchers need to

by a historical contextualisation of digital activism and the history of digital technologies in the past decade, serves to argue that in its current form, the term 'digital natives' may represent a renewed dedication to the native place in a point in time when previous distinctions between 'physical' and 'digital' places no longer hold (Rogers, 2008). As claimed by Palfrey and Gasser (2008), digital natives no longer distinguish between the online and the offline and relate to both as a hybrid space. This definition relates to older debates about the introduction of ICTs that questioned the differences between the 'virtual' and the 'real', the 'online' and the 'offline' (Rogers, 2009). The claim made by Palfrey and Gasser is ontological and epistemological; since digital natives do not differentiate between online and offline realities, the definition implies a new spatial epistemology. If this is the case, how does a digital native – spatial epistemology manifest itself in various forms of digital native activism?

Before attempting to answer this question in the following part of the chapter, I return to the terminological analysis of the existing definitions of digital natives. If the 'nativeness' of digital natives relates to their fluency in 'digital language' and their 'being at home' in digital spaces, how are their predecessors defined? Prensky, for example, contrasts digital natives with a previous generation of 'digital immigrants' – "those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology" (Prensky, 2001, pp. 1-2). Palfrey and Gasser add a third category to describe the predecessors of digital natives – 'digital settlers', those who grew up in an analog world but have helped shaping the contours of the digital realm, but unlike digital natives, they "continue to rely heavily on traditional, analog forms of interaction" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p. 4).

The distinction between 'native', 'settler' and 'immigrant' does not only separate chronological generations; it also re-awakens the debate between the offline and online realities that preceded the emergence of the term. From a spatial point of view, it also distinguishes between the places of birth of

different generations. As inferred from Palfrey and Gasser's definition, digital natives are presumed to be born into a hybrid space comprised of enmeshed digital and physical components, while digital settlers and digital immigrants are perceived as having travelled to those spaces from the offline world. The terminological premise is that natives are better acquainted with their place of birth than immigrants, or settlers, and refers to the extent to which they are "at home" with digital technologies. However, it would not be far-fetched to assume that the imagery of the native, the immigrant and the settler also borrows from colonial history, or any other history of territorial disputes for that matter. The chronology of such demographic developments entails that a space is first inhabited by natives, the 'indigenous inhabitants', who are later joined by settlers (often times not without struggle), and much later eventually joined by immigrants. In the digital context, however, the chronological order is reversed. For digital natives were not born into a digital 'terra nullius'; digital spaces were conceived, shaped and already inhabited by those referred to as 'settlers' and 'immigrants'. Ironically, it is the settlers who set the grounds for natives, and whose practices precede those of the natives.

This chronological paradox of being native to a place already created and inhabited by others may explain the tension between other connotations of 'digital natives' that arose as the term evolved. As Shah claimed (Shah, 2010, p. 15), the naming of a group as "natives" entails an act of "othering" and in the case of digital natives, the "othering" was loaded with expectations to have unique, "indigenous" characteristics that would ontologically justify their classification, while at the same time adopt and continue the practices of their predecessors, the "settlers".

As a consequence, the mystification or laments about the new generation of digital activists were performed vis-à-vis what was already performed digitally, which explains terms such as "slacktivists" (Shah, 2010, p. 17), or Bennet's explanation of digital natives' politics as "self-actualizing citizens" versus "old century dutiful citizens" (Bennett, 2008). As proclaimed by

Shah, to better understand digital natives, a fresh look at what digital natives do may be more useful than the constant (and often failed) attempt to define who digital natives are (Shah, 2010, p. 20).

Perhaps one way of doing so is by shifting the weights in the definition of digital natives from “being digital” to “being native”, focusing on the geographies and places digital natives are native to – not as being surrounded by a media-rich environment, but as operating in a hybrid geography of physical and online spaces. In the following, I argue that digital natives have a granular dedication to their local places and local causes, a dedication that can be seen as a form of counter-practice to previous forms of cyber-activism, shaped by transnational activist networks using ICTs for promoting global causes. To make the case for digital native practices as a renewed dedication to the local, I now turn to a historical account of previous practices of digital activism for social change led by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)<sup>5</sup>.

By comparing two key-events of social protests and large-scale mobilisation of activists using ICTs, one marking early forms of digital activism in the late 1990s, the other marking one of the most recent forms of digital activism to date, it shows that both digital technologies and agents of social change have structurally changed from the transnational to the local, and from the institutional to the individual. I then claim that the current discourse about digital natives can be better understood by placing it in a specific point in time, and a specific place in the constantly-changing digital space.

## From Seattle to Tahrir Square

The anti-globalisation protests against the WTO summit in Seattle in 1999 marked the beginning of an era of what was then termed ‘cyber-activism’ led by CSOs<sup>6</sup>. During the protests, a diverse range of activists, groups, organisations and social movements coordinated actions against the WTO summit using

think through while working in this field.

One of the ways to understand the distinction between the ontological and epistemological identities would be through two distinct questions. The ontological is understood in the question “Who becomes a digital native?” The epistemological would be at the level of “What are the actions that the digital natives do?” The distinction is important because most research is unable to bridge the gap between the two.

For many digital natives, the social network works as a safety net – they might never use their social networks in order to mobilise crowds for change, but it is the space that they think of as the first platforms of expression. They are familiar with the potentials of the network, as they organise their social life using these platforms. It is this potential that needs to be tapped into when thinking of social media integration with activism and change-making.

Digital natives recognising their own power to produce change is the first step. Then comes the next question: “Who do they approach to actually effect the change? Where do the learnings go from here?” Giving money to the four-year-old is not going to solve the problem. Trying to institutionalise the process is also not going to lead to anything fruitful. What is needed is infrastructure that makes digital natives critically aware of their own role in the processes of change and harness the potentials that their everyday practices of digital and online technologies offer.

The immediate environment is important because we want to locate the people in their everyday reality. However, the immediate environment is not limited to the physical geography; it is also the digital environments.

Maesy Angelina (Book 2, To Think) in her own research on the environments of digital natives’ actions talks about how this emphasis on the environment also allows us to reverse the focus: Instead of thinking about how technology works

laptops and mobile phones. Some of the actions were directed at coordinating protests on the streets; others were directed at disseminating information about the demonstrations and the anti-globalisation movement on the Web. The media took up the stories put together by the various organisations, which eventually led to the establishment of [www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org), the alternative media outlet for social activists (van Laer & van Aelst, 2009).

Twelve years (and many other digital campaigns and protests) later, the masses took on the streets of Cairo to protest against President Mubarak's regime. They too used the internet and mobile phone technologies to coordinate the protests. People from all over the world watched the events through Al Jazeera's satellite TV channel as the Egyptian authorities first switched off the internet in Egypt to prevent the protests, then saw Mubarak step down<sup>7</sup>.

Are these events comparable? Do they represent a 'generational gap' between public protests facilitated by ICTs in the 'digital settlers' era, and their current manifestation in a digital age inhabited by 'digital natives'? If we accept for a moment the dichotomous demographic definitions of older versus younger inhabitants of the digital space, then an analytical comparison of the events may highlight the differences between older and younger generations of digital activists, to better understand what is unique to digital native activism that was not already performed before. At first sight, however, the differences between Seattle and Cairo do not seem significant: both are events of public protest facilitated by ICTs, both were propelled by a loose network of activists working on a joint cause, both are examples of civic initiatives that proved effective and powerful in promoting a cause against well-established institutions such as governments, inter-governmental organisations, or the mainstream media. Such similarities question the extent to which current forms of digital activism are unique practices that justify the dichotomous definitions of older versus younger users of digital technologies. Yet an examination of the differences

between the events reveal that in a decade's time, technological and social factors are responsible for a gradual shift in the types of actors, the types of causes involved in the process, and the digital spaces in which they operate.

Although the internet and mobile phones played a role in both the cases, what was called 'The Internet' in 1999 was slightly different from its current form. Within a decade, digital technologies have transformed from a decentralised network of computers connected to the internet and a parallel-but-separate network of cellular communication devices, to enmeshed networks that combine both. Taking into account that in 1999 there were few, if none, wifi hotspots, the activists in Seattle had to use laptops with a LAN or modem connection to the internet to coordinate their actions (mobile phones were only used for voice communication, not for uploading data or seeking information). The Web was less social, too. While current protests in the Middle East and North Africa were mostly coordinated through social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook<sup>8</sup> especially, in 1999 most of the coordination of actions was performed using email distribution lists, e-bulletin boards and NGO's websites. The actors were different, too, since the main level of coordination of actions in Seattle was performed by a core network of CSOs, with a loose network of other CSOs and individuals attached to them (Clark & Themudo, 2003, p. 116). The activists in Egypt, on the other hand, were not necessarily mobilised by civil society organisations, but by a critical mass of citizens, individuals, who communicated with their immediate social networks to mobilise and coordinate the demonstrations.

One other difference relevant to the case I wish to make for digital natives is that both the actors as well as the causes in the two instances represent a shift from the transnational to the local. While Tahrir square has become both the physical site and symbolic location of the Egyptians' liberation from their local regime, Seattle had transformed into a battle site only because it hosted the WTO summit and attracted a network of transnational

activists to protest against it. Put differently, while the protests in Cairo were about Egypt, the protests in Seattle were not about Washington; they were about anti-globalisation.

The scholarly literature on social transformation facilitated by ICTs that spurred in the aftermath of the 'Battle of Seattle' highlighted the importance of the structural fit between ICTs and social movements. This 'perfect match' has been given many names, one of them was "the dot cause", coined by Clark and Tehmudo (2003: 110):

*'The term 'dot cause' can apply to any citizen group who promotes social causes and chiefly mobilises support through its website. Such group fit Keck and Sikkink's (1998:2) definition of 'transnational advocacy networks' as including 'those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services'. In social movements, dot causes can be important mobilising structures, attracting new support, coordinating collective action and producing and disseminating new framings'.*

In many ways, the new technology, perceived as decentralised, global, and flattening time and space, only facilitated the already-existing structures of transnational networks of civil society organisations. Thus, the "settlement" of civil society organisations in cyberspace and their transnational networking on the Web was perceived as a 'natural move'. However, digital technologies did not transform civil society organisations' modus operandi: their networked structure has remained the same (albeit greatly facilitated by the new technologies), their causes have not changed, and their actions are still directed at the same institutions (government, inter-governmental institutions, and the mass media) (Garrett, 2006).

To contextualise the current discourse on digital natives, I suggest a rhetorical 'thought experiment', by applying the terminology used today to refer to Digital Natives versus Immigrants or Settlers on the various stakeholders that used ICTs for social change in the late 1990s. In such a case, transnational networks of CSOs were the 'natives' since their

and what people do within the technologised environments, we also need to start looking at what technologies can do for us and how people are using them for their purpose.

The hybrid space, despite its fusion idea, actually reinforces the idea of the physical and the digital because it still presumes some hybrid overlaps. Digital natives don't think of these two as separate spheres. They don't think of the virtual and the physical. They just think of things as they are without worrying about which is which. It is the difference between geo-location services and digital-cartographic services. One just has a realisation that there is a world and it has different dimension. The other is trying to simulate the physical into the digital.

In our conversations with different digital natives, we have realised that there is a certain way by which the digital natives are always imagined as young. However, there were different kinds of digital natives – those who literally built the internets and are no longer in their teens. We fondly call them 'digital dinosaurs' but this is only an ironic name. These first builders of the internets and cyberspaces have completely disappeared from our imagination of technology-mediated relationships despite the fact that they are more native to the digital and internet technologies. They in fact have more control because unlike the new generation of digital natives, they were also heavily involved in the production and construction of digital spaces and tools, whereas the new generation is increasingly becoming a consumer of technology and producer of content.

The terminological premise is also that these hybrid spaces are internationally the same. It presumes that these digital natives are the same everywhere. So, for example, it is easily presumed that Facebook users all around the world must be doing the same things because they are using the same platform. But even a cursory look tells us that this technological determinism is a fallacy. People produce protocols and practices based on their needs and desires



networked, transnational structure was not alien to the transnational and networked structure of the new technologies. Other institutional stakeholders, such as governments, inter-governmental organisations, or mass media corporations, had difficulties adjusting their fixed structures and business models to emerging ICTs in the same way the current discourse about 'digital natives' refers to the generation of 'digital immigrants' or 'digital settlers'.

Over time, however, the paradigms hailed for the structural fit between CSOs, transnational advocacy and ICTs have started to collapse. Transnational collaboration was effective, but in certain cases it hit a wall, especially when local issues and causes were addressed by the international community. As Garrett points out: "Protests occur regularly around the world, but activity generally doesn't continue at a single location for extended periods, and a particular location is unlikely to see more than a few protests a year" (2006:210). Rogers and Marres (2008), for example, report how NGO-Web involvement in the controversy around the Narmada Dam in Gujarat, India resulted in the abstraction and generalisation of the issue to the extent that it no longer addressed the situated problem. In a different study on the involvement of transnational network advocacy in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, we found that local Israeli NGOs involved in objecting Israel's construction of the structure between Israel and the Palestinian territories were left out of the debate (Rogers & Ben-David, 2008). Local issues, then, remained less well-treated by the transnational community, using the global structure of ICTs.

At the same time, the World Wide Web has become less and less wide. Very much following the logic of "daily me" Web cultures described by Cass Sunstein in *Republic.com 2.0* (Sunstein, 2007), Ethan Zuckerman speaks of an "imagined cosmopolitanism" effect of digital technologies, reflecting on the need to tune into local reports from all over the world in order to widen the potential of the Web as a global technology (Zuckerman, 2010). Zuckerman is especially referring to Global Voices Online<sup>8</sup>, the blogging platform he co-founded in 2004, hosted at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School. Global

Voices Online shares and translates local citizen media and blog posts from areas in the world which usually do not make it to the global news<sup>9</sup>. Yet, a study of Global Voices Online, performed in 2006 by the Govcom.org Foundation, which examined the extent to which the local reports are discussed in other places, showed that the conversations did not travel far – they were rather clustered regionally (Rogers & Govcom.org Foundation, 2006).

From a technological point of view, the effect of the narrowing Web described by Zuckerman is explained by a gradual process of localisation of Web-based and mobile communications technologies. Richard Rogers (2008) describes the evolution of the politics of Web-space by dividing it into four periods, starting from the perception of the Web as a global, hyperlinked space, followed by a period in which the Web was perceived as a public sphere, then transformed into isolated islands of content that marked the "Web as social networks" period, followed by its current politics of localisation, what he also terms "the revenge of geography", where the Web's organising mechanisms, such as search engine algorithms and IP-based Web-services no longer distinguish between Web-spaces and geographical spaces. From a Web-space perspective, then, the 'Battle of Seattle' is placed in the "Web as public sphere" period, whereas current events in Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa represent the "revenge of geography" period. The rapidly localising digital technologies, characteristic of the period in which the discourse about digital natives emerged, is also characterised by increasing control of nation-states on digital technologies (as evident in Egypt's Internet shut-down, to name one example), as well as by the increase in access to the Internet through mobile phones which in many developing countries is now more prevalent than access from PCs (International Telecommunications Unit, 2010).

Arguably, the growing localisation of ICTs has transformed the structural fit between transnational advocacy networks and ICTs. Until recently, civil society organisations have been the hegemonic agents for social change using ICTs. They were quicker than governments and other institutions in adopting digital

technologies, and thus changed power relations between them. Alternative media outlets such as the Independent Media Center (Indymedia)<sup>10</sup> which was established in the aftermath of the 'Battle of Seattle' successfully competed with the traditional hegemony of mass media outlets such as newspapers and broadcast electronic media, and were effective in mobilising and informing sympathisers of various causes from around the world. However, as ICTs became more local, the hegemony of transnational networks and organisations withered, and the agency of change shifted from the organisational level, to the individual (Angelina, 2010). In the same way that institutions such as governments and mass media corporations have had to adjust to the new digital spaces a decade ago, civil society organisations now need to rethink their paradigms to adapt to the current developments in digital technologies. Last decade's natives, then, become 'settlers', or 'immigrants', in contemporary digital space, while at the same time new actors need less adaptation in using the new technologies for social change. In the short history of the Web and of digital spaces, then, this is perhaps the moment in time when the discourse about digital natives comes into the picture.

New forms of digital activism are less reliant on existing structures of organisation, fund-raising, and framing of campaigns. Instead, activism for social change by actors termed as 'digital natives' is characterised by individuals and groups promoting immediate, local causes, relaying information and mobilising for action through their immediate social networks.

Such activities changed the ways 'campaigns' were thought of so far. Current debates on whether launching a Facebook group may or may not attract a critical mass of members that will eventually lead to social revolutions have not yet been resolved, but the spontaneity of action, the granular level of the causes, as well as the lowered threshold of the agents and initiators, are typical of the current trends in digital activism that are different from previous practices from a decade ago.

which emerge from different locations and contexts.

This is also an interesting addition to the "born digital", "being digital" debate. I wonder if we can talk a bit about "being native" and "becoming native". Can a person naturalise him/herself into being a digital native?

Kara Andrade (Book 3, To Act) in her reflections, charts her own journey into 'becoming digital' as well as 'becoming native'.

This is also a good spot to talk about the relationship between the global and local. People often think that digital natives are essentially global and removed from their local. But most of the stories are actually about the local that reaches a global audience.

The notion of loose network or loose affiliation has been criticised by the likes of Gladwell. The main point of criticism being: How can a loose network really affect difficult change? Sami Ben Gharbia, a defender of online freedom of speech, defies this argument by stating that it is the loose network that enables successful digital activism initiatives. "The digital activism field in the Arab world forms one of the most decentralised, unstructured, and grassroots-oriented dynamics of change that even most of the cyber-savvy local NGOs and opposition parties have a serious trouble in "infiltrating" or exploiting it for their own benefit. Consequently, this has made this movement independent, attractive, and resistant to any kind of control. But independence does not necessarily mean disconnection or isolation".  
<http://samibengharbia.com/2010/09/17/the-internet-freedom-fallacy-and-the-arab-digital-activism/>

Loose affiliation might actually define new forms of activism. The Pink Chaddi Campaign in India is a nonviolent protest movement launched in India in February 2009 in response to notable incidences of violent conservative and right-wing activism against perceived violations of Indian culture. A group of



Examples from all over the world abound. Among the less-celebrated of the countless examples is a digital initiative called Gaza Youth Breaks Out (GYBO)<sup>11</sup>. What started as a provocative manifesto posted on Facebook by individuals who knew they should remain anonymous for the durability of their cause<sup>12</sup>, became a youth-movement of young Palestinians who wished to break out the current situation in Gaza, being critical not only of Israel's closure policy, but also of the fracture between Hamas and Fatah. Their concern was to make a specific place – Gaza – a better place to live in. The manifesto was circulated outside Facebook and has reached audiences from all over the world ; it both enabled the local mobilisation of youth in Gaza as well as raised support for the humanitarian situation in Gaza in ways that reached beyond the well-worn political debate about Gaza. When Facebook eventually froze their account, GYBO moved to Twitter, Youtube and other digital spaces, but their geographical cause has remained the same.

In less than six months, GYBO transformed from a digital initiative to a social movement, without adapting the structure of a civil society organization. It did not have a media strategy, did not have accountability commitments to funders, it did not launch a planned campaign.

Rather, they made use of their situated knowledge – both of their life in Gaza, and of the digital tools they have at hand, to promote social change in their local place.

The historical contextualisation of digital activism does not serve to claim that current practices replace previous ones. Digital natives do not replace previous actors for social change such as CSOs and transnational advocacy networks. Rather, it sketches the spaces in which digital natives operate, one that is both digital and geographical and that is populated not only by natives, but by other types of actors and stakeholders characterized by their respective practices. With these renewed meanings loaded into the concept of digital natives, the following part concludes this chapter by returning to

the conceptual discussion of digital natives and their digital places of birth.

## Conclusions: Hybrid spaces, situated knowledges

This chapter attempted to reintroduce a spatial context to the term 'Digital natives'. The shift from focusing on 'native actors' to 'native places' enables bypassing some of the problems and ambiguities attached to the term. Instead of struggling with the problems of ontological dichotomies and exclusions that come with the characterisation of a group of actors and users, it treats the 'digital native space' as a continuous space that is constantly evolving and that simultaneously hosts a complex network of actors and practices, digital natives among them. As Palfrey and Gasser claimed, and as described by Rogers from a Web space point-of-view, this space is characterised by hybridity, both of digital and geographical spaces, of various digital mechanisms and technologies and of a heterogeneous set of actors.

This is very much in line with Shah's conceptualisation of a digital native space as a flatland, a "free floating space, which is at once improbable and real, and where the elements that constitute older forms of change processes, are present but in a fluid, moving way, where they can reconnect, recalibrate and relate to each other in new and unprecedented forms" (Shah, 2010, p. 30). As demonstrated in the previous part of this chapter, forms of public protests facilitated by digital technologies may not be completely new, but they introduced an unprecedented dedication to the local place. This dedication, however, does not entail that the knowledge produced by local forms of actions are confined to local spaces. The protests in Egypt were inspired and influenced by the events which took place in Tunisia a month earlier, where digital technologies also played a significant role in disseminating information and mobilising action. The GYBO initiative in Gaza started more or less at the same time and had similar characteristics, but the type of action and knowledge about the local issues was adjusted to the situated place. In that sense, knowledge produced

by current forms of digital activism travels from one place to another, but is constantly localised and transformed to fit the local actors and their causes .

This type of knowledge is very different from the previous dominant use of digital technologies by transnational networks. As described above, transnational networks of activists often times failed to effectively address, or even see, the situated causes and issues of local places. The current dedication to the local place can be thus interpreted in terms of a counter practice, one that alludes to Donna Haraway's concept of situated and subjugated knowledges (Haraway, 1991). Transnational advocacy networks on the Web may be described as adopting "the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" (Haraway, 1991, p. 195), while granular activism dedicated to local places may be described in terms of the grounded knowledge, that albeit its partiality, encompasses greater complexity.

This brings me back to the anecdote about the hibiscus flowers and the graffiti which I described in the prologue to this chapter. Despite my commitment to environmental issues which I try to pass on to my daughter, my taller gaze was a 'gaze from nowhere' and failed to notice the graffiti that she found so disturbing and demanded an immediate action for change. Admittedly, my response to her dedication entailed an act of 'othering', of treating her devotion to remove the graffiti from the streets as something that is by all means very cute, but incapable of understanding the complexities involved in the real politics of change. The conceptualisation of digital natives as a young generation of users may entail a similar act of 'othering' that views their politics of change as different, while at the same time failing to notice that despite their difference, they are very real. I suggest that by shifting our 'othering' gaze from the indigenous actors called digital natives, to the indigenous landscapes in which various types of actors operate, we can benefit from learning about the complexity, heterogeneity and multiplicity of situated knowledges and practices that take place in hybrid geographical and digital spaces.

I conclude by returning to the terminological

women were attacked by this right-winged party in a pub in Mangalore. In response, a group of young women started a Facebook group in which they asked 'friends' to join in their peaceful protest and send pink underwear on Valentine's day to the head of the right winged party. The Facebook group attracted over 30,000 followers and over 3,000 pink panties were sent. This action gained widespread media attention and the right-winged party had to publically distance themselves from the people who were invoking the political party's views on cultural singularity to justify their violence against women. Maesy Angelina (Book 2, To Think) argues that the cases of digital activism like the Pink Chaddi Campaign or as described by Sami Ben Gharbia have an alternative approach to social change and organising a social movement that cannot be understood through the current stereotypes of activism.

The internets should be in plural forms. The very granularity of practice, of experience, of expectations, of portability, are all different. This essay particularly brings to us the idea of how the internets cannot possibly be conceived of as one smooth evolutionary framework. Different versions, experiences, executions and structures of the internets exist simultaneously for us. They change and mutate through time. This also means that the digital natives who belong to these digital environments are also different and change with time and place.

These observations ties in with the larger research framework of the project where we have identified that one of the biggest disconnects between existing actors and digital natives is that despite infrastructure building and promotion, the CSOs in emerging ICTs like India have not taken to digital technologies. And this is not just an access or an immigrant problem. There are complex structures at work about why these actors shy away from technologies that are seen as neo-liberal and elite, in the first place.

This approach of research and investigation

problem of digital natives. Consider, for example, how the current generation of digital natives would behave ten or twenty years from now, when they are no longer 'young' and when digital technologies and spaces would probably be very different from the way we know them today. Would they still be considered 'natives' in these future spaces? Would they rather become 'immigrants' or 'settlers' in the spaces considered their place of birth, as is the case now with CSOs having to adapt their campaigns and strategies to social media platforms? It may very well be so that the paradigm of the 'native', with its connotations of subjugation of power and chronological orders attached to it, will be abandoned in the future. For now, the term is here to stay. As Shah claimed, we would rather treat the concept of digital natives as an umbrella term, or a "placeholder" (Shah, 2010, p. 13). Following Shah, and by focusing on the return to the local cause, this chapter treated the concept of digital natives as "a holder of place".

## Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to Nishant Shah, Fieke Jansen, and the staff at Hivos and CIS for hosting the *Digital Natives with a Cause? Thinkathon* conference in The Hague in December 2010. I also thank Noah Efron, Anat Leibler, and the book's editors for providing valuable comments on a previous version of this text.

<sup>1</sup> Digital Natives with A Cause Thinkathon. URL <http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Themes/Digital-Natives-with-a-Cause/News/Digital-Natives-with-a-Cause-Thinkathon>.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the 'nativity' referred to originally is that of a language, rather than a place of birth, a point to which I return.

<sup>3</sup> The turn from the 'cyber' and 'virtual' to the 'digital' is based on Rogers (2009). For an overview of the umbrella of terms related to 'digitaldigital nativesdigital natives' see Shah, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the Merriam Webster Dictionary definition for 'Native'. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/native>.

<sup>5</sup> This chapter does not map all forms of dDigital nNative activism, but focuses mostly on forms of public protests facilitated by digital technologies.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to claim that cyberactivism was 'born' in Seattle. Older practices of cyberactivism date back to the 1980s. See, for example, Rheingold 1993.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, ("Can Egypt's Internet Movement Be Exported?"., 2011) and ("Social Media, Cellphone Video fuel Arab protests", 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Global Voices Online. URL <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>. Retrieved May 2 2011.

<sup>9</sup> In March 2011, for example, Global Voices Online reported that the Cameroonian government banned access to Twitter via SMS, an issue that did not travel outside Cameroon in the news space. See Global Voices Online. March 10, 2011. "Cameroon: Netizens React to SMS-to-Tweet Ban". URL. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/03/10/cameroon-netizens-react-to-sms-to-tweet-ban/>. Retrieved May 2 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Independent Media Center, URL <http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>. Retrieved May 2 2011.

<sup>11</sup> "Gaza Youth Breaks Out" (GYBO) on Facebook.com. URL <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Gaza-Youth-Breaks-Out-GYBO/118914244840679>. Retrieved May 2 2011.

<sup>12</sup> The Manifesto was eventually removed from Facebook.com. But it is still blogged on the group's Wordpress platform. URL <http://gazaybo.wordpress.com/about/>. Retrieved May 2, 2011.

## Bibliography

“Can Egypt’s Internet Movement Be Exported?” (2011, February 18). *The Nation*

“Social Media, Cellphone Video fuel Arab protests” (2011, February 27). *The Independent*

Angelina, M. (2010, December 6-8). “Towards a New Relationship of Exchange”. *Digital Natives with a Cause(?)* Position Papers, 105-129. The Hague, Museum of Communication, The Netherlands: Hivos and the CIS.

Bennett, W. L. (2008). “Digital Natives as Self Actualizing Citizens”. In A. H. Fine, M. L. Sifry, A. Rasiej, & J. Levy (Eds.), *Rebooting America: Ideas for Redesigning American Democracy for the Internet Age* (pp. 225-230) Personal Democracy Forum.

Clark, J. D., & Themudo, N. S. (2003). “The Age of Protest: Internet-Based ‘Dot Causes’ and the ‘Anti-Globalization Movement’”. In J. D. Clark (Ed.), *Globalizing Civic Engagement. Civil Society and Transnational Action* (pp. 109-126). London: Earthscan publications LTD. .

Garrett, R. K. (2006). “Protest in an Information Society: A Review of Literature on Social Movements and New ICTs”. *Information, Communication & Society* , 9 (2), 202-224.

Haraway, D. J. (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : the Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.

*International Telecommunications Unit*. (2010, October 20). Retrieved June 10, 2011, from The World in 2010. ICT Facts and Figures: <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/material/FactsFigures2010.pdf>

Marres, N., & Rogers, R. (2008). “Subsuming the Ground: How Local Realities of the Fergana Valley, the Narmada Dams and the BTC Pipeline are put to use on the Web”. *Economy and Society* , 37 (2), 251-281.

Palfrey, J., & Gasser, U. (2008). *Born Digital : Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. New York: Basic Books.

establishes technology as a paradigm that cuts across culture, politics and ideologies in order to produce a world-view. Such an inquiry helps us build the idea of technology not as a tool but as an integral part of our mechanics of living.

Ben Wagner’s contribution (Book 4, To Connect) in this project examines such an idea of cosmopolitanism as normative and restrictive. Wagner examines how certain kinds of glorified and codified processes and identities actually produce exclusions by keeping those who do not conform to them, out of the digital natives sphere. Simultaneously, these norms also put significant pressure on those who bear the label of ‘Digital Native’ to perpetuate the values and roles ascribed to them, thus taking away the possibilities of innovation and creative experimentation.

Eddie Avila (Book 4, To Connect), the director of Rising Voices, a programme that is emerging under the Global Voices Online umbrella, presents very effective case-studies to show how technologies for development play a dual role: On one hand, they help users customise them for local usage and on the other, give them a global audience to which they can reach out with their efforts and ideas. This dual nature of technologies has enabled their widespread integration in processes of social and political change.

The idea of localisation is perhaps better understood from the kind of debates that arose in the recent WikiLeaks controversies and debates. The location of the server, the jurisdiction under which Julian Assange could be tried in the court of law, the residence of data, the hosting of the website, all negotiated the complexity of space when it comes to digital and internet technologies, especially when we start looking at the future of cloud computing.

We cannot overemphasise the location of internet and digital technologies within a larger media complex. What is written on Facebook is often important not because of what happens to it on Facebook, but what

Prennky, M. (2001). Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants  
Part 1. *On the Horizon* , 9 (5), 1-66.

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community* (28 ed.).  
Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Rogers, R. (2009). *The End of the Virtual: Digital  
Methods*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Rogers, R. (2008). The Politics of Web-Space.  
*Unpublished MS*.

Rogers, R., & Ben-David, A. (2008). “The Palestinian-  
Israeli peace process and trans-national issue networks:  
the complicated place of the Israeli NGO”. *New Media  
and Society* , 10 (3), 497-528.

Rogers, R., & Govcom.org Foundation, A. (2006).  
*Public Media Projects and their Publics: Global  
Voices Online*. Retrieved May 2, 2011, from Center  
for Social Media, American University: [http://  
www.centerforsocialmedia.org/sites/default/files/  
documents/pages/Global\\_voices\\_maps.pdf](http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/sites/default/files/documents/pages/Global_voices_maps.pdf)

Shah, N. (2010, December 6-8). “Knowing a Name:  
Methodologies and Challenges”. *Digital Natives with a  
Cause (?) Position Papers* , 11-34. The Hague, Museum  
of Communication, The Netherlands: Hivos and the  
CIS.

Sunstein, C. R. (2007). *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton and  
Oxford: Princeton University Press.

van Laer, J., & van Aelst, P. (2009). “Cyber-Protest  
and Civil Society: the Internet and Action Repertoires  
in Social Movements”. In Y. Jewkes, & M. Yar (Eds.),  
*Handbook on Internet Crime* (pp. 230-254). Willan  
Publishing.

Zuckerman, E. (2010). “A wider web, a wider world”.  
SIGUCCS '10. Proceedings of the 38th annual fall  
conference on SIGUCCS. New York: ACM.

can happen to that information as it travels across the various digital and online platforms.

Many digital natives turn to the internet as their default space of belonging and expression. Many digital activists use the web because they think it provides anonymity and it helps them spread their word across the presumed unregulated geography of the internet.

However, it is necessary to highlight the fact that the internet, just like the physical counterpart, is equally regulated and controlled. Digital natives are going to often be in conflict with private actors who have the ability to freeze their accounts, governments that can trace them back, and different social structures who will control their activities.

One of the examples that emerged in our conversations at the Workshop was how YouTube blocked human rights documentation videos because the content was often violent and disturbing. Similarly, sexuality rights activists have had their accounts frozen or their posts removed because a large audience of fundamentalists online objected to the content there.

It has become necessary that all the actors collectively become a part of these deliberations and processes because often the containment and censorship is unintended. Parmesh Shahani (Book 1, To Be) in his reflections on “corporate affairs”, discusses this from a corporate perspective and the role of integrated knowledge practices and makes a strong case for this.

Steve Vosloo (Book 4, To Connect), in his case study on a mobile literacy platform in South Africa highlights a similar trend: People grow and the platforms grow with them. We often see younger users completely oblivious of platforms and services that were the biggest names just a decade ago. Digital natives will thus also start proliferating on different platforms and new tools. What will bind them together is their relationship with the local and their faith in technologies (both as tool and paradigm) giving them powers to make a change.