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Places to Go: Google's Search Results for "Net Generation"

by Stephen Downes

Probably more words have been written about Google than about any other site, but as I was searching for a site to review in the spirit of this Net Generation special issue, it was to [Google](#) that I returned over and over, searching for "Net Generation."

And it occurs to me that, if any site represents the Net Generation best, it is Google. The Net Generation, we are told, is "curious," "independent," "contrarian," "intelligent," "adaptable," "confident," "focused" and "globally conscious" (Riverdeep [n.d.](#), "Characteristic Checklist"). These are exactly the traits one would expect from someone who uses Google.

On the Internet, observes Don Tapscott ([1997](#)), users do not just observe, they participate:

This makes the Internet fundamentally different from previous communication innovations such as the development of the printing press or the introduction of radio and television. These are hierarchical technologies—inflexible and centralized. By contrast, the new media is interactive, malleable, and distributed in control. The new media will do what we command of them. And tens of millions of N-Geners around the world are taking over the steering wheel. ("The Net," ¶4)

This describes Google. A person using Google does not obtain information from a centralized source; rather, by typing a search term into the simple interface on the main page, users obtain information from anywhere around the world, from any of tens of millions of sources. Google also allows people to produce and publish their own media through services as varied as [Google Groups](#), [Blogger](#), [YouTube](#), and [Google Video](#).

Contrast this—interestingly—with the sites that purport to tell us about the Net Generation. At the top of my Google search results for "Net Generation" ([my version of Google](#) is localized to Canada and automatically personalized to reflect my own preferences) is an online book published by EDUCAUSE entitled *Educating the Net Generation* (Oblinger and Oblinger [2005](#)).

One wonders about the perspective of those who, when faced with describing the Net Generation, felt that a book, even an online book, would be the best medium to use. The work is static and changeless, enshrined in uneditable PDFs. The EDUCAUSE copyright is reasonably progressive, allowing noncommercial distribution and reproduction, but there's no space for comment, discussion, or other input from the readers of the site. "How can you read a book if you can't see the links to the criticism of it?" a Net-Generer might ask.

Don Tapscott also ranks well in this listing. Tapscott is another author who felt a book, *Growing up Digital* (1998a), would be the best means to spread his message, although the top result from the Google search is an article he wrote for the Milken Family Foundation, "The Net Generation and the School" ([1998b](#)). This article has much the same content (some of it word for word) as the [Web site](#) that promotes his book. Interestingly, though, the Milken page quotes Darla Crew, a 16-year old from Nova Scotia, Canada:

I think it's [TV] too predictable to make time for. The shows change but the situations stay the same. They're fake. I like the Internet more because it's a form of communication, a way to socialize and make new friends all over the world. It's a way to educate yourself about things that interest you. (Tapscott [1998b](#), "Today's

Web Surfer" sidebar)

What Darla Crew says of television could also be said of the books about the Net Generation. The books are unchanging, static. They suggest that there is some unchanging fact of the matter that constitutes a description of the Net Generation. By contrast, Google is constantly changing. New resources arrive; new words produce new search results. It is not *just* a catalogue or index; it becomes, through its dynamic listing of resources, a way for people who don't know each other to communicate.

To adapt what Tapscott ([1998b](#)) says, "This makes [Google] fundamentally different from [books]. They are very hierarchical, inflexible, and centralized. Not surprisingly, they reflect the values of their adult owners. By contrast, the new media is interactive, malleable, and distributed in control" ("Today's Web Surfer," ¶4). It is interesting, and perhaps revealing, that through Google we find primarily books when we search for a phrase like "Net Generation."

Also appearing in the top ten results for "Net Generation" is an article by Scott Carlson ([2005](#)) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The Net Generation Goes to College." It's one of the magazine's "free" articles; the subscription-based articles, which constitute the majority of the *Chronicle's* offerings, don't fare well in Google searches. Google ranks articles, at least in part, by how often they are cited using a Web link, but there is very little point linking to an article that most people cannot read.

"Tech-savvy 'Millennials' have lots of gadgets, like to multitask, and expect to control what, when, and how they learn," says the *Chronicle*, asking, "Should colleges cater to them?" (Carlson [2005](#), heading). The response is generally skeptical, ranging from the suggestion that Net Generation students are self-centered to suggestions that they are out of control. The article quotes Naomi S. Baron, a linguistics professor at American University: "We think that the students will come if we teach in a way that meets the expectations we have of what the students want. At some point, what we are doing is killing higher education" (Carlson [2005](#), "Not So Different?", ¶6).

It is not surprising that a subscription-based magazine catering to a university audience would find a nonhierarchical, flexible, and decentralized student population threatening. But the article also captures a more subtle criticism—that the characterization of the Net Generation ossifies as definitive a description that really fits only a small subset of young people. On the basis of this criticism, Michael Gorman, then the president of the American Library Association, cautions against fully embracing the full potential of online media: "This sort of end-of-history approach is dubious to me, . . . this idea that we have reached a watershed and we have to throw everything aside and come in with new approaches" (qtd. in Carlson [2005](#), "Not So Different?", ¶2). It was not surprising, then, to find Gorman opposed to another Google offering, [Google Scholar](#). Designed to facilitate searches of printed materials by digitizing books, Google Scholar was seen in some quarters as a massive violation of copyright. In a column in the *Los Angeles Times*, Gorman stated that "massive databases of digitized whole books, especially scholarly books, are expensive exercises in futility based on the staggering notion that, for the first time in history, one form of communication (electronic) will supplant and obliterate all previous forms" ([2004](#), ¶7).

Gorman's attack, though, is not limited to Google Scholar; it is also an attack on his critics from the Net Generation, people he characterizes as "Blog People." "The Blog People read what they want to read rather than what is in front of them," he argued in a follow-up piece in the *Library Journal* ([2005](#), ¶1). He now writes that he is not against digitation, but he maintains that "this particular project will give us anything that comes anywhere near access to the world's knowledge," mostly because Google does not deliver well-ordered search results ("Digitized books," ¶3). What would be a better alternative? "If a fraction of the [money being spent] were devoted to buying books and providing librarians for the library-starved children of California, the effort would be of far more use to humanity and society" ("I'm no Antidigitalist," ¶1). If Gorman's recommendation seems modest enough, his portrayal of blog readers remains so condescending that it simply overgeneralizes in its own right.

A more reasoned statement of the same criticism can be had from Norm Friesen (2006). The research, Friesen argues, points to members of the Net Generation "claiming greater online self-efficacy and skills" but failing to live up to those claims in practice ("Actually," ¶1). Friesen maintains that "the vast majority are consumers of content; only a small minority interact with this content, and even fewer create it" ("Actually," ¶2). Moreover, "one of the most important predictors for these differences is class" ("Actually," ¶1), and "it is important to address significant inequalities in use, understanding, and facility associated with these new technologies, rather than simply painting all students with the same brush" ("The implications...", ¶1).

Do the same statements apply to the use of Google? Apparently not. The use of Google has become so popular that the word has become a verb, prompting a response from the company (Krantz 2006). "Virtually every Internet user takes advantage of these tools on a daily basis," writes a U.S. military analyst, pointing to the security problems this massive disclosure of information creates (Conti 2006, "Future Work," ¶1). Rich or poor, using a computer or a mobile phone, users can and do access Google from around the world. We typically associate "content creation" with the writing of an article or a book. But content creation results from the operation of any sort of interactive media. The content created by Google searches, which manifests itself most evidently as the ordering of search results, also results in a demographic trail that can be as revealing as any video on YouTube.

Perhaps the only genuinely Net Generation Web site to be found in my Google search for this phrase appears in position eight: [Peacefire](#), a site subtitled "Open Access for the Net Generation." The site offers users advice on how to "get around your blocking software" by using circumvention sites or even by booting your own alternative (and unblocked) Ubuntu operating system (n.d., "To get around your blocking software"). As I once commented, "We can tell whether something is being used by the Net Generation very easily. It's the site that is blocked in schools."

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