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Policies for the Natives Designed by the Immigrants?: Night Thoughts After a Workshop Day at the Berkman Centre

Essay by Herbert Burkert, December 11, 2009

Three terms appearing in an agenda, "Reputation", "Privacy" and "Quality of Information", and a somewhat vague invitation to think about "Youth Policy" made me recall a moment in my life, a long time ago, when my mother - while I was at school - invaded the privacy of my room and discovered a comic book (an American comic book given to me by an American soldier stationed in my German home town, yes that long ago, but I digress) and scolded me for my poor judgment on information quality, destroying once and for all my carefully built reputation of an ardent consumer of Grimm folk tales.

I should perhaps explain: "Reputation", "Privacy" and "Information Quality" had been the focusing points of a policy workshop organized by the Berkman Centre - with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation this fall in view of a future youth policy. American foundations of this kind - so much admired from my side of the Atlantic - seem to have a tendency to make sure that scholars do not get away with simply developing and spreading brilliant ideas. These foundations nail them down nudging - if not forcing them - by putting their reputation at stake - to turn their ideas into actions cutting off what would be our favorite excuse: "Sorry, but no resources left to deal with these questions as well!"

Thus a highly vibrant and restless research initiative on "Digital Natives" bundled, structured, as well as thoughtfully transformed into a highly successful book ("Born Digital") by two engaged fathers (John Palfrey and Urs Gasser) was finally forced to hold its breath for a moment and to actually think if not do something about "Youth Policy". It was in this context then that I had recalled my little story from the past.

Today, my little story would have taken a different turn. The comic book would certainly no longer be the issue (well, it might, depending on the author …). But the story would probably appear on the family website, first accessed by uncles, aunts, grandpa and grandma and a couple of friends. Then it would spread to some social network, because of some ill advised cousin who could not help but twitter about it … In other words what had been a conversation piece then between my mother and me would today turn into a broadcasting piece. Why this change? It is the technology, of course. The Internet is a "BET" - a broadcasting enhancing technology. But it is never the technology alone. Our vices and vanities ensure that we make good use of this technology to reach our audiences. Turning "conversations" into "broadcasting" is inherent in the way we communicate. Our communication is always a hybrid, a mix between conversation and broadcasting: There is always a reason, of course, to raise your voice at restaurant a dinner conversation to be overheard by the people at the next table …

How attractive must this playing with communication modes be for someone even less grown up than I? This, then, finally is Youth: The frightening and joyful way in which we cleave a path through the world with the help of our communications, tentatively molding and re-molding the contours of our self in a world so full of challenges and promises, a world in which what we are is so fluid and dependent on how others see us. It is with this constant back and fro, this joyful oscillation that notions like property, privacy and reputation are re-experienced.

In such a mode our perceptions of privacy, reputation and quality take on other meanings. Privacy for the young it seemed to me listening to the contributions of the workshop is not so much an enclosed space, not even the possibility and capacity to control, it is an action with which to include and exclude, a constant re-assortment of those to whom we feel close and those to whom we don't, not for always but for the here and now. Home then, I learned from danah boyd (or should I say danah made me remember), cannot be a private space since there is no opportunity to draw such lines of exclusion with lasting effects. Are such perceptions dangerous, because the Internet is not a momentous broadcast but a record keeper, like Father Christmas, handing out gratifications only after checking our past sins? But what gratifications could there be at all, the young argue - I remembered Theresa Senft reporting from her research - if one's achievements have to remain private, if they do not get properly credited? Is there a trade-off between privacy and reputation? And maybe, it crossed my mind, indeed, we should not be scared so much by a device which allows us to remember, but rather by our own reluctance e.g. to forget what we have heard about a person when we see this person. Maybe, too, it would be important, as Mizuko Ito suggested in one of her interventions, to teach kids how to evaluate the contextual information they have about other people? Maybe then, I thought, later when these kids would be in "human resources" (or whatever the responsibility for hire and fire would be called then) they would look differently at past records to judge current behavior. Maybe information quality, a notion which had seemed to be so difficult to describe during the workshop, is not something which is attached to a piece of communication. Perhaps, not unlike this re-definition of privacy, information quality is an activity too, or a capability to assess information adequately and to discern the accidental from essential. A capability, however, and here I remembered what Maura Marx had told us, that is in need of "special resources" like e.g. the opportunity to access primary sources regardless of technical and legal obstacles..

Those were the bits and pieces I recalled, the faces and voices I remembered when the event had come to an end and the three words "privacy", "reputation", "quality" kept resounding in my mind like the refrain of a song, the full lines of which were to complicated to remember.

But there was more to this workshop: there had also been a curious mixture of playfulness, and joy, and serious engagement, a mixture that we like to remember about the things we did when we were young. Had it been the subject that had taken hold of the participants in a way that they had not imagined when they had signed up, or had it been the other way round that they had picked their research subjects because that spirit of being young was still so strong in them? This workshop had had a special style, indeed.

But there had also been a methodological difference: While traditional approaches try to better understand the Internet by comparing the world before and after the technology, or by juxtaposing the online world with the offline world, this project, this book, this workshop added another perspective, accepting the technology as the "today" and comparing within this today the older and the younger generations, thus enriching the methodology of Internet Research by bringing the history of technology into our own life cycle.

The difference between the young and the old was not the only question of this workshop. The other question - as it may be well remembered - was what to do with this difference once it had been more closely examined. What policies to device, to implement, to oversee? What is it that we, the "Immigrants" to Cyberspace could "prescribe" for the Natives without falling into the trap of "cyberspace colonialism"? Or should we just step back and let the market decide, let life take its course, because the young ones "won't be the young ones very long" (Cliff Richard). I am not a parent, as readers will have guessed by now because of my fatalist remark, as they may have guessed the generation I belong to by the song I quote from.

Is this sort of fatalistic thinking a shortening reflex, is it a rigor of fear when forced to think about policymaking, to turn from observations and ideas to concrete policies? Or is it just a moment of hesitation so as not to fall into the jargon of politicians too easily? I recalled a moment when - a

week before this workshop - I had listened to a speech - not a speech by a politician but by an architect: By some coincidence I had been present at a dinner which the British architect David Chipperfield gave for his team. The occasion was the end of the reconstruction of the so-called "New Museum" in Berlin, a 19th century building which had been heavily destroyed during the war. The discussions on what to do with this building had started after German reunification, and the reconstruction itself had lasted more than twelve years. Politically Chipperfield's approach to restoring had been highly controversial in the beginning, because the architect had decided not to restore the building in a way that would have recreated the full ancient splendor, but in a way that united the new necessary interventions into the buildings with the remainders of the old in a way that kept the scars of the past visible. The architect, in his thank you speech, looked back at these years of discussion and reconstruction by reminding his staff: "Before we could start to build we had to build a culture". He was referring to the long and open dialogue process which he had initiated and which had finally succeeded in convincing those who had opposed his approach.

Building a culture then in order to construct youth policies? In any case there was an attitude and a perspective present at the Berkman Centre workshop that could make a difference. As to attitude I was reminded of a quote from some highly experienced youth policy makers, USAID, stating in reference to their "Health Policy Initiative":

"Policy should recognize and promote young people as a positive force for economic and social development, not [...] as a problem group that must be addressed. Most laws and policies exist to control "bad" youth behavior. The reality is that much of the advocacy around youth [...] issues takes a negative approach [...] and on the negative consequences to society. While such an approach may be effective to mobilize policy makers and the public to take action, it does reinforce the image of young people as a problem to be solved."

And as to perspective, I felt, it was encouragement that had guided the participants in their presentations: Encouragement acknowledges risk, provides for an environment that gives enough support so as not to invite recklessness, and yet remains demanding enough to require courage. Seeing what the Natives are doing (or what they seem to be doing) as opportunities what sort of encouraging actions do the Immigrants have to offer at a moment when - as John Palfrey had suggested in his introduction to the workshop - there is a window of opportunity to actually get things done?”

For a brief moment "Market", "Social Norms", "Codes" and "Law" that ever-ready quadriga to bring the day and to disperse the night had passed through the meeting room. But the participants had already provided more concrete suggestions even if only scattered over different contributions and comments. There had been an observation by Urs Gasser e.g. that, if, indeed, there are social spaces developing on the net - we should develop policies which would consciously construct - or reconstruct - guarded social spaces. Such places had existed at the family's dinner table, at the home of an engaged neighbor, in the principal's office, in the parish church. For many complex reasons - mobility, changes of family and neighborhood structures, professionalization of roles - guarded spaces of conflict resolution have become "officialized": Conflicts are now handled by public prosecution institutions and it is only their procedural rules in juvenile cases which seek to retain some of this guarded space. But not only with regard to conflict resolution would such places would be needed. Such spaces could also be built for experiencing and experimenting with information quality, the reaches of privacy and the impact of reputation. Libraries, it had been mentioned, perhaps provided already such a space or could be further developed to become one.

Along these lines one could also think of the construction of safety nets: In spite of all encouragement and of all opportunities young people need trust. Trust in them but also something they can trust. Trust takes risks - hence encouragement - but it also comprises reliance. Making Youth Policy also requires to take care of accidents after they have occurred,

after harm has been done. We need to think in advance of compensation systems, of possible means to re-stabilize after the fact. For such re-stabilization a society cannot and should not rely on punishment, at least not on punishment alone. It should also give assurances to those who might suffer that there are people and procedures and means in place which provide help afterwards. Encouragement also means that mistakes can be made and that, while these mistakes have consequences, there can be constructive ways to deal with such consequences.

Protected spaces and safety nets invite another thought - not so much about future possibilities but about current necessities: If we are really so deeply concerned about the young why do we not realize that we are already building youth policies for cyberspace - even more so - that we are already applying them? In other areas, like environmental policies, taxation, or health policies we are aware that whatever we are doing now, we have a responsibility for future generations. Have we ever thought about what kind of signals markets, social norms, code and law (which we allow to operate today for cyberspace) are sending to the digital natives? Are the good policies already applied by the Immigrants also good policies for the Natives? Do these policies meet with their experiences? Do these policies leave enough breathing space for new experiences by them? From what was gathered at the workshop "sharing" might well be such an experience where the surrounding rules seem to be somewhat counterintuitive.

But when we are already researching into the experiences of the Natives could we not simply ask them, or ask them more pointedly what they think about policy making? Why not let the Natives do that workshop on policies themselves that still has to follow this workshop - with proper guidance, of course! (And wouldn't this be a nice excuse, too, for us not to face the task ourselves?).
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