

Millennials or Digital Natives: Consuming and Producing News from Activism

**Carolina Celi
Concordia University**

This paper portrays why and how millennials or gen Y consume and produce news from an activist perspective. The increasing development of lighter digital technologies, such as tablets, mini cameras, notebooks and similar devices leads to abundant information flow in journalism. This makes millennials' characteristics vital to understand how news is understood from this generation's perspective. In that respect, the fact of being highly technological literate and to produce and consume news with a sense of immediacy is located from a sense of effectiveness rather than efficiency.

Keywords: Millennials, News Consumption, Prosumer Model, Activism, Cohort, Gen Y, Citizen Journalists

This paper portrays two major characteristics that Generation Y, “Digital Natives”¹ or so-called millennials² possess. These characteristics are imperative to understand how this generation engages with news consumption, production, and journalism from a citizen journalism concept³. In that respect, to be ‘high technology literate’⁴ and to respond through technological devices with a sense of “activism”⁵ when consuming and producing information, are features that influence the way Digital Natives engages with news⁶ and act sometimes as citizen journalists.⁷

First, millennial background will be explained from the theory of generations to understand how the characteristics mentioned above were developed. Second, the characteristic of ‘high technology literate generation’ will be portrayed to grasp how millennial cohort consume and produce news. And third, ‘activism’ will be portrayed as the main reason why millennial people are more predisposed than other generations to act as citizen journalists.

The increasing development of lighter digital technologies, such as tablets, mini cameras, notebooks and others leads abundant information flow in journalism.⁸ This makes the above millennial characteristics vital to understand how journalism is understood from this generation perspective. In that respect, the fact of being highly technological literate and to produce and consume news with a sense of immediacy⁹ is located from a sense of effectiveness rather than efficiency¹⁰. An effectiveness view from abundance of information over an efficiency model based on information scarcity¹¹. These idea relays on a production, consumption, prosumption model¹². A capitalist dominant system that is changing from a producer-consumer model into a prosumer model¹³. In that respect, this is the fact that could be guiding millennial characteristics when practicing digital technologies and the way that this generation participates in the internet platform as citizen journalists. Consequently, millennial generation is not a passive consumer model but highly active.¹⁴

The terms Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y or millennials are part of a demographic study of the theory of generations. John Stuart Mill defined a generation as “a new set of human beings

that have been educated, have grown up from childhood, and have taken possession of society.”¹⁵ Howe and Strauss define a generation as “the aggregate of all people born over a span of roughly twenty years, or about the length of one phase of life: childhood, young adulthood, midlife, and old age”¹⁶. The study of generations is part of a demographic view, as remarked by David Foot. “Demography, the study of human populations, is the most powerful -and most underutilized-tool we have to understand the past and to foretell the future.”¹⁷ In the case of generation’s studies, it focuses on the trends that are related to an age perspective as described by Foot and Stoffman, “every year each person gets a year older”¹⁸. Thus, demography analyzes people as cohorts. Foot proposes that “each of us is a member of a cohort”¹⁹, thus, every person is part of a specific generation, a year group, influenced by historical and technological shifts in the story of humanity.²⁰ As a result, the study of generations implies the study of cohorts that frame specific trends of a population.

Millennials “spanned the turn of the century”²¹ and are the cohort of people that was born since 1982 to 2010.²² Older individuals of this generation are entering in their 30s and the younger ones are 9 years old. The oldest members of this generation are children of the Second Wave of Baby Boomers generation and Generation X and the youngest millennials are children of those from Generation X.²³ Consequently, their ancestor generations are Generation X, and Baby Boomers.

Foot and Stoffman explain generations from the Pre-World War generation to The Millennium Busters. Foot describes generations with the following categorization: “The Baby Boom (1947 to 1966) dividing them into front-end boomers and Generation X; The Baby Bust (1967 to 1979); The Baby Boom Echo (1980 to 1995) and The Millenium Busters (1996 to 2010)”²⁴. Nevertheless, for this paper the gap portrayed by Howe and Strauss is the one that will be used. Its studies divide generation cohorts into groups of 20 years average and describes generation characteristics in a clearer and broaden way (Appendix A). In that respect, for Howe and Strauss the millennial generation are the cohort of people born from 1982 to 2004.²⁵

“Our generation isn’t all about sex, drugs, and violence. It’s about technology, discovery, and coming together as a nation. —Mikah Giffin, 17, cjonline.com”²⁶. This quote from Howe and Strauss book manages some millennial characteristics in one sentence. Technology with a predominance sense in its practice; and the word discovery deeply attached with and immediate desire of activism in a community.

Furthermore, Erickson Tamara describes millennial generation as often misunderstood. She explains:

“The most common complaint I hear from employers regarding Y’s is that you’re too impatient; you want everything now. I believe that it is completely logical –inevitable, in fact, given the world you saw as teens- for individuals in their twenties to conclude that “living now” is a sensible thing to do. For many Gen Y, living life to the fullest each day - now- is an important and understandable life priority. I believe that impatience –what I prefer to call your remarkable sense of immediacy- will be a lasting and perhaps the defining characteristic of your generation. You will not “outgrow “it.”²⁷

From that perspective, millennials portray immediacy as a result of being highly influenced by past events and it leads to activism. These influences for millennials are mainly significant historical events and technological developments witnessed by them as they grew up. These historical and technological developments shaped their minds and behaviors from childhood to adulthood.

The oldest Y’s started to enter their teen years in 1994. The following experiences are likely to have been important influences on the conceptual models you developed:

- Witnessing significant global events, including incidents of terrorism, school violence, and natural disasters.
- Experiencing the increasingly widespread technology and new forms of communication.
- Immersion in a culture that included working mothers, increasing gender equality in many parts of the world, and a strong pro-child culture.²⁸

Events such as The Fall of Berlin Wall (1989), portrayed by the media as a huge step for humanity to achieve freedom, is one of the first memories for the older individuals of this generation. The arrive of

new gaming technology such as Nintendo, Playstation, and some operation computer systems like Windows 95 and Windows XP, 2000 were part of millennials childhood as well.²⁹ Furthermore, this generation was influenced by the well-known Millennium Day, December 31th, 1999, portrayed by the media as a chaotic event in the world ending.³⁰

Additionally their minds were also influenced by the 1999 Columbine school shooting, one of the first most media covered shootings around the world and the first of a series of acts of violence in school that continues nowadays in a way of 'bullying acts'.³¹

A year after, in 2001, George W. Bush was elected as president of the United States. This is also a significant historical event for millennial cohort because it remarks the beginning of Irak war with September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Undoubtedly, a deep mark into millennials' mind.³² As a result of this outbreaks, millennial generation witnessed the Global War of Terror from 2001 up today.

Furthermore, among this large period of terrorist wars and violent acts other historical events of similar nature were ongoing. For example, in 2004, the bombing attack in the Madrid rail system and in 2005 a terrorist attack in London.³³

Another major event that is important to mention, in terms of a diversity shift in race, is the election of Barak Obama to the U.S. Presidency in November 2008, as the first black citizen president of one of the world's most influential nation. This is a matter of highly importance for the millennial generation as another strong characteristic of this cohort is their sense of diversity³⁴. Furthermore, millennials also grew up with the idea of global warming, a phenomenon hugely related with environmental calamities that shaped millennials' mind as well. Some of these calamities include the "Prestige" sinking in 2002 causing one of the largest environmental disasters relating to oil spills on the coasts of Spain, France and Portugal. Furthermore, the 2004 Tsunami in Asia has been characterized as one of the major natural disasters that killed more than 225,000 people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina was characterized with a lot of media broadcast coverage around the world.³⁵ Subsequently, Haiti and Chile Earthquakes in 2010 and Japan earthquake in 2011.

In light of the above millennial generation has been influenced by their living experience with historical harsh events but also with an "increasingly widespread technology and new forms of communication"³⁶, thus, millennial generation is highly technological literate. They learn digital technology as people learn a native language³⁷. Furthermore, "you redraw the line between institutional and personal technology"³⁸. In that respect, "technology is not the domain of the specialist, and it is as much an extension of you as a handbag or briefcase may be of your parents"³⁹. This technology literate "born digital"⁴⁰ and that is what differentiates them from other generations. These members of a born digital cohort "remember a world in which letters were printed and sent, much less handwritten, or where people met up at formal dances rather than on Facebook"⁴¹. In that respect millennials are not "Digital Settlers"⁴² more related with "an analog-only world"⁴³, neither "Digital Immigrants"⁴⁴ whom "learned how to e-mail and use social networks late in life"⁴⁵.

While technology as a practice "is the way of doing things"⁴⁶ the fact of being linked with culture⁴⁷ as a "set of social accepted practices"⁴⁸ is what changes the way that millennial cohort practice technology. Unlike past generations, millennials, considered as also digital born or Digital Natives, "relate to information differently from their parents"⁴⁹. For instance, this generation do not share music from a LP, neither a CD. They share music on line, "mediated by an Ipod or the iTunes Music System"⁵⁰. The same happens when consuming news as information.

As a result of the exposed above, millennial major characteristics are enclosed into a multitask native skill when practicing technology and that is what differentiate this generation from other generation's technology practices.⁵¹ Furthermore, these characteristics are enriched with other millennial unique characteristics. For instance, millennial generation is big in number population. They "represents one-third of the global population"⁵² "nearly a quarter of the world's population and more than 20% - nearly 70 million strong - of all Americans living today"⁵³. This generation is considered high well-educated and possess a "safety net" around their parents, thus they are confident and optimistic.⁵⁴

As a matter of mixing millennial generation native skill of practicing technology with activism, this cohort is shifting the way of consuming and producing news, especially when by using portable-immediate technological devices.⁵⁵

The previous generation's technology practices are situated into a resource scarcity model of news consumption that relays on a traditional producer-consumer model, while for millennial generation, technology practice relays into an abundant model known as prosumer model⁵⁶. This abundance of resources is given due to the huge flow of information that Digital Natives manage when engaged with different kind of information, from news to music and social networking.

From the following concepts of journalism a sense of re thinking the profession will be presented and further it will encounter the need to engage with the prosumer model mentioned above.

Journalism has been defined from different perspectives and is not easy to explain. However, to develop this paper I will stand that journalism deals with news gathered, presented and distributed with specific standards of practicing journalism such as accuracy, truthfulness, objectivity, fairness and ethics.⁵⁷ Consequently, journalism treats news as facts, differentiating them from opinions.⁵⁸

This journalism conception relays in a dominant capitalistic model of scarcity.⁵⁹ In this model resources are limited, information is limited, and thus journalists must be efficient when managing information to achieve media standards of accuracy, avoiding libel and editor expectations.⁶⁰ In this model people produce for themselves much like the agricultural model of the past, as explained by Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* book.⁶¹ Nevertheless, with the intervention of new technologies like internet platform, and portable lighter devices, a sharing system of free information develops a new economic system. As a result, capitalism's scarce-efficient model present difficulties to control prosumers⁶², and millennial generation are prosumers where abundance of resources exists. In light of the above, millennial people act differently when it gathering, presenting, and disseminating information, they act from an immediacy, multitasking and an activist response.

From the view of abundance of information, according to Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, Journalism is one of the most important social, cultural and political institutions.⁶³ A field with "a clear North American/Euro dominance in scholarly contributions"⁶⁴ that needs to be re-invented to adapt itself to the global changes of the world⁶⁵. It means that journalism should take a jump from the empirical dominant methodology to a critical-active, which should include a transformation of audiences, in this case a generational audience that is critical an active as well. To include deeply research practices is a call for journalism, as well as improving content production⁶⁶. In the same way, Conboy defines journalism studies from a critical and academic view. This author highlights that a serious journalism must develop research on the academy and must be able to adapt it to the actual technological changes. Then, "journalism itself was becoming more self-reflective than any point in its history"⁶⁷, so it is important to be flexible and critical enough to those changes.⁶⁸ Besides, engaging with audiences and addresses the importance of having an answer from the people who consume media products is a must for Conboy when explaining journalism. This respond will develop "a more socially aware consumer, a more engaged citizen of the media sphere of the 21st century, one who is aware that journalism is both commercial and conduit for investigation and activism"⁶⁹ Thus, Journalism studies find a definition through unifying the commercial criteria of the media and journalism with eager of researching and audience activism. It is a proposal for defining the journalism field as an active one, guided through a constant community interaction, in the changes of technologies.

To understand how millennial generation are part of journalism news consumption and production the concept of citizen journalism must be also explained. Alternative or citizen journalism is defined as "anything and everything that people believe could count as journalism"⁷⁰ and as "anything produced by its potential audience"⁷¹.

A world that talks about millennials with no important perspectives from the media⁷², leads to a sense of stereotyping and a perception of a generation too dependent of their families, careless for the past circumstances of the world. Thus, unengaged with news⁷³, and if it wasn't enough a treatment of blaming this generation for being impatient rather than immediate when practice technology is presented.⁷⁴

In that sense, the avoidance of traditional journalism consumption is evident when millennial generation write a blog, post a comment, or simply disseminate some kind of information through the different free tools of social media, to produce critiques from different kind of audiences. It doesn't mean that all millennials write blogs or participate with important ideas for audiences in their technological devices. In fact, "data do not support the argument that Digital Natives, or anyone else, are, in large percentages, using new technologies for purposes of civic activism."⁷⁵, but it is for sure that in a new media environment, provided by internet, Digital Natives are no longer mere passive viewers, neither other users too.⁷⁶

According with Paula Pointdexter, millennials reject the consumption of news because they grew up with the influence of dramatic historical events, but also with a negative description of those events through the mainstream media. In that way, the First Wave of Millennials were avid news consumers in their childhood, but something in the media shifted that attitude. Pointdexter argues that "The Millennial Generation has grown up during a time that journalistic malpractice has scandalized some of the most prestigious newsrooms in the country, damaging those organizations and chipping away at the credibility of the press everywhere"⁷⁷. One example of this is "the Janet Cooke scandal at *The Washington Post* which occurred in 1981 before the first millennials were born, more scandals hit newsrooms and newspapers front pages as Millennial Generation began to come of age"⁷⁸. Thus, for the Millennial Generation the idea of accuracy and facts is also rejected as a product of distrust of the media that were supposing to serve the public interest.⁷⁹ Furthermore, millennial generation avoid the consumption of news, and even if they consume some of the traditional news, they consume it in a different way from past generations. They consume news in an abundance-effective model. In that way, millennials relate with news in a holistic way and are more engaged with the practice of social media, understood as "forms of electronic communication such as web sites for social networking and microblogging through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content such as videos"⁸⁰. Thus, social media is a platform in where their activism model relays.

In terms of news consumption, Pointdexter highlights how "news engagement"⁸¹ is today different from the past generations. For instance, the ways of consuming news for Baby Boomers was primarily "consumption-oriented"⁸². It was a passive way of reading news and the most that they were able to participate as feedback was when writing a letter to the media editor. Now, the engagement is different and millennials are consumption-sharing-comment-post-like-oriented. In one word prosumers. Therefore, scarcity of information is not the light which guides a conversation in millennials' background. They participate in news consumption and production process, as in "acts of journalism"⁸³ from an effective scope, with huge abundance of information.

When millennials produce 'acts of journalism', for instance in YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, they do not wait for a decision of relevancy in a hierarchical media model⁸⁴. "The traditional hierarchies of control of news and information are crumbling with new dynamics replacing the old. These dynamics will lead to a more responsive politics."⁸⁵ millennials disseminate what they deem to be relevant in their lives, even if they are common events and these events in citizen journalism are news. The relevancy of those events is validated by the people who decide what to see or not on the web. A good example of this is the high increase of You Tuber users participating around the world as simple participants or even as amateur journalists. For instance, there are some millennials that, even though they do not portray news from the mainstream media, portray events of the common life. Some of these YouTube users include, Yuya from Mexico, Hola Soy Germán from Chile, EnchufeTV from Ecuador, Werevertumorro from Mexico, PewDie Pie from Switzerland and Italy, among others. In these cases, these millennials are rejecting traditional news, and breaking hierarchies of the mainstream media by portraying their own news with own formats. It is a kind of "alternative journalism"⁸⁶.

Finally, millennial generation major characteristics, of being high technology literate and react with activism, are features that make 'Digital Natives' deeply engaged with doing acts of journalism. Even though other generations may react in the same way, and that no all millennials are citizen journalists, what make this generation unique is their natural sense of activism supported in their optimistic practice of technology with immediacy and urgency.⁸⁷

In that respect, Digital Natives engage with news different from past generations. Their high technology literate characteristic make this engagement immediate, fast, and active. Their activist way of engaging with the world stimulates them wildly to share information with others into a prosumer model. Their own sphere of understanding what is important pushes this generation to share mainstream news or personal news with their social circle anytime and anywhere.⁸⁸ For instance, as digital technologies are so in-hand for millennials, “instead of just receiving a newscast of the day’s events in politics from one or three mainstream news channels, citizens can themselves take the video clip of a candidate’s speech, interpret it themselves, and remix it into a video that they share with friends-or with the rest of the world on Youtube”⁸⁹.

Finally, as described by Pointdexter, even millennials news engagement seems to be low, it still exist, but it is applied from activism. Thus, millennial generation characteristic of activism is equal important as to be high technological literate. Activism is how millennials practice technology and also how do they answer, as a natural response, to criticize the ongoing historical developments that shaped their minds. This activism characteristic is what make millennial generation act in a natural way as citizen journalists. Thus, their news consumption is an active, not passive one that relays on a prosumer model with abundance of resources.

ENDNOTES

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APPENDIX A

Key to Generations

GENERATION ¹	BIRTH YEARS
Homeland	2005-Present
Millennial	1982-2004
Generation X	1961-1981
Boom	1943-1960
Silent	1925-1942
G.I.	1901-1924
Lost	1883-1900
Missionary	1860-1882
Progressive	1843-1859
Gilded	1822-1842
Transcendental	1792-1821
Compromise	1767-1791
Republican	1742-1766
Liberty	1724-1741
Awakening	1701-1723

¹A generation is defined by a common age location in history and a collective peer personality. See [Generations](#) (under Method & Insight).

From: Howe: <http://www.lifecourse.com/about/method/phases.html> Accessed 12 November, 2013