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## The Fragmented Generation

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**Abstract**

We propose "The Fragmented Generation" as an appropriate moniker for America's current generation of young adults. The authors consider how the historical and technological contexts in which these young people have come of age have contributed to the generation's fragmented nature. *Wikipedia*, the open source encyclopedia, provides a metaphor for considering the characteristics of young Americans in comparison to those of previous generations.

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How does one characterize a generation? Gertrude Stein once dubbed Americans who came of age in the years following World War I as the "lost generation." Since then, there have been numerous attempts to characterize various generations with a single phrase: the "Silent Generation," the "Greatest Generation," the "Beat Generation," the" Baby Boom Generation," "Generation X," "Generation Y," "The Echo Generation." The list goes on.

Nor is there any shortage of attempts to coin the term that encapsulates the current generation of young Americans. In a 2007 column, Thomas Friedman referred to contemporary young adults as "Generation Q—the Quiet Americans" (p. A23). He described a generation full of idealism but little fire or outrage. In so doing, he added to a growing body of writing that includes Schneider and Stevenson's (2000) *The Ambitious Generation*, Twenge's (2007) *Generation Me*, and Brooks's (2001) "The Organization Kid." Poking fun at this tradition on the part of elders, Yale University junior Nicholas Handler won the 2007 *New York Times* college essay contest with his piece entitled "The Posteverything Generation," arguing that his generation's revolution is simply in a different language and makes use of different technologies than those of earlier generations (Handler, 2007).

All of these characterizations contain partial truths, yet none of these labels capture the essence of Americans born during the Reagan years. As it happens, clues to this generation's character—which we hereby anoint the "fragmented generation"— may come from one of its bones of contention with older generations—*Wikipedia*.

*Wikipedia*, of course, is the on-line, open source encyclopedia for which any individual may create or edit an entry. According to *Wikipedia's* founders, *every day* hundreds of thousands of individuals from around the world make tens of thousands of edits and add thousands of new entries to the *Wikipedia* website. High school and college students have quickly adopted *Wikipedia* as the most efficient means of learning about a particular topic of interest while older Americans worry about the accuracy and objectivity of the information *Wikipedia* offers. Having spent the past decade teaching, researching, parenting and proctoring many hundred teens and

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young adults, we believe that *Wikipedia* offers a useful metaphor for considering the fragmented nature of this contemporary generation of young Americans.

So what is the story that captures the essence of this generation?

Today's young adults have grown up in a fragmented America, and their identities are more fragmented than those of any previous group in American history. Evidence of this splintering can be found in the way young adults describe their mentors and heroes. Ask older Americans about their heroes, and a number of common names float to the surface:  Eleanor Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Rosa Parks, Neil Armstrong, Cesar Chavez, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali. . . .   Many young people, on the other hand, are unwilling or unable to name any well known person whom they admire, and some are unwilling to characterize anyone as a villain (Gibbon & Gomes, 2002).  Asked how they manage to forge their own identities, they speak explicitly about taking aspects from many different individuals. Instead of having mentors, or even anti-mentors, these young people forge a life through "fragmentoring." *Wikipedia* exemplifies this contrast between young adults and their elders; traditional encyclopedia entries are written by a single authoritative "expert" while *Wikipedia* hones an entry by drawing upon the perspectives of thousands or even tens of thousands of informants.

Contemporary young adults "read" the world around them through a similarly fragmented lens. In previous generations, Americans turned to trusted authorities, like journalist Edward R. Murrow, on major television networks and radio stations to help them understand and interpret world events. Today's young adults describe themselves as distrustful of media sources and piece together an understanding of the world through a multitude of blogs, media outlets, websites, and news programs (Kiesa et al., 2007; Weigel & Heikkenen, 2007). One source of information popular with young adults, Digg.com (2008), describes itself as a "place for people to discover and share content from anywhere on the web . . .  from the biggest online destinations to the most obscure blog" (para. 1).  The pieces that get the most 'hits' (regardless of their source) are upgraded to the front page and viewed by millions of young news seekers. Like *Wikipedia* vs. *Britannica*, Digg vs. Murrow replaces trusted authority with fragments and a bottom-up, emergent, demotic consensus. In other words, the key "decider" of newsworthy events has shifted from the reporter to the audience.

In his award-winning essay, Handler (2007)—the Yale junior—characterized his generation as refusing "to weave together an overarching narrative to our own political consciousness" (p. A36). We have had ample opportunities to observe this refusal firsthand. We see young adults who offer one persona at school or work, but project an entirely different identity on *Facebook* or *MySpace*. Other young adults create avatars for on-line worlds like *Second Life,* [2] who bear little resemblance (or seem to be the diametric opposite) of their *first life* personas. Still other young adults have told us about joining multiple on-line dating websites, but crafting very different profiles on each. It may be impossible to parse whether this generation of young Americans is unique in its tendency towards fragmentation or whether today's technologies have simply allowed these tendencies to emerge. Would the Greatest Generation have tossed aside *Encyclopedia Britannica* for *Wikipedia* with equal enthusiasm?

However, this fragmentation is not only evident on-line. National surveys of college freshmen reveal today's young adults to be far less likely than earlier generations to characterize themselves as "conservative" or "liberal" or even "Republican" or "Democrat" (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007).  Instead, today's young adults craft their political attitudes by picking and choosing among the various issues. It is not unusual to find the teenager who believes

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[2] *Second Life* is an on-line virtual world (www.secondlife.com) with more than 15 million registered members.

drugs should be legalized but also supports three strikes laws, or the young adult who favors universal healthcare but also wants to privatize social security.

Similarly, traditional American prototypes like the "flower child" or "Master of the Universe" are no longer mutually exclusive entities. Young investment bankers working 80 hours a week are buying Prius hybrids and building themselves homes that flaunt the latest green design principles. Meanwhile, inner-city school principals and nonprofit directors are adopting corporate management strategies that demand banker-like hours and data-driven results from their employees. Some of today's hottest buzzwords—"social enterprise," "microfinance," "corporate sustainability"— explicitly, even oxymoronically, seek to merge the flower child and master of the universe fragments into one.

Contemporary young Americans have come of age in a climate unlike any previous group of Americans. They have grown up with access to enormous amounts of information from *Wikipedia* and elsewhere while we, their elders, worry about the veracity of the information coming at them— from *Wikipedia*, in chat rooms, on *MySpace*, etc. Earlier generations sought guidance and mentorship from singular "experts," while today's young adults piece together fragments from a multitude of sources.

We believe these new ways of making sense of the world make it harder for contemporary young adults to form a coherent framework or worldview, though these young adults are also less dependent upon a few designated authorities to form that worldview. That greater independence may be self-protecting in a world where the foibles and shortcomings of our remaining authority figures are so routinely exposed.

In the end, there may be a silver lining in this fragmented pattern. In the distant past, individuals took their identities from admired role models. When psychologist Erik Erikson described the "identity crisis," some years ago, he saw identity as a co-construction between the desires of the individual, on the one hand, and the signals from the community on the other. Nowadays young people get much less guidance from *the* community, or, more properly, the several communities in which they reside. If our young people nonetheless succeed in constructing a coherent identity—or to live productively and coherently with a fragmented sense—then this is truly an accomplishment for which they deserve primary credit. Perhaps one reason for President Barack Obama's appeal to young people is that, as an adolescent, he had more incommensurate fragments than most young Americans and yet has managed to integrate them into a coherent, convincing composite.

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