

**Next Generations: Reactives to Civics to Adaptives,**  
as foreseen by an old Adaptive (Jim Dator)

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"Next Generation" means "technology" to you. It means "people" to me. So what do you get when you cross your technology with my people? Let's see.

Two of the theories I use to make what I hope are useful statements about the future are age-cohort analysis and a more sophisticated version of Marshall McLuhan's famous statement, "We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us." Nothing changed my life more than cheap and abundant oil, the automobile, the jet plane, air-conditioning, space satellites, electronic communication technologies, and bottomless consumer debt. So I constantly am interested in what new technologies are on the drawing board and especially what technologies are about to rolled out of factories into a Wal-Mart nearby.

Age-cohort analysis is another theory/method I use. It is based on the fact that people born and growing up during the same time span, and in the same cultural space, share ideas and beliefs about the world which are very different from the ideas and beliefs held by members of age cohorts only a few years older or younger than they are.

Thus, when an age cohort with one "worldview" retires and leaves positions of political and economic power, and a new age cohort with a very different "worldview" comes in, the world changes because, holding different beliefs, the actions and policies of the newer cohort differ substantially from those of the older cohorts.

Studying the interaction between new technologies, and new and old age-cohorts helps me understand much of the past and present, and some important things about the futures.

In the US, the cohort born in the 1910s and 1920s who grew up during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and fought the Second World War in the early 1940s (often termed the "G. I. Generation"), carry with them forever the dashed hopes of the glittering flapper era followed by profound poverty, the horror of war, and then the sweet triumph of complete victory and global dominance--tempered by the death of so many friends and loved ones. These were their "galvanizing experiences" that define them as a cohort. They have a "can do" attitude towards almost anything, having been teased, tested, tempered--and triumphant. They earned and deserve the label "The Great Generation". Locally, they are members of the 442<sup>nd</sup> generation who largely shaped what Hawaii is today.

But children in all the following cohorts experienced neither significant economic deprivation nor war on a mass-mobilized, global scale. They only know, and expect as a natural right, peace and prosperity without their having to struggle for it.

Childrearing fashions change too, and influence adult behavior. One of the largest cohorts ever born in the US--the so-called "Baby Boomers" born between the late 1940s and 1960--were reared by parents who followed the advice of Dr. Benjamin Spock in his book, *Baby and Child Care*. The parents of the Baby Boomers lived in suburban isolation trying to rear four or five children without experienced family members around to guide them. Dr. Spock's book filled the void, telling them to just let their children "do their own thing," freely, and without restraint. Trust your children's basic instincts. Let them be.

Yet children born before them, in the 1930s and early 40s, were reared in a completely different way--"scientifically" and according to "the clock". They were expected to eat at specific times (not sooner or later), to move their bowels on command (and not before or after the command), to take naps and go to bed at an exact moment on the clock, and in general to be disciplined by scientific, strict, mechanical, external forces--not by their own whims and internal rhythms and certainly not by the emotions or loving instincts of their mothers. Indeed love had nothing to do with child rearing, and mothers were judged inferior to the scientific principles discovered, of course, by men.

For much of American history you had to be a war hero to be elected to national office. Generalissimo Dwight D. Eisenhower, a WWII hero, was the last great example. But Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Newt Gingrich, George W. Bush, and Barack Hussein Obama became national leaders without having military service at all. That entire life-warping experience of military life that conditioned almost all males and many females (and certainly all major political leaders) came to an end.

In the 2008 presidential election, only one of the main candidates for the presidency was a Gen Xer--the cohort born in the 60s and 70s. All the rest were Boomers--or Silents. But the victor turned out to be a person who broke all the old rules about who could be elected president. Obama is our first Gen X president. You may remember that Obama's eventual Republican opponent was John McCain, a Boomer Vietnam war veteran who tried to use his experiences as a prisoner of war to get him elected. That was utterly unappealing to young citizens who massed to vote for hope and change--which then never happened.

It is worth noting the age-cohorts of the US Supreme Court since they are the final arbiters of controversy in our political system. Who they are and what they think impacts every American for generations to come. Of the nine members of the current US Supreme Court, almost half--four of the nine--are antique Silents (Scalia, Kennedy, Ginsburg and Bryer). Most of the rest--four more--are fading Boomers (Roberts, Alito, Thomas, Sotomayer). Only one of the members of the US Supreme Court is Gen X--and only barely so (Elena Kagan).

These are the people who will make the final decisions about the technologies you develop and about how people should use them. How do you think they will decide, given their cohort experiences? How representative are they of future generations, whose lives they will control by their decisions?

While some of you in this room today are Boomers, I suspect many of you are Gen X, while the rest are Millennials. Rising quickly behind you, though still in school or waiting to be born, are members of what are sometimes called the Cyber generation. The numerous Baby Boomers are retiring fast, and the Millennials are putting the squeeze on the few Gen Xers caught in the middle.

To repeat: When one cohort leaves power and a new one comes in, the world changes.

Now, the age cohort labels I have been using here come from William Strauss and Neil Howe. They persuasively demonstrated that there have been four successive "generations" of Americans who have cycled through American history from colonial times to the present, and, they forecast, on through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, into the futures.

The four cohort-types found in the past and expected in the future in the US are:

- Idealists
- Reactives
- Civics
- Adaptives

Then the cycle begins again with new Idealists, then, new Reactives, and so on.

As the name implies, the Idealists have some new vision of the future that they strive to articulate, but are not able to achieve in their lifetime.

The next generation, Reactives, reject the Idealists dream, and harken back to the ideals of earlier cohorts as their guide.

Then the next cohort, the Civics, accept the Idealists' vision as given, and do their best to see that it becomes reality; they see the world through the lens of the Idealists, and actualize it.

But the vision is spent and weak by the time the next generation comes long, and yet there is no viable alternative yet. So these Adaptives simply do the best they can with the old ideal, but are pretty cynical about anything new or better for the future.

Until a new generation of new Idealists comes along with a new ideal...and so on forever through American history and futures, say Strauss and Howe.

OK. So now let's consider the cohorts from the GIs to the Millennials and beyond in terms of the technologies that also shaped them and that they shaped by their generic cohort characteristics. Remember that "technologies" are not only physical tools, but also social institutions and political movements as well.

The GI's are last generation who learned primarily by direct experience of hard manual labor, especially on the farm. They are the last cohort who knew how to skin a moose, churn butter, and prime a pump. All formal learning was by live lectures and sermons, and reading and writing (though only a small portion of them did much reading or writing until the GI Bill sent thousands to college at federal taxpayer expense who never could have gone otherwise, setting the stage for America as a future information society). Newspapers, radio, black and white still photographs, and black and white silent movies were part of their environment when young--talking movies came later. Color movies and live television were introduced when they were adults and are still considered to be entertaining nonessential frills--frosting on a pound cake of reality. Media were to be consumed, not produced.

The automobile made increased auto-mobility possible for some, but not for many. They are thrifty and hardworking. Being Civics, they believe strongly in the American Dream of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and are fully confident in the ability of real Americans to do anything we put our minds too. They have always been very optimistic about the future--while also aware of its fragility. They are racially prejudiced if white or accepting of racial discrimination if not. For a brief period during WWII, women flooded the workplace, only to be sent home afterwards, where they belonged.

The next generation, the Silents, grew up with color movies and live broadcast television, but reading and writing still prevailed. In fact, this was the Golden Age of newspaper and serious book reading. They were also consumers and not producers of media. The Silents were very few in number and, as Reactives, tended to identify mainly with the GIs in most essential ways, having no particular distinctive style or influences of their own--save their very strict and by-the-clock "scientific" child-rearing experiences.

Vitamins were invented while they were young and given to them for the first time. Moreover, they are the last generation to have eaten plenty of balanced, home-cooked food instead of obesity-causing fast-foods in their youth. Struggles for and against racial integration were a major feature of their youth and they remain racially prejudiced if vaguely tolerant. There have no doubt that a woman's place is in the home though tolerate the "gals" elsewhere. They are as thrifty as the GIs, but much more cynical about life and the future.

The Boomers--the largest age-cohort--are Idealists by cohort designation. Hippies, flower children, devotees of drugs, sex and rock and roll--they were loved but pretty much "let be" by their puzzled parents, following the advice of Dr. Spock. Audio and videotape enabled them to record and manipulate reality for the first time. But for the most part, they were passive, vinyl natives. Though still educated by reading and writing, their world has been increasingly mediated by audio-visual productions. Reality is fading away as they strive to adjust to it.

They expected to have automobiles and air-conditioning as a matter of right. Indeed, they have a strong sense of entitlement to everything, in part because of their large numbers and in part by virtue of being Idealists. Struggles for and against racial equality and woman's liberation were dramatic events in their lives. Being world-class complainers without a clue, they once were groupie peacenicks, but now fuel the T-Party. They will soon swell high-tech, assisted-living settlements though they do not ever expect to die.

Pity the poor Gen-Xers, generically called "Reactives" because they have no dreams of their own as a cohort--a cohort so colorless it doesn't even have a distinctive name, just an X. Television was a given, but computers new to them, though they struggled to master their use. They were latch-key kids from broken homes who grew up by surviving on their own and so are highly individualistic and self-

centered. Being the echo of the Silents, they are also relatively few in number, and therefore are often squeezed out by the numerous Boomers who think they will never die, and by the persistent and healthy old Silents who actually may never die because their food and lifestyles were so wholesome. One of the distinctive features of Gen X is that absolutely nothing happened to them as a cohort. They are unique in having no galvanizing experience. Years of asking my students about their galvanizing experiences confirmed this. It was truly unsettling to have a generation of students collectively draw a blank when asked to describe the galvanizing experience they all shared--other than divorced parents.

The Millennials started out the same way, but 9/11 ended their calm and placid lives. Millennials are relatively numerous Civics who are the best educated and most thoroughly pampered and group-oriented cohorts in American history. They are only children (some have one sibling), went to Punahou, were driven to violin practice and Mandarin lessons by their parents who protected them from everything real or threatening. They all played soccer on manicured fields, strictly by the rules, on teams with coaches, and referees, and cute little uniforms while their doting parents cheered nervously. Winning didn't matter. At the end, both sides were taken to share ice cream together (Except in Hawaii where they have ever-expanding and increasingly-catered potlucks).

The Millennials can't stand the slightest criticism, and expect to be given high grades and effusive praise for everything they do. If they don't get the praise they want from their parents and teachers--and they don't, no matter how much praise is heaped on them--then they form little peer groups where they praise each others' crappy work, and then tweet to the world about things no one else in the world cares about, but pretends to, so that their own trivial tweets will be read and praised as "Oh My God! That's totally awesome. Like me, one day, at band camp".

They were raised to be praised, and as long as everyone plays by the rules and no one gets hurt, they are wonderful. Computers to them are like water to a fish, and not for computing--strictly for communicating. They will not read anything unless forced to do so. They are the first true digital natives: Youtube, Facebooks, Twitter, and the rest are the nerves that twitch them to life.

They are eagerly awaiting the next generation of your technologies and their heads are already in the clouds searching for it. They have made ADD a virtue in their entirely artificial world. They are utterly without prejudice concerning ethnicity, gender, or sexual preference--since that would require them to make a judgment about something which they absolutely cannot do. But they are ripe for a good dictator who makes the trains run on time when times go really bad.

All of you are familiar with the **grand theory of history that says that human societies evolved** from small, nomadic, hunting and gathering societies; to sedentary agricultural societies around urban hubs; to industrial societies with huge factories and cities; and now to a global information society. This evolution was driven by new technologies, especially communication and transportation technologies that have allowed humans to think, share, expand, and thrive at exponential rates.

Some futurists say that the era of the information society is over and that the next era is the Dream Society of icons and aesthetic experience. You folks in telecom are the major drivers of this social transformation to a society where dreams--and the production and consumption of dreams--are more important than information, just as information is now more important than the production of goods and food.

Elements of a Dream Society already exist in the behavior of the Millennials, but it may dominate the lives of the next generation, tentatively called the Cybers.

They are being born or still in school, and thus difficult to characterize in detail, but the Cybers are generically Adaptive. As such, certain things about them can be anticipated.

They will not have strong opinions on their own. They will tend to identify with Millennials--and, later in their lives, with the Idealists who will come after them. Their young lives will be lived almost entirely in dynamic virtual realities of their own choosing. Genetically modified and artificially intelligent beings will be their friends and lovers much to the chagrin of their parents and grandparents who will be prejudiced against the artifacts they embrace.

The major galvanizing experience for them will occur as young adults, when the oil runs out and they finally learn that nothing has been developed to replace it as the lights abruptly go out. Environmental issues, long neglected and exacerbated, will demand their attention as the oceans rise, potable water disappears, food becomes very scarce, corporations collapse, the machines stop, and T-partied governments are absolutely incapable of doing anything about it.

While tragic for the remaining boomers and millennials, the cybers know how to adapt. They had no expectation of social support from government or corporations to begin with, and so quickly learn to count only on their friends, neighbors and themselves as the Dream Society vanishes and they wake up to new realities.

Of course, I may be wrong: an extended Dream Society is always possible, but increasingly likely as well, or instead, is a prolonged period of economic stagnation, energy shortages, environmental challenges, and political stalemate. For this, the Boomers deserve a lot of the blame because there are so many of them demanding to be instantly gratified into death do them part. Surviving Gen Xers will be busy taking care of Number One and to hell with everyone else as they have always done, while the remaining Millennials will be tweeting each other on foot-pedal-operated twittering machines. Only the adaptive Cybers will thrive as many of the values and institutions of their great, great grandparents, the GIs and Silents, become relevant once again, but without the ethnic, gender, sexual prejudices and violence of their time.

But what do I know about the futures?