Born Digital, But Then What?

UT professor Craig Watkins on the migratory patterns of the Internet's first flock

By Belinda Acosta

It's no accident that the title of Craig Watkins' new book, *The Young and the Digital*, is an oblique reference to a daytime soap opera. His book is a scholarly examination of how young people use social media and technology, with all the facts and figures a scholarly examination requires. But when it comes right down to it, the book exists because Watkins had a story to tell. And as it turns out, the primacy of story – how humans want and need to tell stories – is as much a part of his findings as the data he has analyzed.

"For me, stories are at the center of what young people are attracted to," Watkins said in an interview at his office at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is an associate professor in the Radio-Television-Film Department. *The Young and the Digital: What the Migration to Social-Network Sites, Games, and Anytime, Anywhere Media Means for Our Future* is his third book focusing on youth culture (his earlier titles include 1998's *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* and 2005's *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*. Published in October of this year, *The Young and the Digital* examines how teens through twentysomethings use technology, specifically social media like Facebook, MySpace, online games, and texting. "Much has been talked about and written about the technology revolution," Watkins said, "but what is really revolutionary are the ways that young people are choosing to tell their stories, or life sharing."

*The Young and the Digital* is the result of research started in 2006 when Watkins was invited to join the MacArthur Foundation's digital media and learning initiative. The collection of scholars, visionaries, and other leaders from around the world were asked to "explore the intersection of digital media, everyday life, and learning." For his project, Watkins collected more than 500 surveys and 350 in-depth interviews with young people, parents, and educators to assess the use and impact of social media on the first generation of digital natives – those who have always had technology in their lives.

There's a long history of hesitancy in popular culture regarding digital innovation, running from concern to outright fear of the soulless machine overtaking the heart of man. While that's mostly the stuff of science fiction, panic still rises to the top from time to time and especially in this moment of rapid media and technological change.

"I think for a while there, there was a sense of hysteria and paranoia about how technology was making us less social and that face-to-face interactions were diminished," Watkins said, referring to Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In short, Putnam argued that increasingly media-rich homes were eroding participation in public life.
"A great irony of life on the computer screen," Watkins writes in his introduction, "is the fact that we usually go online alone but often with the intent of communicating with other people. Among the teens and young adults that we talk to, time spent in front of a computer screen is rarely, if ever, considered time spent alone." Social media, Watkins asserts, is an interim mode of communication and a means to coordinate future face-to-face interactions, not a substitute for human interaction, as was argued in the past.

"I came away with a different question," he said. "I would perhaps argue that we are excessively social." Because of the ability to always "be on," Watkins considers what the repercussions are when attention is constantly shared (i.e. multitasking). How does it affect learning? How does it affect engagement? How, he wonders, will the first generation of digital natives' use of technology change when they enter the work force and start their careers?

Though Watkins offers plenty of dry data in his book, his overall writing style is conversational and thankfully void of academic jargon. It's wonky stuff, sure, but The Young and the Digital is remarkably readable. Maybe even more remarkable is what a focused account Watkins has produced about a media climate that is still in flux, in which he ponders questions that may not be answered until this moment in media history has long passed.