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Confronting the Myth of the 'Digital Native'

By Megan O'Neil

When Kaitlin Jennrich first walked into her communications seminar last fall, she had no idea that the professor already knew of her affinity for pink cars and Olive Garden breadsticks—and that she planned to share that knowledge with the class. It hadn't taken much sleuthing on the professor's part to uncover those inane nuggets. The 18-year-old freshman at Northwestern University had herself lobbed them into the public sphere, via Twitter.

Her reaction, she recalls, was, "Oh, no."

"I realized the kind of image I was putting out there wasn't the kind of image I wanted potential employers or professors to see," says Ms. Jennrich, whose professional aspirations include sports public relations.

That is just the sort of gut check that Eszter Hargittai, a sociologist and Northwestern professor in the communications-studies department, wants students to make during the 10-week course called "Managing Your Online Reputation." She created the curriculum with her colleague Brayden King, an associate professor of management and organization at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management.

Campus efforts to educate students about their digital presence, if they happen at all, exist as one-off, library-sponsored workshops or course addenda. They usually emphasize enhanced privacy settings on social-media accounts and scary case studies of career-ending YouTube videos.

While the course developed by Ms. Hargittai and Mr. King uses

cautionary tales, it also seeks to train students to build robust, productive online identities through which they can engage topics of interest, command audiences, and advance their careers. The course draws on social-science research about reputation and crisis management. The professors believe it to be one of a kind.

"The way that most students find jobs or connect with people is not by mailing out résumés," Mr. King says. "It is by people finding each other on social media."

A decade after Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook at Harvard University, the idea that an ambitious young person should maintain a clean record, digitally speaking, might seem like yesterday's news.

But Ms. Hargittai and Mr. King, among others, say that the familiar narrative about tech-smart young people is false. Their course grew out of years of research conducted by Ms. Hargittai on the online skills of millennials. The findings paint a picture not of an army of app-building, HTML-typing twenty-somethings, but of a stratified landscape in which some, mostly privileged, young people use their skills constructively, while others lack even basic Internet knowledge.

In one multiyear study that Ms. Hargittai conducted on students' Internet use at the University of Illinois at Chicago, about one-third of the survey respondents could not identify the correct description of the 'bcc' email function. More than one-quarter said they had not adjusted the privacy settings or content of social-media profiles for job-seeking purposes.

"It is problematic that there are so many assumptions about how just because a young person grew up with digital media, which in fact many have, that they are automatically savvy," Ms. Hargittai says. "That is simply not the case. There are increasing amounts of empirical evidence to suggest the contrary."

"Because a 2-year-old can swipe their finger on an iPad, suddenly every young person, every child, is just universally knowledgeable about digital media," she says. "But there is so much more to using

digital media than turning it on or starting an app."

Siva Vaidhyanathan, chair of the media-studies department at the University of Virginia, describes Ms. Hargittai as a "pioneer of empirical Internet studies." It is "absolutely untrue" that young people understand how the Internet works when they enroll in college, he says. "That myth is in the direct interest of education-technology companies and Silicon Valley itself. If we all decide that young people have some sort of savantlike talent with digital technology, than we're easily led to policies and buying decisions and pedagogical decisions that pander to Silicon Valley."

Assuming that young people know all they need to know about technology means they often don't have opportunities to learn or ask questions, Ms. Hargittai says.

"I think it is incredibly important for educational institutions to recognize that students aren't universally savvy and address this," she says. "If nothing else, you need to do this because the less privileged students know a lot less than the more privileged ones, and by not addressing this, the institutions are perpetuating inequalities across their students."

The Northwestern course on online identity management comes at a time when everyone with a Facebook wall is a publisher, and everyone with a Twitter handle is a brand. The perpetuity of Internet content raises the stakes for those who use such platforms.

Ms. Hargittai taught the inaugural class to 15 undergraduates during the 2013 winter term. There was a waiting list when she taught it again last fall. Both she and Mr. King will offer it during the next academic year, Mr. King to M.B.A. students. The two professors have a contract with Princeton University Press to write a book about online reputation management, and the class could inform some of the book's content, Ms. Hargittai says.

Throughout the course, students are required to search for themselves on various search engines, including Bing, DuckDuckGo, and Dogpile, and take note of what the Internet

turns up. Other assignments include creating profiles on platforms such as Google Plus and Tumblr, and engaging with people of professional interest on Twitter. Each student must create and present to the class a brief case study of someone who has successfully managed and benefited from a positive online reputation.

The exercise in which Ms. Hargittai digs up bits of information on each student and shares them on the first day of class is meant to let students see themselves as an employer might.

For some who completed the course, the lessons are paying off in concrete ways. Jackie Quinn, a 19-year-old sophomore and aspiring comedy writer, says she landed two internships in Los Angeles this summer by leveraging Twitter to do comedy and to connect with professionals whose work she admires.

"I know I wanted to be a writer, but I would never have the chance before to look up writers and see what they are thinking, jokes that they are pushing," she says. "Twitter makes that really easy."

Her breakthrough came during an event last year held by the Northwestern University Women Filmmakers Alliance. Ms. Quinn was managing the group's Twitter account, and an LA-based comedy writer in attendance took note. They began talking about their work. The writer followed Ms. Quinn's personal Twitter account, and during winter break, the student asked the writer to circulate her résumé, leading to the internship offers. Ms. Quinn, who has spinal muscular atrophy and uses a wheelchair, says building an online identity has enabled her to connect with others in ways that might otherwise have been difficult.

"I think that my wheelchair is daunting to a lot of people," Ms. Quinn says. "And with an online presence, where I can just show who I am without attaching a wheelchair to it, it can let people get to know me and to know my comedy. They can see that I am approachable and a funny kid."

Other students say that if nothing else, the class has prompted them to be more thoughtful about the way they

conduct themselves online.

"The other day I was scrolling through Facebook, and someone had posted a picture of themselves doing illegal drugs," says Nicholas Prose, 20, a sophomore who took the course last year. "I was like, 'Uh, really? That would have made me cringe before I took the class, but now even more."

As for Ms. Jennrich, the student with a fondness for Olive Garden breadsticks and pink cars, she has built a small audience on her Twitter feed around Northwestern athletics. She tweets campus sports news and has earned at least one retweet from the university's sports Twitter account and a follow from a star athlete.

"I used to tweet offhand," Ms. Jennrich says. Now that she realizes her tweets could potentially reach multitudes, she says, "I am a lot more cautious. I don't know how they are going to receive the message."