

KIDS ON EARTH - THE NEXT NORMAL

HOWARD BLUMENTHAL

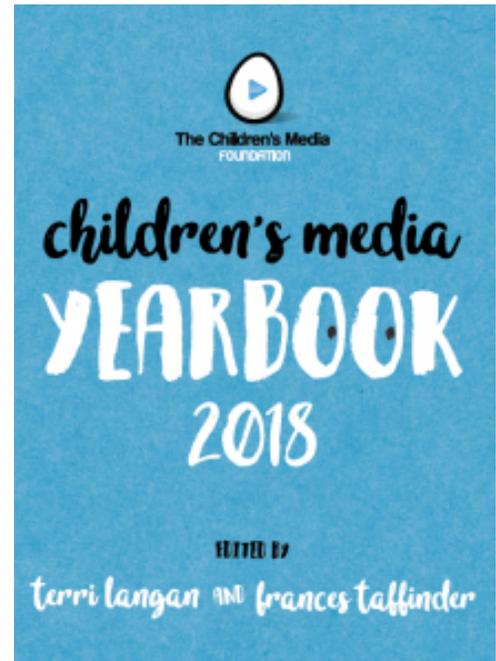
Five key ideas are shaping our next generation.

- Half of the world's children and teenagers are literate and connected by technology, with another quarter not far behind.
- Video is taking the place of print and writing as our primary means of sharing ideas.
- Informal education among peers is overwhelming the limitations of school and formal learning.
- Children and teenagers are learning what they want to learn, when they want to learn, and how much they want to learn.
- Global citizenship is disrupting local, regional, state, provincial, and national thinking.

As Alejandra in Massachusetts waits patiently for Danilo in the Philippines to wake up and play Minecraft before she goes to bed, Alej is on FaceTime with her sister Maria in Mexico, and asks to see the new Australian Shepherd puppy. Maria tells her sister about Li Wei, whose parents are Chinese (dad) and Egyptian (mom). He says he's Chigyptian. Alej thinks he's cute.

As nationalist politics enjoys its last blast of power, localism faces a big challenge. People are no longer living the lives they once did. In many classrooms, kids with roots in Kenya or Greece sit next to kids from Brazil and Vietnam, and become friends. They read books by Roald Dahl and J.K. Rowling. They watch Nickelodeon. They know Ariana Grande's concert was bombed in Manchester, England, and that she returned for a benefit show. They like to eat pizza and fried chicken, pasta and Chinese food, too. The new normal isn't just international—connecting one country to another—it's global.

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It doesn't matter whether they're eight or fifteen—kids are curious. The internet has opened a new world for them, a world they can explore by making friends everywhere. Well aware of potential dangers, and quite reasonably assuming adults are hard at work to keep them safe, children and teenagers watch and listen to far away people and places. They ask questions and sometimes, those questions are answered. Little of this is structured, well-researched, properly supervised, or responsibly monitored, but that's not going to stop an eleven-year-old who wants to learn more about kangaroos or the Royal Wedding.

Years ago, I created and produced a popular television series called *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?* for PBS in the U.S.A. and several other countries. We developed *Carmen* by talking to over a thousand children in the U.S., asking them what they knew about the world and what they wanted to know. Recently, I started that process again, talking to kids in schools in the U.S., then, around the world.

When an NGO offered a Media Fellowship to interview children and teenagers in Uganda last summer, I realized how little I knew about a country with 43 million people. Most U.S. adults knew as little as I did (vague 1970s references to Entebbe and Idi Amin). Kids in the U.S. were uncertain whether Uganda was a country, an article of clothing, or a kind of animal.

I visited four schools in Uganda. The children and teenagers were very proud of their “peaceful nation.” Well aware of Uganda's struggles with corruption and poor economic opportunity, they were studying to become doctors, members of parliament, teachers, and engineers. They knew a lot about U.S. politics—parsing key achievements in Obama's presidency, expressing high hopes for Trump (because his decisions affect everyone in the world), explaining how and why Clinton lost the 2016 election. How do they know all of this? Television and dinner table conversation, but mostly the internet.

Under the protection of “no question is a stupid question,” I asked about wild animals in Africa. Do they roam the streets of the capital city, Kampala, Uganda? Do local students ever walk beside a giraffe on the way to school? Their answers were good-humored (being silly plays well in just about every country). No, they explained (with a smile on their faces), those animals live in the safety of the savannah up north, in a game park. They became comfortable asking their

own questions. Few had traveled beyond Uganda, except, perhaps, on a school trip to nearby Kenya or Tanzania.

When I told them I was traveling next to Hong Kong, they asked about food, school, climate, football (soccer), families, China, ferry boats, language, pets, houses, subways, and more. I was curious, too, not only about life in Hong Kong, but about how, exactly, I would cause local kids in Hong Kong to magically appear before me, with personal release forms signed by parents, to be recorded by a video camera and a microphone that I did not yet own or know how to operate. Thank goodness for the internet, email, and the kindness of strangers!

The kids I encountered at a school for musical theater in Hong Kong were informal and articulate. Their parents came from Korea, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, always with mom from one place and dad from another. Trips to visit relatives on other continents were common. Unlike Uganda, where most people's roots extend from rural villages to Kampala for job and educational opportunities, the sense in Hong Kong was not international, but global. The entire world was available to those with the interest and inclination to explore and make the necessary connections.

Thilo was co-starring in a very large (and fun!) musical comedy called *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. There were posters for the show everywhere in Hong Kong's MTR public transit system. Speaking like a seasoned performer, the twelve year old casually told me about his character's role in the story of two drag queens and a transgender woman (Priscilla is a lavender colored bus on its way to Alice Springs). He was so nonchalant about the subject matter—and I wondered whether I would meet other kids, in other parts of the world, whose parents would be so open-minded. And when the time came, how would I start a discussion with a ten year old about faith and religion, knowing that the video would be shown throughout the world on a Kids on Earth website or Vimeo channel?

Next stop was an proper boy's school in Altrincham, near Manchester, England. Those young men were well-mannered, dressed like the private school students I met in Uganda (also, British Empire). Still, they were running around the schoolyard, tagging and teasing, tossing balls around, huddling with groups of friends, easily distracted, just like boys and girls everywhere in the world. As we settled down for one-on-one interviews, I found out that Kylan's dad was a

British football star originally from Barbados, Franek told me about his extended family in Poland. Like the U.S., England is now very international, rich with immigrants.

Moving on, I was less certain about the middle school students I would encounter in an upscale suburban middle school outside Philadelphia. This year's American football champions—the Super Bowl winners—were the Philadelphia Eagles, so I was prepared for young teenage fans wearing Eagles sweatshirts. I did not anticipate chatting about shopping malls in Ulan Bator with Olivia, who had recently relocated from Mongolia, nor did I expect to meet Sianna, a joyful fourteen-year-old who is helping to raise four foster children in a family with financial challenges. I met kids from Moldova, Israel, Ukraine, India, Russia, and Japan. They were media savvy, knowledgeable about healthy food (often preferring less healthy options), good students if not quite as dedicated or diligent as those I met in Uganda, frequent travelers to nearby ocean beaches and New York City (about two hours away). They do their homework, love and tangle with siblings, bicycle around the neighborhood, read, learn to cook, and play outside with friends. Some play videogames, but only a few were interested in pop culture, movies, or TV.

Next, I am off to Bulgaria, then Slovenia, then England for our conference, hopeful about a side trip to Scotland or Wales. There are whispers about travels to the Philippines and Uruguay, and southern Australia later this year. This summer, we'll try something new: interviews conducted by a professor and undergraduates as part of a project in Sierra Leone. A musician and producer in Pakistan, and by a graduate student in Afghanistan who is addressing kids' concerns about terrorism, have also volunteered to record local interviews to our specifications. In connection with global citizenship and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, some students are planning to record their own Kids on Earth interviews in their elementary and middle schools. Later this year, we'll begin to explore other languages, translations and captions (in part to understand non-English speakers, in part to familiarize young people with languages other than their own). We will begin to record interviews via Skype, careful not to sacrifice informality or authenticity in the process. We are beginning to work with children who require assistive devices to communicate, with young people in refugee families, and in remote locations, including, perhaps central Alaska and Appalachia. We are collaborating with university professors on research projects related to authentic storytelling, often within their specialties, including public health, journalism, international law, and developmental psychology.

Every day, we think in terms of three steps: awareness through storytelling, connected kids, and altruism.

Kids on Earth storytelling is authentic and simple, very lightly produced, gently directed and minimally edited. There is no merchandising or licensing program, but someday, maybe a lot of young people will wear Kids on Earth caps or t-shirts, or carry books in a Kids on Earth backpack (books sent by young friends in other countries where books are abundant). Right now, we're raising awareness—it's tough to care about somebody if you've never heard of the country they live in.

Over 2 billion kids live on earth. If we could provide a safe way to connect every one of them, that's what we would do. For now, we participate in public policy discussions to assure a future of secure connections to promote curiosity and global understanding.

We believe kids are naturally compassionate, happy to help one another. We're meeting potential partners to develop 21st century programs for public good, powered by the first connected, literate generation of global citizens.

You can help in three ways. First, introduce us to schools and teachers around the world. Second, connect us with resources to expand our travel budget so we can interview more children and teenagers around the world. Third, when you're seeking a partner passionate about global citizenship for young people, please keep us in mind.

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- To learn more about Kids on Earth, please visit: www.kidsonearth.org
 - To watch a lot of Kids on Earth videos, go to: <https://vimeo.com/user31644857>
 - Wharton article: <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/how-the-next-generation-of-global-kids-will-learn-from-one-another/>
 - About Howard Blumenthal: <http://www.hblumenthal.com>