

streams of specialized news delivered clearly and factually. Move parts of the White House press operation into regional and local offices, even overseas. Hold presidential news conferences online, or in front of student newspaper editors, or even members of Congress. To prevent a disaggregated communications operation from sending out mixed messages, the president himself should use his position as communicator in chief to pull together themes and explain ideas as he attempts to bring the political change he promised.

Offer multiple televised messages to minimize the importance

of a daily briefing that has become a “silly theater of the absurd with all sides posturing for the cameras and the editors and employers watching.” Consider filming cabinet meetings or even some National Security Council sessions. “The more everything at the White House is televised, the less that any one thing becomes a focus for disproportionate coverage,” he says. The more Americans see of serious policymaking, the greater their respect for it will be. Trust the generation facile in Facebook and ubiquitous on YouTube, McCurry counsels, and run a spin-free exercise devoted to getting the public the information it needs.

PRESS & MEDIA

Congenitally Digital?

THE SOURCE: “Generational Myth” by Siva Vaidyanathan, in *The Chronicle Review*, Sept. 19, 2008.

IN THE WAKE OF THE GREATEST, the beat, the baby boom, and the millennial generations comes the “digital generation,” another empty formulation describing an amorphous group with a trait of the moment. Siva Vaidyanathan, a professor of media studies and law at the University of Virginia, says that a generation of “digital

EXCERPT

Stand Up for Integration

The Carolina Israelite was a remarkable solo act, a bold effort to liberate its southern white readers from the inertia of tradition, defying the odds that anyone producing a one-man newspaper in the mid-20th century was very likely to be a crank. . . .

The Vertical Negro Plan, which made [editor Harry] Golden's reputation, . . . was simple. Blacks and whites standing together—in grocery store lines, at bank tellers' windows, at drugstore counters—appeared to pose little challenge to regional mores. Only when blacks sat down—on buses, at dining counters, in theaters—did they seem not to know their place. So why not provide “only desks in all the public schools of our state—[and] no seats.” He commented that since pupils “are not learning to read, sitting down, anyway, perhaps standing up will help.”

—STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD, professor at Brandeis University, in *Southern Cultures* (Fall 2008)



The Carolina Israelite, written and edited by Harry Golden (right), influenced readers such as poet Carl Sandburg, author of “Chicago.”

natives" doesn't exist.

"I am in the constant company of 18-to-23-year-olds. I have taught at both public and private universities, and I have to report that the levels of comfort with, understanding of, and dexterity with digital technologies vary greatly within every class." Overall, Vaidyanathan finds, students' level of computer savvy hasn't budged in a decade.

"Every class has a handful of people with amazing skills and a large number who can't deal with computers at all," he says. Although studies show that three out of four children had access to a computer at home as long ago as

2003, many used it for playing games rather than connecting to the Internet and taking advantage of its scholastic potential. Even at elite universities, many students are not affluent enough to have had extensive digital experience, Vaidyanathan writes. Painting an entire generation as innately digital discounts the experience of immigrants and those who don't speak English. "Mystical talk about a generational shift and all the claims that kids won't read books are just not true. . . . They all (I mean all) tell me that they prefer the technology of the bound book to the PDF or webpage."

What is a generation, anyway?

The Vietnam War affected most men who were 18 to 25 at the time, but they are hardly a "Vietnam generation" with common experiences. College students are more complicated than any "imaginary generations" can portray. Lack of Web-savviness correlates with "identity traits" among young people, according to new research being conducted by Eszter Hargittai, a sociologist at Northwestern University. Who are these less Web-proficient undergraduates? Women, Hispanics, African Americans, and students whose parents have lower levels of education. Sounds as if a lot of young people missed out on digital DNA.

HISTORY

Fallout From the Ice Age

THE SOURCE: "Crisis and Catastrophe: The Global Crisis of the 17th Century Reconsidered" by Geoffrey Parker, and "Crisis, Chronology, and the Shape of European Social History" by Jonathan Dewald, in *American Historical Review*, Oct. 2008.

HISTORY BURSTS WITH WRITERS who believed they lived in the worst of times, but scholars think they know who's right. People who lived in the mid-17th century faced "adversity on a scale unparalleled in modern times," writes Geoffrey Parker, a historian at Ohio State University. What is dubbed "the General Crisis" affected the entire globe. More wars took place than in any era until the 1940s. The Ming dynasty in China, the world's most populous

country, collapsed; England's king was beheaded; Ottoman sultan Ibrahim was strangled; and the richest state on earth, the Mughal Empire, jailed its ruler. Popular revolts swept across some 50 regions.

For most of the 20th century, these upheavals were explained in the English-speaking world as fall-

Scholars have begun to confirm what Voltaire told his mistress: *le climat* was partly to blame for the great upheavals of the 17th century.

out from the shift from feudalism to capitalism, writes Jonathan Dewald, a historian at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In France, they were seen as evidence of the "limits of pre-industrial society." But new researchers, chronicling disasters from Mombasa to Peru, began to question how such unrelated events could have a single cause.

Parker advances an old theory with a strikingly contemporary ring: The climate did it. Vast new data archives of climate and other information have begun to confirm what Voltaire explained to his mistress, Mme. du Châtelet, in the 1740s. The "period of usurpations almost from one end of the world to the other," he wrote, were the result of government, religion, and "*le climat*."

The Little Ice Age, which had been building for centuries, brought fierce weather globally. In Virginia, Chesapeake Bay "was much of it