Reading Online: Young University Students’ Experience with Internet Reading

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ABSTRACT

The popularization of mobile devices in the everyday life of Mexico City’s broad socio-cultural sectors, particularly the cell phone, calls attention to the fact that young people read and write permanently, from the moment they wake up to the time they go to bed. They receive and answer dozens of messages throughout the day, and they search and publish all kinds of information. Nonetheless, surveys that measure reading practices leave out questions about these experiences, and subjects, when questioned about their reading habits and preferences, don’t mention nor recognize them in their answers. These observations led us to ethnography traditional and emergent reading and writing practices and representations that young people studying Communication in a public university have. Its main results are reviewed in this paper.

Keywords: Communication, Ethnography, Internet Reading, Mexico City, Mobile Devices

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

During 2014 I carried out a research about changes in the ways of reading of different Mexico City sectors. I inquired into traditional and emergent reading and writing practices and representations that young people studying Communication in a public university have from the following questions: how are traditional reading and writing practices localized or relocated in the constant chat, post, publish and click flow? How do young university students represent them? What meanings do they confer to them? Are they kept differentiated? Are they integrated? Hybridized? Resignified? Is their social value altered?

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From these interrogations, emergent reading and writing ways practiced by young people on the internet, and their complementary, paradoxical, recognized of denied coexistence with traditional ways, were observed in the context of social, affective, cognitional and ludic experiences shared by the students with their significant referents (near and far, mediatic and virtual) in social media. This set of shared experiences in the Net will be conceptualized as biographic space, understood as a lived and performed display of contemporary culture:

*A sphere in presence –and also in absence-, between forms of various degrees of vicinity, relationships nor necessary neither hierarchic that acquire their meaning precisely in an space/temporalization, in a simultaneity of occurrences that, because of that, can turn into symptomatic and become susceptible of being articulated, that is to say, of being read comprehensively in the wider frame of a spirit of the age. The biographic space, so understood –confluence of multiple ways, genres and horizons of expectation- is an interesting field of enquiry. It allows us to consider the corresponding specificities without losing sight of their relational dimension, their thematic and pragmatic interactivity, their uses in the different action and communication spheres. [...] In our view, studying the narrative circularity of lives –public and private- is then possible, particularizing in the various genres, in the double dimension of both intertextuality and interdiscursivity. (Arfuch, 2007: 49-50)*

From the anthropological perspective of our research2, we assume that doing ethnography of readers required understanding reading and writing as inseparable and polysemic practices in the biographic space. Also, in order to observe young people’s reading and writing practices in different formats, we focused in the overlaps and negotiations more than in the differences and conflicts, and we favored the inquiry on continuities and discontinuities more than the description of fractures between the various ways of reading and writing.

To carry out the ethnography, we considered firstly the representation and organization of time, which is a key to understanding how are traditional and emergent reading and writing practices localized, as well as the representations that organize the social imaginary of reading. The sense of time, more than any other structuring dimension in the everyday life of young people, has become a malleable symbolic material to define quotidian situations that can apparently be contradictory but that flow in parallel or simultaneously without provoking any conflict of sense. Secondly, we will address continuities and discontinuities between emerging and traditional reading and writing practices by means of sense-producing associative chains that integrate and reconstitute fragments of various texts, stories and images, which are ignored as reference for the synthesis.
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