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Abstract

Most studies into reading from screen and paper focus on characteristics of reading established in relation to print. This article considers emerging digital practices based on studies of information behaviours of scholars in the humanities and teenagers, combined with insights into community use of a historical website. The emerging reading practices are related to the concept of transliteracy and described as “transliterate reading” – the practice of reading across a range of texts when the reader seamlessly switches between different platforms, modalities, genres, and types of reading. The concept of “netchaining” is used to describe an online behaviour that combines a range of media and activities, including reading.

Keywords

Transliteracy; Reading; Information behaviour; Scholars; Teenagers; Community

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Introduction

Until recently, the science and art of reading were of interest to specialists only. With the recent advance of tablets and smart phones, reading practices and the use of reading devices have attracted a great deal of public interest. From concerns about the decline of sustained and engaged reading to fascination with videos of babies and cats interacting with tablets, everyone seems to be interested in the way we read. In May 2015, a Google search of the keywords “reading” and “device” retrieved a staggering 265 million results, and “e-book” retrieved 290 million.

A number of questions arise from the proliferation of digital reading devices, which could be roughly grouped into two categories: 1) questions around the suitability of the screen for print-based types of reading, and 2) questions about the emergence of new reading practices and behaviours. Most current discussions belong in the first category. A critical issue in these discussions concerns the impact of all the screens we use daily on the quantity and quality of our reading.

Despite a common assumption that people nowadays read less books than in the past, American and Australian studies (Australia Council for the Arts, 2014; Rainie, Zickuhr, Purcell, Madden, & Brenner, 2012) found that the opposite is true, although these findings are not definitive. According to an Australian study by Roy Morgan Research (2014), book reading is declining, but online activities do not seem to distract people from reading books. People who spend more time on the Internet also spend more hours reading, this study found. A study by the National Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom found that electronic devices have advantages in improving the reading habits of some groups of children and notes a general preference among young people for reading from screen (Picton, 2014). An Australian study, however, found that teenagers do not necessarily prefer e-books to paper books (Merga, 2014).

Studies of the quality of reading generally favour paper books. Recent studies (Chen, Cheng, Chang, Zheng, & Huang, 2014; Stoop, Kreutzer, & Kircz, 2013) confirm well-recognized advantages of tablets and e-readers for carrying a large number of texts, searching, and skim reading. On the other hand, physical interactions with hard copies, the stability of print text, ease of browsing, and non-linear reading all aid immersed reading, comprehension, and learning (Hillesund, 2010; Mangen & Kuiken, 2014). A study of narrative engagement found that reading from a tablet negatively affects the reader’s engagement when text was perceived as non-fiction, but the effect was not observed when text was perceived as fiction (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014). Chen et al. (2014) found that reading from paper improved literal (also called “shallow”) comprehension, but the difference was less significant for deep comprehension, especially when participants were familiar with tablets.

Another issue is whether the general exposure to online speed and stimuli affects immersion in reading and the ability to devote attention to reading, regardless of technology, especially in young people. Observations by parents and teachers suggest that children and teenagers rarely have patience for the slow pace of most classics. While a positive impact of computer interactions on visual and spatial processing has

been suggested, there is a question of whether abstract thinking based on deep reading is suffering in the process.

These are all relevant questions pointing to the importance of research-based evidence to inform our practices, particularly when they concern children and teenagers. This article, however, will take a different tangent by considering the second category of issues, namely the evidence of emerging reading behaviours. The adoption of well-known reading practices will be discussed as well as signs of different reading qualities emerging from interactions with digital devices. New reading patterns will be considered on the basis of three projects with different groups of participants:

- Scholars as participants in the study *Roles of Electronic Texts in Research Projects in the Humanities*;
- Team members of the project *A History of Aboriginal Sydney*, and their insights into site use by the community; and
- High school students as study participants in the transliteracy and digital storytelling project iTell.

Methodology

Findings from the three research projects were used to consider the patterns of reading discussed in this article. Although the three studies were structured around related research questions, they were conducted independently of each other. Methodological approaches and methods used in each of these studies will be considered in this section.

1. *Roles of Electronic Texts in Research Projects in the Humanities* was a doctoral study into the nature of scholars' engagement with primary materials in digital forms. Qualitative methodology was used to investigate roles of electronic texts in academic research projects. Data was gathered from sixteen scholars in literary and historical studies who discussed thirty research projects.

The study had two phases. In the first phase, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with participants and examined the manuscripts and published works, as well as some e-texts, they mentioned during interviews. In the second phase, in-depth data was gathered from a small group of academics that participated in the first phase. Data-gathering forms, audio-tapes on which participants recorded their comments about their interactions with e-texts, and interviews were used to collect data in the second phase of the study.

Data was analyzed by adopting a hermeneutical approach and grounded theory techniques. Interviews and audio data were transcribed. Software NVivo was used for coding. Additional details about methodology can be found in "Convergent Flows: Humanities Scholars and Their Interactions with Electronic Texts" (Sukovic, 2008a) and "Roles of Electronic Texts in Research Projects in the Humanities" (Sukovic, 2008c).

2. *A History of Aboriginal Sydney* was an academic project conducted by a team led by Professor Peter Read at the University of Sydney from 2010 to 2015. The project aimed to gather historical data and present it in a form that is accessible to Indigenous and

general communities, and high school students. The website was developed to enable community access, and archival solutions were considered from the early days of the project to ensure the preservation of and long-term access to the project data. The author worked as Research Associate on the project and was responsible for the system architecture and Web design.

The online presentation of historical data was new to all members of the project team who worked on creating historical records. Informal conversations indicated that the shift to the online communication of historical findings had an impact on the project team. At the beginning of 2015, the author conducted semi-structured interviews with three team members to document their experiences of exploring and presenting history online. Interviews were transcribed and coded for analysis.

3. *The digital storytelling project iTell* was delivered in a high school library in Sydney. Students were asked to think about a fictional story or a book and explore a different perspective, a less prominent character, or an alternative ending. Students could also choose to present an oral story or their original text as a digital story.

A research study was part of the project aiming to investigate student engagement with learning, development of transliteracy skills, and any impact on student learning after the project. iTell was developed in the framework of action research with several cycles of workshops, data gathering, and analysis. Data was gathered from 34 girls, 12 to 16 years old. A variety of ethnographic data-gathering methods was used in the project, including interviews, surveys, and ethnographic data. All interviews were transcribed. The software packages NVivo and Survey Monkey were used for analysis. Details about the study and research results can be found in “iTell: Transliteracy and Digital Storytelling” (Sukovic, 2014) and student digital stories are available online (St Vincent’s College, 2014).

SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATIONS

The three studies were exploratory in nature, looking into patterns of knowledge construction, skill development, and participants’ experiences in interaction with digital technologies. Research, learning, and creative processes were the primary concerns rather than any particular aspect of these processes. This approach enabled open-ended investigations with different groups of participants. Research findings point toward emerging patterns of reading behaviours, enabling a deeper understanding of interactions with digital technologies. Particularly relevant are emerging comparisons between different groups of users.

A limitation is that the research questions did not focus on reading practices. The three studies were conducted as separate projects rather than parts of the same study. The studies do not have statistical significance, but comparisons with similar groups are possible.

READER-USER-CREATOR

Electronic texts are fluid entities in online environments, which support seamless transitions between different resources, media, and work practices. Even distinctions between print and digital are not as clear as they may appear. In the three research

projects with different groups of participants, some commonalities emerge pointing toward a disappearing line between the reader, user, and creator.

SCHOLAR

The doctoral study into the roles of electronic texts in research projects in the humanities investigated how scholars in literary and historical studies interacted with e-texts during the research process. Research findings were reported in several publications (Sukovic, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2011).

The reading practices of academics were discussed in interviews when the participants showed examples of their reading and organization of research materials. Skim reading of search results and a large number of texts, printing for more convenient reading and intellectual assimilation, and remixing passages from a textual collection in novel approaches to analysis are some of the research practices described by the academics. Skim reading was usually performed on screen to assess the usefulness of retrieved information before more focused reading. Some scholars mentioned speed-reading a whole novel on screen, while a few participants practised reading from screen even when they read in a more focused way and for extended periods of time.

Printing for in-depth reading or speed-reading of longer texts was common, as most people found reading from screen very tiring. Some researchers preferred to take printouts home to read in an armchair rather than at their desk and talked about different physical settings required for focused reading. Frequent interruptions at work were not conducive to focused reading. Another reason for printing was to aid the intellectual assimilation of material. Participant 2/1 (participant 2 in the first stage of the study), for example, felt that she had not read the text properly if she read it on screen, while Participant 13/1 needed to make printouts at some point for synthesis because it was easy to keep adding electronic files without any intellectual grasp of that material. The printed text was usually marked and annotated.

Working simultaneously with hard and electronic copies was a way of using time in an archive efficiently. Participant 7/1 described how she worked in overseas archives where she would conduct a catalogue search and save it for a day, and then she would start ordering materials in hard copies. While waiting for the hard copies to arrive, she used a digitized version to make printouts. Participant 6/1 worked in a similar way by printing digitized rather than archival hard copies. In these examples, reading of digital copies for assessment, examination of originals when the content and physical aspects of the document were of interest, and subsequent reading of page images were all part of a process in which the reading of electronic copies and originals have their specific purpose.

Academics who work with audio files transcribe or summarize documents and work with various combinations of formats. Participant 10/1 tended to read out the content of documents into a tape-recorder in situations when he could not make photocopies. He would transcribe the tapes and use electronic copies of the transcriptions as e-texts. Participant 2/2 described how she worked in an archive, which had a database of audio

files, text transcriptions, and sound waves for some of the recordings. There were also keywords marking sections of the audio-file, which aided retrieval:

... [it] is really a different way of interacting with the text completely because usually with audio you may have some written text, which is coming up in front of you on the screen while you are listening to it from the tape or whatever. But in this, it is actually integrated into the file, so the way I can explain that is that you can search by keywords and so on, actually in the file while it's there in front of you. (Participant 2/2, taped comments)

In this case different levels of understanding are formed in interactions with different aspects of the text. An in-depth focused reading happens, for example, while the researcher listens to an audio-file, relates the content to the sound waves, considers keywords as content markers, and reads the transcript on the screen.

A clear delineation of practices, named and defined in relation to print culture, is often redundant. Old practices, new ways of doing well-known activities, and new practices are coming together to shape new online behaviours. "Netchaining" refers to a combination of any number of research practices in a new pattern of online behaviour (for example, chaining references from a read text, browsing, searching, communicating, and networking). "Netchaining is about establishing and shaping online information chains that link sources and people" (Sukovic, 2008a, p. 274). Any number of reading practices can be part of netchaining – from in-depth reading when a useful reference is found at the bottom of the text, to search and skim reading online, to scan reading for information about the author of the newly found source. This can lead to a correspondence with the author and, possibly, new documents received as email attachments.

Ongoing searching and probing into the wealth of online information, which often requires a significant ability to process information quickly and make decisions about the trustworthiness of information, leads to new ways of exploring ideas. Unlike databases of the past, Internet search engines are starting to support the exploration of semi-verbal ideas:

What I do love about the electronic text world is, you can get a kind of half of an idea or a hunch or a sort of tip-of-the-tongue feeling about an idea that's not quite come yet but you kind of, you might be able to form that idea and I do often do it by sort of Boolean searching, you know, by just going "Ah, it's this, it's red and it's blue and it's sharp and it's slow, you know" [laughter] and then you think, "Ah, give me a whole lot of other things that are like that!" (Participant 6/2)

In this case, interaction with the computer is dialogical. In the interactive process, skimming and occasional in-depth reading correspond to listening to a conversational partner.

COMMUNITY

For research fields based on scattered evidence and knowledge situated outside well-established institutions, search engines enable a deeper reading than the codex.

Professor Peter Read and his team on the academic research project *A History of Aboriginal Sydney* gathered pieces of historical evidence that were often recorded in the communal memory. An online presentation of research data was chosen as the best way to present a palimpsest of Indigenous history (Read & Sukovic, 2010). The website offers hundreds of images and videos as well as some textual overviews and interactive tools to present parts of a dispersed history and enable their discovery (Sukovic & Read, 2011). The website was constructed with a student, a community member, and an historian in mind, who will make their own sense of this hotly contested historical ground. Some members of the research team followed historical pieces of evidence they found through the project and discovered their own Aboriginality or connected with the culture of their ancestors.

During the project, team members were considering and learning new ways of presenting textual information online and combining it with images and videos. In the process, they were discovering different possibilities for reading the material – in a broad sense of the word. By answering numerous questions and comments from website users, the team was learning about community interest and how historical memories presented online connected with users' personal stories. Although there was no opportunity to obtain user feedback in formal ways, an ongoing correspondence with users and conversations with the community provided the team with some valuable insights. Read commented that he initially did not appreciate the potential of the site for free interaction. In his discussion of the changing role of an academic historian as the sole voice in providing the final argument, he commented,

I always maintain that if you want to write a PhD on the history of Sydney, you can write a hell lot of it just looking at the website. And not to make the links that we do – you may, there are many of them – but for you as a historian to make the links ... You'd be able to make all those links yourself, which is what we historians do and put it together and say, "I know the history of Sydney, even if it's not on this website, I understand it differently now. I've got a certain feeling from it, from that website. I can use all information again, not just because it's a big encyclopaedia, but because it presents a certain view that I can make the connections between them."

Another team member commented that no user of the site would watch several hundreds of videos and read all the material:

So everyone is going to form a different picture. And it will always happen because you will always bring your own mind into something, but in a different way from reading a book ... People are going to just dip in and take what they want ... There are underlying themes to get a felt sense of what is going on. Whatever you explore, somebody is going to tell you one particular perspective.

An Indigenous researcher on the team with strong connections with the Indigenous community in Sydney commented on the importance of presenting history online and the sense of user engagement:

Any Aboriginal person in Australia can click on that website and find an elder or a person who is talking about their history. And it hasn't been filtered to an historian's opinion. It's right from the horse's mouth. And I think it was really important to Peter and certainly to the people we interviewed. There was an opportunity to bear witness to their lives. And that's what makes it such a magical and important website. When I introduce people to it and they have a look, they ring me up and say, "Oh, my God, that was extraordinary! I stayed up all night looking at all these stories, and the way it was easy to interact, and between the different sections, and the galleries and video galleries." And I had nothing but very excited feedback from Aboriginal community.

The website presents a "history in your backyard" in which ordinary people learn to read a large palimpsest, uncover lost pieces in remote places and recognize them in their private surroundings. The questions "How deep is this reading?" and "Is this close reading?" cannot be answered using standard measures.

TEENAGER

Creative reading was at the core of the iTell, project in which teenagers, all students in a high school for girls, were asked to create a digital story based on an oral story or an untold perspective in a book they liked. Initially, students were encouraged to consider a presentation of their text analysis using digital tools, but they were more interested in creating digital stories based on creative responses.

Considering the amount of writing about "digital natives" and their intuitive approach to digital tools and abundant online creativity, one could have expected that the girls would have embraced digital stories as a "natural" form of expression. However, this was not the case. A task based on crossing different media and genres was new to them and they were gradually finding their way through the experience. They commented on how the task allowed them to go back to aspects of a story that intrigued them, but they had not explored previously. Some students retrieved their childhood readings to cast a new look at archetypal characters or bring to the front favourite supporting characters. Exploration of a new writing genre and multimodal communication was an interesting and novel experience for all of them.

An interesting aspect of iTell was a collaborative reading and construction of meaning. Collaboration emerged with a group of Indigenous students who created a pastiche comprised of individual memories about events affecting their community. They used newspaper articles, drawings, digital images, voiceover, and sound effects to relate personal memories to a publicly known story and present it as a collaborative interpretation of events. The way in which they worked and wove personal and collective meanings associated with using materials on the website, had strong associations with reconstructions of "A History of Aboriginal Sydney" (University of Sydney, 2015). Once removed from the dominant presence of the print, Indigenous teenagers found a way of connecting aspects of Indigenous culture with contemporary memories and communication tools. At the same time, they modelled collaborative storytelling for other students. Some non-Indigenous students decided to work in pairs in subsequent workshops, choosing popular books to present their creative reading,

strongly echoing personal issues. Students interpreted fictional character development and, in parallel, worked on their understanding of troubling relationships.

Collaborative work and the workshop setting provided a supportive environment in which their stories unfolded. The slow process of building a digital story using a variety of digital and analogue tools enabled reflection and the construction of meaning through a personal connection with the text.

Transliterate reading

These snippets of digital behaviours, which were observed and recorded in the three research projects, illustrate the practices of very different groups of people. Looking into a fuller pattern of behaviours, what emerges is not a picture, but rather an animation with numerous transitions and transformations.

“Transliteracy is about fluidity of movement across the field – between a range of contexts, modalities, technologies and genres” (Sukovic, 2014, p. 207). Originators of the concept defined it as “the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks” (Thomas, Joseph, Laccetti, Mason, Mills, Perril, & Pullinger, 2007). Transliterate behaviours can be observed in academics’ interactions with e-texts as well as students’ creative reading of print and oral stories.

Transliterate reading is the practice of reading across a range of texts when the reader seamlessly switches between different platforms, modalities, types of reading, and genres. Reading is part of a range of netchaining activities, such as searching, watching, and communicating, guided by a personal interest and context. Transliterate reading is based on abilities to search effectively, read across resources, handle files in different formats, and have a trained eye and brain to establish connections. The lines between reading, using, and creating are often blurry, but a transliterate reader demonstrates an ability to adjust reading and incorporate it in other activities. Transliterate reading does not replace or supersede traditional forms of the focused and deep reading of a single text. Transliterate reading, however, extends the range of reading skills and situations when reading comprehension is required.

Netchaining emerges as a key concept in “reading across.” The authorial voice presenting an argument or a story is replaced by the reader’s/user’s/creator’s idea, which guides netchaining. The scholar switches between a whole range of activities and different levels of reading following the development of a research question. Many users of A History of Aboriginal Sydney said they stumbled across the site accidentally and then stayed there to explore stories related to their families and communities. Names of people, places, and events are their guiding ideas as they skim read or carefully read search results, and explore films and images. The spiral of searching-reading-watching unfolds around personal connections.

It has been suggested that the focus on computers prevents immersion in electronic literature (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014). For the website users, however, the computer is an enabler. A level of familiarity with this type of interface, which does not emphasize technological novelty, is possibly a contributing factor for “staying in a flow.” It is,

however, a personally meaningful story that maintains a sense of immersion and makes the user say, “Oh, my God, that was extraordinary! I stayed up all night looking at all these stories.” It is a personally meaningful story developed as a result of deep reading that also keeps teenagers motivated through an often-tedious process of searching for images they can use to illustrate their work. Drawing, making photographs and motion animations, which are sometimes technically demanding, are other techniques to bring one’s reading to life as reading merges into creating.

The juxtaposition of ideas is an essential part of moving across a range of information presented digitally. For a user of the website, understanding emerges from the juxtaposition of resources and snippets of information in search results. Academics taking part in the study that explored the roles of e-texts described serendipitous discovery at times when they had different documents open on their desktops. Participant 6/2 described how reading across documents provides opportunities for creative insights:

... when you’ve got your computer going and you’ve got a couple of different documents open and you’re cutting and pasting or you’re toggling between two or three documents
... you’re just feeling ideas come out of this idea, idea number one and idea number two, when they pop up against each other often completely other idea, idea number 25 will, sort of, turn up out of that. (Participant 6/2)

An ability to “go with a digital flow” or stop for focused reading requires a new combination of skills and sophisticated metacognition. While there are rules developed over centuries on how to present writing in a book and the whole education prepares young people for interpreting ideas on paper, there are very few definitive rules for the construction of digital environments and almost no training for reading on screen. Academics and teenagers alike are unsure what they are expected to know about digital tools and resources. It takes a leap of faith to be open to the possibilities and acknowledge “idea number 25” when it appears.

Conclusion

New digital practices are emerging, but we currently do not have a clear understanding of the forms of reading happening on screen or in interactions with mixed platforms, let alone how they can be captured and measured. What is becoming evident, however, is a need to recognize very different reading contexts and practices. The key question is not whether our visual cortex will take over parts of the brain dedicated to verbal and abstract processing, but rather which resources, genres, pedagogies, and andragogies we need to cultivate transliteracy. The question is not whether we read better from the print page or screen, but which form of reading is most suitable for the task and text at hand. A cultivated ability to adjust and apply skills in novel ways online and offline may result in differently trained eyes, ears, hands, and brain to participate in a fully transliterate reading experience. A transliterate researcher with methodologies to study the experience will be needed.

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