

SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON DIGITAL READING

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some changes in the context of reading brought about by new forms of text publishing and reading, such as PDF files, websites and eBooks. In order to do so, the paper starts with some discussion on the importance of such devices. Then explores some of the main their characteristics, as well as some consequences it might bring to the behaviour of readers. It ends with some observations on how this new perspectives of regarding have been dealt with in the Brazilian educational system.

KEYWORDS

eBooks, PDF files, reading, strategies, screen reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, books, newspapers, academic journals and all sort of publications are becoming digital. They are now likely to be part of the same reading reality as other ordinary webpages: as we browse and read these them, we might have multiple tabs open, click on diverse information in order to check and get more accurate data. As a result, depending on the occasion, our background on a given subject is now an on-going process.

According to Lemos (2012), the sales of electronic books (eBooks) have already outgrown the actual “physical books” in many online bookstores (such as Amazon). As a result a number of reading devices is increasing; besides Kindle, one might find a number of devices such as Kobo, a Japanese eBook format, Nook, sold by Barnes & Noble among many others. This brought about a new reality, reading devices demand a materiality which is rather different from computers, tablets and printed materials.

During the last 30 years, major technological changes have led to a great change in the way new we relate to language (KRESS, 2003) and, as a result, to the text. This includes not only the way texts are produced, assuming syntactic, lexical and semantic changes, but also changes in text support: in many cases text has ceased to be printed. As a result, computer monitors and locative devices, such as phones and tablets, are becoming a natural place for reading and writing. It is now important that we start discussing new theories and methods in order to make the teaching of reading closer to everyday practices. Actually, media research needs to take us to discussions on media digital literacy in order to bring them to schools and to students’ daily practices, making them more meaningful to the many social contexts (Buckingham, 2008; Buckingham, 2010) our students live in.

On the one hand, such new technologies have allowed the expansion of our universe from a reality which was merely typographical to another that takes many other semiotic resources into account. On the other hand, it has also ensured our contact with a variety of information that was once unimaginable. Network technologies arise with the unique ability to aggregate individuals and contexts in order to promote a process of reintegration of a human diaspora (Lévy, 1998). Naturally new forms of text play a significant role in this argument, since they continuously expand the possibilities of meaning making of a text (Bolter, 2002). The practical result of such transformation is the birth of a series of new content and social practices. Firstly, it becomes important to perform studies that focus on how such contents are received in different communities. In this sense, it would be important to develop research to help us understand the process of structural configuration and reconfiguration of the interaction amongst users, media and resources.

This paper aims at bringing about an initial discussion on some possible changes in the behaviour of readers in three platforms: PDF files, eBooks and websites. The discussion looks at how the technological features of such platforms may change reading strategies as the technical elements of each of these platforms are presented.

A reflection on such reading process is also presented. The final remarks tend to be centred in educational changes that might take place in the Brazilian context.

2. SOME CHANGES IN READING STRATEGIES

Most reading strategies adopted for screen reading are rather different than those used for printed texts. Due to the great amount of information present on webpages, PDF files and eBooks, readers tend to read vertically, constantly skimming and/or scanning the text in order to get a general comprehension of its structure and to grab the specific pieces of information that are relevant. Besides that, those readers rarely read an entire website, they tend to follow links and move on as soon as more interesting aspects comes along. In fact, as Lemos (1998) mentions, most of the knowledge developed in this interaction tends to be superficial, that is, online readers tend to connect to a greater deal of information, but most of the time their attention is kept on a superficial level. This kind of reading strategy is similar to patchworking, the many paths possibilities allow readers to create their own texts. Therefore, these texts become a result of the interaction of the many other texts. The result is something highly personal, since there might not be equal textual experiences, that is, not all readers follow the same path through reading from the Internet.

Nowadays PDF files have evolved to an encapsulating format that allows not only images, but also videos and audio and web-links to be placed just within a single text. This not only makes PDF resemble hypertexts, but also attaches an important feature to this device, since it does not depend on a network connection: video, audio and internal clickable links – which usually refer to pictures, tables etc. – are embedded into the file. In these texts each textual reference might be followed. This is a textual phenomenon that used to be possible only in websites.

However, this seems to be a much more endogenous kind of reading. In other words, if a PDF file does not offer links to websites, the reader navigates only within the text. Naturally it also provides a way of reading, which is rather different from traditional books. The possibility of using such resources allows the reader to create a pathway that is similar to hypertexts. Due to the possibilities offered by such links, the PDF file is read in an order that is rendered regarding the interest of the reader to follow the text's internal references.

EBook reading devices, Kindle being the most popular format, are different. They seem to be a much simpler file format and its emphasis is clearly on the "content" of a text, rather than on its form. They do not encapsulate all the semiotic systems and elements that we have in websites and PDF files, in most of the cases they seem clear text files with a fixed typesetting and no colour. Nevertheless, Kindle eBooks are much lighter files and are easily distributed through 3G networking available to certain readers, or Wi-Fi, which is the standard technology of this device.

If we think in terms of reading strategies, some important changes might operate. PDF files offer some important resources for skimming through the text, thumbnails can give us a general picture of the way the pages look like. Here the pages are available in the right side of the screen in reduced size. The reader might choose which page to click and then read it in whatever order s/he likes, some programmes even allow the rearrangement of the pages to an order that suits better the readers' reading purpose. In eBooks the possibility of readers changing text order does not exist in this type of reading, browsing does not even follow the concept of page. Kindle books, for example, are organised according to position, that is, the portion of the text that fits into the screen. Position might also be variable according to the size of the font that appears on the screen. If the reader chooses a larger font size, there will be less text displayed on the screen, therefore, the position is never the same for every reader. For example, a reader who uses smaller font size, will therefore, see more lines on the screen. In the latest Kindle versions, the interface tells us in which page we are in reference to some printed issue; this reference, though, does not show us in where each page starts or ends. EBook skimming seems to become a rather sequential matter; we actually have very few possibilities to navigate as we have in printed books.

Automatic search is standard out-of-the-box technology in any word processor, PDF or eBook reader. They allow searching for regular expressions, which may be composed by single letters or even a whole sentence. Such tools, in some sense, substitute the need for scanning the text using only our naked eyes. The discrete element that is named the search-target is easily found and, sometimes, clearly highlighted. It is rather different from traditional printed reading, where the scanning depends only on both reader's ability to establish subjective and objective search criteria as well as his/her capacity to scan through the text.

This is the reason why this technology is well used by readers who believe that specific lexical items or expressions might be present in a given text. If used well, it might be a very important tool to help students to check some predictions regarding the contents of what they read. It might be also a very productive way to make our students to pay more attention to the words which are around their search node, teaching them that any word meaning is, to some extent, defined by the language choices that are put together in texts.

Two of the platforms discussed here (PDF and eBooks) enable the use of notes, which allow the highlighting of some part of the text. For PDF files, some specific programmes are needed to perform this action. It is so because some standard Adobe readers do not allow readers to annotate in documents which have DRM protection. For eBooks, this is a standard feature without any restriction. For some readers, such notes are also saved in *.txt file, which can be read separately. It is a tool rather useful for later study or even for comparison between student's notes.

PDF files, carry a lot of formatting and visual information. This type of file is, sometimes, a facsimile of printed material. In eBook readers, on the other hand, texts do not have any typographical appeal, even the use of images here seem to be very limited, that is,, most of the readers are monochromatic and do not integrate images as PDF files do. Most of the times, images stand alone on the screen.

EBook readers and some PDF readers have interesting feature: if you select a word in a text, you can look it up automatically in a dictionary. Different models have singular procedures, but in most of the cases the readers only need a click or two. In the touch screen model, for example, the reader only has to hold his/her finger on a word for a dictionary definition to come up. In simpler models, the word must be selected and a secondary menu shows up. These kinds of facilities are important for integrating the dictionary as a reading tool within a same device, this allows the reader to clarify his/her doubts on the spot with no time wasting. This might lead to an overuse, and some dependency on dictionaries.

3. SOME REMARKS ON THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

A consequence of this new type of technological reality is the need to establish a reading instruction programme that aims at teaching techniques regarding digital reading. In the case of Brazil, the issue is complex and involves several factors. Despite of the fact that several schools have access to computers, most of them do not have access to eBook readers. It makes difficult the access to equipment. It is important to notice that much of what is discussed here would lead to a teaching of reading that would rely on strategies adapted to digital reading. Unfortunately, in the Brazilian context, this component is not part of the teachers training curriculum programme in the vast majority of national Universities. The Access to the Internet and telecommunication networks might be another problem: notwithstanding the wide popularization of these elements in Brazil, the Internet is still accessed by only a little over 50% of the population. This is a determining factor for reading in any of the digital models discussed above. Regarding classroom practice, the teacher would not only be teaching technical procedures of each of the hardware or software discussed here, but s/he would also be able to bridge these techniques to the reality of students' reading practices. Brazilian schools are indeed still lagged in relation to student's digital reading habits. At schools, the existence of this reality is simply ignored. The vast majority of computer centres is used just as research engines, and the overwhelming majority of schools do not have access to tablets. Even teachers, as already mentioned, have little or no experience of the platforms investigated here.

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