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Tsvetkova, Milena

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Media culture

Compromise duality between mobile reading and stationary reading: An analysis of culture of the media nomadism

*Assoc. Prof. Dr. Milena Tsvetkova,
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski,
Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication,
Department of Communication and Audiovisual Production,
Bulgaria, 1000 Sofia, 49 Moskovska str.
E-mail: milenaic@uni-sofia.bg*

Abstract. The research is an attempt to answer the question how far the mobility manages to preserve the cognitive and the social status of the reader and to minimize the negatives of the “technological” reading. Object of the research: the new phase in the changes of the reader’s practices that have occurred with the massive use of mobile communication devices. By the notion “mobile reading“ the author mark the perception of text from a portable or from a mobile digital device and with the notion “stationary reading“ – the perception of text from a fixed medium as a print media and as a desktop device. Purpose of the research: to prove that the mobility is the newest, natural and indestructible stage in the evolution of the reading, within the frames of which are passing mixed transformations, inherent as a whole to the „culture of the nomadism“. Methodology: there are used the methods of the analytic and synthetic processing of primary and secondary resources, the selective monographic method, analysis of combination of statistical data and information from a survey of the National Bulgarian Institute of Statistics for access and use of Internet and the results of two world researches – „Reading in the Mobile Era: A study of mobile reading in developing countries“ of UNESCO and „Mobiles for Reading: A Landscape Review“ of USAID and JBS. Hypothesis: the new format of the mobile reading (counterpoint of stationary reading) is not a random phenomenon, but a regular and cyclical metamorphosis in the evolution of the communications. Results: the analysis shows an approximately equal correlation between the positives and the negatives of the reading from mobile devices. The suggestion of the author is the reader’s behavior of the mobile citizen to be formed in „compromise duality“ – the information, the data, the facts, the references can be assigned to „mobile“ modalities, but the knowledge, the learning, the aesthetic delight of the text to be preserved in „stationary modality“.

Keywords: studies of reading, reading education, reading as communication, media skills, reader’s behavior, changes of reading, reading evolution, reading in the mobile era

Introduction

Today’s active reader is a reader in turbulence. But this is a regular process. Marshall McLuhan developed the media axiom that in order to see the future, we must look at the past, because everything in our lives is a constant circle. This conclusion also refers to the reading. Among the old readers is repeating cyclically the banal wail: young people never do the things we want. And young readers, no matter what time we talk, do not know another way of learning of a culture than theirs, because they are not of the same „material“ as their predecessors.

In his book „The Great Cat Massacre“ the historian Robert Darnton arrives at the conclusion, that one of the most deceptive things in the world of the books can be the conclusion, that people have always read the same way [Darnton, 1984, p. 216]. In his opinion not only the individuality, but also time influences reading and its impact on the readers: „The London’s Bürger of the 17th century inhabited a different mental universe than this one of an American professor of the 20th century. Reading itself has changed over time“ [Darnton, 2001, p. 60].

Many contemporary media experts are sharing the same opinion, that „the future of reading is very similar to its past“ [Basulto, 2013] and this is proven by every innovation in the field of the communication technologies.

5350 years ago a text was written on the Prisse papyrus (preserved in the French National Library, bearing the name of the discoverer Prisse d'Avennes), where we read: „The world goes to decline, the children do not listen to their parents, everyone wants to write a book, the end of the world is near.“ 2600 years ago in the Ashurbanipal's library was found a tile with text: „Tough times lie ahead of us, children do not listen to their parents, no one reads“. 2000 years ago the same text was recorded on a tile and in the destroyed by the lavas of Vesuvius Roman city of Pompeii. 500 years ago after the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, one of his contemporaries – Poliziano, very alarmed, states: „Now the human folly will be traced very quickly, it will flood us in huge volumes, which is threat to the good manners and people...“ [Dimchev, 2010]. Such torments are repeated with a regular cyclic recurrence in every technological revolutionary stage in history.

The last activation of the cycle so far happened after 2000 (the period when was created Web 2.0 and we started to write internet with a lowercase letter) and we are witnesses of the activation of this important historical regularity: a cyclical change of the cultural practices (reading, writing, talking, and listening). Its meaning is as follows: when the potential of one or another cultural practice is exhausted, the imposed cultural codes are relativised, and the passive in its genetic program forms of complexity reducing are activated.

Reading, one of the key cultural acquisitions, also is historically conditioned and has its maturity, old age and death. Neither the reader nor the reading are fixed facts or constants of the civilization. Their traces start to get lost just during transient times, crises and breaks, as has happened in any historical media metamorphosis. According to the “old“ readers, the “new“ one has always been a vanishing species. But at this moment, he just swerved into from the horizon or he just changed the direction.

Materials and methods

The subject of the research is the social phase of modifying of the conventional static reading in mobile reading that has occurred with the global distribution of the smartphones, the tablets and the eBook readers. By the notion “stationary reading“ we mark *the perception of text from a fixed medium as a print media and as a desktop device* and with the notion “mobile reading“ we mark *the perception of text from a portable or from a mobile digital device*. By mobile device, we understand tablets, phablets, smartphones, PDA, GPS, eBook readers and other portable devices with a screen diagonal of no more than 7 inches. A subject of immediate research interest is the “mobility“ is an innovative strategy for the reader from a display to get free from the barriers of the statics in his contact with the global world library by continuing to practice reading everywhere and standing.

The contemporary theories of the media reception sufficiently categorically explain the reading as an evolutionary intellectual technology – constantly changing, different in every changed situation of communication, which also includes “reading“ films and other audiovisual media texts [Fedorov, 2005; Fedorov, 2015, pp. 7, 161; Tsvetkova, 2007; Tsvetkova, 2017]. This study attempts to answer the question of how well the mobility manages to preserve the cognitive and social status of the reader and to minimize the negatives of the “technology“ reading. The hypothesis that is put under examination is that the new format of mobile reading (counterpoint to the static reading) is not a random phenomenon, but a regular phenomenon of cyclical media metamorphosis. The purpose is to prove that the mobility is the newest, natural and unforgettable stage in the evolution of the reader, within the frames of which are passing different transformations inherent as a whole to the “culture of the nomadism.”

The main approach to the research is the deductive, as from the general characteristics of traditional practice “reading” and its new metamorphoses is reaching to the concrete characteristics of the “mobile reading” and the technological challenges that determine its development. There have been used the methods of the analytic and synthetic processing of primary and secondary resources and the selective monographic method.

The initial monographic resources are from the field of the media science, from the theory of the communications, from the reading theory, from the book science and from the information technologies. For primary resources are used statistical data and information from a survey of the National Bulgarian Institute of Statistics for access and use of Internet and the results of two world researches – „Reading in the Mobile Era: A study of mobile reading in developing countries” of UNESCO [UNESCO, 2014] and „Mobiles for Reading: A Landscape Review” of USAID and JBS International [JBS International, 2014]. The analytical and synthetic processing of the results is put under a SWOT analysis that represents the good and the weak points of the mobile reader as well as the opportunities and threats that lie ahead the mobile display reading as a new stage in the dynamics of the cultural practice reading.

Results

The SWOT analysis of the reading of the mobile text formats represents a classic four-sided analysis of the results, the summaries and the conclusions of the theoretical overview through the focus of the Strengths, the Weaknesses, the Opportunities and the Threads ahead of the phenomenon “mobile reader“.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the reading in the “culture of the nomadism”

Strengths	Weaknesses
Awareness Plasticity (flexibility) Communication skills Adaptability Extraction of hybrid information through multitasking (decrypt one message and in parallel you perceive another) Permanent option for relax and fun Social reflexivity Physical independence Spatial independence Psychological independence	Damages on the qualitative cognitive act Awareness doesn't mean knowledge Multitasking disturbs the reading Dependence on mobile devices Distraction and forgetfulness Impatience Capriciousness and pretentiousness Lack of ingenuity Arrogance Phubbing (phone + snubbing)
Opportunities	Threads
New opportunities for mobile content for online media New opportunities for communications and social contacts Multimodal marketing Access to mobile content at any time and in any place Activating of spontaneous and voluntary reading Possibility for co-creation Increased abilities for effective feedback Better career orientation Faster family sociability Higher physical security Faster reflex in a critical situation Optimized orientation in time and space	Decrease of the advertising revenues of the publishers Implementation of VAT for smartphones and tablets Decrease of the authority of the reading habits Disregard of the print media from the everyday life Reduction of the number of the classic readers at the expense of the smart devices Disease addiction to mobile devices Speed reading (fast reading) can be dangerous Physical dangers of reading behind the wheel Physical dangers of reading while walking

The quantitative recapitulation on the tetrad, visualized by the diagram, is showing a maximum share of the O (opportunities) when reading from mobile devices:

- S or Strengths are 25%
- W or Weaknesses are 24%
- O or Opportunities are 29%
- T or Threads are 22%

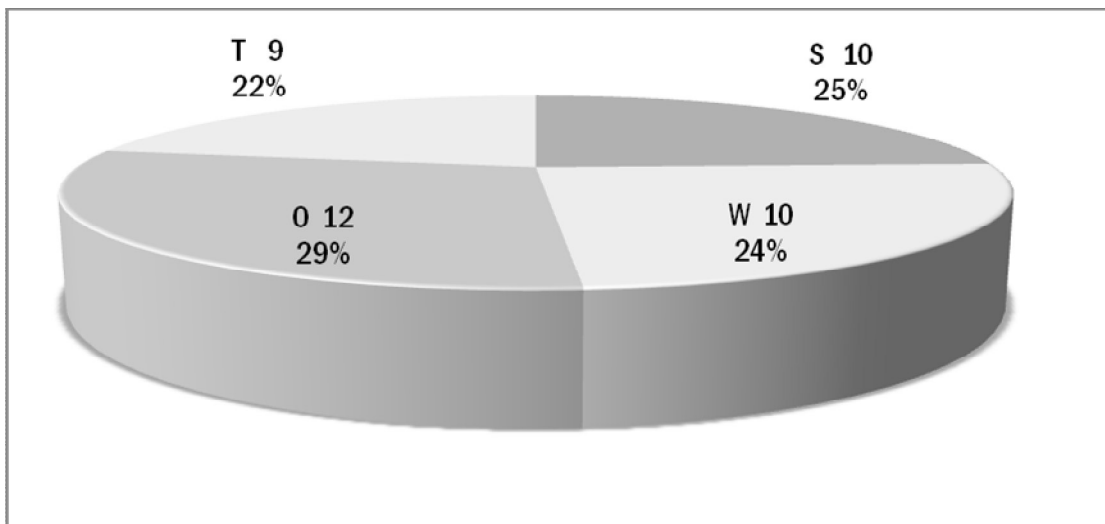


Figure 1. Correlations in the tetrad of the SWOT analysis

Among the advantages of the mobile reading, the awareness, the accessibility and the independence are worthwhile to be distinguished, and among the shortcomings – the danger of non-sociality and phubbing (the practice of “snubbing someone in a social setting by looking at your phone instead of paying attention“), development of dependence of mobile devices and the damages to the reading as an intellectual and cognitive act.

Discussion

The summarized empirical results of the SWOT analysis provide the necessary starting point for verification of several hypotheses about the new format “mobile reading“, a counterpoint to the static reading. We will try to prove that the mobility is a regular, natural and unforgettable stage in the evolution of reading, within the frames of which are passing transformations typical of the “nomad culture“ as a whole.

Reading by nature is a “mobile activity“

By tradition the reading has been likened to travel, wandering, nomadism, migrating to preferred worlds and territories. We are less likely to remember that the reader is an anonymous homeless. The release of the primary nature of reading condemn the reader not to have his own home – he will be hardly identified with an author's book. In this sense, the “old“ reader is a voluntary prisoner indexed in the legitime for the dominating culture book fund and subjected to periodic inventory.

Since his goal is to become sooner or later a proprietor, a holder of intellectual property, there is no greater convenience for him than the striped nirvana behind the bars. On the background of the comfortable settled in their property “resident“ readers, the newcomer is a typical sociological “alien“. But as a rule the foreigners have a dubious loyalty. Because the natives are distrustful to anyone who doesn't want to adapt fully to their home. They accuse him in ingratitude, because he doesn't accept all the good-wishers and their political advices. He remains misunderstood because the wandering has turned him into a cultural hybrid [Tsvetkova, 2009, pp. 203-217].

Reading by nature is a nomadism

The natural readers are nomads who are only anchored in the right book – like for a temporary moorage or as parasites, while they suck up the vital juices they need and set off without warning to new territories that are not being exploited by them personally. Because reading is a cultural practice of tactical type, i.e. its purpose is neither to surround nor to build up a personal place, his secret is in the step – a position of the reading body where the one leg serves as a support in the current reading and the other is already target at the next place to step.

The tactic protects himself from the local stability and the fixation. He strives to be in constant play with the events to catch the suitable cases, to catch on the move the options for benefit. Michel de Certeau justifiably calls the reading “cunning art of tenants.” [Certeau et al., 2002, pp. 49-53]. Only the natural reader has the ability to perfection to appropriate temporarily and impunity the property of the other, to poach in foreign farms, to inhabit other nests, to feed from foreign tables without having worked the morsel.

It is found to be that the mobile reader is not a mutation but a natural reader. There is nothing unnatural for the reader to ask for all the books he needs always to be “available to him“. But only today, the civilization offered him mobile “libraries“ – the portable readers for ebooks, tablets, and all sorts of “external memory“ for “draft“ books. There is nothing unnatural for the reader who wants the books to be intangible.

The young reader who is mobile and rarely coming back home (who lives mostly on rent and can hardly keep a home library) is dreaming of books not weighing, not taking up space, not collecting dust, not feeding insects, not burning. He is dreaming of making the books dematerialised and teleported, “to flow“, “to radiate“ or “to spread“. Proactively managed units of the media and the software business opportunely offered him reduced only by content “draft” books (such as “mobile books“ for smartphones and readers) and even with “holographic“ books that sprang up in front of the reader's eyes almost as natural.

The reading in a natural stage of new mediamorphosis

In his new book, “The Case for Books“ (published in French as “Apologie du livre“), Robert Darnton examines the “most urgent aspects of the digital question.” [Darnton, 2009]. Today people feel losing ground under their feet, and they vacillate to the new era, which will be characterized by technical innovations. We are witnesses of a change in the models of behavior. A generation, “born with digital devices“ and “always online“, jabbbers everywhere on their mobile phones, writes emails and surfs in the web in real or virtual worlds.

The young people we meet on the street or in the transport are both here and somewhere else. They tap into the rhythm of music that only they can hear inside the “cocoon“ of their mobile devices. Somehow they are different from the older, whose attitude towards the media fits into another area of the subconscious. The previous generations learned to adjust their devices by rotating the knobs, the young ones are pressing keys or touching the screen. The difference may seem trivial, but it stems from reflexes grounded deeply in the kinetic memory.

We force our way through the world through sensuous predisposition, the sense of the fingertips that the Germans are calling “*Fingerspi tzengefuehl*“. If we are learned to guide the pen with our forefinger, we should look at how even the children use their thumbs on the mobile phone's display and we will see how the technology soaks through the body and soul of one new generation.

In a significant controversy with Neil Postman in Harper magazine, the American writer Camilla Palia explains: “Some people have more developed senses than others. I have found that most of those people born before World War II are excluded from modern media. They can't understand how born after the war, we can read and watch television at the same time. But we do it. When I was writing my book, I had earphones on my ears in which was playing rock, or Puccini and Brahms. The soap operas were spinning on the television with the sound off. Sometimes I was talking on the phone. The “baby boom” generation has multi-layered, multi-track capabilities to cope with the world.” [Qtd. in: Birkerts, 2004]. Actually we really have a

loss (and meaninglessness) of an old sensorium of signs mastered by an old cultural practice (the “old” reading) and we are already observing how by the method of decompression, the primitive hypersensitivity seems to be revived. It is perceived in the principle change in the sensitivity of the reading person – polysensor, polyglot, with polymodal receptivity and polytechnic competence.

The explanation of the changes described in reading is contained in Marshall McLuhan's thesis that the effects of the technology change “the ways of perception steadily and without any resistance.” [McLuhan, 1986]. According to Mark Prensky for the generation of digital natives the media is a space for self-expression and autopresentation in the economy of the non-commercial sharing (gift economy), where the links and the interaction between the active users (included round-the-clock - 24/7 in the social networks) and the spreadable new-age media fundamentally differ from those between the passive users (the consumers of ready content) and the traditional media [Prensky, 2001]. According completely to the McLuhan's thesis, the digital channels and the virtual communication influence transformationally on the ways of perceiving the information at the digital natives generation – in the form of a fast stream of particles as it spreads over the network [Carr, 2012, p. 14].

It can be said that in the period 2000-2015 the new mediamorphosis cycle was put in motion, where the network thinking removes the linear thinking, because by personal choice or by necessity, people began to assimilate the typical for Internet “speed-gathering and dissemination of information” [Carr, 2012, p.18]. For the appearance of the mobile reader's figure people began to talk openly and professionally for the first time in 2013.

One of the most important tendencies that was discussed at the FutureBook 2013 conference in London – the most important annual forum of the publishers in Europe, was the growth in the use of mobile devices for reader's recommendations and social reading. According to official information, 80% of the monthly traffic on the platforms Wattpad and Goodreads was made by the fans through their mobile phones [Campbell, 2013].

On the background of these processes and in the media theory emerged a discussion about the appearance of the new mobile reader, who is increasingly communicative and pragmatic, his perceptions are extremely dynamic, his attention is inconsistent and unmanageable. Gradually is formed his empirical-theoretical profile. The mobile reader orientates to the constantly flowing stream of information primarily visually and fragmentally, striving to satisfy his information needs with ultra-condensed and easy to perceive formats, following the screen of his mobile device. The dialogic with the web sites, the provided opportunities for fast comment or opinion on every subject, the gameplay and infotainment dramaturgy, the competitive character and winning chances are key factors for the attractiveness of the display reading that transforms the old fashioned reader into a moving communicator.

The new readers take for granted the mobile, the interactive and the hybrid media communication, and the ability to be perceived synchronously diverse media streams increases at the expense of the drop in attention and the ability of short attention span. The data are showing that the time for hold of attention has dropped drastically from 12 to 5 minutes for the period 2001-2011, mainly due to the increase in the share of communication in social networks [Vidyarthi, 2011]. Therefore the mobile consumption of content while browsing, scanning, linking becomes increasingly difficult to be defined as “reading,” as far as it is about nervous reading, diffused reading, unfinished reading.

The retaining factors of the mobile reading

Criticism towards the reading in motion exists probably from the age of the “peripatetic philosophers.” One of the most convincing and synthesized arguments against the hurry and the disorder of reading is formulated by academic Dimitriy Lichachov. In his opinion: Reading shouldn't be accidental. It is a huge expense of time and time is the greatest value that shouldn't be lost in vain. The danger of reading consists in the development of a tendency towards

“diagonal“ examination of texts or towards the development of different speed reading methods. The “speed reading“ creates visibility of the knowledge, but it can be allowed only in some professions. Protect yourself from habits of speed reading – it leads to illness of the attention [Lihachev, 1988]. Decades after these advices of Lihachov, many philosophers and psychologists accuse falsely Internet as a “killer“ of the reading with the same motive that it distracts the attention and the social networks that are skilfully playing with the sense of isolation, although paradoxically they reinforce it. Therefore many writers continue to stay aside from the computer and they are working on typewriters.

The social and the economic status of the users of information is another lasting retaining factor for the quantity of owners of mobile reading devices in the poorer and economically weak countries. The financial opportunities for purchase of a smartphone or a tablet of higher category for telecommunication and internet fees restrict the mobile reading to moderately widespread practice. This is shown by the recent data of the National Institute of Statistics for access and use of Internet in Bulgaria in 2015 – only 59.1% of the Bulgarians have access to home internet and only 38.7% have access to mobile internet via mobile phone or smartphone [Infostat, 2016]. With the clear awareness that without Internet they will react adequately professionally and personally, the interviewed Bulgarians describe themselves as a mobile media consumer of a mixed type, using both classical and “new“ media to satisfy their specific information, utilitarian, entertainment and social needs.

A third retaining factor for the intensity of the mobile reading are the emerging regulatory and sanctioning regimes for public use of mobile communication devices. On the one hand are the medical recommendations for refuse of the mobile reading and writing on the move. In 2014 a scientific experiment of the National Institute of Health of USA has found that reading and writing of the display in step lead to a change in the trajectory of movement, to slowed down walking, to distortion of the spine, and from the head movements when reading electronic messages is negatively affected the vestibular apparatus.

As a preventive measure the experts offer a special smartphone application developed by the Japanese mobile operator Docomo that fixes a motion through a GPS signal and warns the person that reading while walking is dangerous [Schabrun et al., 2014]. On the other hand are the sanctions of the law enforcement and the traffic control. In 2011 the car accident cases in USA with car or bus drivers who are reading or writing SMS while driving, obtain a scale of an epidemic, by the admission of Minister of Transport Ray Lahoud.

Since then big automobile companies are activated in spreading social advertising against these dangerous habits (one example is the online advertising campaign of BMW with the slogan “Text messaging is very distracting“). With the care for the safety of the mobile readers in 2011 the company MegaReader offered a unique application for smartphones – Walk n'Read HUD (Heads Up Display) [MegaReader, 2011]. It adds a revolutionary new function for safety display reading while moving (driving or walking) by transforming the display behind the text into a window that can track the road.

Inference

The results from the conducted surveying research and the completed SWOT analysis of the results supported the research hypothesis by establishing the following:

a) The media of the present and probably of the next generation must be a 24-hour multimedia platform in a coessential format – a virtual reading-room, a digital content and mobile personal applications for tablets and smartphones.

b) The traditional print media can't succeed to stay in the spotlight of young mobile audiences, therefore, if there is no effort put to get out of this situation, it will be very difficult, almost impossible, to ensure the sustainable development of any physical media in the predominant multimodal, multiplatform and multi-media consumption practices.

c) The periodic researches at the reception of the mobile audiences are showing that the virtual communication influences the way they perceive the information – the network thinking removes the linear thinking, the cross-media presentation and perception of the information gets the upper hand over the linear.

d) The reading is a time-consuming process. The media time is expensive and limited, so the content requires fast reading. The communication society from the past is replaced by a society protecting the commercial information systems of the mobile technology. The mobile telecommunications acquire cosmic “self-confidence“ while compressing the entire planet in a “village“ (emanation of McLuhan's prognosis).

From pragmatic point of view and having in mind the summaries that have been made, the completed SWOT analysis of the mobile reading can serve to three categories of subjects: to content makers – in choosing a strategy to offer commercial and free media content; to mediators in the education (teachers, school managers) – in the choice of learning devices in the training; to every rational reader – in the choice of personal communicative behavior.

Conclusions

The trend of condensed “palpating“ writing and of mobile display informing will have a lasting effect on cultural practice reading. And the question of the near future will be: how does the physical and the communicative mobility of the individual will help his career and social vertical mobility?

Having in mind the approximately equal distribution between positives and negatives of the reading from mobile devices, the suggestion is the reader culture of the mobile reader to be formed into “compromise duality.” Since the reading is a basic intellectual technology, the information, the data, the facts, the references can be assigned to the „mobile” modalities. And the knowledge, the learning, the aesthetic delight of the text to be preserved in the in “stationary modality” of the reading in contemplation and peace.

Having in mind that this stage in the evolution of the reader is quite new and not yet revealed in its full scale, I think that it is obligatory its systematic observation and its socio-psychological, cognitive and anthropological explanation.

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