Reading on smartphones and other devices: a survey of library professionals and students in Denmark
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Introduction

The increasingly popular smartphones change not only how we read, but also where we read. Reading on the go is not new as the printed book has long been a treasured item for entertainment during travel (Marshall 2010). Still the digitization of texts and the introduction of smartphones with reading-quality screens creates a new situation where we potentially have constant access to all kinds of reading materials. This development forms the backdrop of our survey study, conducted in Denmark in Winter 2016/2017 among library professionals and Library and Information Science students.

Based on current research in the area of digital reading and general media habits (e.g. Hjarvard & Helles 2013, Balling et al. 2014, Palfrey & Gasser 2008, Hayles 2007, Hillesund 2010, Gerlach & Buxmann 2011, Lui 2005, Mangen & Kuiken 2014) we identified the following hypotheses:

- Age: Younger people are more likely to read on screen than older people.
- Genre: Longer texts are less likely to be read on small screens.
- Parenthood: Parents of young children have less time/freedom in choosing how and where they read. They may therefore be more open to adopting the phone also for long-form genres.

Commuting/geography: People who spend more time in public transit are more likely to read on the phone than non-commuters.

The study was grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives, most significantly media sociology, wherein different media habits are discussed in relation to socioeconomic variables (age, gender, occupation), and media studies, wherein the use of different devices for different purposes is discussed in relation to concepts such as distraction, affinity, and haptic dissonance.

Methodological overview

The study was conducted as an online survey designed in SurveyXact. The survey was distributed to students of Library and Information Science at Copenhagen University and to public library professionals from across Denmark. Danish public libraries have a strong digital agenda, running a common ebook lending website called eReolen (The eBookcase) and experimenting extensively with digital literature. This is also reflected in the LIS program at Copenhagen.

The questionnaire consisted of 51 questions following seven different themes: the overall use of the smartphone; the use of digital technologies beyond the smartphone; reading of different genres on the smartphone and other devices including print; the use of different reading technologies in different everyday situations/locations; subjective user experience when reading on the smartphone (e.g. the perceived importance of availability, backlight); the number of books read in the last 12 month (eBooks/paper books); and demographic questions (age, education, children).

A total of 282 respondents answered all the questions. 55 of these respondents were male and 221 were female, with a mean age of 39 years (sd 12, range from 19-65 years). 71 respondents were students and 208 answered that their main occupation was work. There were 17 males and 53 females in the student category, with a mean age of 28 (sd 7, range 19-52 years). Among the library professionals, there were 38 males and 168 females, mean age 43 (sd 11, range 25-65).

Key findings

Preliminary analyses do not support the notion that younger readers read more on phones or that mobile reading is limited to shorter texts. Our key finding to date is that people use what is at hand and what makes most sense. Even though we cannot confirm the more stereotypical picture of readers inherent to
our hypotheses, however, we can identify more subtle nuances in the data. For instance, gender differences emerge in how domestic space is used for digital and print reading, and care for young children correlates strongly with the use of tablets for reading. In our paper we will look further into the patterns in the data concerning age, gender and level of urbanization in relation to device, genre and environment.

Brief discussion

The overall results of the study, surprisingly, do not confirm our hypotheses. Rather, they suggest that the decisive factor in our respondents’ reading behavior is a combination of affinity and device. Regardless of genre, environment, and demographic variables, our respondents largely choose to read on the device closest at hand, often the ubiquitous smartphone. With smartphones, digital technology seems to have reached a point where it has exhausted its potential affordances for reading insomuch as users, in our selected population at least, keep apace equally across the productive age spectrum.

References


