

How online platforms and communities have changed teenage reading habits

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Abstract

This study investigates the change that teenage and tween reading habits have undergone with the rise in popularity of digital reading. Focus is placed on online reading platforms and the social element these platforms are bringing to digital reading. Drawing on research in the field of the topic and investigating how these practices can be related to current teenage readers' digital reading habits, allows this study to create a broader understanding of its evolution and their evolution. By investigating modern day reading habits from social media to online platforms such as Wattpad, the study aims to provide publishers a substantive understanding of the current teenage reading market and how to capitalise on their need to share and question in almost all aspects of life.

Key Words

Situational Model, Teenagers, Tweens, Reading Platform, eReader, Wattpad, Fan Fiction, Reading Habits

Introduction

The advent of the internet has brought about many changes to everyday life, but none more than that in reading habits. A group of readers that have not only embraced this new medium for reading but seemed to have mastered it, is teenagers. By investigating the evolution of online reading habits amongst teenagers it is important to consider the influence different online platforms have had in shaping these new reading habits. Before embarking on this investigation it is important to understand the target market called teenagers and also the platforms used as reading mediums. This article will thus investigate both the evolution of reading practices as well as the platforms that have shaped these habits.

Who is the teenager and what are reading habits?

The group referred to as teenagers is defined as persons between the ages of 13 and 19 by the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2016). Technology has however allowed for a younger group called Tweens, defined as the age group 11 to 12, to be classified as the predecessors of the teenage group and at times they overlap with their teenage group counterparts (Brito, 2012). It is thus important to keep this group in mind as well when investigating teenage reading habits as the group is very much seen as a social construct (Brito, 2012) rather than an age dominated group.

Reading habits are developed in children as young as 5 or 6. By the ages of 12 to 15 children become aware of themselves and the development of their personalities. It is during this teenage stage that readers become more interested in plots and events in books (Mukwaya, 2012). This development in reading habits allows teenage readers to start making personal reading choices based on their developing personalities or the direction they would like their personalities to develop into. However, reading online poses a few more challenges to readers because of the medium choice.

The concept of reading and the interaction of groups with new media is intertwined in this study. Maureen Mukwaya defines reading as a way to decode language as well as to derive

meaning from the symbols that make up this language (2012). This would mean that any teenager reading text online would first need to understand the symbols provided as language and also understand the context in which this language is shared with them as readers. Unlike in a print book where a standard format is used to present the text, online reading is available in a number of formats, or layouts, to these teenage readers. It is through this process of using previously collected experiences and knowledge that readers start to create a representation of the text called a 'situational model' and this model is regularly updated as text changes (Margolin, S.J. et al 2013). Teenagers who are reading on a number of different platforms today thus need to update their situational model on an hourly, maybe even shorter, basis to not only be able to read but also to draw cognitive understanding of the text they are reading.

Ranjana Das agrees with this notion as he describes an audience using online mediums as 'transformed' just as the online mediums are ever 'transforming' (2012). Both teenage readers and the reading platforms are thus constantly changing to suite each others' needs. An interesting concept if the speed of change that the publishing industry has undergone in recent years is considered.

Unlike teenagers, their older generation have been less receptive to Das's 'transforming' theory on digital reading devices and apps such as eReaders. The author's grandmother who is an avid reader has refused to read books on an eReader despite it allowing her functionalities such as enlarging text, which has been a limiting factor in her current reading selection. The differences in generations' use and experience of digital reading are influenced by mediums of which the use is also unknown to the user.

For the purpose of this study computers will be seen as the first new electronic medium used to read on. The computer has created a 'new mental landscape' (Rappoccio, 2014) which has developed into a number of different platforms such as eReaders online reading apps. The onus now rests on the user to successfully navigate this landscape.

Online platforms as reading platforms

Teenagers have been interacting with the internet and each other on the internet since what seems the advent of the online concept. Reading is no longer restricted to books and newspapers, but has become an interactive, *always on* activity (Rappocchio, 2014) in which teenage readers today are always involved.

One aspect that has a great influence on reading is the memory. The same *always on* activity that has become habit under teenagers is a concern when reading on these online reading mediums. A study by McVay and Kane (2012) attempted to understand the influence of 'mind-wandering' on the cognitive memory needed to translate the text being read into context (Margolin, S.J. et al, 2013). When reading using online reading mediums readers are exposed to notifications from not only the platforms they are using, but also other applications which might be open on the device they are reading on. This has been a concern for teachers who have been reluctant to allow online reading in schools (2013).

Online reading under children has however become part of their everyday lives. Today children as young as 12 years old, tweens, have an extensive knowledge of social media websites such as Facebook (Das, 2012); this despite the *legal* age for anyone to have a Facebook page being 13. It is important to acknowledge social media sites as sources for reading material for teenagers and tweens. Social media posts are to teenagers today what classified advertisements in newspapers were to the previous generation. The *classifieds* were not only space for selling and buying, but it was also the place where one could read about marriages, deaths, births and more. Social media is the equivalent source of reading material to teenagers today and these short bursts of online information are consumed in a very specific way by teenagers.

There are a number of online reading mediums which could be investigated, each with their own features, advantages and disadvantages. eReaders allow readers to read a digital version of a print book, more often than not with no more advances than a few links and maybe a video.

Personally the author of this article has been using the Kobo eReading app to read textbooks and the platform has moved toward creating somewhat of a reading community, allowing the comments made by one reader in a book to be visible to any other reader who purchased that book. On their website at http://www.kobobooks.com/readinglife_awards, Kobo lists features such as *Kobo Pulse* that allows readers to share ideas and have conversations about books, in the books themselves. Readers can also receive 'reading awards' for anything from starting a new book to reading for a specific amount of hours (Kobo, 2016). Amazon's Kindle reading app also provides readers with selected social functions such as their *highlights function* which allows readers to highlight passages in books and then view the most popular highlights, and books with the most highlights in them, on the Amazon website (Barnett, 2014). Because of the static format of Kindle eBooks this function seems to lack in the creation of a social reading community on Amazon and despite the great variety of social aspects built into the Kobo eReading app it still does not seem to resonate in full with the teenage reading market and their inquisitive, information sharing personas.

One online reading platform which has captured teenage readers is Wattpad. This platform has been active for nearly 10 years, having started in 2006 and has created steady success for both authors and readers. It was the fast reaction of the co-founders that ensured Wattpad became not just another fleeting online vanity publishing venture, but a platform with more than 40 million constant users (Miller, 2015). Wattpad's two biggest markets are Millennials between the ages of 18 and 30 and teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 and it is estimated that more than 11 billion minutes are spent on the site by readers every month (Miller, 2015). The platform is obviously very popular with young readers but what is it that makes Wattpad so popular? In a very interesting study by Kylie Mirmohamadi (2014), the popularity and appeal of Wattpad to avid readers is explained through investigating the work on the platform based on Jane Austen's books. Wattpad was in fact started as a website for authors to post their *fan fiction* stories based on other popular works of literature, movies, television shows or any form of pop culture. When reading Mirmohamadi's study, a pattern forms in the understanding of Wattpad's popularity. The

characters in these online books seem to all start off their days staring at digital screens (2014) and in that way, despite all the other differences teenagers have all over the world, they have one thing in common with these characters – their dependence on their digital screens. The characters are relatable to the readers thus enhancing the situational model of these young readers to a level which not only stimulates their reading habits, but keeps them coming back for more.

Despite the advantages these new digital reading devices hold for readers, the digital divide between those with access to digital or online reading mediums and those without, is still great (Rappoccio, 2014). Not all teenagers across the world thus have the same situational model to use as reference when reading online as all teenagers are not equally exposed to digital reading. Unlike reading in print which is a medium integrated reading culture, digital reading is creating an even greater barrier to equal education for all. This could cause a much larger gap between children from developed countries where digital reading is much easier acquired than in developing countries.

Teenage readers and the social aspect of reading

The act of reading had been defined in 1989 by Stevenson as a social act where readers seek approval from each other (as quoted in Mukwaya, 2012). This definition could seem to be in sharp contrast with some notions of solitude connected to book reading.

However, the act of reading has in fact always allowed for social interaction, hence the book club, or reading group. These book clubs or reading groups are made up of a group of people who all read the same book or a collection of books and then come together to discuss the books read. The function of the book club has however developed a great deal from a small group of friends talking about books. One of the most popular book clubs is the Oprah Book Club. As an article in *Newsweek* put it, no one has ever called Oprah a literary critic (1996), but from the day she held up her first book to the audience in 1996 a new form of social book clubs was created and Oprah's book club made it *cool* to read again. Online

reading platforms such as Wattpad have capitalised on the idea of *cool social reading* for teenagers.

Pedro Quelhas Brito believes that children's 'social awareness and cognition is developed through their social experiences' (2012). By combining these social experiences with online reading communities publishers and authors are able to have a much greater influence on the development of teenage readers than was ever before possible.

In the study *Children Reading an Online Genre: Heterogeneity in Interpretive Work*, Ranjana Das found that teenagers from the ages of 15 and older started to seem less interested in who the author was of text they read online (2012). This poses the question whether online publishing really creates a fan base for the authors of this new form of publishing, or are these digital native teenage readers more loyal to the texts themselves.

Wattpad's initial success was based on the reader's loyalty to the texts and the characters, rather than to the authors and from there the popularity of fan fiction. One of the trends the co-founder of Wattpad caught on at an early stage was this notion of 'user generated content and social media' (Miller, 2015). Journalist Clive Thompson calls it 'the audience effect'. According to him a piece of conversation shared on social media today adds to the 'collective ideas' which again influence more conversations and writings (Miller, 2015). Gardner describes the communities created by sharing opinions about plots and characters online as a 'mobile campfire' (Miller, 2015). For books this is not a new concept, it was what book clubs were created for. For teenagers the same activity has now simply moved online. Wattpad has capitalised very well on the teenage desire to share their comments on the books they read by allowing readers to comment in the books themselves on the platform. Like most social media sites, Wattpad has created a platform which is addictive in its sense of community interaction (Mirmohamadi, 2014).

How online reading has advanced reading habits in teenagers.

Reading online has not only allowed teenagers to create new communities through books, but their reading habits themselves have changed as well. Studies have shown that when

reading online children are no longer simply reading to understand, thus using their situational model, but they are also analysing and searching the text. Information is evaluated for its relevance much quicker when reading online than in print. In essence online readers are solving the problems they face (for example doing research) as they are reading and no longer as a separate process (Margolin, S.J. et al, 2013). This realisation about the way in which text is now consumed by young readers online opens up vast new avenues for educational publishers to share information in completely new ways with teenage readers.

One of the features mentioned that makes online reading unique is the dictionary function built into many of these online reading platforms. The feature is made possible through the use of the internet, however with this new generation of teenage readers who do not only read but also analyse, many questions are asked about the text itself. Research has found that readers online find it more difficult at times to understand the meanings of words and for that reason it would be to their advantage to provide the word in different contexts for explanation rather than a set dictionary description (Sun, 2003).

Conclusion

Online reading, new digital mediums and technology have their advantages and disadvantages for teenagers today. Pedro Quelhas Brito rightly believes has it right when he says that a positive of the current digitally native generation is that they are no longer simply being exposed to these new technologies, but are rather contributing to the building and developments of these technologies (2012). Some new start-ups and innovations in publishing have started to incorporate their teenage markets in their development processes, but this researcher believes not to the extent it should be. Teenage readers are open for new things and always searching and sharing, the challenge for the publisher is to master these online reading platform/social media hybrids and create a new generation reading community.

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