15th International Conference of the Spanish Association of Language and Literature Education, 15th International Conference SEDLL, 19-21 November 2014, Valencia, Spain

About the horrific peril of reading on digital devices

Vicente Garcia Martinez[a], Joaquim López-Río[b]*

a, b Universitat de València Estudi General, Av. Blasco Ibáñez 13, Valencia 46910, Spain

Abstract

Reading on digital devices has become a widely debated issue in mass media and academia. The dawn and consolidation of digital technology have made possible new devices for reading. In the Internet era, reading is not just a matter of books and paper. This loss of exclusiveness has generated different anxieties in many intellectuals, researchers, journalists, editors, and publishers related to the printing environment. An analysis of such uneasiness can provide clues about the hidden interests and misunderstandings implied in their arguments. Revealing anxious claims about digital devices can enlighten us about the multiple factors and interests involved in the act of reading.

Keywords: Digital devices; reading; moral panic; amazon; gutenberg galaxy; anxieties; academia; internet; publishers.

1. Introduction

A quick review of newspaper op-eds or academic papers reveals many anxieties about the introduction of digital technology to the printing environment. However, before analyzing this issue, we need to define some concepts to assure that our claims stand up against facile criticism.

By printing environment, we mean all the actors, technologies, and social structures involved in the process of writing, editing, translating, publishing, and promoting the product of Gutenberg's invention: printed letters on paper in a serial process. The concept *printing environment* equals the concept of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* coined by Marshall McLuhan in the 60's. As McLuhan (2012) explains, by the end of the Middle Ages, serial printing technology had created a full industry with brand new jobs, brand new readers with brand new ways of reading, and—this is our point of interest—with a full, new socioeconomic environment for the reading–writing process. The

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-963905358.
E-mail address: vicent.garcia@uv.es, ximo.lopez-rio@uv.es

social structure of the Gutenberg Galaxy, quite immune to great turnabouts during the last 500 years, is undergoing a transformation due to the digital revolution and the spread of the Internet all over the world.

The economic wars between publishers and Amazon, the most powerful book distributor on the Internet, are an example of the changing roles in the printing environment. Amazon offers services to publishers that they could hardly have imagined. According to the wish lists and the number of visits to Amazon's website, publishers can know in advance how many books they need to print in order to reach sales expectations. However, Amazon does not provide such services for free: they force publishers to lower prices to increase sales, or demand a higher percentage from each transaction. If publishers do not accept Amazon's requests, the search engine of Amazon's website may leave the books of the rebel publishers out of the main searches made by potential customers, damaging the sales of an actual company. The publisher Hachette and Amazon have just agreed to end this economic war (http://nyti.ms/1AuIPXy).

The spread of the Internet confirms McLuhan's idea that a new media creates its own social structure with its own actors. We will demonstrate that the fears and turbulences generated by the appearance of digital media cause anxieties among the social actors of the Gutenberg Galaxy. The purpose of this paper is to explain to what extent this challenge and the debate around it are contaminated by unjustified claims about digital technology and the reading process.

2. Anxieties revisited: the moral panic

Human beings tend to overreact to any kind of unknown phenomena as a mechanism of defense. People react irrationally when assessing the potential danger of visitors, objects, technology or whatever the novelty is. In Kubrik's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the appearance of a huge, black, perfect hexahedron in the middle of our ancestors' territory puts them into a frantic state. Just a few minutes later in the movie, one of the apes feels curious about the bones spread all around. He starts hitting the bones with a single bone and creates a tool from a former meaningless object. In one of the most celebrated ellipsis and metaphors in the history of cinema, the bone thrown up to the sky becomes a spaceship while *The Blue Danube Waltz* plays: from the dawn of technology, to technology at its peak.

The first part of Kubrik's film illustrates how the tension between fear and curiosity about technology and environment shapes our capacity to innovate. The anxieties are the result of this antagonism and exert a restraining role over the process of innovation. Nevertheless, many anxieties are not legitimate, just an irrational-apish fear against brand-new discoveries or—and this is our point—an ideological construction built up in order to preserve the old status quo, as Fitzpatrick 2012 explains:

"It has always been so: new technologies are perennially imagined to be not simply the enemy of established systems but in fact a direct threat to the essence of what is to be human. For this reason, declarations of cultural decline always bear complexly submerged ideological motivations."

The problem lies in the criteria used to identify a specific technology which can generate non-reasonable anxieties. According to Genevieve Bell, director of Intel Corporation's Interaction and Experience Research, the moral panic concept explains illegitimate reactions to technological development (Bell 2011). Any technology is potentially capable of producing such angst when it fulfills the following conditions: first, if it changes our relationship with time; second, if it changes our relationship with space; third, if it changes our relationship with other people. As Bell (2011) explains, the moral panic always begins with women and kids:

If you electrify homes you will make women and children vulnerable. Predators will be able to tell if they are home because the light will be on, and you will be able to see them. So electricity is going to make women vulnerable. Oh and children will be visible too and it will be predators, who seem to be lurking everywhere, who will attack.

Reading on digital devices accomplishes these conditions. First, we don't need to waste time travelling to a book-shop or library to get something to read; second, wherever the digital device can access the Internet has become our reading spot, and our personal library can travel with us anywhere; last, reading can become social, not just an isolated act (through blogging, Twittering, annotations and highlights in e-books…). If we add the socioeconomic downfall of some of the leading agents in the Gutenberg Galaxy, we face confusion seriously enough to foster a moral panic atmosphere in the book environment.