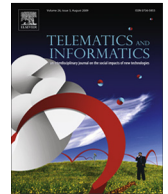


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Bodily dimensions of reading and writing practices on paper and digitally



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the different shapes in which reading and writing practices occur when paper/pen are compared with keyboard/screen. The focus is on the bodily aspects of these practices. Reading and writing are viewed as techniques of the body, which over the years have become increasingly mediated by technologies. The analysis is grounded in the theory of social practice. Research material consists of written essays collected from 25 students at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, in 2013. Results show that paper as material is considered suitable and adaptive to numerous reading purposes and bodily positions, while regarding the screen the places and positions of reading are viewed as more limited due to the material boundary conditions presented by devices. Students describe handwriting as a more flexible and relaxed bodily practice than typing, although the worsening skills of handwriting are recognized too. Skills and competences turned out to be less decisive factors than materials and images when trying to explain the differences in reading and writing practices when a paper/pen is compared with a keyboard/screen. Finally, the study argues that digital reading writing interfaces do not determine the ways we read and write as strongly as previously suggested.

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1. Introduction

Sociologists have typically viewed practices as a way to maintain routines and shared attitudes in human communities. However, if we place the transformation of practices under closer scrutiny a different vantage point opens up (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Recent developments made in the theory of social practices emphasise the dynamic nature of practices. More precisely, practices are deemed to originate from the configurations of equipment (materials), skills (competencies), and images (meanings) (Shove et al., 2012). This novel approach seems to hold much potential, yet it still needs to prove its potential and empirical applicability in the various fields of sociology (Schönian and Laube, 2013). In this article this theoretical approach is applied to understanding the *different shapes in which reading and writing practices occur when a pen and paper are compared with a screen/keyboard*. The analysis presented here revolves around the bodily aspects of reading and writing practices.

A quick glance at the history of reading and writing helps to illustrate the significance of the shift from the analogue to the digital world of reading and writing. Before the development of fully fledged writing systems there were ‘proto-writing’ techniques based on ideographs which did not encode the grammatical features of language. Proto-writing was actually based on the practice of scratching figures and symbols on a surface (Damerow, 2006). In Mesopotamia, soft clay bricks were

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used for this practice, in which the body was closely involved. When analysing these historical roots of writing Vilém Flusser (2012, p. 26) argues that this very act of writing, or engraving, reveals that ‘to write’ originally meant ‘to in-scribe’. More recently, the rise of modern technology-assisted writing tools – first manual typewriters and later keyboards and computers – has substantially changed the material basis of writing, making it more mediated and offering a strong rationale for refining the research on the social practices of writing.

In this article the bodily aspects of writing practices are analysed side by side with the practice of reading. These two are in fact inseparably linked. First of all, reading texts that are written by others tie the reader and the writer to the same action: it is the writer and the reader together that make communication a social practice (Flusser, 2012). Second, present-day digital reading and writing tools, such as smart phones and tablet PCs, no longer have separate interfaces for the two practices. Instead, touch screens are used to accomplish both practices (Emerson, 2014). Simultaneously, new interactive and collaborative media platforms have emerged calling for new types of media skills. It is these new interfaces and the rise of collaborative media platforms together that have shifted the focus from ‘read-only’ skills to ‘read and write’ skills (Hartley, 2008). The consumers of new media have also become producers (or prosumers), who not only read digital contents but who also create them – shifting smoothly back and forth between these two practices. It is here where the concept of multitasking becomes fundamental for the study of social practices. It refers both to the overlapping of reading and writing practices and to the use of digital tools while engaging in social interaction with others (‘social multitasking’) (e.g. Baron, 2008, pp. 40–43). Against this background, it would be factitious to research these reading and writing practices separately as in reality the two commonly overlap with each other.

In fact, it was Flusser who noticed as early as 1991 that the technologization of the writing process is slowly eroding the original essence of the gesture of writing (i.e. to in-scribe) and is replacing it with different meanings (Hanke, 2012). In Flusser’s (2012) analysis it was a typewriter that played the role of a new technology, and flagged the shift from the practice of engraving to typing. Recent studies on digital writing bear out the continuation of this trend. For instance, due to the use of aids, such as a dictionary or thesaurus, the rhythm of writing has changed (Fortunati and Vincent, 2014, p. 46). In addition, modern keyboards have evolved from full-size mechanic keyboards to virtual on-screen keyboards. The material and functional differences between these keyboards affect the bodily practices of writing. For instance, it is a little awkward to use a full-size keyboard while lying on a bed, while mobile phones and tablets can be used for typing in almost any position and place. However, compared with the virtual keyboard, the mechanical keyboard has other advantages, such as typing without looking at the keys. All this demonstrates how the practice of writing has substantially changed along with recent technological advancements.

Like writing, the crux of reading has changed along with digitization. The use of a computer screen for reading in particular, has become a real source of distraction modifying the practice of reading by making it more fragmented (Taipale, 2014). With regard to young Finns, Herkman and Vainikka (2014) have shown that digital reading follows their mundane routines, and hence consists more of quick ‘viewing’ than engrossed ‘reading’, the idea commonly associated with the printed book. However, it is worth noting that different types of screens entail diverse reading practices and bodily positions. The screen of a small device affords perhaps more comfortable reading postures than large and stationary screens, yet the usability of small screens for prolonged reading is not always as good as the usability of e-book readers, tablets or even desktop computers.

From a sociological perspective, previous literature on the digitization of reading and writing practices is partly constrained. First, it is obvious that digitization pushed scholars first to study the ergonomics of digital reading and writing in relation to direct and tangible implications for people’s physical well-being (e.g. musculoskeletal disorders of the neck and upper limbs). These efforts aimed at observing and measuring gestures and postures in order to understand how the take-up and use of digital tools affected body positions, including the trunk, upper and lower limbs, neck and head, was pivotal. For instance, Hedge and Powers (1995) measured how various arm and wrist support equipment affects the wrist angle and the distance between the user and the computer (also, see Zecevic et al., 2000). Laptop and desktop computer use have also been compared with each other to see if their effects on body positions are similar or not. The only difference Straker et al. (2000) found was the need for greater neck flexion and head tilt with laptop use. In sociology this kind of comprehensive approach to the human body as a conveyor of communication can be found in the concept of body-to-body communication (Fortunati, 2005). It considers the entire body and body language as responsible for daily communication processes, unlike face-to-face communication which mainly emphasises the role of the human face. In short, the major advantage of observation studies and the studies that objectively measure bodily dimensions and movements is that they can reveal unconscious bodily practices of which the observed person is unaware. However, from a sociological viewpoint mere observational studies are problematic as they are incapable of revealing the effects of meanings (images) and the social origins of skills (e.g. socialisation) that, according to the theory of social practices, are fundamental for understanding why we undertake certain practice and not others.

Second, previous sociological research designs have scrutinized the digitization of reading and writing practices mostly in relation to office work (e.g. Sellen and Harper, 2002) or professional adult language users, such as academics (e.g. Hillesund, 2010). It is only more recently that younger users of electronic texts and writing tools have been included as research subjects (e.g. Fortunati and Vincent, 2014; Mueller and Oppenheimer, 2014; Taipale, 2014). The reading and writing practices of younger generations definitely require more scholarly attention since the practices of young people are most indicative of tomorrow’s practices.

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