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Beyond solutions: Students' rationales for print and screen reading in Irish higher education

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1. Introduction

Reading platforms have been the subject of much attention over recent years, against a background of some cultural pessimism at the loss of value in reading generally (Birkerts, 1996; Carr, 2011). After early excitement at the prospect of the replacement of print books with ebooks, using dedicated ereaders, along with tablets and, later, smartphones, (Gilbert, 2015), the resilience of the 'dead tree' format has confounded what had become a new orthodox narrative of disruption (McGreevy, 2016; Nielsen Book Research UK, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2016). The stalled trajectory of ebooks (Ballatore and Natale, 2016) appears to bear out a growing questioning of digital transformation, also now extending to newspapers (Deegan and Sutherland, 2016; O'Sullivan et al., 2017).

The re-emerging appreciation for physical text connects to an emerging cultural discourse on the retro-affective regard for the analogue and the 'slow' (Sundén, 2015). But such evolution of thinking does not yet appear to have substantially reached higher education, where largely unexamined technology adoption features loudly. Even in non-technical disciplines, such as in the humanities and social sciences, staff and students alike are expected routinely to utilize at minimum virtual learning environments and online reading materials, especially ebooks and journal articles.

The wider context is one of sustained digitization. Google's Consumer Barometer survey (2016), carried out online between in late 2014 and early 2015, shows rapid adoption in Ireland of screen devices, in particular of the smartphone. The country registers high smartphone use in European comparisons, at 78%, out of 97% mobile phone use; 77% of people use a computer – either desktop, laptop or netbook; 50% use a tablet, 8% an ereader; and 5% a wearable digital device. Among under-25 s, use of smartphones is near-universal, at 97%. Many activities are performed at least as often on a phone as on a computer, with viewing of video featuring particularly strongly. (Reading and writing were not included as surveyed activities.) The rise of the phone is also borne out in terms of market share, at 45.81% of Internet traffic in March 2017 (StatCounter GlobalStats, 2017). The national trend is part of the move to the mobile phone globally (European Commission, 2015), with a tipping point represented by the overtaking the desktop PC (StatCounter GlobalStats, 2016).

The study presented here fits in the third phase of a wider international research program carried out by members of the European

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Commission COST Action FP1104 'Exploring New Possibility for Print – Combining Print with Digital'[1], and comprising eight countries – Ireland, the UK, Italy, Hungary, Serbia, Slovakia, Russia and Bulgaria. Broadly expressed, the research has, in contrast to psychological or performance testing, investigated students' preferences in their reading and writing.

The present study uses qualitative data from a small-scale survey with 88 student participants at Dublin City University (DCU). It is hoped that it will inform wider discussions, as has already occurred in relation to consideration of students' use and perceptions of the smartphone (Vincent et al., 2017). The research question addressed is as follows: what are the platform preferences of Irish university students for academic reading and how are those preferences formed?

While writing is included in the survey questions, the primary focus of interest here is on reading. And, while reading for pleasure is investigated, it primarily serves comparative purposes here. Responses are theorized in the broader context of the institutional and political economic forces that structure the environment of teaching and learning in higher education. This socio-technical approach offers an alternative view of the often one-dimensional perspectives on learning, inherited from the dominant agenda of digital innovation.

2. The rise of edtech

It is unsurprising to observe that the promotion of digital learning in higher education is based on institutionally-amplified messages of progress, reform, efficiency, broadening of access and the fostering of student engagement (Meyer, 2014; Seery and McDonnell, 2013). Much of the discourse invokes Prensky's influential conceptualization of younger generations as digital natives, categorizing older people, including those in teaching roles, as digital immigrants (2001). This rigid paradigm has been seen to run into difficulty as generations progress, with new digital generations showing differences in their adoption of technologies (Fortunati et al., 2017). However, its constructed division is pervasively and uncritically cited, often with an evangelical tone (e.g. Kivunja, 2014), and in spite of further criticism that likens associated calls to digital improvement to an academic 'moral panic' that has been neither theoretically nor empirically informed (Bennett et al., 2008). Bulfin et al. conclude that their survey of researchers of education technology and media demonstrates poor theoretical engagement, with one respondent (categorized as UK/Ireland) observing 'a default tendency to over-emphasize… popular concepts with no empirical base, such as "digital nativism" etc.' (2013), p. 342). Conversely, a recently emerging focus of research considers the addictive nature of smartphone use, related to but not confined to pedagogy (e.g. Elhai et al., 2016; Hawi and Samaha, 2016).

Concern at the dearth of critical perspective is impressively marshalled by Gavriel Salomon (2016), who observes that the most common premise for research is not learning, but what the technology can do. He cites the application of iPads in a problem-oriented teaching course: students said that what they had learned most was how to use an iPad. Salomon decries the 'horse race' approach in which one medium is tested against another without regard for human and situational factors, reinforcing the belief that it is technology that makes the difference. He asks:

> Will technology be allowed to play the role of the great educational seducer, a bandwagon luring education to hop on it and join the e-commerce crowd? … will the technological tail be allowed to wag the educational dog…? (Ibid.: 158).

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In the face of the seemingly unstoppable – one might say frenzied – momentum toward digital adoption, frequently with academics as it most zealous accelerators, Salomon's is among other voices emerging from within the academy, concerned at the fit of digital tools and challenging largely unexamined claims (Henderson, 2015; Selwyn, 2016).

Electronic texts come as part of the wider adoption of technologies such as VLEs, wikis, message boards, chat, learning diaries, quizzes, video, MOOCs, badges, analytics, and networked database-driven matrices of measurable, commodifiable 'learning outcomes'. Change has been driven with little critical discussion at faculty level. Rather, it is the product of a highly-resourced official program with, at the top, EU policy, echoed by national positions and university strategic plans, frequently citing a legitimizing agenda of opening access to education (Brečko et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2017; Devine, 2015; European Commission, 2014; Johnson et al., 2015; National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2015), and linked with digital literacy (All Aboard Project Consortium, 2015). Academics are subjected to a consistent hum of exhortation to 'enhance' teaching, often with implications for career advancement. Those who are not digital improvers are, in the language of innovation diffusion (Lyytinen and Damsgaard, 2001), laggards at risk of obsolescence.

The top-down political and administrative push invokes the engagement of private commercial entities in the 'edtech' sector, providing implementations across all aspects of institutions' operations, from content delivery and library services to database and monitoring products. The strategic entry of such interests is made overt through commercial sponsorship of academic events, such as a conference in the program for which Google gnomically sets out 'Making learning magical' as one of its aims (Irish Learning Technology Association, 2013, p. 7). In the case of books, the theme of future proofing and the appeal of the 'universal library' providing digital access for all, is unpacked by librarian Rebecca Lossin (2017). She warns of an anti-democratic virtual book-burning, in which the advantages of physical copies are sacrificed for notions of access, mundane efficiencies and user-oriented appeals to adolescent motivations, in a new regime of privatized provision. As with the free labor and data economy constituted by users of social media platforms, this new library has data-driven surveillance at its core.

From a political economy perspective, the intensity of this in-plain-sight, programmatic drive reflects the scale of opportunity in

[1] See http://www.cost.eu/COST_Actions/fps/FP11041