

READING ON THE INTERNET: IS ONLINE READING SIMILAR TO COMIC READING?

KRISZTINA SZABÓ

Doctoral School of Philosophy and History of Science, Budapest University
of Technology and Economics, Egry József Street, 1, Budapest, 1111, Hungary

E-mail address: kriszti.szabo@filozofia.bme.hu



ABSTRACT

The Internet penetration sparked off new debates about reading literacy. Agreeing with those who take the attitude that surfing on the Internet is also a type of reading, the following question is raised: how do we read in an online space? „Reading comics [...] can be compared mostly to the active user activity of the Internet” (Dunai, 2007). Taking this idea into consideration, my ongoing research⁹ is a critical comparative analysis of comic reading and digital reading, based on the contemporary theories of digital literacy (Hillesund, 2010; Dyson, & Kipping 1998; Sivak, 2003; Cull, 2011; Bolter, 2001) and comic reading (Koós, 2004; Kovács, 2009; Maksa, 2007). In my paper, I will argue that reading on the Internet can be similar to comic reading. My aim is to confirm this hypothesis in order to get a better understanding of digital literacy and online reading, and also to make a step forward in the theories of developing digital reading literacy skills.

Keywords: Online Reading, Digital Text, Digital Literacy, Reading Comprehension, Comic Reading.

PREFACE: A CHANGE IN READING

In the history of human culture, communication, information sharing and message transfer have always had an essential part. Over centuries, new media – such as books, journals, radio, television and Internet – rose as a consequence of technological developments that have completely changed not just our way and quality of communication, but also the entire thinking processes of people. Two sweeping changes of media have been book printing and Internet penetration. The former was the starting point of the so called Gutenberg-galaxy, in which civilised people became readers all around the world. The latter is the Digital Age that opened the gates for worldwide communication networks, informa-

⁹ This ongoing research is conducted in the framework of *Integral Argumentation Studies*, OTKA – K-109456 at the Doctoral School of Philosophy and History of Science, Budapest University of Technology and Economics.

tion sharing and a mediatised world, connecting people any time and any place, giving them the chance to extend their knowledge far beyond their previous imaginations. We can claim that in the history of reading, digital devices represent the greatest change in the level of media. (Hillesund, 2010) But the transition between these two media: books and Internet is so shockingly fast and complex that we can hardly keep up our understanding of their advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless numerous researchers working in different scientific disciplinary fields intend to get the essence of it.

One of the most vivid debates at the area of Communication and Literature Theories, Hermeneutics, Info Communication and Education Theories and Reading Researches concerns the nature of reading processes, more specifically reading literacy. We can state that as a result of constant Internet use, our reading habits have changed in the last few decades. The debates are about the quality of this change. How do we read in the online space? What are the differences between printed and digital texts? Is it true that we read much less than in the era of books, thus our reading literacy is progressively weakening?

Reviewing the related literature, I take a stand on that we do not read less but in a different way. Our texts have been changed, so does our reading mechanism, and vice versa. Thus to get a deeper picture about reading, we should examine the changes more carefully, comparing classical to digital texts and reading. Agreeing with those who claim that surfing on the Internet is reading, I try to capture some significant points of the online reading mechanisms and text comprehension.

Hereinafter in this paper first I will present my hypothesis concerning the similarities between digital reading and comic reading; second I will give a short literature review about the theoretical background and a couple of definitions necessary to distinguish. Then I will talk about the research method and show the results and consequences I found. Finally I will sum up the research and give some directions for possible further researches. As *Michael F. Opitz* and *Roger G. Elridge, Jr.* claims: "How important it is to remember that comprehension is the essence of reading and that it has to be taught and cannot be left to chance!". (Opitz, & Elridge, 2004, p. 772) According to the above, my aim is to demonstrate that by understanding online reading as analogous to comic reading we can get closer to comprehend electronic and multimedia documents.

HYPOTHESIS: NEW METAPHORS FOR ONLINE READING

"E-reading [...] takes place on a multitude of electronic devices and is rapidly increasing in popularity." (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012, p.13). Since reading processes are constantly changing, I agree with those who claim that new metaphors and models are needed to help us understanding the changes of reading in the New Media Age. "If success in the twenty-first century depends increasingly on advanced literacy skills and the education and training they make possible, it is important for educators, policy makers, and the public

to understand what advanced literacy is. In short, a new definition of literacy is required – one that highlights the skills that children need to deal with the new demands.” (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012, p.6)

Taking consideration these previous terms, in this paper I will argue that reading on the Internet can be similar to comic reading. Wherefore comic? According to *Tamás Dunai* „Reading comics [...] can be compared mostly to the active user activity of the Internet” (Dunai, 2007). Continuing on this idea I think that it is worth making a comparison between digital reading and comic reading on the level of texts, of (additional) visual elements and of reading processes in order to get a better understanding of digital literacy and online reading.

METHOD

In my research I make a critical comparative analysis of comic reading and digital reading based on the related and relevant literature (See *References*). This secondary research consists of a comparison between comics and digital texts on a primary level, concerning the notion of ‘hypertext’, ‘hyperpicture’ and the role of visual elements. On a deeper level it is also a comparison of reading procedures – for instance, linearity and readers’ reading activity. Since these are the opening steps of my ongoing research I would like to nail down that my methods are under development, thus my first results just set the course for possible further research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

According to *David N. Rapp* and *Paul van den Broek* there are lots of ‘mini-theories’ concerning reading processes which “may account for complementary and even mutually supportive aspects of reading comprehension” (Rapp, & van den Broek, 2005, p.276). But literacy development “is not just decoding and summarizing anymore” (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012, p.6), thus the classical theories require further improvement. Two of these theories are ‘memory-based perspective’ and ‘constructionist perspective’, competing endlessly in certain research circles. The former occupies itself with words, phrases and concepts that are automatically triggered up from the memory during the reading process to serve one’s comprehension. The latter says that readers play an active and quasi independent role in searching and giving their own meanings and interpretations to a certain text (Rapp, & van den Broek, 2005, pp. 276-277). But these separate theories are seemingly not enough to drive us closer to the main goals, because they are not able to handle together all the main changes of the reading processes.

There is also a limitation in the independent concepts of the ‘process of reading’ and the ‘products to be read’; because “the obvious fact is that the two must be closely connected” (Rapp, & van den Broek, 2005, p.277) since reading process is a complex comprehension mechanism. Thus when we investigate reading we shouldn’t separate reading itself from reading contents or more specifically: texts.

The conceptions of ‘shallow reading processes’ (a quick recall of information, summarizing texts etc.), the ‘simple view of reading’ (for e.g. accuracy and speed of reading), or the ‘schema theories of reading comprehension’ (“updating readers’ knowledge schemas by integrating information encountered in text with information already stored” (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012, pp. 6-7) and so forth are also separately insufficient to dig deeper when a mediatised world challenges both adults’ and children’s ability to use and understand multimodal contents. As *Nonie Lesaux* puts it: “reading is a dynamic and multifaceted process that requires continued development if students are to keep pace with the increasing demands of school texts and tasks [...] Reading effectively, readers not only decipher words on a page but also use their accumulating knowledge to assess, evaluate, and synthesise the presented information.” (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012, p. 12).

So as to handle these complex but isolated ‘mini-theories’, *Rapp* and *van den Broek* argue for the theories of *Dynamic Text Comprehension (DTC)* that “focuses on multiple factors and their interaction during reading” (Rapp, & van den Broek, 2005, p. 276). Their so called ‘Landscape model of reading’ is a kind of circle of comprehension fitting in DTC and consists of the following parts:

- text input in the current cycle;
- residual information from the preceding cycle;
- the memory representation constructed for the text read so far;
- the reader’s prior knowledge.

(Rapp, & van den Broek, 2005, p. 277).

At this point I think that it is better to take one step back to the roots and look up some basic definitions concerning digital texts and comics, in order not just to explain on which ground I see a possible similarity between digital reading and comic reading, but also to give a clear account of my thesis.

Digital Text. Digital texts are available on some kind of digital display such as e-books, PCs, notebooks, tablets, cell phones, smart phones etc. (See *Figure 1*.) This category includes several types of texts from usual website texts to e-bills. These digital texts according to *Pullen* are stored as strings of characters on a technological device. (Pullen 2006) Digital texts are special texts, technically hypertexts: they are some kind of networks constructed from web links encompassing the cyber space. (Cull, 2011; Bolter, 1991; Bolter, 2001) These text types can be regarded as design products (Walsh, 2010, p.224), specifically called hybrid texts. One can read these digital texts in the frame of a special mental process which is constitutive, constructive and transforming. According to *Cull* and *Ulin*, in these digital texts the connection between syntax and semantics, cohesion (expressions, the predicative structure, the connection of sentences, the relationship of single phrases and grammatical units) and coherence (the meaning of the text and knowledge in context) work other ways than in printed text. (Cull, 2011; Ulin, 2009)



Fig. 1. Some examples for digital texts.

Source: Original illustration (montage) created by the author. Based on Google free search.

Visual Elements. Visual elements are pictures, graphics, design elements, word clouds, gifs, interactive advertisements, graphical elements of Prezis and Power Point presentations; statistics vector icons, smart art pictures, opening pictures of notebooks and Smartphones, embedded YouTube videos etc. In brief: all additional, explicative and/or illustrative elements which visually appear in texts.



Fig. 2. Some examples for visual elements.

Source: Original illustration (montage) created by the author. Based on Google free search.

Non-Linear Reading. Non-linear reading is a fragmental way of reading, a kind of scanning, when one jumps from one part of a text to another part totally on his or her intentions. This information sorting is fast and pictorial focusing on individual elements which serves the rapid information searching instead of in-depth reading. (Hillesund, 2010)

Comics. A Comic is a medium with pictures embedded in narrative systems. This genre is a part of literature and fine art, and it is constructed on the coexistence of texts and pictures. The frames or panels illustrate the story, guide comprehension and complete meaning. It can be possible that the text and pictures have got separate and converse meanings, and also that they are inseparable. There are several types of comics according to different cultures and cartooning traditions, but in this paper I won't deal with the typology of comics. For my research it is enough that in a first base, comic types share the same primary characteristics. (Dunai, 2007).

FIRST RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By the comparison of comic reading to digital reading my aim was to find some sufficient similarities among the characteristics of these two types of reading processes. Based on the literature of comic reading we can easily discover that in some attributions they share the same features. One essential common characteristic is that reading a comic is also a fragmental, non-linear reading process, when the reader decides whether s/he looks the panels, the plot and the visual element in a linear way, or on the contrary: s/he jumps hectically from one part of the pictures to another part of the text in a kind of scanning reading style. Thus readers can decide on the direction of reading, because the special – open and freely walkable – structure of comics allows differing from the story line during the reading process.

It is also important that comics are webs of pictures, namely “hyperpictures” which allow the readers to handle the complexity of text and pictures together as a map for getting information which they need to understand the storyline. This connection between pictures and texts is essentially true in the case of webcomics. These digitalized comics are linked to each other with hyperlinks, so we can easily jump from one panel to another, whether they are in the same story or not. We can even hide some panels if we want to in order to make reading more focused. The Comic is a design product, thus a “hybridpicture” in which cohesion and coherence function nearly the same way as in digital texts.

Following from the above, reading and understanding comics needs an active user activity, a kind of visual literacy without we are not able to comprehend the complicated relations of text and pictures. With the help of the visual elements we get additional meanings and guidance to understand the plot. Thus the role of pictures and visual elements in comics are as important as in the case of digital texts. At this point I have to mention, that this rediscovery of pictures raises several debates in the fields of literacy researchers, because some of them think that the enormous amount of visual elements in texts – particularly in digi-

tal texts – are digital distractions which do not help us to understand the texts. The fear of going back to picture reading – a less effective, more superficial and already outworn reading style – particularly in the world of motion pictures and video games means that our cognitive processes will regress. By contrast I say that if visual elements have got indispensable roles in comprehending comics at a deeper level, then they do not distract our attention or obstruct the cognitive reading process. If this opinion is right then a question automatically arises: why could not the visual elements in a digital text work in the same way?

However, in order to get a more complex analysis, I need to show some possible objections as well. Firstly, it is important that the narrative structure of comics serves the aim of presenting a story, whereas digital texts are not primarily stories to be told, but information, knowledge, news, letters, bills and so forth. They have got several functions and goals according to the intentions of their authors. The second problem follows from the latter, namely that reading stories and acquiring information or knowledge are different kinds of processes, which is important in the mechanism of comprehension. The third critical point is that according to ages, eras, traditions and cultures, there are numerous types of comics as well as digital texts. At this moment it is difficult to see how can we go deeper in the comparison of them and draw a clearer parallel between the two types of reading.

Table 1. Digital Reading vs. Comic Reading

	DIGITAL READING PROCESS	COMIC READING PROCESS
SIMILARITIES	fragmental, non-linear, scanning, the elements of a content are open and freely walkable by the reader, hypertext/picture, hybridtext/picture, design product, special cohesion and coherence, active user activity, numerous text types	
DIFFERENCES	numerous aims and intentions of the authors for example: getting informed, acquire knowledge etc.	narrative texts, their aim is to tell a story

Source: Original illustration created by the author

Nonetheless, it is promising that some researchers have started to use comics as elements of teaching materials, which shows that comics besides their narrative functions have descriptive, explicative and informative functions, too. However, I acknowledge that the similarities among comic reading and digital reading are not enough to make a direct parallel between the two reading types, thus possible further research is required.

CONCLUSION

In my paper I made a comparative analysis of comic reading and digital reading, arguing that new metaphors are needed to be phrased in order to understand reading literacy skills. My hypothesis was that reading on the Internet can be similar to comic reading. So as to confirm my hypothesis I made a secondary research starting with a short draft of the theoretical background and literature. I also defined some fundamental expressions, for instance digital text, visual

elements, non-linear reading and comic. In the second part of my paper I made a comparison between comics and digital texts, concerning the notion of ‘hypertext’, ‘hyperpicture’, the role of visual elements and the reading procedure. Concluding all the above I claim that my hypothesis is right in some aspects, namely the basic features of the two reading processes, such as linearity, fragmental reading, cohesion, coherence, hyperlinks etc. But in certain cases possible further research is required, because it would be essential to dig deeper in drawing up the similarities and differences of the two reading types.

Concerning the future I think that I should examine the several kinds of comic types taking in also the theories of the eye-tracking heating map researches. What follows from the comic book-like reading literacy is a deeper and dynamic text comprehension theory that can help us to understand and improve digital reading literacy skills, which is a very engaging and gripping task and research topic.

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