On the Move: "Shadow Research" on the Media Habits of Generation Z

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Abstract. The comprehensive research "The Media Usage Habits and Communication Practices of Secondary School Students" was carried out in 2013 as the subproject of the programme called "The Recognition and Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge" at the University of Pécs. The fundamental aim of this wide-range programme was to introduce and mediate the scientific achievements of the University of Pécs to the young generation living in the vicinity of the University. This aim could only be achieved by knowing the language and communication style of the young generation well. The aim of the research carried out with the assistance of the Department of Communication and Media Studies was to set up a knowledge base that would help us establish more efficient relationships with the target group mentioned above. The results of our investigation made it possible to draw a clearer picture about the communication practices and scenes of the so-called Generation Z, including the peculiarities of their media habits. We can capture the generation-specific characteristics appearing in the media usage of this age-group through the significance of motion. Regarding the use of media, motion may be interpreted as a movement in physical space but also as a transit through various media surfaces. The following study summarizes the most important results of our research.

Keywords: Generation Z, media habits, mobile communication

Researching the Media Usage Habits of Generation Z

Most studies define Generation Z as the fifth age group living today, preceded by the Quiet Generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Y. They will be followed by Generation Alpha (Pais, 2013; Pál, 2013; Székely, 2014). Generation Z is represented by young people born between the beginning and middle of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. Typically, they have older parents, live in small families, receive high-quality education and their life expectancy is significantly better than that of the previous generations. The most important feature of this generation is that its members are "born into" the world of digital revolution which makes them responsive towards technological inventions. This is clearly illustrated by the names given to this generation such as "Net Generation", "Digital Natives" or "Wired Generation" (Szijártó, 2014: 19–21). For Generation Z, the role of network communication has primary importance; so, we can, somewhat ambitiously, say that they live their lives online. They understand technology well, their problem-solving skills are above average, they can easily multitask and prefer picture and sound to written text. At the same time, however, they frequently feel loneliness and think that they are unsuccessful outsiders. Frustration generated by such feelings often makes them isolated, anxious or depressed (more about this in Pais, 2013: 10–11).

In March 2013, a research project began at the University of Pécs aiming at the comprehensive investigation of the age-group known as Generation Z. In the framework of a subproject of the research called TÁMOP-4.2.3.-12/1/KONV *Recognition and Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge*, the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University surveyed the most important scenes and forms of communication of secondary and tertiary students and the special features of their media usage. The aim of the research programme called *Understanding the Communication of Young People* was to expand and deepen the knowledge we have about the communication practices of today's young generation.

The research carried out in 2103 applied a qualitative approach; it followed the methodological principles of the so-called "shadow research".[1] This method refers to the principle that while the researchers do their best to have as little impact on the life of the informants as possible, they try to document their communication activities in the most credible way. Accordingly, when establishing our research method, we decided to use the combination of media diaries, interviews and mental maps, recording their communication practice in a visual form (Sheble–Wildemuth, 2009). We also heavily relied upon the experiences of a German research which investigated the communication networks of media users (Hepp–Berg–Roitsch, 2011).

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1   On this, see as well: Gunter (2009: 22–55), Horning (2009: 95–115), Stokes (2008: 143–172).

Applying these methods, we were able to receive detailed information on the time, place, exact manner and conditions of media use. It follows from the manner of data communication that media use and the related impressions and emotions were also given greater importance, that is, we had the chance to record the media-related attitudes as well. Another benefit of this method is that it is suitable to survey the use of one particular medium (e.g. television or Internet) and also to reveal complex trends and habits related to the use of media when we are investigating the full spectrum of the devices and their possible uses in their context.

The general sample of the investigation included young people from South-Transdanubia. (The equality module of the research completed this general sample with two special sub-samples that included twenty-two young Roma people and sixteen children who lived in state care – more about this in Németh, 2013; and Glózer, 2013.) In the framework of a research seminar and following adequate preparation, we involved M.A. students from the Department of Communication and Media Studies and carried out 90-minute interviews with thirty-three secondary school students between the ages of 15 and 19. During the interviews, the interviewees interpreted the media diaries that recorded how they used the media. Connected to the interviews, we asked them to draw a map about their communication network and media habits. We tried to use these maps to understand how secondary students see their media use, what they see as of particular importance and how they interpret that. A little more than two-thirds of the interviewees were women and a little less than one-third included men. Regarding the schools, the sample varied significantly: we interviewed the students of secondary schools having different profiles, six from Pécs and one from Bátaszék, Kaposvár and Szekszárd. Most of the students live with their parents and about one-third of them live in hostels during the week. We also studied the media diaries of thirty-four university students between the ages of 19 and 23, who were not interviewed but prepared their communication network map. The sample showed significant variance regarding the degree courses of the students which included economy, law, medical science, ambulance officer, civil engineering, biology, psychology, English studies and liberal arts.

The following pages will treat the experiences we gained by analysing the general sample and the conclusions drawn on the basis of it. The first results can be read in our detailed research report (Guld and Maksa, 2013). Our intention with this paper is to give a short summary of our results and further consider the conclusions we drew there.

On Our Results

Regarding the time spent on media use, the research in question revealed that the members of Generation Z spend between 5 and 6 hours using the media, but we found examples that differed significantly from the average. University students generally spend a little more time on using the media; however, the age-group of secondary school students produced the most extreme examples. They often reported on using the media for 10–12 hours, even during weekdays.

Looking at the devices preferred by the members of Generation Z, the significance of mobile devices is striking. Among these, smart phones are the most popular, while the presence of tablets is still negligible. The popularity of mobile devices can clearly be connected to the Internet as the most popular communication platform. The preference of social networking, file and video sharing sites, games and chat programmes within the applications accessible through the net seems to be impossible to defeat. Neither does the daily routine of Generation Z exclude classic mass media; however, its importance is being greatly reinterpreted. Radio and especially television are connected to background and parallel media consumption, so it is becoming less and less usual that young people pay attention to these media exclusively. When using radio and television, they carry out other activities as well (for example: eating, housework, physical training) or use another medium at the same time, which is mainly a computer or a mobile phone. The decreasing importance of newspapers and magazines as compared to radio and television is also evident.

The tendencies mentioned above clearly show that the members of Generation Z can rarely be characterized by active media use that is a period of time devoted to the use of only one medium. In case it happens, its duration is quite short and it is only the telephone, the computer and sometimes the television that appear in such contexts. In contrast, the use of media as a background is becoming normal practice. Its most dominant cases are the activities that can be connected to listening to music (daily routine, transportation, studying, relaxing, housework, etc.).

Regarding the media use of Generation Z, the development of the phenomenon known as multitasking is the most striking (see also: Kitta, 2013). We can talk about multitasking when two different media are used at the same time (e.g. television and mobile phone), when more than two different media are used at the same time (e.g. television, mobile phone and computer), when parallel media use is carried out on different surfaces accessible by the same device (e.g. the running of different computer applications at the same time). The phenomenon can be explained by saving time and organizing various tasks in a more efficient way; however, it has grave consequences regarding concentration and attention.

On the basis of the results, we can say that Generation Z is characterized by highly developed media consciousness though the majority typically underestimate the

time they spend on using the media. In general, young people treat the information provided by the media critically and are aware of the general dangers presented by it. However, while they consider their own media use normal, they frequently judge that of their fellows excessive and harmful. Finally, it is important to mention that this age-group consciously avoids advertisements; it is becoming one of the key features of their media use that they look for surfaces where there are no advertisements or where ads can be somehow filtered.

On the Move

The characteristic features appearing in the media use of this generation can be best captured through the significance of motion. Regarding the use of media, this motion may be interpreted as a movement in physical space but also as a transit through various media surfaces (Guld, 2014a).

Movement in the physical sense can be interpreted in the context of *home, school* and the *road* connecting them. Here, special media usage habits are connected to each location and also to the road itself. This is made possible by the widely accessible wireless network and the wide variety of opportunities provided by mobile devices.

The most diverse ways of using the media are connected to the home, which is related to the great variety of communication devices available and the opportunities provided by the free time we have at home. Regarding home, young people's own room has utmost importance as this is the central location of their media activities. In most households, every essential media device can be found here including television, computer, laptop and mobile phone, and sometimes a game console or music system. In their own room, we can find a PC or laptop in the centre, which are frequently used together with other media devices. While in the space of their own room, media use is a typically solitary activity, in the other rooms of the house – in the living and dining room or the kitchen –, this is clearly the source of a shared experience: the most common way of spending their free time together with the other family members. In the communal spaces of family life, it is still the TV that occupies the first place because in exceptional cases, typically at weekends, it is still able to sit the whole family down and grab their attention entirely. At times, radio also appears in this context; however, in contrast with the TV, the use of this medium can be explained by the parents' choice, which can frequently be a source of serious conflicts between the older and the younger generations (Guld, 2014b).

Regarding the school and the hostel, it is mainly the rules stipulated by these institutions and the technical-technological conditions available there that influence the media use of young people. Our research has revealed that the role

of media devices in education seems to be accidental so far as is mentioned in the reports of primarily those students who participate in special informatics courses. The situation is even more problematic in hostels, where the lack of devices – which seems general – does not only hinder studying but also makes personal communication more difficult and heavily limits the ways students spend their free time. As a result of the above factors, young people tend to conceive the most diverse practices to circumvent the strict rules and the attention of their teachers. Their most important "ally" is the mobile phone which can be used undetected not only during the breaks but often during classes, too. Several students mentioned that during class they are regularly logged in to various social networking sites, while girls said they could listen to music using their mobile phone during class because their hair hides the earphones they use. There are places where even the password protected wireless network of the school or hostel does not present a problem for young people to access the Internet as the regularly broken codes spread like lightning among students. In summary, it seems that the education institutions have not yet been able to fully exploit the opportunities provided by the latest communication technologies, while students always try to find a chance to use these technologies via their own devices in order to satisfy their needs.

On the basis of the reports, most of the students have to commute between their home and school, so many of them spend a considerable amount of time on travelling. An essential accessory of any travel, let it be longer or shorter, is some media device and its use that is related only to travel. Thus, many students reported on how listening to the radio in the car had become part of their daily routine, an activity that they rarely or never do other times. Those not interested in radio programmes listen to their own music using their mobile phone or MP3 player in the car or on the bus. Frequently, this is the only time when others who go to school on foot grab a newspaper, typically freely distributed ones placed at bus stops or major crossroads. Using media while on the road is therefore a tool against boredom and frequently replaces or substitutes oral communication with parents, relatives or peers.

Movement in the virtual space of media can mainly be explained by the phenomenon mentioned above called multitasking, which means that young people tend to step over from one media surface to another with no problem; what is more, they are frequently present at various surfaces at the same time. To achieve this, they need complex communication infrastructure that is primarily accessible at home and whose central device is the PC or the laptop. As a result of the possibilities provided by the computer, it represents the most essential surface of multitasking and it would be difficult to list the possible ways of using a computer at the same time as revealed by our research. That is the reason why here we only talk about the three most important or most general surfaces. This category includes programmes suitable for playing music, social networking

sites and chat programmes like MSN or Skype. These programmes are constantly active on most young people's devices; so, in this regard, they can be considered the most popular applications even if in this context they rarely get into the focus of undivided attention for a longer time. Furthermore, it is also vital that these surfaces can easily be associated with each other and with other offline or online activities; thus, their flexibility may further enhance the usability of programmes and the interoperability of virtual surfaces.

Finally, we should mention that besides physical mobility and the possibilities provided by multitasking a third type of mobility is worth noting (however, the diaries, interviews and maps give us information mainly about the first two versions). This is the mobility between geographic and cultural spaces. In the framework of a new, more focused research, it would also be worth surveying questions of how the use of media is connected to various geographic and cultural spaces. These issues include the following: situations when we use the media in our mother tongue and in a foreign language, gaining information on topical issues, the places of information and entertainment and their relation to global and local, transcultural situations and the appearance belonging to various communities in media use.

Conclusions

The more thorough understanding of the practices recorded in the research documents and the novel user strategies outlined in this respect assign further tasks for the researchers and, by extension, for the players of the media market. As researchers, our most crucial duty is to further interpret and consider the results we have got. On the basis of the work carried out so far, we can draw a relatively detailed picture about the *general* trends in the media use of Generation Z; however, the new and special user practices appearing today can only be revealed through more precisely focused investigations. The aims outlined this way also have practical significance because it is easily understandable that the recognition of the new user practices and the adjustment to them would mean considerable advantages in the field of future competition.

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