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"They Already Know Everything." Computer Use by Teenagers and Associated Perceptions in Rural Communities

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Abstract. The statement highlighted in the title, "they already know everything", refers to a small group of Generation Z, rural children and teenagers in three communities in contemporary Transylvania. It is not them who describe themselves so, but a grown-up, a representative of Generation Y, Zalán M., an expert in the maintenance and use of digital devices who is recognized as such in the communities. Because of the recognition of his competence as an expert and the legitimacy this brings him, his views, which he proclaims vehemently and publicly, are shared by others as well. The cases presented in this paper come from a long-term field work with lengthy interruptions. The location is the communities of Vărgata commune in Mureş county (Vărgata, Valea, Mitreşti, as well as to a lesser extent Grâuşorul and Vadu). I have been present as an ethnographer in the field since 2004, conducting observations focusing on various topics. My goal was the holistic understanding of the cultural behaviour and the creation of interpretations using knowledge from anthropological literature. Since the appearance and proliferation of digital and new media devices, the elements of knowledge needed to operate them and the attitudes associated with them are a new phenomenon that has been brought into the crosshairs of public attention in these last few years (since 2009), this paper draws on the contextual knowledge I have developed throughout the years of fieldwork to understand the computer use of the young members of Generation Z and the general perceptions the computer engenders, as well as opinions and ways of behaviour associated with it.

Keywords: generation Z, familiarization/domestication, media literacy/ media illiteracy

Frame of Reference: Familiarization/Domestication

My interpretation of computer use was mainly aided by the notions of familiarization/domestication Roger Silverstone focuses on. All that is presented in this paper resides in the context of everyday life, and the acclimatization with the media phenomenon that takes place in this environment shaped by digital devices appears in this context, performing its effects of transformation. Home is where members of Generation Z live together with members of the previous generation and the newly emerging technology, i.e. where the cumulative effects of new media may be observed. According to Zsolt Szijártó, qualitative characteristics are important, and instead the material aspects of access it is the issues of "mental access" (the capacity for learning, the intensity of its allure) that determine the Internet use (Szijártó, 2013). Referring to a previous state, Tibor Mester quotes Raymond Williams, who, instead of the technical innovations of television, places its communal usage at the focal point of scientific investigation, and states that the institutional framework and ways of usage that are developing have been determined by the cultural context, norms and values as well as the series of decisions that arise under the effects of societal attitudes. This is no different in the case of the Internet as well. The notion of domestication refers to the kinds of individual prerequisites and practices of knowledge and usage that come into being while using the television and the Internet: what happens in the home, or – as Roger Silverstone's notion of familiarization suggests (Silverstone 1999) – in the families, during the coexistence of the generations. Homes, in this conceptualization, are: the instances and locations of interaction between the technology-accepting culture and the technology shaping the culture, with the actors of these activities organizing themselves into generational formations and becoming separate.

It is true that Silverstone developed the notion of familiarization in connection with the use of television and its everyday effects (Silverstone, 1999): just as individual people, persistent consumer items, meaning television or, in our case, computers, will also have a biography. And this develops during family interactions, in the communicational activities that mould families: before they buy it, they imagine the object and they shape its physical and emotional place (as if building it a nest before its arrival). Thus, the object is first present in its virtual rather than actual reality; its placement began before its actual appearance and use. The act of purchase itself has thus already been limited by preconditions: they are not buying just any object but one that can be fitted into a familial framework. An emotional preparation exists beforehand: they will choose not an item to be purchased, but an object which (and this is mostly irrespective of the object's technical performance or specifications) best suits the place that has been prepared for it; of which they most believe will become a "family member" – or

more precisely: they project their perceptions about the objects appearing in the family and in search of their place, disregarding their options to a great extent.

Of course, we are not talking about a single situation, the sole act of purchasing: Silverstone also talks about the process of familiarization. The place and ways of usage of the object and, by extension, its (not technical, but cultural) characteristics are shaped and continually reshaped. The differences between individual family members and generations within the family can be great since they participate in this reshaping with varying levels of knowledge, skills, curiosity, patience and sacrifices (of their time and work). Certain objects or the ways they are used in may fit more readily into family structures and familial cultural behaviours than others. The series of activities which results in the family fitting objects, technologies and phenomena into their own familial culture, i.e. the ways in which they make use of their time and space, and their way of life can be quite time- and energy-consuming. Human behaviour, mechanized labour and technological processes meld together inseparably, yet it is still interpretations and connotations, i.e. cultural processes which are of utmost significance. The final results are what matter, i.e. a newer/renewed cultural way of behaviour: the life of objects happens in this cultural medium, the object and its usage becomes integrated into this familial medium; one may almost say that "tamed" (the original meaning of domestication) objects and uses are engendered. Furthermore, what is quite essential: the objects blend into the cultural medium, almost becoming invisible, which is a prerequisite for everyday normality, and function in the service of everyday routines until they break down, become obsolete, i.e. run the course of their own life cycles.

Domestication, besides taming, also means "accustoming to home". Familiarization: making familiar, accustoming, becoming practised in the intimate sphere. And familiarization is in its essence the transmutation of attitudes, making familial, i.e. cosy and trusted. All of this may also be handled in a general way as an important characteristic and prerequisite of consumption, applied to families. If, by the egress of digital technology into the family, the digitally created virtuality can overwhelm the space and time of the family, saturating it with viruses, familiarization may also mean cohabitation, i.e. becoming immune.

Who Are They and What Do They Know?

The members of Generation Z were children and pupils in the research period. In November 2008, there were 158 families[1] whose children attended the Vărgata schools[2] (classes 1–8); this number has since lessened somewhat. According to the

1 All five communities have schools with classes 1–4, while classes 5–8 of the Vărgata school are attended by pupils of all five communities.

2 Since I studied computer use in the family, and there are families with two or three children in

study done in 2009, 58 percent of the families whose children had attended the school already owned a computer; this proportion has since grown considerably. We might say that it is primarily the families who raise children that strove and still strive to purchase a computer[3] and have Internet access. The school has had a computer room since 2008. However, the children only learned basic word processor use here, nothing else. Consequently, all that members of Generation Z knew about the use of computers and the Internet at the time they left primary education was brought from home and was further developed in a home setting.

Case studies were done in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 about computer and Internet use in 38 families from Vărgata;[4] out of these, 34 have Generation Z members. This level of endowment means that the first computer was followed by the second one, and laptops treated as personal property have also appeared. I.e., in families who raise children, the time of the single computer in the family that had been used by everyone and had to universally serve everyone's needs had lasted a short time. Generally, when the older child graduated from the eighth class and continued his/her studies (this meant their moving away), s/he asked for and received a laptop, which s/he operated more in line with his/her own notions, needs and knowledge. Yet, treating it as exclusive property, and denying access to other family members (e.g. using a password) only occurred with university graduates.

What is it then that the members of Generation Z use the computer and Internet at their disposal for in the communities? What do they actually know about their operation and use, and what could the processes of familiarization/domestication be qualified as?

The first assertion: although there are differences within the families, not only among generations, but within these as well, keeping in touch (via mail, Messenger, Skype), listening to music, watching films, searching the Internet (e.g. adults read Internet newspapers and consult weather information) and, more recently, navigating Facebook have become part of the basic repertoire of skills (I will not address the behaviour of middle-aged male family members, i.e. the fact that in around half of the families investigated they are not willing to learn even the most basic operations; this requires separate analysis). Basic text input and editing is a rarer, yet also characteristic property. We have not encountered young members of the communities who were programmers.

school, I did not take into account the number of the children, opting instead for the number of the families.

3 This was helped by the aid programme of the Romanian government, which provided (and still provides) a subsidy of 200 euros for purposes of purchasing a computer for low-income families. The subsidy is available through a yearly grant application via the school.

4 The presentation of families examined who where chosen from among owning a computer and an Internet subscription was done by students from the Communications and Public Relations programme of Sapientia EMTE based on a previously established system of criteria; I subsequently visited each chosen family, got to know the members of the said families, examined the use on the premises and talked with each computer user in the families.

Second assertion: the distribution of knowledge within the family is quite variable, but all families have "experts", i.e. those who "know the most", who can be called upon to answer minute questions related to computer usage; those who teach and help the others. In exceptional cases, these may be adults, but mostly comprise members of Generation Z. They show and represent the knowledge of the family "towards the outside", towards other families, and they are known and consulted by the "experts" of other families. They are a "contingent of experts" in the communities regarding the types of computers, basic characteristics, the properties of programmes, installations, virus protection, specific Internet sites and downloads. There are some among them who are indeed well-versed and possessing basic IT knowledge, having usually attended or graduated IT profile classes (but not necessarily so) and, in one or two cases, hold university degrees indicative of high-level users. They are actually the representatives, operators and embodiments of the needs and acquirements having taken shape in the family vis-à-vis the community. Their knowledge is potentially adequate to diagnose and solve emerging issues ("there is no Internet connection", "it can't be downloaded", "the programme is not responding", "the computer has slowed down/doesn't work", "the computer has a virus"). They are easy to reach and call upon in reciprocity networks, such as those of neighbours, relatives or friends, and it is especially advantageous that, considering the lack of sources in the social medium and contrary to the services of professionals, using their skills does not cost money. Third assertion: often, adults have been heard to say that in their families the children must help in running the household, and this has priority: "work comes first, then the computer". In organizing familial and individual time management and work processes, parents have a decisive role. They often voice their opinion to the children, but to the young adults who are not married yet but still living in the house that: "all right, it's important for you, but you can't make a living off the Internet". The parents do not know and recognize that "fiddling on the computer" can involve gaming and entertainment, but also learning or earning money. Aside from certain users who practise their trade on them (e.g. bookkeeping), adults in Vărgata only consider and practise all that can happen in the digital world as a leisure activity. They believe that the computer and the Internet are a wonderful thing, and they do declare that "it's not a good thing for a child to grow up without a computer", but the types of knowledge that are valid, useful and make "getting along in life" possible are not connected with the computer and the Internet. The place on the mental map assigned to the computer that has been integrated into the household is between the TV (still the most important for adults), the telephone and the radio.

Fourth assertion: in the allotted time frame and free from parental supervision, children and young adults may use computers, according to their interests, at their own pace and in line with the compulsions transmitted via the social

relationships of their group of friends/institutional groups. This constitutes the main aim and occasion of visiting each other's homes. In the Vărgata school, free of the teacher's presence and supervision, the boys turn on the computers and gloat to each other and the girls about their new-found knowledge (gaming skills, downloads, access to adult websites). The individually acquired skills may be very different, but at the same time are organized into well-defined categories. Elemér M. and his friends know everything there is about games, websites and downloadable applications pertaining to football. Barbara K. and her friends have been playing with dolls for years on the Internet; I make mention of her because she is recognized as the foremost expert on Barbie dolls in her age-group. János K. and his younger brother specialize in all types of torrent and film downloads, they make and sell bootleg CDs. The case of Zsuzsa Sz. is interesting, yet not unique: the Facebook page of her parents' travel agency has been placed in her care, and the content about the business and any events that appear on the page is at her discretion (e.g. photos taken by her, in the order she deems fit), which is to say she does a sort of "ethno-PR" based on her own ideas, knowledge, diligence and the advice and comments of her fifteen-year-old contemporaries.

The fifth assertion, arising from the previous one: the computer skills of Generation Z are limited in and by exactly this: they are their own skills, yet they are not legitimate, they are not integrated into the world of the parents, i.e. it is knowledge without any validity for adults. It is characterized by different horizons, different expectations, different compulsions and answers sought and found for different questions. I formulate carefully since this is a strong assertion: to a certain extent and at present, this knowledge, in this societal context, is weightless, irrelevant. There is a story circulating among the parents that we regard with leniency, but acceptance as well: one mother, when a storm was descending, ran home from the fields and burst into the house shouting, "quick, disconnect the computer!" She was afraid for the newly-bought computer, and she made her children turn it off immediately and to also pull the plug out of the wall outlet. On the one hand, this story shows the hierarchy of values: that which costs a lot of money should, by applying the models of expediency hitherto established, be "spared" and protected, even by limiting its use. On the other hand, it shows a complete lack of trust: the children cannot handle this situation – she must intervene as an adult. Thirdly, this case (and others) have shown where the "digital divide" within the family is, and what results familiarization brings: the model of "new, valuable objects in need of safeguarding in the clean room" works for the mother, while for the children, learning and applying as many uses as possible is important, even if it means subjecting the computer to repairs (since they already know that much). Another story: a father said, reminiscing about an instance of costly computer repairs: "the brain had to be replaced because it was old and it gave out". It is a well-known fact that a computer has a "brain" and it can stop working. Processor, "Winchester"

(hard drive) – these are unknown notions here because familiarization involves changing known terminology and at the same time forming a private interpretation: if it is forced, the brain, the most important part of the computer, may "give out"; thus, it needs to be spared. How? There are different opinions as to this; the most common is that the time allotted to its use must be limited.

Sixth assertion: adults use one computer spot or environment, while it is characteristic for members of Generation Z, even in the community investigated, to multi-task (several devices, programmes, environments, several media used in parallel). An overwhelming majority of parents have no idea what the child – quietly tapping away on the computer with a headset on – is up to, what they listen to, what they open and what they close. It is indeed an important generation boundary that parents believe that what they sometimes see is the extent of what always is on the screen, i.e. they are in control, while children on the other side of this divide may, in principle, roam the considerable breadths of virtuality. Parents, as I have mentioned, may designate the occasion and time of computer use – but they are unable to impose what the child's attention extends to, how they choose; i.e. they have no influence over the effects arising from multitasking. In this age of the information boom, there is much more accessible information than can be encompassed and organized – the greatest issue being the existence and operation of the filter (value system, life principles, critical thought) (Eriksen, 2011). This filter exists in a societal context: the experience, taste and horizon of knowledge that contemporaries possess.

Seventh assertion: in this community, the adults are, with few exceptions, media illiterate. I am not speaking about those who do not even have a computer in their household (in 2011, 70 percent of the families, the elderly and the Roma), but those whose households contain the computer and are able to start it up and perform a varying number of previously practised technical steps. The lowest level: "I can watch a film on the computer if they set it up for me, and when I push the long button, it goes, if I push it again, it stops", says one head of the household. But the real question is the level of media literacy Generation Z members of the family are at. In this case, literacy means basically two things: the level technical devices are operated on and the level media messages are understood on. Both are equally important since this duality is mutually inseparable. According to László Ropolyi's definition, "the Internet is a self-developing, complex technical device made up of computers, which, owing to its propensities, on the one hand, plays an important role in the communicational processes characteristic of the present, and, on the other hand, is a cultural medium suited to receive, display, conserve and operate fundamental human values, relationships and aspirations" (Ropolyi, 2006: 34). In order to be culturally present, one must rule the technical device, yet familiarization with and operation of the technical device may only happen based on cultural determinations. Computer-based, digital activities

are added to the established cultural behaviours of adult generations preceding Generation Z, and they modify and optimize these behaviours (speeding them up and facilitating them). It is a fundamental generational difference that the activity of Generations Z-ers are, characteristically for a universe of childhood, actually like unto discoveries and games, while grown-up generations, within or beyond playful discovery, learn the use of computers in order to attain certain work outputs, specialized in certain fields of expertise. Since in this rural environment the nature (physical, agricultural) of the work does not require the use of the "self-developing, complex technical device made up of computers", this is not the primary representative of the "cultural medium suited to receive, display, conserve and operate fundamental human values, relationships and aspirations".

Eighth assertion: the members of Generation Z are not technological beginners, but are still situated at the basic level of literacy defined as the attainment, evaluation, sorting and thoughtful criticism of information (Rotaru, 2010). It can thus be asked how they would act in the future within this intricate media environment, exposed to strong (even addictive) effects. What do they want to know, how do they sort and evaluate, and for instance do they use and produce the publicity that ensures political participation? What is the extent of the knowledge they want to attain, and what does the knowledge they have already attained enable them to do?

And Who Are the Ones Who Know Everything?

Of course, there are no such ones. There are those exceptions like István D., born in 1943, who graduated high school and obtained a degree in mining, worked in Bălan, and returning home, worked in the industrial co-operative in leading positions, was also a migrant worker in France after 1989 for a year, and is now retired. His son lives in France, and he initially bought a computer to keep in touch with him, but then, spurred on by curiosity, he gradually got to the point where he reads Hungarian and French newspapers each morning, corresponds with acquaintances from different parts of the world, does e-banking, makes online purchases and if he wants information about something, he goes on the web and obtains it. In this respect, he has no peers in the local community. He also plays games if he is so inclined, and downloads e-books and films; he watches shows or listens to music like so many others. According to his wife, he barely goes out the gate, but in his opinion "the Internet is a big enough gate". He does not and cannot know everything – but he claims that "I have experienced and learned everything that I need". The boundaries of his needs and his attained knowledge overlap.

With the members of Generation Z, the situation is usually radically different: considering their ever-growing needs, their knowledge, while also expanding,

seems quite limited from an outside view. Focusing on the case studied, however, I can claim that at present, the knowledge their environment provides them is sufficient to satisfy their needs, and the computers have truly been "domesticated" in their milieu – and this is what Zalán M. based the validity of his observation on when he said "they already know everything".

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