

Commentary

Reading and organizing: a new challenge

The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life.

Georg Simmel,
“Metropolis and mental life”, 1903

In the early twentieth century, Simmel discussed the struggle between the individual and power entailed in a society moving from nineteenth century rural life of the toward the consumer society offering a vast array of technological products. Because a century or so later most of these technologies are increasingly embedded in the social sphere, the likelihood of attaining independence from the technologies of the industrial revolution is very slim. The personality and lifestyle of the current human being is quite different from than that envisioned by Simmel, but even at that, his statement is timely; because over the last century and to date, researchers such as Manuel Castells have pointed out that because of the technological paradigm organized around information technologies we are now moving through one of those rare phases in history characterized by the transformation of our “cultural material.”

This struggle for individuality is perhaps visible in Google’s analysis of the frequency of words in a data base containing more than five million books published between 1500 and 2008. David Brooks comments on this analysis and specifically on the research of Jean Twenge, W. Keith Campbell and

Brittany Gentile, who found that that individualist words and phrases between 1960 and 2000 constantly outstripped communitarian diction. Brooks interprets this as signifying the apex of individualism, while also suggesting it as reflecting a concern for recovering independence from the consumer exigencies and habits imposed by contemporary society.

The human being from the time of Simmel is quite different from the current version, which has acquired new skills and additional modalities of knowledge, in contrast to the linear reading prevailing in the earlier stage. The rise of the image, communications and the transfer of information are the principal emblems of these changes.

The movie theater moved into the home with the creation and distribution of affordable video. Another important event was the beginning of television and the ability to watch any world event in real time. The telephone moved from being an instrument for voice transmission and recently has incorporated cameras for taking photos, video recognizing one's of nearby surroundings and transmitting text messages. The development of audiovisual entertainment in videogames, which are graphic, noisy and fast, must also be cited. The Internet, with its array of online and audiovisual interconnection services, is a seminal moment for modern life, as communication of the events is nearly concurrent with their occurrence.

There is a prevailing sense is that a part of the world population knows about a large part of the planet and even outer space, because it can observe images transmitted by satellite traveling through the sky. And it can also dream that it controls all of this by immersion in videogames.

Many of us have seen images of the killing fields of Ruanda, the moon landing, the smoke from the Twin Towers and their appalling collapse. Mexico shared the 1985 earthquake of 8.1 on the Richter scale with the world, and recently the floods of 2013 were widely disseminated. Several researchers, however, have called attention to a kind of defensive reaction to the overwhelming amount of information and stimuli.

It is possible to say that such knowledge might be minimal and misleading, as suggested by researchers such as Aldo Mazzucchelli; however, society appears to be quite conversant with prominent images and world events, something Library

Science should not be ignore in its role as an organizer of knowledge.

The information search habits of current online culture, unfortunately, promote superficial, quick reading, with little engagement of thought and generally meager attention to information and data obtained, which, moreover, is soon forgotten because of the luxury afforded by online memory and ease of retrieval. If we were to call this a weakness, there would probably be little argument.

In recent years there has been some research into changes in brain activity. Notably, Patricia Greenfield (2009) published a case study in *Science* examining the effects of diverse media on intelligence and ability to learn. She explains that all new media develops certain cognitive abilities, but always at the expense of others. New visual-spatial intelligence strengths appear which must be traded off against losses in higher order cognitive processes, entailed in abstract lexicon, attentiveness, reflection, inductive problem solving, critical thinking and imagination. Rafael Capurro also warns that the change in media necessarily involves loss and gain in specific qualities associated with the particulars of our situation in the world, in contrast to what happens with other living beings that are not evolutionarily tied to a determined program and communication medium.

The new approach to reading observed in young people and the new media they prefer has been implemented in the teaching of Library and Information Sciences, especially with regard to teaching indexing, which is a fundamental part of the organization of knowledge.

In addition to studying reading comprehension of the written support, the curricular approach also incorporates reading comprehension of the audiovisual medium. From the structural study of the image (objects, light, color, human figure, and relationships with the historical and social context) a type of reading unfolds requiring reflection, attention, imagination, critical thinking and inductive problem solving. This should be the object Library Science education, in conjunction, of course, reading comprehension training that promotes appropriation of grade-appropriate texts.

The comprehension of texts and the aptitude to transmit informative contents in an abbreviated form is the task of the

librarian as the natural agent of the informative process. The librarian is responsible to a given work, in any support, and may or may not have abbreviated previously information. In addition to enjoying the pleasure of reading and a taste for understanding all kinds of texts, the Library Science student must be trained professionally in the tasks of reading comprehension and transmission of texts to the social milieu.

Of course, Library Science reading cannot be merely mechanical; because not only is comprehension of the text needed, but also knowledge of the topic and the social context in order to make a rational analysis of the content. After his formal education, each student will complement the knowledge acquired with reading comprehension of a given topic or professional sphere of information, thereby acquiring the required speed.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the field of linguistics has grown exponentially, especially in the area of cognitive linguistics, which has helped change the ways texts are approached and understood. Moreover, linguistic approaches have permeated those sciences that base their respective research on textual association and discourses.

Knowledge organization systems are linked, no doubt, to the way knowledge is constructed. The current explosion in the audiovisual field and the characteristics of its organization involve empirical and rational facets, as well as meaning transmitted through the language, and expression of cultural evidence from the theoretical standpoint of a given domain.

When Simmel asserts: "We are all fragments, not only of the universal man, but also of ourselves"; we once again see why technologies are ever present and the social immersion for mastering them becomes increasingly necessary and real.

Perhaps, the most redeemable instance of individuality in the twenty-first century is the availability of organized knowledge based on a human appreciation within a given society, where Library Science can contribute by making these things available, thereby ensuring access to relevant information beyond that produced for commercial interests, as Denis de Moraes and Simmel cautioned some time ago.

This is the true challenge of Library Science before the monopolistic concentration of the information-communication sector. It must, within its field of action, offer valuable information, properly understood and transmitted on the basis of deep understanding.

Catalina Naumis Peña