

Mobile Media and “Google Generation”: Significance and Challenges for Information Professionals

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Abstract: The “Google Generation” is a target group librarians often struggle and fail to reach with their services and activities. Nowadays, in the media landscapes of young people mobile media rank first in media consumption and as the most highly valued technology. Recent figures show that especially smart phones and tablet computers are very popular with children and adolescents. The demand for mobile media devices is constantly increasing as well as the mobile use of the internet. Furthermore, learning with mobile media devices such as iPads or smart phones is at present one of the most discussed developments in the area of e-learning.

Given these rapid changes in the media worlds of so-called “Google Generation”, it is worth asking for information professionals what opportunities mobile media might offer to attract this target group to libraries. This paper suggests that information professionals should be exploring mobile devices as a way to connect with this user group in order to become an essential and integral part in the media routines of “Google Generation”.

Introduction

This paper explores the significance of developing mobile digital library services for the target group of “Google Generation” library users and the challenges ahead for understanding and appreciating mobile librarianship. So far, in the library context “mobile learning has seen increased service development, but has not yet evolved to be a robust field in librarianship” (Hahn, 2008). But latest research results of young people’s possession and use of mobile media devices and their success both in formal and informal learning contexts provide a number of starting points for information professionals to develop future services and activities. Mobile learning and the inherent *active* nature of mobile media might show the library a way of becoming more relevant to “Google Generation”.

Possession and use of mobile media devices among young people

In a current prognosis, Microsoft assumes that mobile use of the internet with smart phones and tablet computers will overtake internet use on desktop PCs from 2014 worldwide. Recent figures already show that smart phones and tablets are very popular with children and adolescents. The demand for such media is constantly increasing as well as the mobile use of the internet.

The high growth rates of the smart phone market have now reached the target group of young people. According to current figures from Germany almost every second adolescent owns an internet-capable touchscreen mobile phone (Feierabend, 2012, p. 52). The possession of a smart phone in the age group of 14- and 15-year-olds went up 40 % in comparison to 2011. Meanwhile, every second German child or adolescent at the age of eleven to nineteen has a smart phone for the use of mobile internet whereas every seventh owns a tablet computer for

that purpose. These numbers have doubled since 2011 and demonstrate how great the dynamics is when it comes to the use of mobile media of young people.

Concerning the specific use of mobile media devices, recent research findings point out that, in general, smart phones are used for the same online purposes like computers and laptops. Hence, apps like Facebook or YouTube, which are used the most, are at the same time the adolescents' favourite web pages. Nevertheless, researchers compare the quality of mobile smart phone usage with 'fast food': young people concentrate on the gadget very often but only for a short amount of time; therefore, the emotional involvement is quite low ("just quickly checking facebook"). In opposition to that, computers and laptops are consulted less often, which implies a longer and more complex usage of the internet and a higher emotional participation: 'slow food' as the authors of a German study (Elements of Art, 2012, p. 8) call it.

Mobile learning and "Google Generation": current research results

Learning with mobile media such as iPads or smart phones is at present one of the most discussed developments in the area of e-learning. The emergence of touchscreen devices and the range of educational apps (applications) available offer potential both for informal learning and for use in kindergartens, schools, universities, and – of course – in libraries.

Preliminary field reports from German kindergartens and schools in which tablet computers are being tested for their suitability as a learning resource show that mobile media are used enthusiastically by children and adolescents, and not just for play but also for learning. From the point of view of a constructivist didactics, mobile media are particularly suited to this – at least in theory – because learning is understood here as an active, self-directed and social process. Thus some experts already see the tablet as the future of the computer, and as a key tool for learning in the 21st century (Groebel, 2012, p. 82).

The feedback already received from pilot projects in the context of mobile learning with tablet computer is mainly positive. Many participants report that even preschool children can handle the devices and the apps effortlessly and intuitively. Operating an iPad by communicating with gestures is obviously easier for children than handling a computer mouse; the latter requires good hand-eye coordination, and, furthermore, the hand is moving on a different surface than the cursor on the user interface of a PC. Moreover, preliminary scholarly research findings suggest that "touching" objects can boost children's learning process, e.g. when learning to count. First research results also indicate positive effects of apps concerning the promotion of literacy (Stiftung Lesen, 2012) – important to know for librarians who work in this field.

Overall, experts see mobile-media-based learning for young people as offering potential mainly as an individualized learning experience, accessible anytime and anywhere. Tablets and smart phones close the gap between formal and informal learning environments and can also facilitate self-directed and self-organized learning, alone or in groups, at home, at school or in the library. In the field of the educational theory, the opinion that mobile media offer a didactic advantage, which analogue teaching aids cannot provide, is gaining acceptance (Bachmair, 2010 and Friedrich, 2011).

Implications for information professionals in the post-PC era

Overall, findings of current research suggest that – especially for young people – mobile media are not only much appreciated devices but do also offer huge learning potential. Libraries wanting to be recognized and taken seriously as partners in lifelong learning must acknowledge this potential and integrate the benefits of mobile media devices in their daily work.

Information professionals can use the mobile web to bring their clients a new set of services. These services are expected especially from young users who are frequent and passionate users of smart phones and tablet computers. Libraries can benefit mobile technology “Google Generation” is currently using to deliver contemporary offerings that integrate library services *within* young users' daily lives and media routines. Thus they can attract this target group and connect with it anywhere and anytime.

Here are some examples of mobile library services and activities already being offered in practice which target users of mobile devices aim to attach to the library (cf. Kroski, 2008):

- Mobile library websites and MOPACs (mobile OPACs)

Many libraries are creating mobile versions of their websites for their users to access on-the-go at any time. They offer information on services and collections, provide access to library catalogue search, portable exhibit information, subject guides and e-journals, optimized for mobile devices. Providing a mobile OPAC interface is crucial for every library to become – and to stay – visible and relevant in the mobile web.

- Mobile library instruction

This is a very effective way to get in touch with users who do not want to attend an on-site training. With their mobile devices users can still get the most out of the library resources by accessing tutorials online. Information professionals can distribute their expertise via podcasts or video files which are suitable for mobile use.

- Mobile media collections and databases

Libraries should offer their users mobile access to digital media collections which they can use anywhere, enabling them to benefit from resources whenever they want. Academic software and database providers tend to offer mobile versions of their products; consequently, libraries have to provide access for their users who prefer to search them with their smart phone or tablet as well.

- Library SMS notifications and reference services

Mobile technologies make it easy for libraries to maintain relevance as information hubs by offering convenient services. E.g. text messages provide just-in-time news announcements to mobile owners, reminders about important events, or requested information. Reference services at libraries will become increasingly virtual as more and more students are used to work no longer exclusively in the library. Especially the usage of tablet computers gives reference services a foothold into the mobile technology landscape of “Google Generation”.

- **Mobile learning activities**

According to recent research results, a new “App Gap” has developed among children in disadvantaged families. Based on current figures from the U.S. (cf. Zero to eight, 2011), only a minority has access to a smart phone, an iPod or an iPad among children in lower-income households. This disparity in access has led to a disparity in use between higher-income and lower-income families. In the light of these findings, libraries have to be aware that they should not only provide access to tablet computers but also support the educational use of mobile media devices to socially disadvantaged library users. This will strengthen the libraries’ role as learning centres and relevant partners in the lifelong learning process.

Challenges for libraries and information professionals

First, information professionals have to consider the technology capabilities of mobile devices. Hereby, services that are not possible on the stationary PC should be in the main focus (e.g. mobile access to location-based services, QR code campaigns, or “push” text alerts). But libraries also have to identify their users’ needs when determining a mobile strategy. In the beginning, it is helpful to create a profile of the user group who is in the centre of a mobile strategy.

A successful way to develop for the mobile web is to start small and allow for learning: it makes sense to provide some basic services as MOPACs or library SMS notifications first before approaching complex applications as mobile library instruction or reference services. Trial initiatives which will provide experiences with mobile library services are recommended. Their impact should be assessed based on user feedback.

Overall, creating a mobile web experience is not about transforming a web site into a reduced version of its desktop counterpart (Kroski, 2008). It is about providing additional benefit and valuable services for members of a media generation who are used to satisfy their information needs with mobile devices in the mobile web *whenever* they want and *wherever* they are. Furthermore, information professionals should always keep in mind what the target group of their mobile strategy really finds useful on the go.

Considering the unique chances that mobile media devices and the mobile web provide is crucial for the success of mobile librarianship activities. For the 21st century librarian, understanding and appreciating mobile librarianship might be the key to stay relevant in a mobile digital world.

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