Real-time Reading: A Twitter-based Diary Study of College Students

Authors
M. Cristina Pattuelli, Elizabeth Kaufer, Gina Shelton, and Storey Sitwala
Pratt Institute, School of Information and Library Science, New York, NY, USA, mpattuel; ekaufer; gshelton; sradziun@pratt.edu

Abstract:
As part of an ongoing research project focused on the use of e-books and e-reading devices (e.g., Kindle, Nook, iPad) in academic environments, this study reports on a novel methodological approach to investigate everyday reading habits of college and university students. Traditional qualitative research methods, including interviews and questionnaires, can effectively shed light on the behavior of readers, especially on their perceived motivations, preferences and expectations. To gain a broader understanding of the factors involved in the adoption and use of e-books, it is critical to capture data on the everyday life context in which reading practices occur. To this end, we used a novel diary research technique that relies on the use of the very popular microblogging system, Twitter, to record actions and observations in real time. Diary research has long been recognized as an effective instrument to gather self-observation data that offers direct insight into individual life events. The effort and time commitment, however, required from study participants is a limiting factor that affects data accuracy and completeness (Pickard, 2007). The fast, easy and ubiquitous qualities of Twitter have the potential to overcome some of these limitations.

A Twitter-based diary method was designed and piloted in the fall 2013. It was part of a three-phase study including focus groups and semi-structured interviews conducted on a total sample of 11 undergraduate and graduate students from two New York City universities. First, two focus groups were held to gather preliminary data about students' reading preferences and habits. The findings informed the design of the Twitter session that was next completed with seven participants over a period of one week. Finally, a series of seven one-on-one post-Twitter interviews were conducted to elaborate and dig deeper into the diary data.

While the data collected are currently under a second round of analysis, preliminary results show that the methods adopted were successful in harvesting a particularly rich and varied collection of data useful for supporting the interpretation of different facets of participant behavior. Themes that have emerged include: environment, interaction, annotation, text manipulation, and reading strategies.

Our presentation will address the study results as well as the design and evaluation of the methodology adopted. We will focus on the Twitter-based technique for diary research to share the benefits and limitations and the general lesson learned from using a promising new approach to ethnographic data collection.

Work cited:

Keywords: information behaviour, diary research, e-readers, e-books, reading, technology adoption, academia, qualitative research methods

---