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Book review:

Performing search

Search engines and mobile devices in the everyday life of young people

Cecilia Andersson (2021). Performing search. Search engines and mobile devices in the everyday life of young people. Lund Studies in Arts and Cultural Sciences 27, Lund university.

In the PhD thesis *Performing search. Search engines and mobile devices in the everyday life of young people* Cecilia Andersson examines the relation between search engines and mobile devices, how these are used and negotiated by 13-16-year-olds in a school and home setting. *Performing search* is a well-written thesis with a clear aim and addresses the following research questions (p. 25):

1. How is online search done in school, and how is the activity legitimised in a school setting?
2. What framings can be identified when teenagers describe their use of Google Search?
3. How do young people become aware of their online search traces, and what strategies do they have for managing them, if any?
4. What framings of the smartphone can be identified in the way that young people use and describe smartphones, and how do the framings relate to online search?

The thesis is written as a compilation, consisting of four articles and an introductory summary chapter (kappa). To achieve the aim of the thesis, each article addresses a different aspect of online search. Drawing mainly on Erving Goffman's work the research questions are approached from a dramaturgical perspective; focussing on the way search engines are used, and how participating young people manoeuvre in a complex web of expectations and rules that surrounds the use of search engines and mobile devices in various contexts.

Young people's online search is placed in a wider societal context in the thesis that is the central role of search engines and mobile devices in today's society. Searching is made possible almost anywhere, anytime and about any topic. Searching online has become a practice that we hardly think of.

Andersson describes contemporary society as a culture of search, featured by an increased search-ification of everyday life. This becomes even more evident for young people, who have never known a world without search engines. While not being the main focus of the thesis, Andersson also discusses how search engines are never neutral as strong commercial interests shape information and data flows online.

The thesis *Performing search* relates and draws upon research from several disciplines: information studies (research on information practices, information literacy), media and communication studies (information seeking online among young people, digital media use in everyday life) and educational science (the role of devices in school, young people and digital literacy). In the mapping of previous research Andersson identifies several knowledge gaps that her research wants to address such as how young people search information in everyday life, what meanings they assign to search engines and the various devices used for searching. As for information studies, much focus has been on cognitive processes and scholars have paid less attention to issues concerning materiality and the role of physical devices. Furthermore, Andersson calls for more research in information studies, media and communication studies and education science that examines the interplay between school and other everyday life contexts in the attempt to develop young people's literacies.

With the emphasis on setting, situation, and context the thesis applies a sociocultural perspective in understanding young people's online search. Sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory (1959) is a central component of the theoretical framework. Here, routines and taken-for-granted ways of performing activities are put to the fore, how these are shaped by norms and social situations in interaction with others. Central concepts of Goffman's work are applied in the thesis – frontstage, backstage, audience, roles, and impression management. Andersson talks about an implicit power perspective in Goffman's work, where people attempt to influence how others perceive them by controlling information given in a certain situation. Furthermore, Andersson draws upon Goffman's frame analysis (1974) to understand how people make sense of what is going on in a specific situation. According to Goffman, people make use of different so-called frames, where various cues in a situation are interpreted. A certain frame will lead to a specific interpretation but also specific actions. Finally, Andersson adds a sociomaterial reading of Goffman from the work of Cress (2015) and Hafermalz, Riemer and Boell (2016), making us attentive to the role of materiality in young people's online search and applied framings. Digital devices like laptops and smartphones are understood and framed also by their physical properties.

With the aim of examining online search and mobile devices in young people's everyday life, uncovering the taken-for-grantedness of mobile devices and online search, data has been produced through an ethnographic approach. Young people from grade 7-9 at three schools in Sweden have participated. Andersson has chosen the school as the study's field site with the argument that "[…] I view attending school as a part of the rhythm of everyday life for my participants" (p. 67). Fieldwork was conducted 2014-2016 and in total 43 participants took part in the project. As the analytical focus is both on the sayings and doings in relation to young people's online search several methods have been applied. Andersson conducted 6 focus group interviews with 4-10 pupils per group, 17 individual interviews, one group interview (4 participants) and one interview in pair, 15 classroom observations, and 15 days of walk-alongs in school. As for the latter Andersson followed the participants throughout a day in school, in classrooms, breaks and during lunchtime.

The thesis is written as a compilation, consisting of four articles and an introductory summary chapter. In the first article (*The front and backstage: pupils' information activities in secondary school*) attention is drawn to information activities in school and how various ways to accomplish a task take

place and become legitimised. Legitimate ways of doing information search activities are the ones emerging in front of the audience, here the teachers and other classmates, while non-legitimate activities are left backstage. Andersson identifies how new backstage activities emerge in the classroom as it becomes rather difficult for teachers and pupils to see what actually happens behind a laptop or smartphone. In the second article (*'Google is not fun': an investigation of how Swedish teenagers frame online searching*), Andersson looks at how Google Search is used and framed by the young participants. Three framings are identified in the analysis (Google and fact-finding, Google as a neutral infrastructure, Google as an authority), which in turn have implications on how young people use and understand Google Search. As for the third article (*Searching and deleting: youth, impression management and online traces of search*) an analysis is made on how young teenagers become aware of their online search traces and the strategies they employ to manage and limit these. Removing a trace can, for instance, be the result of an imagined audience, who one thinks will actually have access to the search history. Finally, the fourth article (*Between enabling and disturbing: smartphones and shifting frames in the everyday life of young people*) identifies three framings of young people's smartphone use: the entertainment framing, the easy access framing, and the challenging co-presence framing.

With her research Andersson turns our attention to how young people's online search on various devices are done, as well as placing this in the wider context of everyday life and the contemporary culture of search. With the aim of examining young people's meaning-making processes in relation to online search and search engines the thesis highlights the need of moving beyond the search task at hand. A search task is not an isolated event, it takes place in a specific situation or context with an audience (physically present or imagined) but also on a certain device. To grasp this complexity of online search in today's media society, the thesis stresses the need of interdisciplinary approaches. With Andersson's work, the necessity to apply an everyday life perspective (here through the theoretical lens of Goffman and taking an ethnographic stance) in information studies and information literacy research is highlighted. The thesis contributes to information studies empirically, methodologically, and theoretically. However, the issue of context is left unproblematized. Context is a rather vague and contested term, where clarification usually is missing in research. Thus, we usually run into the problem of boundary specification, which in turn influences the unit of analysis. When applying a dramaturgical (symbolic interactionism) perspective on online search in a school context, a more critical discussion is needed on what can actually be examined and concluded from one context to another (from a school setting to a home setting). On page 49 it is stated "People learn how to interact in relation to different settings and situations, as the social expectations are not uniform across contexts. For instance, in school, where I have done fieldwork there are certain norms surrounding how to behave". That social expectations are not uniform across contexts collides with the main argument of the thesis, that the school as a field site offers a window into young people's everyday lives (p. 48). The thesis would therefore have benefited from a critical discussion on the gap between relevant research and researchable context and its implication on the study's findings. In relation to the discussion on and importance of context, the thesis brings in a sociocultural perspective as an additional contextual layer. "The study takes off from a sociocultural approach, which means that the role of Google is understood as socially and culturally shaped and negotiated. […] Frame analysis fits well with the sociocultural theory as it rests on the same traditions in terms of knowledge being viewed as something that is evolved through communication, in practices as well as through interaction" (p. 179). However, the sociocultural perspective/theory is not specified in the thesis nor how it may be distinguishable and understandable by empirical observation.

The thesis' theoretical framework is based on Erving Goffman's work, which is well described and motivated but could have been strengthened further by a more critical discussion on its pitfalls and

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the chosen theoretical framework's implications on findings and future research. A more critical stand is also lacking when discussing conducted fieldwork. Andersson is, however, making important methodological reflections from a dramaturgical perspective on her various roles during fieldwork and brings to the fore several important formal and informal ethical considerations when conducting research with children. Furthermore, the chosen methods are valuable and well-motivated, but a better description of the sampling process and participating pupils would have strengthened the thesis.

In contemporary culture of search, it goes without saying that the thesis addresses a highly relevant and important research area for several disciplines like information studies, media and communication studies and educational science. The thesis reveals a tension between agency and structure: young people might be aware of online search strategies in relation to various devices and social contexts (family and school), but at the same time leave the workings of search engines and algorithms unproblematised. With its descriptive analysis, mapping various online search strategies/framings among young people, Andersson's research sets an important ground for further studies, highlighting that we have only started to understand young people's online search and the need to examine in more detail how identified framings/strategies in a specific situation are formed by various micro, meso and macro processes, by whom and why. And perhaps more importantly, the societal implications of these strategies/framings for children's rights in a culture of search.

References

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