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INTERNET EDUCATION AS MIRRORED ON THE [COMMERCIALISED] INTERNET

Summary

At particular stages of its development, the Internet [or the World Wide Web] would be referred to as the iconosphere, semiosphere or infosphere to imply its nature of a 'self-regulating ecological system' capable of accommodating infinite numbers of icons [i.e. representations], meanings [generated in the perpetual process of semiosis], and fresh news items. All these function as contexts to 'Internet Education [IE]' understood as the body of e-learning courses provided via the Internet. But actually the Internet remains deeper involved in IE provision in consequence of its multiple other capacities of, inter alia, a marketing tool, a mirror of trends, and a magnifier of perceptions.

To see how the above multiplicity affects information provision, the author took up an Internet query and collected some observations on IE featuring hypertext nodes [equivalent to linked entries] only to discover that [apart from purely commercial agents] they are mainly put up by two types of entities, i.e. non-for-profit organisations and universities. Both identify their mission as creating new [technological or educational] opportunities and target individuals in restrained life situations with a marketing type rhetoric contrasting global with individual perspectives [or advocating 'going global' as a strategy to escape personal constraints]. The resulting image highlights selected IE strengths [further hyped by visualisations, more conservative for academic institutions than other organisations].

A more balanced IE picture should emerge from thematic reports, but these are scarce. The latest comprehensive UNESCO report relatively easily accessible on the Internet comes from 2003, Moscow. Its argumentative section inspires looking at the hypertext entries targeted at 'on-line' and school teachers, as well as parents. In the guise of 'useful tips' they signal the problems associated with the use of the Internet in education – related contexts and, interestingly enough, stay in line with the findings from the studies focused on the cognitive styles, behaviours and constraints common among today's twenty-year-olds [as representatives of the first generation raised in a fully Internet-penetrated world] who currently prevail among university students.

By way of reference to the Internet's multiple capacities [as mentioned above], the author asks the question if it is possible that the Internet could be used as a provider of remedies to the problems it has helped to create.

Key words: Internet [or the World Wide Web], iconosphere, semiotics vs semiology, semiosis, Internet education, observation in humanities, Generations X, Y, E. legality of Internet education.

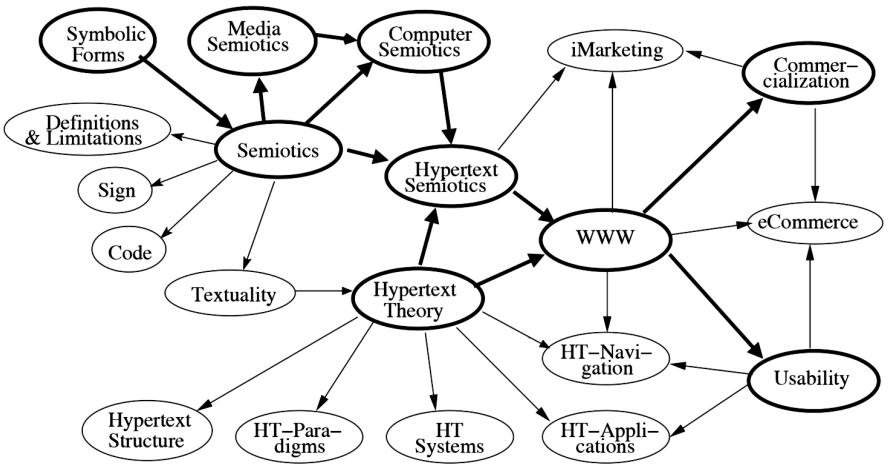
JEL Codes: I2

The tautology inscribed in this article title highlights the fact that the Internet has grown into a leading means of globalised material and non-material goods provision, including e-learning courses. Yet, the Internet's provider function can hardly be separated from its multiple other capacities of a source of information, a mirror of trends, a magnifier of perceptions, a research as well as a marketing tool. Technological kinship with hypermedia magnifies the effect of Internet's commercialisation on the beliefs, thinking modes, value systems, attitudes, and behaviours of its users who often do not realise how deeply 'caught in the Web' (Brändström 2011, p. 48) they have become.

This article owes not only the above reflection, but also overall approach and structure to Moritz Neumuell's Doctoral Thesis, titled 'Hypertext Semiotics in the Commercialized Internet', and the conceptual framework – to Daniel Chandler's academic publication titled 'Semiotics for Beginners', both certainly available on the Internet (Chandler 2002; 2014).

Though Neumueller's background [similarly to that of this article author's] is humanities [in fact, art history], he presented his paper [in 2001] at the Vienna University of Economics, only to prove that certain aspects of the human communication process, stemming from the interplay of verbal, visual [and, possibly, other sensory] messages, with the anticipated appearance of olfactory machines (Neumueller 2001), cannot be ignored in analysing Internet use. His attitude indicates a growing need to provide a 'conceptual interface' between the worlds of IT operations and cognitive mechanisms of the human mind, as studied and described by humanities. In an effort to bridge the two, Neumueller's thesis views the Internet as a relatively simple [in conceptual terms] structure of mutually interconnected nodes of text [in semiotic terms identified with organised series of signs of verbal, visual or any other character]. It uses the 1980s' generic IT terminology and comments on the newly emerging trends only to admit that with the Internet things change rapidly. One of the purely commercial change mechanisms he identifies is cybersquatting, or speculative purchase and sale of potentially valuable domain names (Neumueller 2001, p. 168) which may contain common terms whose use in general language becomes in consequence limited. Best illustrated by the fact that the expressions quoted in the following paragraph as originally referring to the Internet sooner or later after their first appearance have become capitalised, registered as proper names, and thus shifted from general to strictly commercial language use.

Figure 1. The Internet as a structure of mutually interconnected text nodes



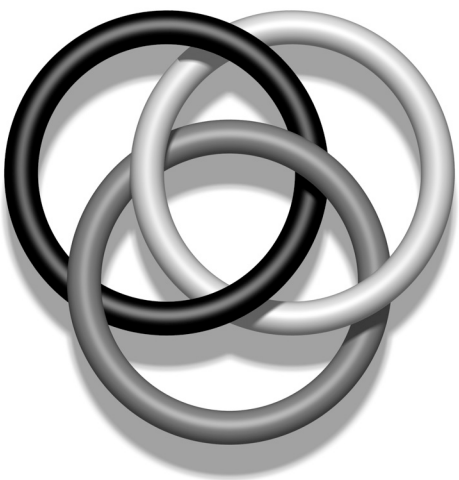
Source: Neumueller (2001).

This paper is a walk through exercise in the application of Neumueller's analytical model to the IE offer, as currently displayed on the Internet. The above means that, in her query on IE, this paper's author put herself in the position of an average Internet navigator confronted on thematic surf with a mix of [commercialised] argument [of verbal and non-verbal nature], data, and information. All, certainly, would accumulate into Internet navigator's knowledge, provided the navigator could identify the contexts conductive to meaningful interpretations of particular search results. Similarly to her predecessor, this paper's author in the first analytical step applies concepts derived from the XX c. semiotic, structural and post-structural approaches, as well as communication theory, in order to summarise the [commercialised] IE image emerging from her observations. In this, she follows Foucault's opinion that the evidence value of observation in humanities is to be recognised as equivalent to experiment in sciences (Foucault 1973, pp. 110-120). Next, in order to set the [commercial] IE image in the meaningful 'outer world', or factual context, she looks at a few relevant source documents [in fact, analytical papers] also accessible on the Internet. In consequence, in order to reflect the nature of the phenomena described, the linear structure of her academic text has to accommodate passages of non-linear character.

At particular stages of development, the Internet [or the World Wide Web] would be referred to as the iconosphere, semiosphere or infosphere with the root 'sphere' implying its nature of a self-regulating ecological system capable of accommodating infinite numbers of icons [or representations], perpetually generated meanings, and factual information [or fresh news] items. Mutual interaction of the three types of inputs in any Internet navigator's mind,

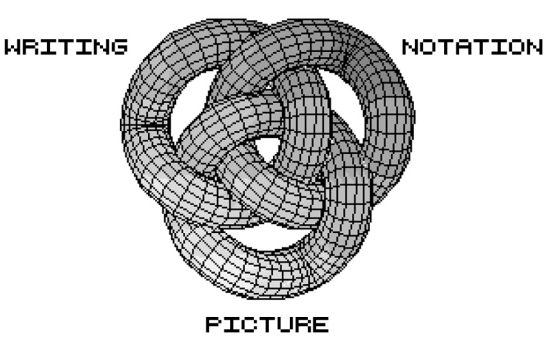
according to Neumueller, is best visualised by Borromean rings. They represent the three registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real […as reflected in] state of the psyche, […thus doing] just is to the common sense belief that all images are somehow related. A page of text could fall on the circumference of the 'writing ring' […] but even there be intimately connected with the other rings (Neumueller 2001, p. 44). On the other hand, removing any of the interlocked components results in system disintegration[1]

Figure 2. Borromean Rings



Source: Borromean rings (2014).

Figure 3. Borromean Rings

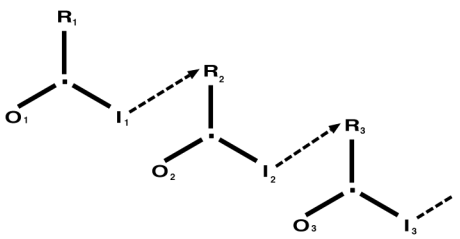


Source: Neumueller (2001).

[1] As described at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borromean_Rings (accessed on 30.11.2014).

Applicability of the above analogy to Internet messages comes from their combining words and pictures. The basic level of picture understanding is by way of reading it as an icon [i.e., identifying the things it represents]. The next level is best summarised in Saint Augustine's statement [made some sixteen hundred years ago] that 'there are things and there are signs' meaning that message reception essentially consists in identifying the associations that visible objects evoke. In the IT environment, further reception levels ensue from Internet's kinship with the Hypermedia, and specifically, from interactive choices made by Internet user as a navigator. In their consequence any icon might gain associative meanings suggested by the way and order of appearance on screen, other [contextual] icons selected by navigator's momentary decisions, or even the direction taken by their eye in looking at the screen. All cumulate in the process of perpetual generation of [new] meanings, known as semiosis and manifesting itself especially clearly in Internet use (Neumueller 2001, pp. 52, 47).

Figure 4. The Semiosis Process Scheme



Source: Neumueller (2001).

Verbal and visual messages, however, are read in a different order. Verbal message reading is linear [or analytical] and always occurs in the context of a certain discourse [containing intentional statements or denotations and inferred meanings or connotations]. Our civilizational heritage is the source of vast experience with falsified contents of verbal messages, strengthening criticism in their reception. Visual message reading, on the other hand, is immediate and prone to falsifications at an uncontrollable, unconscious level (Neumueller 2001, pp. 40, 168). They are fostered by the weakening of our valediction mechanism already 'accustomed' to 'real life' representations manipulated by post photography, to infinitely reproducible digital pictures marked by absence of any 'aura of the original' and to the practices followed by "the average Webpage designer [who] (knowingly or not) seems to recur on the same [… clichés] of a common visual culture" for their message – carrying designs to be readable to Internet users [otherwise, the Internet would not be able to perform any communication or commercial function]. In the process of

reception by human mind pictures are transferred into images. "Images are the result of an intersection between photographs and viewing subjects, a product of a mental process, […or of] perception and thought, of semiosis" (Neumueller 2001, pp. 40-53, esp. pp. 41, 46, 47, 51).

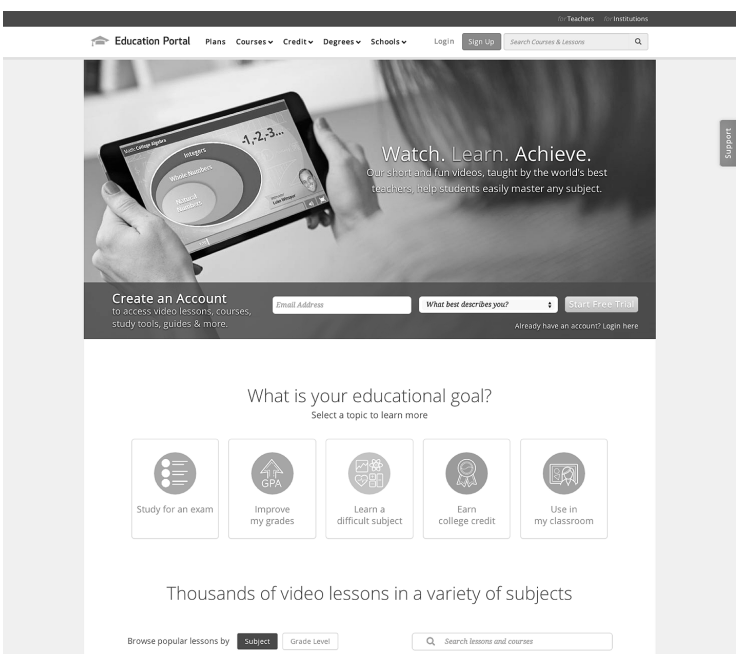
Thus meaning is not 'transmitted' but actively created in interplay of codes or conventions, of which we are normally unaware (Neumueller 2001, p. 46). The above terms [i.e. images, representations, or icons, meanings, or conventions] belong to the stock of old semiotic concepts[2] currently applied within the two major conceptual systems of meaning recognition – dualistic proposed by de Saussure and triadic – by Peirce. Referred to as semiology vs. semiotics, both are marked [though to a different degree] by dependence on the language and a limited interest in its relation to the objects in the physical world (Neumueller 2001, pp. 20-23). Both also stay in line with the definition of man as an animal *symbolicum* that lives in a symbolic universe, nowadays epitomised by the Internet (Neumueller 2001, p. 24, 26). Its assumed nature of a self-regulating ecological system, however, evokes the Darwinian vision of the 'survival of the fittest', and thus justifies Neumueller's warning that those who cannot understand such environments are in the greatest danger of being manipulated by those who can (Neumueller 2001, p. 53).

All the above rules govern communication in the Internet environment, or 'the greatest marketplace of XX and XXI c., which has turned to trade also in intangible goods that often have no physical carrier, among those - data, information, knowledge, and education' […]. (Neumueller 2001, p. 163). Thus IE related information provided on the Internet, and the ensuing IE image, should be influenced both by the above mentioned rules of Internet communication and Internet's multiple other functions. To verify this supposition, the author took up an Internet query of IE featuring hypertext textual nodes [equivalent to linked entries]. In her capacity of an average Internet navigator she looked at the list of thematic links [and text nodes] supplied by one of the Google-dependent search engines [Firefox]. They came arranged in the order seemingly dictated by the numbers of key words [i.e. 'IE'] occurrences in previous Internet users' queries, but distorted by certain items' higher positioning paid for by their respective senders. The author's query [from 22 November 2014] yielded 1 750 000 000 search results. She decided to focus on the top 60 [contained on the five initial pages of the query results printout] assuming that they will be most frequently looked at and visited by average navigators, thus most heavily bearing on the received IE image. As the author's approach reflected Foucault's

[2] This in itself being an enlightening constatation that some concepts developed at least several hundred years ago remain applicable to analysing a XX/XXI c. cybertool. As semiotics passes for a very abstract and scholarly discipline, this article's author shares Neumuller's opinion that its applicability to modern studies will benefit from cutting down on the 'semiotic jargon', permitting to leave off debates over the numerous definitions discussed and debated on in the long time of its existence [concerning such notions as 'text', 'code', or sign classifications] (Neumueller 2001, pp. 28-30, 54-58, 182).

postulate on the usefulness of observation as equivalent to experiment in humanities, it is necessary to comment on the status of the above-quoted figures. They cannot be read as data or statistics, as they are the product of the peculiar mode of functioning of the query tool, displaying day-to-day variations reflecting momentary changes in Internet users' focus [possibly influenced by current events], or of purchasing interventions potentially made by the message-sending entities. Message-sending entities could be classified in accordance with their Internet addresses' extensions [i.e. .com, .org, .edu, .gov[3] or unidentified]. The above classification, however, is marked by limited reliability in consequence of the recently amended policy of awarding Internet addresses.

Figure 5. Picture from .com pages



Source: http://eduaction-portal.com/ [accessed: 26.12.2014].

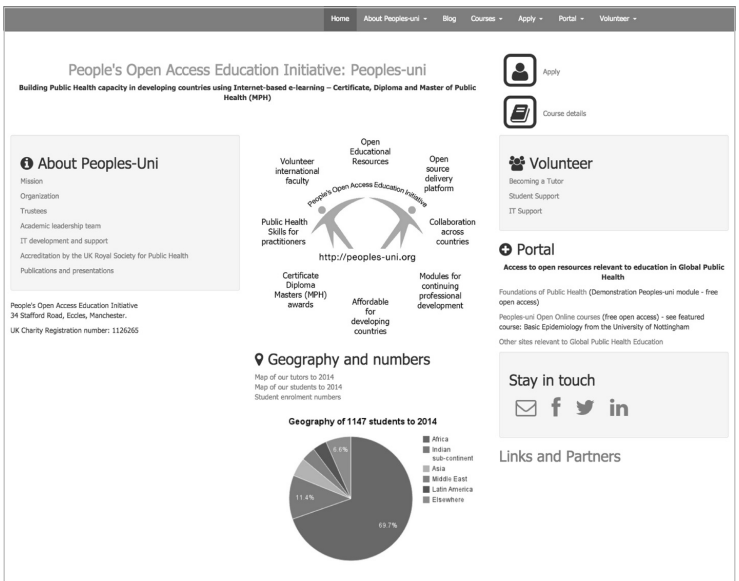
Irrespective of class, all message senders refer to IE using such enthusiastic expressions as 'great', 'global', 'change[ing] forever', 'revolutionising', '[the] future [of education]'. As strong expressions [e.g. 'paving the way for a brighter future'] appear in messages by 'unspecified' senders. Those who once classified

[3] It deserves to be noted that the govrnment sector is very humbly represented on the initial five pages studied [by just one entry referring to medical education as transcending boundaries] though the investment level and geographical distances concerned would make it an ideal investor in IE courses.

themselves as belonging to the commercial [or .com] sector approach their potential clients advocating IE as 'your own learning activities and classes', '[learning] whatever you want [and] wherever you want', 'personal', or '[working] effectively for education'. They also highlight IE as 'the new great equalizer', or 'a step towards education […] participation'. The above implies that they view IE's commercial success in personalising the education offer by way of highlighting its financial and social accessibility, individual time management, online availability [inter alia, of library service], and …teacher attractiveness [as proven by the reference to 'our lovely teacher Carly [and her] cool language courses']. The above stays in line with Neumueller's observation that on the global Internet market education is offered as 'an experience good' expected to evoke 'a feeling of direct engagement' (Neumueller 2001, p. 165). Yet, this approach tends to substitute motivation with stimulation.

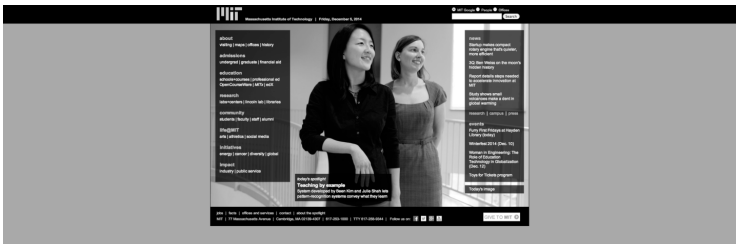
The author discovered that the majority of allegedly non-commercial messages are put up by two types of entities [with address extensions of .org or .edu], i. e. non-for-profit organisations or universities. Both types are similar in identifying their mission as 'creating new [technological or educational] opportunities'. They follow a similar marketing strategy targeted at individuals in restrained life situations. Their marketing rhetoric is based on juxtaposing global vs individual perspectives, or advocating the strategy of 'going global' as a way to escape immediate constraints. The resulting picture highlights the respective IE strengths, further hyped by visualisations more conservative with academic institutions than other organisations. The latter seem to be more willing to show IE as totally different from traditional education, while universities are more concerned about persuading their future students that, no matter how futuristic in technical and organisational terms, IE university courses will prove fully equivalent to 'traditional education' in yielding diplomas capable of opening new life's opportunities. They promise IE students will 'gain each other's knowledge', receive a [standard] degree, equalise superstars and participate in democratisation of education. The above agrees with Neumueller's opinion that payment for non-material goods provided via the Internet primarily covers the right to access as the key to success (Neumeller 2001, pp. 164, 185). Certainly, the above argument will work best for the universities marked by competitive branding. The strategy peculiar to the organisation [or .org] sector is best exemplified by the Internet Education Foundation with the mission to educate […the public] about the potential of a decentralised global Internet and promote democracy. Other organisations promise transform[ing] pedagogy, death of the traditional university system, [teaching] creativity [difficult to achieve within traditional educational context], open access to educational resources [and] libraries research. They also tend to associate education and leadership [programmes], or education, Internet use and religious affiliation; some [as Wikipedia] provide vast thematic definitions.

Figure 6. Picture from .org pages



Source: http://peoples-uni.org/ [accessed: 26.12.2014].

Figure 7. Picture from .edu pages



Source: http://web.mit.edu/ [accessed: 5.12.2014].

As remarked above, the semiotic approach [applied to marketing strategy development and analysis] is primarily focused on perceptions thus giving a one-sided picture of IE featuring messages. For the sake of their contextual interpretation [enabling proper understanding], the received IE image needs to be confronted with other sources providing the 'outer world' context. A more balanced IE picture should emerge from thematic reports, but these are scarce. In fact, the query has yielded one comprehensive UNESCO report titled (*Internet in Education. Support Materials for Educators* 2003). Its argumentative section highlights such IE strengths as creating opportunities in distance and lifelong learning, or direct availability of expert knowledge and qualifications. On the other hand, it indicates dangers related to unreliable or aggressive

information, and IE's dependence on students' possession of the necessary interpretative knowledge, experience, and power of observation; their ability to work with information, use different skills [including critical thinking] come into psychological interaction, overcome the language barrier and manage intercultural communication. For teachers, the report points out varied quality of educational materials as a source of additional burden and demand for greater competence in materials' selection, need to look for technological instruction, methodological support, and [good] quality electronic textbooks.

The report also raises the issue of legality of Internet education as another barrier to success in the 'outer' world, because of its relevance for the employment issue. As it states "many educators have to admit that the employers are rather sceptical about the certificates of distance education. They evidently identify distance education with that of correspondent courses, which are not highly estimated by the communities. [Though] [in] reality the effectiveness of distance education can be even higher than of full-time tuition" (p. 9). The author of this article decided to verify this opinion by way of asking daytime students, if they could switch to IE courses. They denied explaining that obtaining an IE diploma would seriously reduce their employment chances.

The above inspires looking at the hypertext entries targeted at 'on-line' and school teachers to reflect [in the guise of 'useful tips'] the problems commonly associated with the use of the Internet in education. They would be hard to identify among the top query results, if it were not for 2011 pilot study by Camilla Brändström from Gävle University. It is titled *Using Internet in Education – Strength and Weaknesses* (*Qualitative Study of Teachers...* 2014) and based on interviews held with language teachers. Its findings are summarised as follows: "[…] the teachers think that the Internet is a valuable source of information and an important additional teaching tool. The Internet can, e.g. motivate the students, make teaching more fun, and allows variation in teaching. Four major drawbacks on the use of the Internet were reported by the teachers, viz. students' cheating, unreliable information, technical problems and students' extracurricular activities during lessons".

Brändström's study also comments on the issue of students' bordering on legal infringement not only in their cheating behaviours, but also by copyright abuse. It admits that the common trend to 'copy-and-paste' texts from the public domain for use in students' papers is often rooted in misunderstanding, primarily indicating very low awareness of the intellectual property status. Regarding copyright abuse so frequent in Internet use, Neumueller sceptically states that the very concept of intellectual property rights protection will probably have to change under the pressure of the commonly followed practices.

Figure 8. 30 are better than 1 by Warhol

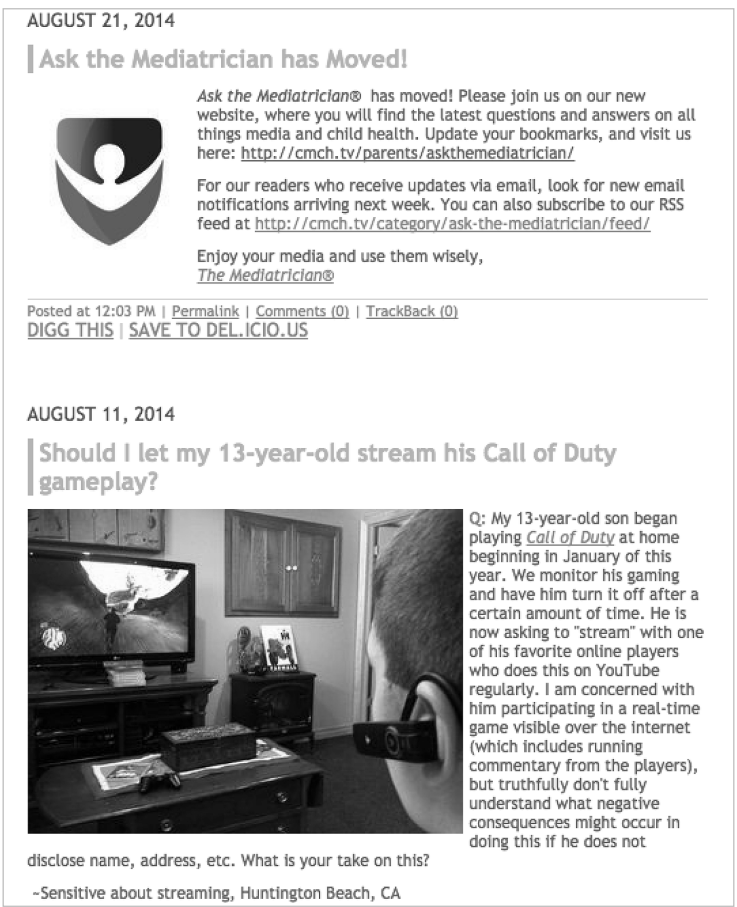
Source: http://classconnection.s3.amazonaws.com/138/flashcards/3273138/png/screenshot_2013-12-01_210314-142B10F91783B395C90.png [accessed: 26.12.2014].

Interestingly enough, both Brändström's observations and Moscow Report postulates highlighting the key importance of potential IE participants' skills and abilities, stay in line with the findings from the studies of the mental profile, cognitive styles, and constraints characteristic of today's twenty-year-olds who prevail among current university students and represent the first generation raised in a fully Internet-penetrated world. At times they are identified as the E or Y Generation [not to be mistaken with the X Generation currently around and over thirty who experienced the onset of the Internet at a later age][4]. As said above, their most wanted [and most deficient] abilities include longer concentration time in the situation when their Internet environments frequently change [or move around them], while physical bodies remain motionless (Neumueller 2001, p. 57), improved attention focus, critical thinking, and subject knowledge [necessary to assess the usefulness of acquired

[4] Cyclical recurrence of certain names as labels is misleading; Generation X may serve as an e. Initially the term was used as the title of a book referring to the British modes moveent, later it picked up to be used as a band name, in the end was used to denote the generation of today's 30-some-year old as the first generation raised with the Internet.

information]. These are shaped in the process of growing up both in school and family circles.

Figure 9. Ask the Mediatrician



AUGUST 21, 2014

Ask the Mediatrician has Moved!

Ask the Mediatrician® has moved! Please join us on our new website, where you will find the latest questions and answers on all things media and child health. Update your bookmarks, and visit us here: http://cmch.tv/parents/askthemediatrician/

For our readers who receive updates via email, look for new email notifications arriving next week. You can also subscribe to our RSS feed at http://cmch.tv/category/ask-the-mediatrician/feed/

Enjoy your media and use them wisely,
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Posted at 12:03 PM | Permalink | Comments (0) | TrackBack (0)
DIGG THIS | SAVE TO DEL.ICIO.US

AUGUST 11, 2014

Should I let my 13-year-old stream his Call of Duty gameplay?

Q: My 13-year-old son began playing *Call of Duty* at home beginning in January of this year. We monitor his gaming and have him turn it off after a certain amount of time. He is now asking to "stream" with one of his favorite online players who does this on YouTube regularly. I am concerned with him participating in a real-time game visible over the internet (which includes running commentary from the players), but truthfully don't fully understand what negative consequences might occur in doing this if he does not disclose name, address, etc. What is your take on this?

~Sensitive about streaming, Huntington Beach, CA

Source: The Mediatrician (2014).

The importance of proper media exposure for child development found recognition in the creation in 2003 of the Center on Media and Child Health [CMCH] (*The Mediatrician* (2014) at Boston Children's Hospital [BCH] with the mission to provide guidance and help towards creating and consuming media in ways that optimise children's health and development. Its founder Dr Michael Rich views the media as 'a powerful environmental health influence'. His key statement goes "what matters is not what is done, but what is not done, or neglected already at a relatively young age". Both research papers and intuitive conclusions from direct observations locate the majority of the

problems related to Internet use in education in the realm of psychology, especially personality and cognitive styles' studies. By way of reference to the multiple capacities of the Internet [as mentioned above], the author would like to conclude this article by asking the question if it is possible for the Internet to be used as a provider of remedies to the problems it has helped to create. According to Neumueller, "at the beginning of XXI c. it is possible to create useful tools that never take physical form" (Neumueller 2001, p. 166). Similar conclusions are prompted by Dr Rich's opinions. Apart from the technical aspect, it is only logical to ask, what is the marketing chance of a product that would combine popular gaming designs with skills' development functions? Or build motivation to 'learn more'? Posed in the above context, the author's question implies that there is room for psychologists' broader involvement IT products design and new generation tools development. All that can be said for today is that the current IE image, as displayed on the Internet, stems from the attitude of adapting to potential students' weaknesses and problems rather than coaching them towards improvement or building new potentials.

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The Mediatrician (2014), http://www.cmch.tv/parents/askthemediatrician (accessed: 30.11.2014].

Edukacja internetowa jako odzwierciedlenie (skomercjalizowanego) Internetu

Streszczenie

Na poszczególnych etapach rozwoju o Internecie (lub sieci ogólnoświatowej, WWW) można mówić jako o *ikonosferze*, *semiosferze* lub *infosferze*, co ma implikować jego charakter „samoregulującego się systemu ekologicznego", zdolnego do pozyskiwania nieskończonej liczby ikon (tzn. obrazów), znaczeń (generowanych w nieustannym procesie semiozy) oraz świeżych pozycji wiadomości. Wszystko to funkcjonuje jako konteksty edukacji internetowej (EI), rozumianej jako całokształt kursów e-uczenia się, realizowanych przez Internet. Tak naprawdę Internet pozostaje głębiej zaangażowany w realizację EI w efekcie jego licznych pozostałych możliwości, między innymi jako narzędzia marketingowego, zwierciadła trendów i zwielokrotnionych percepcji.

Żeby zobaczyć, jak wyżej wspomniana wielorakość wpływa na przekazywanie informacji, autorka przeprowadziła kwerendę internetową i zebrała pewne obserwacje na temat hipertekstowych węzłów przedstawiających EI (ekwiwalent do haseł w linkach), by odkryć, że (poza czysto komercyjnymi czynnikami) tworzą je głównie dwa typy podmiotów, tzn. nie nastawione na osiąganie zysków organizacje i uczelnie. Jedne i drugie identyfikują swą misję jako tworzenie nowych (technologicznych lub edukacyjnych) możliwości i obieranie za cel osób w niekorzystnych sytuacjach życiowych z retoryką typu marketingowego, przedstawiającą perspektywy globalne w kontraście do perspektyw indywidualnych (lub będącą orędowniczką 'rozpoczęcia działań globalnych' jako strategii ucieczki od osobistych ograniczeń). Uzyskany wizerunek uwypukla wybrane mocne strony EI (dalej stymulowane przez wizualizacje, bardziej konserwatywne w przypadku placówek akademickich niż pozostałych organizacji).

Bardziej zrównoważony obraz EI powinien wynikać z raportów tematycznych, lecz tych jest niewiele. Najnowszy wszechstronny raport UNESCO, stosunkowo łatwo dostępny w Internecie, pochodzi z roku 2003 z Moskwy. Jego rozdział argumentacyjny inspiruje do spojrzenia na hasła hipertekstowe skierowane do nauczających w systemie 'on-line' i nauczycieli w szkołach, jak również do rodziców. W przebraniu „użytecznych wskazówek" sygnalizują one problemy towarzyszące korzystaniu z Internetu w edukacji – powiązane konteksty i, co dość ciekawe, pokrywają się z ustaleniami badań skoncentrowanych na stylach poznawczych, zachowaniach i ograniczeniach powszechnych wśród dzisiejszych dwudziestolatków (jako przedstawicieli pierwszego pokolenia wychowanego w świecie całkowicie spenetrowanym przez Internet), którzy obecnie przeważają wśród studentów.

Poprzez odniesienie się do wielorakich możliwości Internetu (jak już wspomniano) autorka zadaje pytanie o to, czy możliwe jest wykorzystywanie w Internecie oferenta jako środków zaradczych na problemy, które pomógł stworzyć.

Słowa kluczowe: Internet (lub WWW), *ikonosfera*, semiotyka vs semiologia, semioza, edukacja internetowa, obserwacja w naukach humanistycznych, Generacje X, Y, E. legalność edukacji internetowej.

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