

Sound Reading

Exploring and conceptualising audiobook practices among young adults

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Abstract

Audiobooks and subscription services are becoming increasingly popular in Sweden as well as many other parts of the world. This compilation thesis develops knowledge and conceptualisations of audiobook reading practices in the context of subscription services and apps. This is carried out by exploring audiobook use among young people, with a particular emphasis on the temporal and spatial aspects of the practices and the tools used. The context of the thesis is Sweden, with subscription services and users in the country. The thesis takes an explorative approach, where several theories and research methods are operationalised in four different articles. Schatzki's practice theory forms a foundation for the thesis, with the theory of timespace applied to consider temporal and spatial aspects of activities. Furthermore, the theories of remediation and affordances have been included to examine the digital technology related to contemporary audiobooks. Different aspects of audiobook practices have been explored; firstly, with temporal transaction logs collected from a subscription service. Secondly, semi-structured interviews with ten young audiobook users, and thirdly, an app feature analysis focusing on the player function in three audiobook apps. As such, the approaches are both qualitative and quantitative, and digital methods are employed together with more traditional research methods in virtual forms.

The transaction log study reveals that the average subscription-service user listens to audiobooks for a considerable amount of time every day. There also appears to be a correlation between audiobook listening and the work or school day, with more audiobook use carried out during daytime on weekdays, but also at bedtime. The analysis of the interview study highlights that audiobook reading practices have become part of users' everyday routines, and listening is closely interwoven with other daily activities. For young people, audiobooks are combined with commutes, schoolwork, chores, exercise and leisure activities. Listening has become routine for specific purposes, such as improving the enjoyment of another task, increasing reading time or supporting the user's wellbeing. Audiobook apps play a significant role in contemporary audiobook practices. The app feature analysis explores features in the player function of three subscription service apps and has found that some features make certain reading practices easier, while others create hindrances for users. Some app features are used for adjusting time, such as changing the speed of the book, setting a sleep timer or rewinding the audiobook when the user has lost focus. Moreover, some users alternate between the printed and audio version of a book title, and when possible, then use a feature for selecting the track to switch between formats. Finally, the thesis also contributes by developing and clarifying concepts relating to audiobooks, subscription services and reading. For example, the concepts of *reading by listening*, *mobile reading* and *stationary reading* are introduced here to highlight the specificity of different reading practices. Furthermore, the business models of subscription services have been conceptualised as following either a *library model* or *bookshop model*. Research on digital and subscription-based audiobooks is still in its initial stages. An ambition with this PhD thesis is to contribute with new knowledge and lay some conceptual groundwork relating to this topic.

Keywords: Audiobooks, reading practices, subscription services, apps, practice theory, timespace, transaction logs, interviews, digital methods, young adults.

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