Teenagers on YouTube: from non-formal information practices to information culture?

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Context

Teenagers develop uneven representations and skills about information and the internet through everyday activities (Cordier, 2015). They use social networking sites as information sources for personal as well as educational needs, yet those practices have been mostly studied for their social and communication aspects (Aillerie & McNicol, 2016). In 2014, surveyed teenagers for the JAMES study ranked YouTube as their favorite website and declared they visit it for leisure as well as for information seeking (Willemse et al, 2014; Waller et al, 2016).

→ YouTube is a place where teenagers «tinker» (De Certeau, 1990) with practices to satisfy their information needs and such activities might play a part in the development of information practices and literacy.

French teen press covers about YouTube or youtubers, published between April 16 - May 17.

Information literacy as information culture...

In 2003, Brigitte Juanals compared information literacy to information culture, encompassing « general knowledge, […] knowledge of medias, taking ethical considerations and social integration into account, largely exceeding a documentary and computer competence ». Alexandre Serres later defined information culture as the combination of one's uses, practices, competences, representations and information behaviour, with the addition of concepts and theoretical notions (Serres, 2012). Information literacy embodies a composite far too complex to be considered only as a set of competences and skills. Thus, we propose to examine it as information culture (Juanals, 2003 ; Le Deuff, 2009).

... in a non-formal environment: YouTube

- A familiar place for teenagers, where they spontaneously display various practices on a daily basis.
- YouTube involves video information seeking which might reveal specificities about seeking each type of documents.
- An hybrid device, mixing aspects and issues of a social network, a search engine and a video archive – which increases the variety of practices we might observe and makes it a place of convergence for literacies.
- Its ownership by Google, its economic model and the video remix culture it heavily relies on imply specific media and information literacy issues.

Research questions

Information access: How do teenagers access contents on YouTube?
Does it involve passive or active seeking?
Does it depend on their information need and intention?
What is the influence of algorithms on their practices and how do teenagers deal with them?

Information evaluation: How do teenagers choose and assess contents they watch ? Do their criteria evolve over time?
Do they use the same criteria for personal and educational needs?

Information use and production: How do teenagers conceive of plagiarism, online identity and ethical use of contents in their experience of online videos, as viewers and/or as content producers?

Hypothesis

A first preliminary survey led to following hypotheses:
Teenagers first stick to automatic suggestions in the familiar homepage of YouTube and later search for other contents : their access practices switch from passive seeking to active seeking, with an important effect of algorithms and suggestions at first.

Popularity signs, fostered by algorithms and suggestions, is an important criterion at first ; teenagers later use other criteria, one of them being their trust in their favorite Youtubers – except for educational needs.

Intellectual property has a different meaning for them, emphasizing the moral aspects of this notion over the financial ones.

Method

Individual semi-structured interviews with teenagers aged 12 to 19, recruited outside school. The words the interviewees will use are meaningful to study their representations and practices: screenshots from YouTube videos or comments will be used as speech supports to minimize the biases we might cause through the use of specific words in our questions (e.g. copyright, plagiarism...). A computer will be at the interviewees' disposal to show anything they might need to.
Among the panel, we will select five to ten teenagers aged 11 - 15 to meet for a longitudinal study of their practices over three years.

Usefulness of this research project

- A better understanding of teenagers' information practices outside school, the way they evolve and literacies at stake in those practices, which is necessary to offer relevant educational situations.

- A contribution to research about video information seeking, which might « reveal specificities about seeking each type of documents » and « redefine information activity that used to be almost split between active seeking (i.e. in text information seeking systems) and passive seeking (i.e. in traditional mass medias) » (Boubée & Tricot, 2011).

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