"Now I Do Academic Fast Food": Grad Students in the ICT's Era

Joaquín Linne

CONICET, University of Buenos Aires, University of Lanus, Argentina

joaquinlinne@gmail.com

ABSTRACT – Together with the widespread use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), global changes have taken place in most social environments. This article stands at the intersection of communication and education studies, by investigating the introduction and use of ICTs in students' learning and everyday life. The aim of our research, indeed, is to explore the transformations in learning and academic information processing habits among students part of the School of Philosophy and Literature and that of Social Sciences at Buenos Aires University. Methodologically, we gathered targeted interviews with students and professors from said faculties (n: 140). Moreover, we undertook on-site observations at university libraries and virtual observations on social network sites and university websites. From the findings a paradox concerning the intensive use of ICTs emerges: greater accessibility, availability and information exchange lead to degrees of 'distraction', 'superficiality' and 'speed' in the fruition and circulation of content. Based on a native category, we have come to call this tendency "academic fast food".

1. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become globally widespread and are now affecting everyday life in most social contexts (Castells 2009). Also, they are a key asset of today's communication, particularly among young people, contributing to generate new ways to access, process and manipulate information (Urresti 2008). These new practices have been referred to in different ways within social sciences. One of the most accepted conceptualizations is that of "culture of convergence" (Jenkins 2008), which stresses how cultural concepts increasingly tend to converge around ICTs, since the most dynamic areas of society (services and finance) are interconnected through digital networks (Castells 2009). This

phenomenon expands until Internet 2.0 is developed, which refers, among other features, to the use on a mass scale of "social networking sites" (henceforth, SNSs; Boyd and Ellison 2008) and the emergence of collaborative platforms.

Within this context, our research question is how the use of ICTs impacts on the learning and daily practices of university students. To this end, we have developed two axes: 1) communication among fellow college students and between professors and students; and 2) how college students deal with the retrieval and production of academic information, as the writing and delivery of summaries, assignments, term tests, papers, articles, theses and dissertations. Lastly, this article aims to explore the study practices of students, notably those enrolled at the School of Philosophy and Literature and the School of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative study we carried out a mixed ethnography relying on tools from both "traditional" ethnography (Symon & Cassell 1994) and "virtual ethnography" (Hine 2000). During the first semester of 2012, we conducted some on-campus observations attending for two months, on a weekly basis and at different times, the libraries of the School of Philosophy and Literature and that of the School of Social Sciences. We especially focused on how students used their cell phones, laptops and the desktop computers in the libraries. Furthermore, as young people are increasingly immersed in digital environments (Livingstone 2008; Urresti 2008), we deemed relevant to use 'cyber ethnographic' tools (Farquhar 2013) to complement our methodological strategy. Notably, we have conducted some virtual observations on Web forums and SNSs, thus adding a further layer to our investigation of academic students online practices, quest, and processing of information.

Concerning interviews, between 2012 and 2015 we conducted 120 targeted interviews with college students. Firstly, we interviewed acquaintances from these faculties. Then, we approached students directly in the libraries or in the Faculty premises. We also contacted those who voluntarily agreed to be interviewed so that they too could take part in the research. Our corpus comprises of students between the age of 20 and 29. Besides, at

both Schools we conducted 20 targeted interviews with professors whose age range goes from thirty to forty years old. The names of all interviewees have been hindered for privacy reasons.

We conducted interviews with 60 students from the School of Social Sciences and 60 from the School of Philosophy and Literature. Even though the corpus was evenly split between males and females, no significant gender-related discrepancies were detected concerning the use of ICTs. The participants were middle-class residents of Buenos Aires. In line with the National Institute of Statistics and Census (2012), we define middle-class young people as those who have parents with a secondary level education or higher, hold medium or high qualification jobs and live in houses with basic public services.

Since this is a non-probabilistic sample, the results of the study cannot be extrapolated to the whole universe of study. However, we claim that this research is useful for outlining emerging tendencies at the intersection of communication and education studies, especially with regard to students' use of ICTs.

3. STATE OF THE ART

Our participants can be said to be all 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001); in this respect they share not only the habit of multitasking but also the condition of 'prosumers', that is, of both consuming and producing online content (Urresti 2008; Piscitelli 2009). As Albarello puts it,

> The computer has succeeded television as totem, but with the difference that digital natives find in it a different meaning and project onto this device a great number of expectations linked to play, experimenting, learning and sociability, to the point of regarding it as a part of their identity. (Albarello 2011, 38)

Excluding adolescents, those who spend the highest amount of time on the Internet are college students, who still bear the aura of learners and who, because of that, are extended a 'social moratorium' beyond the limits of the 'vital moratorium' (Margulis, Urresti, Lewin et al. 1998). In other words, their status and condition grant them more time to go online, differently from their working peers and those belonging to previous generations (Urresti 2008). On the Internet, adolescents mostly use SNSs, particularly

Facebook and Twitter. Overall, SNSs can be considered as multi-purpose platforms where users share information through their public or semi-public profiles in order to interact with their close contacts as well as with their more latent ties (Haythornwaite 2005; López and Ciuffoli 2012). On these sites, the most popular content posted by young people consists of texts and personal photographs (Linne 2014).

When it comes, more broadly, to address the human-technology relation we witness a certain polarization of the positions at stake. Eco (1968) was the first to posit such polarization as follows: on the one hand, we have 'apocalyptic' people, who associate technical advances with the degradation of culture; on the other hand, we find the 'integrated' ones, that is, the enthusiasts of technological change imposed by scientific progress in association with companies and public bodies. Albarello (2011) redefines these two positions with the terms 'technophiles' and 'technophobes', and adds a third position, the neutral one, according to which technology is neither good nor bad, but depends on how it is used. On this same point, Landow (1995, 211) claims that "a technology always confers power on someone; it gives power to those who possess it, to those who use it and to those who have access to it." Although (or maybe because) ICTs are increasingly widespread worldwide, they still kindle opposing views between those who think of them as beneficial and those who think they may have deleterious effects. We suggest that this dichotomy can be productive in the context of our analysis.

For instance, multitasking, which refers to the practice of doing many tasks simultaneously (for example, chatting and studying), means to some people the positive dismantling of binary mental tools inherited from nineteenth-century culture (Baricco 2009) whereas to others it entails distraction and a decrease in productivity, especially in relation to schools and work environments (Healy 1998). Thus, while Berardi (2007) warns against the risk of homogenization and alienation of bodies, researchers such as Landow (1995) and Shirky (2010) highlight the unprecedented freedom and the potential development of collective intelligence enabled by hypertextual communication and information genres.

More generally, supporters of the Internet stress the fact that users are now free to choose across a wide variety of content, resulting in empowered citizenships and the possibility for minorities to be heard. On the other hand, Internet naysayers mention the false egalitarianism promoted by technology, claiming that the Internet is controlled by the same corpora-

tions that control traditional mass media. Also, they stress the addiction produced by video games, pornography and social networks (Carr 2008), compounded by the ease with which child pornography and menacing content of terrorist networks can be disseminated, or also the spreading of cyberbullism such as the publication of intimate, private content without the owner's consent (Livingstone 2008). In other words, the Internet may turn into a space for liberation as much as domination (Lago Martínez 2012). It could be suggested that, at present, the Web is neither a space of total freedom, nor one of exclusive State or corporate control, but basically the medium by means of which most people express themselves and get informed (Castells 2009).

As most professors and students have their own computers or smart-phones in class, the debate about the impact of technologies in school learning is at its peak, and other perspectives come to enrich the polarization described above. Those who emphasize the positive effects of ICTs indicate that each generation is more digital than the one that came before (Negroponte 1995), that more texts are read than ever before and that there are more texts available to be accessed and read (Baricco 2009; Piscitelli 2009). They also value the advent of ICTs in class as tools to promote non-linear self-directed, interactive, simultaneous learning open to the senses (Negroponte 1995; Reinghold 1996; Cassany and Ayala 2008). By contrasts, other scholars stress the obstacles and new problems that such a phenomenon poses (Berardi 2007; Levis 2009; Palazzo 2010). Specifically, these scholars warn that people do not read any more, that the Internet diminishes the quality of reading and writing, and that it makes us more superficial (Sibilia 2008). Concerning college students, these authors suggest that hypertextual reading impairs their capacity to remember data while the distraction generated by multitasking negatively affects their academic performance.

To sum up, it is possible to witness positions that underline either negative or positive aspects in the use of ICTs especially within learning contexts. Our article unpacks precisely such opposition: as with other technologies, the value and usefulness of ICTs depends on its uses and how it is re-appropriated. Moreover, insofar as there is a notable corpus of studies analysing the genesis and architecture of digital devices, we consider our work as a specific contribution to such corpus from the perspective of young generations' learning practices.

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4. RESULTS

4.1. Frequency

Interviewees spend an average of 7 hours per day online. The most frequent users confess to spending "over 12 hours a day", "all day", "all the time", "all the time I am at home or close to a computer" or "from the time I get up till I go to bed". On the other hand, a minority of participants claim to stay connected less than one hour per day. Whereas the average for Social Sciences students is 8 hours daily, those of Philosophy and Literature average 6 hours. Partly, this difference may be due to larger course loads, the greater number of mandatory final exams and the lesser use of ICTs in courses of Philosophy and Literature as compared with those of Social Sciences, which usually focus more on the study of communication practices and statistics in the context of media ecology.

The most active students are normally bloggers or frequent SNSs users. They tend to be readers of digital-format news and to consume various audio-visual contents. These users generally have a greater level of presumption in their daily media diet, insofar as they not only stay connected longer, but they eventually produce content of their own at some point, even if this means to simply post on their personal Facebook profiles. Also, immersed as they are in 'bedroom culture' (Livingstone 2008), it is the computer (or other devices) to dictate their routines and time schedules. This 'bedroom culture' is an apt example of what we understand by digital environments, that is, a galaxy of digital devices which young people build for/around themselves largely consisting of a desktop or laptop computer, an mp3 player, a smartphone and, sometimes, a tablet. 'media ecology' (Horst, Herr-Stephenson & Robinson 2010) In fact, the students of our sample normally live in media-rich houses where a variety of technological devices are available to them.

The average television time of our interviewees is one hour. In many cases, they claim that they do not own a television set, they never or rarely watch TV or, more simply, they have substituted TV with Internet. This happens, for instance, with the films they used to rent, the newspapers they used to purchase or the books they used to buy in book stores: there is, indeed, a trend to consume online and at no cost the cultural objects or texts for which they once had to pay. Nevertheless, rather than analysing the extent to which the Internet has come to dominate students' media diet

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to the detriment of TV and other traditional media such as books and printed formats, we deemed more relevant exploring how new means of communication and information integrate existing ones (Morduchowicz 2008), and how people live together in this media diversity.

> I use the Internet 8 or 9 hours a day. I'm online that long, but my hours surfing the net are less. One, two or three hours a day I read the papers, use social networks, watch videos, reply to emails, etc. I call being on Facebook or listening to music on the Internet being online, as I work with other applications not on the Internet. (Macarena, 26 y/o)

> I think it's not even one hour of television a day. But to have a more serious statistic I must be in the three hour a day slot. I've been living without it for many days, and it looks like I got used to its not being on, now that I have one. Basically, because I replaced it with the PC and the Internet. (Julieta, 24 y/o)

As seen, most of the interviewees make frequent use of the Internet, especially in order to use SNSs. The main arguments that they offer to justify the frequency of use can be summarized as follows: 1) they find browsing "entertaining"; 2) on and through the Web and digital devices, they integrate communication with their peers, professors, family, teachers and, in some cases, employers; 3) they deem important to have continuous access to various kinds of information to stay up to date; 4) they claim that being online improves their chances of getting a job, a partner, and new contacts; 5) they are at ease with the medium, meaning that they find it practical to consolidate the relationships with their fellow students and friends; 6) they think it is the best way to widen what Bourdieu (1985) calls the "cultural capital", i.e to gain useful knowledge, obtain university degrees and improve their foreign language level; and 7) they widen their 'social capital' online (Bourdieu 1985) by consolidating and extending their contact base.

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4.2. *Main practices and sites used*

The behaviours of our participants resemble those already detected by other research studies (e.g. Cassany and Ayala 2008) in that young people seem unable to imagine their lives without ICTs. Our students also claimed that the use of emails is significantly characterizing of their experience in college. Unlike adolescents (who belong to a post-email generation) and peers with low incomes (who do not normally use emails, as shown by Linne and Basile 2013), when it comes to college students, emails are usually the most common medium for academic communication (alongside with Facebook), as our participants have reported. Although SNSs and instant messaging services are somewhat replacing emails as the main digital communication medium, the latter continues to be a fundamental tool for college students: professors use it both to facilitate communication, in that it provides a direct link with students, and also as a strategy to generate a horizontal communicative network (be it among professors, students, or between the two). Some students said to check their in-trays several times a day up to a dozen times. Others, by contrast, report that they have abandoned their email accounts, as they now communicate with their teachers and fellow students via Facebook. At any rate, students generally have high expectations concerning the integration of these means at college, but it is not rare that these tend to remain unsatisfied, as the testimony below attests:

> In one course that looked like they'd propose email as the means to communicate, they did not do so, arguing that they were flooded with messages and they couldn't cope. When the second class came along, we the students formed an email group to swap the writings that we had to submit (and so we did). I think that the other two parallel courses did the same. (Ariel, 25 y/o)

With respect to smartphones, our students claim that prove useful to arrange meetings and fill daily down-time. For instance, as they travel to college on public transports or wait in line for some academic formalities to be solved, they play *Candy Crush* or update their Facebook or Twitter statuses (where they are, how they are). Students also stress the increased degree of communication they enjoy through Whatsapp, G-talk or similar chat apps, especially on Facebook. All these services are free of charge, apart from the fixed monthly fee paid to the IP or company provider.

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In the case of Philosophy and Literature students, among the most frequented web pages is the online forum created by the students themselves, which features daily updates and has become a useful site to exchange information on various academic-related issues. In addition, two forums of both the surveyed Schools were created on sites like Facebook and Yahoo! Also, on these platforms valuable information is exchanged, for examples news on courses, books, articles, monographs and exams. And there exist other web pages visited by college students on a daily basis.

In order to retrieve information on topics they know little to nothing about, Google resulted the most popular search engine. Second to Google, the best ranked web pages are Wikipedia, Google Scholar (Google's search engine specialized in academic materials) and You Tube, the biggest and most known online video portal, where uploading and searching, and watching pedagogic videos on a wide variety of topics is becoming more and more frequent.

Overall, SNSs are used by our students as socializing tools and as platforms through which to exchange academic information. Facebook and Twitter are the most used SNSs. A great number of students are users of both, though some choose to favour one of the two. Even though Facebook is the platform to which our students resort the most, Twitter enjoys a favourable preference too among many of the college students we interviewed. LinkedIn, which ranks third, shows a growing acceptance especially because of its specialization in the professional world. Lastly, Academia.edu, which is a fairly recent platform dedicated exclusively to the academic world, is also getting momentum among college students.

Regarding news portals, the most popular ones are Clarin.com, Ole.com.ar and Lanacion.com.ar (national newspapers web sites). It is notable that the increasingly fast news diet to which Web users (and especially young people, who stay connected the most) are exposed, triggers, in turn, a sort of information addiction, which is further satisfied by the websites' ability to incorporate data about users and provide more and customized newsfeeds The Web, which daily expands its limits – as it incorporates data and users –, generates constant dependence to informative updating in many students.

4.3. Advantages of Internet-based Study

The interviewees consider as positive aspects of the use of ICTs in learning and studying the possibility to access e-book libraries, online encyclopaedias, summaries and articles. They also value the chance to enrol for courses and seminars online, to inquire about exam dates, to have access to courses' bibliographies directly from the college's web page (or via the online campus of the different courses), to do bibliographic searches without having to travel and, above all, to have access to materials from other local and foreign universities and have a more dynamic dialogue with researchers from other countries in order to keep track of what is being investigated elsewhere. Eventually, this digital environment, generated around computers and smartphones, constitute a mediated hub where complex synergies and crossovers among platforms unfold (Baricco 2008; Urresti 2008).

> The fantasy is that the Internet is a more interesting and entertaining present, where anything happens, and which [sic] the future is clearly. But also that it is a place of vital resolutions, as the feeling that is becoming widespread is that more and more things in life happen in the Internet. All knowledge and learning today is permeated by the Internet. (Florencia, 23 y/o)

> The Internet and multimedia are already part of the furniture in the bedroom. The Internet is there when one gets up and turns in, where it seems to have always been: "I don't know any other way of studying which doesn't include the Internet, it's not exclusive as a source, but it's always there" (Melisa, 25 y/o).

> All that is good may be bad too: greater access, which may come at the price of contamination of the information, and a lesser reliance on one's own work, but access to information is all-important, especially where gratuitousness is the rule, which is in most cases. (Sandra, 27 y/o)

Significantly, the majority of students claim that they cannot compare the changes in studying brought about by ICTs, since they (and the institution) were already Internet users when they came to college: "When I came to university, it was already wired to the Internet, so I didn't witness any gradual progress that allowed me to perceive, or not perceive, changes" (Facundo, 26 y/o); "I was into the Internet when I came to college" (Santiago,

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31 y/o); "When I started my studies, the Internet was already a widespread phenomenon" (Lucia, 24 y/o); "I couldn't see the changes because the Internet was already there when I signed up … in fact, I signed up online". (Julieta, 28 y/o)

Only a minority of students were able to recall changes in how the Internet has impacted on their study habits and access to knowledge, or also in the way in which ICTs has affected the delivery of courses, courses materials and courses enrolment.

> In second year of college, I first heard of Wikipedia from a friend when nobody knew about it. Knowing the site let me reach contents that I wouldn't have known otherwise. (Alejandro, 26 y/o)
>
> I don't have one point of contact without the Internet, but little by little I noticed a greater use of email in the courses I was doing, creating accounts or groups in many courses, and having a communication that was part of the course configuration: sending pieces of writing, receiving corrections, sharing them with students. (Ariel, 25 y/o)

The internet makes available content to students that would otherwise be inaccessible. Additionally, it allows them to communicate with people from remote locations and to exchange content with peers, teachers and non-teaching staff in a more dynamic and convenient way especially when compared with pre-Internet practices.

4.4. Risks of Internet-based Study

Many interviewees indicate their difficulty in disconnecting from the Internet as well as the potential risk of increasing inequalities in the access to technologies, notably between those who can access the Internet at any time and those who cannot. In the words of two students: "it raises the technological gap between digital natives and digital illiterates" (Glenda, 27 y/o); "while its use becomes widespread, we depend on the Internet, which may increase inequality with those without easy access". (Julian, 29 y/o).

On the other hand, numerous students draw attention to the potential unreliability of online sources, the difficulty of fact-checking them, and, more in general, the overabundance of information with which Internet users are confronted. Besides, other downsides concerning the use of the Internet have to do with recurring exposure to pornography, laziness in relation to the library attendance and the delivery of teamwork, the lack of

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proactiveness caused by having access to so many sources that are only a click away, the temptation of plagiarism and the gradual disinterest in reading printed books. Below are some examples from our interviews:

> When you study from [sic] the Internet, you have the feeling that everything is at hand, you believe everything is easier than it is, the availability of wonderful works on the same topic one has to write about, all add up to the constant temptation of plagiarism. (Carolina, 25 y/o)

> The Internet influences what one reads too much, stumps criticism and leaves less space for free thought and creativity. I stopped going to libraries, now I do academic fast food. (Mariano, 27 y/o)

This native category of academic 'fast food' is particularly apt for our analysis. At the end of our last series of interviews, we asked students whether they agreed with this expression for describing a part of the academic workload based on the intensive use of ICTs. All participants agreed with the proposed label; consequently, we decided to employ it to describe, in a more economical way, a certain imaginary present across our corpus of participants. In relation to this phenomenon most students state that they normally study and produce assignments more quickly but also with less quality due to repetitive micro pauses and the unmanageable amount of information available online.

Students also maintain that the intensive use of ICTs goes against their creativity. In fact, this widespread complaint about the 'superficiality' and extreme speed with which they tend to write their dissertations, assignments, and summaries is clearly a consequence of this 'academic fast food'. Students report that they get distracted often by the Internet, that they find it hard to concentrate and that the new habit of reading in a digital format is both economical and convenient, yet it generates a cursory comprehension of texts and it brings with itself the tendency to read shorter texts and to skip parts of these same texts.

> To me, reading from the computer does not generate the same effect as from paper. I can't read from the screen, and downloading books from the Internet makes it less probable, mostly for economic reasons, that one prints them. (Laura, 21 y/o)

> I think that 70% of the time spent online is sort of walking in circles. It is neither producing contents nor reading articles or books or stories or poems,

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nor seeing films nor doing research on anything. Truth is the advantages are not so great; I don't know if a world with the Internet is better than a world without it. (Antonella, 24 y/o)

Internet-based study has changed in many ways. It distracts me more, and I study with the books and notes, but with the computer by my side, pausing to check news updates and check email. (Camila, 23 y/o)

The majority of students complains that the convenience and ease to gain access to different sources give them the feeling of having "covered half the distance" and that, because of that, it makes them produce more superficial texts: "it's easy to feel you're studying when you googled the subject". (Francisco, 29 y/o) There is also a marked tendency not to question the information sources validated by Google, like Wikipedia and the most popular portals on the Web. Over a half of the interviewees agree that, even when they save time thanks to copying and pasting, or to the digitalization of content and the automatization of searches and procedures, it takes them longer to discriminate which sources are useful amidst such abundance of data.

There is so much information that it's unfathomable many times, and you lose focus. Besides, because of the Internet I get distracted more, use Wikipedia more and my notes less. (Sebastian, 25 y/o)

Search for information has been automated to such an extent that it has diminished the level of complexity used to formulate questions as triggers for the search. And if the information that one expects to find isn't available online or is incomplete, one tends to simplify the complexity of the search or to get discouraged: "if it isn't on the Internet, it isn't reliable enough". Or, to quote the saying: *If Wikipedia says it, it must be so.* This contributes exponentially to the dependence on this robotized, unintellectualized search. Insights and intellectual processes pertaining to study volatilize and alienate themselves from thought. Students don't use their brains in working out the answers. They copy and paste the information as need be. The logical process has gone softer, the way the solution to a problem is thought out or an idea is articulated is different. (Samanta, 29 y/o)

The professors we approached are the most critical of these transformations. Among the disadvantages, they warn that "comprehension does not increase one bit, as it fosters plagiarism and savage paraphrasing" (Ser-

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gio, 35 y/o); "the temptation to cut and paste goes up" (Ana, 32 y/o); "it allows students to cheat" (Marina, 31 y/o). They also state that the variety of stimuli robs students of energy and time to analyze the topics and the information provided by the professors. The majority agree that with the Internet the capacity of reflection has been plummeted.

> Too much stimulus takes time from reflecting on the information obtained. It leads you to think that having information is explaining. And that is not so. It is NOT enough to say "this is so", but "this is so because...". (Martin, 37 y/o)

> The Internet substantially modifies the search method and the way you relate concepts. The link lets you relate topics easily, but it also limits that relationship. Online availability speeds everything up and you search fast because you have something else that may be more useful. In that passage, what may be lost is a certain capacity for reflection, or at least for reflection as we understood it up until not so long ago. (Pablo, 31 y/o)

Although the risks of relying on ICTs for studying, as we have seen, are many and varied, the majority of our interviewees perceives them as a must for going through university life: not only having an email and a Facebook account, but also owning a computer with an Internet connection are considered basic (academic) needs.

5. Conclusion

We have provided empirical evidence of how ICTs have significantly modified the study practices of today's college students. Most students use the Internet intensively. Due to the fact that for all interviewees multitasking and presumption are two recurrent practices, we claimed that the students of our corpus belong to the category of 'digital natives'.

For our participants to have access to a computer with an Internet connection is more and more frequent and necessary in order to complete their university degrees. Hence, the subjective need to be part of a network overlaps with the external imperative of being connected. As professors and students alike reported, the use of the Internet favours, among other things, the access to multiple sources of information, the communication among peers, which becomes more dynamic, and the writing of academic assignments. In other words, through the Internet our participants claimed to

consolidate their social as well as cultural capitals.

The majority of the students interviewed declared that the Internet is their principal source of entertainment and information. In addition, they stated that their email and SNS accounts are fundamental tools for exchanging academic, social, and work-related communication and information. On the other hand, we remarked the disadvantages that both college students and professors highlighted in the academic use of ICTs: mainly, the low reliability of online sources, the constant risk of plagiarism, and the superficiality of both study methods and student productions.

These new modes of ICTs-mediated study are reflected in the high amount of time spent online by our sample of students. It is in relation to their own self-criticism towards their academic production that the 'academic fast food' native category was coined and becomes productive. This label summarizes well a tendency and a ambivalent feeling shared among college students: to them, indeed, ICTs have become key tools in their everyday (academic) life, but these tools also entails an increasingly fragmented attention due to the overload of content, stimuli and applications they offer to the users. As seen, Eco's (1968) traditional distinction between 'apocalyptic' and 'integrated' people remains valid also today for reflecting upon the risks and advantages brought by ICTs.

All the phenomena we detected, rather than entailing a crisis of the educational system, represent an opportunity and a challenge for renovating its practices, since students have gone (and are still going) through profound cultural and cognitive transformations that have not been fully contemplated yet by academic institutions. Even though 'academic fast food' is a category hard to be tested at large, future research should delve deeper into the phenomena we highlighted in order to ascertain whether what we call 'distraction' may be, in fact, a new paradigm of knowledge, more fragmentary and hypertextual, and less linear than the one that came before.

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