

**Works in Progress • Digital Social Reading**

# **Chapter 1. Social reading becomes digital**

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## 1.1 Reading is digital and social: Breaking down the concept

In order to clarify the scope of the present book, it is useful to comment on all three terms of the title: digital, social, and reading. I will start with the adjective “social,” since it qualifies the distinction of DSR from the most common practice of individual reading.

### 1.1.1 Social interaction

In the phrase “social reading,” “social” refers to the encounter of the thoughts, impressions, and opinions of another person in relation to a reading activity. It can be the case of two friends in a pub talking about *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*; a Medieval monk reading glosses between the lines of a Latin Bible manuscript; a janitor browsing reviews on the website Goodreads after an algorithm recommended them a book; or a student who has been assigned to read *Pride and Prejudice* and is doing it on the Wattpad mobile app, where they can also find other readers’ comments in the margins. Social reading is not only about reading groups, book clubs, or classroom discussion, it is about the influence that someone’s experience of reading a book (or a specific part of it) can have on another person’s reading experience. Social reading is both a *social process* and a *social formation* (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013; Rehberg Sedo 2011c). It is something happening between readers and between readers and texts, but it is also the result of social, technological, and cultural history. Henry Jenkins (2006) used the term *convergence* to qualify a crucial aspect of contemporary culture, not as a convergence of media but as a convergence of contents and people, which has now become more frequent than in the past, to the point of becoming a dominant aspect of digital culture.

In a broader sense, all reading practices have always been social. All acts of reading are based on some kind of social infrastructure, which involves tensions regarding identity, gender, race, communities, and cultural opportunities, but also includes the technology used to distribute and access literature (Bourdieu and Chartier 1985; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013; Long 2003; McKenzie 2004; Reeser and Spalding 2002). Book historians have shown that in other historical contexts reading was mainly a social activity, for instance in European cities between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, where texts were read collectively and meanings constructed together, exceeding what could have been achieved by individual readers (Bourdieu and Chartier 1985).

Twenty-first century reading practices mediated by digital tools involve a social dimension more related to the publishing system than to the readers' interactions: for instance, data collected by Amazon from my Kindle e-reader about unfinished books and highlighted passages, and votes I left on Goodreads (owned by Amazon), are combined with similar behaviors by other readers to suggest me books that I might like (Murray 2018b). Because of what other readers liked, a set of books is recommended to me. This is an example of the pervasive and hidden sociality of the field of literary production, distribution, and reception. Historically, there have been similar institutionalized and commercial cases on a smaller scale, with publishers printing and distributing texts annotated by famous authors, with the aim of increasing revenues (Jackson 2005) or the use of television, radio, and public events to create reading communities (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013).

Conversations around books and reading have always been part of our response as readers, reading together is how we learn to read, and also how we learn to interrogate and understand literary texts in the classroom. Many detractors of digital reading are also practitioners who teach their students that the close reading of a text is the key to its comprehension, and they do it together with the students to make them learn. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for many readers conversations around books and social interactions were mainly happening in different contexts and over long stretches of time. When I was a child, I received a comics version of the *Odyssey* as a present, I read it and peeped at the pages when my brother was reading it too, often commenting together on the illustrations that we liked the most. In middle school I found out about the original Greek text, reading short excerpts that someone else translated into Italian and listening to the teacher's explanation, who read what literary critics wrote about it and was reporting their speech to us students. In high school, I read a few whole chapters myself, having fun with my classmates, who were partly showing off their cultural capital and partly acting like spirited teenagers by quoting Dante's famous verses about Ulysses while mimicking his sailing performance on the floor of the classroom. Only when I was more than twenty years old, I finally read the whole book, but before starting it I browsed the opinions of other people in critical essays and online blogs to find out about the best translation available. From this autobiographical story it is clear how many people can interfere and affect various kinds of reading acts, even when internet, smartphones, and e-book readers were not widespread. Digital media have condensed in time and space a sociability that has long been part of reading, inasmuch as literary systems are existing and evolving through the interactions of authors, readers, publishers, booksellers, librarians, schools, etc.

However, this broader kind of considerations are not the main topic of this book, I will rather focus on interactions between readers, which can happen in various forms and across various media. In particular, I will explore how digital media facilitate social reading practices and the positive and negative impact they can have on reading – as a cognitive and aesthetic process – and on literacy.

### 1.1.2 Digital media

The adjective “digital” in “digital social reading” refers to the medium used to talk about books and reading experiences. This book is mainly about the specificity of using digital media – like websites, social media, and mobile apps – for social reading. The sociality of reading has since long involved intertextuality and multimodality as forms of circulation of texts and engagement with them, as my example in the previous section shows (comics, translation, improvised amateur performance). The change brought about by digital and social media is a multiplication of opportunities: many conversations can happen online on platform like Goodreads, Wattpad, or a reading group forum, where people with different backgrounds and jobs talk about their reading experience, mention and link other texts, but also post videos and music related to the book. Sometimes, non-human agents intervene in the conversation, too, like algorithms that recommend books related to the one reviewed or show the most underlined passages of a text.

Abundance of opportunities and extension of the network of people with whom it is possible to interact are not just a quantitative change created by the media and related to “a new situation for human association and human perception” (McLuhan 1964). This new situation also enables the emergence of qualitative changes, by influencing the kind of content produced and shared, the quality standards (based on the wider availability of cultural models, rather than on institutionalized selection and editing), and people’s behavior in response to it (Reagle 2015; Acerbi 2020). In the context of digitalized culture, the message is more and more structured by both the medium (McLuhan 1964) and the format. “Formatting matters because it frames the mode of media apprehension. How the cake is cut also determines how we eat it. To format text without margins, for example, is also to deny marginalia. And to format text in a way that prevents further remediation is to deny the formation of shared culture” (Tenen 2017, 192). Digital media do not only generate an increase in the information transmitted, they are also likely to change the nature of such information. New genres and formats depend on this possibility, but to what extent such qualitative changes are good or bad is controversial.

The debate about the harm of digital technology on reading – or on our brain altogether – has been going on for at least twenty-five years (Baron 2015; Birkerts 1994; Carr 2010; Wolf 2018; cf. Hammond 2016). The problem with these laments is that they mostly reflect the view of adult literary and media scholars and are based on their personal experience with technology. If we look more broadly at research on the impact of digital technology use on adolescents' well-being, results are not clear due to methodological inadequacy, lack of transparency, and bidirectionality of the effects (Dienlin and Johannes 2020; Orben 2020b; Odgers and Jensen 2020). Ironically, before digital technology started to be blamed as the cause of youth degeneration other technologies were held responsible for it. The most famous example is probably Plato rejecting writing as an invention that “will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it” (*Phaedrus*, 274c-277a). Indeed, many centuries later reading fiction was still one of the favorite strawmen: the *Pessimists Archive* has collected newspaper articles, dating from 1806 to 1938, complaining about the bad moral influence and physical harm coming from novels (“The Novel” 2020). One way to explain why history repeats itself is to see this pessimism as a reiteration of bias and behaviors typical of humans, who fear innovation as disruptive of established knowledge and, therefore, disruptive of manageable interactions with potentially harmful others. In every epoch, new media are considered dangerous because they are not familiar and we cannot forecast how they could change our behavior and that of the people around us.

An important thing to bear in mind is that, as it happens with any tool and technology, material or digital artefacts do not univocally have good or bad effects. The context, the kind of content, and the attitude of the persons involved usually play a big role in determining the quality of the social interactions, the cognitive-emotional activation, and the learning outcome. Thus, in order to fairly assess the potential benefit or harm of digital media, it is important to consider the context in which they are used (e.g. leisure, or education), the skills and familiarity of the people using them (e.g. tech geek but novice to social reading, or passionate fan), the motivations (e.g. intrinsic, or school assignment), the individuals involved (e.g. teenagers, or cultural workers) and their relationships (e.g. informal hanging-out, or teaching-learning).

The concept of *hyper reading* (Sosnoski 1999; Burbules 1998) has been used to describe reading on digital media, sometimes in opposition to *close reading* (Hayles 2012), *intensive reading* (Baron 2015), or *deep reading* (Wolf and Barzillai 2009; Birkerts 1994). Skimming, scanning, fragmenting, and juxtaposing texts are some of the practices that characterize hyper reading, especially with respect to information-

seeking reading. Here I will consider the specificities of different ways of reading and I will underline the “need for pedagogical strategies that recognizes the strength and limitations of each cognitive mode” (Hayles 2012, 12).

### 1.1.3 Reading fiction

There are many different connotations of the term “reading:” close reading, hyper reading, distant reading, surface reading, deep reading, reading for pleasure, reading for studying, reading literacy, peer reading, reading as activism, reading as a sign of cultural status, etc. Here, I will focus on reading as a cognitive-affective embodied activity, not on readers at large as agents within social, cultural, and pedagogical institutions. Namely, I will consider cognitive, aesthetic, and social processes closely related to the activity of reading. I will not disregard the fact that every reading act is situated and contextualized in a socio-technical cultural context (Murray 2018b) – reading is not an anthropologically invariant activity (Cavallo and Chartier 1999) – but I will consider readers’ interaction with the other stakeholders of the digital literary sphere (authors, publishers, retailers, etc.) only in relation to the reading act, not dealing with broader socio-economic issues that are reorienting the literary field. To be even clearer, using the term “reading” I will mainly refer to the activation of cognitive and emotional responses due to the engagement with a written text.

Another due clarification regards the scope of my reflections with respect to the extension and variety of published texts. DSR practices can involve many different kinds of books and can be strategically employed by authors and publishers during the writing process. Namely, in recent years academic books have sometimes first appeared in drafts hosted on digital platforms allowing users to comment on them, and open annotation has been adopted by a wide range of publishers and journals (‘The MIT Press Open on PubPub’ 2018). The first appearance of this book on MIT Press’s PubPub web platform is an example. However, this book will mainly deal with *fictional narrative*, although some considerations will also apply to the relation between other kinds of texts and digital media.

Anouk Lang introduced the concept of “hybrid practices” referring to how digital media influence reading, and identified four dimensions:

the democratizing effects of the Internet; the challenges that new reading practices pose to existing ways of establishing literary value; the role played by textuality in subject formation in Internet-mediated contexts; and questions

around the identity-work that readers can be observed to be doing through book-related technologies. (Lang 2012, 6)

Dynamics of power, literary value, subject formation, and construction of identity. A fundamental aspect of what readers look for in books is missing: enjoyment. Overlooking this aspect means overlooking an important element of the motivations to read affected by technology (cf. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2016). Defining what reading practices are, Lang remarks that they include affective responses as well, but with respect to technology they are mostly framed as ways of negotiating literary value. From the perspective I am adopting in this book, affective response is seen as something influenced by the social and technological context of reading practices. And it is worth focusing on how affect arises, because often this is the end sought by readers, who are not so much interested in literary value.

How digital media are changing social readership? How are they affecting the aesthetic experience of reading? Who are the readers engaging in digital social reading? These are the questions that I will address in relation to DSR practices. Probably, I will disappoint readers who were hoping to find more information related to broader sociological, historical, literary, cognitive, or pedagogical aspects of reading. Every account of a phenomenon is inevitably partial, I had to make some argumentative choices and limit myself to what I deemed most relevant for an overview of digital social reading. However, before trying to outline the variety of DSR practices, I can offer a few remarks about the evolution of reading that will help to put my discourse into perspective.

## 1.2 The Evolution of reading

We are used to consider reading fiction as a solitary practice of adults: a relationship between a grown-up person and a material object called book. But this is just one of many ways of reading (Cavallo and Chartier 1999; Murray 2018a): it is not the first one we encounter in our life and there is no particular reason to consider it the best one, or the achievement of the full development of reading skills. To reach this configuration of technological, individual, and social elements that characterizes the solitary reading of paper books many things had to happen and change since the invention of writing. Before writing systems were invented, people used to tell each other stories orally. Now we mainly read stories alone and in silence, but it once was a social activity in which words were spoken aloud. The first written literary work is probably *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – which can be dated back to the year 2000 BCE – but for millennia the majority of people has not been able to read. Telling stories has been

for the most part of human history an oral activity. Reading for pleasure, reading fiction in the way we think of it nowadays, is an activity that started in Modern times, around the year 1700 in Europe, with the rise of the novel as literary genre (Price 2003; Abigail Williams 2017). But books have been quite expensive for a long time and stories still kept circulating mostly in oral form. Moreover:

Despite the polarisation of this debate, however, reading aloud or in silence was rarely an either-or choice because the two rendered a different experience altogether. Other leisure activities at the time (e.g. going to the theatre, concerts, pleasure gardens, coffee-houses, dances, etc.) were predominantly (if not exclusively) collective and public. Solitary reading was often represented and discussed in these public venues and, it seems, became thereby consolidated as new type of leisure. Indeed, it could be said that solitary, immersive reading, pondering a text in the privacy of one's closet, and social reading in polite company forms a kind of feedback loop, where public statements and intimate reflections shape each other. (Vogrincic Cepic and Kukkonen 2019, 30; cf. Abigail Williams 2017; Jackson 2001; Saenger 1997).

Broadening our perspective, written stories and books can be seen as part of the “Gutenberg parenthesis” (Sauerberg 2009). The printing press allowed to create copies of texts much faster and cheaper than manually copying them, a technological change that allowed the creation of more books and their wider circulation. However, in human history, only 500 years have been marked by this very particular way of circulating information and stories as written text. Before that, voice was the most popular medium, and we now live in an era in which multimodality is the most popular form of transmitting texts and stories, mixing oral and written form. The number of online newspapers, websites, and electronic texts far exceeds the number of texts printed and distributed. In a historical perspective, the dominance of writing for telling stories represents only 7% of the time passed since when humans have been able to write (Figure 1). And only 1% of the time since the origin of language around 20,000 years ago (the most conservative hypothesis).



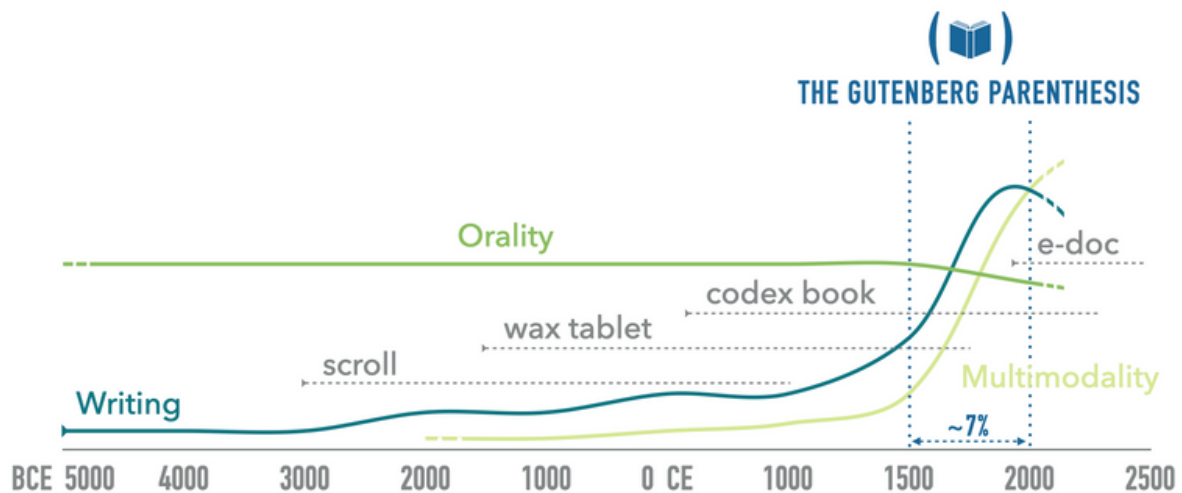


Figure 1. Hypothesis of the approximate evolution of media dominance for storytelling

With the invention of the radio and then cinematography, the situation began to change again: orality and multimodality started to rise and nowadays – with TV, smartphones, and other digital media – stories in which voice and graphics have a dominant role have been reaching far more people than books, especially among youth (Feierabend, Rathgeb, and Reutter 2019; Wennekers, Haan, and Huysmans 2016). Sometimes looking at the big picture is helping to put things into perspective. It is natural that culture keeps evolving and, if we believe that reading is important, we need to find a way to integrate it into the new media landscape. We cannot ignore the context in which the majority of people lives, surrounded by digital media that keep transforming and enable the emergence of new forms of entertainment. Reading practices already evolved in this environment: the materiality of books is changing, the gestures we do to use texts are changing, and the interactions we can have with other people while reading are also changing. For instance, e-readers are made of plastic, not paper. They are lighter and smaller than printed books, and therefore can easily be held in one hand. Thanks to e-ink backlit screens it is possible to read in the darkness without using external lights or mobile phones. The typesetting can be adjusted according to our needs and taste, also increasing accessibility: bigger fonts, with or without serifs, black text on a white page or white text on a black page, etc. On e-

readers, we do not turn pages, we tap or scroll to go to the next chunk of text. “The Age of Print is passing, and the assumptions, presuppositions, and practices associated with it are now becoming visible as media-specific practices rather than the largely invisible status quo” (Hayles 2012, 2).

The materiality of the support we use for writing stories keeps changing, and with it the way we interact with them changes, too. Nowadays, e-books are not the only digital medium with which we can read stories, there are plenty of apps for reading on mobile phones. And when we read on mobiles, our gestures are again different – we use vertical scrolling rather than horizontal turning. In time, many changes happened to what we call “book.” They happened gradually, and for people who see the changes as they happen it may be difficult at first to adapt to new technologies, but the new generations usually pick them up without any problem. E-books and mobile phone stories are examples of how humans try to use and adapt new technologies to many purposes, including reading. When reflecting and evaluating DSR practices, it is worth keeping in mind the long evolution of reading, the rich media landscape that we irreversibly created around us, and the fact the young readers are growing, and nurturing their passion for stories, in such environment.

Digital reading is not just a replication of paper-based reading practices, the digital context invites a different kind of attitude. The apparatus around paper texts is mostly characterized by silent individual reading, even in public places specifically designed for reading, like libraries. On the contrary, the apparatus around digital texts is thriving with conversations and other stimuli, like images and videos. One of its main characteristics is “hyperparatextuality,” an abundance of connections with other texts and discourses about texts (Barnett 2019). Reading in a digital apparatus means being predisposed to social interaction and multimodal communication, we cannot ignore these affordances of digital texts when comparing it to reading on paper. If we are interested in understanding how we read in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we should not just focus on the technology but on the whole apparatus around it. I guess in Western countries there is some resistance to the idea that digital readers rely on collective intelligence rather than only on individual skills, on shared emotions rather than only on solitary introspection. For these reasons, tests like PISA and many experiments who used texts displayed on screen are flawed in terms of ecological validity, since they do not consider crucial affordances of the environment (van Lier 2004; Gibson 1976; Thoms 2014). There are interesting results showing that the social dimension of digital reading can make a difference with respect to text comprehension and learning (C.-K. Chang and Hsu 2011), and it is also often combined with annotations focused on

literary interpretation, showing how social interaction is an important affordance of digital platforms (Thoms and Poole 2018; Kalir et al. 2020).

However, reading socially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does not mean that silent individual reading is going to disappear. Once a technology and a behavior emerge, it cannot easily be swept away by cultural selection. At some point in time humans have learned to read by themselves and this behavior will continue to exist, because on many occasions it is a more efficient and rewarding activity than social reading. Naomi Baron and Patricia Spacks both noted that

if you have read a book in a social context (such as in a book group or a college course), it is valuable to reread the work for yourself to figure out your own perspectives and opinions. It's all too easy to assume we agree with the interpretations of whoever was dominating the conversation. Only by returning to the book in solitude do we have a clear shot at holding our own conversation with the author. (Baron 2015, 129).

To reread, all by myself, books originally read in a context of shared responses dramatizes the difference that diverse life situations can make to the apparent import of a printed text. (Spacks 2011, 19)

Solitary reading, social reading with paper books, and digital social reading are activities that will coexist for a long time, mainly because of the configuration of our educational systems. They are different in many ways and such differences should be acknowledged and taken into account when evaluating the pros and cons of each of them.

## **1.3 From social reading to digital social reading**

### **1.3.1 Context: shared agency**

One of the earliest works on algorithmic book recommendation systems and online reviews is Ed Finn's doctoral dissertation, in which an important difference between traditional literary culture and the digital literary sphere is framed very clearly: "In a digital landscape where the science of marketing has been working for decades on mass-producing 'serendipity,' the whole concept of agency as a form of cultural distinction is compromised or, more positively, shared" (Finn 2011, 40). That is, book recommendation algorithms, tuned on the evaluations (reviews and rankings) of a multitude of readers, populate with titles the digital spaces that we visit, presenting to us books specifically selected to maximize the probability that we will buy them. In

brick-and-mortar bookshops and libraries, the availability and disposition of books is not planned based on the need of any specific reader, thus serendipitous encounters with books are common. And the mere fact of visiting such physical places, knowing how to look for information, positions ourselves as active agents within the cultural field. The more we are active explorers of the aisles and shelves of a bookshop or library, the more the chances of finding books which are meaningful for us increase.

In contrast, digital platforms require a minimal initial effort to complete the creation of a user account, but after that moment we are flooded with reading recommendations in the forms of email, advertising banners, web pages designed to be filled with suggestions specifically fit for us, etc. All this can happen continuously based on our purchases, the content we like or share on social media, or the information about our past reads that we voluntarily feed to platforms like Goodreads. But it can also happen with no further action required from us, based on personal information gathered automatically from other websites on which we created a profile, and aggregated with those of many other people, either because such information is owned by the same company (e.g. Facebook owns Instagram and WhatsApp) or because we signed up through a third party service (e.g. “Sign up with Google”). The interconnectedness of the internet enables cultural encounters that can appear as serendipitous but are instead the outcome of technological and commercial calculations tailored on individual users. Whenever we see a new title of a book on Goodreads, on our Facebook timeline, or our YouTube homepage, it is because of some opaque algorithmic reason. Even an apparently casual reading suggestion that we may see in a tweet by someone we follow is there because of a combination of factors that made it more relevant than hundreds or thousands of other tweets. Factors that ultimately are all dependent on commercial interests pursued through incentives to spend more time on each platform and engage with the content served to us. For all these reasons, in the passage from social reading to *digital* social reading, the agency of cultural distinction became less individual and more shared, or compromised.

Despite the anxiety that becoming aware of the deep roots of our digital lives may cause, there are many opportunities and direct benefits provided by the wide availability of personalized content and by the possibility of reading it socially. In the rest of this book I will highlight them and offer a more balanced account than what commonly offered by news media. For instance, there are spaces that are safe from the influence of commercial interests, like the community-built Archive of Our Own (AO3) and the Wikipedia literary portal (‘Portal:Literature’ 2020). Nevertheless, the agency of cultural distinction is undoubtedly shared in the creation of such literary

institutions. For Wikipedia, because many authors contribute to the encyclopedic entries; for AO3, because of the influence of the “fanon,” which is the canon established by the widespread positive reception of previous fanfiction. In both cases, cultural evaluation is more distributed and shared than when the judgement of literary works is left to professional critics and publishers only.

From another perspective, this change of agency can be defined as a shift from a “filter, then publish” model to a “publish, then filter” model (Shirky 2008). That is, publishers do not need to select what to produce and distribute, calculating costs and risks, now they just need to scout the content that has been selected by the internet audience, and proved to be successful. User-generated content is first autonomously published by its creator and then filtered by the audience. “Mass amateurization of publishing makes mass amateurization of filtering a forced move. Filter-then-publish, whatever its advantages, rested on a scarcity of media that is a thing of the past. The expansion of social media means that the only working system is publish-then-filter” (Shirky 2008, 89).

Beside this radical change driven by new and pervasive forms of sociality, digital media also transformed and amplified existing social practices related to reading, like marginalia and book clubs. Writing in the margin of books is an old practice, undertaken by Medieval and Modern readers alike: “when he lent books, [the lawyer and diarist Henry Crabb] Robinson must have encouraged the borrowers to write down their opinions; it is to him that we owe important marginalia by Coleridge and Blake, generally written in pencil but then carefully overtraced or transcribed in ink by Robinson” (Jackson 2005, 57).

Because of the limitations of paper-based technology, the circulation of annotations was mostly asynchronous. It was unlikely that proper written conversation between the same interlocutors started in the margins, since this would have required the book to physically go back and forth between the readers. However, one of the social aspects of annotating lies in knowing that the notes will be read by others. Although it is only on the horizon, this public dimension affects the content and style of the annotations, as well as the performance of identity through writing.

Though we think of reading now as a solitary and private experience, marginalia of the Romantic period prove that it was not always and is not necessarily so. Books were annotated for an anticipated audience, usually friends and familiars, thus performing complex social functions and being governed more by social than by literary conventions. (Jackson 2005, 196)

Common forms of annotation in the British Romantic period were the insertion of parallel passages from previous readings and notes

in which readers confirm and endorse (or deny and reject) the writer's words by referring to their own experience—still stressing common ground rather than singularity. These readers implicitly approved of work that had a bearing on their own lives, reminded them of other things they'd read, and supported their understanding of the way the world works. (Jackson 2005, 252–53)

Nowadays private annotations can hardly be considered as an instance of social reading, contrary to what happened in the past. This is because they are not intended – or expected – to be shared publicly, or more precisely, they are written in a sociocultural context in which annotating books destined to public use is not commonly accepted. For instance, libraries forbid users to write on books and, given the abundance of books and ease to purchase them, it is not a recurrent practice to lend annotated personal copies, at least not as much as it was in other historical periods (cf. Jackson 2005; Abigail Williams 2017). When we do so, sometimes we even feel the need to warn the borrower, excusing ourselves that a novel is annotated, as if we ruined the precious integrity of the text or may hinder the future reader's appreciation of the story. On the other hand, digital technology enabled new forms of ongoing conversations in the margins, since we can annotate any document displayed on a web browser, for instance with the tool Hypothesis, and we can reply to other readers' annotations, who in turn can reply back (Kalir and Garcia 2019).

The rapidity of communication allowed by digital media enables readers to engage in conversations in the margins with other readers: I can write a comment, reply to other people's marginalia, read other readers' conversations, and reply back to readers who commented on my own remarks. The rapidity of communication led to an amplification of the social dimension of marginalia, marking a striking difference between offline social reading and DSR. However, real-time conversation and rapidity do not have to be a necessary mark of DSR, like it happens for other kind of digital contents. For instance, news publishing driven by online advertising pushed rapidity of updates to become one of the most important features in journalism. This aspect, together with the intrinsic transient nature of news content, afford comments – on the news publishing platform, where allowed, or on social media – that usually span over a limited time range. However, reading fiction somehow remained a slow activity and readers' comments can pile up in the margins, reactivating at time conversations that happened months or years before. This is mainly possible on platforms on which

annotations are linked to the source text, so that they are not lost or submerged by new posts, namely it can happen on Wattpad, but not on Twitter. Technological affordances can shape and limit the shared agency of readers, but it even technological interfaces designed for a different scope can be transformed by users for social purposes. For instance, Kindle's notes were meant to annotate texts, but the possibility to make notes public enabled people to use them as a social network to engage in conversations with other readers, often on topics unrelated to the book which is being annotated (Barnett 2014).

The practice of annotating and commenting books by authors is referred to by Hispanic scholars as *lectoescritura* (reading-writing) (Centro Nacional de Innovación e Investigación Educativa 2019; cf. Jenkins and Kelley 2013; Lessig 2008). This term foregrounds another crucial aspect of DSR, namely the tied relationship existing between reading and writing practices. Such condition is very popular among fanfiction communities and emerging authors, like on AO3 and Wattpad: before being authors, writers are readers and commenters of other people's stories. In this regard, the term "demotic authorship" (Skains 2019) underlines the continuous interpersonal exchange informing authorial practice. The interdependence between content consumption and content creation performed socially is a typical trait of *convergence culture* (Jenkins 2006), one that should be acknowledged and considered when studying reading practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Lectoescritura* and creative practices are not only relevant for aspiring authors, they are a common way of engaging with cultural content, including books that are part of the literary canon (Hickey, McWilliams, and Honeyford 2011; Jenkins 2006), but also in other more informal contexts (Black 2008; García Canclini et al. 2015; Centro Nacional de Innovación e Investigación Educativa 2019; Thomas 2011a).

### 1.3.2 Competence: transmedia literacies

In the context of a reconfiguration of the cultural field, with a shift from individual agency to entanglement/participation in a pervasive network of social relations, a different set of cultural competencies and social skills is needed, in comparison to those developed and used in the "Gutenberg parenthesis" era. Jenkins and collaborators called them "new media literacy skills" (Jenkins et al. 2009), whereas Carlos Scolari and colleagues prefer the term "transmedia literacies," integrating and expanding Jenkins et al.'s classification (Scolari 2018). Most likely, such skills are more widespread among younger generations, who grew up frequently interacting with digital technology. Context and demographic variables influence DSR practices in

various ways. Transmedia literacies are often developed autonomously by people born and grown up in a landscape where culture is participatory, but educational institutions should contribute to their strengthening. Famous examples of DSR, like *The Golden Notebook Project* – in which seven women have been invited to annotate and discuss a web version of a novel – show how many adult readers have a hard time adjusting to both digital reading and social reading (cf. Winget 2013). Moreover, the non-interference of adults is sometimes explicitly sought by young readers, who want an intimate space for reading where they do not feel judged by persons with institutional roles or think they know better than them (parents, teachers, adults in general) (cf. ‘Shared reading’ in Rebora et al. 2021).

Scolari et al.’s nine dimensions of transmedia literacies are quite broad in scope and can be relevant for many activities related to the use of digital media. They are: production, risk prevention, performance, social/individual/content management, media and technology, ideology and ethics, narrative and aesthetics (Scolari 2018). Jenkins et al.’s new media literacies are more focused on the intersection of the sociality and digitalization of communication and learning, and thus are more informative for DSR. They are:

- **Play.** The capacity to experiment with the surroundings as a form of problem solving. E.g. creating lists and virtual shelves on Goodreads to categorize books that we read.
- **Performance.** The ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. E.g. emphasizing a social role or personal characteristic (being a sportsperson, being introverted, etc.) when reacting to a scene in a novel read on Wattpad, for the purpose of giving voice to a usually unexpressed characteristic, and maybe connecting with other people.
- **Simulation.** The ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. E.g. writing a book review remarking the relevance of a story read for one’s own life.
- **Appropriation.** The ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. E.g. writing fanfiction.
- **Multitasking.** The ability to scan the environment and shift focus onto salient details. E.g. browsing recommended books and selecting those relevant for one’s own interests.
- *Distributed cognition.* The ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities. E.g. using wikis and online resources to improve one’s knowledge of a certain literary genre.



- **Collective intelligence.** The ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal. E.g. debating a particularly complex plot on a discussion board in order to make sense of a story's ending.
- **Judgment.** The ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources. E.g. critically acknowledging the toxicity of "bad boys" Wattpad novels while enjoying them for their repetition of favorites tropes.
- **Transmedia navigation.** The ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities. E.g. grasping the complex entanglement of an original written text, its screen adaptations, and the fanfiction based on its narrative universe.
- **Networking.** The ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information. E.g. knowing where to find online book clubs discussing specific genres or authors, gathering information about them, and contributing to the discussion around them.
- **Negotiation.** The ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. E.g. commenting on a digital version of a reading assignment together with one's own classmates and teacher vs. making a video review of the same book to be posted on YouTube.

Not everybody engaging in DSR practices develops the mentioned literacy skills in the same way, mostly because of three factors: the participation gap, the transparency problem, and the ethics challenge (Jenkins et al. 2009, 15). People do not have equal access to digital technology and do not have the same chances of developing critical skills in using them. They do not necessarily reflect on their media experiences, learning from their participation. And it is not granted that they know how to face offensive and abusive situations, or that they comprehend all the possible consequences of their actions. DSR contexts add an extra layer of social and media complexity to the complexity of the reading act. That is why a broader range of literacy, social, cognitive, and emotional skills are needed and activated when sharing reading experiences with others. For instance, one of the frequently cited worries about adolescents' use of social media is that they abandon critical judgement and only consume content that is popular or presented by celebrities. However, the most reliable studies about social media use agree that the effects of prestige and popularity are limited and, especially, dependent on many other factors, as shown by Alberto Acerbi (2020) in a critical review of part of a vast literature on the influence of prestigious individuals, celebrity advertisements, and social media influencers.

In the specific case of book reviews, Marc Verboord (2010) asked Dutch readers whether they trust professional critics and internet recommendations, either coming

from humans or algorithms. He found that people with an omnivorous taste in fiction – readers liking highbrow literary texts as well as middlebrow or popular texts – have less confidence in professional critics and rely more on advice by family and friends. No association was found between reading fiction and trust in internet sources. This was confirmed in a more recent study (Verboord 2020), according to which the majority of people (~76% of Dutch audience) claims not to attribute any different authority to book recommendations coming from professional reviewers or internet sources. All respondents can be differentiated based on the fact that they attribute none, some, or quite a lot of value to recommendations, but they “barely distinguish[...] between mediators with a different institutional status. Current validation repertoires do not therefore have strong hierarchical trademarks and suggest that the legitimacy of cultural mediators is currently not very high” (11). More importantly, regardless of age, parameters that significantly predict the different levels of trust in book recommendations are cultural capital and belief that internet is a diversity tool, with omnivores and expert-oriented having similar attitudes in this regard (same direction and extent of the parameters’ estimation). And with respect to the actual influence on recent book consumption, positive internet reviews, ratings, and recommendations do not significantly predict different behaviors, whereas there is an effect due to positive newspaper reviews, recommendations on TV talk shows, and award won by the book. In sum, there are people who clearly have a prestige bias towards non-digital media but there is no evidence of substantial positive or negative biases due to internet sources, suggesting that perhaps people are more critical towards information coming from digital media.

Participants in Verboord’s research were drawn from a true probability sample representative of the whole Dutch population in 2015 ( $n = 858$ , 53% women; mean age 52.1,  $SD=17.9$ , age range: 16-92), thus we cannot assume that these results accurately describe younger generations (I could check, if I had access to the data), but they should prompt us to be wary of rushed evaluations about the impact of digital media on reading. What we can do is to remain vigilant and design learning activities that help teenagers to develop appropriate transmedia literacies, with the aim of minimizing acritical or harmful behaviors and foster positive ones (Leu et al. 2015; Turner and Hicks 2015).

### **1.3.3 Content: motivation for creating and sharing**

Shared agency and transmedia literacies in the digital literary sphere have some effects on another important aspect, content creation in the form of annotations,

reviews, lists, and so on. In her exploration of Jane Austen's fandom online, Kylie Mirmohamadi presents an example of how shared agency and transmedia literacies can intervene in the construction of readership.

The youthful, textually promiscuous environment of the Wattpad platform means that, unlike the fan fiction and spin off narratives encountered on dedicated Austen fan sites, readers may arrive at Austen-inspired text by a different route; their fondness for werewolf fiction, for example, a desire for the 'clean' stories penned by LDS (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) writers, or a preference for fan fiction based on the British boy band, One Direction. Wattpad, in other words, shifts the reception context away from the confines of literary Austen fandom and places it in a universe of visual, aural and literary texts in which a Taylor Swift video, an Ang Lee film or a BBC adaptation is positioned as being equally Austenian as an excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice*. This is reflected in the spatial arrangement of the website 'page', in which the written text is counterbalanced on the periphery with paratextual material, often conflating the literary with the filmic and televisual. (Mirmohamadi 2014, 12)

This kind of "textually promiscuous" dynamics are true for many other digital platforms, as well, and call for a deeper investigation of whether there are some common psychological, cultural, or socio-economical patterns, behind all these different readers' trajectories that end up in the creation of paratexts. Why do people share content like book reviews, annotations, and fanfiction through digital media?

Looking at the broader context of the cultural economy in which we have been living for several decades, some theorists observed that in a highly saturated marketplace, in which there is abundance of products to satisfy basic needs of consumption – including cultural needs – producers started to create more and more customized products that try to intercept very specific desires, the so-called "long tail" of niche products (C. Anderson 2006; cf. Toffler and Toffler 2006). This change also pushed consumers to create and customize the products they want, if they cannot find something suitable, becoming "prosumers" (Toffler 1980) that also share their creations with others who may have the same desires. With respect to books, George Landow coined the term "wreader" with a meaning similar to that of prosumer (Landow 1994) – even though he later abandoned it in favor of "reader-as-writer" (Landow 2006) – referring to readers who are increasingly also writing as part of their readings, amending and rewriting received stories to match their personal taste. These remarks are relevant for the creation of primary content, like amateur original fiction and fanfiction (cf. sections 3.2

and 3.3), but also for secondary content like book reviews and discussions, since readers started writing online the kind of reflections that they find useful and enjoyable (cf. section 3.4).

Surveying users of online book clubs (n = 248, mostly from North America and the UK; 76% women; mean age = 43, age range: 16-82) Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round found that many people who use digital platforms to discuss their readings are looking for occasions and venues that could satisfy desires which they find achievable with more difficulty in other contexts (Thomas and Round 2012b). A majority of the respondents joined to share ideas, followed by readers who want to learn more about a book and/or author (81% of respondents said that digital platforms “gave them new insights into the books they read”). There are also social motivations (40% of respondents said that they had joined to meet other people), but the most quoted reason was the possibility of writing rather than speaking (59%), followed by informality (43%), anonymity (37%), and having your say uninterrupted (36%). Other reasons given are that friends did not share an interest in literature, or did not have the same taste in fiction, and that digital platforms are conveniently accessible for people busy with work or for those who do not find local opportunities to discuss books.

In two follow-up focus groups, British undergraduates studying English (n = 11, six women; age range: 19-23 plus one 30 years old), two of whom were active users of DSR platforms, revealed that they think of online social relationships as not very constructive, because of some kind of self-censorship aimed at avoiding arguments, and because of the excessive self-affirmation sought by frequent commenters. The group of cultural workers and offline book club members (n = 10, three women; age range: 30-70) expressed hostility towards online book clubs, feeling that sincerity and intimacy would be lacking online and suggesting that online groups were “lacking in the ‘energy factor’, so that motivation to participate and keep up with the reading would be adversely affected” (Thomas and Round 2012a).

Looking at a completely different context, the motivations bringing Chinese adolescents (n = 1,039, 55% women; age range: 12-18) to undertake DSR practices have been explored by Wu Li and Yuehua Wu (2017), who found that leisure and self-development motivate both reading and socializing related to the shared text. However, information acquisition and personal interests are significant predictors only of the reading act, whereas social interaction and peer recognition significantly predict only socialization through comments.

The mentioned motivations reported by users of DSR platforms suggest a positive scenario, full of unprecedented opportunities for readers who want to share their interest with others, but also some possible risks, some of which may only be prejudices, since they were reported by people not engaging with DSR (I will address these issues in chapter 5). Overall, there are millions of people worldwide that frequently use DSR platforms, and direct material reward is involved only in a minority of cases (see section 2.3), thus it is important to dig a bit more into their possible motivations, also in relation to other activities that involve sharing user-generated content online. Some useful answers come from the fields of social psychology and cultural anthropology. In a nutshell, it is still uncertain what are the deep motivations that lead people to intensively participate in online activities creating and sharing content, but a few interesting hypotheses have been suggested.

Discussing results from experimental psychology, Hugo Mercier argued that humans are epistemically vigilant participants in intense activities of information sharing – that is, not easily gullible – and that are mainly motivated by two drives: informing others and managing their own reputation (Mercier 2020). From an evolutionary perspective, there must be a fitness advantage in creating culture: reputation may be the prominent factor when using digital social media, compared to other kinds of chains of information transmission. Communication aimed at enhancing reputation can suitably address a wider audience than that which we feel apt for informative communication, thus the public visibility offered by social media may be more effective. When we share something online, most of the time we behave as if we were broadcasting rather than talking directly to someone in particular. This communicative asymmetry may explain various features of social media sharing, like a preference for novel information, which would probably enhance our reputation as competent sources. Another example is that of sharing information “positively associated” with the ideology of a specific group, in which case informing is less important than stating our belonging to the group or our support for it (cf. Boyer 2018).

This kind of explanation can hold true for many DSR practices, from tweeting our benevolent critique of the newly released book by a prestigious author, to writing and commenting Harry Potter fanfiction, passing through the tagging and classification of books on Goodreads. Online we can show that we are updated about literary elites and competent enough to be critical about it, being part of the group of readers with highbrow taste. We can show that we know even the most forgotten details of the storyworlds we love, and can write about it in a way appreciated by an underground group of people who share our same interest. We can show that we are competent

amateur librarians, who know large collections of books, subtle genre differences, and can list the moods that a specific book can elicit.

This version of the reputation argument, however, cannot explain cases like anonymous positive book reviews on Amazon or anonymous contributions to Wikipedia entries related to authors, books, genres, etc., since these are cases in which there is no material gain for the creator, e.g. because they are the publisher of the book, or a professor expert of a certain topic (cf. Acerbi 2020). In some cases, the effort required to produce content whose creator is identifiable exceeds the benefit the creator can get (e.g. correcting typos on Wikipedia), therefore it might just be more cost efficient to do it anonymously. However, the widespread existence of more complex cases – like the use of multiple pseudonyms, “orphaned” stories published on AO3 (AO3 Admin n.d.), or positive anonymous feedback to authors – urges us to look for a better explanation.

Acerbi suggested that there is a mismatch between our cognitive system as it evolved and the conditions of many communicative situations in the modern world: we are not cognitively equipped to deal with anonymous information, so we act *as if* our interaction would produce reputation gains (2020, 15). We are used to intuitively grasp phenomena as if they are driven by some kind of agency (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and, accordingly, we mistakenly have the intuition that our contribution are recognized by the receivers, because we know that we are the agent behind it, even though our name is not written on it, and we want to be seen as contributors to knowledge. Moreover, the circulation of information is beneficial to our adaptive fitness: the more we know, the more we will be ready to face potentially harmful situation. Therefore, anonymity may protect us from the risk of losing reputation if the spread information eventually turns out to be false, inaccurate, or not appreciated. So, creating content may be a safe bet anyway (Boyer 2018).

Regardless of the identifiability of creators, Pascal Boyer suggested that the ultimate motivation of our proneness to generate and share information is related to our fitness in society.

If humans readily identified good sources and tried to keep such individuals in their social environment, this would result in a dynamic whereby it is fitness-enhancing not just to have good sources in one’s environment but also to be a good source, as other people value you, a process somewhat similar to building friendship (Tooby and Cosmides 1996). Another possibly relevant dynamic is that of prestige in the selection of sources, a variation on the kind of dynamic

described in dual inheritance models (R. Boyd and Richerson 1985, 241–80). In some domains of high uncertainty, one criterion that a source is of high quality may be that others seem to take that source seriously, and act on that person’s advice. This could create information cascades and result in bandwagon effects, whereby people assume some individual is a good source because others follow his or her advice, and so forth. (Boyer 2020).

With respect to reader response, it does not matter if comments and reviews are “true”, i.e. accurate interpretations of the fictional work, it is enough that they are relevant for some other readers, who will possibly acknowledge in public their appreciation for our contribution. This is a plausible explanation of why so many people engage in DSR practices.

## 1.4 Audiences and networks

In book history, relationships among individuals have often been framed in terms of Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field and logic of distinction. However, Simone Murray noted that the digital literary sphere exposes some limitations of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, namely with respect to the substitution of traditional gatekeepers by algorithmic culture:

once cultural gatekeeping functions shift to computer programs, sociological critiques of individual or small-group agency become far harder to sustain. It is not that algorithms function without social or political investments (far from it) but rather that their mathematical nature lends them a powerful air of scientific objectivity, thus rendering their encoded social and cultural priorities harder to identify and interrogate. [...] If anything, critiquing the effect of algorithmic culture on perpetuating mass-cultural trends paints the Bourdieusian critic him/herself as self-appointed cultural arbiter. (Murray 2018b, 57)

I agree that, in the digital literary sphere, it can be harder to conceive of agents as representative of institutions or social classes operating within the cultural field, rather than as individual readers, critics, or publishers. This is related to the amplification of shared agency, as I explained above (section 1.3.1). However, Murray’s remarks about the limits of Bourdieu’s theory hold only if we consider Amazon, Google, and the like, as distributors empowered by artificial intelligence, in opposition to traditional publishers who primarily act in the interest of culture and beauty. This is not an accurate depiction of the role technological corporations took upon themselves as alleged gatekeepers of literary culture. Even though we are inside a digital literary

sphere, print publishing is still widely regarded as the consecration of a writer as a literary author, and it is no surprise that Amazon and Wattpad themselves became publishers whose printed books are also distributed in brick-and-mortar bookshops.

Similarly to Amazon, other business-oriented platforms like Wattpad and Inkitt use algorithms – combined with judgement by human editors – to discover the most popular stories uploaded by amateur authors and include them in the restricted list of printed books that they publish. Traditional publishers also take advantage of such scouting service, partnering with these companies in order to profit from their algorithm-certified promise of economic success. Very often they literally steal amateurs' work from the fans that supported them, since many publishers include among the authors' contractual obligations the removal of the original work from digital platforms. In this light, I would not say that "cultural gatekeeping functions shift to computer programs," rather algorithms become the means to perpetrate Bourdieu's dynamics of distinction in a way that is furiously capitalistic. Despite the opaqueness of their technical working, the economic function of the algorithms used for cultural selection is blatantly transparent: only a group of books are qualified to receive the publicly recognized aura of "literature" – inasmuch as they are printed by major players in the publishing industry – and this selection is based on the likelihood of maximizing publishers' return of economic investment, since the selected stories most often already had a wide success of audience on online platforms. Therefore, the main feature that allows these stories to be qualified as literature is economic profitability, forecasted on the basis of their digital popularity. As finely observed by Murray while commenting on the business jargon adopted by the publishing industry, in the digital literary sphere communities are *assets*, the "intangible feelings of group-identity and fellow-feeling" has become a commodity (2018b, 77). In Bourdieu's terms, communities are not just social capital anymore, they are now economic capital, too: for an author, bringing two thousand Twitter followers to the publisher's table is equivalent to offering money to increase the publisher's resources.

This is just one side of the story, though. Beside the commodification of communities, more civic and culturally fashioned agendas may play a role, too. For instance, Wattpad's pledge to increase the diversity of published authors is worth of praise. And for readers, participating in a community create many values and opportunities for personal growth that are not easily achieved individually. Murray suggests conceiving of "community" (in its traditional sense) and "commodity" as interrelated and overlapping aggregators for various kinds of communities (77-78). On one side of the spectrum there are "book-centered online communities that perceive themselves to lie



outside of commercial relations” – something like the ad-free fanfiction platform AO3, I would say – on the other side there are communities openly exploited to drive sales, like those targeted by Amazon services. In the latter case, we should probably wonder whether the term “community” is still appropriate. Indeed, alternative conceptualization have been suggested, also in relation to the differences that the affordances of digital media bring about, in comparison to social networks forming offline.

In her ethnographic study of an online book discussion forum, DeNel Rehberg Sedo used the term “community” in a very loose way:

The ‘commune’ is the key social construct that emerges when people build and share connections through a book, or a serial, or a readers’ guide, or even a review. Using the term ‘community’ gets to the heart of the notion that social formations can shape themselves around a text. (Rehberg Sedo 2011a, 11).

Community is the most frequently used concept, but when talking about interactions and bonds between individuals meeting via digital media, it is critical to choose the right term. “Community of practice” (Shirky 2008), “affinity space” (Gee 2005), “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006), and “networked individualism” (Wellman 2001; Castells 2001) are all concepts with their own connotations, widely debated in sociology, anthropology, and media studies (Pink et al. 2016). “Contact zone” (Pratt 1991; cf. Hitchcock Morimoto and Chin 2017; Jenkins 2014) and “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna 2011) can be added to the list. Each of these terms put different emphasis on individual agency, the reason for which people interact, and the strength of the ties between them. The widest consensus seems to be around the concept of “affinity” which allows to keep the focus on the book as a mediator of social relationships.

The ties between people sporadically interacting on a book review page, or between the members of online reading communities, are based on a principle of *affinity*, rather than geographical, educational, demographic, etc. Sometimes affinity is stronger, e.g. for *Harry Potter* fandom (Black 2008), sometimes it is a more general interest for stories written by teenagers, like for *Wattpad’s teen fiction category*, or LibraryThing’s genre-specific lists of books (Pinder 2012). Interviews with readers following booktubers in Mexico (Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda 2015) showed that affinity is among the reasons why young people talking about books on YouTube are appreciated: they talk directly about their emotions, they do not present themselves as experts or act as they have a greater cultural capital, they show that reading can be fun, and their followers do not feel judged when commenting about books. Other reasons

include their book selections being different from serious, difficult, and imposed reading that teenagers are asked to do at school. But there are also cases in which books suggested at school are felt to be too childish in comparison to those recommended by booktubers. Certainly, the complexity of certain texts has a formative value and public educational institutions also have the democratic function of giving everybody access to difficult literature, nevertheless the diversity of booktubers' reading choices is something that young readers enjoy.

Booktubers talk to other readers in a more horizontal way than literary critics and teachers, they recommend books while being in the role of readers themselves, not of experts. Authority is granted to them by their followers, not by institutions, based on a mix of factors like entertaining skills, displayed competence, adjournment about books, celebrity, ability to express and communicate (share) their feelings and thoughts as readers. "Readers willing to buy and read books as a way of sharing and inspiring become models of a generational identity," they are "*emotivational* readers of physical books within a digital community" (Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda 2015, 100; my translation).

Booktubers' followers and other grassroots reading communities thrive because they emerge from the spontaneous common interest of a group of readers. But the existence of a shared interest sometimes is not enough, spontaneity and intrinsic motivation are crucial factors, too. For instance, some of the commenters involved in *The Golden Notebook Project* observed that being in a coerced digital space without knowing possible common interests with the other participants made it difficult to keep the conversation going (Winget 2013). On the contrary, contact zones characterized by broader affinities between readers thrive with conversations that rely on shared cultural background (e.g. fanfiction and Wattpad teen fiction).

However, it would be naïve to think that passion and a few common interests alone can bring about something as complex as a lively community. Even in small communities, power dynamics and cultural authority are very relevant for the book discussion, the interest generated by a reader's comment, and the participation of other readers (Rehberg Sedo 2011b; Thomas and Round 2016). For the same reason, the magnitude of interactions in large social networks depends on the role of acknowledged leaders (e.g. site administrators, moderators, long-time users) and influencers. This is an aspect of social interactions that holds true regardless of the media involved. It happens in online book clubs (Ramdarshan Bold 2019) as well as with comments in the margins during a learning activity: "Social annotation occurs in the context of evolving

relationships between students and faculty. Those relationships are not inherently balanced and power may differ between participants which impacts the contributions they are able to make” (Brown and Croft 2020, 6).

Stanley Fish argued that within interpretive communities reader response is consistent among members (Fish 1980), but the limitations to this conception have been pointed out already (Freund 1987; Schweickart 1986). In DSR, the authority recognized to a user make it more likely that they will receive replies from others or that their review will be appreciated. Sometimes authority is given to librarians and other institutionally recognized experts, who can gain professional and reputational reward from the discussion: as teachers, librarians, authors, publishers, reviewers (Rehberg Sedo 2011b). Some other times,

The challenging of the authority (cultural or otherwise) traditionally lent to authors reshapes the power relations within the community: the readers enact their own authority, which ends up messy when a person who holds the traditional authority role plays the dual role of cultural participant and worker. (Rehberg Sedo 2011b, 117)

Some print-published authors seem to believe that the communities created on social media are more superficial and easily dismembered, because they are mostly formed by people who do not know each other, so it is difficult to establish meaningful bonds or engage in deep conversations (Gerber Bicecci and Pinochet Cobos 2015, 211). This kind of comments reveals that often authors do not know their readers and position themselves within the literary field as distanced from lay readers, probably closer to expert critical readers, who supposedly are able of deep comments and conversations that authors like to have about books (and their own books, in particular).

Actually, reflection on personal experiences and associations are quite frequent in book reviews, appearing 33~56% of the times (Hajibayova 2019) and suggesting that DSR experiences are not necessarily shallow for readers who read reviews. Analyses of Wattpad comments also show that online communities are able to last in time – over months and years, along with the serialized publication of chapters – with readers getting closer as they find themselves commenting the same books or having intense conversation around intimate topics (Worrall 2015; Pianzola, Rebora, and Lauer 2020). We cannot easily generalize about the positivity of online communities, but it is also unfair to assume that all digital communication is superficial. For some young readers finding people with whom they have an affinity can actually help them to face difficult situations at school or at home, as suggested by the fact that scenes with characters

talking back to bullies are among the most appreciated on Wattpad (Pianzola, Rebora, and Lauer 2020).

By engaging in conversation with readers, authors can learn from their recommendations and be surprised (Gerber Bicecci and Pinochet Cobos 2015, 212; Skains 2019). Moreover, DSR is not isolated from offline conversations: some authors reported to witness a circular online-offline communication, very often triggered by reviews or text published online. And the relationship between authors and readers can change, because, when meeting in person, the materiality of the setting inhibits the reader's response: there is often a table separating the author and the audience, a microphone that signals who has the right to talk, objects that underline the existence of differences and hierarchies (Gerber Bicecci and Pinochet Cobos 2015, 215). On Wattpad – and to some extent also on fanfiction platforms – authors can talk directly to readers using author's notes and comments, and readers can reply in the same space, that is in the margins, whenever they feel like doing it. As I already said, power dynamics are still in place, but some of them are eased in favor of readers.

An ongoing research by Peter Boot looks into which cultural authorities are mentioned by Dutch readers who write reviews online (1,500 records from blogs, review sites, a magazine, and a newspaper) (Rebora et al. 2021). Commercial institutions (e.g. publishers) are the most frequently mentioned, followed by the author, other online critics, and literary prizes, all between 13% and 18% of the times. The network of DSR stakeholders looks quite complex, with connections between established cultural authorities and fellow amateur critics. More research is definitely needed, both from academics and from the publishing industry, which has an interest in better understanding how readers evaluate books and talk about them.

For instance, managing a social networking platform and keeping users' engagement high requires a great effort. So far, no centrally owned digital platform survived without the continuous labor-intensive activity of content editors and social media managers. Publishers sometimes try to venture in this business, lured by the promise of information they can get about readers, and hoping to exploit it to increase book sales. Eventually, almost all of them realize how hard and expensive it is to keep reading communities alive and are forced to sell the platform to someone else or to close it. It happened in The Netherlands with Dizzie and Crimezone (Boot 2020) and in Italy with aNobii (Dini 2019). Successful examples are Goodreads, backed by the tech giant Amazon, Wattpad, which invests a lot in community engagement, and *Me Gusta Escribir*, managed by the Spanish branch of Penguin Random House.

More broadly, beside transmedia literacies, it is also important to understand how discursive norms are built, shared, and learned. Some may be learned and enacted within the same digital platform, some others may be learned somewhere else, as a result of participation in a shared cultural universe. Sometimes they are valid across various DSR contexts, some other times they are specific to a certain platform or genre. DSR is not always “reading of” the text, it can also be “conversations about” reading, and “conversations near” the text, but the fact that relationships are built in the margins of the text may be annoying for some readers, like observed about DSR on the Kindle e-reader (Barnett 2014, 156).

Audiences engage with various practices, contents, and platforms, creating networks ruled by different social and discursive norms. Sometimes their interactions are tacit, other times they can lead to the emergence of reading communities with meaningful and lasting ties. In the next chapter I will organize the cross-disciplinary knowledge produced about the various types of DSR platforms and practices, providing a summarizing taxonomy.