

Works in Progress • Digital Social Reading

Introduction

Published on: May 03, 2021

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What happened so far

In 1985 the Italian author Italo Calvino wrote *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, prepared for the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University. Calvino proposed six literary values that he foresaw to be central in 21st century literature: lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity, and consistency. Now being twenty years into the new millennium, we can assert that Calvino missed another long-lasting literary value, which is the most widespread nowadays: sociality.

Almost every major textual initiative today is structured around three overlapping notions of sharing: commonality, transferability, and sociability. We want other people to read the same thing we are reading (commonality); we want to be able to send other people what we are reading (transferability); and we want to be able to talk to other people about what we are reading (sociability). “Social reading” is shaping up to be the core identity, or ideology if you will, of digital media. (Piper 2012, 84)

Digital Social Reading (DSR) is a term encompassing a wide variety of practices related to the activity of reading and using digital technologies and platforms (websites, social media, mobile apps) to share with other people thoughts and impressions about texts. Reviewing, rating, annotating, underlining, and commenting texts in a form different from traditional social reading (e.g. book clubs) is transforming readership in many ways. Strictly speaking, the term “Digital Social Reading” disregards some key aspects of the phenomenon, like the extensive *writing* activity and self-publishing occurring on digital platforms. However, it still catches the determinant role of *social interactions* around the experience of reading, which are visible through DSR practices and platforms (Rebora et al. 2021; Vlieghe, Muls, and Rutten 2016). Surprisingly, DSR has not yet been taken as the topic of a comprehensive critical book. There are volumes describing different tools and opportunities (Cordón-García et al. 2013b) and an increasing number of articles dealing with specific case studies, but only a few attempts at theorizing and systematizing the knowledge around it (Murray 2018a; Thomas 2020; Rebora et al. 2021). The first typology of digital social reading has been proposed by Bob Stein (2010) – director of the Institute for the Future of the Book, which existed for a few years – but since then the popularity of DSR research did not live up to the interest called out by Lisa Nakamura (2013) in a much quoted article appeared in the *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*.

The biggest difficulties are of two kinds: first, to be able to propose a theoretical framework of a phenomenon, a substantial amount of analytical and critical studies is necessary – in order to draw inferences from specific cases – and this has not been the case with DSR; second, phenomena involving the use of digital and social media can often be transient, disappearing as fast as a website or mobile app becomes obsolete or loses its popularity. This is a context that is unfamiliar to many humanities scholars, who are used to work on consolidated reading practices and with long-standing traditions. Moreover, it might not even be worth to invest time and energy to study how reading happens on an app that probably will disappear within a couple of years.

One of the widest investigations of DSR comes from Hispanic library information science and education scholars, mostly shaped in the form of documentation regarding the phenomenon (Centro Nacional de Innovación e Investigación Educativa 2019; Cruces Villalobos 2017). The 2013 book by Cordón-García *et al.* is an attempt to describe the landscape of the social and digital reading tools available and used at the time, but reading that book now has the flavor of a discussion of media archaeology. Many of the tools presented were developed by start-up businesses, whose nature is very fragile, since they tend to present services or products while trying to find the business model that will allow their economic sustainability. But they are ready to stop operating at any time, if there is no foreseeable return on investment and the business is not sustainable anymore. Therefore, even though some of the tools were interesting and triggered positive reading practices, they have rarely been widely adopted by users and many of them do not exist anymore.

However, a decade has now passed since the spread of book-related social media – Goodreads, aNobii, LovelyBooks, and Wattpad have all been launched in 2006, as well as the generalist Twitter – and we now have enough historical distance to start understanding what are the similarities, diversities, and evolutionary trends of reading practices that intersect the use of digital and social media. This book is an attempt to draw from ten years of history of digital social reading to highlight the social dynamics enabled by digital media and technology, and the impact they have on how readers experience and engage with fiction.

Given the transient nature of many digital platforms and tools, I will focus more on readers' behavior and the affordances of the technological changes (i.e. how digital media features enable and invite possible uses), rather than describing in detail specific media solutions. Case studies will be used as examples to better illustrate features and behaviors that are widespread and have been consolidated and

transmitted throughout the years. The gaze extends beyond the Anglophone sphere, presenting cases and drawing theoretical insight also from reading practices and scholarship from other countries worldwide. Such geographical extension is already a sign that DSR is a global phenomenon, which can be of particular interest for research acknowledging how the global perspective that many young citizens have (Facebook IQ 2019; Wattpad 2018) is relevant for literary history, literacy pedagogy, and communication studies.

Why study digital social reading?

There are two main reasons to critically investigate DSR. First, because “the meaning of a work (artistic, literary, philosophical, etc.) changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader” (Bourdieu 1993, 31–32) and nowadays the reading field has changed drastically for many readers – due to technological and social transformations. Second, because every reading act is valuable and contributes to the personal growth of the reader, both with respect to literacy and cognitive-emotional skills. Sometimes, during presentations and in peer-reviews, I found scholars and students stating with confidence that books published online are quite shallow, and social media celebrities who talk about literature are not worth to be considered when discussing the interpretation of books. On such occasions I realize how judgments of superficiality are often the outcome of a superficial analysis (or sometimes of a refusal to do an analysis at all).

Biases inform human behavior in many contexts and academic research is no exception. However, research on digital social reading is quite limited, therefore any kind of reflection of theoretical, aesthetic, or commercial import risks to be based on speculations and theoretical frameworks informed by traditional publishing and reading dynamics that do not apply in all cases. We do not know enough about how people read socially with digital media, in particular we do not know enough about how people who grew up interacting with digital media and mobile technology from a very young age use them to read. We are facing a generational change brought about by the spread of technology and there has not been enough historical time yet to study and understand it. Nowadays, reading is a phenomenon related to a variety of media, activities, and places. In such a diverse context it is crucial to understand how to study reading practices in their increasing complexity.

A principle shared by two of the biggest research projects dedicated to the evolution of reading in a digitalized culture – the European E-READ Cost action (‘E-READ COST’ 2014) and a Hispanic research network (Cruces Villalobos 2017; García Canclini et al.

2015; Centro Nacional de Innovación e Investigación Educativa 2019) – is that, before measuring how much we read nowadays, we have to understand what we have to measure. That is, common assumptions about reading as related to the materiality of the codex book, solitary silent moments, the publishing and distribution industry, literary canon and intellectual legitimization have to be reconsidered in light of the changed landscape of reading practices.

Reading on screen should be considered as a new *apparatus*, not simply as the use of a new *device* (Agamben 2009; Costa 2020). The book and digital media should be considered as part of an apparatus, something

that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and —why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself [*sic*] be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he [*sic*] was about to face. (Agamben 2009, 14; cf. Packer 2010).

On a more personal level, DeNel Rehberg Sedo expressed very well why DSR matters: “I see the members of this [online] book club as educational theorist Henry Giroux sees teachers: ‘cultural workers who provide the theory, language, and skills to dissect the dominant culture and construct a new, more democratic culture and more empowered and ethical identities’” (Rehberg Sedo 2011b, 106; Giroux cited in Kellner 2016, 236). Indeed, DSR is a field animated by reading practices that involve many young adults, who find in them opportunities for identity formation and personal growth through culture, “the sphere in which adults exercise control over children and a site where children and youth can resist the adult world and create their own cultures and identities” (Kellner 2016, 224).

DSR spaces and practices are often created as a way to participate in cultural discussions otherwise dominated by a small group of readers, namely individuals belonging to the publishing and media industries, and to educational institutions. This political standing, together with its technological fashion, does not make DSR an appealing topic for many humanities scholars. Actually, social reading was already neglected by mainstream literary criticism way before it became digital. Book clubs do

not have a good reputation among literary critics and “high-brow” authors, for reasons often entangled with issues related to gender, cultural, and racial minorities. For instance, Anna Kiernan pointed out that:

While not exclusively so, books that invite reader empathy, identification and emotion are the mainstay of the book club choices. However, these ‘feminine’ conventions are the cause of much of the bad press that book club books have garnered – on both sides of the Atlantic. This, I would argue, is because empathizing is an emotional rather than an intellectual response and, as such, is presumed to be a *feminine* response. (Kiernan 2011, 129)

That is, many critiques to reading groups are often biased or moralizing. But why book clubs are usually created and attended mostly by female readers? A few answers have been suggested: to resist male norms (Radway 1984) or to find pleasure and empowerment negated in other contexts (Ang 1996). But, more generally, book discussions organized outside cultural institutions can be seen as a way to counteract discourses dominated by literary editors and critics, who too often are white male Oxbridge or Ivy League liberal arts graduates (Curran 2000).

It is not just a matter of interpretation, though. Digital platforms offer a variety of stories that readers can hardly find in the catalogues of the traditional publishing industry (Vadde 2017; Skains 2019). For instance, stories that represent ethnic minorities and queer characters in prominent roles. And when they find the books they want, readers also like to connect with others who are similar to them or simply share their same passion. This book is dedicated to these digital reading practices, exploring the potential of sharing fiction, as well as some of the drawbacks of using digital technology for doing it, when compared to solitary or institutional reading. Studying digital social reading is a way to make literary studies more democratic by focusing on the margins, be they the material margins of the text or the marginalized individuals who find their voice and audience through online publishing, reading, and discussing (cf. A. Liu 2013)