

Works in Progress • Digital Social Reading

Conclusion

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Sociality has been an important part of storytelling and literary culture for a great part of human existence and is now rising to prominence again, among all the various reading practices, thanks to the use of digital and social media. Looking ahead, we have to acknowledge that the generations of new readers grow up in a media landscape dominated by digital media, reading huge quantities of text on screens of different size. In this context, they are also nurturing a passion for reading while being immersed in the use of digital media, using fanfiction websites or apps like Wattpad. Pessimistic claims about the effect of reading on screen compared to paper (Wolf 2018; Baron 2015; Carr 2010; Birkerts 1994) have to be reconsidered taking into account the changed social context in which millions of reading acts are taking place.

Throughout this book I showed that there are already several scholars doing an excellent job in investigating the various ways in which reading is embedded in digital media or complemented by their use. For instance, looking at the relation between social media and literature, Bronwen Thomas underlines that

a focus purely on the content of an individual tweet provides only a very superficial insight into how that tweet may be experienced by followers at a given time, or how it is taken up and shared by users across time. This presents a challenge to traditional literary criticism, which may talk about context and milieu, but which has been slow to fully engage with empirical or ethnographic work based on reader or audience response. Even less common are studies which combine this kind of analysis with attention to infrastructure and modes of production, and yet this is precisely what I would argue is needed to move studies of social media literature beyond sterile debates about quality to begin to understand how these works impact on users, and how those same users take up, reimagine and relocate them to further extend their reach. (Thomas 2020)

Besides literary texts, there are now other primary sources available with which to work to understand how fiction is created and received. Of course, traditional ways of doing literary criticism will always remain legit, but the context around creative and cultural production is changed and there are now different conditions that can be leveraged to endorse or refute critical readings. The availability of reader response evidence on a large scale does not change the epistemology of literary studies, but it inevitably shows how, in the 21st century, they need to be connected to media studies, communication studies, and all the various disciplines dealing with the study of technology and infrastructure.

Meaning emerges in the interaction between text and readers (Iser 1978), but if analyzing the meaning emerging from hundreds of different interactions we cannot find evidence supporting a suggested critical reading, then we have to admit that it cannot be generalized, but it will be rather valid only for specific readers (Bourdieu and Chartier 1985; Lang 2012; Radway 1984; Reeser and Spalding 2002). Having access to a wealth of reader response data we are brought to face new questions: In which cognitive and emotional conditions is an interpretation emerging? What kind of socio-cultural background is fertile/required for its emergence? What demographic, economical, educational, age, and gender profiles are more likely to read in this way? What kind of personal experiences support or resist this kind of interpretation? What reading habits or previous knowledge encourage it? Literary scholars should thus acknowledge that analyzing “extra-textual datasets” (Swann and Allington 2009, 247) can help to understand the cognitive, affective, and aesthetic effects of stylistic features of texts, but also “contribute to a stylistic textual analysis and/or wider discussion of stylistic theory and methods” (cf. Stockwell 2012; Whiteley and Canning 2017, 73).

This is also an important matter for educators, since digital social reading has a great potential for the promotion of reading and should therefore be legitimized as an institutionally accepted reading practice, which is especially strengthening social exchange as a vital part of reading for pleasure (Gerber Bicecci and Pinochet Cobos 2015, 224). Not because digital social reading should become the way children are taught to read at school, rather they should be made aware of the many different possible forms of reading and the tools available to facilitate them. Reading on mobile phones and texting about it cannot harm the development of critical reading skills. Practicing reading and becoming more familiar with the way other people respond to stories and interpret them is a way of learning to become more mature readers. In some cases, it is also an explicit form of peer-learning that can help with a particularly difficult text, language, or style. “Digital media are a good ally for reading practices, showing that reading can be a passion and it can hardly be taught, being rather a contagion. Normally it is learned by imitation, like the hobbies, sports, and games that attract us” (Pérez Camacho and López Ojeda 2015, 98).

Digital social reading is making books a more easily approachable cultural object for many people, dimming their aura and introducing them into daily routines and familiar activities, like the use of social media. Whether the aura of the paper book is something necessary for learning about literature and becoming better (or simply more critical) readers is a question that educators and literary scholars should address

with intellectual honesty. As a matter of fact, what readers do with digital media resembles other historically attested reading practices:

Unlike modern readers, who follow the flow of a narrative from beginning to end, early modern Englishmen read in fits and starts and jumped from book to book. They broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks. Then they reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing were therefore inseparable activities. They belonged to a continuous effort to make sense of things, for the world was full of signs: you could read your way through it; and by keeping an account of your readings, you made a book of your own, one stamped with your personality. (Darnton 2000)

In the 21st century, reading is seldomly a linear interaction with a single text, and “intelligence” is not just the ability to maintain our attention focused on a well-defined problem.

While supported texts still tend to be linear (whether they are short or long), social-reading applications suggest new forms of non-linear interactions with new media “texts.” Furthermore, each engagement with a social-reading environment allows for a new kind of interaction with the text: users of these applications can see the intellectual paths they and other readers have taken through a text, track the development of their thoughts and ideas, and take note of particularly powerful passages, either for themselves or others. Because each text in a social-reading environment has multiple readers, each encounter with a social-reading environment provides users with a chance to make new connections, to see the text in a new way, and to engage with the ideas in heretofore unexpected ways. (Winget 2013, 4)

In his critical introduction to literature in a digital age, Adam Hammond urged us “to understand that a deepened knowledge of literature and its future will come not from retreating into the comfort of existing forms, but through active engagement with emerging ones” (Hammond 2016, 206). By drawing on theories and methods from different disciplines, I tried to organize the existing knowledge about digital social reading and its impact on aesthetic experiences, learning, and people’s lives more in general. A lot of work still need to be done and it will necessarily require broad collaborations in order to achieve the most reliable results.