

## **Introduction: Read this! Why reading about readers in an age of digital media makes sense**

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If you are a regular reader of *Participations* you might be wondering why this issue contains not one, but two, special Themed Sections focussed on readers and reading. Research on readers and cultures of reading – notwithstanding what type of material is being read or where and how the act of reading takes place – does not appear often in the journal’s archive. Now, here are two collections of articles angling for the attention of scholars whose professional work on audiences and reception may primarily engage media such as film and television, online media practices or perhaps the range of media uses that technological convergences enable. Why should you not click away? In this brief introduction to ‘Readers, Reading and Digital Media’ we explain why we think this Themed Section is relevant to researchers working with any type of media audience; we consider why ‘audience’ has had a rather mixed history within our own field of reading studies, and we introduce the fourteen articles that are collected under our theme.

The first reason you should not click away is that it’s not all about books! Even though reading studies might be most readily understood as a sub-field of book history, researching contemporary readers and cultures of reading is not only about book-centred practices and communities. Much of the book history literature does of course focus on the reading of books and printed materials – perhaps most frequently codex books and periodicals – but it’s a catholic field that encompasses the production, circulation and reception of legible marks made on and with all types of material from parchment to digital code. Or, as our colleagues Shelley Trower, Graham Smith and Amy Tooth Murphy note in the introduction to their Themed Section, ‘We are as interested in what people do with books and other printed materials (for example hiding behind as well as escaping into books and newspapers) as in what they read and their interpretations of that material.’ In that spirit, we did not exclude print from our Call For Papers on the grounds that it is an old

medium, and in fact, as the collection we present here bears out, it is often impossible, and not especially desirable, to disentangle some readers' attachments to the older medium of print from their new media practices. Our intention for this Themed Section was to spotlight research that investigates individual readers and groups of readers who use digital media to engage with books or magazines or other print genres and/or born-digital material. We wanted this special Themed Section to broaden customary definitions of reading, while also addressing some of the gaps in reception scholarship, for example the engagement of readers with social media platforms like Pinterest. In our CfP we asked scholars not only to think of 'readers' and 'reading' expansively, but also to conceive of 'digital media' in the broadest ways possible, to encompass medium, texts, and platforms so that a wide range of contemporary cross-media reading practices would be addressed.

Secondly, it's not all about speakers and readers of English. Although *Participations* is an English-language journal, and English often dominates the sub-field of reading studies, we tried to take some steps to counter that dominance. Taking our cue from the journal's mission statement and from other Themed Sections, we actively sought out research that focussed on readers in areas traditionally underrepresented in the Anglophone literature of reading studies. We used our professional networks, and in particular the regional representatives of SHARP (The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing) to disseminate our CfP as widely as possible, in an effort to connect with scholars investigating readers in Asia, Africa, continental Europe, and South America. We made a commitment to work with authors whose first language was not English. Although English-as-a-first-language speakers and readers are still over-represented in the fourteen articles and coda, the Themed Section includes case studies of readers in rural China, francophone Africa, Argentina, and Denmark, as well as case studies that involve transnational communities of readers connecting via social media platforms.

Thirdly, it's not all about interpretive communities and hermeneutics. Although *how* people read (in the sense of interpretive practices) is an important emphasis for many scholars in the community of reading studies, *why* people do (or don't) read, the value that they ascribe to their practices, the social bonds they may choose to form through these practices, *where* acts of reading take place, and *how* readers makes sense of co-extensive media use are all explored in this Themed Section.

Fourthly, there's nothing special or exclusive about our approach to research. Scholarship by reading studies scholars is not isolated from the methods and methodologies employed within cultural, media and communication studies. In fact, as a skim-read of the abstracts will quickly reveal, researchers of contemporary readers, cultures of reading and digital media depend upon the theories, methods and insights of colleagues working out of those other fields, as well as code studies, infrastructure studies and fan studies. Thus, the contributions in this section will appeal to scholars who use critical approaches across interdisciplinary fields of inquiry. For example, the framework proposed by critical media scholars Seven Funk, Douglas Kellner, and Jeff Share (2015) is evident throughout the Themed Section. First, there is a recognition that texts are not neutral. That is, books (and

reading material in whatever form), platforms, and reading responses are social constructions. Second, codes, conventions, genres and languages are specific to different platforms and are made evident through critical analysis. Third, readers/audiences will negotiate the meanings they make of their reading, reflecting their cultural literacy and readerly capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Driscoll 2016), reputation management, and self-representation. Fourth, some of the articles engage with the issues of ideology, power and pleasure to make evident the process of representation. And, finally, several projects consider the business models that inform the production and promotion of books, engagement with specific digital platforms, and readers' responses to both.

In sum, there is much in this Themed Section to interest readers of *Participations* whatever your engagement with media reception might be. Moreover, as reading studies specialists, we know that there is considerable common ground that we share with colleagues who focus on the users of non-print media. One of our motivations for working on this special section was our sense that we wanted to invite more dialogue with and, hopefully, collaboration among colleagues who are sometimes kept apart by institutional or disciplinary boundaries. There is, however, an issue we believe needs to be addressed before we introduce the fascinating articles that are contained in 'Readers, Reading and Digital Media.' For *Participations* is not only a journal of reception studies, it is also explicitly a vehicle for audience studies, and 'audience' – whether it is a concept, descriptor or an indicator of methodology – is not an especially visible term within the field of book history. Excavating some of the ways that 'audience' and 'audiences' have been configured within that field of scholarship goes some way towards the recuperation and re-imagining of 'audience' that we believe is relevant for the contemporary study of readers who use both digital and offline media to curate, connect, share and learn about reading material, reading experiences and other readers.

### **When is a Group of Readers an 'Audience'?**

Among reading studies scholars, 'audience' is not the go-to term for a collective noun, and is most often used when referring to the market that publishers might target for a book campaign, or the listeners who gather to enjoy a reading event at a literary festival. Moreover, when the term 'audience' has been invoked by book historians to describe a group of readers, it has not always been interrogated. One of the benefits of being part of the book history community has been the generosity of scholars whose work focuses on earlier periods of print production and reception. Their research is a constant reminder that we should always question how 'new' a habit, practice, act or engagement with a medium might be, however 'new' the technology that supports it. Nevertheless, relatively few book historians conceive of groups of readers as 'an audience,' and it is often those scholars whose work has been most directly influenced by communications and cultural studies who have done so. Notable among these is Janice Radway whose influence on reading studies is explored in our colleagues' introduction to their themed section, alongside sociologist Wendy Simonds' work and that of Martyn Lyons and Lucy Taska's cultural history of readers

in Australia (Trower, Smith and Tooth Murphy 2019). However, several book historians whose methods are primarily archival and documentary-focussed have raised important questions about the utility and implications of ‘audience’ research for print studies. A handful of brief examples (an admittedly Anglo-EuroAmerican-centric selection) from book history will have to suffice here, but each engagement with the term ‘audience’ raises a problem or makes a provocation that seems helpful to us as scholars introducing a Themed Section for *Participations* on readers, reading and digital media.

First, Jon Klancher in *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* published in 1987 notes that ‘Audiences are not simply aggregates of readers’ (6). This is a point that we believe resonates differently, but also significantly, in our own era where increased computational power has made it possible to work with large quantities of data derived from reader activity online. Indeed, for researchers working on cultural practices in the contemporary era, the issue around aggregation might be whether or not patterns identified via quantitative data can indicate anything nuanced or complex about reading habits and practices. This is a point pursued in Simon Rowberry’s article about how Amazon gathers data from people who use Kindles. Klancher’s statement is actually a reference to the inverse of this problem: the tendency of historians to rely on accounts about *individual* reading experiences, whether these appear in memoirs, or court records, or personal correspondence. Such an individuated approach is, as Robert Darnton wrote in his essay, ‘First Steps Towards a History of Reading’, first published in 1986, partly the result of historians of reading having to work with ‘an imperfect body of evidence’ created by the gaps where sources have been destroyed or where no trace of reading exists (2002, 33). For historians of reading, and especially those investigating lay reading audiences, the problem is compounded by the fact that the sources that are available mediate the habits and actions of reading. Roger Chartier highlights this issue in his important essay about ‘popular appropriation’ from *Forms and Meanings*:

When we are confronted with [the] texts and images that bring popular readers into our view caution is indispensable. Whatever they might be, these representations never involve immediate and transparent relations with the practices they describe. (1995, 94)

Here, Chartier raises an important issue about interpretation and methodology. If anything, his words are more relevant now when, if we are referring to audience as a constituency of readers, we might locate or track them and their reading experiences via a range of media and media adaptations, from film to TV to radio and – most crucially for this themed section – across digital media.

In another well-known book history essay that explicitly addresses the problematics posed by ‘audience’, Jonathan Rose elaborates a possible method for investigating historical audiences of readers. In ‘Rereading the English Common Reader,’ originally published in 1992, Rose declared that:

*a history of audiences...would first define a mass audience, then determine its cultural diet, and ultimately measure the collective response of that audience not only to particular works of literature, but also to education, religion, art and any other cultural activity. (2002, 324; our emphases)*

As a methodology and set of methods, this essay poses several solutions for carrying out an investigation, and Rose is careful to delineate specific sources that might enable 'cross checking' of results. But as the quotation we have used suggests, his essay raises some challenges for those of us wanting to think about who or what the 'audience' for print and non-print material might be. Not the least of these challenges is the term 'mass audience.' Perhaps Rose simply means 'large'; but then, how large? And what are the other parameters that might delimit 'a mass audience'? And does 'collective response' mean an aggregate of individual responses or something closer to the expression of the dominant cultural and literary tastes within a particular period?

If we consult Raymond Williams's *Keywords* for help we find that 'masses' is one of the longer entries, ending with the reflection that the term was being used in the late twentieth century with 'actively opposite social implications' (2014, 192); 'the masses as the subject and the masses as the object of social action' (193). Such a distinction is echoed within the intellectual history of cultural and media studies and its conceptualisations of audiences as first passive receptors of media artefacts, and then active, subversive agents capable of reading 'against the grain' of dominant ideologies. Both positions are usually refuted in contemporary media studies and audience research as too polarised and simplistic. One of the aspects of media and cultural studies' work on 'audiences' that we, and many of the contributors to this themed section have adapted, is a layered and contextualised approach to research about the consumption of multiple media artefacts. In so doing, reading studies scholars recognise – but also complicate – the communications circuit mapped out by Robert Darnton (1982) in which readers appear as passive receptors of print. More recent re-imaginings of Darnton's diagram lend more agency to readers within contemporary circuits of digital and mixed media communications. Claire Squire's and Padmini Ray Murray's critique and literal re-drawing of the circuit for the era of digital communications has been especially influential (2013).

If audiences are more than a collection of individuals, then they are also, at times, associated with specific cultural anxieties. Media historians can offer book and reading studies specialists helpful frameworks for making sense of those anxieties. In *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals*, for example, Richard Butsch critiques historical representations of audiences in relation to different media in nineteenth and twentieth-century America. His examples, drawn chiefly from theatre, film and broadcast media, critique the 'traditional categories' of 'dangerous crowds, ideal publics, and isolated individuals' (2008, 141). He usefully demonstrates how historical characterizations of audiences reveal the links between ideas of citizenship and worthiness, but also articulate ideals of equality and democracy. So, for example, a 'reading public' is desirable and

worthwhile because this type of audience is self-disciplined, economically productive, and, in the context of American history at least, a reading public produces a morally worthwhile citizenry (144). Of course, this logic is predicated on a notion of citizenship that assumes a liberalism towards human rights that might not be guaranteed for all, either legally or socially. Butsch's work also made us consider how 'audience' does not always translate easily across media either as a concept or as an everyday word. We don't, for example, use the term 'a crowd of readers' in British or Canadian English to describe a large group or audience, even now, in an era where 'crowdsourcing' for ideas, as well as for capital investment, has entered our vocabulary. The fact that we conceptualise a reading audience as 'a reading public' not a 'crowd' depends in part on the notion of a solitary, silent (but socially harmless) reader. As book historians we know that image of the silent reader refers to a relatively recent historical reading practice that is only one type or mode of reading activity among many.

Indeed, another significant adoption of the term 'audience' within book history and in the English language refers to the aural reception of texts whether transmitted by a reader in person or via a sound recording. Some historical examples such as staged readings by celebrity authors like Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, or domestic occasions of shared reading (newspapers and magazines as well as books), foreground the performative and social aspects of being part of a physically present audience (see, e.g., records for 'audience' in UK RED database). In the context of a media-saturated twenty-first-century environment these qualities of reading aloud – the spaces, situations and senses that shape the shared reading experiences of audiences – appear to be extremely pertinent. These qualities should remind us that online and offline audiences for books and other types of reading material are not only readers but also spectators, consumers, performers, producers and listeners. Indeed, the mediated identities, varied roles (for example as both a writer *and* a reader of material) as well as the embodied and somatic practices of readers are examined by many of the contributors to our themed section. To underline our concern in this part of the introduction, identifying 'audiences' of readers and the study of those audiences emerges from these collected articles as a valid and productive framework for research into groups of readers both large and small in number. These audiences range from Brigitte Ouvry-Vial's provisional study of a small group of young African readers who were surveyed face-to-face and via email, to Melanie Ramdarshan Bold's much larger sample of followers for Emma Watson's 'Our Shared Shelf' online book club, data about which was collected with the help of software. More elusive than both of these examples is the audience for Kindle books whose page views and highlights barely register how they read or who they are (Rowberry). Even then, not all these collections of readers should necessarily be conceived of as 'audiences'. The young African readers might best be understood as a group of readers, as individuated subjects, whose individual reading experiences are made explicit through a research-inspired conversation. The members of OSS, meanwhile, are connecting directly with each other and the club, responding to book selections, sharing opinions and reacting to other readers' commentaries. It might be more accurate to say, then, that audiences of



readers *and* readers who constitute audiences for particular modes of reading or media artefacts are brought into focus by the articles.

### **Readers, Reading and Digital Media: Fourteen Articles and a Coda**

The research included in our Themed Section is only a sampling of the many abstracts proposed to us. Those projects that we decided to include address book historian Leslie Howsam's call for 'interdiscipline work' that puts aside disciplinary boundaries in order to investigate the 'evolutionary change' facilitated by books (in whatever form they come in) (2016). The work that follows accounts for the changing forms of the book, the platforms and communication channels on which readers articulate their experiences, and the ways that readers connect to other readers, and to authors, publishers and booksellers. When we conceptualised the relationship among these agents as 'the reading industry' for our study of mass reading events (the term we came up with for formally organized, mass-mediated public shared reading programmes) we were giving a name to and a framework for critiquing the various social and economic structures that produce contemporary cultures of reading (2013, 15-19). In early- twenty-first century North America and the United Kingdom (the geographical parameters of our own research at that time), we wanted to register and examine the commercial, for-profit businesses shaping cultures of reading; cultural policies and histories that informed ideas about the value of reading (for example as a 'civic' enterprise and a social good), and the uses that cultural managers and intermediaries and readers themselves made (or chose not to make) of various forms of city- and nation-wide reading events from 'One Book, One Community' to *Richard and Judy's Book Club*.

The convergence of print publishing with other forms of media production through vertical integration of the industries concerned, and the transnational flows of media content that accelerated in circulation was part of the environment that we wanted to capture in our definition of the 'reading industry.' Now we are at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century that environment also includes social media platforms that have been operational for over a decade (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) or just short of a decade (e.g. Instagram, Pinterest). People who enjoy reading for pleasure, information and education have established ways of using different devices (see Balling et al; Rowberry) as well as these SM platforms (and others that are more specifically aimed at the acts of creative writing and reading like Wattpad and GoodReads) to curate and display their reading choices (see Rodger on how readers use Pinterest), to produce reviews and commentaries of specific books (see Driscoll on book bloggers), and to form online communities focused around genres of writing or practices of reading that they hold valuable (see McGregor on Harry Potter re-read podcasts and Matthews on reading, Instagram poets and black feminism). Publishers and booksellers also use these same platforms and apps to engage with audiences for new books, to search for the next bestselling writer, and to entice a positive review from a successful blogger, booktuber or celebrity online book club leader (see Ramdarshan Bold on Emma Watson's book club and Branagh-Miscampbell and Marsden on Zoella's book club). To some extent we can

categorise online book clubs, book blogging and ‘shelfies’ on Pinterest or Instagram as new iterations of older reader practices, although, of course, new media and new devices bring different design affordances and situations of use into play that were not available in a predominantly print era.

About half of the articles in this themed section focus upon digital technologies, digital devices or born-digital material and media that enable modes and acts of reading that we could not have conceived of at all twenty years ago. ‘Smart’ mobile and digital e-reading devices (see Ayala; Balling et al; Barnett, Rowberry, Wang and Sadner), ambient literature (Marcinkowski), and digital fiction (Enslinn et al) all come under scrutiny here. Whether the readers and audiences for these devices and ‘new’ types of content are located in China, Argentina, Denmark, elsewhere and/or everywhere, their engagement with digital media demonstrates the variety of reading habits and experiences that have become possible. Sometimes such engagements occur in areas of the world where access to print media and the literacies it demands has been especially inequitable. Indeed, we open with Brigitte Ouvry-Vial’s philosophically wide-ranging essay that asks a deliberately provocative question about whether reading (understood as an act, as a habit and as a socially situated practice) can ever be considered as a ‘Commons’. In her exploration of the possibilities that Commons research may offer to contemporary scholars of reading, Ouvry-Vial presents readers of *Participations* with a compelling overview of the debates and problematics in (EuroAmerican) book history that have often forestalled our collective enquiry into recent modes of reading reception. She also proposes a number of ways in which scholars of media studies suggest critical pathways that researchers of reading in the contemporary era of co-extensive media use might take.

Ouvry-Vial’s essay raises a question that echoes across this Themed Section. Where are the points of continuity or discontinuity in the history of reading in relation to the reading acts and practices examined in this particular collection of articles? There are some answers here: opportunities for historically marginalised voices to be heard and for the sharing of ideas, values in and through reading experiences (Bold, Driscoll, Matthews, Wang and Sandner); the far-reaching potential of international (Bold, MacGregor) and intersectional (Matthews) communities; or new conceptions of the materiality of books observable through online platforms, such as Pinterest (Rodger) and YouTube (Branagh-Miscampbell and Marsden). On the other hand, less positive aspects of residual reading cultures, especially inequities of power, do get reproduced. Established taste hierarchies and taste cultures can be replicated through ‘new’ modes of reviewing e.g. blogs (Driscoll) or in brief responses to texts produced by, for example, Instapoets (Matthews). Maxine Branagh-Miscampbell and Stevie Marsden argue that although the distribution of images of women readers has changed, there remains a ‘highly feminised and domestic imagery to construct an image of the ideal woman reader in the twenty-first century.’ The replication of inequalities is not necessarily parallel, but always still reflects power relations. Soledad Ayala argues that contemporary university reading and search practices are visible in the coexistence of paper and digital supports. She writes, ‘Reading materials are constructed



through a variety of supports, formats, technical and design features, and some digital materials include search tools. Their availability and usage possibilities, both material and cognitive, evidence their insertion in a particular game of power relations. A search process is not a mechanical and repetitive action; it condenses cultural, educational and technological capital.’ Her important Argentine case study pays attention to the complexity of university faculty and students’ reading and searching processes that account for not only technological and economic access but also the legal, social, educational, and cultural aspects that influence these processes.

There are aspects of innovation too that can be celebrated including the potentiality of locative digital fiction and the type of immersive reading experience it offers such as its capacity to interpellate the reader into specific histories embedded in places (Marcinkowski). Living in a rural community no longer necessarily means isolation from other like-minded audiences of readers (Wang and Sandner). Social media platforms like Pinterest (Rodger), Instagram (Matthews) and YouTube (Branagh-Miscampbell and Marsden) and transmedia texts like the internationally successful web series *Skam*, offer new ways to connect ‘live’ with other followers and fans (Fuller). The multiple literacies that these digital media demand from readers complicate how researchers might understand the qualities of a reading experience in a mobile, networked multimedia environment (Fuller). There are cautions and warnings made by our contributors too, for example, regarding the failure at inclusion and intersectionality on ‘Our Shared Shelf’ (Ramdarshan Bold); the unevenness of access to both print and digital media in some regions of the world (Ouvry-Vial); how little data from Kindles and similar devices actually tells us about how readers read (Rowberry). These cautions and complications raise provocative questions for the future of reading studies in a multi-, trans- and inter-medial era. Some of these questions are made explicit in the coda, alongside the identification of several intersections among the fields of research with which contributors to the themed section engage in their efforts to make sense of readers, reading and digital media. For now, however, we leave you to make your own connections and invite you to ‘read this!’

### **Acknowledgements:**

We would like to thank all of the reviewers who worked so generously with our contributors, making the most of the open review process. We are also grateful to Martin Barker for his support and hard work throughout the preparation of this themed section.

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