

Response to 'Reading and Interpretation in the Age of the Internet'

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If you walk into Rediscovered Books, an independent bookstore on North 8th Street in Boise Idaho, it seems that the world of reading physical books continues much as it did before the internet. There are new and old, paperback and hardback books on shelves and tables, in the usual sort of sections (Literature, Crime, Poetry, Cookbooks, Young Adult), including a lot of books in translation and local authors, not just the bestsellers. If you can't make up your mind, you could read the blurbs on the backs of books, or get the booksellers' recommendations as posted in the bookshop, or just ask them; you could even turn to another customer. There are shelves at the front displaying the current titles being read by more than thirty of the town's book groups. How did this business survive Barnes & Noble, Amazon, and e-readers? And how did the practices of reading books survive when the internet has totally changed popular music, newspapers, or television?

A closer look shows that this shop thrives at least partly because it embraces the internet. It is active in all social media, and uses them to highlight its book clubs, readings by authors, wine & book evenings, and activities for children, and linking the shop to other events around town, including the library. When an author visits and does a reading or book-signing, they will also tweet photos of the shop. If I retweet their announcement of a book & wine night with the title of the book I am reading now, I might win tickets to the event. You can also buy books on the Kobo e-reader via the shop, and buy from them on-line. Rediscovered Books, and other stores like it, seem to have realized early on that the internet did not just bring new ways of buying books, it brought new ways of sharing and talking about them, and relating to booksellers.

The articles in this special issue all bring together interpretive practices that started before the internet, often long before, with others that have been transformed by new technologies.

- The introduction by Daniel Allington and Stephen Pihlaja reviews a wide range of work on reading, both in experimental contexts and in social practices off-line (for instance in book groups) and on-line.
- Stephen Pihlaja links the practice of quoting fragments of the Bible, part of Protestant rhetoric for hundreds of years, with the way this rhetorical device is used in Youtube videos.
- Simon Rowberry updates up the practice of preserving quotations from one's reading in a commonplace book, a tool of authors since the

Renaissance, to the practice of marking and sharing 'highlights' on the Kindle e-reader.

- Book groups have existed for more than 150 years, and some existing groups are decades old; Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round consider how their practices are preserved and transformed on-line, and in particular at the role of the moderator.
- And Daniel Allington compares the comments on a literary novel by professional book reviewers, following a trade that has been around for hundreds of years, to those of customers on Amazon, developing a practice of electronic word-of-mouth that has arisen in the last decade.

So this collection is not just about new media; all these studies use the still somewhat strange innovations in new media to understand older, taken-for-granted practices.

What is 'the age of the internet' in relation to reading practices? The introduction to this special issue and the studies that follow it touch on many changes, but it might be worth summarizing some of them here:

- **Distribution:** The web provides many ways to order physical books and to access digital and audio forms on various devices, via on-line booksellers, libraries, public archives, and audio stores (e.g., Rowberry).
- **Feedback:** The web allows readers to post comments, evaluations, or just the fact that they are reading a book or watching a movie, via bookseller comments, book discussion sites, or social media (e.g., Rowberry, Thomas & Round, Allington).
- **Aggregation:** These comments are archived and made searchable on such sites as bookseller comments, book groups, social media, or even automatically via an e-reader (all the studies).
- **Interaction:** The contributors to these sites can react to other posts, commenting, evaluating, promoting, agreeing and disagreeing with more or less sociability and civility (Pihlaja, Thomas & Round, Allington).
- **Community-building:** These interactions are not dyadic; where they are given a chance (and even where they aren't) they expand into self-aware groups sharing common norms and often excluding others (e.g., Pihlaja, Thomas & Round, Allington).

There are, of course, other possible transformations made possible by the internet that don't happen to be the focus of the five articles here (they can't do everything); I will mention some of those later.

The internet has changed many practices around reading: the ways we find out about books and movies, and buy them, and even the postures in which we consume them. But here we are focusing on language practices. And the first response I had to these articles, as in walking into the bookshop, was to see the continuities between traditional and on-line practices, for instance in references to time, and practices of recontextualisation, stance-taking, and categorisation.

One thread is the references to *temporality* (the perceived speed or slowness of the experience), with references to page-turning, or to wanting it to go on, or to re-reading paragraphs, or putting it down. Thomas & Round show a complex awareness of temporality in their book groups, for instance when participants

withhold knowledge of what is coming in future chapters, so as not to spoil the reading for others, or in the ideal of trying to read 'as if for the first time' books that one has read many times before. Concerns like these must come up in face-to-face book clubs as well as those on the web. In this case, the web brings together the kinds of comments that people have often made, and continue to make in other modes, and shows us how central they are to describing the otherwise inaccessible subjective experience of movies or books.

Another continuity is in practices around quoting and *recontextualisation*. I must say I find rather strange the evangelical practice described by Pihlaja of quoting bits of the Bible out of their context, as if they were self-evident guides to behaviour. But the practices he describes are much older than the historical criticism that I got in college. The point he makes about the use of quotations on YouTube is that the allusions are recognized, and their meanings shared, for the intended audience. The same sort of recontextualisation practice can be applied to literary texts, as in the way a character in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, Gabriel Betteredge, uses randomly selected quotations from *Robinson Crusoe* as a guide. Another set of recontextualisation practices is in the ways people choose quotations from fiction, in commonplace books, on posters and mugs, or on-line on Twitter. Rowberry has useful references to this tradition, with its preference for general moral statements, and shows how it continues in the selections recorded on Kindle Highlights. The difference in this new context is that the highlights of thousands of readers on their devices can be aggregated on a site, and can even shape the interpretations of a reader who is aware of which passages other readers have marked, as if one had the misfortune to check out an endlessly scrawled-on library volume. It shows how users become aware that e-readers aren't just devices for transferring the texts they want to read from a central source, they are also devices for transferring data about their reading back to that source.

Other practices of recontextualisation signal another kind of reading. For Thomas and Round, the on-line book group moderator who says 'Please quote directly from the text to support your opinions' is taking on a role 'much closer to that of a teacher of literature.' And one of the empirical findings in Allington's study is that professional reviewers are significantly more likely to use quotations from the novel being discussed, a carry-over from the intensive, evidence-based discussion in academic institutions. Another of his findings is that the professional reviewers are more likely to refer to the style of a book than Amazon reviewers, who are more likely to refer to the characters and story. So we see two kinds of arguments emerging in these studies, one based firmly in one's own subjective but incontrovertible experience (as in references to the temporality of page-turning), one constructing a shared and apparently objective text, for instance by reference to specific passages as representative of larger patterns.

All the studies in this issue deal with *stance-taking* as central in some way to interpretation, whether it is evaluation of the book or movie, or of other people. When evangelical Christians quote the Bible (Pihlaja), they are not, of course, evaluating the text itself; they are using descriptions and symbols to evaluate

other people as wolves, sheep, or goats. Readers in book groups (Thomas & Round) or on-line reviews (Allington) have their own evaluations of books based on such features as perceived realism or consistency with their own experience. When these readers' evaluations differ from those of academics or critics, the issue is not usually a difference over good or bad, but a difference over just what is being evaluated, whether it is plot, characters, setting, or style. Thomas & Round note ('sadly') that there was very little interest from members of the Austen book group 'The Republic of Pemberley' in a discussion of Free Indirect Discourse, the kind of topic that might engage readers of this journal.

Stance-taking, as John DuBois (2007) has argued, is a triangle, with the person taking the stance (e.g., saying 'a literary classic and an all-time great novel'), the object of the stance (here, *The Inheritance of Loss*), and crucially an interlocutor who is assumed to share some ground in understanding this stance (the on-line reader of reviews, and possible purchaser of this book). The critics in Allington's study, and the evangelical Christians in Pihlaja's, assume that a competent reader will understand immediately what they mean and why they are using these specific terms to evaluate these specific objects (books, kinds of believers). And within any one place, whether a church Bible group, a classroom, a long-established reading group, or the pages of a review section, this assumption of shared values and a shared project will usually be well-grounded; the arguments will usually be about how one applies the values to this particular book or film or lesson.

The web, on the other hand, breaks down the walls around these places, and all sorts of other people can get in, including those who don't understand or don't accept the shared project of evangelical Christians, or academics, or of a group reading for fun. Someone like me, trained in a different way of reading the Bible, could come across Yokeup's video in a search for something else. Self-confessed fans of Austen could come across academic discussions of early 19th Century literature, or the other way around. Someone searching for a good read could come across reviews evaluating Desai within literary history. By focusing on the moderators of on-line groups, Thomas and Round explore the possible tensions in these encounters across different frames of evaluation, mentioning their use of directives to try to maintain order, but also their carefully informal language, modals, and banter to soften the potential conflicts. Youtube, notoriously, has no such moderation, and its comment sections are full of off-hand hatred and abuse. Of course any of the face-to-face forums can have conflicts, as studies of book clubs, for instance, have shown. But on-line, there is an entertaining or unsettling unpredictability in the audience and responses.

This unpredictability of audience is one of the ways that the internet transforms face-to-face and print genres. That unpredictability may be one reason the interactions studied here are so concerned with *categorization*, particularly with categorizing oneself against some other. These studies often refer to 'communities' possible on-line, but the most striking aspect of these new communities is not their togetherness and support but their boundary-making. Pihlaja's evangelical YouTube maker Yokeup is explicitly trying to separate the sheep from the goats, and the sheep from the wolves, when he mocks the 'huggy

crowd'. In Allington's study, some readers set themselves up against what they take to be norms imposed by another group, for instance book prize winners 'picked by pretentious literati who are easily conned by flowery prose and grandiose aims'.

Pihlaja reviews a promising theoretical framework to make sense of these complex processes of categorization, drawing on Positioning Theory (see Harré 2009 and further references in Pihlaja's article). They propose that the categorisation practices I have noted in these studies is just the first level of identity construction; a second level comes when one encounters other positions in interpersonal interactions (as in the on-line book group, or YouTube exchanges), and a third level of positioning outside this immediate interaction, in Biblical narratives (for Pihlaja's analysis), or a literary canon, or qualifications. In Thomas and Rounds, a participant in an on-line book group complains 'you're assuming everybody has been to Uni', since the kind of intensive discussion they reject is associated with academic study (and the class identities associated with it).

One kind of positioning device that runs through several of the studies is the assumption of a 'common reader', a set of practises immune to the refinements of high culture or advanced education. The phrase is usually traced to Samuel Johnson's assessment of 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' in his *Life of Gray*, as quoted by Virginia Woolf as the source for the title of her first collection of reviews:

'I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours.'

Woolf notes the positioning work here, 'the common reader, as Dr. Johnson implies, differs from the critic and the scholar'. And many readers, after Woolf, are happy either to take up this position, as someone who reads for pleasure, or to define themselves against it, as someone who can find pleasure in finding interpretations that go beyond the first experience. The common reader (or moviegoer) goes to the movies and wonders about the plausibility of a shoot-out, takes Bible readings as obvious and unproblematic, reads Austen to transport them to an alternative and more pleasant world, knows whether they liked reading a new novel or not.

Johnson, of course, did not need a Google search to find out what 'the common reader' thought of Gray, he knew from the coffee-houses of London, as Woolf knew from the literary reviews of her time. The web problematizes the idea of 'the common reader'; everywhere one looks one finds diversity of views that cannot be easily aggregated into a shared communal response. Rowberry finds overlapping highlights on Kindle, but even in those, different readers mark different stretches of text, and there are also the highlights (not studied here) that one reader has clicked that don't overlap with any others. In the Amazon reviews that Allington studies, each new contributor can read a long line of previous comments before posting their own, and readers can vote the comments up or down the list based on whether they are useful or not, but the

main effect can be the explosion of different kinds of responses rather than convergence to one. By giving us an easily accessible empirical check on all sorts of different readers, the web makes it harder to maintain the sense of a norm for responding to any one text.

These studies give a rich introduction to both the continuities and transformations in reading practices enabled by the internet. There are of course many other directions such research could take. The web is multimodal, and they could have studied how the reading of the verbal text can be shaped by visual and aural texts, for instance in graphic versions or videos. The web both reproduces texts, millions of times over, and allows for alteration, revision, and deletion, for instance in mash-ups, parodies, fan fiction. The web allows for (almost) instant communication, but it can leave an (almost) indelible trace (as anyone who has typed a Tweet with a typo will know). And though this collection talks about 'the Age of the Internet' as one period, users of these new technologies might find different and perhaps incompatible worlds of reading in the affordances of each new technology, such as bulletin boards, web sites, social media, or on-line publishing. To be fair, the introduction to this collection says as much; they are opening a territory for *Language and Literature* readers, not mapping it. But they have gone far enough into this new territory to suggest it is worth a visit.

Reference

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