

## Cover Sheet

Title: Moderating Readers and Reading Online

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## **Abstract**

Despite the proliferation of online forums for the discussion of literary texts, very little has been written to date on the management of these spaces and how this helps frame the kinds of discussion and interpretative work that take place. This article draws on a series of interviews with moderators of online book-related sites, alongside close analysis of online interactions between moderators and users to consider issues of authority, hierarchy, power and control, asking how these act to structure or facilitate acts of interpretation taking place online.

We begin by outlining the moderator's role before conducting a brief review of existing scholarship on offline reading groups and online communities, to identify how social infrastructures are established and negotiated. The main body of the article draws upon interviews with moderators of two online literary forums - The Republic of Pemberley and *The Guardian's* online Reading Group – to explore the ways in which each of the respective moderators frames his or her role. This is accompanied by an in-depth exploration of how the forms of interpretation we find on the two sites are shaped and directed by the moderators. The article concludes by reflecting upon some of the issues raised by this study and its methodology, particularly with regards to digital dualism and the blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private in online spaces.

## **Keywords**

Moderators; interpretation; interpretive communities; social reading; reading formations; digital dualism; internet studies

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## Moderating Readers and Reading Online

### 1. Background to the Study

In 2012, as part of our project Researching Readers Online, we contacted moderators and administrators of over 20 online forums and book groups to seek permission to circulate details of an online survey we were conducting into users of these communities. The response was very varied: some moderators were helpful and enthusiastic, while others treated us with suspicion and even barred us from their forums. This prompted an interest in the role of these individuals, which has attracted little scholarly attention to date, so we interviewed several moderators via email. We wanted to find out more about the people behind the sites we were researching and to hear from them about their experiences of managing discussions rather than rely solely on the textual traces they left behind. We also wanted to see if their perception of their role matched how we 'read' the communities we were observing. This is especially important when conducting digital ethnographic research as so much of the activity that takes place may not be visible to the observer, for example the removal of posts or the banning of participants. Online discussion spaces are often assumed to be non-hierarchical and anonymous: we wanted to challenge these assumptions and draw attention to the invisible processes that guide such discussions.

In 2014, for our second project ([www.digitalreadingnetwork.com](http://www.digitalreadingnetwork.com)), we followed up our initial research with two semi-structured online video interviews (via Skype): one with Myretta Roberts, co-founder of the Jane Austen site The

Republic of Pemberley, and the other with Sam Jordison, who runs the UK newspaper *The Guardian*'s online Reading Group. These sites were chosen on the basis that they seemed to offer different styles of moderation and interpretive practices. Interview questions were based on topics suggested by members of our research network and focused on the power moderators had to control discussions, how they established group norms and facilitated participation. These interviews, supported by textual analysis of the differing styles of moderation and discussion taking place on the two sites, form the basis for this study. This mixed methods approach replicates previous studies of reading as a social practice (e.g. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2013) and is informed by debates about the ethics and protocols of researching online communities. Our aim is to explore the extent to which interpretation in the age of the internet replicates practices and value systems more familiar from offline contexts such as face-to-face reading groups or classrooms, particularly as regards how leaders or authority figures shape and influence responses.

Studies of ethics and good practice in internet and fan studies (e.g. Whiteman, 2007; Kozinets, 2010) stress the importance of engaging with users rather than treating them as data, and of foregrounding the relationship between researchers and the communities they study. In our analysis, the anonymity of users has been preserved, but the moderators and the communities they manage are named (with permission); not only to provide context for the discussion, but also to acknowledge our relationship with them, built over the course of several years.

## 2. What do Moderators Do?

The role and nomenclature of the moderator (often referred to familiarly by users as 'mods') varies greatly from site to site. In a recent article, Grimmelmann (2015: 47) defines moderation as 'the governance mechanisms that structure participation in a community to facilitate cooperation and prevent abuse', using Wikipedia and Reddit as two of his case studies. Grimmelmann identifies moderation practices such as excluding users, filtering and formatting content, and discusses the role of mods as norm-setters. However, he concludes that while moderation is necessary, it is also complex and 'messy'.

For some of the sites we contacted in 2012, the moderator is primarily a technical facilitator, but most of the individuals we spoke to are active participants in discussions whose enthusiasm for their reading (of world literature, crime fiction, etc) is the reason for their involvement. In some instances we had to dig deep to uncover who was managing discussions, whereas in others the mods were visible presences welcoming and guiding visitors as soon as they entered the site. The mods we interviewed tended to downplay their roles, saying that the most common problems they faced were with 'spam' (i.e. posting of links to external sites by advertisers). They also reported that over time the communities tended to self-manage and reach a 'golden mean' (Dweller in Darkness, email interview).

As well as being involved in the setting up of the website and managing its day-to-day running, the mods we studied initiate topics, curate discussions and mediate disputes. They also act as energisers, intervening to resuscitate flagging threads, and are often treated as experts or authority figures by other users. Mods perform an important role liaising between users and those outside the community, for example protecting them from trolling (abusive and intentionally disruptive behaviour), unsolicited marketing and data mining (the harvesting of information by third parties, especially for commercial purposes). Mods may therefore be perceived and addressed as friends or guardian figures, helping to create and sustain community spirit, and to set the tone for discussions through their initial framing work (posting rules, FAQs etc) and ongoing interventions.

It is this role of the moderator in shaping and steering the interpretation of literary texts that is the main focus of this article. While there are inevitable overlaps with the role mods play in shaping the social dynamics of their communities, our interest is primarily in exploring the extent to which they contribute to the privileging of certain kinds of interpretation in online spaces where their 'presence' and influence may be more masked than in face-to-face situations such as offline reading groups or classrooms. In order to do this, we will draw on existing studies of offline contexts that focus on the power dynamics at work where readers come together to share their interpretations of literary works.

### 3. Existing Studies

Stanley Fish has provided one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding how literary texts are discussed and evaluated within specific 'interpretive communities'. Fish argued that critics should see interpretation as socially constructed, shaped by 'canons of acceptability' (1980: 349) according to which some readings are held to be 'wrong' (he gives the example of reading Blake's 'The Tyger' as an allegory of digestive discomfort). Interpretation according to this view is not a simple process, nor is it monolithic or stable. Instead it is composed of powerful sets of practices that are 'continually transformed' (1990: 153), for example by filling gaps left by former readings or responding to new social norms.

The idea that interpretation is socially constructed also underpins the idea of 'reading formations', influential in media and cultural studies. Bennett and Woollacott define a reading formation as 'the product of definite social and ideological relations of reading composed, in the main, of those apparatuses – schools, the press, critical reviews, fanzines – within and between which the socially dominant forms for the superintendence of meaning are both constructed and contested' (1987: 64-5). Such reading formations have been linked to the emergence of so-called 'executive fans', who adopt positions of authority in fan clubs and magazines and who superintend the reading of others (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995). In many ways they are the precursors of the online mods, exemplifying how authority and power emerge gradually from within communities, rather than being imposed from outside.

As noted above, few scholarly studies focus exclusively on the role of the moderator. In internet and fan studies, the role may be discussed in relation to how order or decorum is maintained in online discourse (Whiteman, 2007). Yet while increasing attention is being paid to the tensions that emerge in online communities of readers or fans (Johnson, 2007), the focus remains mainly on relations between users rather than on the management of those communities. Some attention has been paid to the functions and visibility of mods (Whiteman, 2007; Grimmelmann, 2015) as well as to the ways in which moderation is centralised or distributed (Fister, 2005; Grimmelmann, 2015). There has been much less emphasis on how mods interact and deal with forum users, or how they influence and shape the direction that discussion takes.

Analyses of the group dynamics of offline reading spaces have drawn attention to how book or topic selection can result in complex issues of power and control. Boyarin (1993: 191) notes the social infrastructure that underlies reading processes from their very beginning (as we are taught to read by another) and argues that 'informal processes of social control' (1993: 204) guide the selection of books and direction of discussion in both academic and non-academic spaces. Meanwhile, more specifically dealing with leadership and management issues, Daniels (2002: 220) found that in school reading circles 'teacher ego' often drives the discussion, resulting in a reluctance to 'let go' and allow the group to find its own direction. Daniels also stresses that, even when student-led, reading circles require a large degree of invisible 'meddling' (79) to be successful, for example ensuring that participants and



books are well-matched.

At their most extreme, informal social measures may be used to silence members. Boyarin (1993) cites an incident where a book club member suggested the group next read a Shirley Maclaine book – the suggestion was never acknowledged or commented upon by the other members. Similar scenarios are noted by Long (1986: 601) and Allington (2011: 141), supporting Boyarin's conclusion that such groups fall significantly short of Habermas's (1990) 'ideal speech situation' (where communication is free of coercive influences and all participate equally). Rather than being egalitarian groups using discussion to reflect on presuppositions underlying society, Boyarin (1993: 205) argues that offline reading groups are heavily structured in accordance with their own limited framing social background (typically heterogeneous upper/middle class). Other studies of offline book clubs have also focused on the power relations between participants in conversations about reading (Whiteley, 2011; Peplow, 2011), with some paying attention to how authority figures emerge from within groups over time (Hartley, 2001).

More explicitly dealing with how interpretation is shaped and directed by leader figures, Allington's (2012) study of classroom interactions showed that university tutors of varying levels of seniority used different tactics to guide student responses to set texts. While lower status tutors were more 'democratic' and prone to 'interpretive fence sitting' (Allington, 2012: 219), 'autocratic' teachers reformulated students' contributions and instructed them to find 'evidence' for their interpretations. Both directed students towards

formal features of the texts under study, and encouraged students to link their readings to theory and to existing criticism. While Allington found evidence of resistance to the ways in which interpretation was directed, this was often deflected by the use of humour, which also functioned to prevent the tutor from losing face (Goffman, 1955) when challenged.

Meanwhile, Allington and Benwell (2012) have examined the 'social order' of offline book groups and how they establish their own norms, implicit values and systems of accountability. While this study focused on interactions between members rather than on leader figures, of particular relevance here is the attention paid to how responses are 'validated', ratified and taken up by the group, and how a sense of what type of response is 'right' for that particular group is established over time. The study set out to provide a situated account of the utterances of group members that contextualised them as part of a sequence. So ratification could be found where participants expressed agreement with a previous speaker, or where a topic initiated by one speaker was continued by another. The study also showed that the interpretations offered were in part at least constructed in response to approval from other members, and that overt disagreement was avoided.

Online book clubs and forums have reignited interest in the social aspects of reading and the tension between the personal and the public that exists in acts of reading. Online reading forums may appear to negate many of the power-based issues affecting offline groups, allowing for anonymity and diverse group membership. The written medium lets discussion happen at

members' own pace, and mods can be literally unseen and exert only minimal control. Online reading groups therefore have the potential to be democratic, diverse, and non-hierarchical.

Analysts of online communities also recognise their potential for resistance and subversion. Worth (2005) demonstrated how users of online chatrooms learning a foreign language employed varied strategies of resistance to defy instructors, including code- and language-switching. Wanner (2005) also draws attention to the ways in which users test the technical boundaries of online spaces, for example responding to messages instantly on a discussion board (designed for delayed posting of messages), thereby using it as a chat room. However, despite these efforts to test the boundaries of what is permissible, Wanner (2005) points out that many online discussions are effectively a series of stated, staged opinions, meaning that issues of hierarchy, power and authority remain. Similarly, Collins (1992: 21) has shown that the removal of indicators such as age and location is a double-edged sword. In fact, dominance and unequal power relations exist as much online and offline: forum members use all the same strategies to assert their authority as found offline, including citing background and experience, or ignoring certain contributions.

#### 4. Case studies

The following discussion provides an overview of the communities selected before analysing examples of the mods' interactions with forum users. As contributions tend to be brief, dipping in and out of discussions rather than

engaging in prolonged debate on the same topic with the same user(s), our analysis relies on providing short illustrative quotations rather than extended extracts. Selective quotation from different threads also allows us to provide insights into the variety of styles and practices adopted by mods, and their differing relations with users. This analysis is set against the insights from our interviews with the mods, revealing the inner workings of the communities and the mods' own perceptions of their roles and influence.

## 4.1 History and Context

### 4.1.1 The Republic of Pemberley

The Republic of Pemberley was set up in 1997 as a breakaway from the Austen-L Mailing List established in 1994 (see Thomas, 2007 and Rowberry, 2016 for more on digital public reading of Austen). According to Myretta Roberts (2014, online interview), the reason for the split was that the more 'academic' Austen-L members were not interested in discussing the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, and in particular Colin Firth's reinvention of the role of Mr Darcy. While the use of the term 'republic' might seem to capture this spirit of rebellion (as in the explicitly revolutionary language used in framing *The Guardian* site; see below), Myretta reflected that the main reason for choosing it was that it 'sounds better', but that 'community' with its cosier connotations was closer to how she saw the group.

Both in terms of its visual design, and aspects such as register and orthography, the website conveys the idea of the community as a quaint

village with its very own 'shoppe' and 'gazeteer'. However, this sits alongside language that seems much more autocratic than democratic (Allington, 2012), featuring directives such as 'You must be registered'. Indeed, a casual browser might be somewhat perturbed by the 'welcome' page, warning off 'weekend tourists' or idlers seeking help with homework. To register to access all areas, users must provide their (real) first names, diminishing the potential for anonymity, but giving identity to group members. Most Pemberleans use female names, and the photos and activities featured in the Meetings section also suggest a predominantly female membership. The volunteer committee is all female.

When asked about the composition of the committee, Myretta revealed that though this varied according to how busy the site was, membership was always 'By invitation' (2014, online interview). When asked about how troublemakers were dealt with, Myretta related an incident involving a 'bunch of kids' misusing the site, resulting in a decision to 'ban them all'. However, Myretta's framing of the site was overwhelmingly collegiate – she spoke throughout the interview in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'.

In discussion of one of the earlier iterations of the site, Thomas (2007) clearly missed the Austenian irony behind the invention of the 'Volunteer Committee' and the playful take on the 'Republic', which came across in interview. In the section on the site entitled 'Homework Policy', the Republic is described as a space for those 'afflicted' by an obsession with Austen to come together to discuss her work and consult the 'knowledge base'. However, members can

also buy Austen-related memorabilia and find out about offline activities, retaining some elements of what Myretta describes as the ‘fan-girl raving’ (2012, email interview) that led to its establishment. The main emphasis is on sharing information about Austen rather than subjecting her life or work to critical scrutiny.

#### 4.1.2 *The Guardian* online Reading Group

This group has been running since 2011 and its ‘host’ is Sam Jordison, a freelance journalist and publisher. Users need a Guardian account to comment, but anyone can browse the discussions and the group has no explicit rules other than those operating for the paper’s website in general, making it much more democratic than autocratic (Allington, 2012) in terms of its policies. *The Guardian* is recognised as a newspaper with liberal values, and as well as the online Reading Group it has a Book Club hosted by an English professor via a weekly column, a teen book club and a science book club. Although it is dangerous to make too many assumptions based on user names, they strongly suggest a predominantly male grouping. In the interview with Sam Jordison in 2014, we discussed how user names created certain assumptions about gender or background, with Sam revealing that ‘over the years I have picked up bits and pieces’, leading him to believe there were ‘a few women’ and several ‘retired academics’. This provides a fascinating insight into the relationship between community members, straddling on- and offline identities as they speculate about the real world identities of members, but also respect their privacy and right to perform versions of themselves

online (Page, 2011). The relationship between gender and power on these forums would of course make for an interesting study of its own.

#### 4.2. Forms of Reading and Interpretation

On both the Guardian and Pemberley sites, members can participate in readings of selected texts taking place within a limited time-frame, led by the moderators. An obvious difference between the two is that Pemberleians only read Austen, whereas on the Guardian site different authors are read each month. In addition, Guardian group readers predominantly reflect *back* on their reading as something that has been completed, whereas for Pemberleians the group read is much more about sharing their progress through the text step by step. Austen's pre-eminence as a writer is never in question, whereas Guardian group members are more than happy to offer their evaluations of this or that writer's worth. This appears to place Guardian discussions closer to the offline scholarly seminar as described by Allington (2012). While Pemberleians do prize knowledge about historical context such as minute details of costume, cuisine and conduct, as we shall see there is much more resistance to engaging with matters of technique and little or no reference to critical opinion. Instead, discussion often includes speculation about the life and opinions of the author, and 'off page' events, all of which has become dispreferred in most academic literary contexts since Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946).<sup>1</sup>

For the truly dedicated, Pemberley's Group Reads section offers the opportunity to read or reread all of Austen's novels in rotation. For the even

more dedicated, group reads of the letters also take place, the accepted understanding being that 'the audience/participants ... will be much lighter than for a novel'. This section of the site has its own rules and protocols and group reads usually begin with a reminder of these from the moderator. In particular, jumping ahead and providing spoilers is strictly prohibited. Each group read begins with the moderator welcoming participants and ends with a vote of thanks, picking out individual readers whose contributions have been enjoyed by other members.

The basic principle is that members read an agreed number of chapters and report back, picking out details they missed on previous readings, and sharing their impressions as they progress through the novel. There is an element of a game to this: when one member remarks 'I wonder what the next chapters will bring', it is evident that participants agree to pretend not to know what is going to happen next. Present tense posts ('Catherine's parents are failing miserably'; 'Colonel Foster is off the market') also help to maintain the illusion of synchronous reading. And when one moderator urges participants to 'talk about lots of things instead of debating a few', a sense of the time-bound nature of the exercise is reinforced, as well as a preference for extensive rather than intensive reading. Once again this clearly contrasts with the practices of the scholarly seminar (Allington, 2012), where tutors work to steer the discussion back to close examination of formal features or theoretical concepts.



Mods initiate the group reads and invite members to provide 'focus topics' for discussion. Yet how they do this varies considerably, evidenced by the linguistic style used, as well as actions taken.

Hi Ho!

Welcome one and all to our group read! Please take a looksie through our group read guidelines and the schedule so we are all on the same page, literally and figuratively. If you have decided on a focus, let us know, but please do not feel like you have to have a focus! I usually just read for fun and pick up on things I had not noticed before.

Again, welcome, and I am glad you could join us!!

In the extract above welcoming users to a group read of *Northanger Abbey*, the moderator uses informal and colloquial language ('Hi ho'; 'looksie') and expresses her own preference which is to 'read for fun and pick up on things I had not noticed before'. While she blends into the background as the group read gets underway, it is evident that the participants echo and match her framing of the discussion, playfully referring to her as 'madam moderator', and putting in a request for games to accompany the reading.

Elsewhere, the moderator's language is much closer to that of the teacher:

Please quote directly from the text to support your opinions instead of making a general allusion or summation. We have a whole week to talk about around 50 pages, and we can take the time to be quite clear... Please remember that we need to agree to disagree and move on with our discussion. I don't want to stop people from discussing anything, but I also don't want to get bogged down with lots of restatements.

On the group read for *Emma* quoted above, the moderator is much more like the 'autocratic' tutors observed by Allington (2012). She reminds participants of the need to 'quote directly from the text to support your opinions', and

despite the politeness of her language (the repetition of 'please') and her claims that she will not intervene ('I don't want to stop people'), she provides strong and clear direction for the discussion and implies that intervention is a possibility otherwise. In fact, the same moderator goes on to do all she can to focus attention on matters of form (point of view, the role of the narrator) and even attempts to initiate a discussion of Free Indirect Discourse in Austen's work, only attracting a single post in response. This suggests that while Pemberleans expect attention to detail about Austen and her world, they are not so concerned with probing too deeply into matters of narrative technique or perspective, and will in fact resist attempts to steer them in that direction. It also shows that while mods command a certain amount of respect, their authority does not carry the same institutional weight as that of the classroom tutor,

When new members are spotted by the mods they are welcomed to the boards but also reminded of the rules, helping to consolidate the strong sense of an enclosed community. As well as managing the reads and initiating topics, mods intervene to answer questions posed by other users and to refer them to other sources of information, reinforcing the notion evident elsewhere on the site of the mods and the Committee as guardians of the Austen legacy.

Members' responses to the mods occasionally hint at discontent with their management of discussions:

This group read should, I believe, be seen as the coming together of a number of like-minded people to build a grand house... Ah well, I will hew to the rational approach... I wanted to try to read as for the first time and avoid the disputes for as long as possible.

In the above extract, a Pemberlean with a male user name who has just been politely reminded of the rules and admonished for misleading wording, hints at earlier 'disputes'. Moreover, despite seeming to promise to 'hew to the rational approach', he clearly continues to harbour discontent and to stubbornly employ his own arcane phrasing. The same user also frequently answers back to the moderator, for example saying with bitter irony, 'we can trust you of course', suggesting ongoing tensions. As was said earlier, it can be difficult to deduce exactly how much disagreement exists, as posts and users may be removed, and lurkers (people who join communities but never contribute or make contact with other participants) may be silently fulminating on the sidelines. Myretta's own position in both her interviews was that any problems are minor and quickly dealt with. Her views were echoed in the attitudes expressed by other mods who step in to keep the reads ticking along: as one puts it 'we need to agree to disagree and move on with our discussion'.

In sum, the Republic's Group Read is an exercise in close reading, but one which is geared towards adding to the 'collective intelligence' of the community.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the occasional post making reference to existing criticism of Austen (as in the attempt to initiate discussion of FID), we found that discussion rarely moves outside Austen's own work.<sup>3</sup> Yet the academy remains a reference point, even if only as something to distance oneself

from<sup>4</sup>: 'I'm not a student of literature', one Pemberlean reminds us, in response to a brief discussion of the unreliable narrator in *Emma*, again demonstrating the group's resistance to matters of form or technique.

To launch *The Guardian* online Reading Group in 2011, Sam Jordison invited 'Comrades' to join the overthrow of 'the old hegemony of the journalist' and clean out 'the critics from the ivory towers'. Like the Pemberleans, therefore, the group's very existence arises from a sense of opposition to existing cultural mediators and arbiters of taste, although here the antagonists are named more explicitly. Yet despite this open and free-sounding invitation to form a 'reader-led' group, Sam acknowledged in interview (2014) that 'all the decisions about running it were made at Headquarters'. Setting out his ideas for the group, Sam suggests that each month the group chooses a book for discussion supported by contextual material, but he concludes by saying 'If you want to overturn those ideas, go ahead'. 437 comments were posted in reply, responding with suggested reading but also offering feedback as to how the group should conduct itself. This immediately brought to light very vocal and forthright differences of opinion regarding the terms of reference of the group and unearthed possible future tensions. For example, one respondent suggested 'doing away with novel-centric book clubs'. Another complained that in the discussions so far 'You're assuming that everybody has been to Uni and that everybody has read the same books', making overt reference to issues of status and privilege while also, like the Pemberlean quoted earlier, distancing the group from the scholarly and the academic.

As with the offline groups referred to earlier, the selection of books for discussion can bring to light the power dynamics existing within a group.<sup>5</sup> In his 2014 interview, Sam linked the choice of books to ‘the literary calendar’, and talked of his desire to base discussions around ‘art’ and ‘humanity’, assuming an underlying consensus about what these words refer to. He also referred to the fact that book selection tended to be based on ‘authors people are going to have heard of’ and assumed tacit agreement about the form that analysis and debate should take, referring to the organization of discussion around themes, and to the fact that discussions always refer back to ‘the book’. Thus despite the resistance of some users, Sam at least seems to align his vision for the group with the kinds of values and practices familiar from scholarly settings. In many ways, therefore, this bears out Kendall and Mcdougall’s (2011: 59) claim that reading groups often aim to maintain or extend ‘conservative arrangements of textual value’ which serve ‘to reproduce culture’.

Although the Guardian group does not have the same distinctive identity as the ‘Pemberleans’, regular participants and strong personalities do emerge, and the banter between users, and between users and Sam, can recur across threads and over months or years. There is noticeably less social or off-topic discussion in the Guardian group. Although occasionally users will refer to current affairs, or share musical or other recommendations, usually these are prompted by the book under consideration: for example in a discussion of a novel by Ian Rankin, one user reports following Rebus’s lead by sitting down with a glass of Rioja to listen to a Dr John album.

Earlier in the same thread, the discussion moves from Rankin to other crime writers, with another dig at 'academia' and the way in which some writers 'last' while others are left to 'fade away':

User 1: you really think they will last? leslie charteris and james Hadley chase didnt, just off the top of my head. popular culture is ephemeral. nothing lasts, or if it does it is only to be embalmed by academia, far better to fade away.

Sam's intervention and response to the post is a good example of his moderating style:

Mod: Well, you might be right. It's a bit of a lottery. But they at least deserve their chance. Your point about Leslie Charteris (a name I don't even know) is well made. But on the flipside, there's Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett and etc.

As well as acknowledging his own limitations and downplaying his expertise ('a name I don't even know'), Sam responds positively to the 'well made' points while steering the conversation round to writers more likely to be familiar to the group. Modal expressions ('you might be right') and hedges ('it's a bit of a lottery'; 'at least') mitigate any potential threat to the face wants of users (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Elsewhere, the positive reinforcement even extends to entire discussions: 'I'm always impressed by the comments we get here, but this month has been especially enjoyable'.

Despite the robustness of the discussion, we found little evidence of anyone directly contesting either Sam's role or the organisation of the group, though it is clear that there is ongoing jostling for position. In one instance, a user seemed to directly challenge Sam's credentials: 'I'd really appreciate it if people who've more than an A-level knowledge about a certain subject would be writing for the Guardian', once again highlighting sensitivities about

education and levels of knowledge. The response from Sam was speedy and equally forthright ('Your comment would be more pertinent if you had your facts straight') and prompted loyal support from other members ('Author 1: Troll 0').

One year into the role in his interview in 2012, Sam characterised discussions as being largely user-led ('it all works quite naturally'), attributing this to the fact that 'because there are regulars, and because there are expectations, it kind of has set its own rules, or the readers have set rules of how the discussions go'. Despite this, it was evident from our analysis that Sam has to maintain an active role in stimulating and sustaining discussion: it is much more noticeable if a discussion runs out of steam than it is on the Pemberley site, with its multiple mods and simultaneous threads.

#### 4.3 Community bonds

Although studies of online forums increasingly contest simplistic notions of 'community', references to the notion, and to the affective bonds that form between community members, frequently recurred in our interviews with the mods. In the 2014 interview, Sam spoke of a 'nice community feeling' in the Guardian group and of friendships forming over time. However, he also reflected on the fact that disagreements did happen and that people 'get annoyed', and that perhaps these were both more common because of the anonymity of the online environment and the 'safe place' for varying opinions that this offered.

In her 2014 interview, Myretta recounted that while it is policy to ‘discourage personal discussion’, Pemberleans do form connections and become close friends. In a post titled ‘The Amazing Myretta’ an outpouring of gratitude from members for the work going on ‘behind the scenes’ demonstrates how strong affective bonds form between members and mods. Myretta spoke movingly of the community’s response to the death of one of its members, and her desire to protect and keep serving that community despite the considerable time and financial commitment involved was very evident.

## 5. Conclusion

As well as allowing readers to find those who share their interests in ways that may not have been possible previously, the vast number of competing online sites that have emerged allows users to choose amongst many different styles of discourse. In the examples discussed here, Pemberleans clearly enjoy playing with Austenian language and tropes, or sharing titbits about her life and work. For Guardian group members, banter and critique are more the order of the day, and both the actual participants and their mode of interaction vary according to whether they are discussing Terry Pratchett, Dashiell Hammett or F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Our study has shown the crucial role mods play in helping to shape these group identities and dynamics and in balancing the freedoms online spaces offer with establishing and maintaining community bonds and good governance. The concept of ‘digital dualism’ critiques the tendency of commentators to discuss online identities and behaviour as though they are



completely divorced from the offline, 'real' world. Meeting the mods, albeit remotely, has brought home the extent to which our analyses of their online activities could so easily result in misrepresentation and misconceptions about their roles and motivations. Listening to their experiences has also brought home the very real personal and financial investments they make in ensuring that the communities they are passionate about continue to flourish and survive.

## Notes

1. In his study of classroom interaction, Allington (2012: 212) describes how personal responses soon give way to a 'more scholarly mode of engagement' under the encouragement of the tutor. Of course authorial intention does continue to feature in discussions of literary interpretation (e.g. Hirsch, 1967; Stockwell, 2016), while studies of paratexts (e.g. Thomas, 2012) have demonstrated how 'off page' matters can shape interpretation.
2. Henry Jenkins borrows Lévy's (1997) concept of 'collective intelligence' to talk about the ways in which fans work collaboratively to extend their knowledge base.
3. It should be pointed out that elsewhere on the site, Pemberleans are just as happy to talk about adaptations of the novels, and discuss other more contemporary Anglophone texts such as *Downton Abbey* and *Wolf Hall*.

4. In her study of reading groups, Elizabeth Long (1986: 603-4) found that groups opted for playfulness rather than the constant need for accountability for interpretations that they associated with academic contexts.
5. Most of the books chosen by *The Guardian* group have male authors, and a common thread is 'books that have annoyed people'. Some genre fiction (mainly thrillers) has featured, and one month the group even turned their attention to Stephanie Meyer's often-denigrated young adult vampire novel, *Twilight*.

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