2015

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Recommended Citation

Horova, Tony (2015) "Some Reflections on Social Reading," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 3, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7079>

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Some Reflections on Social Reading

by **Tony Horava** (Associate University Librarian, Collections, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada) <thorava@uottawa.ca>

Is reading social? We traditionally associated books and reading with solitude. Mention the word “library” to the average person, and a timeless image of someone with head down, immersed in a book, springs to mind. The 2005 OCLC study on Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources made it clear that the book is still our brand. The 2010 study¹ reinforced this message: “69% said ‘books’ was the library brand in 2005, while 75% said the same in 2010. Importantly, the corollary message was that the definition of book included eBooks as well as print books — and this gives us opportunities for opening doors to new channels for reading, and to suit the needs and interests of our wide range of patrons. This shouldn’t be seen as an either/or choice, but rather an opportunity to engage with the multiplicity of reading technologies, circumstances, and learning possibilities in the digital era.

This implies for me a fundamental re-evaluation of what we mean by public versus private reading experience. It used to be that this was a relatively straightforward issue. Books and other intellectual works in a library were read by solitary individuals, usually in contemplative silence. Subsequent engagement with the broader community occurred through any number of subsequent activities, through quotation, discussion, word-of-mouth, and book clubs. **Battles** and **Schnapp** remind us that “...books have never been ‘just books.’ They were always coaxed to life by conversation and oration; the oral and written sharing of excerpts; practices of addition, deletion, and extension; swarms of mental and scribbled notes; acts of collation, from rebinding to anthologizing to the authoring of mimeo- or xerographic readers.”² There is no doubt that the ‘grand conversation’ of books always darted across time and space, going backwards and forwards as linkages and connections were sparked. Libraries played a key role in this grand conversation, by creating collections that fed into the societal project of building knowledge, informing citizens and communities, and relying upon the democratizing force of shared learning and living knowledge. Today the nature of this conversation is frequently focused on the implications of the online experience, and how this changes our relationship with books.

Sven Birkerts wrote that “The print engagement is essentially private. While it does represent an act of communication, the contents pass from the privacy of the sender to the privacy of the receiver.”³ In today’s world the act of screen reading can include a public dimension that completely changes the dynamic of the experience. Whether through comments, recommendations, reviews, highlights, or tagging, the ability to share one’s thoughts and feelings

in real time — as one is reading — has fundamentally changed the game (think GoodReads, Amazon, BookReviewBlogs.com, Library Thing, etc.). No longer necessarily a private and personal activity, reading is potentially a very public one, with a globally dispersed community or audience that makes the conversation very dynamic and multi-directional.

Steve Johnson tells us, “With [Amazon’s] ‘popular highlights,’ even when we manage to turn off Twitter and the television and sit down to read a good book, there will a chorus of readers turning the pages along with us, pointing out the good bits.”⁴ The issue of public or private reading involves a broad spectrum of patron activities, and we need to assess how we situate library services in relation to this range of possibilities for supporting students and enhancing discovery and delivery of books.

Allison Mennella tells us that “eBooks and eReaders are beginning to challenge the very definition of what constitutes as ‘reading.’ For example, eBooks are visual, audio, interactive, extremely social, and a relatively new phenomenon that will no doubt begin to see magnificent and significant changes and additions to newer additions. In order for an eReader to fully maximize the potential of an eBook and promote the concept of social reading, the eReader itself must be fully social.”⁵

This is one of the major dimensions of the shift in the reading experience — the technology facilitating our ability to share instant reactions and comments with a new global community through the functionality of the eReader, tablet, or cell phone. Some of us would find such an experience profoundly unappealing, intrusive, and disruptive of our very private and personal relationships with texts and ideas. However millions of people see it as empowering and supportive of their identity, their interests, and their online personae. The multimedia eBook engagement is communal and thoroughly social. Driven by sophisticated technologies and the demands of a networked culture, the meaning of ‘social reading’ has new resonance in our data-flooded world

where sharing and connectedness have new force. Our relationships with people, ideas, and words are becoming more and more mobile, personalized, and fluid. User-generated content around reading is becoming an integral component of the reading process. Books are not the only

form of scholarly content we acquire — think of journals, reports, theses, working papers, manuscripts, and letters, among others. This provokes questions about how we make decisions to support reading — the platforms we choose; the functionality we support; the forms and media of reading, and the range of learning styles and preferences to which we

need to remain sensitive. It’s important for us to be aware that writing and reading are intellectual yin and yang — we can’t pay attention to one without thinking of the other. How we read affects how we write, and both are changing rapidly. Services to support writing exist in many of our campuses, and are very valuable for our students. Connecting the dots between such services and our strategies to support reading will only benefit our communities.

Sharing of reading via social media is very seamless but has major implications for privacy, confidentiality, and online identity. **Andrew Piper** reminds us, “When distributors of electronic books store your reading data or annotations on their servers; when search engines store your page views; when social networking sites store everything you write, you are by default sharing your reading, whether you want to or not. It may not be ‘public’ (i.e., on display) but it is being read.”⁶ Data mining for behavioral tracking and targeted marketing is becoming commonplace today. Content generated by reading and readers becomes personal data that can be used for very different purposes and intentions, by organizations driven by commercial and marketing interests. To some, this lack of privacy and confidentiality doesn’t matter much; to others, this matters a great deal. Whether this is a generational divide, a digital divide, or any other kind of divide is up for debate. What is clear, though, is that this issue goes to the core of what is important to us, as professionals who want to deliver value and innovation to our communities, and as thinking individuals with a critical stance on culture, technology, and learning, and how these impact libraries. Thus debates about the future of reading become enmeshed in issues that cross many social, technological, and political lines. As reading is a cultural foundation of society, technological and political issues are not far behind.

“Reading too, is, or should be, a moving between the solitary encounter and something more social,”⁷ says **Alan Jacobs**. However, these social strategies “are not reading proper, but rather accompaniments to reading.”⁸ What is “reading proper” in today’s world is another question for which there are no easy answers. There are and will be multiple forms and personalized experiences of reading. There are some who see social reading as not really focused on reading at all. **Naomi Baron** asks, “What is most attractive about social reading: the ‘reading’ part or the ‘social’?” For millions of people, the social connection dominates, and the reading part essentially provides an excuse for meeting up.”⁹

Regardless of one’s perspective on this question, we need to ensure that the serendipitous, “aha” moment of encountering books that change lives will remain a focus of our libraries. This is key to our future, regardless of formats and media. The books need to be found and experienced, or we are not meeting

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our goals. **Ranganathan's** dictum "Every reader his book" has never been more true. As we acquire larger and more diverse eBook collections, the need for effective discovery mechanisms becomes more acute. **Stephen Bell** puts it very well: "The planet's future isn't always in the balance when collection collisions happen. More likely it's just the birth of a lifelong reader or the launch of some new passion. These 'good accidents' are too much a part of the quintessential library experience to allow them to fade away. It is up to our profession to design our libraries and the paths to our collections, physical or virtual, to keep the collisions coming."¹⁰ The collisions can be individual or social; short-term or long-term; imaginative or pragmatic — the main thing is that we in libraries enable them to happen. Without these special accidents of the imagination, many of our best mental sparks would never be born, and the magic of reading would be diminished. The value of libraries would equally be diminished. Social or not, reading is a core service that we nurture and feed, amid the buzz of new technologies and possibilities that greet us daily. 🐼

Endnotes

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Building, Sustaining, and Transitioning the College Reader: Going from a Shared Experience to Sharing the Experience

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One of the many challenges that faculty and staff struggle with at our urban community college is the low literacy level of many of our students. These students are not just the ones enrolled in our developmental English classes, but they are also taking our college level courses and visiting our campus libraries. Many times their success depends on their ability to read and comprehend their textbooks, which may be written two to five grade levels above their actual reading ability. We know that our college is not alone in this challenge, and many literacy organizations are raising awareness of these issues. Each year the **International Reading Association (IRA)** releases its list of "hot topics in literacy education." In the category, "Hot and Should Be Hot" for 2015 is "College and Career Readiness." This is followed by the category, "Should be Very Hot" in which "Adolescent Literacy" is identified (Wohlwend). National attention is focused on education, and it is important that we identify systems and supports to build our students' literacy skills.

Since many of our students are nontraditional, adult learners with families, and come from neighborhoods that statistically have low literacy levels, we recommend creating a multi-dimensional program that first builds the reading skills of the student in the classroom and then sustains and expands those skills outside of the class either through a Reading Center and/or with high-interest reading programs sponsored as a collaboration between faculty and campus librarians. As students become more accomplished readers at college, the students will be able to transition these literacy skills into their homes by sharing literacy with their family in any number of ways, such as reading to their children or helping others in their family or community become stronger readers. This building, sustaining, and transitioning approach is one that our campus' Reading Center uses to help students succeed at the college level, and it is also one we hope allows students to bridge their academic and literate life on campus into their homes and communities.

The Cuyahoga Community College Experience

Located in Cleveland, OH, the Metropolitan (Metro) campus of **Cuyahoga Community College** draws many students from area

neighborhoods that have had historically low literacy rates. To determine the literacy rates, we reviewed the *Literacy Needs Assessment Technical Report for Cuyahoga County*, which used a statistical model to review the literacy levels in different neighborhoods of Cleveland. The literacy levels range from 1 to 5. Level 1 literacy includes "locating a piece of information in a sports article" and locating "the expiration date on a driver's license." Level 2 includes the reading skill to "locate an intersection on a street map." People with Level 3

literacy can "use a bus schedule to choose the correct bus to take to get to work on time."

Levels 4 and 5 include being able to "explain the difference between two types of benefits at work" and being able to "compare and summarize different approaches lawyers use during a trial" ("Literacy Levels"). Those who test within the 1 to 3 range are believed to have difficulties reading, especially to "meet the demands of the 21st-Century life" (Mikelbank et al. ES1).

Many students who attend Metro campus live in neighborhoods where the population at a literacy level of 1 or 2 can range anywhere between an estimated 68% to as high as 97% (Mikelbank et al. 26). Furthermore, in the spring of 2014, 55% of incoming students tested into either a developmental English course or a bridge course, which is meant to prepare the students for college composition. Because of these numbers and because of the goal to have students become more accomplished college-level readers, faculty and staff created a Reading Center to assist students and to have a program of building, sustaining, and transitioning the literacy skills of students.

The Student Perspective

Before engaging in the building process with the students, it is important within the classroom to learn the students' perspectives on reading, and this is particularly important for instructors in the developmental courses who need "to be aware of the students' beliefs or personal theories about reading and learning" (Simpson, Stahl, and Francis 19). By understanding the student perspective, instructors will be able to scaffold course assignments so students will become more self-directed and actively engage in the learning process. As Simpson, Stahl, and Francis note, this helps

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