

## **Researching Readers Online**

### **Workshop report 31/5/2012**

The workshop was intended to bring together some leading and emerging researchers working with readers and audiences in both offline and online environments. The participants were as follows:

Professor Roberta Pearson (RP), Department of Culture, Film and Media, Nottingham University. Has worked extensively on fan cultures and tv and film audiences.

Danielle Fuller (DF), Department of American and Canadian Studies, Birmingham University. Was Principal Investigator on the Beyond the Book Project and has published widely on reading, writing and publishing communities.

Anna Kiernan (AK), Head of Department of Writing, University of Falmouth. Has published on reading groups and is a Literature Assessor for the Arts Council.

Nathasha Whiteman (NW), Department of Media and Communications, University of Leicester. Author of *Undoing Ethics*, specialises in the ethics of researching online communities.

Katherine Halsey (KH), Department of English, University of Stirling. Member of the management team for the OU's Reading Experience Database 1450-1945, specialises in the history of reading.

Sara Whiteley (SW), Department of English, University of Chester. Has published on affect and emotion in reader responses.

David Peplow (DP), Department of English, University of Nottingham. Has recently submitted his PhD thesis on the language and discourses of reading groups.

Andrew Salway (AS), University of Bergen. Works with computational linguistics, currently involved in a project using data analysis to research online discussions of climate change.

Casey Birenza (CB), Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge. About to submit her PhD thesis on manga publishing in the US.

Ernesto Priego (EP), recently graduated with a PhD from the Department of Information Studies, University College London. Interested in print and material culture with specific reference to comic books.

Ian Hague (IH) Department of History, University of Chichester. Currently completing a PhD on how comic books engage the reader's senses.

Simon Locke (SH), Department of Sociology, Kingston University. Works on the sociology of comics.

Ahead of the workshop, participants were sent a report based on a summary of the online survey and focus groups findings. They were asked to prepare brief feedback on the report, and to introduce themselves and comment upon any aspect of the project (methodology or findings) from the perspective of their research specialism. The second half of the workshop focused on possible future directions for the research project, led by the PI.

### **Feedback on Methodology**

Additional information requested on the survey included: the methods of website selection; the distinctions between the types of forums chosen and whether these were representative of the range available; the relationship of the PI and CI to the sites surveyed; and whether the genres mentioned were set/listed within the survey or suggested by the participants. It was also suggested that exploring the discussion of literature on more general/social forums (Facebook etcetera) might be informative.

### **Feedback on Findings**

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive. A couple of participants (DF and KH) commented on similarities and continuities with their own research into offline reading communities, though we also discussed whether the distinction between offline and online groups was more fluid than fixed. In particular, mention was made of the focus on intimacy and connectedness, while historical parallels were also mentioned in relation to concerns about the quality of reading materials, and attitudes towards reading as potentially improving. NW also noted many similarities and crossovers with her research on online communities.

**The position of the researcher** in relation to the objects of study came up repeatedly in the discussion, leading to some interesting discussion of whether or not lurking was participatory and ethical. The loaded nature of the term and its sinister connotations were also remarked upon, particularly in the context of other terms such as flaneur or voyeur. The assumption that participation was a natural/normal state online was also critiqued and it was pointed out that attitudes and forms of participation vary across genres.

Another recurring topic of discussion was **the categorisation of readers**. We discussed whether the readers could/should be described as fans, the differences between professional/academic and amateur/nonacademic readers, and whether in fact all online users are readers of some kind. In the discussion of the focus groups, the issue of how far readers self-categorised (SL) was raised, and the need to provide more context for the kinds of interpretative frameworks used by various kinds of readers was mentioned. The PI responded that work

had already been started on providing in-depth qualitative analysis of the results and the wider context of the research, and that this would accompany the presentation of quantitative data in the full report and any subsequent publications.

Several participants (DP, SW, AK) talked about the importance of analysing the language used by readers, as well as paying close attention to how their **contributions were situated within specific discourse contexts** which in turn shaped and influenced the kinds of contributions they made (SL). For example, it was suggested that the protocols/interpretative frameworks used on websites and the membership status/categorization of readers might structure their responses. Contradictions were noted in the value attitudes held towards different spaces (e.g. forums vs blog) and the notions of online equality/anonymity that students and participants had mentioned were felt to be outdated.

The discussion suggested that **notions relating to the social practice of reading and intimacy/the material form of literature are reconceptualised online**. The notion of 'energy' online troubled some participants. It was suggested that 'restlessness' might be a digital consequence and argued that the attitudes documented by the study revealed assumptions about reading as monotasking that might not be valid. DP suggested that a 'cline' of social reading existed and was apparent in online spaces.

**Links between devices and content were noted**, and the argument that technology drives format was put forward. The extent to which economic factors and pre-existing readerships influenced the emergence and dominance of certain genres and reading communities was also raised, as was the issue of the materiality of the reading experience, and whether readers noted losses as well as gains with electronic devices (KH). The importance of the material object (e.g. as seen in the fetishisation of individuals' kindles, covers etc) was remarked upon. IH raised the point that many digital devices seldom handle paratextual material well: either there is too much (Project Gutenberg) or none at all (launching straight into main body of text or similar, e.g. in hacked ebooks).

As the discussion dealt more explicitly with issues affecting readers of comic books, some interesting points were made about **the concept of ownership**, and whether readers of comics saw themselves as renting rather than owning texts (IH). It was also suggested that the stigma against self-publishing was nowhere near as strong when it comes to comic books due to the historical evolution of the industry and specifically its underground publishing and fanzine movements (IH). Again, the focus tended to be on the materiality of the reading experience, and the kinds of practices that readers engage in.

### **Future Directions for the Research**

The overwhelming feeling amongst participants was that 'going small' rather than attempting large scale data analysis might be more productive. In

particular, there was strong support for more creative approaches to engaging with readers, for example through asking them to write stories or blogs based on their experiences. NW suggested that the research could focus on following specific individuals and their journeys as readers, and this idea received a favourable reaction from other participants.

It was suggested by some of the participants that the research questions needed to be refined and clarified, and that perhaps these should be split into separate areas. Although linked, there was a clear research strand relating to the use of e-readers/digital *devices* to *consume* literature, and other focusing on the use of forums/digital *spaces* to *respond* to literature. The CI responded that as this had been an exploratory study we had focused it around research aims (to explore and harness the enthusiasm we perceived students held for digital devices and spaces) rather than clearly delineated questions but that follow-on studies would separate out these two areas.

There was also some discussion of the 'digital transformations' theme and whether in fact anything significant was being transformed here. In terms of methodology, as noted earlier, there was a strong current of opinion in favour of contextualizing the data, and providing some qualitative, in-depth analysis. It was also suggested that the researchers could include more reflection on their own roles as readers with a professional interest in getting people to talk about their reading, and with regards to how the concept of readership itself is understood and used in specific communities.