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## Readers as Audiences

Wendy Griswold, Elizabeth Lenaghan,  
and Michelle Naffziger

“Reading,” an instantly recognizable and socially valued activity, has boundaries that are difficult to discern. Changes in both the delivery of written words and the breadth of access to them have drawn attention to the instability of concepts like “the reader” and “the book/text.” There is nothing new about this. When a letter from a student abroad in London arrived in a colonial Nigerian village, a literate community member would transmit its contents to the nonliterate parents. Who is the reader here? Is it the person who mechanically translates the letter from written to oral form, or the parents who memorize the contents and scrutinize the words for what is said and left unsaid? What is the text, the words on paper or the set of connotations and implications drawn by the parents? Online reading and electronic media present such questions in a different technological form and context, but they remain the same questions. The analyst may take an expansive or restrictive view of the process and practices, but the absence of bright lines between reading and some other activity (e.g. scanning blogs or downloading podcasts of news reports) is a constant.

That being the case, the following discussion is shaped by several choices. First, we are not focusing on literacy – as in who develops the capacity to decode writing – but on the practices of reading. Second, in keeping with most of the social scientific and indeed the popular uses of the term, we define *reading* to be leisure time reading; literacy is required for an increasing percentage of occupations worldwide, but to say someone is “a reader” or “likes to read” refers to their leisure pursuits rather than to their occupational requirements. Third, we draw primarily on the research involving traditional genres, especially “the book.” While the ways in which texts can reach their potential audience are rapidly evolving and multiplying, books continue to be the model that new media emulate, as when electronic reading devices, like Apple’s iPad and Amazon’s Kindle, replicate the printed page.

A reader is an individual, and readers are aggregates of individuals, but an audience is a collectivity, a mass phenomenon whose attributes are not the sum of individual components. So what might conceiving of readers as “an audience” offer us? Conceptualizing readers-as-audience encourages an emphasis, first, upon the social, economic, and political context in which reading takes place; and, second, upon the agency of readers as constructors of meaning, images of passivity having been superseded by those that emphasize interpretive agency.<sup>1</sup>

Cultural studies, to take a prominent disciplinary example, has looked at readers in context since its mid-twentieth-century inception. Hoggart (1957) considered television, along with “degraded” media such as magazines, a threat to the traditional rhythms and values of British working-class life, while Wertham (1955) argued that comic books endangered the sensibilities and morality of young Americans. By the mid-1980s, the image of vulnerable readers gave way to an emphasis on resilience and resistance (Willis 1977; Morley 1980; Fiske 1989). This made way not only for readers to be understood as more active interpreters of texts, but also for less canonical interpretations of texts to gain legitimacy, as in Radway’s (1984) seminal look at how women readers of romance novels rationalize their practice and understand its meaning in ways not suggested by the ontological boundaries of the text itself.

Both linguistic and cultural studies theories find contemporary analogs in reader response criticism and reception studies. Emerging directly from the structuralist and poststructuralist movements (including Barthes 1968/1977), reader response criticism emphasizes the individual reader’s role in constructing the meaning of texts. Reception studies, while also emphasizing the individual’s role in meaning making, go to greater lengths to situate individual responses within a larger cultural context. In its earliest incarnations, both reader response criticism and reception studies found inspiration in the work of Jauss (1982) and Iser (1974, 1978), whose phenomenological approaches to reading were seen as a departure from the Marxist emphasis on production (see also Fish 1980). Feminist and ethnic studies scholars, rejecting the concept of the “universal reader,” have explored discrete, marginalized text communities (Radway 1997; Bobo 1992; Currie 1999; Sonnet 1999, 2000).

An audience perspective, then, suggests that the analyst might conceive of readers, or of a readership, as a collective body. The readers-as-audience may share socio-economic and/or demographic characteristics, may be targeted as a group, and may respond to or resist literary messages. Furthermore, members of the collectivity may influence one another through interaction or because of a shared identification. The scale of the audience (from universal to micro) is an empirical question, as is the degree of agency the group exercises. Beyond what they share with all audiences, readers have specific and defining attributes as well. These include both the material conditions that reading entails and the social practices and institutions surrounding reading. An audience for a live concert, for example, is interacting with a transient cultural object compared with a book’s stability and availability; a theater audience has the potential for collective effervescence while a reading audience is an abstraction

from what are typically private engagements with texts. Following is a consideration of how these specific attributes impact the readers-as-audience model.

### **Books as Material Objects, Reading as Physical Practice**

Taking into account the material properties of books means considering how the physical act of reading is directly tied to the physicality of books themselves. The burgeoning field of book history contains a number of steps in this direction. McKenzie (1985) and McGann (1983) helped to move textual studies beyond the impulse to create essentialist distinctions between different types of texts (i.e. print vs. digital) and back toward a rhetoric of material forms. McGann, in particular, has specified what he terms “the poetics of the book” to discuss the production and distribution of books in terms of their material properties (page format, paper, typeface etc.). As Chartier (2002) has since argued,

Readers, in fact, never confront abstract, idealized texts detached from any materiality. They hold in their hands, or perceive, objects and forms whose structures and modalities govern their reading or hearing and consequently the possible comprehension of the text read or heard. (p. 48)

Chartier, like McGann, emphasizes the importance of the institutional structures governing the reception and production of books, concluding,

We must insist that there is no text outside the material structure in which it is given to be read or heard. Thus there is no comprehension of writing, whatever it may be, which does not depend in some part upon the forms in which it comes to the reader. (p. 51)

The material culture approach, which focuses on these forms, offers a position from which to theorize the physical role of the book, even though it sometimes concentrates on the book-as-object to an extent that obscures the complexities of the surrounding social world. Other studies maintain a balance between attention to the physical properties of the book and the social world in which books circulate.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most successful efforts look at archival evidence from the beginnings of book printing and circulation to explore the role of books in the development of society and culture (Johns 1998; Swann 2001; Andersen and Sauer 2004; Brown 2007; Chartier 2007). In addition to detailing what books were printed and read in the burgeoning print cultures of early modern Europe and colonial America, these studies also detail how books were purchased, circulated, and displayed in both private and public places. This attention to the consumption and social rituals surrounding books, necessarily, pays close attention to their representation as material objects.

Another trend in recent research has responded to the perceived threat that digital content poses for the book as physical object by focusing on how the material forms of both historic and contemporary texts carry meanings that cannot be found in their digital reproductions. Journals such as *Modern Intellectual History* and *PMLA*, for example, have published special issues on book history that, according to editorial introductions, were inspired by just these concerns (Price 2006; Bell 2007). Lerer's (2006) epilogue to *PMLA*'s effort explicitly addresses this growing attention in both the scholarly and popular understanding of books. He counters decades-old predictions of the book's demise with centuries-old accounts of the joys of reading in bed, suggesting that he "can't imagine curling up with a computer" and elaborating, "I can imagine falling asleep in front of a screen but not 'over' one, the preposition *over* powerfully carries with it both the physical place of the reader and the imaginative space generated by that place" (p. 234, emphasis in original).

Lerer's attempt to distinguish the book from its digital form, based entirely on its physical properties, is echoed in the more popular accounts of journalists and bloggers, whose chronicles of the latest e-book ventures suggestively call into question the sorts of casual (though valued) facets of reading culture that might be lost to e-reading technology. These accounts include the serendipitous pleasures of digesting the titles consumed by fellow readers in coffee shops or on public transport, judging the tastes of potential lovers from the books in their collection, or taking in the smells and sights of public research libraries (Crain 2007; Grafton 2007; Dominus 2008; Donadio 2008). The significance of the loss of such encounters and the gains of digitalization is explored by professional organizations such as the (now) transatlantic Institute for the Future of the Book.<sup>3</sup>

Together, both print and digital as well as the academic and popular attempts to examine the significance of the physical form of the book point toward a contemporary desire to acknowledge and understand the importance of books as material objects. The consequences of such study not only help us to understand the role that books play in the larger social milieu in which reading takes place, but also indicate that the value of reading may not be solely determined by the content of books alone. Rather the materiality of books might determine both the propensity for, and the pleasure in, reading.

### **Books as Social Objects, Reading as Social Practice<sup>4</sup>**

Historically a culture's "reading class" (Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright 2005) has been populated by a small minority, usually of men engaged in commerce or in religious or government administration. So a reading class is not the same as a broad-based reading culture, and indeed reading classes often flourish without reading cultures. Qing Dynasty China, for example, was administered by a reading

class populated by the bureaucrats known as the *literati*, while most Chinese were illiterate. The manuscript culture of medieval European monasteries and the Koranic interpretation of conservative Islamic cultures of the past and present offer clear examples of elite reading classes separate from reading cultures. Readers, therefore, have been a privileged minority throughout most of human history. Although written records and communications became established in certain institutional niches, most people continued to occupy themselves with basic tasks – farming and hunting, tending children, and fighting – for which reading and writing were not much help. Reading was mainly useful for activities involving coordination and memory – administration, trade, and organized religion – and early readers were the people involved in these activities: rulers and their staffs, merchants, and priests. Even in so-called literate societies, the vast majority, including almost all women, almost all rural people, and most slaves, did not read.

Every society that has writing has a reading class, but not everyone who can read is a member. All societies with written language have a reading class, but few have a reading culture. A reading culture is a society where reading is expected, valued, and common. A reading class has a stable set of characteristics that include its human capital (education), its economic capital (wealth, income, occupational positions), its social capital (networks of personal connections), its demographic characteristics (gender, age, religion, ethnic composition), and – the defining and noneconomic characteristic – its cultural practices. Only during the past two centuries, and only in northwestern Europe, North America, Japan, and a few cities elsewhere, did reading become routine. It took the Industrial Revolution for reading to become a common leisure time activity, because when industrialism began to give way to the postindustrial society, reading became a vehicle to achieve secure employment in better jobs. In this handful of places, the reading culture also became a “reading audience” in which the majority of the adult population participated. So while the term *readers* could refer to each and any of these reading formations, it may be useful to reserve the term *reading audience* for readers whose reading experiences settle on a particular type of reading material.<sup>5</sup> For some material the reading audience may both be considerable and be largely independent of the reading class. An example is the immense reading audience for evangelical Christian fiction (E. Smith 2007). For other materials, such as academic research texts, the reading audience may be quite tiny.

In countries with essentially total adult literacy, something like half of all adults read books now and then, and something like 15% are heavy readers, the heart and soul of the reading class.

Surveys of reading conducted in various high-income countries over the past 50 years have repeatedly found that about 80 to 90 percent of the population reads *something*; 50 to 60 percent of the population reads books as a chosen leisure activity; and 10 to 15 percent of the population are avid readers, who borrow and buy the lion’s share of books, magazines, newspapers, and other media consumed. (Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer 2006, pp. 17–18)

The NEA (2004) survey found that about 17% of Americans are *frequent readers* (reading 12–49 books/year), while only 4% are *avid readers* (reading 50+ books per year). Internationally, these figures vary somewhat – Scandinavians and Japanese are particularly heavy readers, while southern Europeans read less – but the basic pattern is roughly the same in developed countries: most people can read and do so as their work or daily lives require, about half read for leisure, and a few read a great deal.

The demographic patterns for developed countries are consistent as well. Readers in general (the 50% or so who read books) and the reading class (the 15% or so who read a lot) are highly educated; their amount of education is by far the strongest predictor of whether or not someone reads. They also tend to be urban, affluent, middle-aged, and female. The picture is often different in developing countries, where male literacy is invariably higher than female literacy and where older cohorts may have considerably less education than younger ones. Developed or not, individual countries often vary along religious and ethnic lines too; some minorities (e.g. African Americans) read less than average even when education is controlled, while others (Jews in North America and Europe) read more.

Readers have distinctive social characteristics as well. They tend to be very involved in cultural and civic life. Surveys show that readers have high rates of participation in the arts. Perhaps more surprising, given popular images of bookworms as introverts being lost in their reading, readers score higher than nonreaders on virtually all measures of civic and political participation: voting, membership in associations, and volunteerism. It is this tendency toward active participation, along with the characteristics of education and affluence, that give the reading class power and influence far beyond its relatively modest numbers.

So while elegies for the “death of the book/print/reading” harken back to a time when the book/print/reading lived and flourished, taken in historical perspective, this period was a mid-nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century anomaly. Today, as the use of electronic media increases, we are seeing a return to the norm: a thin slice of “readers” cut from a loaf of nonreaders. These nonreaders are literate, reading constantly for their work and for some of the business of everyday life, but they do not lose themselves in books, they rarely subscribe to newspapers or magazines, and they are seldom called *readers* by family and friends.

## **Institutions Bringing Social and Material Together**

A vast institutional apparatus supports reading and readers, and these institutions perpetuate the social prestige of reading. Education is the most familiar example. Much of the early work of Bourdieu (1984) concentrated on how schools and schooling naturalize and justify social inequality. Similarly discussions of “the canon” emphasize the privileging of “good reading,” while the response of

multicultural education has aggressively broadened the definition of quality, and some proponents of popular culture want to do away with it altogether. Religion is another institutional field that legitimates, even makes sacred, certain texts and certain ways of reading. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are all “religions of the book,” organized around scriptures believed to be divinely inspired or written. The third of the major institutional fields is commerce. Books were one of the first products of a consumer society. Urbanization and modernization bring newspapers, bookstores, and a reading public. Today books and other texts circulate globally and, especially in electronic format, almost freely, although authoritarian regimes still try to control them. The fourth institutional field that supports reading is the state itself, and virtually all levels of government. No form of cultural practice has anything approaching the extent of relentless government support and promotion as reading. At all levels from the local to the transnational, governments promote reading and literature through, for example, support of public libraries and promotion of literary festivals (Augst and Carpenter 2007). The authority of the regime is built on and supported by the sacred status of books.

Books and reading shape consumption practices well beyond the actual sale of reading materials. A wealth of consumer products beyond media spinoffs accompanies a reading phenomenon like the *Harry Potter* or the *Twilight* series. Many bookstores incorporate coffee shops and “third places” for community gathering.<sup>6</sup> More rarified spaces exist: the Library Hotel in New York City offers its guests over 6000 volumes of books organized throughout the hotel by the Dewey Decimal System. Interior decorators follow Anthony Powell’s (1971) advice on elite domestic spaces: “Books do furnish a room.”<sup>7</sup> Institutional supports, from the stable (education, public libraries), to the episodic (literary festivals), to the trendy (the Library Hotel), support, create, and reward readers, thereby shaping both the reading audience and those who do not read themselves but observe this audience. Consider how this works in two different fields: the macro-institutional level of schools, and the micro-interactional level of book groups.

### Reading and schools

When scholars consider the practice of reading in the context of schools, their work builds from the fundamental assumption that reading is intimately tied to the development, transformation, or maintenance of the social order. Research in this area asks what students read; how this varies by ability, race, or class; what values are associated with the content of reading; and how particular values or reading practices are translated into costs or benefits for students and, more broadly, various groups within society.

Reading can be understood as a mechanism for developing human capital in the form of cognitive skills and linguistic tools (Bernstein 1964, 1973; Coleman 1988). Sociologists take gaps in reading ability as evidence of broader race- and class-based

inequalities (Farkas 2000; Jencks and Phillips 1998). Exacerbating differences in ability, in some tracked school systems teachers teach standard literature to high school students in higher tracks but young adult fiction to students in lower tracks (Oakes 1986; Gamoran 1993).

Looking beyond the question of ability, some scholars understand the practice of reading, and reading certain texts, in terms of status culture and as a form of capital that can be mobilized for social advantages (Weber 1946; Collins 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1984). Regarding cultural capital as an indicator and/or basis for class position, Bourdieu argued that class-based attitudes, preferences, and behaviors are conceptualized as “tastes” which can be mobilized for social selection. Dominant groups use such cultural capital to define their boundaries and justify exclusion even in the eyes of the excluded. Schools are a key venue for the translation of cultural capital into social advantages. Collins (1971) goes so far as to suggest that their primary function is to teach status cultures in the form of “vocabulary and inflection, styles of dress, aesthetic tastes, values and manners” (p. 1010); such education will be advantageous when “the fit is greatest between the culture of the status groups emerging from schools, and the status group doing the hiring” (p. 1012).

Many studies consider reading as one component of cultural capital. As such, these analyses test for effects of participation in high-status culture activities on school achievement (see DiMaggio 1982; Farkas et al. 1990; Lareau and Weininger 2003, among many others). Parent-to-child reading is considered essential for student school success. Educators and public officials regard the practice of parents reading to children as virtually sacred. What is read matters less than how they read with their families. Parent-to-child reading is understood both as developing human capital and as preparing children for successful interactions in schools. When children read with their parents, they learn to take and use meanings according to shared community rules (Heath 1983, 1996). When children get to schools, these meanings influence their chances of success.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars also assess how actors value reading by focusing on battles over *what* students should read. Primary, secondary, and postsecondary reading content all serve as battlegrounds for contestation. Actors can and do engage in these battles on both through challenges to entire curricula or specific disciplinary canons, and through opposition to particular books. In a review of research on higher education, Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2008) find that because universities grant status and legitimate knowledge, university actors and content become the target of political contestation. Small-scale battles, often targeting school libraries, tend to focus on battles over particular books in the form of censorship. Censorship may result from a moral reform movement or from class-based efforts at social reproduction (Beisel 1990), or it may be based on shifting evaluations (e.g. the depiction of African Americans and the removal from school curricula of books that use the word *nigger* such as *Huckleberry Finn*). Control over reading can be used as a tool for social reproduction, but at the same time actors imbue freedom to

read with a democratic ethos. Librarians shifted from being “moral censors” in the late 1800s to being “guardian[s] of the freedom to read” in the early twentieth century (Geller 1984, p. xv).

### **Book groups**

Book groups “constitute one of the largest bodies of community participation in the arts” (Poole 2003, cited in Burwell 2007, p. 285). A Google.com search on the phrase “book club” produces 23,700,000 hits. Book clubs are growing rapidly, with estimates of 500,000 in the United States as of 2002, 50,000 in the United Kingdom (Hartley 2002), and 40,750 in Canada (Sedo 2002). Further, Sedo has estimated the individual membership of book clubs in the United States at 17,230,933 and in Canada at between 244,500 and 489,000. As this growth continues, more and more people will experience and interpret specific books in groups rather than solely as individuals.

Reading in groups for both black and white women dates back to nineteenth-century literary societies and is intimately connected to social reform (McHenry 2002; Murray 2002; Long 2003; Kelly 2008). In her study of the Boston Gleaning Circle, the first postrevolutionary reading group not connected to a particular institution, Kelly (2008) finds that women used the space of the reading circle to puzzle through the rights and responsibilities of women citizens. They developed their reading and social practices based on transatlantic traditions and cultural institutions and engaged in and informed this discourse. Women in this group were dedicated to “the improvement of the mind” (p. 8). The group would write as they read and share those communications with one another. They used one another to understand their world: “meeting in this social way to search for truth” (p. 9).

Long’s (2003) survey of 73 contemporary reading groups in Houston showed that members of book clubs generally match the demographic criteria of readers outlined by Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright (2005). Long found that book club members are generally highly educated, affluent, stable, and traditional with regard to marriage and religion. Indeed, ethnographic work on book clubs generally focuses on groups of women readers (see also Eberle 1997, 2007).

Considering the homogeneity of reading group membership, texts serve as sites for “encounters with difference” that are “more likely to occur through textual engagement than through encounters with other members” (Burwell 2007, p. 285). Readers work collectively to make sense of books in relation to their own subjectivities and experiences:

[P]articipants in book groups create a conversation that begins with the book each woman has read but moves beyond the book to include personal connections and meanings each has found in the book, and the new connections with the book, with

inner experience, and with the perspectives of the other participants that emerge within the discussion. (Long 2003, p. 144)

One way that groups of readers use texts is to look for guidance on how to identify and handle problems, both public and private. Readers look to books for “equipment for living” (Burke 1973), but sometimes readers produce surprising interpretations of seemingly straightforward texts. Some readers challenge conventional interpretations of genres, such as those who read romances to defy traditional gender roles (Radway 1983, 1984). Long (2003) argues that the groups she studied did more than passively look to books for advice on how to live. Instead, she found that groups constructed collective reflections on life that resonated with their experiences and with an ideal sense of how the world should be; reading group discussions are “creative cultural work” enabling members “to articulate or even discover who they are: their values, their aspirations, and their stance toward the dilemmas of their worlds” (p. 145).

While the typical reading group takes place in a private home, libraries are increasingly starting book clubs. Library science journals abound with articles providing advice on what makes a book club effective, why libraries should offer them, and how effective book clubs operate. For example, in *Teacher Librarian*, Hall (2007) shares lessons learned from running a “really popular book club,” which include incorporating movies, field trips, even a sleepover and other activities to keep students excited about and engaged in the club’s book choices (see also Solan 2006; Priddis 2007). Some educators also argue for the establishment of book clubs in school to encourage participation and better engage young readers. Heller (2006) found that when first graders discuss nonfiction books in a book club–like setting, children retell the facts they’ve learned as well as employ narratives to make sense of the information they encountered in this genre of book. And Twomey (2007), building on past research on how book club members reshape their understandings of the social world, advocates incorporating books clubs in education to encourage critical thinking.

A growing body of scholarship considers the impact of television talk show host Oprah Winfrey’s popular book club on how and what America reads and the effects of that reading (Sedo 2002; Hall 2003; Striphas 2003; Farr 2004; B. Smith 2007). Oprah’s book club, which is broadcast as part of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, appeared in two incarnations, first from 1996 to 2002 and then again from 2003 until the present. In its second incarnation, Oprah rebranded the book club as *Traveling with the Classics*, focusing on literary classics and incorporating travel to sites in the chosen books.

In her book on this subject, Farr argues that through her book club, Oprah advocates a “cultural democracy” because she encourages her readers to “challenge given standards of taste in social contexts” (2004, p. 107). Farr understands this cultural democracy as founded on “aesthetic freedom” (p. 101). Oprah expands the base of who can read, what they should read, and how they should read as she uses

novels to “invite social interaction as well as intellectual engagement and personal transformation [which] affirms a wider and more generous standard for evaluating fiction” (p. 102). Oprah’s book club reaffirms that “reading, valuing, and assessing literature is, and has long been, a democratic activity” (p. 103). Similarly, Fuller (2007) finds that a popular Canadian radio broadcast, *Canada Reads*, promotes a combination of reading practices that are both academic and widely engaged in by face-to-face book groups. He encourages researchers to develop “nuanced analyses of non-academic reading practices and theories capable of explaining the pleasures, politics, and social relations that reading practices both shape and resist.”

The internet provides an infrastructure to support both online and face to face reading groups. The website [www.ReadersCircle.org](http://www.ReadersCircle.org) lists author events and 764 book groups open to new members in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Readers are now organizing and sharing titles they have read through more than two dozen social-networking sites by names such as aNobii, Booktribes, LibraryThing, Shelfari, Squirrel, and All Consuming (Schubert 2007). Such groups represent another way for readers to connect to one another as they engage with texts. In her study of an online mystery book group, Fister (2005) finds that though virtual, the group she studied actively works to build and maintain community. Club members share book recommendations and reviews with one another, building an international network of friendships in the process. Relationships sometimes extend beyond books as well, through the “sunshine club,” a subcommittee of members who offer extra support and encouragement to members going through hard times. For Fister, who estimates that thousands of online reading groups have formed, these groups provide “a sense of community with books at the center” (p. 309). And in an online survey of 252 members of face-to-face and online reading groups, Sedo (2002) finds that virtual groups and face-to-face groups share many similarities. Members in both kinds of groups enjoy the intellectual stimulation provided by participation in these groups. She argues that virtual group members most appreciate the exposure to new books, while face-to-face members value sharing ideas and learning from one another. Face-to-face groups tend to meet once a month for between two to four hours at a time, while virtual groups sometimes discuss books daily. “The virtual meetings allow the reader to transcend physical, geographical and time boundaries, enriching her interpretations of the book” (Sedo 2002, p. 16).

## Death and Resurrection

If predictions about the death of print, the death of the book, and even the death of reading are correct, exactly what is imagined to have died? In popular and academic discourse, the death of the book is linked to four things: literacy, reading, print, and “the book.” No one supposes that the actual ratios of illiterates to

literates is increasing, but what the Jeremiad predictions of the “death of literacy” focus on is a decrease in the literacy competence required by the labor market, which they assume is and will have a destructive impact on international competitiveness.

In the case of reading, the argument is that people are literate but they simply don't read. By read, all studies mean read in leisure time, not reading for work or school, and many studies refer to “serious” or “literary” reading, distinguishing between this and more popular or ephemeral reading materials. The National Endowment for the Arts issued a grim report in 2004: “The report can be ... summarized in a single sentence: literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young.” As for print, Gomez (2008), a writer turned publisher who has worked in e-books and online marketing, says this shift is already happening as new technologies cause declines in old media, not just books but also magazines, newspapers, network television, and movie attendance. Print material will go the way of music, “ending up as a digital file, instead of as a physical thing” (p. 16). Gomez argues that authors “won't ultimately care” any more than musicians do because “it's the writer's words that touch us, not the paper those words were printed on.” In these critiques, a cultural object has emerged, not “books” but “the book,” that incorporates all of these: literacy, leisure reading practices, and print. The “dead” metaphor “incorporates” quite literally “the book” as body, its materiality.<sup>9</sup>

While the death of “the book” is related to the death of print, the emphasis here is not simply on materiality – print versus digital media – but also upon the form itself. “Books” are linear, while digital “content” is splayed out and may be accessed at any point. Commenting on an article in *The Economist*, Gomez concedes that good points are raised, but is disgusted that

[a]fter extolling all of the virtues of electronic books, the writer trots out the standard ‘the book is perfect’ argument.... *The Economist* classifies all readers as similar, noting that the most important thing to them was not to be interrupted while they're reading. This is a silly if not insane notion. Readers are changing ... some people will continue to hug novels in bay windows on autumn days, basking in the warm glow of a fireplace with a cup of chamomile at their side. But many more will embrace the convenience and advanced usability that digital technology and electronic reading provides. (pp. 26–27)

He argues – without evidence – that the novel itself will change into “short, pithy bursts.” So far this prediction is not borne out by the types of new writing available. Most novels remain linear narratives just as in the past. So debates over the death or nondeath of reading are unabashedly premised on technological change and ignore the social dimensions of reading. There are two aspects to this debate that warrant further attention. One is the variation in global reading audiences. The second is the social position of reading.

Research about global reading audiences concentrates on the literacy of adult populations; the degree of tertiary education; the inequality of education by gender; book and newspaper production per capita; reading surveys; and any other indicators of unequal distribution of reading practices, such as different religious or cultural traditions. Such research suggests that there are four types of reading cultures, each with specific configurations of reading audiences: advanced, restricted, emerging, and potential reading cultures:

- *Advanced reading cultures* occur in countries with substantial tertiary education (above 50%) and established reading practices (as indicated by newspaper circulation, book production, library use, and survey data).
- *Restricted reading cultures* occur where lower percentages of the population access tertiary education and reading practices in general are weaker. They are characterized by well-established reading classes but considerably less middle-class or mass reading. This is the case in Italy and some Muslim countries.
- *Emerging reading cultures* are similar but demonstrate rapidly increasing participation in tertiary education and attempts to redress historical inequalities of region and gender. Some countries, like Portugal, have introduced explicit programs to increase reading.
- *Potential reading cultures* tend to be found in nations that are changing slowly or where improvements are disrupted by war. These are countries, like Nigeria and Sierra Leone, with very low rates of participation in tertiary education, that are unable to provide a secure social basis for a reading class beyond the narrow elite.

The global situation demonstrates considerable diversity, but would seem to herald an increase in elite reading classes at the expense of reading cultures. However, we should bring technology back into the picture at this point because it seems likely that the new media, user-generated content (UGC), and web 2.0 are not bringing about the death of reading, or a postprint age, or the disappearance of the book in ink-on-dead-trees form, but are changing the nature and type of reading experiences available.

First, consider the demographic likenesses and differences between the new media class and the established reading class. To a large extent, they include the same people. In terms of internet use, the *digerati* are the *literati*. Heavy users of new media and heavy readers are (above all) highly educated, and they tend to be affluent and urban as well. They represent advantaged groups in most societies, yet the two classes are not entirely congruent. This leads us back to the issue of “reading audiences” and, more specifically, to the question of who reads e-books. Historians do (Grafton 2007), and so do students and academics, though, as McKiel (2007) notes, even these prefer print books.

Students are judging e-books as inferior to finding and using regular books – a process that they understand well and find easy to do. They also judge e-books to be

inferior to books because of the portability and ease of use for reading print books. . . . The e-book collection is not primarily purchased as a collection of books that would be read cover-to-cover. . . . Until e-book reading devices are preferred to printed books and are commonly available, the e-book collection will not be seen as preferable when the intent is to read an entire work. (p. 3)

As argued earlier, reading for pleasure distinguishes both the reading class, and the reading audience of the present and future. Yet McKeil finds that it is academic, not public, libraries that use e-books. Public libraries “serve a much higher proportion of their patrons with content that is read cover to cover, much of it fiction. The primary mission of an academic library is the provision of content for research and teaching” (p. 2). And while it has been the mission of Apple iPad, Sony Reader, and Amazon.com’s Kindle to change this, it is not clear what success they have had. Neither Sony nor Amazon reports sales (Amazon’s reluctance on this is especially surprising given their heavy promotion of the Kindle).<sup>10</sup>

According to the PEW Report (2007) 8% of American adults are technology “Omnivores... Web 2.0 devotees, highly engaged with video online and digital content. Between blogging, maintaining their Web pages, remixing digital content, or posting their creations to the websites, they are creative participants in cyberspace.” They are predominantly men (70%) and in their twenties (53%). Students and academics, sometimes reluctantly, use new media forms for ready access to information, but there is little evidence that any group of leisure readers is relying primarily on e-books, reading online, or other forms of new media for their reading.

The core of the reading class is very different in composition. It is mostly middle-aged people, especially women (55–60%). In terms of the PEW (2007) study, they are closest to the “connected but hassled” group; they are online to manage their work and domestic affairs, but not to read in what little leisure time they have. Given these differences, and despite the fact that they draw from the same pool of educated and advantaged readers, the new media class seems unlikely to replace the reading class (young men will not become middle-aged women), and the reading class seems unlikely to convert wholesale to digital books.

A second reason why the reading class is not dying is social, specifically the social life of books – which is not quite the same as the social life of information. A wealth of research suggests that technology per se rarely produces social or cultural change (print using movable type may have been the exception to the rule). More typically, technological innovations facilitate people doing what they were already doing, only more efficiently. So if what people “were already doing” is getting information, then media other than books-on-paper may be preferable. But people do other things with books. Most notably, they entertain themselves, and nothing has beaten the book in terms of portability and use in all personal spaces – the bath, the bed, and public transportation. They use books in interactions – bringing the marked-up copy to the book club – and as objects of loan, trade, and gift. They collect and display books, and in these activities the material nature of

the book is paramount. They signal interests, passions, and other identity markers through the books they carry, the books they are observed reading on planes and in coffee houses (this doesn't work for Kindles, although an e-book reader might signal something else, like technology geek). None of these aspects of the social life of books is conveyed in the books-as-vehicles-for-information model, and to confuse these is to misunderstand the reading audience and its desires.

The third reason is cultural. Reading is a sign of status and has explicit connections to the realm of the sacred.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, it is accorded immense social honor, even by those who are not themselves part of the reading class. This is why there are so many institutional supports for reading, seen most dramatically in literary festivals and One Book programs.<sup>12</sup>

### **Readers and Social Honor: A Lesson from Africa**

A West African case vividly illustrates the social prestige accorded to readers everywhere (Griswold, McDonnell, and Metz 2006). Ghanaian and Nigerian internet users of all ages were surprised when asked if their online time affected their reading. They uniformly insisted that the internet had no impact on reading, unless it was to support it by providing access to information about authors and books. They did think that their internet use competed for time with a number of things – they mentioned phone calls, hanging out with friends, watching television after school, and writing letters – but not with reading. This is consistent with what seems to be the case in the West: internet use has a negative relationship with television watching, but either no impact or a slightly positive one on reading. Although the internet-reading relationship may be similarly noncompetitive, the reasons for this are somewhat different. In the West, the positive relationship between internet use and reading is an example of the more general point that educated people do more of just about everything. Surveys have shown that middle-class people don't just participate more in highbrow culture; they also participate in just about every form of cultural activity (Erickson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). We suspect the same is true for West Africans. In West Africa, to a far greater extent than in the West, reading and going online occupy different physical, temporal, social, and especially cultural spaces from each other.

In Nigeria and Ghana, people read for pleasure in their homes, in private vehicles (for those lucky enough to ride in them), or – for students – in the school library. They go online in cybercafés. They read after their evening meal, or in the early morning. They also read at work, more or less surreptitiously, and on their way to work if the vehicle is not too crowded. Adults, especially job seekers, use the internet in the daytime, and students – the most frequent users – go online in the mid-afternoon and early evening. Electrical failures drive Nigerians and Ghanaians from their televisions to their local cybercafés. Loss of power has less impact on reading,

which does not require electric light during the day. West Africans view reading as a private activity (even if surrounded by other people), while they regard going online as a social activity. Internet use is in public and often in groups. Moreover, going online is inherently social, maintaining ties to distant friends, relatives, and strangers (even scams are social). Middle-class women are a significant portion of the West African reading class but a negligible portion of the internet class.

Going online is new, trendy, and associated with youth and globalization, yet tainted for Nigerians by its association with scams. West Africans hold no comparable reservations about reading. On the contrary, the occasional persecution of journalists and writers has established them as cultural heroes. Reading is established, institutionally encouraged, and associated with elite practices and with wisdom and has the attractions of honor. Thus the two activities occupy different cultural positions; they do not compete in West African culture. Nigerians and Ghanaians read for information, for study, for self-improvement, for entertainment, and to enact and demonstrate their social status. They go online to maintain or initiate social connections, for fun, for practical reasons (school and job searches), and to enact and demonstrate their cosmopolitanism. The functions of the two activities overlap but are by no means congruent. West Africans regard reading as more serious, the mark of a refined person, someone of substance and gravity, while using the internet is fun, practical, and the mark of the young and the trendy.

There is every reason to believe that this separation between the sacred status of reading and the more profane (though possibly glamorous) states of other media use persists everywhere. Technological change does not unsettle longstanding cultural hierarchies but augments them. More generally, readers – whether we are talking about committed members of the reading class, reading audiences for specific kinds of materials, or the general literature population – exist in a network of social relations, material contingencies, status cultures, demographic relationships, micro-interaction contexts, global exchanges, and individual bodies that seek emotional and physical pleasure. Their reading cannot be reduced to information gathering, sheer escapism, or any other single dimension. Scholarship that acknowledges complexity will be on sounder footing than predictions based on a single angle of vision.

## Notes

- 1 Both early twentieth-century pragmatism (Park 1922; Dewey 1927) and later studies of mass communications (Lasswell 1927) and “uses and gratifications” (Blumler and Katz 1975; Katz 1990) influenced the reading-in-context approach. Schmidt, for example, advocated a “systems-oriented” approach to literature that locates readers as actors who inscribe meanings based on their cultural and structural context (1998, pp. 646–650). Other empirical studies of literature have taken more cognitive approaches to understanding how readers derive meaning from texts, for example by using experimental

designs to isolate how readers use textual features (such as word order or line breaks) and personal experiences to identify the important elements of a narrative (Miall 2006; see also Wolf 2007). More squarely in the mass communications tradition is work on marketing and consumer culture that looks at new systems for measuring audience behavior as shaping producer and consumer choice. Chris Anderson's (2006) "long-tail" theory, for example, looks at how seemingly infinite choices for consumer content (represented by online retailers such as Amazon, eBay, and Netflix) suggest new models for marketing and publicity that allow for greater consumer agency in determining a product's popularity or distribution. In the literary field, such methods have been used to study the adoption of the Bookscan Audience Measurement System in the American publishing industry (Andrews and Napoli 2006). Looking at how retailers' preferences for more accurate Bookscan technology forced publishers to change their longstanding practice of using bestseller lists to measure the success of newly published literature, these types of studies locate readers as an economic audience whose aggregate choices inform the behaviors of publishers and retailers.

- 2 Levenston (1992) and Danet (1997) are examples of studies that focus explicitly on the material aspects of their object of study at the expense of considering the larger social world from which these objects are derived.
- 3 See [www.futureofthebook.org](http://www.futureofthebook.org), sponsored by the University of Southern California and the MacArthur Foundation. In addition to regularly blogging on matters related to the evolution of print and media on their *if:book* site, the Institute's projects include maintenance and development of *Sophie* (a project of reading and writing rich media texts in a networked environment), *CommentPress* (a digital reading tool allowing users to comment on already-published texts in a conversational, networked manner), and *MediaCommons* (a site for scholars to post commentary and research on media-related themes). Their collective attempts to both probe and problematize the manner in which digital technologies engage material forms suggest the significance of physicality in even the most virtual realms.
- 4 Parts of this section are drawn from Griswold (2008).
- 5 As one study of reading audiences put it, "Audiences are not simply aggregates of readers. They are complicated social and textual formations; they have interpretive tendencies and ideological contours" (Klancher 1987, p. 6).
- 6 It is revealing that in the third (1999) edition of his 1989 book, Ray Oldenburg added "bookstores" to the list of public gathering spaces in the subtitle.
- 7 Anthony Powell's 1971 novel, *Books Do Furnish a Room*, which takes its title from a commonplace, was the tenth novel of his 12-volume cycle, *A Dance to the Music of Time*.
- 8 Cook-Gumperz (2006) identifies an early-modern link between literacy and virtue which still persists today. According to this approach, reading can be considered one aspect of a distinct interpretation of cultural capital in education as the ability for families to comply with institutional expectations (Lareau and Weininger 2003). Lareau finds that student success in elementary and secondary schools varies by class and depends on parents' ability to meet school expectations for parental involvement (see Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau 2000).
- 9 OED Incorporate: I. trans. 1. To combine or unite into one body or uniform substance; to mix or blend thoroughly together (a number of different things or one thing with another). [f. late L. *incorpor{amac}t-*, ppl. stem of *incorpor{amac}re* to embody, include, f. *in-* (IN-2) + *corpor{amac}re* to form into a body, CORPORATE v.]

- 10 On September 11, 2008, Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg reported in *The Wall Street Journal's* Technology page that "The online retailer [Amazon.com] has steadily refused to provide any information regarding the number of Kindles in use.... Sony hasn't released sales figures for its device."
- 11 For a historical analysis of the overlap between reading and the sacred, especially as manifested in library architecture, see Augst (2007).
- 12 One of the most dramatic examples of collective reading is the multiplicity of "One Book, One City [or state, or community, or university, etc.]" programs. The idea started in 1998 when Nancy Pearl, a librarian and the head of the Washington State Center for the Book, launched a program called "What if All Seattle Read the Same Book?" Although Pearl and her colleagues thought the venture might fall flat, "One Book" programs were irresistible, tapping into readers' desires for intelligent discussions, libraries' desires to increase visibility in the community, and mayors' desires to associate their cities with the prestige of literature. "One Book" programs have proliferated in the United States and have spread to Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. In the United States, the Library of Congress attempts to maintain a list of the more prominent programs, although of course the plethora of university and institutional programs slip below the radar. See <http://www.read.gov/resources/> for a current listing.

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