

Reading Fiction in The Digital Age

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The focus of the snapshot of publications on the bookshelf above the desk on which I am writing this article¹ is a red book entitled *THE BOOK* by Keith Houston. Published in 2016, it bears a subtitle with a questionable claim: “a cover-to-cover exploration of the most powerful object of our time.” That the codex has been a powerful tool for a certain period of time is incontestable, but where its power lies in the end of the second decade of the 21st century needs to be investigated. The physical embodiment of literary texts has evolved yet again as the material page dissipates in virtual space where numerical strings become the form preceding textual instantiation. And when books are thus digitized, reading becomes a community activity.² Such statements inflame the opposite camp in the debate about the future of reading who insist, as John Updike did in his response to Kevin Kelly, that “the printed, bound and paid-for book

¹ This article builds on and expands previous research published in Glavanakova, Alexandra. “Intersections: Teaching Literature in the Digital Age.” In *New Paradigms in English Studies. Language, Linguistics, Literature and Culture in Higher Education*, ed. Emilia Slavova, Bozhil Hristov, Jonathan McCreedy, Rositsa Ishpekova, Alexandra Glavanakova. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2017. 165-185; Glavanakova, Alexandra. “Posthuman Modes of Reading Literature Online.” In *Representation in the Time of the Posthuman: Transhuman Enhancement in 21st Century Storytelling*, ed. Monica Calvo, Sonia Baelo. London and New York: Routledge. Forthcoming.

² Kevin Kelly, “Scan This Book!” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/magazine/14publishing.html>

[...] is the site of encounter, in silence, of two minds.”³ Many researchers have underscored the argument that the print book is more suited to deep reading and contemplation.⁴ The most pertinent and frustrating question for contemporary research is whether, recognizing the massive digitization of literary reading, it is possible to facilitate a similar deep engagement with complex or long-form texts delivered online. What are the specific reading strategies and modes for the development of reading literacy that would help foster a “biliterate brain” in Maryanne Wolf’s terminology: a brain that will know when to skim and when to read deeply?⁵

Before charting the major developments in the expansive and important reading research field, which is so dynamic that the present critical review will require revision before long, a definition of reading is necessary. Providing one proves to be a challenging task because of the very nature of the object under investigation. For over a century now print reading has been studied extensively through a series of lenses and approaches: behavioral, constructivist, developmental, physiological, affective social learning, and cognitive.⁶ The latter has been gathering momentum since the 1960s. Incorporating methodology, research strategies, and data from psychology and neuroscience, the cognitive approach has focused specifically on what happens in the brain when reading.⁷ It has given rise to a multidimensional, integrative model of reading, which will be presently expounded and used as an entry point into the research collected in this volume.

The reading process has developed in the brain for less than 6 000 years – an insignificant period for any reading-specific genes to have biologically evolved in humans. The mental processes involved in reading developed previously for other purposes and were subsequently

³ John Updike, “The End of Authorship.” *The New York Times*, June 25, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/25/books/review/25updike.html>

⁴ See Stephen Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006); N. Katherine Hayles “Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision.” *New Literary History* 38.1 (2007). “Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision.” *New Literary History* 38.1 (2007); Naomi Baron *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital Age*. (Oxford University Press, 2015); Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (HarperCollins, 2018).

⁵ Wolf’s chapter “Building a Biliterate Brain,” *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (HarperCollins, 2018).

⁶ This categorization is based on Daine Tracey and Lesley Morrow, *Lenses on Reading. An Introduction to Theories and Models* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

⁷ A large number of publications attest to the dominance of the cognitive approach: Daniel Willingham, *The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017, Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. (Icon Books, 2008). Wolf, Maryanne. *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (Harper, 2018).

reassigned for reading. This lack of a genetic blueprint for reading has led Stanislas Dehaene to expound the influential hypothesis regarding the “neuronal recycling” for numeracy and literacy. He claims that “The invention of reading led to the mutation of our cerebral circuits into a reading device,”⁸ whereby existing circuits of neurons originally designed for different functions – such as vision, language, and cognition – owing to the plasticity of the brain, converged towards the reading circuit.⁹ Not being a genetically programmed activity,¹⁰ reading therefore relies on the formation of these newly re-arranged circuits, which are configured in accordance with the demands of a given language and the particular environmental factors. The ecosystem of reading includes the specific medium utilized for language transmission, which plays a crucial part in this process. The individual reading brain then is not only language- and culture-specific, but also depends largely on the personal choice of what, when, and how to read, which further complicates its investigation.

In a little more than 400 milliseconds, “The reading circuit incorporates input from two hemispheres, four lobes in each hemisphere (frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital), and all five layers of the brain.”¹¹ As neuroscientists have already revealed, there is a series of lower level processes involved in reading.¹² These are based on the acquired linguistic knowledge – orthographic, phonological, semantic, morphological, and syntactic – applied to decoding and comprehending a given text.¹³ Following the estimated 200 to 500 milliseconds required for decoding, there comes the time to think new thoughts¹⁴ and to add completely new individual experiences and feelings. Therefore, reading, as an extremely complex activity, not only involves the parts of the brain originally responsible for vision, language, cognition, motor, and affect; it also depends on memory, on the powers of inference (deduction and induction), problem solving, evaluation, critical analysis, interpretation, and building hypotheses.

⁸ Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention*, (New York: Viking, 2009), 302.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁰ Wolf, *Proust and the Squid*. 19.

¹¹ Wolf, “The science and poetry in learning (and teaching) to read.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 100.4 (2018), 13-17.

¹² The research is summarized in the chapter “A neuroscientist’s tale of words” in Wolf, *Tales of literacy for the 21st century*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³ See Wolf, 2007, 2008, 2018; Wolf and Barzillai, 2009.

¹⁴ “Visual recognition 0-100 msec; Word specific activation 150 msec; Phonological processing 180-300 msec; Semantic processing 200-500 msec.” Wolf, *Proust & the Squid*, 145.

There are two major ways to read.¹⁵ Tabular reading is driven by the need to find particular information or facts for a specific purpose, while the linear type of reading involves concentration and emotional engagement. Readers are constantly switching between the two forms, especially within electronic documents, which allow them to leave one page and explore a range of alternative pages, thus providing a less linear reading experience. In addition, since words on a screen are kinetic, flexible, malleable objects, the navigational acts of swiping, scrolling, and tapping become automatic and inherent to the reading act. The expert reading brain is capable not only of the most superficial forms of tabular reading – skimming, scanning, browsing – but also of the deepest ones, integrating feeling and thought. It is deep reading which forms the pinnacle of achievement in this acquired skill by going beyond inference and critical analysis to the highest levels of insight, contemplation, and epiphany.¹⁶

[D]eep reading ... [is] the array of sophisticated processes that propel comprehension and that include inferential and deductive reasoning, analogical skills, critical analysis, reflection, and insight. The expert reader needs milliseconds to execute these processes; the young brain needs years to develop them. Both of these pivotal dimensions of time are potentially endangered by the digital culture's pervasive emphases on immediacy, information loading, and a media-driven cognitive set that embraces speed and can discourage deliberation in both our reading and our thinking.¹⁷

Digital reading comprises only one among the many possible instantiations of this activity. In itself, the term can indicate different phenomena. It can refer to a text that has an analogue counterpart and has been digitally encoded. Alternatively, it can refer to reading a variety of text formats online: either long-form narrative or non-fiction texts, websites, forums, blogs, emails, posts from social networks, etc. It has to be noted that humans are only one component in the processes of creating, generating, and delivering texts online, since digital machines have become not only mediators but also significant agents of textuality, and are integral to the reading process. The computational aspects of a text's generation and material actualization affect both the textual organization and the readers' behavior. Eye-tracking experiments conducted through the digital medium have established that our eyes do not move

¹⁵ Sun, S. Y., Chich-Jen, S., and Kai-Ping, H, "A research on comprehension differences between print and screen reading," *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 16 (2013), 87–101 <http://www.sajems.org/index.php/sajems/article/view/640>; David Durant, *Reading in a Digital Age*, ATG LLC (Media), 2017. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cb/mpub9944117>

¹⁶ Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai. "The importance of deep reading." *Educational leadership*. 66 (2009), 32–37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

smoothly but rather jump from one spot to the next within a distance of seven to nine letters, while most of the time each eye looks at a different letter.¹⁸ Through such experiments, the F mode and the zigzag mode of traversing a text on screen have been established as dominant.¹⁹ This type of reading behavior, labeled scanning, browsing, and skimming, has led to a decrease in focused attention and less time spent on concentrated reading.

Reading in the digital age has become a complicated activity distributed across multiple platforms.²⁰ The transformations in the reading process, the reading modes, and the readers' behavior can no longer be encapsulated simply in the traversal between page and screen, and in weighing the pros versus cons of each medium for reading comprehension.²¹ Therefore, the major question regarding the distinction in the nature of reading on paper versus reading on screen, and which of the two is preferred under what conditions, needs to be rephrased to incorporate a series of variables that affect the strategies and modes of reading. These variables determine the main areas of research in the field, which are briefly outlined in the following paragraphs.

A multitude of factors need to be taken into account. First, what is being read? The nature of the text being read, especially its content and form – whether it is verbal or multimodal, long-form or short, what writing system is used to encode it, not forgetting the genre specificities – all affect the process. Second: how is it read? This question pertains to the medium substrate – whether it is paper or a screen (PCs, laptops, mobile phones, e-readers), and whether the text is read privately or collectively on the many available platforms and applications for social reading. This leads to the next set of questions concerning what the purpose of reading is: work, study, information, leisure, or pleasure, as well as the crucial roles of motivation and engagement in defining a reader as reluctant or motivated, novice or expert.²² Another important variable that

¹⁸ Keith Rayner, Alexander Pollatsek, Jane Ashby, Charles Clifton Jr., *The Psychology of Reading* (New York: Psychology Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Wolf. *Reader Come Home*, 65.

²⁰ Tully Barnett, “Distributed Reading: Literary Reading in Diverse Environments,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 12.2 (2018) <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/12/2/000389/000389.html>

²¹ I am referring here to Amaranth Borsuk and Brad Bouse's *Between Page and Screen* (Siglio, 2012), which offers a literal demonstration of this movement through the work's integral components required for reading it: a paper book, a computer screen, a webcam, and an Internet connection. For more, see Rapatzikou's essay in this issue.

²² Patricia Alexander explores the connection between the readers' personal interest in reading as a driving force in their development for achieving competence. See “The Path to Competence: A Lifespan

complicates the picture even further concerns the varying contexts of reading, which can further restrain or facilitate the process. The answers to these questions in different combinations provide the key factors affecting reading that researchers take into account, depending on their research goals.

The developmental aspects of reading form one important area. The focus here is on how children learn to read and how reading is to be taught. Studies nowadays emphasize the fact that each reading medium, based on its affordances – defined as “the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action”²³ – advances certain cognitive processes over others. The most legitimate question in this area concerns how the brains of children are developing as they are learning to read while immersed in a digitally dominated medium, knowing that a child is given an average of 2 000 days to learn to read.²⁴ The exploration of the development of reading from a cognitive perspective also involves an examination of the emotional engagement on the part of the reader. A growing body of research indicates that literary reading plays a role in the development and support of social and emotional skills, such as empathy and sympathy.²⁵ A decade ago, Nicholas Carr, who expressed a generally felt anxiety concerning the long-term cognitive impact of the internet on humans, referred to a research carried out by Washington University’s Dynamic Cognition Laboratory, which established, through tracking by brain scans, that in the reading process:

‘[R]eaders mentally simulate each new situation encountered in a narrative. Details about actions and sensation are captured from the text and integrated with personal knowledge from past experiences.’ The brain regions that are activated often ‘mirror those involved when people perform, imagine, or observe similar real-world activities.’ Deep reading, says the study’s lead researcher, Nicole Speer, ‘is by no means a passive exercise.’ The reader becomes the book.²⁶

Developmental Perspective on Reading.” *Journal of Literacy Research* Volume: 37 issue: 4 (2005), 413-436.

²³ Samer Faraj and Bijan Azad, “The materiality of technology: An affordance perspective.” In Paul Leonardi, Bonnie Nardi, and Jannis Kallinikos (Eds.), *Materiality and Organizing: Social Interaction in a Technological World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ Wolf’s chapter “How the Brain Learns to Read Over Time” in *Proust and the Squid*.

²⁵ See: Keith Oatley. “In the Minds of Others,” *Scientific American Mind*, Vol. 22, Issue 5 (Nov/Dec2011); David Comer Kidd & Emanuele Castano, “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” *Science* 342 (6156) October 2013; The chapter “Empathy: ‘Passing Over’ into the Perspective of Others” in Wolf, *Reader Come Home*.

²⁶ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton, 2010), 74.

A lot of evidence to support this argument has been provided by neuroscientific research regarding mirror neurons, which “represent a distinctive class of neurons that discharge both when an individual executes a motor act and when he observes another individual performing the same or a similar motor act.”²⁷ This research has been applied to further study the role of reading for the development of empathy as different parts of the brain become activated (including areas involved in motion and touch) in alignment with what characters are experiencing, feeling, and doing.²⁸ Again the focus has shifted to incorporate the role of the medium. As new neural pathways are formed in digital reading, owing to the brain’s plasticity, “new dimensions of cognition and perception are already evolving for the species.”²⁹

Another research area focuses on examining the role of physicality in the activity of reading, regarding both the textual substrate and the reader’s bodily experience. A number of recent studies have been dedicated to the ergonomics of reading: the sensory-motor engagement of the human body in the process.³⁰ Print books lend an obvious physicality to individual texts, while e-books are not tangible and are differently touched, held, and navigated. Recalling the etymology of the word ‘digital,’ from the Latin *digitālis* “of or belonging to the finger,”³¹ serves to underscore the significance of haptics (the sense of touch) through the whole history of reading, regardless of the specific technology used for text transmission. The tactile function of our hands and fingers is prominent when reading on different media. Obvious examples of this routine activity when reading on paper are holding the book, turning the page, but also following a line with a finger, or inserting a finger as a bookmark to indicate how far in text a reader has reached. This is valid for digital reading as well, for which the ample use of *digitī* to scroll, click, and navigate through a text is also an essential feature. The tactile and kinesthetic aspects of reading arise from human physiology, but in addition to the active role of the hands, the coordination between hands and eyes has further neurological effects.

Studies in experimental psychology and neuroscience show that this physical manipulation of the text provides spatial information, which is crucial for building coherent

²⁷ Sourya Acharya and Samarth Shukla. “Mirror neurons: Enigma of the metaphysical modular brain.” *Journal of natural science, biology, and medicine* vol. 3.2 (2012), 118-24.

²⁸ Wolf, *Reader*, 45.

²⁹ Wolf, *Tales of Literacy*, 142.

³⁰ See Maja Köpper, Susanne Mayr, and Axel Buchner, “Reading from computer screen versus reading from paper: does it still make a difference?” *Ergonomics* 59:5 (2016), 615-632.

³¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2020. <https://www.oed.com/>

mental representations of the manipulated object. Andrew Piper has argued for the significance of the physical perception of the printed page for the reader's ability to process the information on the page more slowly and more deeply.³² On a printed page, spatial information ("where in the book") can be directly related to time ("when in the story").³³ The physical dimensions of print for following the sequence of the plot of a text proved significant when comparing levels of comprehension of the same text read in print and on screen in a Kindle, according to one particular study.³⁴ It found that plot details remained undetected by the respondents when they were reading onscreen.³⁵ The researchers concluded that when reading on paper, "The immediate sensory – kinesthetic and tactile – access to text sequence, as well as to the entirety of the text" aids the readers to build an "effective mental map of the text," and to "localize relevant events within the space of the text and within the time of the story."³⁶ This affects reading comprehension.

In the past two decades, a significant number of empirical studies has been conducted on the differences in reading comprehension between print and screen continuous reading of linear texts. Until the early 1990s, most studies found that people read more slowly and with less accuracy on screens than on paper. However, later studies show more mixed results. Some researchers have found no difference in comprehension between reading on page and on screen.³⁷

Two important recent meta-studies have summarized the main findings of a large body of empirical research focusing on the comparison between print and screen reading. Singer and Alexander's review from 2017 was oriented towards education aiming at establishing the levels of comprehension when reading in print and digital media. The authors selected 36 studies out of

³² Andrew Piper, *Book Was There. Reading in Electronic Times* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

³³ See Anne Mangen, Bente Rigmor Walgermo, Kolbjørn Kallestén Brønnick, "Reading linear texts on paper versus computer screen: Effects on reading comprehension." *International Journal of Educational Research* 58 (December 2013), 61-68; Anne Mangen, Gerard Olivier, and Jean-Luc Velay, "Comparing Comprehension of a Long Text Read in Print Book and on Kindle: Where in the Text and When in the Story?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (February 2019) article 38.

³⁴ Mangen, Olivier and Velay, "Comparing Comprehension of a Long Text Read in Print Book and on Kindle: Where in the Text and When in the Story?"

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3

³⁷ Alexandre Porion, Xavier Aparicio, Olga Megalakakia, Alisson Roberta, Thierry Baccino. "The impact of paper-based versus computerized presentation on text comprehension and memorization." *Computers in Human Behavior* 54 (2016), 569–576.

254 published research papers on the subject. The main parameters for categorizing the research data used by Singer and Alexander were length of the text for reading comprehension (a short one consisting of up to 500 words or a long one – above 500); the various definitions of reading provided in the papers (conceptual, componential, multifaceted, operational); and the settings where the research was carried out (instructional, research, or non-academic). Significantly, Singer and Alexander’s conclusion is that comprehension is significantly better for a print text when it is longer than 500 words (more than an average page or screen), when it is more complex, and when deep reading is required as opposed to reading for gist. Their findings are consistent with several others that indicate that digital natives prefer paper reading when the purpose of reading is deep understanding and gaining knowledge.³⁸

The second meta-study that reviews research on reading compares print texts with digital texts most closely resembling the printed ones.³⁹ This review includes 54 experiments, published between 2000 and 2017, with 171 055 participants from 19 countries, and concludes that 1. “the paper-based reading advantage increased in time-constrained reading,” 2. “the paper-based reading advantage was consistent across studies using informational texts” but not narrative texts, 3. “the advantage of paper-based reading increased over the years” in the period between 2000 and 2017.”⁴⁰ Significantly, this meta-study also confirms that when deep reading is required, print reading is the better choice in terms of comprehension, and has been established as the preferred mode even by digital natives, in opposition to general expectation. An important finding included as one of six points in the Stavanger Declaration of the European-based Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitization (E-READ) (2014-2018) research group of 200 scholars⁴¹ as well is that no differences were observed in long-form narrative text comprehension when print and screen reading were compared as opposed to informational texts. Further Mangen, Olivier, and Velay support these findings when comparing long-form-text reading on a

³⁸ See: J. McNeish, M. Foster, A. Francescucci, and B. West, “The surprising foil to online education: Why students won’t give up paper textbooks,” *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*, 20. 3 (2012), 58–69; K. Kurata, E. Ishita, Y. Miyata, and Y. Minami, 2017, “Print or digital? Reading behavior and preferences in Japan,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 68.4 (2017), 884–894.

³⁹ Delgado et al., “Don’t throw away your printed books: A meta-analysis on the effects of reading media on reading comprehension.”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴¹ *Stavanger Declaration. Evolution of reading in the age of digitization.* E-READ. 2018. <http://ereadcost.eu/stavanger-declaration/>

Kindle and in print, for “on most tests subjects performed identically whatever the reading medium.”⁴² Readers’ preferences for long-form texts were examined by the Academic Reading Format Preferences (AFRIS) research group, which studied over 10 000 university students from 21 countries (2014-2017) regarding academic reading, and the findings have been summarized in several important publications.⁴³ Their findings revealed that when students had to read less than 7 pages, they preferred to read them electronically, but for texts longer than 7 pages, their preferences were for print. When deep reading is required, these studies’ findings confirm that screen reading is inferior to paper in terms of comprehension, and this is true even for digital natives.

Though it is easy to hypothesize that in the digital ecology the preference would be for reading online, a number of studies, in addition to the abovementioned, have gone against this proposition, establishing the variable contexts and reasons for which people, especially students, chose reading print over online texts.⁴⁴ Print was preferred not only for schoolwork, but also for reading for pleasure, especially when length of the text was a factor. Reading a print copy of a text was what 92% of the respondents also found preferable when it came to their ability to concentrate.⁴⁵

Researchers offer the metacognitive deficit hypothesis by way of explaining these counterintuitive findings. The better comprehension on paper⁴⁶ builds on those reading strategies that involve the application of metacognition: the individual reader’s awareness and monitoring of the relationship between his/her cognitive resources and task demands.⁴⁷ An inflated sense of understanding, or overconfidence, is especially common among screen readers. This leads to overestimating one’s own comprehension of text read on screen and the belief that

⁴² Mangen, Olivier and Velay, “Comparing Comprehension of a Long Text Read in Print Book and on Kindle: Where in the Text and When in the Story?” 1.

⁴³ Mizrachi, D., Salaz, A. M., Kurbanoglu, S., and Boustany, J., “Academic reading format preferences and behaviors among university students worldwide: a comparative survey analysis,” *PLoS One* 13.5 (2018).

⁴⁴ Baron, *Words Onscreen*.

⁴⁵ Baron, N. S., Calixte, R. M., and Havewala, M., “The persistence of print among university students: an exploratory study,” *Telematics Informatics* 34 (2017), 590–604.

⁴⁶ See: Ackerman, R., and Goldsmith, M., “Metacognitive regulation of text learning: on screen versus on paper.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* 17 (2011),18–32; Norman, E., and Furnes, B., “The relationship between metacognitive experiences and learning: is there a difference between digital and non-digital study media?” *Computers in Human Behavior* 54 (2016), 301–309.

⁴⁷ Judy Olson, Jennifer Platt, and Lisa Dieker, *Teaching Children and Adolescents with Special Needs* (5th ed.), (Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall, 2008).

performance will be better on screen than it actually is.⁴⁸ In addition, digital natives share the widespread assumption that there is no need to remember facts in a digital world where information and data are readily available, and this has a direct bearing on human memory. The increase in the digital reading modes, reflecting the characteristics of that medium, affects the “underlying brain circuitry” and has “a bleeding over effect” on readers’ behavior on paper as well leading to shallow reading.⁴⁹ Wolf rightfully points out that the “‘language of books’ no longer fits the culture’s dominant cognitive style [which is] fast, heavily visual and often artificially truncated” in book notes, summaries, and plot guidelines.⁵⁰

Digital reading evolves into new posthumanist practices of reading: incorporating traditional modes of close reading and deep reading, and advancing new professional reading strategies, as well as social reading. The new professional reading strategies offer tools for gathering large datasets and for new analytical approaches. In addition to close reading and historical contextualization, which have been established analytical tools for decades, *hyper reading*,⁵¹ *social reading*,⁵² *distant reading*,⁵³ *surface reading*,⁵⁴ and even *machine reading* have been proposed and recently developed. In his essay “Hyper-Readers and Their Reading-Engines,” James J. Sosnoski defines hyper reading as “reader-directed, screen-based, computer-assisted reading”⁵⁵ and outlines eight hyper reading strategies: filtering, skimming, pecking, imposing, filming, trespassing, de-authorizing, and fragmenting. The term *surface reading* was introduced by Best and Marcus to name a reading strategy that focuses on the surfaces of texts. It is limited to:

⁴⁸ See Virginia Clinton, “Reading from paper compared to screens: A systematic review and meta-analysis,” *Journal of Research in Reading* 42.2 (2019), 288-324.

⁴⁹ Wolf *Reader, Come Home*, 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵¹ James Sosnoski, “Hyper-Readers and Their Reading-Engines,” *Passions, Politics, and 21st Century Technologies*. ed. Gail E. Hawisher und Cynthia L. Selfe (Urbana: Utah State University Press, 1999) 161–77; Katherine Hayles, “How we read: Close, hyper, machine.”

⁵² Bob Stein, “Social reading – an opportunity,” *The Bookseller* (November 2, 2014), <https://www.thebookseller.com/futurebook/social-reading-opportunity>

⁵³ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, (London: Verso, 2013); Stephan Jänicke, Greta Franzini, Muhammad Faisal Cheema, and Gerik Scheuermann. “On Close and Distant Reading in Digital Humanities: A Survey and Future Challenges.” In *Eurographics Conference on Visualization (EuroVis) - STARs*, edited by R. Borgo, F. Ganovelli, and I. Viola (2015), 83–103.

⁵⁴ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface reading: An introduction,” *Representations*, 108.1 (2009).

⁵⁵ James J. Sosnoski, “Hyper-Readers and Their Reading-Engines,” 167.

*What is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through.*⁵⁶

Surface reading aims to study the materiality of texts, mostly on the medium used for carrying them and the significance of the medium in defining the work itself.

Finally, the practice of distant reading, as defined by Moretti, involves the analysis of large corpora, regardless of whether they are gathered and analyzed done by human or machine.⁵⁷ (2013). Moretti aims at the bigger picture: the description of literary patterns and developments that connect hundreds, even thousands of literary texts over decades and beyond national borders. He presents this practice as a shift “From texts to models, then, and models drawn from three disciplines with which literary studies have had little or no interaction: graphs from quantitative history, maps from geography, and trees from evolutionary theory.”⁵⁸ In addition, Hayles insists on distinguishing yet another category: machine reading as “human-assisted computer reading where computer algorithms are used to analyze patterns in large textual corpora.”⁵⁹ This approach allows researchers to understand a work within the larger literary and cultural tradition that it reinforces, or subverts and resists. Finding patterns in large amounts of data, which involves quantitative approaches to large corpora of literature, has started to gain ground.

Alongside the preponderance for shallow reading, the preference for shorter texts, and the negative effect of the digital medium on focus and concentration, there is another key development regarding online reading behavior, which is positive: social reading. The scene of the silent, individual reader staring deep into an open book is a characteristically humanist and a less encountered model of the interaction between reader and text today.⁶⁰

Despite the solitary nature of any individual reading act, it always involves communication between self and other, and herein lies the basis for social reading. Social reading today made possible by digital tools is a continuation of practices previously encoded in

⁵⁶ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface reading: An introduction,” *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), 9.

⁵⁷ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

⁵⁸ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps and Trees* (London: Verso, 2005) 1.

⁵⁹ N. Katherine Hayles. “How we read: Close, hyper, machine.” *ADE Bulletin*, 150.18 (2010), 62-79.

⁶⁰ See the examination of individual readers in Stewart, Garrett. *The Look of Reading: Book, Painting, Text*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.

the concept of collective reading. Digital media are creating “new social valences of reading,”⁶¹ which involve practices related to traditional book clubs. Therefore, despite the differences in socio, cultural, and technological environments, collective reading nowadays represents a “going back to the future,” in Robert Stein’s words. The trend towards direct reader participation is projected to increase. In a short span of time, social reading is predicted to emerge as the center of the new digital reading ecosystem. Social reading “favours the formation of a ‘community’ and a means of exchange,”⁶² could be virtual or face-face-face, and involves “more than just reading, e.g. also writing, distributing, criticizing, adapting, etc.”⁶³ Social platforms used for creative storytelling purposes – for writing, commenting and collective reading, *Wattpad* for example – offer a wealth of material for analysis of how literary concepts and terms are contextualized and used.

The well-established tradition of sociological research into reading habits performed by the Bulgarian Alpha Research Agency, which has been an integral element of the National Interdisciplinary Project *Reading Practices in Bulgaria*⁶⁴ from the start, adds important details to the general picture. The data gathered by the Alpha Research Agency from over one thousand respondents aged over 18 in the 2018 survey reveals similar tendencies in Bulgaria as in other European countries and the US. The well-educated read more, people with higher incomes read more, women read more than men, women prefer fiction, and men prefer non-fiction. A serious limitation of the survey is that it does not research and gather information regarding the reading behavior and preferences of the millennials – Bulgarians under the age of 18, while 27% of the respondents are retired, with nearly 30% over the age of 60. Another interesting fact that should be noted is that Bulgarians prefer to watch television: 88% do so every day and 56% browse the internet every day, as opposed to the 13% who read books every day. For 53% of the respondents, the preferred social network is Facebook, and this is reflected in the large number of Facebook pages not only of individual authors (popular and unknown), but also of reading

⁶¹ Lisa Nakamura, “Words with Friends”: Socially Networked Reading in *Goodreads*,” *PMLA* 128.1 (2013), 238.

⁶² José-Antonio Cordon-García, Julio Alonso-Arévalo, Raquel Gómez-Díaz, Daniel Linder. *Social Reading: Platforms, Applications, Clouds and Tags* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2013) 156.

⁶³ Joachim Vlieghe, Jaël Muls and Kris Rutten, “Everybody reads: reader engagement with literature in social media environments,” *Poetics* 54 (2016) 27.

⁶⁴ Читателски Практики В България 2018. Национален интердисциплинарен проект, изследващ състоянието на четенето и грамотностите в България. <https://projects.unisofia.bg/ProjectDetails.aspx?ProjectId=2300>

communities, some of which number in the tens of thousands. About 40% of the readers of fiction admit to reading only in print.

Regarding participation in online reading communities, almost 60% of the respondents say they comment and share their views on what they have read, but only a small minority of 5% do so on social networks. Only 6% of Bulgarian readers are members of reading clubs: 4% in virtual ones versus 2% in offline ones. 13% of all readers are also writers – another interesting tendency that has been already noted. However, only a negligible 1% of them participate in online writing communities. The overwhelming majority – 90% – read in Bulgarian; only 8% read in foreign languages, the majority of those (72%) in English, and a much smaller number (just 8%) in Russian.

My goal as a member and supervisor of the *Online Reading Practices* group, set up to study the patterns of reading online by Bulgarian readers as part of the National Interdisciplinary Project *Reading Practices in Bulgaria*, 2018, was to provide an overview of the behavior of Bulgarians in online reading communities. I grouped them into three separate categories: 1. online discussions in specialized blogs, forums, and applications designed for social reading, including online sites for book reviews such as *Goodreads*; 2. webpages and platforms for fanfiction; 3. creative writing social platforms such as *Wattpad*, which allow for the readers' running commentary on the written texts, often taking place parallel to the writing process and affecting it in a significant way. The outcome of the research is organized in a data set of the relevant sites, compiled as of December 2019, a sample of which is included in the Appendix to this article. Most of the names and the descriptions, as can be expected, are in Bulgarian. This is the first analysis of online Bulgarian reading communities and is the initial stage of what needs to be a long-term mixed methodology research of the reading behavior of Bulgarians online, especially regarding fiction reading patterns.

This initial exploration of the behavior of Bulgarian readers concerning fiction revealed through the analysis of the cartography of communities for reading – webpages, blogs, social media sites – revealed the typology of reading communities.

Firstly, the diverse categories of online communities of Bulgarian readers dedicated to fiction are not clearly differentiated. Their boundaries are not distinct, rather they are mutable and shift across multiple platforms. In many cases popular readers' blogs are not stand-alone virtual spaces but duplicate their content on social platforms as well. For example, the website *Az*

cheta [I read],⁶⁵ with tens of thousands of readers, has webpages on all major social networks: *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, *Pinterest*, which increases the popularity of this Bulgarian online platform dedicated to promoting books, authors, and events about them.

Secondly, there are personal blogs and webpages set up by “professional” readers, which are acknowledged by a large portion of the Bulgarian readership. Two of the online communities for books and reading in Bulgaria, which boast the largest following, are the personal blog *Knigolandia*, maintained by Hristo Blazhev OR blajev,⁶⁶ (the Facebook page is followed by over 27 000 people),⁶⁷ and the Facebook page *Literaturen Gid* [Literature Guide], maintained by Svetlozar Zhelev.⁶⁸ In addition, Bulgarians make use of global social platforms for reading, where they have set up language-dedicated groups, such as the “Bulgaria reads” one on *Goodreads*, with 3 250 members.⁶⁹ Multiple online groups and book clubs on *Goodreads* also discuss individual works by writers of Bulgarian origin or books about Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian online reading communities organized through social networks encourage the sharing of personal impressions, book reviews, and serious critical analysis. The discussions here range from the general to the specific: from recommendations of books for reading based on criteria set by the participants in the communities to whole expository essays. As a consequence, the critical discourse about literature shifts away from the traditional platforms for literary criticism and academic research and their specialized publications. This leads to a decentralization and subversion of critical authority. The Bulgarian reader becomes a lay critic online and pushes further into the background the professional literary critic, whose perspective becomes further marginalized and appealing only to a closed elitist circle.

Further, my online research revealed that electronic literature (elit.) in Bulgarian is non-existent. No literary specimens were found exploring the affordances of the digital medium in creating fiction through hypertext. It could be hypothesized that such experimental vanguard forms where the very textual body is transformed by making use of digital code are of no interest for the Bulgarian reader and writer. It is likely that Bulgarian readers who read in foreign

⁶⁵ <https://www.AzCheta.com>

⁶⁶ <http://www.knigolandia.info/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/knigolandia.info/>

⁶⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/literaturengid/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/29774-bulgaria-reads>

language also read electronic literature under some form, but this aspect of their behavior remains to be studied further.

On the *Wattpad* mega platform for creative writing and collective reading, the research for the keyword „България“ returns 294 stories, out of which 65 are displayed with a completed status.⁷⁰ Most of the texts are written in Bulgarian, as the platform and its application can be used in different scripts and alphabets. This platform promotes genre literature in more than 20 different categories and gives each author the choice of a specific popular fiction category for his/her writing. Other platforms also resort to the invention of serialized content by writers to respond to specific readers' tastes. Such is the option offered by *Storytel* in the *Storytel Originals* section,⁷¹ where the reader can choose among the serialized audiobooks both in English and in Bulgarian written especially for the platform. Despite resembling the 1800s and early to mid-1900s (Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* immediately come to mind), when the same commercial trick was used to sell newspapers and magazines, serialized online fiction reflects and shapes the new modes of reading online, which are defined as short, succinct, and interactive.

The information that is available to be gathered from the Bulgarian-language section of *Wattpad* and *Storytel Originals* can be divided in a dataset of genre preferences and a dataset of reader-specific comments in the margins of individual works of fiction. This can be further analyzed with the goal of indicating the genre and book preferences of Bulgarian readers, on the one hand, and their knowledge and use of literary terms and concepts on the other, as well as to gauge their reading literacy levels and interpretative skills. Distant reading methodology, when applied to datasets gathered from social platforms dedicated to reading, can help establish how communicative, argumentative, and critical thinking skills are applied in the discussions by analyzing the online interpretation of literary texts.⁷² Big data analysis can be used with the aim of discovering patterns of online language use, especially regarding the use of specific literary terms and concepts. Their use can be indicative of the behavior of the *actual reader* versus the

⁷⁰<https://www.wattpad.com/search/%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F>

⁷¹ <https://www.storytel.com/bg/bg/publishers/536-Storytel-Original>

⁷² Research in this direction has already been published. See Simone Rebora and Federico Pianzola. "A New Research Programme for Reading Research: Analysing Comments in the Margins on *Wattpad*." *DigitCult*. 3.2 (2018), 19-36.

Iserian *implied reader* envisaged by the author – a hypothetical figure who is likely to get most of what the author intended. The very notion of implied reader becomes problematized in the context of collective reading coexisting with the writing of a fictional text, as the author’s intention gets continuously revised to match the taste and opinion of the reader. These are some of the most important areas for future reading research in my view. The patterns used by Bulgarians for reading fiction online should be further studied at the intersection between reading device, taking account of its medium-specific affordances, physical environment, the text form and genre, and the reader’s profile, choices, and behavior.

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Appendix
Bulgarian webpages dedicated to reading

LITERARY BLOGS / БЛОГОВЕ ЗА ЛИТЕРАТУРА

Книголандия - Блог на Христо Блажев - <http://knigolandia.info/>

Литературен гид – Блог на Светлозар Желев

<https://www.facebook.com/literaturengid/>

<https://literaturengid.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR2lhAZAOG5QdHHllcSDvn6LPsushPH21boZwj5GjVWtjI5YDQzUnnRjL2Y> (2014-2016)

The Bookish Fangirl - Блог на Melani Shakiri (юни 2017)

<https://melithefangirl.blogspot.com/>

Дневникът на един книжен тигър -

[https://thebooktigersdiary.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR2XXweou-](https://thebooktigersdiary.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR2XXweou-8xAd8DaK7MNMzfxuQBYf0D_qDpC6PkwG6z3dAuctEXkzE24w)

[8xAd8DaK7MNMzfxuQBYf0D_qDpC6PkwG6z3dAuctEXkzE24w](https://www.facebook.com/thebooktigersdiary/)

<https://www.facebook.com/thebooktigersdiary/>

Литературата днес – блог на Преслав Ганев за литература;

Читателски дневник – споделяне на мнения за книги;

Стефан Иванов – блог на писателя, с много снимки;

Public-Republic – отворен медиен проект за литература и гражданска журналистика;

Миглена Николчина – статии, разкази;

Галина Николова – блог за поезия;

Ясен Василев – блог на поета;

Васил Видински – блог за философия;

Истинска публицистика – много съдържателен блог, със статии от Захарий Стоянов,

Христо Ботев, Любен Каравелов, Пейо Яворов, Димитър Талев, Стефан Стамболов,

Данаил Крапчев, Петко Славейков, Алеко Константинов, Георги Марков, Георги

Раковски, Александър Цанков и др.;

Владимир Трендафилов – блог на преводача, критика и публициста;

Кръстопът – част от списание и форум „Глоси“;

Иван Ланджев – също много текстове и връзки;

Иван Христов – блог на поета

READERS' REVIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS / ЧИТАТЕЛСКИ КОМЕНТАРИ И ПРЕПОРЪКИ

Cheti.ME е сайт за безплатно споделяне на книги и любовта към литературата като цяло.

<https://www.cheti.me/za-nas>

Cheti.ME - група за споделяне на книги (7 000)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1954465818103408/>

Моята библиотека (Читанка) - <http://chitanka.info/texts/comments>

Какво четеш - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/kakvochetesh/about/>

Основател на групата е Христо Блажев

Book Adventure Club на Любен Спасов:

Blog:

http://bookadventureclub.blogspot.com/?fbclid=IwAR21hIzASdZJQas9G9OeehPTbljwuHgtU_0T1Mkz_R2FW7nu-4JY2zf7XDU

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/b00kadventureclub/>

Goodreads:

<https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/37410306>

Bulgaria reads - Група за дискутиране на книги на български език.

<https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/29774-bulgaria-reads>

Booky Monster <https://www.facebook.com/the.booky.monster/>

Клуб на четящите (12 000 души) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144222982650210/>

Чета и трупам лавици с книги (9 000 души)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/290674751343189/>

Общество на книгохолиците (1 500) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/158067014640261/>

За всеки, който обича да чете (7 400)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1591355714512089/>

За книгите (2 800) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1819874024953675/>

Магията на книгите (1 000) <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1749475725294822/>

The Fantasy Bookhoppers

https://www.facebook.com/pg/thebookhoppers/about/?ref=page_internal

COLLECTIVE READING AND CREATIVE WRITING/ СЪВМЕСТНО ЧЕТЕНЕ И ПИСАНЕ/

Книговище - <https://knigovishte.bg/> „Книговище“ е образователна интернет платформа, която затвърждава способността на децата да осмислят прочетен текст. „Книговище“ е онлайн игра на въпроси и отговори върху прочетени книги, която насърчава удоволствието от четенето и създава общност. То е и читателски дневник, и пътеводител в света на книгите.

Аудио и дигитални книги апликация Storytel - <https://www.storytel.com/bg/bg/> шведска компания, основана през 2005 г. Апликацията предлага стрийминг на дигитални книги и издаване от януари 2019 в България. Стриймингът е услуга, базираща се на абонаментен план, и предлага аудио книги и е-книги под бранда Storytel. Услугата е достъпна в Швеция, Норвегия, Дания, Финландия, Исландия, Полша, Холандия, Русия, Испания, Италия, Турция, Индия, Обединени арабски емирства. Издателската дейност включва издателствата Norstedts Förlagsgrupp (Швеция), People’s Press (Дания), Rubinstein (Холандия) and Storytel Publishing (глобално).

Към момента 400 заглавия на български и над 50 000 на английски език. Storytel Brief - резюмета на заглавия, Storytel Originals – авторски аудио сериали написани специално за платформата, пригодени към аудио-формата. Компанията търси такива автори!

Даваме Истории - по заявка на читател посочват линк към място с история или може би дори я написват! Част от платформа ask.fm

<https://ask.fm/istoriislichnosti>

Written World

<https://writtenworld.bg/genres>

Български сайт за фенфикшън. Обичате да пишете и да четете, или пък искате да споделите творчеството си, Written World е мястото за вас.

Това е един от малкото български сайтове за литература, в който можете да пишете истории и да намерите такива. С разнообразие от 22 жанра, Written World предлага по нещо за всеки, а с мобилната версия на сайта, можете да пишете и да четете във всеки един момент, без значение къде се намирате.

Тук има още много хора, като вас, които са фенове на литературата, и с които ще можете да комуникирате.

Фейсбук група: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1717322275237257>

Цитаделата: български сайт за фентъзи и фантастика

<http://citadelata.com/>

<http://citadelata.com/fan-fiction/>

Категория творчество в сайта Цитаделата

<http://citadelata.com/category/%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE/>

Национален Хари Потър фенклуб

<http://www.potter-mania.com/?page=20>

Фенфикшъни на български език

<https://favoritestory.alle.bg/>

Фенфикшъни на български език в Wattpad

<https://www.wattpad.com/list/213071976--1d>

Фенфикшъни, базирани на анимета:

<https://animes-portal.info/fanfictions>