

# All We Do is “Stalking”

## Studying New Forms of Reading in Social Networks

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### ABSTRACT

A particular use of the term “stalking” is emerging in social networks to indicate a wide range of reading practices aimed to gain insight on a subject. As a new type of reading, “stalking” does not always have a negative connotation and it is not limited to the personal sphere but ranging from ludic to professional aims. Considering the preliminary results of a case study in the READ-IT project, this contribution wishes to engage the hypertext research community in considering “stalking” as a type of reading activity emerging from the unique features of social networks related both to “stalkers” (as hypertext readers), and to the “stalked” (as a type of contents) within the context of social networking platforms (as a type of medium and environment for reading).

### CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems • World Wide Web • Web applications • Social networks

### KEYWORDS

Digital Humanities; Reading Experience; Profile Staking; Social Networks; Social Media; Digital Reading

## 1 Introduction

Social media and social networks provide Internet users with new types of contents and experiences of reading. Reading such contents on screen implies the discovery of interlinked collections of thoughts, experiences and events while social networking sites structure multiple modalities to display, organise, explore and experience social “connections” of profiles, contacts, timelines and posts [1]. Drifting away from its original predatory and criminal connotations, in this hypertextual context, a vernacular use of the term “stalking” is now applied to the practice of reading social media profiles and contents: a specific kind of reading that is often perceived as a form of intrusion in someone’s life and as a source

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of implications on the personal and social spheres of both the author and the reader. “It is now common to find the word used in a more positive sense on the Internet” [2], “in the context of being a fan” or as a dedication to a subject (of stalking) “in excess of what would be considered ‘proper’ or ‘normal’ behavior” [2]. Indeed, in this particular and vernacular sense, “stalking” nowadays refers to a set of practices and aims that lay a common ground between both professional and ludic uses of social networks, while configuring a new type of reading which is native to the social media sphere.

The study of stalking as a type of reading is one of the case studies addressed in the frame of READ-IT (Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool): a JPI project with the aim of developing a set of tools for digital humanities to enable interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research on reading in Europe. One of the main goals of READ-IT is the creation of a European repository of reading experiences from sources from 1800 up today, from correspondences to tweets and blogs. Indeed, during these last two centuries we experienced several revolutions of reading which imply a deep reflection on how medium, contents and reader practices interact. The study of stalking does present two challenges related to understanding and modelling a contemporary digital practice and revising methodologies and theories of reading in order to include these new trends, contents and media.

This contribution aims to engage the hypertext community in considering a new perspective on social media and social networks, considering stalking (a type of reading activity) as a central metaphor to understand the interaction between users (readers), content (social media posts and profiles) and medium (social networking sites or platforms). By using the READ-IT model of reading, we analyse different varieties of stalking and highlight a set of core features. Lastly, we discuss the relations between the “stalker” (reader), the features of the medium (social network) and the authors of social media contents to provide a preliminary interactional model.

The structure of the contribution is organised as follows. First, we provide a background on stalking with a particular focus on the different tasks of stalkers and their reading practices. Then, after a brief introduction of READ-IT concepts, we first define a conceptual model of stalking and then apply the model to real examples. Following our demonstration, we discuss the relation between stalking, what is stalked and the social network outlining

the assumptions and limits of the proposed definition of “stalking” while considering the challenge of studying the phenomenon of stalking reading in relation to languages, roles of the stalked and social media platforms..

## 2 Stalking and Social Media: a Reading Practice

Given its etymological background, the contemporary uses of the term “stalking” involve the metaphor of hunting [3] for contents, the moral judgment of behaviours deemed as voyeuristic (that must remain secret), and a quite literal interpretation of the “follower” status. Drawing upon such imaginary and semantic features, in the context of social media, “stalking” has therefore become an ordinary metaphor for online reading.

Nevertheless, a critical assessment of such metaphor provides us with a central argument: Stalking is not about “spying” people or the “surveillance of someone’s life”. It is not really about “people”, it is about textual resources – one may argue. To be precise, stalking is a practice that requires browsing and reading personal contents, implying access to someone else’s posts, texts and pictures on social networking sites. Therefore, stalking as a reading practice is intertwined with several hypertextual features of social media websites and can be described as follows:

- **The experience of looking for a particular content** or resource that can be accomplished either by filling search boxes with Names that work as keywords or by consciously following a specific “path” through the links that lead to the desired resource/URL.
- **A serendipitous [4] practice characterized by wandering around** available links and stumbling upon a particular personal content from another account or profile (whether previously known or unknown).

In both cases, stalking implies knowing how to read hypertexts within the frame of social media portals – a particular type of reading that shows how contemporary digital literacies seem to be fully embodied. Such skills can be described with the vocabulary of semiotic analysis for what contemporary French researchers call “screen writings” [5]:

- a) When stalking, the reader’s eye plays with the difference between the “*architext*”<sup>1</sup> (the functional text of the apparatus, the platform template and productive structure) and its “contents” (the expressive texts of other users, the accessible personal uploads).
- b) The stalker/reader is used not only to see Names working as searchable keywords but also to Names and Faces being read nowadays as packs of hyperlinks (functioning as clickable “*signes passeurs*”<sup>2</sup>) that give access to personal spaces (profiles, timelines, etc).
- c) Stalking implies heading out of the industrialized narrative of “feeds” [6] and the sort of popular-recent items that social platforms tend to display as default centralities, welcome

screens or homepages: an extra reading effort is thus required ; it follows an implicit (and perhaps distracted) knowledge of more valuable items which may be reached by browsing towards the folds of peripheral/personal spaces or ‘hidden’ old posts.

- d) The process of stalking is often associated with secret or clandestine or guilty reading; the so-called “obsessive” exploration of the social hypertext is actually obsessed with not leaving traces of the reader (e.g. the stereotyped fear of accidentally liking someone’s content or the scams that lure users with a much fantasized feature promising them to “find out who checks their profile”)
- e) Memories of stalking experiences are often related to a sense of detail: finding out, discovering, learning something about someone. More surprisingly, “stalking” can even be used for oneself: in that case it describes a feeling of heteroscopy (In the sense of seeing oneself as another) when browsing or re-reading one’s own archive.

This conceptual framework summarises a preliminary study on stalking which aims at outlining the semantic landscape of this activity by analysing self-declared “stalking” experiences shared in social media. The collection of testimonial tweets and Facebook posts that we conducted from September to December in 2018 also show a rich set of meanings and associations between values and emotional frames in which the verb “to stalk” is used by social network users with different outcomes, such as:

- reading someone’s “page” and “tweets”; feeling “relieved”
- reading “what people read” (via book networking app Gleeph); feeling “good” and “healthy” about it
- reading Facebook “timelines” with interruptions; feeling “distracted” and “clumsy”
- reading “every tweet” and feeling “confessional”
- reading “reader progress” on Goodreads feeling “superior” and “ironic”
- reading a “Twitter page” and a “hashtag”; feeling a “dilemma” about commenting
- reading friend “comments” or “memes”; feeling “grateful” or in “love”
- reading “comments”, “tags” under one’s “old photos” and feeling “puzzled”
- reading a “Timeline” feeling “anxiety” for “updates”
- reading “FB” collectively to “stay informed” and make “fun” of someone.

Given that social networking sites are both the location for “stalking” and spaces for sharing and discussing the outcomes of stalking, a wide variety of such reading experiences and derivative practices can be documented through testimonial tweets and posts. This is particularly true in case of ordinary and ludic stalking, while it is not the case of stalking for business and professional purposes.

<sup>1</sup> Fr. «*Architexte*»: the digital text production tool, a writing standard whose format commands other writings. Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Fr. «*Signes passeurs*»: the clickable signs that change the nature of the text onscreen (buttons, underlined links, arrows, etc).

The distinction between ludic and professional stalking practices goes beyond the social network where the stalking is performed (e.g. Facebook or LinkedIn). Indeed, the distinction lies on the aims and use of the result of the stalking activity, such as amusement and sharing or strategically selecting the next company where to apply for a position. Nevertheless, the distinction between generalist (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), domain specific (e.g. Tinder for dating or Anobii for books) and professional social networking sites (e.g. Glassdoor and LinkedIn) is relevant for stalking practices in terms of:

1. **potential sources of information**, e.g. personal orientations of employees, corporate practices, events, projects, initiatives, skills
2. **hypertextual stalking experiences**, e.g. via thematic feeds, corporate pages, update notifications
3. **potential consequences** for both the stalker and the stalked, notifications about readers profile, visibility of the stalker, autonomous personalisation the stalker profile as result of the stalking activity, public subscription to updates.

Within this broader conceptual frame, the awareness of potential consequences of stalking does have a central role of in both professional and ludic stalking. In the first case, complementary research with professional network users suggests that the consequences are mostly related to a potential backlash in terms of being engaged as result of stalking, e.g. being “*harassed*” by recruiters or update emails; while in the latter case the consequences may also involve the personal and social spheres of the user, in terms of potential conflicts with the stalked and of emotional distress as a result of the investigation on the life of people with whom we share special bonds, e.g. friends, ex-lovers or colleagues.

In both ludic and professional stalking, the risks of unwanted and unforeseen consequences are related to native mechanisms of social networks. Stalkers as users may suffer from the lack of explanations about the use of the data [7] related to their reading/browsing activities within social networks. Following this perspective, if we rely on the facets of “explainability” of data-driven technologies [8], the interaction between stalkers and social networks can also be characterised by:

1. the **lack of agency** (control) users may experience over the information about their search queries and clicks
2. the **lack of legibility** of the use of their personal information concerning the target of their stalking and in their profiling by the social network algorithms
3. the **lack of negotiability** of which information should or not be considered and with which relevance

As a summary, we can formulate a general working definition that applies to multiple cases (either ludic or professional) of this contemporary digital reading practice: **stalking is the systematic reading of contents providing insight on a subject, human or organisation, in an uncontrolled public digital space**. This definition points the focus on the tendency

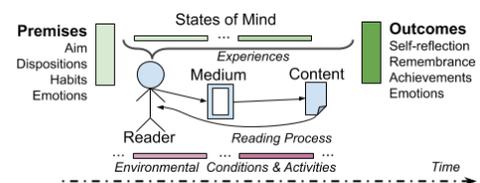
towards systematicity of the action of stalking, which may not be initiated intentionally by the reader (e.g. engaged by a notification alert) and may remain fragmentary (e.g. focus only on some details or small bits of information) but is always performed with method so that the outcome can be a better understanding of the subject of stalking. Furthermore, the definition points the focus on two critical features of the information space of stalking:

- a) **public**, as “stalking” is a contemporary type of reading that is focused on contents available within the legal boundaries of browsing, even when the experience is described as “*clandestine*”.
- b) **uncontrolled**, as there is always an element of uncertainty related to stalking and therefore of risks of conflicts, unwanted engagement with contents or technically opaque issues as result.

We conclude this brief analysis of stalking with a remark on the inextricable relation between the reader as stalker, the technological means (or spaces) for stalking, and the genre of contents. Indeed, we may argue that we have “stalking” rather than plain reading when we have these three conditions: 1) the systematic reading of insightful content on a subject (teleological interaction between stalker and content), 2) a public environment providing hypertextual access to the content (instrumental interaction between stalker and medium) 3) an uncontrolled environment mediating access to content (thought to be “secret” but somewhat uncertain interaction between stalker and content through medium). Following, we apply the READ-IT model of reading to address these three types of interactions and provide a conceptual framework to investigate stalking as reading.

### 3 Modelling “Stalking” as a Reading Activity

In order to create a digital repository of European reading experiences, the development of the READ-IT model of reading was conducted through a design method with the aim of building a meta-language capable of describing the phenomenon of reading across multiple disciplines [9]. The methodology combined theoretical analysis of reading [10-14] with the analysis of sources to identify the key concepts and relations of the structure (anatomy) and process of reading.



**Figure 1: Reading is a process embodied in a physical and social environment triggering changes in the Reader’s States of Mind.**

For the sake of addressing “stalking” practices within that framework, now we introduce a subset of concepts from the aforementioned reading experience “meta” model: the Reader,

agent of reading, the Reading Process and Reading Resource, object of the reading. Furthermore, we introduce concepts related to the embodiment of reading in the cognitive and personal space of the reader, such as his aims, expectations and dispositions toward both content and media, see Figure 1.

### 3.1 The Stalker

The stalker (Reader) is the agent of a particular reading activity. Through the lens of the READ-IT conceptual model, a Reader is a Person, but defined as a collection of its variable features, such as the age at the time of reading, i.e. the Reader is a *description of a Person* at the time of Reading.

The Reading Process is a collection of Experiences, changes in State of Mind of the Reader result from his interaction with Content and Medium. A Reading Process is embedded in a situation (in the reader's life) of activities and expectations (Premises of reading) providing a context that will be relevant for the results and closure of a reading (Outcomes of reading). Premises and Outcomes constitute the cognitive Frame in which reading takes place, a sum of the contingent personal and social situations related to Reader's life, the public discourse and personal value of Content or the relational system surrounding the specific Medium. Whenever a "stalker" is engaged in such reading processes, a cognitive landscape can be modelled by tracing motivational Premises and its rather pragmatic or emotional outcomes.

The reader's abilities, beliefs and skills – e.g. knowledge of topics, personal experiences, religious or political positions – define a set of Dispositions, a subtype of State of Mind acting as filters in *interacting with* Contents and Medium and *in approaching a* Reading Process. Lastly, an experienced reader develops specific Habits in relation to a specific content, situation or medium of reading.

As argued, a stalker is an agent whose Aim or Premise for stalking is gaining insight on a subject, which is also the topic in common with the Contents he's "hunting" for, the object of Reading.

### 3.2 The Means for Stalking

Stalking reading is enabled and sometimes promoted by social networks, through the implementation of user profiles as a metaphor for organising and presenting contents, and specific features aimed to engage readers in stalking, such as notifications, summaries and suggestions. In the READ-IT language, a social network platform plays the role of Medium of social media Contents and of source of environmental conditions in which Reading Processes take place (i.e. digital environment of reading).

As a Medium, a social networking service provides a specific experience which is connected to the Reader's Dispositions, such as his skills in using the specific features and concerns related to unwanted and unforeseen effects of his reading. Furthermore, social networks provide several functionalities specifically aimed to personalise and enrich the experience, i.e. to produce Alterations of the Medium. Stalking require such technical and

interpretative skills in order to browse hypertextual "connections" while dealing with the many ways in which contemporary platforms hail users with what their algorithms consider to be "relevant" for them.

As environments, social networks are a source of conditions in which reading takes place. On the one hand, the conditions of Reading do mediate the reading experience and lead to a specific outcome, e.g. a stressful experience for someone wanting to remain unnoticed while stalking someone's details on LinkedIn. On the other hand, considering the perspective of the Reader, a Reading is both a process and an Event. As such, Readers evaluate and compare Readings not only in terms of targeted contents but also under the light of the effective conditions of the "stalking" activity itself.

### 3.3 The Stalking Activity

Stalking is a reading process that can require a continuous interaction with the Medium and with the Content. The interaction with the Medium is a physical activity aimed to acquire access to the content through senses, while the cognitive activity of analysing and making sense (processing) of Content is related to the Aim of Reading, and thus performed in different ways.

The processing of Content is a dual-track activity combining a) the analysis of textual structures and b) the analysis of situations, i.e. what a content explicitly says and what a content implies. The existence of these two parallel processes become evident through the polarisation of the analytical perspectives, following relative specific studies on expert (analytical) reading and hedonistic (narrative) reading. As any other type of reading, stalking combines elements of both: on one side, the task is to understand what the author has posted and which is his intentionality (e.g. which is the identity or information he is displaying to the public) while, on the other side, there is the participation or engagement in the events and situation described (e.g. assessing a specific content as "relatable" through personal experience and empathy).

Evidences of the predominance of a type of content processing can be found on the Premises and Outcomes of the Reading. As argued, the Premises provide indications about the Aim of stalking, the conditions of the stalker (e.g. motivational or emotional state of the stalker and his aims). The Outcomes of stalking provide insights on the stalker's Achievements and on the overall experience, for instance shedding light on the role of social media features in facilitating or impeding the stalking.

Lastly, the understanding of the stalker's Dispositions and Habits on the Medium can inform about his skills on stalking, the existence of practices related to stalking in a specific social media (e.g. how the stalker bypasses or exploits the mechanisms of social media). If such stalking practical processes evolve into recursively targeting a specific type of Content, the stalker's systematic activity may imply either a self-judgment of the agent's Reading and browsing Habits or an Alteration in the Medium's algorithmic patterns for suggesting new Contents.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusions

The prospect of modelling contemporary “stalking” practices within the READ-IT database allows a debate on how the choice of a standpoint (a focus on the stalker, the stalked or the social media industries) informs the ways in which we may interpret the deep connection between stalking and hypertext contents. At this stage of the READ-IT project, we have already pinpointed the following discussions.

From the stalker’s viewpoint, the aforementioned model involves an ontology of individual agents which clearly favours a rather self-centred description of his “stalking” activity. Therefore, the contemporary hypertextual reading experiences that we are documenting are those in which the agent explicitly describes his own activity as “stalking”, i.e. a brief recount or confession that includes the actual use of the verb. From a linguistic perspective, we must also observe the multilingual spread of the verb beyond English: “to stalk” has been “territorialised” throughout Europe and the Americas, inspiring various forms (French: “stalker”, Spanish: “stalkear”, Italian: “stalkare/stalkerare”, Pt: “stalkeiar”) that may include semantic nuances depending on the cultural background of the agent.

From the standpoint of the stalked, our general working definition tends to a teleological interpretation of reading: the stalked is a figure of the other on which the agent wants to gain insight on. In the current state of our data collection, we prefer to focus on experiences in which the stalking is explicitly applied to “contents” rather than to “people”, i.e. what is stalked is mentioned as being “posts”, “old photos” a “timeline”, a “Twitter page”, “a LinkedIn profile” depending on the reader’s “semiotic predilections” [5] for naming such digital resources as they appear on screen. Yet, a thorough account of the “stalking” could eventually include an active role of the stalked, e.g. “seeking” or “escaping” stalkers’ attentions.

From the standpoint of social media platforms and services, our working definition locates stalking activities within the boundaries of what is made public but also insists on the crucial role of the Medium. Thus, the READ-IT model theoretically allows us to decentre the description of the reading-browsing activity from the intentions of the stalker (agent) in order to include occasional accounts of the technicalities of social media environments, e.g. confusing items on one person’s timeline with those on the main timeline because Facebook’s algorithm often displays his posts, wondering if “blocking” someone will prevent them from noticing their LinkedIn profile has been stalked. Such testimonies on the experience of social media environments, may orient our future debates towards more implicit political questions that could be rooted in either Marxist or feminist perspectives, e.g. a critical assessment of the opaque nature of digital mediations, the exploitation of the popular and the new as ideal values for contents and narratives, an analysis of the feelings of privacy or secrecy in the age of “surveillance capitalism” [15].

As “stalking” becomes an ordinary term for describing new reading practices within the frame of social media, its

etymological criminal or predatory background is being repurposed by common users (non-criminal stalkers) to a hypertextual “hunt for contents” which involves sufficient reading and browsing skills in order to discretely reach targeted or valuable contents. Since “Stalking” implies accessing with method, “stalking” can be identified by a “systematic” approach in browsing and using social media feature. Indeed, the reading experience of the “stalker” (documented individually in terms of premises, outcomes, skills, dispositions and habits) must not be dissociated from the crucial role that is played by the Medium, as it links the “stalking” experience with broader contemporary debates on digital culture and the ideological implications of social media (the structure of “people” as text, the asymmetrical boundaries of privacy, the exploitative nature of engagement constraints and attention economies).

“Stalking” seems to be an emerging and dynamic globalised vernacular reading practice that cannot be yet seized completely. Nevertheless, by highlighting its distinctive features within the frame of the READ-IT, we can investigate a new type of reading that is intrinsically related to the hypertextual structures of “social media” in the scope of documenting some of its contemporary varieties and exploring its connections with the imaginaries of other “clandestine” or “obsessive” historical reading experiences.

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