

# Reading Popular Culture Offline and Online: Outlining a Comparative Study of Reading Experiences Between Webcomics and Twenty-First Century Book Club Choices

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## Abstract

*A recurring criticism of historical reading studies has zoomed in on the heavy reliance on individual case studies. This approach produces small size datasets hard to combine in larger sets that could support a broader Digital Humanities research programmes. However, large-scale data are limited by a lack of context, either too general or impossible to reconstruct due to ethical and legal limitations concerning contemporary data subjects (e.g. data rights and privacy of users). This contribution discusses the design of a comparative study on reading popular culture online with a focus on the challenges and potential approaches to combine the depth of case studies with the need of interoperable data.*

The history of the book encompasses the history of reading, and as the history of the book has evolved over the past decades, so has its object of study. Recent contributions have emphasized the need to update and reframe book historical models and approaches to make them more applicable to the digital literary sphere (Murray 2018), which bears striking similarities but is simultaneously markedly different from the print-centered literary sphere of the past centuries. In this sense, book studies is a more inclusive term than the oft-used book history (Noorda / Marsden 2019). Merging historical and quantitative approaches, as well as drawing on close and distant reading techniques, can provide insights into new digital communications circuits (Squires / Ray Murray 2012) and the new reading and writing communities that are emerging within it (Pinder 2012; Ramdarshan Bold 2018). Examples include studies of platforms such as Goodreads (Walsh / Antoniak 2021; Bourrier / Thelwall 2020; Driscoll / Rehberg Sedo 2019; Stinson / Driscoll 2020), Kindle (Rowberry 2016), and aNobii (Faggiolani et al. 2017).

A recurring criticism of historical reading studies has zoomed in on the heavy reliance on individual case studies. Historical reading studies are often limited by the small size of datasets (i.e. small and hard to combine in larger sets), leaving a small ground for the generalization of results in general and specifically in case of contemporary studies that cannot benefit from a historical perspective of the significance and representativeness of the case study in hand. Some recommendations have been made to alleviate this problem (Weedon 2019). On the other hand, DH-based studies of reading are supported by large homogeneous datasets with a high representativeness of the phenomena.

However, large-scale data are limited by a lack of context, either too general or impossible to reconstruct due to ethical and legal limitations concerning contemporary data subjects (e.g. data rights and privacy of users).

In this view and as argued by Antonini and Benatti (2020), the difference between DH and traditional Humanities research is not caused by a significant difference in the research aims, but by the nature of data on hand which constrains the DH-led studies to who, when, where and how many questions. We argue that DH studies have an intrinsically higher complexity due to the need to combine quantitative and qualitative studies of large-scale data with interpretative vertical studies necessary to provide contributions comparable to standard Humanities studies. Given the difference in the nature of the data and of the limitations of DH-based and historical reading studies, how is it possible to design a comparative study involving digital and non-digital topics, DH and traditional Humanities approaches to reading?

Comparative studies mixing Humanities topics and DH methods are emerging. An exemplary approach is provided by recent studies comparing professional and online readers of nineteenth-century literature (Bourrier / Thelwall 2020) or historical and contemporary highlighting practices (Rowberry 2016). These types of hybrid studies are effective in addressing the emerging of new opportunities provided by the availability of large-scale digital data. This approach to comparative study can be understood as historically-driven and as based on identifying digital sources comparable with historical sources, i.e. finding digital sources of the same nature and therefore enabling the same type of study.

This historically-driven approach cannot be applied to native-digital genres as it cannot be adapted to new types of data about digital media, contents and practices, such as likes, micro-transactions, subscriptions, comments, links and logs. Furthermore, the use of historical sources to drive comparative research involving new media may not be appropriate for addressing questions concerning new native-digital practices and genres. Indeed, instead of asking how an existing phenomenon changes with the digital transitions, we should also focus on the relations of new digital phenomena with historical contexts, e.g. are new practices similar to historical practices and, if there are no historical parallels, why is this the case?

This contribution provides a discussion on the research design of this specific setting: research on native-digital topics by using DH methods and how a comparative study can be designed to include a more traditional-leaning Humanities case study. To support the discussion, we present the design of a comparative study on the readers of webcomics as a native-digital genre and of hardcover, printed books that readers are reading as part of their subscription to a monthly book box service. These two case studies are used to exemplify a new digitally-driven approach to the design of the collection and processing of data, harmonising the component of the mainstream genre to the limits and constraints of digital studies.

On a methodological level, the new angle proposed also provides the opportunity to discuss some key hidden issues concerning digital and non-digital comparative studies in regard to the genre, public and information value of data. In historically-based studies, the sources depend upon what has survived from the past. Scholars tend to study all the (scarce) available sources for a given author, reader or location. With digital sources, the challenge is that of abundance (Rosenzweig 2003). Scholars need to develop a strategy to handle the abundance of data: either to include a sufficiently large amount of data and then identify significant results through the application of statistical methods (ex-post selection), and/or to select a representative sample of the data based on explicit criteria (ex-ante selection). In case of comparative studies, the strategy developed concerning the selection of sources must ensure a comparability of sources and of potential outcomes, to be derived from, e.g., their provenance, information content, genre, themes and value.

Implications of the construction of a comparative study are explored. There are three differences in the two case studies which will be discussed: 1) method (selection of data: qualitative, source-led selection vs. web scraping extraction); 2) reading experience (novel reading vs. serial reading); 3) timing of readers' engagement (post-reading experience vs. during work-in-progress).

In the first case study, traditional-leaning Humanities approaches are employed to consider reading experiences of Book of the Month members which they have shared in the password-protected online community space on BookoftheMonth.com. The readers have been engaging with texts in the form of hardcover, specially designed books as part of their membership in Book of the Month book club, a hardcover book box subscription service founded in 2016 (Norrick-Rühl 2017). Book box subscriptions (Noorda 2019, Lehmann 2020) are a booming trend which celebrate what Jessica Pressman has termed "bookishness" (Pressman 2020). Online book box subscription services build on ideas that were highly popular and successful in the twentieth century, when book sales clubs had their heyday between the 1920s and 1990s, distributing mail-order book culture and reading experiences to millions of households worldwide. Today, book box subscription services again offer readers curation, convenience, concession on the recommended retail price and community (Norrick-Rühl 2018; 2019). While the readers' ratings and reactions are recorded and shared online, the actual reading experience is entirely offline, rooted in and reinforced through the post-digital framing of the hardcover book box subscription service. This contradiction and other particularities of this case study are explored through qualitative analysis of data from selected entries on BookoftheMonth.com.

In the second case study, these reading experiences will be juxtaposed with readers' reactions after and while reading online webcomics. Webcomics are a native-digital genre, being published and read entirely digitally (Priego 2011), and are enabled by web-based practices (Antonini et al. 2020), such as crowdfunding, fan translation and reposting. Our case study focuses on reader comments from the popular webcomics platform Webtoon (<https://www.webtoons.com/en>). Webtoon publishes both self-published and commissioned digital comics, which are usually released weekly and free to read. This dataset was extracted through web scraping and includes the most popular comics per genre, social media analytics (ratings and followers) and top comments for each comic issue, including replies and social media reactions (likes and dislikes). These sources describe immediate responses to a serial installment that differ from book reviews on a work as a whole. Thus, in identifying an equivalent in more traditional forms of reading we have to consider the specific characteristics of webcomics, in particular three main challenges concerning the sources of webcomics reading experiences: value, provenance and information content.

The presentation will discuss in detail the design of the data collection, processing and interpretation of this multifaceted case study and provide insights into the value and limitations of comparative studies, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the complex task of writing reading histories. The discussion will address the comparison between the characteristics of available sources, specifically: a) the temporal distance between the testimonies and experiences, b) whether testimonies are spontaneous or prompted, and c) the scope and purpose of the testimony. We will discuss the use of an integrative framework for experiential studies—Experience & Observation ontology design pattern (Antonini et al. 2021)—that will guide the comparisons and integration of the results of the analysis of the different sources. Lastly, preliminary considerations about challenges and limits of the approach will be presented.

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