



## About reading seen as a Commons

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## Reading seen as A Commons

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to suggest that reading can be understood as a potential 'Commons', e.g. at the very least a shared and deep sense of inhabiting, with other readers, a common domain afforded by literature or books at large. The article traverses the field of existing literature on historical and contemporary reading practice, combining previous findings in Book History with the emerging field of digital writing and reading studies in order to find points of commonalities reconnecting current digital practices with the long history of print modes. Recent technological changes are thus put into perspective, while the discussion suggests that the social imagery, as well as the societal impact attached to reading, makes it akin to a sort of Knowledge Commons. The latter part of the essay presents a brief survey of the reading habits of two small groups of African students and brings it into dialogue with occidental reading standards such as those exhibited in a North American newspaper's literary column. This case study generates reflections on the possible differences in opportunities offered to potential readers from different communities and examines whether standards that are widely accepted and taken for granted by an occidental community of readers can be considered as equally common to or fully shared by another community such as the African students surveyed on the topic.

**Keywords:** New Commons research; Cultural Heritage of reading; Prodisusage; Print and Digital book studies; African readership

The overall purpose of this article is to discuss whether reading could be seen as a 'Commons', at least in the wide sense of the term. Outside the obvious reference to the field of Commons research or theory that emerged in the 1980s, and was further grounded by the economist Elinor Ostrom (1990),<sup>1</sup> the term 'commons' 'has come to signify a much broader set of meanings than that assigned to it by academic scholars.'<sup>2</sup> It also encompasses an eclectic set of public interest goods beyond the pool of common physical resources for which it was initially forged. As J.R. Wagner states, the scope of the concept has also been recently enlarged and its understanding modified with 'the advent of *new commons* such as

music, policing, highways, public housing, digital libraries, cyberspace,<sup>3</sup> as well as with the discussion about *knowledge commons*<sup>4</sup> understood more generally as ‘a resource shared by a group of people.’<sup>5</sup> While R.J. Wagner essentially points at the terminological inconsistency as a signal that ‘many conventional commons terms and definitions do not map well onto the hybrid property regimes that characterize life in an increasingly complex, globalizing world,’<sup>6</sup> we see it as an opportunity for a speculative approach to changes in today’s reading habits. Indeed, several recent or ongoing studies from different disciplinary approaches potentially point to various practical dimensions of reading as a Commons, whether they examine a common pool of canonical texts,<sup>7</sup> search for a shared, gender neutral set of reading emotions,<sup>8</sup> attempt to wrap up recent observations on changing habits of leisure reading in Europe,<sup>9</sup> or even resort to computational methods thus opening up new directions in the study of reading modes, clubs, libraries, etc.<sup>10</sup> Still at issue within this rich, but not blended, array of interdisciplinary studies is that the various strands of research do not cohere (or their data is not yet available). With this in mind, ‘Reading Seen as a Commons’ aims at a more anthropological overview examining possible common values attached to reading. This will be conveyed in this essay through a step by step analysis of communal understandings as well as theoretical discourses on reading stretching from the 1960s until today. The essay will contend firstly, that against a linear and compartmentalized narrative of reading history, recent findings about past and current reading practices foster a historically-informed picture of multiple, overlapping and interacting modes of reading. Secondly, the essay argues that in today’s *digital culture* individual readers are *producers* who connect to each other and/or learn from watching each other, thus generating a new hybrid as well as common set of reading modes. Thirdly, the essay contends that there is a social imaginary of reading that sees it as a societal issue of concern to all areas and members of modern societies, as well as a set of common resources. Thus, the last part of the article focuses on the possible differences in opportunities offered to or perceived by potential readers from different communities. A provisional case study examines whether standards that are widely accepted and taken for granted by readers in occidental societies can be considered as equally common with or fully shared by readers in developing societies represented here by a small group of African students who were surveyed on the topic. The Commons framework thus suggests a fresh perspective on reading that paves the way for further reflections about its transformative power and the impact of successive new media on the consumption of written culture.

### **Common understandings in book reading history**

The subject of this essay initially stemmed from encounters with seemingly opposite contemporary approaches to book history. First, a brief cultural encounter with *Le livre infini*<sup>11</sup> by the French data artist Albertine Meunier, which consisted of an empty white paper-notebook augmented with digital content such as creative commons license images or texts. *Le livre infini* is a kind of enchanted book: an insta-book created by a camera -

projector system that is triggered when visitors turn a page on camera. The camera projects photos of text-like images onto the white pages as if it were (temporarily) printing them.

In this version of the series by the artist, *Le livre infini* is a book-shaped object counteracting the e-book and re-enacting the materiality of print. In other versions such as *My google search history*<sup>12</sup> the artist responds to Google's 'mania for the absolute'<sup>13</sup> and recounts a moment in her life through the careful end-to-end compilation of her own three-year Google search history: to be read accordingly (both in a print format as well as online), in the all-too-common reverse order of events made familiar by Web 2.0, from the latest or more recent date to the very first. The infinite here is real and palpable because it qualifies the endless processing of indexing that most of us perform daily 'in company with a reading monster, an archives' fanatic obsessed with completeness, a somebody called Google.'<sup>14</sup> What struck me in this encounter was that the resulting personal diary as well as digital biography, which was simultaneously a reader's and writer's log, testified to its mixed 'read-write'<sup>15</sup> method of production – something that echoes the former regime of humanist reading in the Renaissance.

The second encounter consisted of an engagement with the works of a few established scholars concerned about the changing role of literacy in the world, by the loss of profound meaning and inner wisdom attached to the activity of reading itself,<sup>16</sup> and by how revolutions in technology affect the way we read and understand a text. Among these, Ivan Illitch<sup>17</sup> and Georges Steiner<sup>18</sup> describe the true reading that occurred in the early modern and scholastic 'age of the bookish reading,'<sup>19</sup> and insist on its alleged uncommon, rare and/or long foreclosed status. To convey the main features of the bespoke ideal or 'uncommon reader,' Steiner uses the portrait of a 'Philosophe lisant' by Jean-Baptiste Simeon Chardin (Musée du Louvre, Paris): it represents a well-dressed man of the Middle Age immersed in his silent reading, alternately shifting from reading to writing as suggested by his sitting position, and by the open ink-tank and feather next to the book. Earlier, in his infamous 1962 *Gutenberg Galaxy*,<sup>20</sup> McLuhan also refers to the scholastic handling of manuscripts as a cornerstone of pre-industrial reading, quoting Ernst Robert Curtius<sup>21</sup> and others to confirm the irremediably lost unity of the intellectual medieval universe – wherein writing (as an instrument of production and creation) and reading (as an instrument of reception and study) were the two halves of a sphere. A unity that the invention of printing shattered as it differentiated the roles of producer and consumer.

While identifying printed books as the first industrial articles ever to be produced in series as well as on a mass scale – thus becoming the paradigm of a uniform culture of consumption.<sup>22</sup> McLuhan observes the disturbances provoked by the consecutive invention of writing, then printing, and its subsequent cultural achievements. He makes two assertions: firstly, human environments, whether generated by the book or the wheel, are unique but also ultimately *closed* circuits; at the time of a historical change—such as the shift from mechanical to electronic technology—they do not mingle. They do not succeed one another with infinite nor unbroken sequence. Secondly, the invention of the printing press—a major technical event leading to a new cultural era decisively shaped by the printed book—

dramatically expanded human visual capacity and consciousness, then further affected the sense of time and space related to visual modalities (continuity, uniformity, and proximity), to an extent that the subsequent electronic era, in McLuhan's view, cannot surpass nor even equal.

Both assertions are inconsistent or at variance with observations of the internet and digital culture as illustrated in *Le livre infini*. To be brief, Meunier's work shows that technological changes do not imply the complete replacement of previous behaviors or paradigms by new ones, nor can we portray cultural history as an addition of strictly separate strata and media but rather, we should understand it as a smooth process of interweaving layers. In fact, McLuhan himself implicitly apprehends these alternate views and somehow contradicts his own assertions.<sup>23</sup> He underlines and deplors the 'irrepressible need of closure' of past cultural historians. He also 'theorizes that because electronic media reintroduce simultaneity into our communications, and because they restore the audile-tactile to a dominant position, our culture is less visual and transforming again.'<sup>24</sup> This rejoins, albeit in a hybrid way, oral cultures of preliterate societies so that 'we have more in common with tribal people living in a village.'<sup>25</sup> While McLuhan expresses what appears to be contradictory or non-reconcilable standpoints, the contradiction itself seems inherent to the object of his study. Since the mid-twentieth century, the book's monopoly as an instrument of cultural transmission has been threatened by the rise of audiovisual media, namely radio, cinema and, above all, by television. Much popular media commentary today similarly alleges the end of the printed book as both a distinct object and as structured written matter that characterizes long-lasting occidental cultures.

Overall concerns about issues and challenges to reading culture have arisen in the wake of the so-called digital revolution that *simultaneously* transforms the type of texts written, the forms supporting them, and the modes of their appropriation. There is also a widespread belief that both the book and written culture are being replaced in the digital culture by various devices and screens displaying vast amounts of information flows, largely with no discernible author, leading to an apparently autonomous and free read/write<sup>26</sup> culture wherein roles or positions, as well as skills and possibly values from the traditional book world, are erased and melded.<sup>27</sup> Many in educational sectors also deplore a decrease in reading skills and attention span due to new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).<sup>28</sup> Concerned discussion about declining motivations for reading has also abounded as other forms of entertainment compete with recreational reading. And the ability to concentrate on long and complex texts – what could also be called 'deep reading' – is deemed by some commentators to be deteriorating.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, and at the same time, books remain in the popular imagination in occidental countries as one of 'the' *summum bonum*, or through its unique authority, among the highest goods achieved by human societies ever.<sup>30</sup>

These seemingly opposite views – the decline in book reading as a corollary of the end of print culture on one hand versus its continuity or even renewal despite the technological shift on the other – do not imply strict boundaries separating print versus

digital reading. While the striking novelty today is indeed the simultaneity of the changes observed, the evolution itself of reading matter, media and readership in the course of fresh developments of novel technology, is not an entirely new phenomenon; reading is indeed a complex and ancient activity that has evolved throughout history alongside the successive revolutions of the book. All of these factors tend to lead scholars and book professionals to a notion of the *unending end of the book* or, as vividly stated by Andrew Piper in the meme-like title of his 2012 study, *Book Was There*. So, the very notion and repeated ‘false alarm’ about the end of the book has become a feature of its longevity that concurs with the half-practical, half-anthropological view of Umberto Eco about its infinite and flexible status.<sup>31</sup>

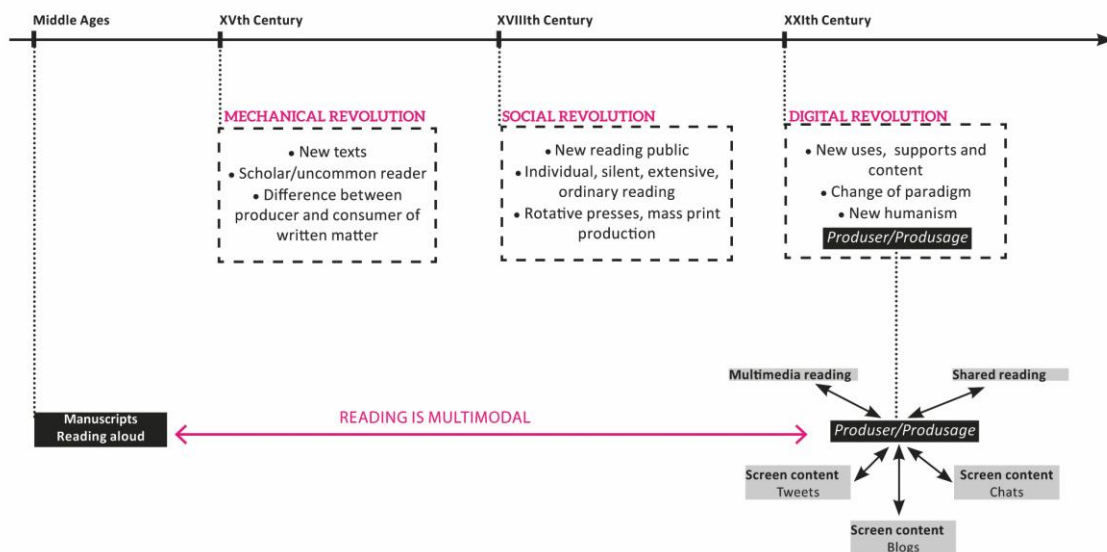
Ou bien le livre demeurera le support de la lecture, ou bien il existera quelque chose qui ressemblera à ce que le livre n’a jamais cessé d’être, même avant l’invention de l’imprimerie. Les variations autour du livre n’en ont pas modifié la fonction, ni la syntaxe, depuis plus de cinq cents ans. Le livre est comme la cuiller, le marteau, la roue ou le ciseau (...) Peut-être évoluera-t-il dans ses composantes, peut-être ses pages ne seront-elles plus en papier. Mais il demeurera ce qu’il est.<sup>32</sup>

There seems to be an overall sense of consensus between scholarly and lay views about book reading history. Interdisciplinary research on reading backs the broad consensus about the concomitance of the ‘transformational nature of recent digital development’<sup>33</sup> together with the continuity between old and new practices. Reading studies also stress points of commonalities across times and media between behaviors and experiences that were at first seen as distinct, but which, in fact, are overlapping from one revolution of the book to the other. It is gradually being established by scholars that the paradigmatic shift induced by the rise of Web 2.0 and by the development of ICTs creates new experiences for readers but does not affect the importance of literary ‘textual reading which is *likely* to remain important as a cultural practice,’<sup>34</sup> while other forms of reading remain key to educational attainment, cultural enrichment and leisure in the twenty-first century.

The outcome is that readers confronted with texts in multiple versions and formats do not completely opt out of print culture nor do they opt exclusively for the digital. Despite the effective shift in the ways that texts are written, formatted and read today, the state of knowledge suggests that we are not observing the radical rupture formerly anticipated as a result of the digital revolution, but rather an evolution of practices towards a dual or even multiple-use of reading in multiple formats along with the transformation *by* and adaptation *to* new devices of a longstanding book and reading culture. In fact, digital reading has confirmed a longstanding practice of ‘reading-beyond-the-book’<sup>35</sup> but it did not inaugurate it from scratch. Regardless of the structural milestones and shifts induced in European historical reading practices by successive revolutions – the shifts from exclusive or selective to popular or mass reading, from oral and collective to silent and individual reading, from intensive to extensive reading, from knowledge-oriented to leisure-oriented reading, and

even from print to digital reading – bookish reading has always been (at least in occidental societies) a multimodal experience. That experience is both finite and infinite, physical and virtual, including, from one period to another, a discernible pattern of loose or alternating relationships between reading and writing.

Reading was already ‘compromised’<sup>36</sup> or rather, to put it positively, ‘multimodal’ when it started to expand in Europe outside the monasteries; print-culture was already postmodern as of the invention of the printing press. This suggests a historical process of not only progression, but also recycling, which can be tentatively mapped as follows in ‘The Revolving History of Reading’ diagram below (**Figure 1**):



**Figure 1:** *The Revolving History of Reading*

Outside the frequently made analogy between the format of ancient manuscript scrolls and contemporary digital screens, the transformations of book technologies throughout history seem to go along one steady line and to pursue a common goal, e.g. organizing the visible and legible transmission of textual matter in a way that best accommodates both the intentions of the author and the expectations of the receptor. Since ‘books and screens are now bound up with one another whether we like it or not,’<sup>37</sup> the variety of reading formats, devices and uses has also increasingly become a common norm for all types of readers and modes of reading. Today’s ordinary readers have (however unconsciously) a common understanding of reading as an ‘instrumented human activity,’<sup>38</sup> one that involves appropriating the instruments of reading, for example, to build personal schemes for their uses. While this understanding was essentially implicit among educated readers in print culture (yet rarely commented upon outside perceived differences, for example, between book and newspaper reading), the new ordinary or new *common readers*<sup>39</sup> juggling with



different formats and devices are increasingly aware of the importance of the strategies and schemes required to handle various instruments.

These varied strategies do not necessarily translate into homogeneous feelings of improvement or progress. For example, McLuhan used to praise the invention of the printed book as ‘an extension of the eye’<sup>40</sup> that expanded the human visual capacity and consequently the appreciation of time and space, and he explored this potential further in the layout of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which prefigures the webpage.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, the current multi-directional organization of reading is considered detrimental by Manovich: he observes that the combination of different media in new platforms of reading in ‘presenting the content in the age-old familiar format of the page (...) yet also adding new dimensions to the page format (...) reflects the contemporary suspicion of all hierarchies, favoring the aesthetics of collage, and ‘flattens’ the reading experience.’<sup>42</sup> Others, like Carla Hesse, soberly anticipated fluid knowledge-building modes for the times to come:

In the future, it seems, there will be no fixed canons of texts and no fixed epistemological boundaries between disciplines, only paths of inquiry, modes of integration, and moments of encounter.<sup>43</sup>

Hesse’s comment might be understood as a programmatic definition of reading that many readers and scholars can relate to in the contemporary moment. In their attempt to define digital culture, Milad Doueiri and Jacoppo Domenicucci<sup>44</sup> recently reminded us that Tim Berners Lee, one of the founding fathers of the worldwide web, originally envisioned its social dimension as a primary function, claiming that, ‘The web is more a social creation than a technical one. I designed it for a social effect - to help people work together - and not as a technical toy.’<sup>45</sup> The claim is one of the stepping stones of what the authors call ‘Confiance’ (trust, reliability) in a digital culture:

Le numérique n’est pas un objet technique -ce n’est pas l’ère du numérique, comme d’aucuns parlent de l’ère de la machine à vapeur. C’est un ensemble de structures symboliques et matérielles, culturelles et sociales en un mot, une civilisation, ou du moins un facteur central dans notre civilisation.<sup>46</sup>

Accordingly, reading in the new open digital culture is not just undergoing a technological shift in its means and modes. It is also undergoing, and imposing onto the majority of online and on screen readers, a broader metacognitive as well as perceptive shift as recent neurocognitive models of reading tentatively suggest.<sup>47</sup> Depending on their familiarity with and expectations of print, screen or both, readers are now confronted with a single or a dual reading contract: print offers better reading comfort and a more continuous, and thus more meaningful, experience because of the size of the book, the typographic enrichment, the contrast of ink on paper and material functionalities such as the sound of paper, the color, smell, weight, and thickness of the book.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the resolution issues for on-screen



reading are not entirely solved; it is still physically uncomfortable or materially impossible to sustain a tactile contact between the reader and the textual device or medium.<sup>49</sup> Further, the fragmented digital text requires that the reader develop an awareness of new skills and schemes of navigation and reference for which most readers are not yet fully trained despite the apparent ease of the processes involved.

Overall, the first part of this essay shows that the more that scholarly research tries to account for communal dimensions in reading behaviors, the more we see the need to combine the long tradition of book history with subsequent reading studies as well as with current research on digital media. The next section of this essay will contend that such a combination might contribute insightful elements to the study of reading itself, while outlining why thinking about, or even theorizing reading as a Commons, is significant for media studies and book history.

### **Reading: a participative activity in the new open digital culture**

Focusing on the new uses of reading in the age of the digital we see that with e-books and logs of their use, as suggested by a body of studies synthesized in a chapter by Freeman & Sanders,<sup>50</sup> it is now possible to track several aspects of user's interactions inside e-books, or to compare 'user's interactions with print books and different e-book formats, including one that simulated a 3-D book with realistic page turning.'<sup>51</sup> Another study rightly suggests that 'the transition from a closed print-based culture to an open digital culture is part of a broader shift in how culture is produced and consumed.'<sup>52</sup> This statement is important because it identifies a shift which, in turn, makes 'consumers and readers into producers and writers by giving them access to the necessary tools for remixing and remaking culture for themselves.'<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, this argument should be more integral to contemporary commentaries made by book historians. To date, many theoretical or historical studies of reading do not sufficiently account for knowledge from cultural theory and media studies about internet practices and social networks.

Furthermore, we also see that research on reading shows a hard-to-bridge discrepancy between the minute observation of cultural practices and the search for an explanatory model or system. Freeman and Sanders underline that 'print books pose inherent difficulties for researchers who want to observe a user's natural in-book reading patterns: the nature of silent reading makes it difficult to study and measure in the laboratory,'<sup>54</sup> partially due to the fact that the act of observing affects the behavior being observed. Also, the exploratory log analysis reported by the authors 'reveals nothing about users' circumstances or intentions,'<sup>55</sup> the latter being an on-going question in reading studies and book history for which the answer is long overdue. Moreover, in a noteworthy 2007 article Axel Bruns<sup>56</sup> harshly criticizes the then-current scholarly context stating that, while the rise of Web 2.0 is said to have a profound impact on social practices, it is as yet poorly understood and insufficiently theorized: 'In particular,' Bruns says, 'studies of user-led content online phenomena continue to operate by applying, sometimes without much

critical reflection, analytical frameworks established during the industrial age which by now are increasingly outdated.<sup>57</sup>

Several issues or problems arise from this situation. Firstly, sometimes useful theories have serious deficiencies when treating the historical facts of book practices, while contextual inquiries sometimes lose the big picture. Secondly, different reading practices – seemingly belonging to different era – coexist in today's so-called global digital culture, making it difficult to evaluate the relevance of analytical concepts pertaining to specifically situated either in-print or e-reading practices. Finally, the scholarship about reading and readers has greatly expanded since the 1990s, and reader-response eventually emerges today<sup>58</sup> as a stand-alone theory that imposed the notion of active reader against traditional textual hermeneutics or later theories of reader-text transaction. Yet, notwithstanding the limits of reader-response theories to account for reader-reader interactions and other social practices of reading,<sup>59</sup> the changing uses of reading in the media sphere raise the need for revised concepts to encompass the ideas expressed in Fuller and Rehberg Sedo's labelling of their account of theoretical approaches to readers: 'Reading beyond the academy: From active to actual readers, from response to experience.'<sup>60</sup> Moreover, new concepts and analytical frameworks in reading studies also need to address the impact of digital, or even post digital, culture on all aspects of readers' practices.

Responding to these research limitations and needs, Bruns challenges the idea of content *production* and argues that *produsage* might provide a more workable model for the new hybrid form of simultaneous text production and usage that characterizes online user-led content creation environments. Bruns first carefully describes the links between the models, the production processes (traditional or online), and the value chains to which they relate, such as in the traditional production models. There he says, products exist in discreet versions controlled, released and replaced by updated versions at chosen times by the producer, not by consumers seen as essentially passive 'end-users.'<sup>61</sup>

Bruns also depicts the paradigmatic shift observed in the creation and the exploitation of intellectual property of informational goods (such as books in physical as well intangible formats), as a shift from an old regime of producer-led replacement with updated versions, to the current regime of reader/produser-led endless revisions. Content in 'traditional' print format cannot be instantly altered so new physical editions or translations have to be produced by cultural industries in order to meet the expectations of new end-users/readers. Likewise, e-books can also be unalterable homothetic replicas meant to preserve a perceived link to past printed books, or they can be hybrid products resulting from the blending of print and digital books.

Accordingly, and while 'this paradigm shift is by no means complete at this point, and its implications are still emerging,'<sup>62</sup> Bruns points at the Creative Commons licenses and underlines the *cultural* remodeling at work:

Legal frameworks such as the Creative Commons suite of licenses allow for the re-use and remixing of existing content into new artworks which are then able to be further reworked by subsequent generations of users. This opens up new avenues for creative work and publication beyond the traditional media industries, as well as undermine[ing] romantic notions of the artist as individual genius (...)<sup>63</sup>

Such a cultural remodelling is both the effect and the means of a *societal* shift: 'A shift from dedicated individuals or teams as producers to a broader-based, distributed generation of content by a wide community of participants.'<sup>64</sup> The digital shift that transforms material and symbolic objects (such as books) induces a reconfiguration of producer/user boundaries. While the production and circulation of ideas through books' authors, publishers and readers in print culture has always relied on intellectual and commercial trade, text reading in the age of digitization appears to expand these exchanges and their intricacies beyond its level in the industrial age. In the new collaborative, participatory environments, ideas and written matter are the co-authored, co-published and co-read results of a community of participants: numerous literary social networks and platforms exhibit this new common and participative reading practice such as Goodreads, Babelio, Bookcrossing, Librarything, BookBub, etc.<sup>65</sup> As a result, reading – rather than writing – is now the leading multifaceted activity that organizes, drives and propels the crowdsourcing of text and information by formal or informal groups of identifiable and anonymous producers.

So while scholars are right to concur (as sustained in the first part of this essay) that 'we cannot think about our electronic future without contending with its antecedents, the bookish past,'<sup>66</sup> the newer, open digital culture points to a series of changes in focus: from the 'book' as an artifact as well as material object aimed at a collective reader or a collection of individual readers, and involving a chain of production, distribution, trade, promotion, etc., to 'reading' as the mental and emotional act of apprehension and appropriation of textual or visual contents of pages whether on paper or on screen; from print-culture, traditionally understood for several centuries in terms of the material printed 'book' as the main substrate of a widely circulated written culture, to reading-culture, where readers demonstrate a variety of 'bookish' practices and habits, some being guided by strict traditional models, some by preferences, some by constraints of availability and access to reading matter regardless of format.

The changing 'physicality' of artifacts in today's saturated, digitally mediated visual culture is not new, of course. Echoing Walter Benjamin's landmark article,<sup>67</sup> the British art critic John Berger declares in his 1972 influential *Ways of Seeing*<sup>68</sup> that 'in an age of digital reproduction the meaning of paintings is no longer physically attached to them; their meaning becomes transmittable.' Today, some even appear as 'a photo opportunity' thus ceasing to exist as an original and separate work of art and become an abstract or ideal representation of art.<sup>69</sup> Although paper books – as opposed to single pieces of art – were

always reproducible, e.g. replicated and commoditized, digital media allows for a similar process of virtualization, leading both to the transformation of written matter from legible to visible forms, and to its endless revision, re-publication and sharing through *common* – in the sense of both participative and ordinary – online reading.

In his upcoming article, 'From Codex to Ludex,'<sup>70</sup> Caleb Milligan 'probes the material representation of 'paper machines' (books and book-adjacent objects) as playable artifacts within digital games.' He declares: 'The commentaries played out by these games speak volumes to my article's major concern, namely, how humans conceive of themselves via print now digitally abstracted.'<sup>71</sup> He comments on how, for example, the shift to digital texts seen as abstracted versions of printed texts, changes the readers' modes of interaction with texts and possibly the impact of texts as a source of personal improvement. Milligan illustrates, from a new angle, the established notion that texts and books have become visual abstractions to be viewed and looked at, thus continuing the 'aesthetic reference of the codex and reading within other media known as 'lectoral art'.<sup>72</sup> Milligan thereby argues that reading is now a multimodal and intermedia experience to a much greater extent than in its traditional mode. Such a claim leads the author to differentiate print-culture and books from 'bookishness' and 'bookish devices that mimic the codex for innovative avenues out of the book.'<sup>73</sup> Further, he reassesses print-culture as the more strictly defined 'paper-culture' periodized by Jacques Derrida:

Paper is [...] the limited 'subject' of a domain circumscribed in the time and space of a hegemony that marks out a period in the history of a technology and in the history of humanity.<sup>74</sup>

This definition underlines the link between the physicality of reading matter and the variation of its communal use and value, as shown by the broad historical evolution of authorship, which can be briefly summarized as follows: in Europe before the Middle Ages, texts used to be 'published' (from the latin word 'publicare' meaning making something public) through an oral performance at the city's forum, thus establishing the speaker as the author. With the multiplication of speakers publishing or voicing texts they had not composed themselves, thus appropriating them, some, like the Latin poet Martial (40-103) sought to ascertain his auctorality or authorship through copyright.<sup>75</sup> He had his texts copied and signed with his name on scrolls that could be found in a shop. Nowadays, digital texts and contents are fragmented and replicated on the net, often without proper reference to the original publisher, or to the established author, or to the edition from which the excerpt has been taken. In this way the chain of authorship is broken again (as it was in pre-Middle Ages Europe) and a huge amount of written matter circulates freely for common use or collective authorship.<sup>76</sup>

To conclude the second part of this essay, reading is undergoing a societal shift: while in twentieth-century European countries with comparable educational systems and readerships, books used to be the main means of ensuring that trust and beliefs were

conveyed through a relatively fixed set of modes. Book-adjacent objects (tablets, computer and smartphone screens, e-books) share the broader 'producer-text-audience model'<sup>77</sup> designed by media studies. Digital text reading thus acquires the common 'value creation' attached to participative activities in past and present forms of social media (after all, reading clubs and shared-reading *were there*<sup>78</sup> before the advent of blogs), and can be reconceptualized 'as sense-making, that is creative explorations of the self and management of social relationships in everyday life.'<sup>79</sup>

### **Reading, a social imaginary**

In this upcoming section of the essay I would like to reflect on how the perceived importance of reading as a personal, as well as collective, added value, namely the social imaginary about reading, could contribute to it being seen as a Commons. There is a vast amount of visual, textual, audiovisual resources from cultural heritage archives bearing evidence of the extensive representation of reading experiences in art and literature of the past.<sup>80</sup> Today, the web and specifically social networks, also exhibit intense interest surrounding reading, whether they convey the point of view of institutions and policy makers, or the personal opinions and activities of individual readers or communities of readers. The expression 'reading experience,' a term that used to prompt questions and much discussion among scholars of reading and book history, is now understood in reading studies<sup>81</sup> and in mundane comments<sup>82</sup> alike, as encompassing the personal and external context within which reading occurs (the Who reads What, Where and When? of reading) as well as the inner feelings it provokes. Initially underlined by Darnton in his 1986 article,<sup>83</sup> the expression now typically relates to self-accounts and portrayals of readers sharing their reading habits or pleasures<sup>84</sup> and the study of such accounts might offer answers to the much sought-after questions of 'Why' and 'How' people read.

The resources bear evidence of the ongoing concern of reading in western cultures since the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>85</sup> They are being investigated by scholars aiming to 'develop a model of the act of reading which takes into account readers' embodied responses,' a notion that is becoming mainstream,<sup>86</sup> and the perception of its cognitive impact.<sup>87</sup> Investigations are also being undertaken to enable a description of how these models account for the learning process, and for the emotions and the inferences made by readers from the texts they read.<sup>88</sup> Altogether, the exploration of such archival resources and imagery makes it possible for scholars to search for a common social pattern of reading. Outside the field of education where reading purposes and processes can be more readily identified as they are channeled towards specific and explicit purposes, recreational reading at large reveals an increasingly greater variety of bookish experiences that do not replicate historical or one-fits-all patterns. For example, the very motivation for non-prescribed reading has clearly shifted across time from an essentially knowledge-driven cognitive activity, to a broader information-driven cultural experience as well as a leisure activity; this shift has also led to an association being made between being well-read or reading a lot

with well-being, as books are more regularly valued according to the level of psychological uplift and self-healing they provide.<sup>89</sup>

On the one hand, multiple uses of reading in multiple formats and on multiple devices continue to coexist, and there is not a uniform set of reading modes, purposes and responses. Likewise, the notion of text has been enlarged and redefined as ‘a multimodal intentional representation with purposes and boundaries understood within a given sociocultural domain.’<sup>90</sup> But understanding reading as a socially situated act<sup>91</sup> performed by social subjects shows us that individual reading activities adapt to each other and influence each other. Social activities such as reading clubs and readers’ groups – even more so on social media than in traditional face-to-face formations – are based on two-way exchanges as well as some degree of ‘collapse’ between the producer and audience,<sup>92</sup> and social activities participate in the personal improvement of individual readers. Reading thus provides an experiential form of knowledge that directly translates into critical thinking and social value.

Each reading experience exhibits a complete set of personal circumstances, e.g. the *triple helix* combination of physical, psychological (or physio-psychological<sup>93</sup>) and sociological dimensions that research observes both in synchronic and diachronic approaches. While the detailed specifics of each set of personal circumstances are different, the combination of them, as well as the nature of its experiential dimensions and components, forms a common pattern. And the analysis of this combination reveals, as Kukkonen advances, that the ways in which the embodied reader makes sense of the fictional world lead her to make sense and learn from the real world as well.<sup>94</sup>

Fuller and Rehberg Sedo interestingly identify such individually situated reading experiences as the very feature determining the primarily social structure and societal impact of reading: ‘For us, then, reading is a social and political act performed by embodied individuals. By this we mean that reading is a cultural activity and all cultural activities have ideological effects.’<sup>95</sup> Accordingly, ‘through a consideration of the major actors, institutions, and material that shape contemporary cultures of shared reading [*Reading Beyond the Book*] identifies and interrogates the complex ideological investments made by readers, cultural workers, government agencies, and the mass media in the meaning of reading at the turn of the twenty-first century.’<sup>96</sup> Such a study, along with the rich archive contributed by historical, literary and social perspectives on today’s reading practices (in any format), suggests that reading in the age of the digital does not simply integrate and combine the discontinuous technical, economic, legal, and religious aspects of print reading; it also involves, if not all, at least a very large amount of members of a society, as most of them share an analogous pattern of emotional, embodied, individual reading experiences.<sup>97</sup>

Thus, reading matches up to the conceptual criteria and requisites of a ‘Fait social total’, that is, a full or comprehensive social fact, to borrow the concept and methodological tool coined by the French anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss.<sup>98</sup> In his ‘Essai sur le don’ (*The Gift*), a short book that is the foundation of social theories of reciprocity and gift exchange, Mauss defines a ‘Fait social total’ as a social situation or practice that may, in



some cases, involve a whole society along with its institutions, or simply a very large number of institutions, exchanges and contracts among individuals. Leaving aside the particularities of gift exchange (although books and reading products are extensively exchanged as such and the net induces a reconfiguration of gift and trust<sup>99</sup>), reading practices have always resorted to and been implicated in (in fact, 'intricated' within) all areas of social concerns, not only cultural and educational, but also commercial, industrial and even political: reading policies, whether they are about the promotion or censorship of reading, are of paramount importance for a democratic and wide access to reading matter, and thus for the development of critical awareness in citizens.

As social subjects are at the same time the producers and the products of their environment, reading can be understood as both an acquired form of knowledge or know-how, and as a replicated behavior across and throughout different societal and cultural contexts. By the latter, and in line with the Social Cognitive or Social Learning Theory<sup>100</sup> contending that 'portions of an individual's knowledge acquisition can be directly related to qualitative and quantitative observations of others within the context of social interactions'<sup>101</sup> I mean that reading behaviour is prompted by the observation of other people's engagement in reading, and by its apparent rewards, or, conversely, discouraged by their disengagement.

This has two consequences on the potential commonality of reading practices. First, the social context that leads subjects to the observation of others and to learning behavior relies on the motivation of social subjects, or on an environment promoting observation as the means of knowledge acquisition. This claim concurs with studies on Knowledge Commons<sup>102</sup> by Ferenc Gyuris who argues that 'knowledge as a shared resource' requires that both information must become accessible *and* potential recipients must become able and willing to internalize it as 'knowledge': 'Therefore, knowledge cannot become a shared resource without a complex set of institutions and practices that give the opportunity to potential recipients to gain the necessary abilities and willingness to internalize knowledge.'<sup>103</sup>

### **Haves and have nots among common readers?**

Our focus here is neither on knowledge nor on shared resources, but on equal or unequal opportunities for potential recipients to gain the so-called 'abilities and willingness' to internalize knowledge. Readership and reading habits are prone to significant collective and individual variations, whether in developed countries with diverse and different cultural settings and personal contexts, or within developing countries where the social and educational infrastructures may differ greatly. While reading is a formative activity made available through education to individuals in most social contexts, reading capacity and reading matter are not evenly distributed nor promoted, leading to wide gaps in literacy and empowerment. The divide between those who do and those who do not belong to educated circles (e.g. people with dual print and digital reading skills, or simply people raised within bookish contexts and families) has evolved. Inequality persists despite the paradigmatic shift



to more bottom-up and communally-held information and knowledge in the digital era. As Bruns discusses in some detail in his 2007 article, shifting to produsage-driven environments does not prevent the divide nor the generational gap (wherein a 'generation' refers to an aptitude and attitude, not an age-based demographic) between those who participate effectively in a produsage environment and those who do not. Nor is it yet evident whether or not the section of society which does participate, is significantly broader than in traditional, pre-digital cultural contexts.

To illustrate the possible differences or contrasts in opportunities offered to potential readers, we will compare the environmental settings suggested by a small survey of African students about their reading habits, to those exhibited in the *By the Book* weekly column of the *New York Times* (NYT). While my original interest was and remains to find out more about current reading in Africa, the lack of comprehensive studies and surveys on the topic made it difficult to set up a genuine methodology and a conceptual framework of understanding for the findings. For this reason, although by no means intended as a colonizing manoeuvre, I resorted to a rough comparison between the highlights of the African survey and the seemingly widespread, yet possibly conservative, occidental reading standards exhibited in the NYT's column. As much as it is artificial – since the two cultural contexts differ greatly – this approach suggests unexpected transcultural components of reading, e.g. its common transformative and meaning-making power across cultural borders.

Two groups of African students were surveyed in December 2017 on the west coast of Senegal in two different educational settings: 1) face-to-face for Group 1 in a village book center known as the Centre de Lecture et d'Animation Culturelle Léopold Sedar Senghor (CLAC), Joal-Fadiouth, Senegal, which I visited several times and where I undertook a group session and oral interviews with the librarian. The group consisted of 17 Senegalese junior high students, the majority of whom were 8<sup>th</sup> graders (15 girls and 2 boys between 13 and 17 years old) who participated along with their school prefect, and two adults who were involved in a creative writing club;<sup>104</sup> 2) online for Group 2 via a survey of 20 African Master students (about 17 boys and 3 girls, but only 12 responded in total) who were from various African countries (mostly francophone but some anglophone) and who were attending a high-level training program in mathematical studies known as AIMS Center, Mbour, Senegal after the award of a full fellowship.<sup>105</sup>

The detailed socio-cultural backgrounds of the students in both groups are unknown, but they all exhibited a high level of language proficiency outside their national languages. The Senegalese junior high school students are fluent in both French and Wolof; all the AIMS students, who are chiefly from sub-Sahara and West Africa, are fluent in English plus French, or in African French for residents from French-speaking African countries, plus at least one African language from among those which are most frequently spoken in West African countries.<sup>106</sup> While AIMS students stand out as they are selected by merit for a one-year full fellowship in one of just 4 AIMS centers (located in Benin, Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa), the junior high school cohort is a rather different sample group. They all came

from the same village middle school and from comparable social settings. They had been encouraged to participate in the survey by the school prefect who also attended the session. It is unclear why the response came mainly from girls within the high school group. The reverse gender ratio at AIMS is explained by the fact that the subjects of maths, physics and engineering in Africa – as elsewhere – attracts more boys than girls. The survey that was designed was a relatively simple one and it did not enquire about the different social, political and cultural contexts from which the AIMS students originated nor into how those contexts might account for their answers.

Prior to the interviews and survey taking place, the Centre de Lecture et d'Animation Culturelle (CLAC) had been approached during a previous visit in 2016. That visit involved a donation of books, email exchanges with the librarian, and with a French citizen who was involved in a school creative writing club in the area. These meetings enabled the planning of the high school group session. I also visited the Mbour AIMS center in 2016 and formally requested the authorization to conduct the survey with the AIMS students. The survey was vetted by the students' Director of Studies and it also benefited from the advice of the students' supervisor. Prior to my visit to Senegal, I had also visited the AIMS center in South Africa and inquired about student readings, and, had gained some knowledge of the infrastructure for and around reading via my research into the Pan-African book business and the reading opportunities afforded by it.<sup>107</sup>

The broad topic and research motivation for the survey were presented orally and separately to each group of students, then answered orally by group 1 and online by group 2. The 2017 survey focused essentially on two points of interest: *Do you find pleasure in reading and can you describe this pleasure? What kind of difficulties prevent you from having a wider access to reading matter and/or more fulfilling reading experiences?* These survey questions were followed by more detailed ones in the face-to-face group with high school students at the reading center, while a written, online enquiry was forwarded by email to AIMS students to be filled in and returned within a week of receipt. In both cases, the preliminary questions that targeted their practical and usual circumstances of reading were deliberately inspired by questions posed in the *By the Book* column. Interestingly, questions about whether the students had books at home (on nightstand, shelves or otherwise? how many? and whether they had been borrowed? given as gifts? or bought?), proved not applicable to most of the student's domestic contexts. Some students pointed to the difficulties raised by such questions, and others just skipped them. Questions about *regular reading habits* versus occasional habits also remained partially unanswered.

The online survey would clearly have benefitted from a reformulation or second wave of questions in order to better match the reading environment of the interviewees. Nevertheless, these setbacks were an indirect finding of the survey: these particular groups of African readers do not live in a broad nor long-established reading culture. Hence, what might appear as mainstream questions to members of occidental reading communities sounded exotic or perplexing or required further refinement to these differently situated groups of readers. A further attempt at circulating an updated questionnaire to the same

students after the research visit and from an overseas location did not succeed, probably because it was not sustained by the type of face-to-face informal exchanges arranged during the period of the initial online survey.

At the CLAC, students seated at a round table first spoke in turn to introduce themselves, and described in their own words what kind of readers they were. Questions and answers then rebounded from one to another and these will be synthesized below. It would have required more time than was available to let everyone express themselves fully and to follow up on all their rich and varied suggestions. This may become possible in the future via a follow-up study on a larger scale to be conducted throughout several official or self-run reading centers along the west coast of Senegal from Joal-Fadiouth to Rufisque.

In spite of the small size of the sample groups, the survey led to some open, reciprocal and enriching exchanges among the students and in their interactions with me. Nevertheless, this study should be regarded as an informative ‘opportunity’ or pilot study that generated a very brief and provisional glimpse into the reading environment of two specific communities of African readers. Although the results are suggestive, they can by no means reveal the reading habits of young Africans from the same age group and with equivalent educational level across the continent, nor even can they be taken to represent a Senegalese or West African reading culture for young people. As far as we can tell from the answers, for these readers, reading is not felt as a deeply rooted or a widespread activity. At the individual level, reading motivation seems to be highly dependable upon the person’s familiar environment: almost all junior high school students but three said their parents were non-readers, and some parents even opposed reading because they considered it to be dangerous or incompatible with traditional beliefs; like playing (cards, games, etc.) reading can attract the bad eye and chase money away. As most of the junior high school students said they enjoyed reading very much and practiced it as much as they could, several explained that it was seen as an act of defiance or distance towards parents and hard to discuss with members of an older generation even when their parents are attentive and wish their children the best. Parents in this rural area do not identify reading as a direct link to educational and social agency. Yet, the high level of illiteracy among the parents’ generation is only part of the explanation as most support their children’s education (and at no small cost to themselves and their families).

Among all the students surveyed (both groups), only one cited discussing his readings with his mother and only six Master students mentioned they had a few readers among their immediate family circle. Among the junior high school students, only three (all girls) said their parents tolerated or were supportive of reading activities (provided house chores were done before or after school hours), and only one said her father (a math’s teacher) equally encouraged and even enforced hers’ as well as her brother’s activities in all areas (including riding a bicycle, which she described as a very rare and unlikely activity for girls like her with a Muslim background).

Cumulatively, both AIMS and junior high school students show evidence that reading is primarily knowledge-oriented for them and that reading – or not-reading – is essentially

an awareness issue: namely, the means of discovering and understanding the world ‘outside Africa.’ This awareness explains why all the AIMS Master students but one said they had only recently started reading books, e.g. late in their teens or even only after completing high school. They seem to assimilate book-reading (outside textbooks for strict learning purposes) as an act of maturity that follows on from the choice of an above-average career or higher education.

The junior high school students appeared to be more engaged in a wide-ranging exploration of all kinds of recreational literature and were reading for pleasure at an earlier age than their AIMS counterparts. It is plausible that the combined effort of the school prefect and the village librarian (who lives onsite, visits his family only once a week in order to keep the CLAC open almost 24/7, attends football games to reach out to supporters and convince them to visit the CLAC) are paying off in terms of creating a culture of reading. Another middle school in the village has an on-site library supported by a privately funded network of French librarians, but we were not able to visit it, and there is little to no cooperation between the two schools nor exchanges of resources. The CLAC is supported by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF),<sup>108</sup> but the librarian does not have sufficient training to make proper use of the educational material, the material books on offer are limited in quantity, and most are worn out due to intensive use and insufficient renewal of the collection.



After the oral survey, students from the CEM Lamine Senghor in front of the Centre de Lecture et d'Animation Culturelle, CLAC Léopold Sédar Senghor, Joal-Fadiouth, Senegal, December 2017.

The two groups surveyed concur on two major assessments, although the age gap between the junior high school and Master students accounts for differences in the ways they express them. First, African would-be readers underline that access to reading matter is a major and widespread issue throughout the continent: libraries, bookshops and publishers are rarities outside capitals or main big cities, at least in the student's home countries; apart from branches of foreign publishers, the local publishing industry is struggling; governments only subsidize textbooks – if indeed there is subsidy for books at all; foreign books are mostly unaffordable, and there are few agreements with international publishers for low-cost copies. Personal libraries are uncommon and limited to small shelves. Among the AIMS students, most owned their own books or had their parents' books at home, but they could not say whether it was the same for their friends or friends' parents, and they were not sure whether those people were or were not readers. While most young people have internet access, albeit through their phones (none had home computers), insufficient broad band, and the costly (thus limited) connection time, do not allow for online reading, downloading of books and so on.

Secondly, and more importantly, the students' testimonies also underline the importance of oral transmission of information, ideas, memories and values in their daily lives. Resorting to books as the means of enhancing life experiences does not appear, or at least is not expressed, as an ingrained nor instinctive behavior. In both groups book reading was perceived as a bonus or as a supplementary source of information and world knowledge, but not one that would supersede the person-to-person traditional modes of exchanging wisdom. For the older group of students (AIMS), reading culture is realistically identified as a specific European or occidental mindset that can be instrumental for young professionals in non-African surroundings or for cultural awareness about unfamiliar social or geographical areas. That said, within the younger group, the level of familiarity with highbrow French as well as African literature, along with an outspoken enthusiasm about the pleasure of reading such material was astonishing when compared to the older group of AIMS students (and, frankly, probably compared to average middle school students in France). The village of Joal-Fadiouth is proud to host Leopold Sedar Senghor's father's and the writer's childhood house, but the fame of the great Senegalese poet, president and cultural theorist associated with the movement of Negritude (1906-2001) cannot solely explain the literary knowledge and aspirations of middle schoolers born after his death in a country with such a fast-growing population and unsteady educational policies. Asked about the effects and emotions of reading, half of this group testified to an experience of self-discovery but also of increased theory of the mind (e.g. the ability to attribute mental states – beliefs, intents, desires, emotions, knowledge, etc. – to oneself, and to others), and a greater capability of empathy.<sup>109</sup> A handful of students advocated the life-changing potential of reading based on the observation of fictional characters and situations, and two of them described their efforts to engage other African youth around them in reading, chanting the mantra: 'La lecture est mon amie' (reading is my friend).



To what extent might the reading standards of these two specific communities of African students correspond with those of occidental, educated readers and newspaper patrons?

The *By the Book* weekly column appears in the week-end edition of the *New York Times* and is clearly situated within Euro-American middlebrow print-culture: it uses the literal and figurative meaning of the phrase for a 'column' (another bookish piece of terminology from the paper presses' layout) where authors and other notable people discuss their lives as readers. The questions follow a similar pattern from one column to another, allowing the newspaper readers to gain a comforting sense of familiarity with the genre of the column, and, perhaps, a sense of belonging to an on-going (imagined) community. The column has also been adapted into a book featuring a selection of the weekly publications. The foreword for the book underscores the meaning and scope of the column:

Sixty-five of the world's leading writers open up about the books and authors that have meant the most to them. Every Sunday, readers of *The New York Times Book Review* turn with anticipation to see which novelist, historian, short story writer, or artist will be the subject of the popular *By the Book* feature.<sup>110</sup>

The questions posed to the people interviewed for the column expect and presuppose that, despite their diversity in terms of cultural and educational backgrounds, they share common reading behaviors with members of the *New York Times* reading public. These are people with typical or dedicated reading environments as well as habits, reading several books at any one time, and often in bed, hence the question: *What books are on your nightstand?* The questions also assume that the interviewee is well aware that the books we possess and display say something about who we are: *What book might people be surprised to find on your bookshelves?* The column is also predicated on the notion that those featured in it are avid readers who typically enjoy rereading: *What kind of books do you reread and why?*

These are also readers who are adept at navigating among the literary categories of 'genres, favorite novelist, preferred writers, classics,' and whose confidence in the ability to do so extends to praising and disregarding with casual ease both these categories and their own reading preferences, for example, one interviewee declares: 'I avoid dystopia like the plague (...) I've never read *Dune*. Yes, I know, I'm the worst sci-fi fan in the universe.'<sup>111</sup> The reading context displayed by the column is endogamous, mostly liberal (but it eventually featured James Comey who advised Donald Trump on essential reading), and, while North American in focus, it nevertheless reflects the cultural values of occidental modern societies at large in its depiction of an exclusive, print-based reading context wherein successful book experts (including a significant percentage of occasional or professional writers) or notorious individuals advise others about 'good-reads'.

In a rather didactic manner the readers interviewed promote the pleasurable as well as the interesting outcomes of reading: 'I tend to avoid fiction that's too dark or serious or has a political message. For me fiction is a form of escapism;' or, they assert the outstanding empowerment value of reading, for example 'I wanted to become a politician, because I was fascinated by people, policy and politics. I read books to learn how to do it better.'<sup>112</sup> The weekly columns assume that the newspaper's readers are familiar with select reading gatherings and their social codes, or at least understand what those could be, for example, *You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers do you invite?* Along with the interviewees, the column's readers are heirs to a common cultural heritage, tradition and educational training that directly links literary reading to social standing. Altogether, the interviewee's discourse, combined with the column's rhetorical framework, implements a sense of belonging and shared beliefs that associates reading with authority building.

Comparing the testimonies of a small sample of students in a developing country with only limited access to books and no established culture of reading, to the established and shared values of such an educated and worldly community like that represented by a *New York Times* column may seem disputable or too farfetched. Nonetheless, as much as we could observe it, the contrast between the social circumstances and resources of say *New York Times* patrons and the CLAC or AIMS patrons does not reveal a complete antithesis in their views about reading nor in terms of their skills. *By the Book* suggests that a longtime and complex set of institutions, as well as practices associated with recreational reading, collectively empowers the column's speakers as well as its readers. This common background leads the newspaper's readers to imitate book experts and develop reading skills. It also contributes to an exchange of reading expertise thereby enlarging the amount of shared resources and the value of critical thinking.

The surveys of African students conversely exhibit that the relative to total lack of institutional support, opportunities and practical access to reading material deprives most young readers of role models and social information. These factors detach them from the ingrained occidental understanding of the direct social and economic gains attached to reading. Yet, those students living in education-driven familial environments can overcome these odds, make the best of even the limited exposure they are given to books and reading, and build upon a sense of agency. Among the junior high school students, for example, the ambitious reading strategies of four students stood out: A 14 year-old girl had set herself the goal of becoming 'une littéraire' (a woman of letters, a writer) after having read a novel by the African author Nafissatou Diallo; another girl (who was 17) was committed to a reading log that she had already kept for five years at the time of the research, (the purpose of which she kept to herself); a 16 year-old boy quoted pages of Victor Hugo and Julien Green by heart, and another 17 year-old girl (who was a reading activist organizing book reading sessions for kids in her neighborhood) demonstrated a passion for literature alongside a dedication to perfect French grammar. Some of the junior high school students revealed themselves as avid readers of French literature, and a few of them were stimulated by their reading to also engage in creative writing.



Neither the *By the Book* interviewees nor the African students surveyed mentioned e-books or other types of online-onscreen reading, the former because they probably do not favor it, the latter because they cannot access it. Despite their proportionately scant means and uneven habits of reading, and while deploring the lack of choice in their reading matter - they can only read whatever is at hand- the young African readers in the pilot study are willing to seize every opportunity and to further develop their personal skills in a way that follows the same implicit pattern as more privileged readers. Their specific cultural and social settings are not a drawback to their willingness, expectations and commitment to make further gains through reading and learning. As such, young African participants in this small study might be conceptualized as self-made individual readers,<sup>113</sup> and they appear to be self-made to a greater extent than their counterparts in developed countries. Because the students tend to read on their own and keep its pleasurable effects for themselves rather than extensively discussing and sharing their reading, each reader's intentions and motivations appear more singular and could be seen to shape their own 'formalist contract.'<sup>114</sup> This formalist contract seems to differ from other competent readers with broader cultural access and exposure to reading material, as they appear to instigate different relationships to books and an unusual sense of companionship with reading, as expressed in the mantra 'reading is my friend'. Their individual testimonies also describe reading as an extension of their sensory nervous system that triggers a multitude of extra sensors as it opens up their minds and bodies to new knowledge about the wider world.<sup>115</sup>

Nevertheless, we need to be careful not to draw grand conclusions out of all proportion to the small scale of the survey that was also limited by its focus upon *book* readers living in a handful of countries where publishing industries are much less flourishing than in some other parts of Africa. Although it sounds more broadly experiential than intellectually driven (especially if compared to adult interviewees in the *By the Book* column) the 'reading is my friend' mode connects the observations of the students to other young users -or producers- on literary social networks<sup>116</sup> outside Africa. And while the accent here is interestingly on reading rather than 'books' as friends, the association with friendship suggests that reading for the young Africans surveyed, as it is for the *NYT* patrons and interviewees,<sup>117</sup> increases the readers' theory of the mind as it creates a sense of agency as well as of kinship with a wider sphere of bookish writers, readers, and characters.

### **To conclude: 'Reading as a Commons' revisited**

Disregarding the quantity or quality of resources experienced, the implicit, shared -albeit diverse- sense of societal achievement and individual hedonism attached to reading is the minimal but sufficient foundation required to make it 'a Commons'. Drawing from a tentative study of the Knowledge Commons framework<sup>118</sup> I contend that 'the complex nature' of reading (and knowledge alike) 'requires a three-fold distinction: *facilities*, *artifacts*, and *ideas*' because it is made up of both non-human and human materials. There are also some commonalities between Knowledge Commons research and reading research, including an interdisciplinary aggregation of user-centric concepts about media use at large,

as well as insights about the generic social value attached to this use even before the emergence of digital and social media. Yet Knowledge Commons, outside its meaning as a shared entitlement to access, ownership and/or production of intellectual property, may only be a default framework for the study of reading. Further application of Knowledge Commons to reading falls short because it is almost impossible to distinguish among the different groups that are either using or managing a potential 'Reading Commons.'

Moreover, as a mental and developmental process, reading cannot be described simply as a set of 'resource *units*' and 'resource *systems*.'<sup>119</sup> Further, the process of reading cannot be directly ruled or regulated by some kind of collective or institutional governance, it can only be monitored, encouraged, conversely repressed or forbidden through the indirect control of its material resources and accessibility by policies in specific educational communities or under the rule of some political regimes. Thus, the meaning of a potential 'Reading Commons' sought after in this essay matches neither the legal and established definition of Commons, nor that of a New Commons. This mismatch occurs in part because of the lack of physical materiality of reading that (as opposed to writing or playing music) cannot be recorded, and which leaves only indirect traces through testimonies, or comments resulting from a reader's reading experience. While the very process and experience of reading remains private and strictly speaking asocial, we can only share its outcomes; and even likeminded people tend to 'read past one another' when discussing their mutual and reciprocal readings.<sup>120</sup>

Still, exchanging reading suggestions or books as material objects points to the fact that through reading we bond together, socialize and aspire to a 'world of commonality.'<sup>121</sup> Moreover, the emotions related to reading can be shared, and the expression of such emotions is an increasingly emerging social fact. It encompasses communal 'know-how,' issues of taste, and the sheer pleasure of reading, alongside or in spite of, its utilitarian bias. Reflecting upon today's common recreational reading practices thus connects reading studies with the 'overarching focus [of media studies] that has been to understand processes of sense-making concerning the self and social relationships through available media technologies.'<sup>122</sup> Resorting to the vocabulary and the field of research on the Commons at large updates the vision of today's common reader as a productive and creative social media user interacting with those media (whether they are books, bookish-, book-adjacent objects or others), with a sense of social belonging. As suggested by Karin Barber 'Commons' here can thus be intended to mean a sense of inhabiting, with other readers, a common domain afforded by literature – a domain that a reader can move through in their own way, where texts are there for them to activate or utilize according to their own conceptions and purposes.'<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the new common reader as described by Bechman and Lomborg is 'someone who interacts and connects with fellow users, drawing from these relationships a sense of social belonging; someone who engages actively and creatively with technologies to express and explore their senses of self; someone using social media more instrumentally as a source of information and expertise in everyday life.'<sup>124</sup>

In sum, the combination of theoretical approaches and empirical studies of reading explored in this essay<sup>125</sup> suggests that reading, despite the variety of its uses across time, across spaces and across media, as well as across the variety of its providers and provenances, is a common good or benefit. It – and literary or leisure reading more specifically – is of interest to the general public thanks to its destination and perceived value<sup>126</sup> as it remains a widespread and popular means of knowledge, of accomplishment, of access to an endless trove of resources as well as moral support, and has increasingly lead to a network of shared thoughts about how we experience the world in which we live, about ‘our web like existence in the world.’<sup>126</sup>

### Biographical Note:

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, The evolution of institutions for collective action, Cambridge University press, 1990. Ostrom developed the concept of a Common pool of resources, arguing that the physical nature of some resources (water, land, etc.) predisposes them to management as Commons.

<sup>2</sup> John R. Wagner, ‘Water and the Commons Imaginary’, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 53, No. 5 (October 2012), pp. 617-641.

<sup>3</sup> See J. R. Wagner, *Ibid.*, for references sustaining the assertion: Benson 2000 ; French 2000 ; Hess and Ostrom 2007; Levine 2001; McCann 2000, as well as the 2008 Conference of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), where organizers wrote that ‘new commons have no history and often no rules or governance in place’, p.618.

<sup>4</sup> Hess, Charlotte and Ostrom, Elinor, ‘A Framework for Analyzing the Knowledge Commons: a chapter from Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: from theory to Practice.’ (2005). *Library and Librarians’ Publication*. Paper 21, <http://surface.syr.edu/sul/2>

<sup>5</sup> Hess and Ostrom (2007b, p. 4-5), quoted by J.R. Wagner, ‘Water and the Commons Imaginary’, p. 618.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> International Society For the Study of Empirical Literature, Stavanger Conference, July 2018, <http://igel2018.no/> ; European Literary Text Collection (ELTeC) <https://www.distant-reading.net/eltec>

<sup>8</sup> Philipp Gench, 'Geschlecht und Lesen', Rautenberg, Ursula, Schneider, Ute (eds.). *Lesen. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*. Berlin/Boston : De Gruyter, 2015. [Consulté le 21 mars 2018]. ISBN 978-3-11-027553-7. <https://www.degruyter.com/viewbooktoc/product>; 'Lektüre und Geschlecht im 18. Jahrhundert', Conference Peter Szondi Institut, Freie Universität Berlin, February 2019: [https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/we03/institut/news/190221\\_Lektuere-und-Geschlecht.html](https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/we03/institut/news/190221_Lektuere-und-Geschlecht.html) ; Astrid Herbold, 'Intellectuelle Frauen um 1800 Sie lasen viel, schnell und in mehreren Sprachen', *Der Tages Spiegel*, March 2019, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/intellektuelle-frauen-um-1800-sie-lasen-viel-schnell-und-in-mehreren-sprachen/24073452.html>

<sup>9</sup> Heta Pyrhönen, Janna Kantola (eds.), *Reading Today, Comparative Literature and Culture Series*, London, UCL Press, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool (READ-IT), [www-readit-project.eu](http://www-readit-project.eu) ; COST Action 1404 Evolution of Reading in the Age of the Digital, [ereadcost.eu](http://ereadcost.eu) ; COST action 16204 - Distant Reading for European Literary History, <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA16204> ; Consortium LibDat: Towards a More Advanced Loaning and Reading Culture and its Information Service. A project financed by the Academy of Finland for the years 2017–2021, <http://virtual.vtt.fi/virtual/libdat/>

<sup>11</sup> Albertine Meunier, *Le livre infini*, a new version presented at Le Collège des Bernardins « L'Humain au défi du numérique ». <https://www.biennalenemo.fr/event/livre-infini-albertine-meunier/2017-11-06/> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPR2WGMhlz4>; <https://www.art2m.com/livre-infini/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.albertinemeunier.net/livre-my-google-search-history>

<sup>13</sup> Milad Doueïhi, Postface in Albertine Meunier, *My Google search history, le livre* –Jan 07, 2011. Nov 06, 2006, (Paris, L'air de rien, ISBN 979-10-90406-00-1, 2011): « Dans sa manie de l'absolu, Google se veut historien. Un peu à la manière des anciens. Ainsi, il offre à ses fidèles, comme un guide aux égarés. Un outil qui permet de préserver son histoire, la retrouver, la visualiser et même la reproduire. »

<sup>14</sup> Milad Doueïhi, *My Google Search History* : « Nous vivons presque tous en compagnie d'un monstre de lecture, d'un fanatique des archives et d'un obsédé de la complétude, un certain dénommé Google. »

<sup>15</sup> Marin Dacos (Dir.), *Read/Write book, Le livre inscriptible*, Marseille, OpenEditionPress, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> A similar sense of loss is acknowledged and described in 1905 by Marcel Proust in "Sur la lecture", a preface to his translation of *Sésame et les lys* by John Ruskin, 3<sup>ème</sup> édition, Paris, Société du Mercure de France, 1906. For a reverse proposition see Allan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Illitch, *In the Vineyard of the text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalion*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> George Steiner, "The Uncommon reader" (1978), *No Passion Spent*, Essays 1978-1995, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Illitch dates this to the 13th century and considers it as the foundation of print culture.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of the Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962.

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle-Ages*, p. 130. Translated by W.R. Trask, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953: 338-340.

<sup>22</sup> Marshall McLuhan, French version translated as *La Galaxie Gutenberg, La Genèse de l'homme typographique*, vol. 2, Idées Gallimard 1967, 1977, p. 299.

<sup>23</sup> McLuhan remains under the spell of linear logics, something Ivan Illich and George Steiner partially do as well. He predicts that television will develop our acoustic technologies and human sense of hearing/ listening but reduce our visual skills, thus failing to foresee the essentially visual e-magery of culture at work in today's new media.

<sup>24</sup> David Barker, *Blog* 29 January 2013 <http://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2013/01/29/the-gutenberg-galaxy-by-marshall-mcluhan>.

<sup>25</sup> As observed by David Barker, McLuhan assumes that "we have more in common with oral cultures of preliterate societies (...) more with tribal people living in a village (...) because our culture is less visual", p. 3. Consulted 17/05/2018.

<sup>26</sup> Marin Dacos, *Read/Write Book*, , p. 8-10.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, W.W. Norton, 2010 ; <https://lewebpedagogique.com/btsap2015/2015/02/25/le-livre-est-ce-la-fin-du-livre-papier>

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Carr, 'Is Google making us stupid ?', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008 ; "If the printed word becomes a thing of the past, it may affect how we think," <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20160124-are-paper-books-really-disappearing> ; *Lecture numérique et culture écrite*, par Alain Giffard, 2010, <http://skhole.fr/lecture-numerique-et-culture-ecrite-par-alain-giffard>.

<sup>30</sup> For tributes to the book, see Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present and Future*, Public Affairs, 2009; Martyn Lyons, *Books: A Living History*, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011 ; Andrew Piper, *Book was There : Reading in Electronic Times*, University of Chicago Press, 2012 p. 2: "The book's graspability, in a material as well as spiritual sense, is what endowed it with such immense power to radically alter our lives"; Jean-Claude Carrière & Umberto Eco, *This is Not the End of the Book: A conversation* curated by Jean-Philippe de Tonnac, Translated from the French by Polly McLean, Harvill Secker, London, 2011, p. 39: "Today's media formats are definitely more fragile and less long-lasting than our wonderfully tenacious incunabula. And yet, whether we like it or not, these new tools are having a profound effect on our thought patterns, and gradually altering them from those engendered by the book."

<sup>31</sup> The statement itself has become a meme, not solely because Eco frequently refers to decisive human inventions such as the wheel, the spoon or the book to illustrate the *summum bonum*, but also because the very repetition of this reference has become a critical, albeit highbrow/middlebrow tool for academics as well as novelists seeking to instill in scholars and ordinary readers' minds a sense of common understanding and shared ethical values (e.g. Laurent Binet in *La 7e Fonction du Langage*, Grasset 2015, translated as *The 7<sup>th</sup> Function of Language*, Random House, 2017, among other examples.)

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Claude Carrière, Eco Umberto, *This is Not the End of the Book*, p. 4 : "Either the book will continue to be the medium for reading, or its replacement will resemble what the book has always been, even before the invention of the printing press. Alterations to the book as object have modified neither its function, nor its grammar for more than 500 years. The book is like the spoon,

scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Perhaps it will evolve in terms of components, perhaps the pages will no longer be made of paper. But it will still be the same thing.”

<sup>33</sup> Anne Mangen & Adrian Van der Weel, “The Evolution of reading in the age of digitization: an integrative framework for reading research”, *Literacy – UKLA* Vol 50, issue 3 Sept., 2013, p. 116. First published: 20 June 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12086>

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> A telling formulation borrowed from the title of Fuller and Rehberg’s, *Reading Beyond the Book*, London: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> As negatively suggested by some of the above-mentioned first-generation book historians.

<sup>37</sup> According to Andrew Piper’s common-sense wording in *Book was There*, 2012, p. ix.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Belisle, « Lire à l’écran », les enjeux de la lecture numérique, in *La Lecture numérique : réalités, enjeux et perspectives*, Claire Belisle, ed., Presses de l’Enssib, 2004, p. 151-152.

<sup>39</sup> As coined by Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader : A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900*, Columbus, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1957.

<sup>40</sup> Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, co-ordinated by Jerome Agel, Canada, 1967 (not paginated).

<sup>41</sup> The lay-out indeed allows for the reader’s eye to select and follow at least three kinds of separate discursive units: A series of single captions in bold capital letters – one per double page- creates a distinct discursive thread for fast reading; then the main text and notes equally share the space of the page yet are typographically differentiated; as a result, the eye must crossover from left page to right page to read the main text’s paragraphs on the top half of the pages, then either turn to the next double page or come back to the middle of the left page in order to read the comments or notes on the bottom half ...then again crossover to read the bottom half of the right page, etc.

<sup>42</sup> Heta Pyrhönen commenting on Lev Manovich, Cambridge, MA : MIT, 2001. E-Book. See “New Perspectives on reading: an introduction”, in Pyrhönen and Kantala (ed.) *Reading Today*, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Carla Hesse, “Books in time”, in Geoffroy Nunberg, ed., *The Future of Books*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Milad Doueïhi et Jacopo Domenicucci (eds.), *La Confiance à l’ère numérique*, Introduction générale, Berger-Levrault - Editions Rue d’Ulm, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web*. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2000.

<sup>46</sup> “The digital is not a technical object - there is no age of the digital as one can speak of the age of the steam engine. It is a body of symbolic and material, cultural and social structures, in one word a « civilisation » or at least a central factor in our civilisation”, Doueïhi et Domenicucci, *La Confiance à l’ère numérique*, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Burke, Anezka Kuzmicova et al, “Empathy at the Confluence of Neuroscience and Empirical Literary Studies”, *Scientific Study of Literature*, 6, 2016; J. K. Kaakinen et al, “Emotional and Motivational Aspects of Digital Reading”, in Mirik Barzillai, Jenny Thomson, Sascha Schroeder, Paul van den Broek book (ed.), *Learning to Read in a Digital World*, London, John Benjamins, 2018; Arthur Jacobs, “Towards a Neurocognitive Poetics Model of Literary Reading” in Roel Willems (ed.) *Cognitive Neuroscience of Natural Language Use*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp.135-195.

<sup>48</sup> Belisle, *La Lecture numérique : Réalités, Enjeux et Perspectives*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.



<sup>50</sup> Robert S. Freeman and E. Stewart Saunders, "E-Book Reading Practices in Different Subject areas: an Exploratory Log Analysis", in *Academic E-Books*, Suzanne M. Ward, Robert S. Freeman, Judith M. Nixon (eds.), West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2016, pp. 223-245.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>52</sup> Rob Wilkie, *The Digital Condition*, Chapter 3 "Reading and Writing in the Digital Age", New York, Fordham University Press, 2011, p. 122. This relates to other studies on user-led online content describing activities of prosumption and produsage in the informational-age, Web.2.0 environment, e.g. S. Elizabeth Bird, "Are We All Producers Now?" *Cultural Studies*, Vol.25, Nos. 4-5 July-September 2011, pp. 502-516.

<sup>53</sup> Rob Wilkie, *The Digital Condition*, p. 124.

<sup>54</sup> Freeman & Sanders, "E-Book Reading Practices in Different Subject Areas: An Exploratory Log Analysis", (PDF, p. 3), p. 224.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>56</sup> Axel Bruns, "Produsage: Towards a Broader Framework of User-led Content Creation", In Proceedings *Creativity & Cognition 6*, 2007, Washington, DC, accessed from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> It is worth mentioning that while the theory of the ideal or implicit reader is well spread and understood across a large span of academic Euro-American research, reader-response *per se* is still not completely integrated in some areas of European literary studies.

<sup>59</sup> See Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book*, pp. 37-43 for a summary of the state of knowledge.

<sup>60</sup> Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book*, p. 37.

<sup>61</sup> Axel Bruns, "Produsage", p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Bruns, "Produsage", p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>65</sup> Numerous social networks concerned with reading regularly appear and disappear on the web. Instagram and Youtube are the most active, along with Twitter and Facebook. See, for example, well-known dedicated platforms such as Babelio (essentially francophone and hispanophone), Booknode, Livraddict, [Lecteurs.com](http://Lecteurs.com), onlalu, SensCritique, Lovelybooks (essentially germanophone), mojoreads (newly founded and so far essentially germanophone), Goodreads (essentially anglophone), anobii (essentially italophone). Then, there are multiple reader's blogs or reading promotion blogs : for German blogs selected during 2018 Frankfurt Book Fair see <https://www.buchblog-award.de/nominierung-2018/>; Other popular blogs rated on Open Page Rank : <https://www.lesestunden.de/topliste/> ; German bloggers on Goodreads : <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/47594-deutsche-buchblogs>; other book bloggers : <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/46870-blogger-lift>, <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/62777-books-blogs-authors-and-more>; Anglophone Blogs : <http://bookbloggerlist.com>; Francophone blogs overview : [www.bibliosurf.com](http://www.bibliosurf.com); hispanophones blogs : <https://www.lifeder.com/blogs-de-libros/>; general : <https://grubstreet.org/blog/best-social-media-book-sites-for-authors-and-readers/>

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Piper, *Book Was There*, p.ix.



<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay, New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

<sup>68</sup> John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London : Penguin Books, 1972.

<sup>69</sup> Scott Reyburn, "The 'Mona Lisa' in the Age of Instagram," *The New York Times International Edition*, Wed. May 2, 2018, p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Caleb Andrew Milligan, "From Codex to Ludex: Paper Machines, Digital Games, and Haptic Subjectivities", Publije, [S.I.], 2018.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> Milligan, *Ibid.*, p.17: "But the iPad, as a tablet computer, is a bookish device that wants to mimic the codex form for innovative avenues out of the book."

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, p. 41, quoted by Milligan, p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Emmanuelle Valette-Cagnac, *La lecture à Rome*, Belin, 2000.

<sup>76</sup> "Alternatives to Author-centric Knowledge Organization", Rama C. Hoetzlein, 2009: 2, quoted in Neeman, Elsa. « Culture numérique et auctorialité : réflexions sur un bouleversement », *A contrario*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2012, p.21.

<sup>77</sup> Anja Bechmann and Stine Lomborg, "Mapping Actor Roles in Social media: Different Perspectives on Value Creation in Theories of User Participation", *New Media & Society*, Volume: 15 issue: 5, pp. 765-781. Article first published online: November 26, 2012; Issue published: August 1, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812462853>.

<sup>78</sup> Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book*.

<sup>79</sup> Bechmann and Lomborg, "Mapping Actor Roles in Social Media", p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> The resources come from different provenances: some from research initiatives on the Cultural Heritage of reading e.g., projects such as The UK-Reading Experience Database, Reading in Europe : Contemporary Issues in Historical and Comparative Perspectives, Beyond the Book: Mass Reading Events and Contemporary Cultures of Reading in the UK, USA and Canada. Others come from SSH research projects devoted to the digitalization of documents related to books and literature, e.g., testimonies collected by the Finnish Oral History group or the correspondence of 20th C French publisher Jean Paulhan (Editions Gallimard) to authors and fellow editors, <http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/corpus/paulhan/>. A third cohort comes from archives centres and/or websites preserving historical and contemporary documents related to famous authors or major publishing houses and journals, e.g., Biblioteca Italiana for early-modern and modern periods, APICE (Archivi della Parola, dell'Immagine e della Comunicazione editoriale) for Italian and European 18th to 20th C sources, the Mainzer Verlagsarchiv for contemporary German professional and non-professional readers. More unpublished digitised sources can also be found in a variety of other archival repositories, e.g., Archives of the National Library of the Czech Republic, Prague; Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague; audiovisual material related to visually impaired readers from the Royal National Institute of Blind People and Fondazione Libri Italiani Accessibili (LIA); and, of course, Europe-scale collections such as European Digital Library Europeana, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), British Library, etc.

<sup>81</sup> The expression can be found in the titles or arguments of dedicated research initiatives, e.g. The UK Reading Experience Database, European Reading Experience Database, etc.

<sup>82</sup> Such as readers diaries, blogs and literary social networks, as well as in newspaper columns, e.g. Describe your ideal reading experience (When, Where, What, How), "By the book", Reese Witherspoon; Ellie Kemper *International New York Times*, September 20, 2018; November 29, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/books/by-the-book-reese-witherspoon.html> ; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/books/review/ellie-kemper-by-the-book.html>

<sup>83</sup> Robert Darnton, 'First steps Towards a History of Reading', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, Volume 23, issue 1, 1986, pp. 5-30.

<sup>84</sup> Among other examples: "First thing in the morning. In this ideal experience, I have gotten up at 4.30 am. I read at the kitchen table, alone." Ellie Kemper, "By the book", *International New York Times*, December 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Including the much debated issue of the woman reader: Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993 ; Diaconoff, S., *Through the Reading Glass : Women, Books, and Sex in the French Enlightenment*. SUNY Press, 2005.

<sup>86</sup> Karin Kukkonen, "Presence and Prediction: The Embodied Reader's Cascades of cognition", *Style* 48.3 (2014): pp.367-384. Kukkonen reminds us that, "At this point, no fully-fledged conceptualization of the embodied, enactive, embedded, and emotional reader has been attempted, but accounts of interpretation in a second-generation vein give us a glimpse."

<sup>87</sup> "I read from 4.30 am to 5.30 am. My brain feels better and stronger after this. I can then move on to answer emails..." or "Usually, I'm reading on the subway or a quick two pages before passing out while eating animal crackers in bed". Ellie Kemper, By the book, *International New York Times*, December 2018.

<sup>88</sup> In this case, Kukkonen refers to a passage from Tobias Smollet's 1753 novel *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*. London : Penguin, 1990 ; Gillioz, Christelle & Gygax, Pascal. "The Specificity of Emotion Inferences as a Function of Emotional Contextual Support." *Discourse Processes*. 54.1 (2017): pp.1-18. 10.1080/0163853X.2015.1095597.

<sup>89</sup> *There are many indications of heightened interest in the healing power of books and reading. The spiritual benefits have for a long time been conveyed by some major authors such as Montaigne in his Essais or Marcel Proust in De la lecture (1921). Academics such as Allan Jacob (The Pleasure of Reading in the Age of the Digital), or Andrew Piper and others pursue the mission, and Piper underlines that "Faust reminds us of the way books are totems against each ceaseless activity, tools for securing the somatic calm that is the beginning of all careful but also visionary thought" (Book was There, p. 23). Conversely, the physical well-being brought by books or bookish reading is a recently – yet much- developed notion: See Elderkin Susan and Berthoud Ella, The Novel Cure, from Abandonment to Zestlessness : 751 Books to Cure What Ails You, 2013 ; Serena Cacchioli, "The Healing Power of Books : The Novel Cure as a Culturally Tailored Literary Experiment", Reading Today, Arnaldo Hax and Lionel Olavarria, London, UCL Press, 2018 ; The Book as Cure: Bibliotherapy and Literary Caregiving from the First World War to the Present, Conference, 14 September, 2018, University of London ; <https://www.healthista.com/the-book-that-changed-my-life-14-women-share-their-favourite-life-change-read/>; <https://booksatbristol.wordpress.com/2018/04/03/conference-call-for-papers-living-well-with-books/>; A Chapter a Day – Association of Book Reading with Longevity, Avni Bavishi,<sup>1</sup> Martin D. Slade,<sup>1</sup> and Becca R. Levy<sup>1</sup> Soc Sci Med. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2017 Sep 1. Published in final edited form as: Soc Sci Med. 2016 Sep; 164: 44–48. Published online 2016. Jul18. doi: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.07.014, etc.*

<sup>90</sup> David O'Brien and Cassandra Scharber, "Digital Literacies Go to School: Potholes and Possibilities," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52.1 (2008) pp. 66–68. doi:10.1598/JAAL.52.1.7.

<sup>91</sup> Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book*, p. 42. Digital literacies are socially situated practices as well: O'Brien and Scharber, 2008, p. 67: "We define *digital literacies* as socially situated practices supported by skills, strategies, and stances that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools."

<sup>92</sup> Bechmann and Lomborg, 2012.

<sup>93</sup> <http://sociol.cherz.com/socio/autob/mauss1.htm>

<sup>94</sup> A notion that a long tradition of poets and writers (at least starting with Montaigne and continuing with Barthes) have often expressed in their own ways. The poet Yves Bonnefoy states "Levez les yeux du livre pour voir ce qu'il dit du monde" ("Raise your eyes from the book to see what it tells about the world", my translation). Yves Bonnefoy. See also, "Lever les yeux de son livre", *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse*, printemps 1988, n° 37, p. 14. Macé Marielle, "Disponibilités littéraires : la lecture comme usage", *Littérature*, 2009/3 (n° 155), p. 3-21. DOI : 10.3917/litt.155.0003. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-litterature-2009-3.htm-page-3.htm>.

<sup>95</sup> Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond the Book*, p. 40.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p.3.

<sup>97</sup> It is the socioculturally-oriented understanding of embodied *individual* experiences that is being conveyed here by Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, rather than the bodily nature of reading. While suggesting "that the changing role of the body in digital reading may serve as a catalyst bringing together socioculturally-oriented literacy research with paradigms from natural science disciplines, most obviously addressing the physiological and ergonomic aspects of reading", Mangel & Van der Weel in "The Evolution of Reading in the Age of Digitization: an Integrative Framework for Reading Research" (2013), still underline the societal determination of reading material affordances: "Forms of imagination are inseparable from the material characteristics of modes, from their shaping in a society's history and from their consequent interaction with the sensoriness, the sensuousness, of our bodies".

<sup>98</sup> Mauss's original piece was entitled *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* ("An essay on the gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies") and was originally published in *L'Année Sociologique* in 1925.<sup>[1]</sup> The essay was later republished in French in 1950 under the title *Essai sur le don* and translated into English in 1954 by Ian Cunnison, in 1990 by W. D. Halls,<sup>[2]</sup> and in 2016 by Jane I. Guyer.<sup>[3]</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gift\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gift_(book)) Mauss describes the "full social fact" as follows: "Les faits que nous avons étudiés sont tous, qu'on nous permette l'expression, des *faits sociaux totaux* ou, si l'on veut – mais nous aimons moins le mot –, généraux : c'est-à-dire qu'ils mettent en branle dans certains cas la totalité de la société et de ses institutions (potlatch, clans affrontés, tribus se visitant, etc.) et dans d'autres cas seulement un très grand nombre d'institutions, en particulier lorsque ces échanges et ces contrats concernent plutôt des individus. "

<sup>99</sup> See Aime. M. and Cossetta A., *Il dono al tempo di Internet*, 2010, Turin, Einaudi, quoted in Doueiri and Domenicucci, *La Confiance à l'ère numérique*, 2018.

<sup>100</sup> The Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura developed aspects of the social cognitive theory (SCT), or Social Learning theory, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_cognitive\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_cognitive_theory).

<sup>101</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_cognitive\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_cognitive_theory). "The theory states that when people observe a model performing a behavior and the consequences of that behavior, they remember the sequence of events and use this information to guide subsequent behaviors. Observing a model can also prompt the viewer to engage in behavior they already learned. In other words, people do not learn new behaviors solely by trying them and either succeeding or failing, but rather, the survival of humanity is dependent upon the replication of the actions of others. Depending on whether people are rewarded or punished for their behavior and the outcome of the behavior, the observer may choose to replicate the behavior modeled. Media provides models for a vast array of people in many different environmental settings."

<sup>102</sup> For an introduction to the state of the art in Commons research, see Ferenc Gyuris, "Basic Education in Communist Hungary. A Commons Approach". *International Journal of the Commons*. 8.2 (2014): 531–553. doi:10.18352/ijc.458.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, p.533.

<sup>104</sup> Participants: Paul Ndiaye, librarian, CLAC Leopold Sédar Senghor, Joal-Fadiouth (Senegal), Joal-Fadiouth (Senegal). Aïta, Khadija, Ndeye, Awa, Fatou, Mame Diarra, Aïda, Veronique, Fatou, Hortence, Ndeye, Maradou, Ndiougue, Seydou, Aissatou, Mame Khary, Lala Aïcha, and school prefect Sancouba Drame (CEM Lamine Senghor, Joal-Fadiouth (Senegal); Marlene Dufournet and Hélène Kama, reading-writing club, Joal-Fadiouth (Senegal)

<sup>105</sup> It was made possible by Cheikh Birahim Ndao, Tutoring Supervisor, AIMS-Senegal, Mbour (Senegal); online questionnaires by Hadija, Jamiil, Anicet, Richard, Barnas, Ishaya, Christabelle, Deborah, John, Noha, Kirui, Francis, AIMS-Senegal Students, promotion 2017-2018, Mbour (Senegal).

<sup>106</sup> Wolof (Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Mauritania), Yoruba or Hausa for citizens of other countries (Chad, Benn, Cameroon, Togo).

<sup>107</sup> Previous works include a seminar, e.g. 'Reflecting on European publishing in Africa', Institute of Media Studies, Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, février 2011; a paper in a conference proceedings, "La lecture, un territoire nouveau pour les Femmes d'Afrique", in *Femmes d'Afrique et de la diaspora*, Université d'Alger, 6-9 décembre 2010, A. Bererhi & B. Lebdaï (eds.), Alger : Presse universitaires d'Alger, 2011 ; and a series of 45 entries devoted to African women publishers within the "Editrices et femmes du livre" sector, Brigitte Ouvry-Vial (ed.), *Dictionnaire universel des femmes créatrices de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (3 volumes), B. Didier, M. Callet-Gruber, A. Fouques, (eds). Des Femmes, 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, <https://www.francophonie.org>

<sup>109</sup> For case-studies on the relationships between reading and theory of the mind, see for example Marina Kotrla Topić and Marina Perkovic Kovacevic, "Reading Fiction from Paper vs Screen in Relation to Empathy and Theory of Mind", or Ilona Savolainen, "Fragile Minds Robust Bodies and the Suggestive Power of Reading: The construction of the Theory on Young Readers in Finland 1914-1944", in *Books and Screens and The Reading Brain*, Vilnius University, organized and funded by COST Action IS1404 "Evolution of reading in the age of digitization" (E-READ), SHARP, Vilnius University Faculty of Communication, Lithuanian Academy of Sciences Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, 27-29 September 2017.

<sup>110</sup> Pamela Paul, Scott Turow, *Foreword*, By the Book: Writers on Literature and the Literary Life from The New York Times Book Review, New York, Picador, 2015.

<sup>111</sup> *By the Book*, Andy Weir, *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/16/books/review/andy-weir-by-the-book.html>

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<sup>112</sup> *By the Book*, Bill Clinton, *The New York Times*, May 31, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/31/books/review/bill-clinton-by-the-book.html>

<sup>113</sup> Robert D. Altick, Chapter 11, *The English Common Reader, A Social History of the Mass Reading Public*, 1957.

<sup>114</sup> David Miall, and Don Kuiken, "The Form of Reading: Empirical Studies of Literariness," *Poetics* 87, (1994): pp.75-91. Through such a contract, "A reader taking up a literary text thus makes several related commitments that guide the act or reading."

<sup>115</sup> As conveyed by Arthur M. Jacobs, "Neurocognitive Poetics : Methods and Models for Investigating the Neuronal and Cognitive-affective Bases of Literature Reception', *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, April 2015, volume 9, article 196, [www.frontiers.org](http://www.frontiers.org), p. 13 : "Moreover, reading provides learning opportunities for simulating the social world and this promotes the interpretation of social information and progress in emotional skills (Mar and Oatley, 2008)".

<sup>116</sup> Such as Wattpad or others.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. *By the Book*, Alice Walker, *NYT*, December 13, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/13/books/review/alice-walker-by-the-book.html>: « My feeling of kinship with « Jane Eyre » has never waned (...) *What moves you most in a book ?* The witnessing of a great soul (...) I was spoken directly to (...) Poetry is that kind of gift. »

<sup>118</sup> Hess, Charlotte and Ostrom, Elinor, "A Framework for Analyzing the Knowledge Commons: a chapter from Understanding Knowledge as a Commons: from theory to Practice.", 2005, Library and Librarians' publication. Paper 21. <http://surface.syr.edu/sul/2>.

<sup>119</sup> Hess and Ostrom, 2005.

<sup>120</sup> See the exchange between Paul Celan and Ingebor Bachmann, quoted in Andrew Piper, *Book Was There*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, p. 84.

<sup>122</sup> Bechmann and Lomborg, 2012. Albertine Meunier's *My Google Search History* is an obvious illustration of such processes.

<sup>123</sup> With thanks to Karin Barber for the insightful review she provided for this article – quoted here.

<sup>124</sup> Bechmann and Lomborg, 2012.

<sup>125</sup> Such as READIT, [www.readit-project.eu](http://www.readit-project.eu)

<sup>126</sup> According to what a community considers as desirable in the new economy of well-being, see "L'évolution des biens culturels"; "Communs de la connaissance", Marie Cornu, Fabienne Orsi, Judith Rochfeld (eds.), *Dictionnaire des biens communs*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2017, pp. 114-115; pp. 269-272.

<sup>126</sup> Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web*, 2000.