

Social Reading and eBooks

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Abstract. The success and mainstreaming of e-books is transforming not only the traditional/Gutenbergian idea of the book but also the previous idea of an e-book as mainly an enriched print book. In the new e-book concept, the nature of a book as an artifact is diminishing and disposition as a networked interface to the knowledge is rising. One of the most important emerging concepts is the social reading, which means reading acts while connected to the other people. Social reading is a new and not very well defined area of reading practices. In addition to the traditional reading together and discussing books person to person, social reading includes a large number of networked functions like sharing and receiving shared information. Research of this new phenomena is almost non existent, yet it is expected to be the next big thing in reading and in e-books. This study provides an overview of the history of social reading of printed books and then defines parallel features in the new digital reading activities. Research material consists of popular e-book software and services. The proposed categorization of social reading is based on content analysis of properties that were found in those services. This report claims that social reading functionalities are manifestations of the social needs that have existed during and even before the paper book; digital time enables re-emerging of some of those features, but in a different manner.

Keywords. Social reading, electronic books, future of books

1. Introduction

What we see in people's practices and orientations towards e-books is a shift in emphasis from the book as an artifact to a set of activities associated with reading. We are facing a process of transformation, from the book as text container to a shared interface in a networked environment [1, 34]. One of the most salient and logical consequences of this is the rising of social reading – the act of reading while connected to others. This phenomenon has been described as the next big thing in reading, or even as the “future of books” [2]. This paper explores this emerging culture within e-books.

Sometimes the term social reading is used only to refer to the digital version of book clubs and social media, how ever social reading can be seen as a broader term, embracing a vast number of functions that follow the logic of networked media in general, like sharing, recommending and commenting.

This poster argues that social reading is noteworthy, because it is based on social needs that have always been present, but that have been channeled differently, following the technological prerequisites of distinct times.

Research questions are:

- What are the social dimensions of e-reading?
- How to categorize social reading functions in eBooks?

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In order to answer these questions, we attempt to unravel social relations and needs that existed before and during the Gutenbergian era of reading, and then reflect what could be their digital counterparts in the future. Finally, we move on to conceptualize social reading according to practices discovered in present-day services.

2. A Tiny History of Social Reading

Social reading, meaning the act of reading while connected with each other, has a longer history than solitary reading. Book historians agree that reading was originally done in groups and by reading aloud [3, 7]. The Gutenbergian time changed reading by making books widely available, but it is often forgotten that it also solidified the practice of solitary and quiet reading, reading with oneself. Similarly, it is rarely noted that also many other practices of social reading existed, for example the culture of annotating to margins of shared volumes, which also faded away with the Gutenberg era. The scribes who copied manuscripts often copied annotations to new versions, and thus knowledge was accumulated socially. The printing press and movable type changed the role of reader as co-author and member of a community engaged in a collaborative search for meaning to a largely private activity [4].

Another example of social reading, which has been faded in history, is the culture of “Commonplace books”, which were kind of semi-social clipart-books, personalized encyclopaedias where authors re-organized texts, like quotes and passages from different sources and annotated them. Liz Danzico [5] has described this everyday marginalia as a 300 years old “slow-motion Twitter or Face-book”.

The famous main point of McLuhan is a valid foundation for e-reading research: when media changes we change. Media changes our habits and extends different kind of elements to our senses, which in turn affects our choices within the media – and gives birth to new paradigms.

McLuhan claimed that the era of “hot media” (media that favours single sense and low-participation) like print and books, will be replaced by multi-sensory “cool media” with high participation. In a way – McLuhan argues – this is returning to the time before Gutenberg, to time of discussion, non-linearity and non-fixed “cool media” [6].

Bob Stein, a pioneer developer of social reading software, argues that reading and writing have always been social; the paper-medium has just covered that. Stein sees an inevitable development, where we will confront “many levels of reader engagement from the simple acknowledgement of the presence of others to a very active engagement with authors and fellow readers” – because of the Internet [7].

3. Methods

In our research, the original sample of e-reading apps was constructed by finding the 100 most popular e-reading-category applications from the Apple app store (US) and then discarding those that consisted only of a single book (we were interested apps that could host several books, because there can not exist, for example, archiving or rating of other books etc. in a single book-app) and those that did not offer access to functions without membership. This left us with 22 iOS-programs. In addition, we scanned available English-language social reading web services. The base list of services was constructed with the help of Huffington Post article “Best social reading sites,” with

nine services. Additionally, three that had been emerged in the preliminary research. Thus, the whole sample consisted of 33 services and programs.

Using the standard methods of content analysis, the available functions were first listed, the meaningful ones from the point of view of social reading chosen (reduction) from the similar functions combined to classes (clustering) to construct categories (abstraction).

4. Results

We can conceptualize reading actions according to functions that are taking place within the software: First, there is an act of reading itself (reading-category); then, missions that deal with organizing and archiving my readings (bookshelf-category); then, a category of annotations that combines all marginalia-functions, like highlighting, notes and comments; Then, there is the obvious category of ratings, where the reader assesses the book, usually by giving points on some scale, like three stars out of five; And finally, a review-category which is about expressing one's opinion of the book in words. Reviews can be short or literature critique-like lengthy writings.

Furthermore, functions can be categorized according to sharing and sharing direction. The first group consists of actions primarily for myself, usually digital versions of something people do traditionally with paper books, we call these "Book 1.0 acts". The second and third categories represent sharing these same functions or receiving them – note that the sharing function can have two directions. The fourth group is discussion together. We call these social reading categories "Book 2.0 acts".

After cross tabulating these categories and actions, we get the following detailed table of available functions as measurable categories. For example, the category on Reading to oneself, breaks down into "Share what I read now" and "Follow what others read now" in Book 2.0 -category. Similarly, the Bookshelf-class is divided into "Share history of readings or intentions to read" and "See others' history and intentions to read" in the Book 2.0 -category.

Table 1. Social reading operationalized: classified functions and action in e-reading programs and services

	Book 1.0 Actions	Book 2.0 Actions "From me"	Book 2.0 Actions "To me"	Book 2.0 Actions "US"
READING	Reading to my self	Share what I read now	Follow what others read now	Reading together
BOOKSHELF	Archiving my books	Share history of readings, intentions to read	See others' history and intentions	Discussing
ANNOTATING	My annotations to myself	Share annotations (Highlights, notes, quotations, pictures)	See annotations of others	Discussing
RATING	My ratings for myself	Publish a rating	Review ratings	Discussing
REVIEWING	Review for me	Publish a review	Read reviews	Discussing

5. Discussion

New social actions in e-reading can be conceptualized into different categories according to their level and direction of sociality as well as what an action is intended to do.

Since most of the described “Book 2.0.” -acts are basically shared versions of existing “Book 1.0” -functions (highlighting, note making, bookmarking, rating, archiving), one could contemplate that these functions should be first broadly and easily available in e-books, before social versions of them can become mainstream. When they become mainstream, one could expect that popularity of social functions will follow the same pattern as found on the net: most of the readers remain passive, only small percentage is willing to produce content him or herself (like reviews) but a vastly larger amount of readers are interested in following others activity by reading given reviews, receiving recommendations and ratings, and following discussions.

Social reading is likely to become more common as the evolution of the network-culture progresses and e-reading and e-books become more mainstream outside US. Books are going to be more retrievable and their content more connected.

Since social reading is more interesting the more participants are involved, this poses a challenge for the smaller systems. This is especially true in the small language regions: it is difficult to achieve the required user base in one service. Public libraries will have an interesting possibility here.

The full version of this paper includes research on reader’s preferences in social reading categories. The Finnish project Textbook2020 will continue this research in the field of textbooks.

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