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#booklove: How Reading Culture is Adapted on the Internet

In September 2017, model and actress Cara Delevingne brought a shitstorm upon herself by posting an image on Instagram that seemed innocuous enough. The black-and-white photograph shows a young woman dressed in 1950s style sitting outside on a flight of stairs, reading a book, a stack of hardcovers piled up next to her. The photo is overlaid with the caption "One girl liked reading so much // She forgot how to take a selfie." Not everybody appreciated the implications: a sizeable number of Instagrammers called Delevingne out for "selfie-shaming" and pointed to the irony of the model's post, considering the fact that she, too, depended very much on self-presentation for her fame. In response, Delevingne professed surprise over the negative echo: "wow! The backlash on this picture is heavy!! I am not trying to say that I am better than anyone. It's a nice reminder to me and anyone. The power of getting lost in a book."[1]

More than a tempest in a teapot, Delevingne's post and the reactions it sparked highlight a deeply ingrained notion of a clear cut between two different media practices and a set of value judgments attached to them. On the one side there is book culture, centered on the printed book as a material object; on the other digital culture, centered on what is displayed on a screen, by now more often than not that of a mobile phone. In the cultural imaginary, the two practices are separated by far more than just media technology. The girl in Delevingne's picture, in choosing to read a book rather than participate in the social media arena, opts (as the black-and-white blocking of the caption neatly reflects) for a commendable type of media use: She sharpens her intellect and exercises her imagination, she digs deep rather than staying on the surface, and she engages – in a seemingly disinterested manner – with valuable content rather than obsessing over how to present herself in the best light. Her absorption is a badge of honor, much different from the 'bad' absorption of digital media users, a recurring trope that is artistically represented, for example, in the much-acclaimed surrealist photo series "SUR-FAKE" by the French photographer Antoine Geiger, which represents mobile phone users whose faces are sucked into their devices.[2]

In Delevingne's Instagram post and the cultural assumptions and anxieties it capitalizes on, the evaluation of book culture as superior is subtly reinforced by the sense that it is an old-fashioned, possibly threatened practice – a notion that is

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[1] Suzanna Weiss. "Cara Delevingne Faces Criticism for Instagram Post About Selfies." *Teen Vogue* Sept 23, 2017 <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/cara-delevigne-selfie-shaming-instagram> Last Access 28 March 2018.

[2] Antoine Geiger. "SUR-FAKE" (Paris, 2015). <http://antoinegeiger.com/PHOTOGRAPHY/SUR-FAKE> Last Access 28 March 2018.

strengthened by the picture's nostalgic iconography, referencing the 1950s. This nostalgic vision not only amplifies the image's meaning, it also connects it to other moments in media history in which new media have elicited anxieties over the disappearance of cultural values and practices and a dumbing down of consumers of these new media. After all, the underlying univocally positive connotation of reading a book shared and understood by Delevingne and her followers is both culturally and historically situated: novels have in the past likewise been seen as endangering their users, e.g. in the 18th century novel fever panic—especially when they intersect with issues of gender.[3] Today, by contrast, novel reading has come to be seen as a prototype of positively connotated book reading as such.[4]

In contrast to the simple binary conception underlying Delevigne's post, we argue in this article that, firstly, far from simply supplanting book culture, digital culture has adapted (to) it in manifold ways (and vice versa). Secondly, this adaptation has happened in a dialectical fashion: the convergence of book and new media cultures includes ways that feed on and reinforce, as well as ways that repudiate and question, the construct of the 'media culture gap.' As we will show, evocations of book culture abound on the internet and in social media in ways that 'translate' the medial regime of the book and value judgments associated with the symbolic dimensions of reading, books, and book use. In line with the widening of the concept of adaptation undertaken in this issue, we examine not only the "medial transposition" of individual texts (the usual approach and corpus of adaptation studies),[5] but the transposition of book culture as a social/cultural phenomenon and a practice into a different medial regime.

The developments we discuss do not, of course, stand in isolation. They are situated in larger cultural, economic, and medial contexts. Much of what happens at the intersection of book publishing and consumption on the one and digital media technologies and frameworks on the other hand is similar to the larger trends that Henry Jenkins has described as "convergence culture." Jenkins argues against the idea of newer media simply replacing older media,[6] a hypothesis that is at the base of most fears about the end of book culture and reading as we know it. Sven Birkerts, an early proponent, makes many of the points prevalent in this debate in his 1994 *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Like other critics of new media, Birkerts sees a close link between print culture and concentrated, immersive, reflective reading. He fears that the rising consumption of electronic media is rendering this type of reception – and indeed the cognitive capacity to engage in it – an endangered practice.[7] Jenkins, in contrast, posits the

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[3] See Rudolf Schenda. *Volk ohne Buch. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe 1770-1910*. München 1977 [1970], pp 507-566. See also Karin Littau. *Theories of Reading. Books, Bodies and Bibliomania*. Cambridge 2006, pp. 39-45.

[4] Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books for Everybody. How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*. Durham, NC 2010.

[5] Irina O. Rajewsky. "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation. A Literary Perspective on Intermediality." *Intermédialités* 6 (2005): pp. 43–64, p. 51.

[6] Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Updated ed. New York 2008.

[7] Sven Birkerts. *The Gutenberg Elegies. The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. New York 1994. More recently Manfred Spitzer pushed the fear behind a media shift to new heights of panic when

notion of a "convergence culture, where old and new media collide," which, for him, means the intersection of various media, their producers and consumers.[8]

While Jenkins' focus is mostly on popular culture and larger media franchises, many of the developments he describes happen in a somewhat similar fashion when it comes to books. Here, too, new and old media intersect and draw on each other, and here, too, does the internet transform interaction between consumers as well as between consumers and producers. For one thing, traditional book culture has been fundamentally adapted to digital environments in a number of ways. The internet has become the most extensive archive, storing and giving access to books through sites like Project Gutenberg or Google Books. Bookselling is increasingly becoming an online business, controlled by the online retail giant Amazon. At the same time, book reviewing has exploded in Amazon's customer review section. E-books have become a serious competitor for printed books.

Meanwhile, traditional print culture is far from simply being swallowed up by a new digital environment. For example, statistics about the share of e-books in the UK in 2017 suggest that print books are even experiencing a come-back, and printed books still made up more than 50% in the US and more than 60% in the UK in 2017.[9] What is more, as the Delevingne controversy shows, there is a cult of reading and print culture that is not diminished, but to the contrary fuelled in digital environments. The internet abounds in 'bookish' sites and sub-communities, which book lovers and some people in the publishing industry dub the "bookternet."[10] The rise of the bookternet further advances the integration of traditional book reading with new medial practices that Jim Collins describes in his seminal study *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (2010). Collins posits the rise of a "popular literary culture" that is promoted by diverse media channels such as Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, movie adaptations of novels, and Amazon.com. The notion of the impending obsolence of the book in the wake of a new media revolution has, as Collins argues, even become a touchstone for (re)ascribing special cultural value to the printed book and "reading as a transformative cultural activity that can occur only in books and nowhere else in the hypermediated culture where that reading takes place."[11]

Since the publication of Collins' study, readers' investment in book culture has continued to thrive and evolve in digital environments. The cataloguing site Goodreads, launched in 2007, by 2018 counts 65 million members who list, review and debate their reading – by 2013 it was already so popular that Amazon bought

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he spoke of "digitale Demenz" (digital dementia). Manfred Spitzer. *Digitale Demenz. Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen.* München 2012.

[8] Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture*, p. 2.

[9] "E-book share of total book sales in selected countries worldwide as of February 2017." *Statista* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/190847/ebook-share-of-total-consumer-book-sales-in-the-us-till-2015/>. Last accessed 20 May 2018. "Great expectations for UK book sales: Market set to surpass £2 billion in 2017." *Mintel.com* <http://www.mintel.com/press-centre/leisure/uk-book-market-set-to-surpass-2-billion-in-2017>. Last accessed 20 May 2018.

[10] E.g. TEDx Talks. "Why I Heart the Bookternet: Rachel Fershleiser at TEDxGowanus." *Youtube* 25 Feb 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=7pQF70mYmp8>. Last Accessed 20 May 2018.

[11] Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books*, p. 82.

it in a bid to increase its outreach.[12] On YouTube, users who describe themselves as BookTubers are vlogging about books and reading, on Instagram we find posters using hashtags such as #bookstagram, while Tumblr has a sub-community Booklr. Beyond these social networks, there is also a host of book blogs and online reading clubs with widely varying reach.

While in mainstream media as well as in scholarship, little attention has been paid to the bookternet as a general phenomenon, one aspect of it has sparked debates that resonate with the already described binary thinking about media culture: the proliferation of online book reviews, most prominently but by no means exclusively on popular sites like Amazon and Goodreads. In a 2012 opinion piece, Sarah Fay outlines the sides in the debate and posits the "bad news" about online reviewing:

> In theory, customer reviews are quick, easy, egalitarian, and make the "consumer" (as opposed to the reader) feel in control of his or her reading choices. But there's a difference between a recommendation and a review. Customer reviews are heavy on opinion and light on insight. [...] Fiction customer reviews typically contain "I-loved-it" or "I-hated-it" declarations based on an affinity for or dislike of the characters and discuss them as if they were real people. Customer reviews rarely include plot summaries--even dull ones. They tend to consider books in terms of whether or not they were worth the money and need not pertain to the book at all.[13]

In her criticism of online book reviews, Fay is joined by others. John Sutherland famously called them a "degradation of literary taste."[14] Sven Birkerts, in turn, argues that "the very nature of the blogosphere is proliferation and dispersal" and worries that it will push out the traditional book review and its virtues: "addressing itself to the idea of a center, by upholding the premise of a public voice, and by hewing to high editorial standards, it [the traditional book review] can do a great deal to keep alive the possibility of shared discourse."[15]

Fay's, Sutherland's, and Birkerts' contributions throw into sharp relief the faultlines in the discussions of the proponents of 'old' and 'new' media. Internet book culture, in the eyes of its critics, stands for commercialization (readers become consumers), the dumbing down of recipients and discourse, and an overall loss of cultural standards and authority. This last point, by contrast, is seen as a crucial advantage by their opponents, who regard the proliferation of reviews online as a sign of democratization – a trope that regularly comes up in both

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[12] Goodreads.com "About Goodreads." <https://www.goodreads.com/about/us> Last Accessed 20 May 2018. Rob Spillman. "Amazon buys Goodreads. We're all just data now." Salon.com <https://www.salon.com/2013/03/31/amazon_buys_goodreads_were_all_just_data_now/>. Last Accessed 20 May 2018.

[13] Sarah Fay. "Could the Internet Save Book Reviews?" *The Atlantic*, 7 May 2012. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/05/could-the-internet-save-book-reviews/256802/>. Last accessed March 29 2018.

[14] "John Sutherland IS SHOCKED BY THE STATE OF book-Reviewing on the web." *The Telegraph* 19 Nov 2006. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3656629/john-sutherland-IS-SHOCKED-BY-THE-STATE-OF-book-Reviewing-on-the-web.html>. Last accessed 18 May 2018.

[15] Sven Birkerts. "Lost in the blogosphere. Why literary blogging won't save our literary culture." *The Boston Globe* 29 July 2017. <http://archive.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/07/29/lost_in_the_blogosphere/>. Last accessed. 22 May 2018.

popular and academic debates about the internet's potential. Prominent examples include Jenkins' celebration of "grassroots creativity" and John Perry Barlowe's praise of the www in its early days, when he called it "the new home of the Mind" and demanded its independence from the governing bodies of the "old" pre-digital world.[16] That Barlowe's view of internet culture seems idealistic and already tinged with nostalgia from today's perspective only underlines the limits of binary thinking about media cultures and the impulse to ascribe wholesale evaluations to medial developments.[17]

Instead of taking sides in an emotionally loaded debate, we want to look at how the practitioners of the bookternet themselves adapt 'old' book culture to 'new' internet culture. We will ask in what ways the structures and practices they create and engage in reflect values such as democratization, cultural sophistication, sociability and self-expression. Moreover, we will sketch not only the differences between 'traditional' book culture and its digital adaptations, but also investigate the continuities between these. After all, to name just two examples,

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[16] Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture*, p. 135 and *passim*. John Perry Barlow. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>. Last accessed 22 Aug 2016.

[17] There are various ways of approaching this debate. Literary blogger Katharina Herrmann has interpreted the contempt expressed by journalists in the German press towards bloggers and Bookstagrammers within a Bourdieusian framework, reading their dismissal as both an expression of their different *habitus* and an interest in retaining their position within the literary/critical field. As Herrmann points out, many of the strategies employed for delegitimizing online book culture in German newspapers stand in a long historical tradition that employs sexist stereotypes against those reading by highlighting their gendered *habitus* that is perceived as inappropriate by the journalists attacking them from an established position of cultural gatekeeper (Katharina Herrmann. "Zur Kritik des normierten Lesens." *54 Books* 7 May 2017. <https://www.54books.de/zur-kritik-des-normierten-lesens/>. Last accessed 27 May 2018).

Daniel Allington and Ann Steiner, taking a very different approach, have made first attempts to put subjective impressions about the tendencies in on- and offline book reviews on a broader empirical basis. Allington's analysis of content bears out some of the points raised by Fay: he identifies a tendency of online reviewers to value books on the basis of likeable characters, exciting events relating to 'real' issues and to avoid structural, stylistic, or symbolic analyses (Daniel Allington. "'Power to the reader' or 'degradation of literary taste'? Professional Critics and Amazon Customers as Reviewers of *The Inheritance of Loss*." *Language and Literature* 25.3 (2016): 254-278, here p. 258). Steiner, on the other hand, points to significant differences between online reviewers' treatment of 'non-literary' books like chick lit and 'literary novels' like Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which on its Amazon page garners reviews closer to traditional literary criticism (Ann Steiner. "Private Criticism in the Public Space: Personal Writing on Literature in Readers' Reviews on *Amazon*." *Particip@tions* 5.2 (2008): n. pag. <http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/ Issue%202/5_02_steiner.htm>. Last accessed 28 May 2018). Both Allington's and Steiner's contributions, however, suggest that more is at stake than just the concrete content of the reviews. Considering Amazon as a professional retailer operating according to an economic model, Allington, drawing on Bourdieu, raises the specter of a loss of autonomy of the cultural field (Daniel Allington. "'Power to the Reader'", p. 256), whose reverse economic logic for Bourdieu depended on its relative autonomy from the fields of economics and politics (Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*. Ed. and Intro. Randal Johnson. New York 1993, e.g. pp. 29-73; cf. also Bourdieu's warning about this loss of autonomy in the postscript to *The Rules of Art*: Pierre Bourdieu. *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Stanford 1995, pp. 339-48). Steiner, in turn, at the end of her article points to the social purpose of online reviews as a way of connecting with others.

neither anxieties about the commercialization of culture nor hopes about its positive effects on sociability first arose with the advent of digitalization.

In order to do this, we focus on two case studies. First we analyze the Guardian Reading Group to explore how an already established player within a traditional medium and the culture it represents, i.e. the century-old bourgeois culture of educated reading, adapts to the internet. We then turn our gaze to BookTube, the conglomeration of book-related channels on the video streaming site YouTube, in order to analyse how mostly millennial readers, i.e. those who grew up with the internet, adopt reading and the internet to their demands. The ways in which this group discusses and represents reading, and in the process themselves as readers, brings together traditional reading and book discussion with patterns of interaction and self-presentation coming out of internet culture. As we will suggest, the kinds of activities that have emerged on social media sites around books and bookish lifestyles cannot adequately be described by simply regarding them as a new kind of book reviewing. Rather, we want to ask in what ways the bookternet facilitates and encourages different practices of reading as social behavior, embedded in concrete social and medial contexts.

1. Adaptation of Book Culture in the Guardian Reading Group

The reading club site in the digital edition of *The Guardian* has been evolving over the last 15 years, and its permutations offer an intriguing case study for the ways in which book and reading culture have been adapted to digital environments.

The publication context in which it is embedded, *The Guardian*, is a traditional newspaper that has been at the forefront of exploring how 'old' news media can embrace new digital possibilities, while at the same time championing the merits of established newspaper journalism. *Theguardian.com* is one of few online editions of major international newspapers that makes all content freely available without a paywall (though users are asked for voluntary donations).[18] As part of its engagement with new technological possibilities, *The Guardian* reports regularly and extensively on topics connected with digitalization (including one 2014 article that mentions but does not really engage with BookTube),[19] and the online edition has a strong focus on reader feedback and participation. Blogging and community features are updated regularly, and in 2016, *The Guardian* ordered

[18] The site was launched in 1999 as guardian.co.uk; since 2013 it has been repositioned as theguardian.com to signal global investment. In 2012, it became the world's third most read online newspaper, according to the media measurement company comScore (Sarah Radwanick. "Most Read Online Newspapers in the World. *Mail Online*, *New York Times* and *The Guardian*." *comScore*. <https://www.comscore.com/Insights/Infographics/Most-Read-Online-Newspapers-in-the-World-Mail-Online-New-York-Times-and-The-Guardian>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.) In late May 2018, the webtraffic analyst Alexa put the site on rank 142 in global popularity and number 103 in the U.S. ("theguardian.com Traffic Statistics." *Alexa*. <https://www.alexa.com /siteinfo/theguardian.com>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.)

[19] Anna Baddeley. "TV's a Closed Book so Bring Over the 'BookTube' Critics. Over to you…" *The Guardian* 16 Feb 2014. < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/16/book-break-online-video-book-reviews>. Last accessed 28 May 2018.

and published an extensive study into online comments and moderation.[20] The report testifies both to the desire to foster reader participation and to the awareness of possible drawbacks, focusing in particular on the role of those comments that are classified as "crude, bigoted or just vile."[21] The finding that those articles attracting the most abuse are those written by women and people of color is taken as an indicator of the need for close monitoring of comment threads and for swift blocking. 'Conversation' between readers and journalists is, on the whole, presented as a central asset of digitalized media, but also as a process that needs constant optimization and can go awry.

The set-up of the *Guardian Reading Group* exemplifies this open, but also quite nuanced and critical attitude towards the possibilities of digitalization. The history of the site testifies to a shift towards a more user-centered approach. It evolved from the *Guardian Book Club*, launched on the site in June 2002, which was hosted by John Mullan, professor of English Literature at University College London. Originally, the *Book Club*'s orientation towards the *Guardian*'s middle-class oriented profile and a concomitantly fairly intellectualized approach to book culture was closely modeled on traditional book review practices, as they have always been part of the paper's arts section. Centered on an expert from the academy and addressed to an educated audience well-versed in reading, the tone of the columns is reminiscent of an academic course directed at the general public. At the same time, the site also emphasizes a contemporary and popular appeal over a more traditionalist focus on canonical or 'difficult' texts: as the tag line explains, it focuses on a "notable novel available in paperback"[22], thus prioritizing easy access, and early choices included not only J.M. Coetzee's Booker-prize winning *Disgrace* (1999), but also more popular titles such as Ruth Rendell's historical crime thriller *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* (2001) and Nick Hornby's *How to Be Good* (2001).

Title and tag line ("As a service to reading groups, John Mullan deconstructs a notable novel…")[23] explicitly associate the column not with the established newspaper genre of the literary review, but with the reemerging phenomenon of the book club.[24] Digital media have opened a new range of possibilities for book

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[20] Results of the study are presented here: Becky Gardiner et al. "The Dark Side of Guardian Comments." *The Guardian* 12 April 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology /2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>. Last Accessed 10 May 2018. There is also a background piece on the methodology informing the research: Mahana Mansfield. "How We Analysed 70m Comments on the Guardian Website." *The Guardian* 12 April 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/how-we-analysed-70m-comments-guardian-website>. Last accessed 10 May 2018.

[21] Becky Gardiner et al. "The Dark Side of Guardian Comments."

[22] John Mullan. "The Virtues of Imprisonment." *The Guardian* 29 June 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview29>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.

[23] For example: John Mullan. "The Attitude Problem." *The Guardian* 17 August 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/aug/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview28>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.

[24] Since the 1990s, private book clubs and reading groups had seen a revival. First in the US, then also in the UK, they were popularized by book-centered segments in popular TV shows, most notably *Oprah's Book Club* (US, 1996-2011) and the *Richard & Judy Book Club* (2004-2009).

clubs to adapt to an evolving medial environment, by allowing them to combine the public reach of television book club formats with the interactive character of private book clubs. But, as the evolution of the *Guardian Book Club* shows, there was no ready-made template for how to do this, and the *Guardian* took some years to figure out in what direction to take the new format in unison with media-technological developments.

With the shift from the *Book Club* to the *Reading Group* – which was originally introduced as an addition to the *Book Club* in 2011 and today remains the main reading community on the site after the *Book Club* was discontinued in 2016 – the *Guardian*'s digital adaptation of book culture shows two general tendencies: it increasingly privileges interactivity and works towards what Jim Collins has described as "empowering amateur readers,"[25] minimizing the role of literary scholars and professional reviewers. These tendencies become apparent through a series of changes that the *Book Club* site has undergone since 2002. Soon after its inception, the tagline was changed from "John Mullan deconstructs a notable novel" to "John Mullan analyses a notable novel,"[26] which presumably was thought to sound less markedly scholarly and reminiscent of lofty French theory.

While at first, the 'social' aspect of the columns was mainly restricted to the notion that Mullan's contributions could be a "service to reading groups," readers were invited to real-life discussions with Mullan and the authors from September 2005 onwards.[27] This focus on the authors' voices in itself already constitutes a turn away from a strictly academic type of literary appreciation with its tendency to give relatively little weight to an author's own interpretation.[28] More strikingly, this was the first in a series of modifications designed to enable reader

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Fictional book clubs also became a central topic in TV shows as well as films and novels (e.g. *The Jane Austen Book Club*; *Bob and Margaret*; see DeNel Rehberg Sedo. "An Introduction to Reading Communities. Processes and Formations." In: DeNel Rehberg Sedo (ed.): *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*. New York 2011, pp. 1-24, here pp. 6; 7). Collins analyses *Oprah's Book Club* as an integral part of a "popularization of literary reading," which provided "new contexts for passionate readers to talk about literary books and form reading communities that didn't feel intimidated by the traditional discourses of literary appreciation" (Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, pp. 19, 20).

[25] Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, p. 18.

[26] The first instance of this is on March 8, 2003: John Mullan. "Between the Lines." *The Guardian* 8 March 2003. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/08/ianmcewan>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.

[27] "In the past, I have guessed at novels that might be favoured by reading groups. Readers wrote in to quarrel with or supplement my pieces, or, most usefully and mortifyingly, to correct me on matters of fact. Now readers will be invited to a regular Book Club event where, when possible, the author too will be present. The last column of the four on each book will survey the comments of readers, both at the event and online." (John Mullan. "Taking Wing." *The Guardian* 17 Sept 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/17/julianbarnes.gustaveflaubert>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.)

[28] This shift is foregrounded in the tagline for the column about a readers' evening with the novelist and professional critic John Lanchester: "John Lanchester maintains that authorial intentions are irrelevant, but that didn't stop readers at the Guardian book club from questioning them, says John Mullan." (John Mullan. "Called to Accoount." *The Guardian* 14 Oct 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/oct/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview5> Last accessed 27 May 2018.)

participation. At the same time, one of the four weekly columns dedicated to each of the books discussed was given over to the readers' opinions, albeit selected and commented upon by Mullan.[29] While the column from the beginning had included an invitation to "have your say about [the book] on the Guardian talkboards or write to [postal address],"[30] it was only from November 2006 onwards that these appeals to participate online were foregrounded in entries with the tag 'book blog' and the possibility of posting comments directly under the article rather than on a separate board.[31] In June 2009, this type of entry was further developed: the tag 'book blog' was now attached to a companion column by a second writer, Sam Jordison, as a "new online appendage to the *Guardian*'s monthly book club, where I'm hoping to foster debate, gauge opinion and encourage you – the reader! – to wax eloquent in whatever terms you wish about the books John Mullan discusses every month."[32]

By engaging Jordison, a younger freelance writer involved in various indie publishing and editing projects,[33] in the role of a moderator, the *Guardian* associated the book club with a more hands-on, alternative take on literary culture. As the quotation makes explicit, his main mission was to make the site more 'social' – a goal also reflected in the more informal, tongue-in-cheek style used by Jordison, and by the controversial questions about literary taste and evaluation that were raised about the author of the month, A.S. Byatt, whom "most critics seem to adore, but many readers love to hate."[34]

Aligning himself with the down-to-earth Byatt-sceptic and foregrounding the contrast to "most critics," Jordison evokes a distinction that has been around since the establishment of literary criticism as a cultural field. The idea of a "common reader," "uncorrupted with literary prejudices" and "the dogmatism of learning,"[35] was proposed by Samuel Johnson and later developed by Virginia Woolf. Woolf made the common reader a pivotal figure in her essays, epitomizing enthusiasm as well as autonomous thinking, and contrasted her against a privileged academic

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[29] Per book discussed, there were now usually two columns by Mullan on selected topics, one with a commentary by the author, one podcast with a discussion between Mullan and the author (first podcast in January 2006, a discussion with Hilary Mantel about her novel *Beyond Black*), and the reader opinion round-up.

[30] "Present and Correct." *The Guardian* 1 June 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/books /2002/jun/01/featuresreviews.guardianreview31>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.

[31] Those comments are archived and still accessible on the website, while the "talkboard" entries are not.

[32] Sam Jordison. "Guardian book club. Possession by AS Byatt." *The Guardian* 19 June 2009. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/jun/18/book-club-possession-as-byatt>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.

[33] Jordison has been doing work for the *Guardian* for more than 10 years now. He is co-editor of the controversial book series *Crap Towns*, and since 2012 co-founder and director of the small, but rather successful indie publishing company Galley Beggar Press, which encourages direct submissions from un-published writers.

[34] Sam Jordison. "Guardian book club. Possession by AS Byatt."

[35] Samuel Johnson. "Gray." In: *The Lives of the English Poets*, Vol. 2, Oxford 1912 [1781], pp. 474-485, here p. 485.

establishment.[36] The title of Jordison's own column *Reading Group* (launched two years after his first appearance in the *Book Club*), advertises a similar ethos. The shift in direction is programmatically announced in the first post, summoning users to "[j]oin the reading club revolution":

> Comrades! We desire a different kind of book club – one more in keeping with the interests of the people, more democratic. The revolutionary workers and soldiers of the internet have overthrown the old hegemony of the journalist, and cleaned out all the critics from the ivory towers. The commentariat of the world looks with pride and hope to the revolutionary workers and soldiers of *Comment is free* as the vanguard of the world's liberating army of the commenting class.[37]

Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round (the only scholars who, to our knowledge, have looked at the *Guardian* reading club, in an article on moderators' roles on book-related sites) argue that "the group's very existence arises from a sense of opposition to existing cultural mediators and arbiters of taste."[38] This is surely an important factor, but the implications of Jordison's introduction are both more complex and of a wider resonance. For one thing, the evocation of an old-world socialist rhetoric is so overblown that it is clearly tongue-in-cheek, and the tacit assumption that educated readers will recognize and appreciate the parody already signals something that Round and Thomas also acknowledge, namely that many of "the values and practices familiar from scholarly settings" are actually to some extent retained.[39] Secondly, the themes of 'revolution' and 'democracy' also invoke broader discourses on contemporary digital and literary culture. In particular, they are linked with the controversial idea that the internet fosters democracy. But they also evoke the contrary notion that in the digital age, literary reading and an appreciation for print culture can be counted as quasi-revolutionary acts of nonconformism.[40]

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[36] For a more sustained discussion of the figure of the 'common reader' in Woolf, and its adaptation to a contemporary medial environment in Alan Bennett's novella *The Uncommon Reader* (2008), see Dorothee Birke. *Writing the Reader: Configurations of a Cultural Practice in the English Novel.* Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 208-213.

[37] Sam Jordison. "Join the Reading Revolution." *The Guardian* 8 August 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/08/reading-group-guardian-books>. Last Accessed 27 May 2018. See also: "'Comment is free' is a part of the Guardian website, now simply entitled 'Opinion', which was created in March 2006 as the first collective comment blog by a British newspaper website. It will incorporate all the regular Guardian and Observer main commentators, many blogging for the first time, who will be joined by a host of outside contributors [...]." (Georgina Henry. "Welcome to Comment is Free." *The Guardian* 14 March 2006. *I put it in because* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/mar/14/welcometocommentisfree>. Last Accessed 27 May 2018.)

[38] Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round. "Moderating Readers and Reading Online." *Language and Literature* 25.3 (2016), pp. 239-253, here p. 248.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Inspired by Collins' analysis of the popularity of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as exemplifying "the sanctification of this community of book lovers under siege, this ideology of the faithful remnant struggling to survive" (Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, p. 264), Birke, in her reading of Bennett's *The Uncommon Reader*, shows how reading is represented as subversive (in a positive sense), but somewhat paradoxically also recreates the sense of cozy community feelings Collins identifies (Dorothee Birke, *Writing the Reader*, p 173).

A feature of the *Reading Group* site that encapsulates its new orientation is its approach to book selection, an aspect that, as Round and Thomas rightly remind us, "can bring to light the power dynamics existing within a group."[41] Where Mullan "guessed" at the works that might interest other readers, Jordison in his first column only proposes a theme – revolution! – and encourages the community to make concrete suggestions for the book to be read in the club (this prompted 437 comments). In the next piece, the participation-oriented approach continues: Jordison poses the question of how to choose between the suggestions, makes several proposals based on readers' ideas, and again asks for feedback (105 comments). In the subsequent week, following the suggestion of several readers, he finally lets chance decide and pulls the winning title – Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* – out of a hat. There is a *YouTube* video embedded in the article that documents the process, with Jordison laboriously cutting up print-outs of the comments, stuffing the pieces of paper into a hat, pulling one out, and holding it into the camera.[42]

The aesthetics and implications of this short YouTube video present in a nutshell how the new *Reading Group* blog approaches the relation between digital and book culture in general, and the issue of reader participation in particular. The fact that there is a YouTube video at all already constitutes a departure from the medial approach of the *Book Club*, which incorporated podcasts and discussion boards, but stayed clear of those features of the internet more expressly associated with social media and youth culture. While the medium of the embedded video itself signals a closer affinity to the environment and practices of the 'digital natives,' the content shown, in particular the cluttered bookshelves in the background (a feature we also find throughout BookTube) and the anachronistic act of handling print-outs of comments (thus emphasizing the materiality of the printed page), conspicuously evokes book culture.

But the video does not only evoke both media cultures – it also bridges the apparent gap between them. What can be called the video's 'aesthetics of imperfection' – the handheld camera with the webcam angle, the poor lighting and image quality, Jordison's goofiness, the intimacy of the setting (presumably his living room or home office, not in a particularly tidy state) – can for one thing be associated with the idea of book culture as being uninterested in self-presentation, i.e. one of the central notions also conveyed in Delevingne's Instagram post. At the same time, precisely these features link the video to the amateurish videos typical of a certain segment of (early) YouTube, signaling the unrehearsed, personal character of the communication and giving its producer the stamp of authenticity.[43] And there is another detail by which the video positions Jordison at the

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[41] Bronwen Thomas and Julia Round. "Moderating Readers and Reading Online.", p. 248.
[42] Sam Jordison. "Reading group: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury." *The Guardian* 22 Aug 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/22/reading-group-fahrenheit-451-ray-bradbury>. Last accessed May 27 2018.
[43] On the relation between 'realist' aesthetics and authenticity claims in film, see Heike Schäfer. "The Parodic Play with Realist Aesthetics and Authenticity Claims in Cheryl Dunye's Black Queer Mockumentary *The Watermelon Woman*." In: Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter (eds.). *Realisms in Contemporary Culture: Theories, Politics and Medial Configurations*. Berlin, Boston 2013, pp. 195-

intersection of book and popular culture: his T-shirt, which proclaims "I would prefer not to," a quotation from Herman Melville's story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853).[44] The slogan, which was made popular by Slavoj Žižek as encapsulating a form of resistance to a capitalist politics, has since become a meme on social media.[45] In the context of the Reading Group's launch, the Bartleby-T-Shirt signals a (slightly irreverent) affinity to book culture as well as sympathy for an emerging type of political activism (or 'slacktivism'),[46] which in turn is tied to the idea that social media enable grassroots movements.

At the same time, as already suggested, the *Reading Group* remains indebted to values associated with academic approaches to literature as well as traditional journalistic practices. For one thing, the retirement of John Mullan did not mean that literary scholars vanished completely from the site – experts from the academy, along with the authors, are regularly featured in webchats. (However, the new format of the webchat means that the communication is no longer dominated solely by the book club's host. He now acts as a facilitator of a conversation between literary experts, practitioners, and readers.) Another typical feature of the *Guardian*'s particular approach is the rather high involvement of the moderator in steering the discussions. Thomas and Round highlight how Jordison balances the role of a guide to discussions with that of a companion and participant. He maintains a visible, but not overbearing presence in the discussions and alternates between being provocative, funny, encouraging and once in a while disapproving, in comments that appear as tailored to stimulate the conversation as to regulate it.[47] In this endeavor, he is frequently joined by other *Guardian* moderators, who add their opinion and react to reader comments. This is in line with the overall *Guardian* approach to comments, which attempts to strike a balance between eliciting reader participation and maintaining some control over direction and quality of the conversations conducted in the forums. This balance is also visible in the selection of topics, which – even if they move away from Mullan's 'sage on the stage' approach in form – are not that different in content, retaining

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213. On YouTube as a site for cultivating amateurishness see Michael Strangelove. *Watching Youtube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. Toronto 2010.

[44] Herman Melville. *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Hoboken, NJ 2004.

[45] See Slavoj Žižek. *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA 2006. Today, the slogan is most famous for having been claimed by the Occupy movement – however, Jordison's YouTube video dates from shortly before Occupy's inception in September 2011.

[46] Cf. Nina Martyris, who calls Bartleby "America's first slacktivist." Nina Martyris. "A Patron Saint for Wall Street." *The New Republic* 15 Oct 2011. <https://newrepublic.com/article/96276/nina-martyris-ows-and-bartleby-the-scrivener>. Last accessed 27 May 2018.

[47] To look at a random example, in the discussion of the characters in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* on Jan 23, 2018, 4 of the 79 comments were Jordison's – one approving of a point made by another commentator ("True!"), two validating topics of conversation and weighing in with his own opinions ("Thanks - that's really interesting. And entirely valid... But! For me it felt like we were being invited to judge him, because he judges himself so much and so often wonders 'aloud' if he's doing the right thing") and one calling out a commentator for being ill informed ("Have you read the book?"). Sam Jordison. "Reckoning with Gilead's Moral Vision." *The Guardian* 23 Jan 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/jan/23/reckoning-with-gileads-moral-vision>. Last accessed 28 May 2018.

their roots in literary culture while occasionally branching out into middlebrow or pop-culture territory.

Overall, then, the evolving design of the Guardian's *Reading Group* site bears witness to an adaptation of book culture to a digital environment which fosters the 'popularization' of literary culture (*sensu* Collins). The site does so by harnessing the opportunities provided by new media to amplify participatory aspects of reading. At the same time, however, it retains a close affinity to traditional practices of literary criticism, as well as more generally practices of 'quality journalism.' It thus, like the *Guardian* as a whole, reflects a progressive, on the whole intellectual-friendly and self-reflexive cultural politics, bridging rather than widening the perceived gap between amateur appreciation and the academy that Collins sees in the American context.[48] The ideal of a community of book lovers as creating a utopian and democratic space, as envisioned by Virginia Woolf, also finds expression in the calibration of the site as a conversation with the readers – while at the same time, the strong emphasis on moderation attests to an awareness that attention and work are needed to maintain this space and make it 'safe.' All in all, the practice of book culture as it is facilitated by the Guardian Reading Group site with its balance between amateur and academic reading gives book lovers the opportunity to feel simultaneously like members of a privileged cultural elite and like rebels against cultural snobbism.

2.   Enter the Millennials: BookTube and the Bookternet

While on the *Guardian* website, the production of 'the reader' as a social persona remains an implicit benefit, the sites we turn to in our second case study quite blatantly revolve around the identificatory potential of book culture. The subjects of this study are a group of "digital natives" (those who came of age with computers and the internet always around) who create videos about book- and reading-related subjects under the hashtag "booktube" on YouTube.[49]

A phenomenon of the 2010s, BookTube is centered around a professed shared love of reading and books (most in the young adult [YA] market). It brings together a group of mostly female, mostly millennial vloggers between their teenage years and their mid-to-late 20s, who exchange ideas and opinions about book-related subjects. While not as big as the YouTube sub-communities around beauty or gaming, some BookTubers have become well-established within their growing community. Although most channels "do not usually exceed 1000 to 1500 subscribers," according to Karen Sorensen and Andrew Mara,[50] some of the most

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[48] Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books for Everybody,* pp. 18-28.

[49] Whereas YouTube is their main arena, content creators and participants are usually also active on other sites, such as Instagram, Goodreads, Facebook, and Twitter; some blog about books or meet offline at book conventions, but for the most active and popular BookTubers, YouTube is their main medium of expression and exchange and we will thus limit ourself to YouTube in our examination, even if it is part of a larger network of interlinked social media sites.

[50] Karen Sorenson and Andrew Mara. "BookTubers as a Networked Knowledge Community." In: Marohang Limbu and Binod Gurung (eds.). *Emerging Pedagogies in the Networked Knowledge*

popular BookTubers have well over 100,000 subscribers. The most subscribed, PolandbananasBOOKS (run by Christine Riccio) has 386.526 sub-scribers and over 60 million total views for her over 700 videos, while Sasha Alsberg's channel ABookUtopia has 367,361 subscribers and almost 38 million views. Several other English-language BookTubers, such as JessetheReader (Jesse George), Katytastic (Kat O'Keeffe), and Peruse Project (Regan Perusse) each have over 200,000 subscribers.[51]

While we do not have empirical data on the social background of BookTubers overall, there are enough markers to place those most prominent in the English-speaking community into mostly white, seemingly comfortable middle-class backgrounds. The amounts of books owned and purchased, the disposable time necessary to film, edit and post weekly updates of a high quality, as well as to devote time to reading (particularly in challenges), the environments and back-grounds gleaned in these videos, the language used, and the fact that many pursue or hold a higher degree all place them within a bourgeois environment. If we thus juxtapose them to the kind of bourgeois reading culture we see as an historical backdrop as well as manifested in the *Guardian* Reading Group's practice, the difference is largely one of age, not of class position—and it is a difference that only goes so far, as we will elaborate in the conclusion.

In their videos, BookTubers post about book-related topics in various ways. Recurring subjects and forms constitute a sort of generic roster for the community. They review books, of course, but individual reviews are not the majority of videos in the most popular BookTube channels, nor are they the most viewed videos on these YouTubers' sites. Often reviews and recommendations are instead part of a larger frame, e.g. monthly wrap ups, best of or favorite videos around a topic or theme, videos about book series or other topical videos that include short opinions and reviews about books that are mentioned. Some BookTubers also share their opinion about TV and movie adaptations of books or book series and do comparison videos, and more popular and well-connected BookTubers like JessetheReader and others do occasional interviews (aka Q&A videos) with writers in the Young Adult genre.[52]

Society: Practices Integrating Social Media and Globalization. Hershey, PA 2014 pp. 87-99; here p. 91.

[51] These numbers were taken from the YouTubers' respective pages on April 24 2018. A second look on May 07 2018 shows that numbers are still going up. There is also a major Spanish language BookTube community with at least two channels above 300,000 subscribers.
While these numbers are impressive, they are dwarfed by the most popular personal YouTube channels, run by PewDiePie which has over 62.4 million subscribers and Ryan ToysReviews, which with almost 13,7 million subscribers has 21.4 billion views. Within the beauty community Yuya has 21.2 million subscribers and YouTuber Zoella has over 12 million subscribers in her main channel and almost 5 million in a second channel.

[52] The access to authors for interviews, the invitation to talk at trade conventions, sending of advanced reader copies to BookTubers, as well as the transition of some BookTubers into writing or publishing (the most conspicuous example being the collection *Because You Love to Hate Me* published by Bloomsbury in 2017, which brings together YA authors and some of the most popular BookTubers) suggest that BookTube is becoming an increasingly important and recognized part of book marketing, particularly in the YA sector. There also exists a back and forth between authors, YouTubers, and publishers. These trends are so recent, however, that they have

The most consistently popular video format on BookTube is the BookHaul. Here BookTubers showcase the books they have recently bought (or, in the case of more popular YouTubers, received from publishers as complimentary or advanced copies) and discuss them briefly regarding their theme and plot. While the hosts have occasionally read a book in the past or started reading it, allowing them to briefly outline what they liked and didn't like about a book, more frequently the focus is on what they expect from a novel they have not yet read. The TBR (to be read) is a variation of this video, sharing similar features focusing on the BookTuber's hopes, expectations, and excitement about engaging with a new book. The Bookshelf Tour, another popular format, gives an impression of the BookTubers' collection, usually as a long series of shots of books standing in front of their shelf with the BookTuber reading out their title and author and commenting only on special features (e.g. an illustrated copy or a collectors edition) or on the fact that they own multiple editions of this book, but withholding comments or recommendations, since these videos tend to be quite long already.

The prominent role of formats such as the BookHaul, the TBR and the Bookshelf Tour suggests that a large part of the appeal of BookTube is not so much the reviewing of specific books in a traditional sense (for which the blog, podcast, or even a Goodreads review offer seemingly more 'natural' fora), but presenting and performing bookishness, a term by which we mean the performative demonstrations of one's love of and deep involvement with books and book-related culture and objects, as a lifestyle. In the following, we want to take a closer look at two main features that stand out in these formats, but also in many other BookTube practices: the use of book culture for identity construction, and the fetishization of the book as a material object. Both these tendencies could be read as signs of cultural decline, fitting in with the above-cited comment by Sarah Fay about the superficiality and the consumerist orientation of the new book culture. However, as we will argue in the following, this is a simplistic way of understanding bookternet practices, and one that also rests on a limited understanding of traditional book culture and its alleged disinterestedness.

3. Identity Construction through BookTube

The idea of expressing one's individuality through the kinds of books one reads is neither new nor extravagant: many readers will have glanced at others' book shelves to assess their reading taste and, by extension, their level of culture, and perhaps even hoped to gain an insight into their character. Following Pierre Bourdieu's conception of society as made up of different fields, i.e. semi-separate spheres in which individuals are positioned in relation to each other and in which certain forms of 'capital' are worth more than others, this makes perfect sense. Books as what Bourdieu calls objectified cultural capital at least suggest an

thus far been examined only in a number of unpublished master theses and seminar papers, e.g. Katharina Albrecht. "Positioning BookTube in the Publishing World: An Examination of Online Book Reviewing through the Field Theory." Master Thesis. Leiden University, 2017 and Priscilla Kind. "The Effect of Online Influencers on Young Adult Literature and its Audience: The Negative Response to Veronica Roth's *Carve the Mark*." Master Thesis. Utrecht University, 2017.

incorporated cultural capital and thus hint at a certain *habitus*, a set of dispositions (including tastes, views, goals, and capital) agents develop in response to the environments they grew up in, and which in turn makes them more or less well-adapted to a field. Investing capital in an attempt to distinguish themselves from others, who do not possess this specific capital in the same amount, be this the cultural capital of book culture, scientific learning or football fandom, social, or economic capital, positions these agents in the field and, by extension, in society more general.[53]

The aspect of book culture as an expression of one's *habitus* and cultural capital is writ large on BookTube. While one may not have the opportunity to scrutinize the book shelf of one's opposite in day-to-day interactions, BookTube offers more than enough material for the bookish voyeur. From TBRs to BookHauls to Bookshelf Tours or videos of vloggers rearranging their bookshelves, there are plenty of formats operating with the understanding that the videos not only say something about the book, but also about the community, including both the individual content creator and the viewer. Within the community, they are often viewed as a marker of the "reading character" of a poster, as Ariel Bissett, a Canadian Book Tuber who frequently posts meta-videos about various aspects of BookTube and its codes and practices, explains. According to Bissett, book hauls are not only a chance for the BookTuber to express their excitement over recently acquired but yet unread books (excitement and passion, which are with Bourdieu expressions of a certain *habitus*, being continuously identified as key quality of good BookTubers), but also offer the viewer "a sample of [the poster's] personality without any prerequisites", such as having to have read a certain book or even caring about the genre or theme of the books acquired.[54] Bissett likens watching a BookHaul to spending time with someone who is also excited about books.

Furthermore, BookHauls according to Bissett, "reveal a lot about the reader" in giving the viewer an impression of the kinds of books the poster purchased or was sent by publishers and their initial reaction to them, despite the fact that the vlogger may never actually read any of the books. As Bissett continues: BookHauls "celebrate books. Maybe I haven't read it yet, but that doesn't mean you're [sic] not excited about it. It doesn't mean that you're not sharing *books*. I'm still spreading literacy [sic!], I'm still spreading just a deep love of literature and it doesn't matter if I haven't read them yet, you know, you're still learning about new books." The excitement about the matter expressed in every aspect of Bissett's highly agitated discussion (ranging from her intonation to her gesticulation and the jump cut editing typical of most vlog-style YouTube videos that heightens the pace and emotion carried over to the viewer) is as typical of BookTube as it is of other YouTube review and vlogging communities.

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[53] On Bourdieu's theory of capitals see Pierre Bourdieu. "Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital." In: Reinhardt Kreckel (Ed.) *Soziale Ungleichheit*. Göttingen 1983, pp. 183-198; here pp. 189-190. On the larger interplay between field, *habitus* and capital see e.g. Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London 1986.

[54] Ariel Bissett "Why Do BookTubers Make Book Hauls?" *Youtube* 17 May 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HW6Uskb2cas>. Last access May 17 2018.

In the development of an idiom that foregrounds excitement and personal engagement as a way of discussing literature, BookTube amplifies tendencies that already distinguished the popularization of reading formats of the 1990s, such as Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, from more traditional ways of discussing literature. Whereas in the traditional review format, critics and facilitators of literature (the occasional Marcel Reich-Ranicki notwithstanding) tend to step back behind the work, typically attempting to speak with the authority of received culture and taste acquired through training, BookTubing is a highly personality-driven format. While on the *Guardian* website, the desired attitude seems to be a balance of personal reading experience and more 'academic' discussion, BookTubers stress time and again that their reviews and videos reflect only their personal taste and opinion. They are very careful not to make any universalizing claims about a book's quality, often following this disclaimer with an apology should they disregard a book the viewer likes – an apology sometimes repeated several times when they feel they disagree with a popular trend or taste on BookTube. In contrast to *The Guardian*'s Sam Jordison's restraint and his minimal interaction with the camera in those videos he does share, BookTubers go in the opposite direction: some of the most popular videos include conscious dramatic overacting, humor, over-the-top props and costuming, or other forms of quirkiness and goofiness. Videos by Christine Riccio (PolandbananaBOOKS) and Sasha Alsberg (A Book Utopia), for instance, periodically include little dance sequences with music that are edited into their uploads or segments in which the YouTuber is having a laughing fit, is stumbling over her own words, and other 'screw ups' that are only half edited out in a willfully amateurish bow to YouTube's non-professional aesthetic or – in a more Hollywoodish manner provided as separate blooper videos.

All of these aspects make the presenters seem more at home in an online world than in one of high culture or professional journalism, and this – in fact – is exactly the point of many posters and viewers who see BookTube not as a space for academic discussions, but rather as a place to share their enthusiasm. The performative enthusiasm which distinguishes BookTube from more sedate sites like the Guardian Reading Group is a crucial characteristic of the most successful BookTubers, who, through their posts, build a persona not merely (and possibly not even primarily) by the books they read, but by how they present them – and by extension themselves – to the community. It is true that, as Bissett remarks,[55] viewers neither have to know the books discussed in a Haul, nor even care about their genre in order to engage with a video, precisely because they are watching primarily an affective, often minimally scripted identity performance revolving around books rather than a long, thought-out review of any particular novel.

While the various BookTubers' identity performances in front of the camera and in comments differ, a common denominator of their videos is the emphasis on the central role of reading for self-cultivation. In the words of Christine Riccio (PolandbananaBOOKS):

> Booktube makes you read books and books make you smarter is what it comes down to basically. I mean books open you up to new experiences, they make you more

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[55] Ariel Bissett "Why do BookTubers Make BookHauls?"

compassionate, it makes you a better writer, it makes you a better thinker. There are so many benefits that come with reading and the traditional education systems tends to make reading seem like a giant chore. If it's a giant chore, it's not something that you wanna go out and do on your own and when you come to BookTube you kind of learn to love reading. And that is something very, very valuable. You know if you love reading then you're going to go out and pursue more books and you're gonna just keep learning and evolving and broadening your horizon as a human being.[56]

Riccio's attitude towards books exemplifies a larger cultural trend. While the idea of reading as an important form of self-education has a long tradition, not least playing a central role in the thinking of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, there is a more current tendency to valorize the practice of reading (in particular novel reading) as such, almost regardless of content.[57] Jim Collins has examined the way in which the belief in book reading as an act of self-improvement is reflected in contemporary novels, for example in the description of a character in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*: "[S]he is in search of self-cultivation hoping to improve her mind, and her reading allows her to separate herself from mind-numbing quotidian concerns even while immersed in them at the supermarket." However, while it is still important for Cunningham's character that "she is not a genre reader,"[58] BookTubers have gone further in disregarding canonical ideas of 'valuable' literature. Genre reading is by and large the most popular category on BookTube, and many BookTubers even celebrate their deviation from received ideas of 'literariness' as a strength or an alternative knowledge culture, while at the same time ascribing the same positive values to their reading that traditionally have been withheld by those in positions of cultural authority from readers of popular genres. Choosing words strongly resonating with neo-liberal identity politics, BookTuber Marisa (littlespider9), furthermore, positions BookTube in direct opposition to formal literary education and describes it as "a safe space for reading enthusiasm" that results in more diverse reading and a "healthier reading community."[59]

Marisa's comment moreover points to another crucial aspect of the identity politics of book culture according to BookTube, and a desire to a lesser extent also implicit in the development of the Guardian Reading Group: to integrate one's invidual reading into a communal practice. This is also reflected in a self-description formulated by Riccio, who stresses that meeting other readers in high school "was so rare" and that now that she has found BookTube, "I have that on an everyday basis in my internet community and it's amazing." Going on with her characteristic enthusiasm, Riccio adds: "I've never had a real book club until the internet. And they became my book family. And I guess not just a book club, and it's made my life so much more fun."[60] The sentiment seems widely popular among BookTubers and captures the essence of how many of them would classify their

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[56] Ariel Bissett. "Is Booktube Educational?" *Youtube* 25 April 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kB7ol0Z2xC4>. Last accessed 18 May 2018.
[57] For a more extended analysis see Dorothee Birke. *Writing the Reader*, especially pp. 169-171.
[58] Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books*, p. 41.
[59] Ariel Bissett. "Is Booktube Educational?"
[60] Ibid.

relations with the real world and their online community. As one cruises BookTube or other online self-descriptions of BookTubers and book bloggers, this is perhaps the most-cited reason for why they are involved in online book communities and a central aspect for why they remain engaged. They understand BookTube not only as a source for learning about new books or for getting recommendations, but as a community: a network of people with shared values and practices organized around a mutual object of interest.

This is also where the issues of identity construction and community participation intersect. BookTube offers users a community that allows for the "intersection of identity production and knowledge exchange," in the words of Sorensen and Mara, and it is the shared object of interest that marks part of the appeal of the community.[61] Many activities, meanwhile, are not about the exchange of knowledge *per se*, but about an expression of identity directed at a community. When BookTubers document their reading experiences and progress in reading challenges in longer, often more personal clips consisting of an introduction establishing a connection to a reading challenge going on in the community or by formulating goals, followed by short clips edited together in which the YouTuber records her experience, thoughts and progress during the Read-a-thon, but at the same time provides glimpses into her private life, viewers are granted access that goes beyond the object of interest.[62] It is in such videos and in videos that are largely un-book-related (such as life updates or certain tag formats, e.g. the boyfriend tag) that BookTubers express themselves not merely as a 'reading personality' but as private individuals (and members of a certain generation). The interaction between these kinds of private vlogs and more clearly book-centered videos expresses most clearly what is also true for YouTube as a whole, namely that expressions of identity become only truly meaningful when they are acknowledged by a community that bestows recognition on the BookTuber as a fellow reader and community member. At the same time, the addresses and inclusions into a participatory virtual community of self-identified readers which

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[61] Karen Sorenson and Andrew Mara. "BookTubers as a Networked Knowledge Community."; p. 89.

[62] In such videos Australian BookTuber Little Book Owl (Catriona Feeney), for instance, shows herself driving or walking to work, in hotel rooms while traveling for work, in bed sick and without makeup, or interacting with her boyfriend in various places of the home as she comments on her days and progress during a Read-a-Thons. This way of sharing of glimpses into a private life is so common in the community that it has produced parodies (e.g. PolandBananaBOOKS. „READING FOR 24 HOURS | READATHON VLOG" *YouTube* 06 Feb 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=5f5qStx5jcI>. Last Access 30 May 2018. in which Riccio complains about others not 'taking seriously' the idea of reading for 24 hours straight because they take breaks and shows herself reading *Twilight* while taking a shower, meeting a Tinder date, and 'comforting' a friend whose dog just died). The dynamic between vlogger and audience has also led to some BookTubers expressing the 'need' to update their followers on events that have taken place in their lives that do not pertain to reading at all. Reagan Perusse (Peruse Project), for instance, is has produced a number of videos in which she gives the viewer e.g. a virtual tour of her apartment or talks about her boyfriend moving out because he took a job in New York "to prevent speculation" when he does not feature in her online life as much anymore (Peruse Project "Life Update: My Boyfriend is Moving Out + Leaving Chicago." *YouTube* 12 May 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCTCIqSFOcw>. Last Accessed 30 May 2018.).

such videos engage in create the BookTube community, making identity formation and community building reciprocal and mutually dependent performative acts.

Like any community, BookTube depends on participation, but the forms are distinct, as are the ways in which BookTubers invite their followers to participate. Apart from the typical YouTube call to 'action': 'comment, like, subscribe' and the direction of viewers to the BookTuber's other social media channels, there are certain forms that are particular to collaborative action on BookTube. We have already discussed Read-a-thons, but there are other forms which at least implicitly encourage communal activity: among these are reading challenges, during which BookTubers and viewer are encouraged to move beyond their usual reading habits (e.g. by reading in a different genre or by reading minority writers), "tag" videos, or collaborative videos which create direct connections between certain BookTubers. Read-alongs more explicitly encourage reader interaction about a specific book. Here viewers read a certain book at the same time with a BookTuber and can then watch and react to a video about this book or during a Hangout discussion between several BookTubers.

Lastly, "how to" videos, ranging from thematic suggestions such as "how to get over a reading slump" (i.e. a period during which you do not read as much as you would like to) or how to prepare for a Read-a-thon to suggestions for setting up your own BookTube channel, contribute to establishing a sense of a community that shares similar challenges (e.g. not finding enough time to read), helps others, and is open to participation from all, since its entry level is relatively low. You do not need technical expertise, expensive equipment or a degree in literature, these videos tell their viewers. All you need is enthusiasm and a love of books.

Understanding BookTube as a community also throws into sharp relief the role of book culture as a means to acquire symbolic capital, in Bourdieu's sense (i.e. recognition within the community bestowed on the basis of a perceived authenticity, trust in a BookTubers honesty, taste and knowledge of her chosen genre [her cultural capital], or a particularly engaging persona in her videos). BookTubers share in, but also add their own twist to values about literature and its relation to and effect on the individual that have been carried over and transformed from their 19th century bourgeois origins. Building on notions of "taste" and "sensibility," which, as Raymond Williams explains "were essentially unifying concepts, in class terms, and could be applied over a very wide range from public and private behaviour to (as Wordsworth complained) either wine or poetry," these "subjective definitions of apparently objective criteria" mask, in both the Marxist and the Bourdieusian understanding, historically grown, but to an extent arbitrary parameters as objective criteria that can then serve to at once justify and mystify real class distinctions on the cultural level.[63] The community of taste that has developed on BookTube around the idea of a "safe space for reading enthusiasm" of Young Adult fiction goes against the traditionally dominant knowledge cultures in both its material and its emotion-, content-, and character-focused endorsements of these books by disregarding both what and how one 'should' read, while maintaining the traditional idea of self-cultivation and self-

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[63] Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford, 1977; pp. 48-49. Cf. also Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction.*

improvement.[64] In this way, BookTube (like other online cultures) is perhaps best understood as a semi-independent field in which success and hierarchies are afforded through symbolic recognition (or capital) that is most objectively measurable through views and followers, but whose terms are distinct, ranging from notions of perceived authenticity and trust to wide reading and a sparkling on-screen persona, all notions that are centered on the individual rather than on external factors like the institutionalized cultural capital of university degrees.

A final aspect of reading as a means for self-cultivation that is conspicuous on BookTube is the obsession with highlighting and measuring reading in quantitative terms, e.g. by the numbers of books or pages read in a month, a year, or during a Read-a-thon. This is a practice that is encouraged by the medial affordances of sites such as Goodreads, which make reading immediately measurable in unprecedented ways, but also by the mainstream notions of self-improvement and -refinement now associated with reading culture. If reading has been transformed "into a heroic fetish" (in the words of Tom Leitch),[65] then reading more is more heroic (as implied, for instance, by Oprah's repeated insistence of the number of pages of the more massive books she chooses).[66]

Added to this personal imperative, reading a lot and staying on top of what is popular on BookTube also becomes a necessity if we regard BookTube as a field or marketplace (again, following Bourdieu) in which many individual posters strive (knowingly or not) to maximize their following and their symbolic standing within that community. The medium-level BookTuber Joce (squibblesreads) is one of many who argue that some individuals, particularly content creators, see BookTube not merely as a non-committal place for sharing opinions about books and reading, but feel pressured to read more or particular trending books, resulting in what she terms "reading fatigue."[67] Individuals on BookTube, in this way, are caught between awareness and rejections of bourgeois categories of taste formation. They also have to negotiate between finding a space where they can give public expression for a love of reading that is voluntary (as opposed to the required reading in schools and colleges to which many contrast it) and neo-liberal pressures for self-optimization. The latter oscillates between encouragement to engage in a cherished activity and pushing readers to read larger amounts than

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[64] We are aware that this is a universalizing statement that does not adequately reflect all the nuances of what is in effect a much more diverse community. There are BookTubers who hold literature degrees (Bissett being one of them) and who use 'legitimate' knowledge, including literary and cultural criticism, to analyze the novels they discuss as well as BookTube itself, and there are those who focus on or at least include the 'classics' that are also studied in schools and universities. The dominant trend of BookTube, however, is a different one, as described in this article.

[65] Thomas Leitch. "Strange Bedfellows: The Post-Literary Novel, the Devoutly-Literary Novel, and the Media Revolution That Was Supposed to Kill Them but Gave Them Life Instead." Review of Jim Collins. *Bring on the Books for Everybody*. *Adaptation* 5, no.1 (2011): pp.119-123, p. 119. Collins. *Bring on*, pp. 221-266.

[66] E.g. Oprah's promotion of Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*. Ken Follett. "The Pillars of the Earth - Oprah Loves the Book." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j5wCSyrg18. Last accessed 20 May 2018.

[67] Squibblesreads. "I am Frustrated with Booktube." *Youtube* 30 Nov 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybL8ofOir7A>. Last accessed 20 May 2018.

they might wish for, did they not feel under the gaze of others, or to read popular books in order to gain followers and symbolic standing in the community.

4. BookTube, Materiality, and the Commodification of Reading

If the reader as a person plays a central role on BookTube, the same can be said of the book as a material object. Videos in which acquired but (as yet) often unread books are publicly displayed in ways not seen since Jay Gatsby library of uncut books may scream consumerism and commodification to the outside viewer.[68] A closer analysis can show, however, that BookTubers' interest in the conspicuous consumption of books cannot simply be dismissed as a sign of shallowness or a superficial understanding of book culture and the learning it signifies. Rather, it is a complex and central feature of their more openly identity-driven approach to reading. It is worth noting, as well, that BookTube highlights aspects that are rarely entirely absent from bourgeois reading and book buying as cultural practices. Instead, millennial book lovers' expressions of their involvement in literary culture connect to earlier modes of practicing book culture, even if they do not show the disavowal of the money economy that the more established agents in the field of cultural production and consumption deem appropriate.[69]

If we look at the form of (re)presentation of the book as a material object, the quality of the book as a printed object is central to the special medial aesthetics of the video log. Following similar codes as other product review and haul videos on YouTube, in which the object discussed is likewise repeatedly displayed to the viewer, most BookTubers hold the book they discuss in their hand and show it to the camera repeatedly. It seems a logical conclusion that a nicely designed cover and sleeve are more presentable and impressive than the same e-reader being shown week after week, and book shelves make seemingly natural backdrops for a discussion of literature, but this is not all. The book as a material object also fulfils an older symbolic function that has not (yet) been fully transferred to other forms of literature such as e- or audiobooks. Little Book Owl (Catriona Feeney) in her comparison of e-books and physical books makes several of the points most frequently brought up in the community that reveal the special symbolic significance assigned to material books, especially hardcovers. Lovingly caressing and interacting with a printed book, she highlights "the physicality", its appearance, feel, smell, and states that "seeing a shelf full of books brings me so much joy." While Feeney, like many other BookTubers (e.g. PolandBanasBOOKS or Jesse the Reader) admits the greater practicality of e-readers, particularly when traveling, her last words are a declaration of love to the book as material object: "I will never stop loving the physical book. No matter what. No … matter … what! Because the funny thing is if I get a book on my Kindle for really cheap, I read it and I enjoy it, I'll most likely go and pick up a physical copy of that book."[70]

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[68] F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. London, 1994, pp. 51-52.
[69] This argument again builds on Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production*, e.g. pp. 74-76.
[70] Little Book Owl. "EBOOK vs PHYSICAL BOOK." *YouTube* 8 Oct 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tliqZYGPUik>. Last accessed 30 June 2018.

Holding and possessing the printed (especially hardcover) book as an expression of love of the object as object thus identifies the BookTuber as a bibliophile. The book is employed (knowingly or not) to bestow symbolic capital and show distinction in a way that the digital object (still) cannot call forth. The countless discussions of organization of shelf space, acquiring new (physical) books in book hauls, unboxings of books and book-related paraphernalia, as well as discussions of getting rid of old books as a way of high-grading one's collection, plus frequent references to books lying around everywhere, are all employed in part as a celebration of one's bookishness and immersion into all literature-related things.

Although this is usually not the primary intention, presenting a book on BookTube at least in part entails promoting the book as a commodity (hence the willingness of publishers to send free books to popular BookTubers or even pay them for the creation of content).[71] BookTube thus becomes tightly integrated into capitalist circles of conspicuous consumption and promotion that are typical of (and thus in part normalized by) other YouTube communities that likewise do hauls, e.g. the beauty community. On BookTube, as Albrecht writes, content providers "practice, celebrate and normalize the frequent purchasing of books," whereas non-commercial alternatives, such as borrowing books from friends or the library are "not nearly as prominently addressed,"[72] a fact that has led some within the community to address the economic pressures and unspoken privilege of BookTube.[73] In fact, even those video formats that are about *not* buying books, such as unhauls (a challenge to sort out unread or unloved books – usually at least implicitly to buy more books) or book buying bans (periods in which BookTubers promise not to purchase any new books) reinforce, if anything, the normality of buying books. Book buying and owning is part of one's identity as a reader, these videos suggest, a lifestyle choice rather than an economic transfer that needs to be sustained through earning an income. It is addictive, but it is an addiction that one can be proud of, since reading, after all, is good for you.

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[71] For an anecdotal account of the money economy's involvement in BookTube from a content providers' side, see Emmabooks. "How BookTubers Make Money." *Youtube* 19 Nov 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYa8bJkad-w>. Last Accessed 20 May 2018.

[72] Albrecht. "Positioning BookTube," p. 32.

[73] This is a debate that resurfaces periodically. A few years ago Ariell Bissett found herself at the center of a controversy after she uploaded a video (later deleted) in which she talked about why she preferred buying books to using the libraries, which spawned a number of angry comments and response videos in which people either said why they loved libraries or called Bissett and other BookTubers out on their privilege. Part of this debate was a video by BookTuber richardthebookfreak, who made a video entitled "I can't afford BookTube," which itself spawned a number of response videos, e.g. by South African BookTuber Sir Rainbow Skychild. Richardthebookfreak "I can't afford BookTube." *Youtube* 27 July 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQp0ImB8o14>. Last accessed May 19 2018. Sir Rainbow Skychild. "On Libraries – An (Angry) Response to Ariel Bisset [sic]." *Youtube* 26 Aug 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjA7MYgQCS4>. Last Accessed May 19 2018. Bissett later returned to the discussion by apologizing, admitting her privilege, and at the same time pointing out that "the internet does not let you change your opinion." Ariel Bissett. "So You've Been Publicly Shamed & Libraries on BookTube." *Youtube* 12 Nov 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXsYRwU-12A>. Last accessed 19 May 2018.

For the BookTubers themselves, the symbolic aspect of the book as an object that represents culture, individuation, and self-improvement through reading does not stand in contrast to its existence as a material commodified object. As noted above, BookTube is a community in which identity formation is expressed largely through the acquisition and ownership of books (the shared objects that bind the community together) or the discussion of books owned—ideally in the more expensive, more bibliophile hard back formats. Books thus become fetishes in the Marxian sense: their materiality and availability in the marketplace transforms them, seemingly by magic, into commodities that transcend their creators and whose social existence and signification depends on, but at the same time goes beyond, their mere material existence.

On top of the highly visible, direct promotion of individual books on BookTube and the lingering sense that you need to buy and to own books to be a truly contributing, book-loving member of that community, the platform contains another aspect of capital generation. For one thing, the videos often include links to online book sellers, such as the popular Book Repository, whose platforms are most easily integrated in the video descriptions, thus encouraging viewers to take the next step to become a consumer. What is more, viewers, commenters, and content providers contribute their data, as well as their free labor, to YouTube and other sites, which is mined for profit in a number of ways. As Lisa Nakamura points out in her discussion of *Goodreads*, social media sites use metadata and algorithmic analysis towards a new, optimized business model in which "consumption is premised on the transformation of the consumer from subject to object of capitalist accumulation."[74] Often owned by giants like Amazon [Goodreads], Google [YouTube], or Facebook [Facebook, Instagram], the social media sites that provide the platforms for a fundamental part of the bookternet are part of a transformation of the medial marketplace, by virtue of their extraction of data as "raw material".[75] If we take this into account, millennial book culture on the internet is embedded in and partakes of larger social processes of capitalist restructuring in ways which exceed that of more old-fashioned arenas like the *Guardian* Reading Club.

5. Conclusion

Although evocations about the future of reading, from the Delevingne Instagram post to Birkert's monograph, often involve a play on the oppositions between "old" book and "new" media culture, a closer inspection has revealed a more complex interplay between media more in line with Jenkins' idea of a "convergence culture." This culture can be adequately described neither by a media conservatism, in which new media equal loss of (supposedly objective, transhistorical) 'quality,' nor by a new media enthusiasm, in which old media stand for a hierarchical system that should be overcome by new media's (supposedly) greater democratic potential. As we have shown, such a juxtaposition of media cultures is wide off the mark of actual medial practices, and often rests on myths about 'book culture,' e.g.

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[74] Lisa Nakamura. "'Words with Friends.' Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*." *PMLA* 128.1 (2013): 238-243; here p. 241.
[75] Cf. Nick Srnicek. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge 2017, pp. 39, 40.

that it is non-commercial and not tied in with practices of self-representation. In fact, as our examination of the *Guardian* reading group and BookTube suggests, digital culture is adapting book culture in many ways.

Many of the emerging practices we have outlined are new in form, but point to continuities rather than ruptures in the development of media culture(s). In line with the multi-directional transformation of 'source' and 'adaptation' insisted on in post-structuralist adaptation theory, new media adaptations of old media reading practices can thus serve to throw into relief aspects of reading culture that are still often buried in everyday discussions. As N. Katherine Hayles remarks, digital media can foster a new awareness of the materiality of print:

> [D]igital media have given us an opportunity we have not had for the last several hundred years: the chance to see print with new eyes, and with it, the possibility of understanding how deeply literary theory and criticism have been imbued with assumptions specific to print. As we work towards critical practices and theories appropriate for electronic literature, we may come to renewed appreciation for the specificity of print.[76]

New media discourse about reading, books, and literature can likewise lead us to reevaluate old practices of reading, particularly when we approach them through a contextual, historical lens. This reevaluation acknowledges the central (and ambivalent) role of commercialization in book publishing, promotion, and consumption that becomes much more apparent in the context of BookTube when millennials unabashedly engage in and post about book buying sprees (but which is also visible in the *Guardian* Reading Group through give aways or the presence of the Guardian book shop). But it goes beyond this aspect to e.g. the close link between media use and practices of social distinction, self-presentation, and identity formation and the codes according to which these function in different contexts.

The comparison of the different formats of BookTube and the *Guardian* Reading Group has shown that, while both adapt a type of reading and discussion that would once have taken place in face-to-face interaction of book clubs to a digital environment, they do so in radically different ways. This difference, however, is one of age and social context rather than mere mediality. Each in its own way utilizes the possibilities of digital media to present content and facilitate exchange about it, but the people who shape and use these sites approach book culture from two different social positions. The *Guardian* Reading Group is part of the digitalization strategy of a traditional newspaper and appears on a website which overall is addressed to an audience that is still quite at home in print culture and, perhaps even more importantly, certain received ways of speaking about this culture and the values it connotes. Conversely, BookTube is facilitated largely by and for digital natives.

This means that we are dealing with two different groups who choose to express their reading cultures in two fora with vastly divergent cultural and medial contexts and ecologies. The *Guardian* Reading Group remains relatively close to the bourgeois reading culture we as academics are most familiar with. The bookish

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[76] N. Katherine Hayles. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA 2002, p. 33.

subcommunities on the internet, from Tumblr via Instagram to YouTube, on the other hand, are connected not only to books and bookishness, but also to each other, due to their users' mobility across social media sites. More importantly, these communities do not constitute a closed network of the bookternet, but are also connected to the respective (social media) sites on which they exist, forming subcommunities of e.g. Youtube or Instagram. This is important, since they in many ways adhere to the codes and medial affordances of these platform. As a result, BookTubers need to be studied not only as millennials doing book culture online (rejecting some notions of book culture while embracing others), but also as a distinctive community within YouTube that is at once part of the larger community of content providers on that site and a distinct subcommunity in its own right.[77]

Looked at within a YouTube context, some of the formats are unique to books and BookTube, e.g. Read-a-thons, read alongs, and TBRs, while others, such as Hauls, UnBoxings, and Tags, are shared with other communities, e.g. the beauty community. At the same time, looked at from the perspective of analogue book culture and book clubs, the notion of reading together with a group, exchanging ideas and discussing themes, characters, and plot is very familiar indeed. Interestingly, reviews, whether individual videos or parts of a wrap-up, sit on the fence, being both a feature of traditional book culture and in the particular form they take on BookTube very much akin to other product reviews on YouTube. The book as material object, for instance, is foregrounded by being held up to the camera or by discussion of its cover, print, smell etc., meaning that a level of attention is devoted to these paratextual features that would be highly unusual for a traditional review, except in the case of the most materially experimental novel.

Let us now, as a final step, widen our perspective even further to include society more fully. As we have shown, the *Guardian* Reading Groups' set-up attests to a belief in the integral place of book culture in an evolving medial environment. On the one hand, the site utilizes book culture's eminent adaptability to participatory practices often identified with a tendency towards popularization. On the other, it also retains affinities to traditional hierarchies of taste and professionalized book reviewing. Many BookTubers, in contrast, vocally reject formal discussions of books, opting instead for more affect-centered discussions of titles that often fall outside the classical canon of 'serious' literature, even if there are also a number of channels that include classics or, like Ariel Bissett, attempt to bring together academic learning and BookTube culture. Nevertheless, the distinction between high, middlebrow, and popular culture is not a major issue for most BookTubers in their choice or reading, for in this subcommunity a kind of book that is still largely marginal in academic culture, YA genre fiction, guarantees the highest return of investment in the form of symbolic recognition in the form of followers, views, likes, comments, links, response videos and recognition be it as followers. Moreover, as we have shown, reading in itself acquires the type of consecration that, in more traditional circles, is reserved only for *certain kinds* of reading.

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[77] After a cursory look into these sites' book communities, we expect that the same goes for Booklr, Bookstagram, etc.

As we have suggested, it thus makes sense to examine BookTube as a subfield within the larger field of cultural production and consumption that develops its own twists on practices and principles of consecration and evaluation. This subfield, however, like all (sub)fields, does not exist in isolation, but is embedded within the larger field of cultural production and consumption, and stands in relation to what Bourdieu calls "the field of power," i.e. the social and political power relations in a given society.[78] Viewed within the larger field of cultural production and consumption and the field of power, participating in the *Guardian* Reading Group equips one better with regard to the kind of book-specific capital acquired, since it is much closer to the type of capital guarded and sanctioned by those in positions of cultural and societal power.[79] Book culture online transforms reading, to be sure, and this transformation might in the long run affect the field as a whole, but this change is slow and up against the resilience of a field in which the established agents have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Moreover, as we have hinted at in the beginning, many of the most successful BookTube 'challengers' to traditional reading culture, in fact, come from very similar class positions as those of an older, established, generation and share many of their values, e.g. that reading is important. It would thus not be surprising if, with age and education, they 'came around' to more established cultural norms and values through the 'magic' of cultural and societal reproduction.[80]

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[78] Pierre Bourdieu. *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp. 37-40; 161-175.

[79] It should be noted, however, that those who post on BookTube acquire other types of cultural capital that may be convertible in some markets, such as the ability to create and edit videos a hand for online communication. In rare cases even the social and symbolic capital of followers on BookTube is convertible into other kinds of capital, as in the case of Catriona Feeney (Little Book Owl), who managed to transition professionally into digital marketing for Bloomsbury Publishing, presumably in part by her experience on BookTube and involvement in the YA community. It should be noted, however, that this experience does not stand by itself but is backed up by internships, a B.A. degree in English etc.

[80] We would like to thank Rosa Schwenger for serving as our expert on BookTube and for her comments on an earlier version of this article.