

# Social reading - the reader on digital margins

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## Abstract

Electronic books enrich the reading experience through a range of possibilities digital technology offers, such as commenting or adding content to the margin space, marking interesting chapters and sharing the content with other readers. The phenomenon of social reading has emerged due to the impact of technology on the book reading practices, making it possible for readers to interact with the content and other readers. The great potential for enriching the reading experience is visible in the digital platforms for social reading, where creativity and new reading practices are fostered through interaction and the creation of new content. These activities can contribute to a better understanding of the text. They enhance the communication about the text, thus revitalizing the content, and move the reading itself from a private to public sphere. This paper will show that the activities in the digital margins are a good indicator of the reading behaviour and highlight the importance and usefulness of such activities to publishers in the creation of new publishing products and services.

**KEYWORDS:** social reading, digital margin, platforms for social reading

## Introduction

The digital sphere opens up new opportunities for both readers and books. The digital environment brings some new features that are not available in the print environment, such as the interactivity, nonlinearity, immediacy in accessing information and the convergence of text, images, audio, and video (Chen and Chen 2014, 67). The integration of social technologies into e-books has enabled readers to create digital annotations in books. Furthermore, it has made possible the communication between readers at various locations in real time, as well as the communication between

the reader and the author or publisher. Chen and Chen found that “collaborative annotations of digital texts can accumulate rapidly and allow readers to share their knowledge” (Ibid, 68). All this is achieved in the digital margins which have become important “meeting places” for all of the participants in a book chain. Various reader activities can be integrated into digital editions thus creating new content associated with the book, and the reading is enriched with new experiences. Books have always been discussed about; however, that communication was face-to-face with friends, parents, teachers, librarians, book club members, at book presentations, book fairs, various literary events with authors in attendance, in public places and such. In the past, public readings were a part of everyday life. In his book *Space Between Words*, Paul Saenger writes that reading aloud was a part of the rich history of reading, and it had been a common way of reading until the tenth century when, after many centuries of standardization of the written word, the book was finally adjusted to the silent reader (Saenger 1997).

Therefore, reading aloud has been taking place in the institutions such as schools, libraries, theatres, museums, churches, hospitals, prisons and courts for many years. In Croatia, books and reading have been popularized through public readings in prisons and hospitals at the famous event called *The night of books*. Today, those designed campaigns aim at the popularization of books and reading. In the past, reading aloud to an audience used to be the usual reading practice.

The tradition of reading as a social activity in the digital environment continues with the emergence of social networks, book blogs and forums, social reading platforms, and web sites where readers can post comments and book recommendations for other readers. Naomi S. Baron indicated that “the issue here is not so much whether we are reading in print or onscreen but whether we formulate our take on a book individually or collectively” (Baron 2015, 115).

This paper analyzes the potential of the integration of social technologies into books. Can social reading trigger the development of electronic publishing similar to the way Web 2.0 influenced the development of the Internet? Some visions of the future book will be analyzed in order to explore the possibilities in the design of e-books that publishers should apply in the creation of new publishing products.

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## Social reading has a history

The beginnings of the written word are related to reading aloud. This reading was intended for interested listeners but also for readers themselves. Throughout history, reading has been both a social and private activity. In his book *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel writes that reading aloud took place at courts and palaces and sometimes even in modest homes, and that the motivations for reading were to learn a lesson and have fun with family and friends (Manguel 2001, 128).

In public places in ancient Greece and Rome, the authors read their works themselves or hired professional reciters. Interestingly, the reaction of the audience was crucial to the future of the book. Recitations in public squares were not always found to be interesting. In his *Letters*, Pliny the Younger describes the disinterested audience who refused to listen carefully to the recitations, but talked to each other instead (Stipčević 1985, 90-92).

Saenger explains why reading was once mostly a social activity. He begins the introduction of his book with "In the West, the ability to read silently and rapidly is a result of the historical evolution of word separation that, beginning in the seventh century, changed the format of the written page, which had to be read orally and slowly in order to be comprehended" (Saenger 1997, 6-7).

In the past, words were put together without spaces and the text was read aloud. That way of writing without punctuation is known as *scriptura continua* which Saenger defines as "a script written in rows of letters uninterrupted by space" (Ibid, 434). The standardization of writing, access to books and technology development created the conditions needed for reading to be practiced privately. It was not until the 10th century that "silent reading" became common in the West. In his *Confessions* Augustine describes Ambrose's silent reading as unusual (Manguel 2001, 55).

Books have always been a conversation topic, but used for written communication between readers as well (Ibid, 57). The margins of books were often used by readers to express their reaction to the text. The readers' need for interaction is best expressed through marginalia studied by H. J. Jackson in the book *Marginalia – readers writing in books* in which he noted that "The author has the first word, but the annotator has the last" (Jackson 2001, 90). The need for underlining, writing down comments and filling in the text is not inherent to all readers. Readers who write in the margins of books are annotators. "When the reader takes on the role of a writer and leaves traces in the book, the communication between reader and text necessarily involves not only their two speaking parts but also the silent audience that will sooner or later witness the performance" (Ibid, 95).

Marginalia, just as the reading, can be a part of a private domain but some annotators and readers want to move the communication into the public domain and make their comments available to the public. Digital margins allow them to do so.

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## Social reading today

Reading has been both a private and a social activity throughout history. It has changed in accordance with the life style, technology development, the motivations for reading and the actual needs of a reader. According to Saenger: "Modern reading is a silent and solitary activity. Ancient reading was usually oral, either aloud, in groups, or individually, in a muffled voice" (Saenger 1997, 6).

The authors of the book *Social reading for today's reading habits* write: "Today we think about reading as something we do privately and while we are alone, but reading has always been social, in the sense that readers have always discussed and shared information about what you are reading or planning, mostly orally" (Cordón-García 2013, 78).

Today when we think of reading aloud, we mostly think of reading in our childhood with parents or reading in school. Today, public readings in the squares are no longer a popular social activity, but are conveniently practiced at book presentations where sometimes the author himself reads his text. Today we rarely read aloud when alone as the text is adapted to silent reading. Parents often read aloud to their children or we read aloud to learn to read well or interpret texts well.

According to Scholastica research conducted in 2014, reading aloud in the childhood is extremely important in developing reading habits. Parents are aware of how important reading is but do not practice it from the birth of a child, but rather later, and stop reading aloud even though children want it at an older age. According to the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics, parents should start reading aloud to children at birth (Scholastic 2014). Family gatherings with reading aloud are now history, and social reading is moved to digital margins.

The Kids & Family Reading Report is a national survey of children ages 6-17 and their parents exploring attitudes and behaviours around reading books for fun (Scholastic 2014):

- Nine in ten parents (91%) say their children were read books aloud at home before age 6, primarily to develop their child's vocabulary and language skills and to foster reading enjoyment.
- More than half of children ages 0-5 (54%) are read aloud to at home 5-7 days a week. This declines to only one in three kids ages 6-8 (34%) and to one in six kids ages 9-11 (17%).
- Nearly one in four parents of children ages 6-17 (23%) stopped reading aloud to their children before age 9, most often citing reasons related to their child reading independently.
- Yet many children ages 6-11 (40%) wished their parents had not stopped reading aloud to them.
- When it comes to being read aloud to at home, eight in 10 children (83%) say they love(d) or like(d) it a lot.

- The main reason why they enjoy being read aloud to is that it is a special time with their parents.

Although the prevalent belief nowadays is that today's reading is mostly a private activity, reading as a social activity is increasingly becoming a part of our everyday lives, but in the digital environment. While in the past it was common to read to others because they did not know how to read, public reading was the vision of social life. Today a lonely reader can become "social" in the digital margins.

While readers underlined, added, drew and enriched the original text of printed books by writing in the margins where the space was limited, digital environment offers a variety of interactions with the text. Digital margins are not fixed and real-time communication is possible with other readers, the publisher or the author.

The popularity of blogs, comments on news articles, social networks, Wikipedia, generally various interactions of readers with the text have changed our understanding of the reading process. The influence of social technologies on the way of reading is visible. The existence of virtual book reading clubs, readers' communication with authors on social networks, initiatives for collaborative book writing where readers finish stories or create new endings themselves have put a book and reading in a social context. The acceptance of social technologies is reflected in the large representation of books, authors, publishers, booksellers and libraries on social networks. Today's technologies offer to an author a verbal interaction with readers at the time of a book creation. The author can test his work among readers and get feedback. Publishers can also get feedback from readers; for example, they can include them in the cover selection of a book and have readers vote on social networks by choosing the preferred option.

"Today, people want not just to read and share information, but also to participate more actively, using the extensive functionality provided by Web 2.0 technologies" (Martin and Tian 2010, 80).

Driven by the development of technology and use of Web 2.0 tools, social technology has been integrated in e-books. Web 2.0 has brought about revolutionary changes in the development of the Internet and confirmed the predictions of many authors, such as Bob Stein who considers the integration of social technologies in e-books necessary for the further development of electronic publishing. Stein also predicted that readers would have a much more active role in the production of knowledge and the telling of stories (Stein 2012).

Non-standardization has always been one of the main barriers to the acceptance of e-books. Different formats of e-books, different devices for reading, the inability

to share and borrow e-books – all this has slowed down the acceptance of new forms of books. According to Saenger, the standardization of a written text took centuries to accommodate a silent reader so we can expect a long time will be needed for the standardization of social reading in the digital margins.

“The biggest difference between traditional ways of reading and digital reading lies in the fact that it is now the application itself which hosts much broader functionality and allows each reader to tailor reading materials to his or her individual preferences” (Cordón-García 2013, 78).

Choosing between different reading devices and platforms which offer a large selection of books but also many other ways to enrich the content according to the user’s preferences is not always simple. There are many options readers can choose from in terms of the manner, time and place of reading.

Readers want a “meeting place” with other readers, the author or publisher. Digital margins are fluid. There is no standardization in the design of e-books. The pagination that is a part of a page of the book in the digital environment is not a good solution. The text in the e-books can be personalized by changing the font size, font itself, or display mode on the screen. The reader creates the size of his site. Navigation design differs on various reading platforms. The scope of read text is done in minutes, percentages, by location or according to the number of pages in the printed edition. Stein claims that the structure of a book should be determined in accordance with paragraphs, rather than the number of pages (Stein 2015).

The commentating of blogs and newspaper articles is usually positioned at the bottom of the text so the annotator is at the bottom and the writer at the top. Stein believes that in this way, the writer and reader are not equal and proposes commentating next to every paragraph, just as it was in printed books (Ibid).

Analyzing the research on digital marginalia Kiri L. Wagstaff concludes that the annotation is a better term because there are no margins in which it is written “the visual format of these annotations is still in flux” (Wagstaff 2012).

Many authors point out the lack of intuition when using a tool for digital reading which serves to highlight and annotate the text. Sellen and Harper found that “scribbling notes on a Post-it, then placing it on a particular passage of text, is so straightforward that users often do it without thinking” (Sellen and Harper 2002, 155). Pearson claimed that “the equivalent digital tools are far less intuitive and suffer from low rates of use” (Pearson 2012). Graphic solutions for pagination and commentating in the digital environment vary from platform to platform, and designers have yet to devise innovative solutions for new digital margins to suit readers of the digital age.

Pearson argues that “we have each found frustration at using the current “state-of-the-art” technologies, and at the same time understood how this poor design was not necessary” (Pearson 2013, XV).

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## Social reading has a future

Although the social component did not prevail in the way we read, many authors predict that it will be extremely important in the future. Their visions of a book of the future dedicate large space to the social reading.

The development of e-books began with the digitalization of printed editions. Initially, e-books faithfully reproduced the printed book. With the acceptance of new technologies, enriched versions of the e-book emerged. Books can be searched and links added to other books or other websites. The technology offers the integration of multimedia in books. Today we witness the emergence of platforms for “social reading” where there is the integration of the social technology in e-books. As new technologies such as books were accepted so the vision of the future book changed. The vision of the book of the future as a universal library was presented by Kevin Kelly. The entire library fund and human creativity was digitalized in this unique book in a way that all the content is searchable, integrated and described. “But this vision misses the chief revolution birthed by scanning books: in the universal library, but the book will be an island” (Kelly 2006).

The proponents of the integration of social technologies in e-books reflect on new forms of books. Stein sees the book as a meeting place, a place of common reading and commenting with friends in the digital margins. He calls his vision of a book a Socialbook and considers it a necessary and natural environment for readers in the digital environment. His future of books is “social reading”. According to Stein, “Socialbook puts participants right into the text of the book, where they can scribble notes in the margin of the digital book, highlight portions, pull out quotes and even rearrange the content” (Prpick 2013). He believes that “the idea that media is becoming fundamentally social is much deeper” (Ibid). Stein said “over the past ten years the experience of dozens of social reading platforms suggests that books will become places where people congregate to hash out thoughts and ideas” (Stein 2015).

Chad T. Douglas emphasizes that books, regardless of the emergence of social tools in the digital environment, are still a text-only islands of the same kind as they were in the printed form. SocialBook allows readers to contribute their marginalia to an ever-expanding discussion that encompasses the text, and is accessible by all readers of that text (Douglas 2015). Going forward, this technology raises many questions and concerns regarding our definitions of a publisher, editor and author (Ibid).

The authors of *SmartBook* vision see “the future of e-books as part of the growing collective intelligence” (Koychev 2011). They emphasize the importance of tools for collaborative creation used both by authors and readers. They foresee a place in the book for the author, the reader and a common area or “meeting rooms”. The ability to present information in new ways, including the display of multimedia content, interactivity, and customization, gives the e-book enormous potential to extend the fundamental concept of the book and its impact on readers. In addition, taking advantage of the emerging social web, ebook authors can publish drafts of their books online to get early feedback, thus transforming book writing into a form of collective brainstorming (Koychev 2011).

Justo Hidalgo and N. Constantino Malagón in their work *Opportunities and Challenges of Building a Books-as-a-Service Platform* call their concept of the book “The Book as a Service” (Baas). They emphasize: “this is one of the key changes in human behaviour with regard to books as we go from a *book as a product* approach to the *book as a service concept*” (Hidalgo and Malagón 2014). These elements are the Book on the Cloud, The Conversation, The Discovery, the Business Model, and the Openness (Ibid). Pearson claims that “the development of reading has never been driven by technology alone but also by changes in society and individual behaviour” (Pearson 2013, XV).

By including the technology typical of social networks within the e-book, the interaction between the text and other readers is created, one that has never before been possible. Teachers and professors can guide or moderate frequently updated discussions, and even connect to other classroom group discussions anywhere in the world. “Ten...one hundred...one thousand or more peopleÐthere’s no limitÐcan read the same copy of the same book at the same time, building an engaging, public, social, shareable, “super conversation” that’s organically curated for readers by readers.” (Douglas 2015)

Some genres have already heavily embraced social reading. “Cookbooks and travel guides have already gone social, with huge amounts of reader commentary enriching each entry. Or consider the always-present comment stream on news articles” (Stein 2014).

Stein believes that the addition of a video, audio and interactivity has a value that enriches the book but the future of the book lies in the social component. He claims that “human interaction in the margins will over time provide a much broader range of valuable “enhancements” than ones that authors/editors/publishers could ever provide on their own” (Ibid).

## Conclusion

Social reading is a form of communication, a reader participation in the production and postproduction of the text. The importance of digital margins is reflected in the need of readers for the communication about the text with the author, publisher or other readers. Readers want to share the reading experience and social reading enables them to do so. Reader's need to comment on the content on the web, blogs and in newspapers became visible with the emergence of social technologies in e-books.

Social reading for publishers can be a powerful tool for extending the life cycle of books and a means to revitalize the content. Discussions on the quality of literary work never cease, they get some new values at other times. The presence on social networks made the communication with readers and writers easier for publishers. Further integration of social technologies in publishing products opens up new possibilities, extending the life of publishing products. The text can become a multimedia and a book a place for supercommunication. The publishers need to critically examine the possibilities of new technologies and reasonably integrate them in accordance with the readers' needs.

For gatherings in the books you must have a defined place and time and readers interested in communication. Today's reader is lost in the digital margins because his determinants in percentages, minutes or location are insufficiently standardized. Described visions of the future books are already part of our everyday life, but for a big momentum of electronic publishing we should standardize the use of these tools.

In the process of defining reader's space, the responsibility of shaping publisher's products will be a great challenge for the publisher, as well as for all other participants in the process of creating e-books. The potential of social technology in the development of e-publishing has not been researched enough. It has a great potential in the education, but we are yet to design the standardized way for its successful and socially responsible application.

By analyzing the existing visions of the future of a book we see that social technologies are an important factor. The emphasis should be placed on a safe usage and storage of reading interaction with the text. The standardization of e-books has always been a huge barrier to the development of electronic publishing. The same problem is evident in the integration of social technologies in e-books.

Baron warns that it is difficult to talk about the future of the book at an early stage of acceptance of online technology without a thorough analysis of the current situation and also stresses that "online technology is turning readers into writers at an ever-increasing pace; it's also upsetting the balance between public and private communication by spying on us as we type and turning the information it gathers from our keystrokes into cash" (Baron 2009, 233). Readers can participate in the production

and postproduction of books by communicating with the author, publisher or other readers. This “supercommunication” changes the way we think of authorship, book publishing and reading. Shaping of digital margins is an invitation for cooperation to all creative participants in the content production. According to Stein, “realistically there are much bigger changes in the offing as writers, artists, and designers begin to wrap their minds around new creative possibilities” (Stein 2015). Manuel Castells says that in the world of personalized hypertext everyone speaks a different language and the art sees the power that can be “a builder of bridges between different, contradictory expression of human experience” (Castells 2003, 226).

In the end, we will agree with Castells and Stein in that we should leave the art to form the best conditions in order for reading practices to be systematically enriched and digital margins to become a favourite meeting place where readers can choose whether they want to communicate with the author, other readers or themselves.

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## Sažetak

### Društveno čitanje - čitatelj na digitalnim marginama

Elektroničke knjige obogaćuju čitalačko iskustvo nizom mogućnosti koje digitalna tehnologija nudi, poput komentiranja ili dodavanja sadržaja na marginama, označavanja zanimljivih poglavlja te dijeljenje sadržaja s drugim čitateljima. Uplivom tehnologije u sferu čitanja knjiga te stvaranjem interakcije čitatelja sa sadržajem i drugim čitateljima pojavljuje se i fenomen društvenog čitanja (*eng. social reading*). Velik potencijal obogaćivanja čitalačkog iskustva vidljiv je na digitalnim platformama za društveno čitanje, gdje se interakcijom i stvaranjem novog sadržaja potiče kreativnost i novi način čitanja. Te aktivnosti mogu doprinijeti boljem razumijevanju pročitano teksta. Na taj način potiče se komunikacija o pročitano, čime se revitalizira sadržaj, a čitanje seli iz privatne u društvenu sferu. U radu će se prikazati kako se aktivnosti na digitalnim marginama pretvaraju u dobar pokazatelj čitalačkog ponašanja koje mogu obogatiti tekst i doprinijeti boljem razumijevanju teksta. To su prednosti digitalnog okruženja važne nakladnicima u stvaranju novih nakladničkih proizvoda.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** društveno čitanje, digitalne margine, platforme za društveno čitanje