

Reception History in Many Dimensions: New Research on Book Reviews

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Overview

The meaning of a literary work is not located only between its covers. Scholars from Janice Radway to Yung-Hsing Wu acknowledge that readers reshape meaning as texts circulate through different social contexts. However, most digital humanities work has focused on literary texts as independent objects, leaving other aspects of literary history mostly unmapped. We don't yet have databases of reception history to match our extensive corpora of

literary texts, nor are there equivalent collaborative networks in place to support such infrastructures.

The organizers of this panel have been working to address this gap by establishing a community of scholars with a commitment to reception history and constructing digital archives that record the responses of journalistic reviewers and so-called "everyday readers" from the end of the nineteenth century to the present. This panel gathers scholars from a wide range of disciplines, united by interest in book reviews and online reading communities. All four papers aim to show how evidence about readers' responses to texts can show multiple perspectives of literary history, with a focus on 20th century and later contexts. This collection of papers will therefore engage with both digital humanities and reception studies, which includes but is not limited to reader response theory and histories of reading and reception.

In "Modeling 'worth by association' in U.S. book reviews, 1905-1925," Matthew Lavin explores the multi-dimensional descriptive space reviewers create in categorizing books. He analyzes a sample of book reviews published in the United States periodicals between 1905 and 1925, to consider how categorization schemas have changed over time. Three groups of features emerge as particularly important—characterizing genre, medium, and aesthetic judgment.

Melanie Walsh and Maria Antoniak argue that the recent expansion of digital humanities research to online reading communities has created new opportunities and necessities for collaboration with research traditions in information science, such as human-computer interaction (HCI) and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW). They will present key findings from their own interdisciplinary research—such as new ways of understanding genre based on user-driven, free-form tagging systems—and demonstrate how a synthesis of information science and digital humanities perspectives can enhance our understanding of online reading communities and other online cultural phenomena. Their paper is titled "Readers as Online Communities: Synthesizing Perspectives From Information Science and the Digital Humanities."

Existing computational readership studies mostly focus on Anglophone books and their online reviews in English. This not only limits the range of books studied; it blinds us to cross-cultural differences in readers' responses even to those books. To address this blind spot, Yuerong Hu collects book reputation and popularity data from two largely distinct online reader communities (by primary language and geographical location of the users) and analyzes their similarities and divergence. Her submission is titled "Cross-Cultural Comparisons of the Popular and Classic Books Curated by users on Goodreads vs. Douban."

In "Was the avant-garde really ahead of its time?" Yuerong Hu, David Bishop, Liza Senatorova, Wenyi Shang, and Ted Underwood ask how the distribution of attention in book reviews is related to actual patterns of change in literary history. Do widely-reviewed (or positively-reviewed) books predict the future of their genre? If so, which dimensions of reception are most predictive, and which kinds of periodicals have been most prescient in their reviewing choices?

Individual Abstracts

Modeling "Worth by Association" in U.S. Book Reviews, 1905-1925

Matthew Lavin

This presentation builds on and responds to previous cultural analytics work on book reviews to further our collective understanding of how people, institutions, and other non-human actors

mediate definitions of literature and its associated categorizations. Prior scholarship along these lines has focused on a singular idea such as canonicity, genre, gender bias, or voice (Walsh & Antoniuk 2021 and Bourrier and Thelwall 2020; Sharma et. al. 2020 and Hegel 2018; Lavin 2020; Mavrody et. al. 2021). This paper, in contrast, seeks to compare how multiple categorization schemas have changed over time by running a series of experiments on a sample of book reviews published in the United States periodicals between 1905 and 1925. To identify features related to categorization that change over time, two related types of linear regression models are employed. The first model predicts individual reviews' publication dates using term frequency data. The second model predicts the publication date of a group of reviews based on terms' binarized document frequencies. Based on these models, terms related to genre, medium, and aesthetic judgment are proposed as "feature families" related to change over time in both models' coefficient lists. The proposed feature families are validated both as category terms and for their relatedness to one another (using topic models to evaluate term co-occurrence). Holdout data is then used to assess how well each feature family predicts dates of publication for book reviews. The sample of book reviews used for this research will be published in a non-consumptive format in order to support replications and similar research.

Readers as Online Communities: Synthesizing Perspectives From Information Science and the Digital Humanities

Melanie Walsh and Maria Antoniuk

The recent expansion of digital humanities research to online reading communities (Bourrier and Thelwall 2020, Walsh and Antoniuk 2021) has created new opportunities—and, we argue, necessities—for collaboration with research traditions in information science, such as human-computer interaction (HCI) and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW). Online reading communities like LibraryThing and Goodreads allow millions of users to review, rate, and tag books. These readerly practices result in datasets that offer powerful new perspectives for the study of readership and reception, such as new ways of understanding genre based on user-driven, free-form tagging systems (Antoniuk et al., 2021).

In our prior work on these digitally- and algorithmically-mediated reading communities and tagging systems, we have adopted a number of theories and frameworks from information science, such as folksonomies (Vander Wal 2005; Furnas et al., 2006; Marlow et al., 2006; Vander Wal 2007) and theories of collaboration and community sensemaking (Star, 1989; Russell et al., 1993; Teevan et al., 2004; Star, 2010). These frameworks have helped to illuminate important aspects of online readership and review culture. We will present key findings from our interdisciplinary research and demonstrate how a synthesis of information science and digital humanities perspectives can enhance our understanding of online reading communities and of other online cultural phenomena.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons of the Popular and Classic Books Curated by Users across Platforms – A Case Study of Goodreads and Douban

Yuerong Hu

Although existing DH studies have investigated book reviews in multiple languages, the books studied are predominantly works that have distinguished popularity, commercial value, social impact, and cultural prestige in the Anglophone world (Hu et al., 2022). Synergistic and reciprocal effects have emerged from existing studies, where book review platforms, booksellers, and book impact indicators (e.g., the MLA International Bibliography, the Open Syllabus Project) echo each other's opinions and endorse the same groups of books (Bao & Chang, 2014; Bourrier & Thelwall,

2020; Maity et al., 2017; Walsh & Antoniuk, 2021). Such predominance of Anglophone perspectives and research materials notably restricts the cultural inclusivity and diversity of existing DH research on readership and books (Pianzola et al., 2022). As Pianzola and colleagues pointed out in their DH2022 panel, multilingual and cross-cultural dataset is "necessary – but so far unavailable – to implement analyses that could reliably explore the impact that books have on both Western and Asian readers" (Pianzola et al., 2022). Motivated by the gaps and emergent needs, this study collects user-generated book review data (e.g., average ratings of the books, numbers of ratings, user-generated tags, rankings of books) about around 600 most popular or top "classic" books curated by users on Douban (Douban, 2021) based in China, along with their parallel data on Goodreads (Goodreads, 2021) based in the U.S. By comparing and analyzing the differences and divergences of user-generated book review data on the same books across Goodreads and Douban, this presents work empirically reveals the social-cultural dependency of user-curated bestsellers and classics and contributes a unique case towards multi-/cross-cultural DH research on reception and readership.

Was the Avant-Garde Really Ahead of its Time?

Yuerong Hu, David Bishop, Liza Senatorova, Wenyi Shang, and Ted Underwood

Measuring textual similarity to the future (and subtracting similarity to the past) gives researchers a relatively straightforward way to identify books that were "ahead of their time" (Barron et al. 2018, Underwood and So 2021). Displacement toward the future cannot, of course, measure literary quality (since the future is not necessarily a good thing) or historical influence (since similarity is not causation). But as a descriptive claim, "ahead of its time" is something we can (retrospectively) test.

But how accurately can readers identify this quality when a book is first published? We've gathered detailed evidence about prizes and book reviews between 1920 and 1950 in order to find out. We find, for instance, that prizewinning works predict the future of fiction more reliably than bestsellers, and that widely-reviewed books are even more predictive than prizewinners. Our presentation will further particularize this story by identifying the periodical venues that did the best job of identifying pathbreaking works, and by characterizing the specific features that made those works ahead of their time.

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