"Readers, Platforms, Genres: Studying Romance Readers with Computational Work, Surveys, Interviews, and Close Reading" (Abstract)

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In the twenty-first century, literary scholars interested in sociologies of reading might feel like we know everything about literary culture because readers share so much on social media. Karl Berglund, Jim English, and Beth Driscoll and many others study readers in the digital age via computational approaches, data collection and visualization on sites like Goodreads; via studying user data of audiobooks; via qualitative studies on social media like Instagram and TikTok. Computational Digital Humanities projects like Federico Pianzola's and the multi-institutional READ-IT[1] interface have scaled up such efforts across European and Asian languages.

Despite these various inroads to generating knowledge, however, there is no one clear path for how to make all this rich information about readers — including not only popularity of books but also readers' grassroots taxonomies of genre, literary value, and social aspects of reading — available for research and analysis. As a remedy, I conduct ethnographic work with readers whom I have identified as highly active readers of the romance genre via Goodreads data collection (as part of a Price Lab research group) and my qualitative dissertation research on Instagram. Surveys and interviews, I argue, can be a crucial phase in Digital Humanities projects and help connect the traditional method of literary studies, close reading, with large scale data while opening up new venues of research via the reader's insights, from 'fanbinding' to the 'Goodreads safety gang.'

Information about individual readers, approached via concepts of genre and fandom, contextualizes computational and analytic knowledge and also highlights the limits of what we think we know about so-called amateur readers and social media users and what they do with books in their leisure time.

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[1] https://readit-project.eu/about-the-project/