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Research of Reading Practices and 'the Digital'

Books and reading habits belong to one of the areas of our everyday lives that have strongly been affected by digitalisation. This has repeatedly been the subject of public discussions in the Finnish mainstream media. One aspect of reading that has been under debate is the decreasing interest towards books in general.¹ Another type of discussions typically focus on the acceptance of e-books and the status of printed books in contemporary reading, sometimes still in a manner which juxtaposes the formats.² Both types of discussions are connected with digitalisation in a wider cultural context. As a technological and cultural process, it has enabled new forms of reading and related habits, which benefit readers and book culture. On the other hand, it has also created new possibilities to free time activities that do not necessarily support people's interests in books.

In this paper, my aim is to discuss the research of books and reading as a socio-cultural practice, and ask if this field could benefit from co-operation with digital humanities scholars and methods. The idea of combining digital humanities with book research is not new; collaboration has been welcomed for example in research that focuses on new technologies of books and the use of digitised historical records, such as bibliographies.³ However, I would like to discuss how digital humanities can benefit research on (new) reading practices and the ordinary reader. Defining 'the digital' would be essential, as well as knowledge of relevant methodologies, tools and data. I will introduce my ongoing PhD-project and present some questions that I have had during the process. Then, based on the questions I will discuss further how a co-operation between Digital Humanities and reading research can facilitate a deeper understanding about the contemporary changes in book reading, reading-related habits, and new forms of readership.

¹ Ministry of educations project to advance reading skills: http://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/kansallinen-lukutaitofoorumi-vastaamaan-lukutaidon-ja-lukuinnon-haasteeseen

² In autumn 2017 these conversations concentrated mostly on digital learning in upper secondary schools and the status of bookshelves in Finnish homes. See e.g. Helsingin Sanomat 31.8.: <https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000005346418.html>
Turun Sanomat 5.9.2017: <http://www.ts.fi/mielipiteet/kolumnit/3641026/Esko+Valtaoja+Uudelleenrakastettuja+kirjoja>

³ For example the The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) organised a conference "Technologies of the Book" in 2017 in co-operation with DHSI: <http://www.sharp2017.com>

PhD-project: Life as a Reader

In my ongoing dissertation project, I focus on attitudes and expectations towards both printed and e-books and new reading practices. The research material I am using consists of 546 writings, that are mostly reminiscences about “Life as a reader”, as the title of the project was. The narratives were written by Finnish people from different backgrounds and age groups, and they were gathered and archived by the Finnish Literature Society in 2014. The collection was organised by the Society’s Literary- and Traditional archives together with the Finnish Book-historical Society. The aim was to focus on reading as a socio-cultural practice. The organisers asked people to write in their own words about their reading memories and experiences. They also included questions, which handled, for example, topics such as childhood and learning to read, reading as a private or shared practice, places and situations of reading, and experiences of the changes, such as e-books and virtual book groups.⁴ Book historical interests were visible in the project. All the questions mentioned above –regarding ordinary readers, their everyday lives, and how they find and consume books – have been posed in other research.⁵

In the dissertation, I will focus on those respondents, who liked to read books for pleasure in their free time. The point is to understand the readers’ perception of the recent changes. I argue that if we want to gain knowledge of the possible futures of reading habits, we first need to understand, which aspects and practices the readers themselves attach to their readership. My main focus is on books as objects and on the habits, attitudes, and expectations related to them. In this context I will also scrutinise digitally related changes that have affected reading practices. I am analysing the material focusing especially on the different roles books as objects play in readers’ lives and on attitudes towards digitalisation as a cultural change. The research questions are based on my background as an ethnologist interested in material culture studies. I believe that materiality as a concept and the focus on practice of reading as a sensory experience are useful avenues leading to a deeper understanding of readers’ attitudes towards different book formats, their choices, and their wishes concerning the future development of books.

⁴ Life as a reader collection call: <http://www.finlit.fi/fi/elamaa-lukijana#.Wf2FwExDzeQ>

⁵ Crone Rosalind, Halsey Katie & Towheed Shafquat 2011, 6-8. The History of Reading. Routledge, London.

Aspects of readership

The research material consists of many different perceptions and experiences. People wrote about their feelings regarding the different book formats and their reasons for choosing or excluding them. During the analysis, it became clear that the meanings given to e-books and printed book are connected with other everyday activities. This meant shifting the focus beyond responses dealing with book formats and reading moments, to include mentions of other reading-related practices. Therefore, I am presently analysing the ways in which people search for and find books, collect them, and how they discuss literature with other readers. These activities often take place in social media, digital book stores, and online-libraries. At the same time the usage of social media and other (digital) free time activities is affecting the amount of time available for reading. This is affecting the interests to use digital devices for reading books.

At the time the material was collected, smartphones and tablets had just recently become popular and well-known objects. They are generally considered to have had a strong impact on reading habits and the responses in the collection were often focused on them, especially in the context of uncertain futures of books. Tablets were used for reading e-books, but they also raised questions about stability and ownership of the purchased books. The ideas of virtual bookshelves were connected to these themes, together with thoughts of visibility and representation. E-books changed the ways these aspects were understood. They caused negative perceptions of e-books especially among those respondents, who characterized print culture as particularly positive. However, there were friends of printed books who saw the devices in the context of digital services that supported their reading habits.

They welcomed the opportunities for using online-services to find and discuss books, for writing and publishing reviews in blogs, for being active on websites like GoodReads or Book Crossing; all of which were seen as enjoyable aspects of the contemporary readership. A small minority of the respondents mentioned also fan-fiction and electronic literature.

In comparing the time of material collection, 2014, with the present day, it can be seen that digital book services offering e-books and audiobooks have become more popular, but overall the situation is not radically different today. E-books are perhaps better known, but they still are marginal in comparison

with printed books. This means that they have not gained the massive popularity that was expected of them previously.⁶ The other aspects of new reading practices, the meaning of social media or the interest in electronic literature have not yet been studied much in the Finnish context. These observations lead to the questions of the possible benefits of digital humanities for book and reading research.

Collaborating with digital humanists?

The changes in books and reading are the cause of both worries and hopes regarding the future of reading habits. In order to produce knowledge about these changes and their impacts, a clear definition of the terms 'digital' and 'digitalisation' is needed. Their meanings vary in different contexts and they are sometimes referred to without any specific definitions. They seem to mean and include various things that are attached to both the technological and the cultural sides of the phenomenon. For those interested in research of contemporary reading, it would be important to theorise digitalisation from the viewpoint of readers and to look at changes in reading from socio-cultural perspectives. These would include concrete changes in material environments and new opportunities to perform as a reader. This field of research would benefit from collaboration with those digital humanists, who have knowledge about 'the digital', reading related software and digital devices, and on the other hand with those who have understanding of digital cultures, practices and digitalisation as a cultural phenomenon.

Discussions about the possibilities created by the digital humanities to collect, use, and save data that readers leave behind while being active in digital environments could be very beneficial for further research. Digital book stores, library services, and social media sites could be useful sources for data; but more expertise is needed for accessing it and for making it usable. Furthermore, collecting and saving digital data raises questions of research ethics. These should be further discussed in book research, as they touch upon important issues such as: Which data should be open and free to use? Who owns the data? Which permissions would be required to study certain websites? Moreover, the changes

⁶ About the problems in mainstreaming e-books (in Finnish) see: Heikkilä Harri 2017: *Tämä ei ole kirja. Sähkökirjan valtavirtaistumisen haasteet*. Aalto-yliopiston julkaisusarja Doctoral Dissertations 28/2017. Aalto arts Books, Helsinki

in leisure activities in general have raised the question, what kind of data could be useful for comparing the time spent on reading and reading-related habits, and the time spent on other leisure-time pursuits.

Collaboration is also needed for the development of reading-related databases. Some steps in that direction have already been taken, for example, the project Finnish Reading Experience Database.⁷ The collection of further reading-related digital data is necessary, and it should be made available for other researchers. At its best, multidisciplinary collaboration could help with creating new perspectives and research questions about the contemporary readership, and therefore all discussion and ideas that could benefit the field of books and reading are welcome.

⁷ Introduction of the Finnish RED: <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/red-fi/>