

Reading crisis: reading, a new idea in the digital age?

The case of works of fiction and their online comments

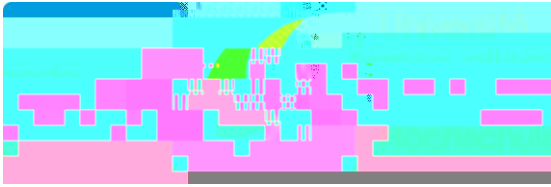
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The title of the thesis alludes to a question about the consequences of digital technology for reading. With increasing importance in our lives, the development of digital technology is seen by some as a revolution,¹ which feeds old concerns about a book crisis and a reading crisis: the printed book would be replaced by fragments of digital texts, the reading practice would decrease, the mode of attentive and critical reading would be replaced by superficial and fragmented reading, etc. This general concern, represented by the term “crisis” in the title, is not new (it dates back long before digital technology influenced our everyday lives) and takes many forms, including surveys, books, book chapters, scientific and journalistic articles and blog entries. The work is based on a questioning of the often defeatist discourses on the mutations of reading in the digital age.

Reading in the digital age, as considered in this thesis, is not so much a new idea generated by digital technology as an activity enriched by new forms. The digital in the title is not to be considered as a “technical object”: In the digital age, readers can leave new (written) reading testimonies, such as online comments. In a context where the value of contemporary reading practices is questioned, the contribution of new *empirical* sources—online comments shared by ordinary readers—should be highlighted and examined. More than on reading practices themselves, the comments give us access to personal reading experiences that are publicly shared: Not the act of reading, but the subsequent discourse is observed. The collection and analysis of online reviews is also a significant step forward in the research and understanding of reading experiences and written culture in the digital age.

As Robert Darnton points out in his article “First Steps Toward a History of Reading” from 1986, we have answers to the questions of *who* is reading *what*, *where* and *when*, but the *why* and *how* we read is still a matter of concern.² Online comments sharing reading experiences seem to be relevant sources when trying to explore aspects of contemporary reading. The online comments examined for this thesis are a selection of comments from ordinary readers who have shared them in the largest francophone online readi





Keywords: Reading, Reader-response, Literary criticism, Social networks for readers, Digital Humanities, Data exploration, Text mining, Annotation

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