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Book Review

Federico Pianzola: Digital Social Reading: Sharing Fiction in the Twenty-First Century

AUTHOR

Anastasia Glawion, PhD, is Junior Professor of Digital Literature and Methods at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and PI in the Research Training Group 2806 ("Literature and the Public Sphere in Contemporary Cultures"). She studied Social Anthropology and European Cultural Studies and previously worked at the University of Konstanz and TU Darmstadt. Her research explores digitally enabled bottom-up processes related to memory and literature. During her postdoc, she worked with reading experiments at the TU Darmstadt LitLab. Her recent publications focus on digital social reading, fan fiction communities, and computational literary analysis. Her main research areas are computational literary studies, digital social reading, and platform-based literary cultures.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6140-1826

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Federico Pianzola: Digital Social Reading: Sharing Fiction in the Twenty-First Century
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Federico Pianzola's *Digital Social Reading* offers one of the most systematic attempts to clarify how reading changes within digital publics. The book's trajectory on MIT Press's "Works in Progress" platform mirrors its subject: it was shaped through open peer annotation, demonstrating in practice how social reading processes inform scholarly production.

Pianzola positions himself within polarized debates on digital media and adopts a reader-centered perspective grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's relational field theory (cf. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity, 1993). Shifts in reading practices, he argues, stem from the arrival of new actors and infrastructures, making empirical reader research essential. His use of affordances is effective for mapping platform cues, though it sometimes narrows the view on culturally contingent reader behavior that exceeds platform design.

The first chapter, "Social Reading becomes Digital," challenges the myth of solitary reading by tracing sociable reading across history. Digital media intensify, rather than invent, sociability and thereby recast Digital Social Reading (DSR) not as a decline of 'real' reading but as a renewed form of communal storytelling. Moving between historical and contemporary contexts, Pianzola shows how solitary, social, and digital social reading coexist and reshape one another. He reframes the field in two ways: first, by foregrounding enjoyment as a missing dimension in prior models of hybrid reading; second, by shifting attention from individual cognition to collective intelligence, calling into question standardized tests that ignore the social context of digital reading.

The first chapter's sections on shared agency, transmedia literacies, and reader motivations extend the argument. Shared agency reframes digital recommendation systems as redistributing cultural distinction across human readers and algorithmic mediators. The discussion of literacies clarifies that DSR depends on a wide range of cognitive, aesthetic, and social skills that are unevenly distributed across age groups and contexts. Pianzola further integrates psychological and anthropological theories of motivation, suggesting that reputation management and social signaling are important forces behind DSR practices, although anonymous contributions complicate these findings.

In "Audiences, Networks, Power," Pianzola draws on Simone Murray (cf. "Secret Agents: Algorithmic Culture, Goodreads and Datafication of the Contemporary Book World." In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24 [4], 2019, 970-989) to situate DSR within platform capitalism, where profitability continues to shape visibility. Rather than democratizing the literary field, digital systems reconfigure existing hierarchies. His distinction between 'community' and 'affinity' is one of the chapter's strongest contributions: it captures heterogeneous online formations without collapsing them into a single model and offers a lucid alternative to the overused community label. One small limitation is that Pianzola chooses

to foreground reader interaction, instead of diving deeper into datafication and commodification. Yet, this proves strategic rather than neglectful. In the final chapter, Pianzola returns to the larger contexts more sharply, positioning scholars within the same economic and institutional conditions that shape platform users.

Chapter 2 develops a taxonomy of ten DSR practices, such as highlighting, tagging, and shelving. This spectrum clarifies how platforms structure interaction. It also provides a clear apparatus for the comparative analyses in the later chapters. Pianzola shows how these practices shape the reading experience: their placement on the page and their interactional possibilities can either support immersion or reframe it. In the final section of this chapter, he merges this overview with further dimensions, such as audience types and the temporal frame of interaction.

In the following chapters, Pianzola examines Wattpad, Archive of Our Own (AO3), and Goodreads. In "Marginalia" (Chapter 3), Pianzola applies his framework to Wattpad's affordances and large-scale interaction data. Witty characters and moments of suspense reliably elicit engagement and users reading classics often help one another interpret difficult passages, forming spontaneous peer-learning environments. "Fanfiction" (Chapter 4) turns to AO3, showing how the platform fosters intensive reading and distributed mentoring. Pianzola argues that fan fiction broadens, rather than weakens, literary judgment. His tag-based analyses reveal trends in pairing preferences and diversity, yet tagging itself is a dynamic practice shaped by visibility incentives. Treating tags as stable indicators risks overlooking how such norms evolve as platforms grow. "Cataloging, Rating, Reviewing" (Chapter 5) centers Goodreads, where institutionalized literary capital shapes which books gain visibility. Platform demographics, genre, and communicative norms produce distinct evaluative styles. Genre becomes particularly influential: amateur reviewers foreground emotional impact and develop genre-specific vocabularies through bottom-up practices like shelving. These dynamics show that digital reviewing generates its own evaluative ecosystems rather than replicating institutional criticism.

In the final chapter, Pianzola adopts a more explicitly critical voice. Drawing on Amy Orben's model of technology panics (cf. "The Sisyphean Cycle of Technology Panics." In: *Perspect Psychol Sci* 15 [5], 2020, 1143-1157), he argues that fears about DSR have simply shifted toward new targets such as ChatGPT. He addresses concerns about declining literary quality, cognitive shallowness, and digital bullying. His comparison of popular library books and popular Goodreads titles shows that convergence reflects power-law distributions rather than platform-specific homogenization. On shallow reading, he notes inconsistent empirical findings and emphasizes that smartphone reading may not be inherently distracting for teenagers who treat the device as a natural medium.

Pianzola then turns to structural issues: corporate mergers (such as the acquisition of Wattpad by the South Korean internet and technology company Naver), datafication, and platform incentives shape DSR and require closer attention. He argues that educators and researchers must strengthen media literacy while acknowledging their own limitations in studying rapidly evolving environments.

Pianzola's final vision centers on sociality, peer learning, and user-driven multimodal infrastructures. Distributed mentoring increases lexical diversity and blends human and algorithmic guidance. Folksonomies offer flexible alternatives to rigid, often exclusionary classification systems. Pianzola identifies distinct DSR models across platforms, such as playful usability (Wattpad), cultural-capital signaling (Goodreads), and belonging-driven participation (AO3), while noting that standardization efforts risk flattening ecosystem specificity.

The book concludes with crucial questions about expertise: what role remains for literary scholars when readers are knowledgeable, active, and emotionally invested? How might collaboration between fandom and scholarship evolve? Pianzola does not resolve these questions, but his framework opens conceptual and empirical space for understanding how people read, socialize, and learn with literature today.