

Draft

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Headword: Book Communities

For the last 20 years technology forecasters have frequently proclaimed that digital technologies would bring about the end of print books, and every few years they find the need to further qualify or renounce their previous proclamations. While the Internet and computing more broadly has not replaced print books, it has transformed the process of buying and selling books, composing and publishing books, and changed some of the relationships between readers, authors, and publishers. It has also changed the way readers discuss, discover and distribute books. This entry documents the way in which book communities, as social networks, have changed through this process.

A Brief History of Book Communities as Social Networks

Before discussing the features of online book communities it is important to establish a historical baseline for the kinds of book communities that online communities draw from, engage with, and extend. The spread and sharing of books has a long history, and the networks of communication and action around books has played an important role in the history of public discourse. Understanding the historical role book communities have played will help connect the role of recent online book communities to a significant body of work on book communities throughout history.

Book communities are as old as books themselves. Before the advent and spread of the printing press the scarcity of print works meant that the networks around the creation and dissemination of print works were very small. Before the printing press book communities primary consisted of groups of scribes, monastic societies and, in some cases, the social elite. The advent and spread of the printing press had an enormous effect on the social networks surrounding books and their communities. By rapidly printing standardized copies of works the printing press enabled quicker sharing, dissemination and propagation of works across increasingly larger communities. Elizabeth Eisenstein has argued that the printing press's ability to disseminate knowledge through communities played a crucial role in the Protestant Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution.

As literacy rates grew in the following centuries and book ownership expanded through out upper class western society, places where books were discussed increasingly played an important role in politics. Sociologist Jürgen Habermas has argued that 17th and 18th century European salons and English coffeehouses, which served as public discussion arenas for books, played a crucial role in the creation of the modern public sphere, which he defines as the space in social life where individuals discuss and identify problems in society and through that discussion engage in political action. While mass media has created several other modes for sustaining the public sphere book communities continue to provide an important space for public interaction. Elizabeth Long has argued that various formats of book clubs continue to provide spaces, particularly for women, where individuals can workout their own identity and needs through collectively engaging with the works they read.

How Amazon Facilitated and Leveraged Book Communities Online

While all discussion thus far has focused on communities of book consumers the 1995 launch of Amazon.com moved a considerable amount of the role of book distribution into the roles these existing book communities had played. The best way to understand the kinds of community knowledge Amazon leverages in the sales of books is to deconstruct any of the individual book pages on the site. Each page includes information about the individual work, but alongside that information it also provides space for anyone to rate, review and critique the work. Many individual book pages also include information about user created book lists. The site allows any user to create annotated book lists around a topic or theme. Alongside the comments and reviews, this provides another user-generated network throughout the books enabling discovery of works that might otherwise seem unrelated. Each book page on the site includes information about what "Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought," which provides valuable connections between works. Most importantly, by tracking each users individual purchases Amazon has the ability to suggest books to its users based on their aggregate purchasing interests. Amazon's recommendation system, space for rating and commenting on books, and it's development of user created lists each contributed to its success in sales by leveraging the social network which those sales created. In a very real way, Amazon's ability to harvest its user community's tastes and values has both improved the ability of Amazon to make sales and simultaneously effected other existing book communities.

Most directly, the success of Amazon.com endangered independent booksellers. While many of those independent bookstores had found ways to survive against large national chains of stores, they had a difficult time competing against Amazon. Simply put one of the chief services independent bookstores have provided is as a crucial network node for sharing information about books that are not on the bestseller list.

Amazon's role as a book community and effect on other book communities has been described as part of a larger network effect, frequently referred to as the long tail. In a 2004 book analyzing the effects of Amazon and Netflix, author Chris Anderson proposed that the success of these two sites is tied to their ability to capitalize on a market that had previously been undeserved. He argued that the structure of the systems these two companies had in place allowed them to make a large profit from selling small volumes of difficult to find items instead of selling large volumes of the most popular books. In effect, the structure of Amazon's site allows Amazon to sell a few copies of hundreds of thousands of books instead of selling only a hundred thousand copies of a few books. He called this idea the long tail in reference to a graph of sales. If you graph sales of books you will generally see a handful of very popular items with considerable sales which quickly tapers off to a majority of books with limited sales. The part of the graph which tapers off is the "long tail" of the graph. The marketing implications of this kind of effect have been extensively explored, but there has been less exploration of the connection between Amazon's success with the long tail in its relation to its effect on communities.

In the world of books, independent bookstores had traditionally served many of the niches along the long tail. Sales staff's recommendations and the physical space in which like minded book buyers engage with and communicate about books have long provided an important social network around books outside the *New York Times* best seller list. One of the biggest threats which Amazon brought to these independent sellers is the way

in which it leveraged an understanding of those existing networks into the design of the Amazon online bookstore. Many of the features Amazon developed to sell books have also become important ways for other services to allow individuals to share their tastes in books with the world.

Sharing Bookshelves as Social Networking

In summer of 2005 Tim Spalding launched LibraryThing, a web book community where users can create a virtual copy of their bookshelves. While users can keep their virtual library shelves private, the primary reason for posting one's library online is to show off their collection, and find other users with similar tastes. As of September 2009 LibraryThing has more than 850,000 user accounts. A large part of the success of LibraryThing is its ability to pull in full records for books from sources like Amazon and the Library of Congress. By simply searching for the title of a book a user can import the full record for that book, in the case of Amazon that record includes an image of the books cover. Users then post comments and reviews on books for anyone to see. Part of LibraryThing's success is the way it allows users to display their collections on other personal web spaces. LibraryThing users have the ability to "widgetized" their collections. The site provides users with snippets of code that they can copy and paste into the sidebar of their blog or personal site to show a random selection of their books to anyone that visits their site. This provides the user with a quick and easy way to add dynamic content to their web site and show off their bookshelves while simultaneously advertising LibraryThing to other users outside the existing network.

There are two specific outcomes of the development of LibraryThing that warrant further consideration. Like Amazon, in April of 2006 LibraryThing added a recommendation engine, called the "suggester," which recommends books based on how frequently they appear in libraries alongside a given book as well as how similar other users libraries are to any given user. LibraryThing was featured on a variety of major blogs for another, less useful but nonetheless interesting development. Turning the algorithm on its head, the LibraryThing team developed an "unsuggester," which would tell users what the least likely books to appear next to a work on a users library shelf were. For example Edward Said's *Orientalism*, an extensive exploration of 19th-century literary discourse, rarely appears on bookshelves alongside Gail Carson Levine's lighthearted children's fantasy book *Ella Enchanted*. While the unsuggester is not particularly useful, it does point to a broader value that these kinds of platforms are providing. As of September 2009, LibraryThing's users have cataloged 44 million books in their libraries, that data is rapidly becoming a resource of networked information for other book projects.

Several college and public libraries have begun experimenting with using the aggregated user generated tags from LibraryThing as method for navigation in online library catalogs. This user-generated classification of books is frequently referred to as an example of a folksonomy. In contrast to a controlled taxonomy the term folksonomy is describes the kinds of emergent categories that develop from large numbers of users deploying their own idiosyncratic set of keywords for identifying a resource. In the case of LibraryThing, several libraries have begun to use a service that provides user generated tags alongside the more traditionally taxonomic Library of Congress Subject Headings as a means for navigation in online library catalogs. Similarly, libraries are also

incorporating LibraryThing's recommendation system as a social discovery layer for their patrons.

What started as a space for sharing one's bookshelf and thoughts about books is increasingly becoming a part of the larger world of book creation and dissemination. In the summer of 2007 LibraryThing began its early reviewers program. Initially the program was connected with one publisher, Random House, but it has grown to involve a variety of publishers. Alongside sending early review copies to book critics, booksellers and prominent bloggers, publishers now send advance copies of books to a selected LibraryThing community members. The program provides advance copies of books to library thing users with the expectation that they will write reviews of the work which they share on LibraryThing. Through this process the community brings its members more directly into the broader global book publishing community.

The success of LibraryThing has spawned several similar services. Shelfari is an example of a nearly identical service, at this point owned by Amazon. While Shelfari does not offer any particularly interesting new features another site, Goodreads, has developed some innovative functionality and created a fascinating book community.

With more than 2,800,000 members and 76,000,000 books Goodreads has emerged as the leader in online personal library sharing communities. Goodreads refines and extends much of the functionality of LibraryThing. Goodreads brings the polish and functionality users have come to expect from other social networking sites. In particular, the site offers users a contact importer, which can tell you if any of your friends in other social networks are already using Goodreads and it makes use of a more attractive design and layout. Goodreads also invites users to share quotes from books, and notifies friends about updates and shared book reviews. The largest difference between Goodreads and LibraryThing is the way that Goodreads explicitly invites Authors into its community. Author's can create author accounts and use Goodreads as a means to directly engage with their readers and their readers reviews. In this respect Goodreads much more explicitly fits itself into the larger publishing world.

There are a few other approaches to online book communities that warrant passing mention. Bookmooch and Bookcrossing are both communities created around the idea of sharing and trading print copies of books. In the case of Bookmooch users list books they are willing to give away on the site. When a different community member requests the book the first user mails it to them. For mailing the book the user receives a credit, which they can then use to request books from other users. Bookcrossing allows its members to tag and leave books they own to anyone in the public, with the hope that someone who picks up the book will log it in on the website. If someone finds and reads the book they can log into the site to leave comments about the book.

The Social Web and Book Production

Not only is the consumption of books being re-configured through online book communities, the production of books is similarly being restructured through new ways of networking creators, publishers, and readers. In particular, the rise of print on demand services which allow users to print individual books at rates that still allow authors to generate a profit, has created a space in which self publishing a book is now much easier than ever before. The best example of how these structures have reconfigured the

publishing industry is evidenced in Lulu.com. For an example of a similar site see Amazon's Createspace.com or Blurb.com

While there are a wide range of print on demand services and options for using those services to create and distribute a book Lulu is by far the most successful. Every two minutes a user publishes new content on Lulu.com. The site has over two million members, half of which are book buyers and half of which are book creators.

Alongside its publishing features Lulu provides its authors and book buyers many of the features already discussed in regards to Amazon.com. Alongside those features, authors can sell their works directly through a personalized storefront page. All of the individual authors works are then added into Lulu's larger storefront, where other users can rate, review, and recommend books published through the platform.

To understand the impact that services like Lulu have had on publishing consider the quantity of books these services publish. According to R.R. Bowker's Books in Print database, 276,489 books were published through conventional means in U.S. in 2008. In that time, Lulu published over 400,000 titles, and Blurb, a print on demand company that focuses on photo books, published over 300,000 titles. While publishing through traditional means has declined over the last few years, the explosion of these print on demand services has resulted in each of these individual organizations publishing more books than the entirety of the traditional book publishing market.

Conclusion:

While Internet futurists will undoubtedly continue to proclaim that digital technologies will bring about the end of print books, for the near future at least, it looks like print books are here to stay. While the Internet, and computing more broadly, has not replaced books, it has transformed the process of buying and selling books, composing and publishing books, and changed some of the relationships between readers, authors, and publishers. Amazon.com, and similar online book retailers have moved a considerable amount of book buying online, and through recommendation engines and personal lists they have also changed the way in which many individuals discover new books to read. Sites like LibraryThing and Goodreads have taken some of the values of book clubs as spaces for public dialog around books and brought them into digital spaces. Sites like Lulu and Blurb have transformed the publishing industry, making it easier than ever to publish a book.

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Further Reading

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