Structured Abstract

Title
Online Reading Communities: From Book Clubs to Book Blogs

Purpose
This paper examines the social dynamics behind online social reading events such as reading challenges and read-a-thons among book bloggers.

Design/Methodology/Approach
The researcher examined and analyzed the challenge announcements posted to the blog "A Novel Challenge" over the course of one year. Two reading challenges and one read-a-thon were chosen to serve as case studies and analyzed in more detail.

Findings
Online reading challenges offer participants an opportunity to discuss their reading, form bonds with similar readers, and get recommendations for future reading. They are both supportive and lightly competitive.

Originality/Value
Although several studies exist of social networks based around reading, there has less attention to book blogs. Studying this community can promote further understanding of both the social nature of reading and an enthusiastic group of readers and internet users.

Keywords: Online social networks, blogs, books and reading, case studies, reading challenges

Online Reading Communities: From Book Clubs to Book Blogs

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Abstract

Online reading challenges offer participants an opportunity to discuss their reading, form bonds with similar readers, and get recommendations for future reading. Through an analysis of the challenge announcements posted to the blog "A Novel Challenge" and case studies of three reading challenges, the social dynamics behind online social reading events are examined.

Reading has always been a social activity, but online social networks make the social aspects of reading more visible. Readers participate in online social networks in several ways, varying according to the affordances of each. Although this paper will focus on book blogs, they are far from the only online social medium focusing upon books and reading. Commercial entities such as Amazon.com, book-centric social networks such as LibraryThing and Goodreads, and general social networks like Twitter often include discussions of literature. However, all these social networks often intertwine with blogging in interesting ways.

Book blogs are unusual among social networks in that each blog belongs to an individual or a group, and there is no obvious infrastructure connecting one blog to another. Book bloggers, then, may write about whatever they wish and are not subject to the rules of a

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pre-existing discussion, but connecting with other bloggers is slightly more difficult. Many book bloggers solve this problem by participating in reading challenges, which are proposals for a certain number of books to be read on a particular theme in a given amount of time, and read-a-thons, which are specific time periods during which participants read as much as possible. Both types of reading events may begin on blogs, but spill over onto Twitter or make use of the tools in social networks. Announcements of challenges often specify whether or not participants need to have a blog, often reassuring potential participants that they don't need a blog but can instead link from Goodreads or another similar site. Typically, challenge participants write their reviews on either their own blogs or on a review site, and link to them from a central location, the "hosting" blog. They may, of course, visit other blogs to engage with the writing of their fellow participants, and the blogs hosting the challenges often include comments sections where participants can discuss their thoughts in a more targeted and consolidated way. Because they are individually-run online spaces, the use of blogs differs in important ways from the use of more centralized social networks.

Reading challenges also differ in important ways from face-to-face book clubs, but they confer similar benefits on their participants—encouragement to read, and an opportunity to discuss their reading with others. This paper will give an overview of the nature of reading challenges and online read-a-thons and, through the use of three case studies, consider their benefits to book bloggers.

Virtual and Face to Face Book Clubs

The literature on face-to-face book clubs provides a good look at participants' reasons for adding social groups to their reading experience. Both social connections and opportunities to discuss reading material are important in such groups. In an ethnographic study of reading groups, Sedo (2002) argued that "in a book club environment, readers are able to satisfy their need to increase their knowledge, nurture their love of books, and share bonds of community" (p. 11). Sedo emphasized the social aspect of these groups, pointing out that at members who have not read the book can still participate in the discussion. Still, according to Sedo, "the meeting and club's raison d'être is an interpretation of literature that is enhanced by each mem-

ber bringing her ideas to the circle" (p. 19). Both Sedo (2002) and Long (1986) examined the way that reading selection is negotiated in such groups, and concluded that one major function of book clubs is to help their members solve "the eternal quest for the next book" (Sedo, 2002, p. 81). The readers in Long's group were "in a complex dialogue with various incarnations of cultural authority when they select and interpret book" (p. 596). That is, the groups' reading selections mirrored the values of "cultural experts," although these readers often showed more independence in their interpretations of works.

Virtual book clubs fulfill some of the same functions but may focus more on the books than they do on the social relationships. Sedo (2003) found that face to face clubs tended to be formed from pre-existing interpersonal relationships rather than online book clubs. The discussions that took place online were likely to focus more on the books in question than are the face to face discussions. In both cases, however, participants felt that the club provided them with intellectual stimulation and reading recommendations.

The literature on book-centric online social networks such as Goodreads and LibraryThing focuses largely on their role as a recommendation engine (Naik, 2012; Stover, 2009; O'Leary, 2012). These articles discuss the sites' ability to recommend books based on user ratings as well as recommendations made by like-minded readers. In this sense, then, these sites perform a role similar to that of face-to-face book clubs. Newman (2008), meanwhile, finds an important difference between such social networks and face-to-face book clubs, arguing that the social networks focus on competition rather than discussion. "[LibraryThing's] intense user monitoring offers a recursive source of energy and interest: it stimulates and channels the social activity it observes" (p. 19). According to Newman, social networks of this type, rather than encouraging discussion about the content of books, encourage users to collect them as status symbols. Because collection and rating information is public, users on these networks can list their book collections in order to build a social media identity. Such a network "stresses the book's value as a commodity or collectible" (p. 21).

Reading challenges, too, can display this "collectible" perspective. However, they also provide the space in which readers around the world can engage with each other, as long as they have an internet

connection. Sedo (2011a) noted the potential for such spaces to create connections among readers who may be very different from each other:

> While the world wide web provides a new and radical medium for the production and distribution of texts and thus acts as a disruptive force upon traditional processes of literary creation, production, distribution and reception, it also provides opportunities for many (although certainly not all) readers to connect with one another regardless of factors such as cultural or socioeconomic background, gender, reading level or geography. (p. 7)

Sedo's work focuses on the way that these opportunities may be used to create communities. She acknowledges that book-related communities may have very different characteristics, purposes and participants. However, she argues that identifying these communities as such is important, because:

> Using the term "community" gets to the heart of the notion that social formations can shape themselves around a text. It helps us recognize the factors at play as community members search for meaning within a text, sort out power structures, and, ultimately, gain the knowledge that comes from exposure to, and discussion of, new and unfamiliar concepts. (p. 11)

Both online and off, readers interact with each other around texts. Both the interpersonal interactions and the interaction with the text itself are necessary components to these communities. Fister (2005) gave an account of a listserv group of mystery readers, for whom "[b]ecoming more adept at reading critically is a member benefit" (p. 307) and "[t]he solidarity of a group of likeminded avid readers is also a source of comfort (and amusement)" (p. 305). Reading communities, then, include three elements: a social element deriving from discussions among the participants, a reading element deriving from the choice of works read and the types of discussion that are valid within the community, and the achievement-based, "commoditized" element described by Newman.

The balance among these elements depends on both the participants and the infrastructure they use. Book blogs differ, in important ways, from the communities described above. Book-centric social

networks like Goodreads and LibraryThing, listservs like the one Fister describes, and the online book club that is the focus of Sedo's (2011b) study provide centralized forums in which works can be discussed. These forums may have moderators or "maestros" and are governed according to specific rules that serve a community-building function. To Sedo, "[t]he community is a site of subjection to group norms and authority figures and at the same time it is a site of active individual resistance to group norms and authority figures" (p. 126) because of the ways that participants exercise authority within the group. Fister's group includes "gently worded rules" (p. 306) which are largely self-policed by its users and a leadership that is shared among several members. These groups can go off topic, though both forbid political discussion. This is very reminiscent of Goodreads and similar social networks, which provide multiple forums for each of their discussion groups, including explicitly off-topic forums. It is easy to identify what is part of the community and what is not; anything that happens on the list or in the discussion group is within the purview of that group. These groups may include lurkers, as Sedo (2011b) notes, but it may also be possible to make an exhaustive list of participants.

Reading challenges conducted through book blogs are not bounded in this way. Instead of providing a centrally located discussion board, a blog is a frequently updated online space belonging to a particular writer or group of writers. A blog's owner(s) can use this space in whatever way she, he or they see fit. When bloggers engage with one another, there is no centralized discussion area in which moderators enforce general social norms; rather, other writers must enter the space set up by the blogger and it is up to the blogger her- or himself to set the rules. However, book bloggers often do form social groups in which they interact with each other; this is one function of reading challenges, discussed in more detail below. Reading challenges, then, are a more appropriate unit of analysis than individual blogs.

Reading challenges have their own rules, and in some cases, they may indeed provide some centralized spaces for discussion. They are hosted by bloggers who often make regular posts on which others are invited to comment, or to link their own blogs. The reading challenges can set rules about what sorts of reading count for a challenge, but obviously cannot directly govern what a blogger chooses to write.

Furthermore, since there is no central authority auditing reading challenges, any blogger can initiate one. Most of the writing that comprises participation in a reading challenge takes place on individual blogs which other participants must visit if they wish to engage in a dialogue. To complicate matters further, bloggers often participate in many challenges at the same time, using the same blog for all of them, and possibly for some reading that is not related to any challenges. Each blogger's social circle is slightly different and more amorphous than the ones that appear in more formalized social networks; in this sense, each blogger belongs to a slightly different community. Bloggers have the ability to create their own networks, which may overlap to a large extent but will certainly vary from blog to blog, even among closely affiliated bloggers. This means that a post about a book read for one challenge may attract comments from the blogger's readers who have a different reading challenge in common. Blogging is not a close community with an exhaustive list of members; rather, each blog is both a space owned by an individual and a nexus of the many communities to which he or she may belong.

The blogs themselves, then, do not create the same kinds of communities that other online social networks do. However, the reading challenges connect book bloggers in a way that creates Sedo's (2002) "online social formations." Certain challenges have a high degree of overlap among a constellation of participants, who may have little presence in other groups of challenges, even very active ones. Readers who are interested in social justice may flock together but have little interaction with readers who are primarily interested in romance novels (and vice versa).

Reading Challenges
Methodology
        "A Novel Challenge" is a popular blog which posts announcements of reading challenges and events. This blog provides information about each challenge and a link to the blog where it is being hosted. The researcher examined all the posts made to this blog for one year, between July 16, 2011 and July 16, 2012. During this time, almost 270 challenges and other book-related online social events hosted on about 70 different blogs were added to this site. Each post included the title of the challenge, the name of the hosting blog, and a description of the books that would "count" for the challenge, in

addition to a link. Many also included information about acceptable modes of participation and, occasionally, prize giveaways. It was also very common for the posts to include editorial information about why the hosts had chosen the challenge, the host's own expected level of participation, and possible interpretations of the rules.

The information thus gained is not by any means exhaustive. Challenges are listed at "A Novel Challenge" only if the host submits information and requests that it be posted. Many of the participants in challenges listed at "A Novel Challenge" were also engaged in challenges that were not listed there. Furthermore, there was a gap in coverage in July 2011 when the future of the website was in question. Fortunately, others were willing to take over from the prior organizer of the site, but some challenges may not have been posted during this period. However, since most challenges are posted in the autumn and winter months in order to coincide with the New Year, this effect was probably very small.

Because there is little standardization among these posts, true statistical analysis is not possible. However, looking at a year's worth of challenges does reveal some interesting general tendencies.

Introduction to Reading Challenges

Reading challenges are blog events which encourage participants to read certain books, certain types of books, or a certain number of books in a given amount of time, and create a way for those who do so to discuss their reading. Challenges may specify a certain theme or author, or simply a number of books to be read over a particular period of time. There is great diversity among reading challenges—their content, the medium in which they are carried out, the strictness of their specifications, and the time period they take to complete may all be different. What they have in common is their ability to gather participants who are interested in the same sorts of reading and give them a way to contact each other, often across internet platforms rather than within the bounds of an easily identifiable social network. To participate in a reading challenge is to join a group. "A Novel Challenge" classifies the challenges posted there into two main categories: challenges, which take place over a long period of time, usually a year, and events, which have a shorter duration. Events include memes, read-alongs, read-a-thons, reading challenges. Reading challenges dominated the blog, with 223 out of the 267 posts

so classified.

A read-along focuses on one particular work or series and is often short in duration. Most of the read-alongs were scheduled to last a month, for instance: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in January, *Anna Karenina* in July, Stephen King's *Bag of Bones* from mid-November to mid-December.

The read-a-thons focus less on content and more on reading voluminously over a short period of time. One blog, Seasons of Reading, hosts four read-a-thons a year. No particular subject is specified for the contents of the books, but participants must check in and track their progress during the read-a-thon. The seasonal read-a-thons each last for about a week and use Twitter hashtags in addition to blogs or other social networks. Some participants post their links to their blogs on the hashtag; others use it to carry on a real-time conversation as they read.

Reading challenges constitute the largest of these categories, with 223 posts thus categorized. Most reading challenges run for one year, beginning in January and running through December. Some of the challenges listed were returning from previous years, such as "What's in a Name 5?" which was running for its fifth consecutive year. Most reading challenges do not specify particular books to be read; rather, they set some parameters for the sorts of books that "count" toward the challenge and allow the readers to select the books they'd most like to read. Reading challenges also vary in the sorts of participation they allow and encourage, particularly for participants who are not book bloggers. Many explicitly allow the use of social networking sites—usually listing Goodreads and perhaps LibraryThing, but occasionally they even specify that Amazon or Facebook are acceptable. Others invite non-bloggers to leave their thoughts in the comment section of the hosting blog or with a utility called "Mr. Linky" which can be used to create comments or repost blog posts. A few challenges even state that readers may participate without writing reviews at all.

The reading material included in the reading challenges varies widely. Table 1 breaks the challenges into several categories assigned by the researcher. "Author," "Series," and "Publisher" challenges straightforwardly named an author, series or publisher. "Format" refers to challenges that specified only the physical format of the book. "Word Association" challenges are based on some criterion having to

do only with the title of the book, such as words of colors or words spelled by the initial letters of each challenge. For instance, the "Read Your Name" Challenge invited participants to read one book for each letter of their names.

Table 1: Types of Reading Challenges

Type of Challenge	No. of Challenges	Examples
Author or Series	39	Charles Dickens Month, Gossip Girl Reading Challenge 2012
Award	11	Alex Awards Challenge, British Battle of the Prizes
Format	2	2012 EBook Challenge, 2012 Audio Book Challenge
Genre	82	2012 Just Contemporary Reading Challenge, Clocks, Cogs and Mechanisms Reading Challenge 2012, Gender in Fantasy and Sci-Fi Challenge
Geography	15	We Want You to Read French Authors, Africa Reading Challenge
Other	57	Unread Book Challenge of 2012, Chunky Book Club
Publisher	3	Harper Imprint Challenge, Harlequin Silhouette Reading Challenge
Word Association	3	2012 Rainbow Reading Challenge, Antonym Reading Challenge

Any challenge in which books were selected based on their selection by some external cultural authority were classed as "award" challenges, whether they used prestigious awards such as the Pulitzer or lists such as the book *1,001 Books You Must Read Before You Die*. The reading of award-winning books harks back to Long's (1986) work, which notes that reading groups often rely on the evaluations of cultural experts when making reading selections, but the bloggers, like the members of Long's book clubs, assert their own cultural authority by evaluating the awards.

A plurality of challenges focused on the genre or theme of the books in question. The "genre" category in Table 1 is defined broadly as any specification based on the content of the book aside from a geographical requirement. This category includes challenges to read traditional genres such as science fiction, classics, and mystery, but also those that define their own genres, whether these were very specific, like the "Foodies 2 Read Challenge" (books about food), very general, like the "2012 Dewey Decimal Reading Challenge" (any non-fiction book), or audience-specific, like the many young adult literature challenges. Challenges focusing on what Long's (1986) readers would consider "trash" (p. 601), that is, popular fiction, exist here alongside higher-brow groups. Geographic challenges are those which specify that books must be about a particular geographical area or by an author from there.

"Other" catches the challenges that do not fall into one of those categories. This category included twenty-three challenges having to do with the reader's relationship to the books (old favorites, books not yet read, books received for free) and eight challenges specifying only a number of books or the length that the books should be. These often seemed to reveal something about the lives of book bloggers. For instance, there were several "TBR" (To Be Read) challenges to help bloggers reduce the size of their To Be Read list. There is even a meta-challenge that readers can complete by entering other reading challenges.

To generalize about the communities formed by reading challenges is difficult. However, some common elements hint at the competitive, commoditizing ethos noted above. It is very common for the reading challenges to specify levels of participation, with thematically appropriate names, according to the number of books that participants read. Many of the introductory posts remind readers that they

may move from a lower challenge level to a higher one, but not the other way. In this way, reading becomes a quantifiable accomplishment, making the community's competitive aspect explicit. In fifty-five of the introductory posts (about 24%), hosts declare that the challenge includes a prize, which makes it a competition in a more literal sense. However, the more social, cooperative element noted by Sedo (2002) also appears among the prizes, which are sometimes provided by publishers but often come out of the pockets, or the libraries, or the hosts. One host notes, "When you meet your reading goal, you can select a book from my library – most likely a gently used trade paperback – and I'll mail it to you. … The person who reads the most books for the challenge will receive a fun little surprise package with a bookish theme" (J. G. 2012, January 20). This is both competitive—a prize will be won—and a gift from the host.

The third element of other online reading communities, the opportunity to discuss reading with other readers, cannot appear in the introductory posts. Only by considering participation in the challenges themselves can this be determined.

Case Studies

To show how challenge participants interact and what these events offer them, this section of the paper will look at three specific book blogging events, one read-a-thon and two reading challenges. Each of the three uses social media differently; they have been chosen to illustrate the range of purposes, types of activity, and participant experiences among online reading communities. The first example, the High Summer Read-a-Thon provides an excellent example of the way that book blogging events sprawl across multiple forms of social media, integrating Twitter, blogs, and book-based social networks into a single, real-time event. This section also explores some of the differences between a real-time read-a-thon and the more common year-long reading challenges. The second and third case studies focus on two very different reading challenges. Read & Resist Tucson is small, content-centric and political in nature. In contrast, the 2012 TBR Pile Reading Challenge is a very popular challenge with many participants but does not mandate any particular content within the books, focusing rather on the participants' desire to read books that have been languishing on their shelves. Both are included, in order to illustrate the way that the number of participants can affect a chal-

lenge, and to show two different groups of participants in the world of book blogging. These two groups participate for very different reasons and, at least in the cases cited, have no overlapping members.

These case studies will point out some of the important social features of reading challenges, and show the benefits of each. They are, as expected, very far from encompassing the experience of all participants in reading challenges.

High Summer Read-a-Thon

A read-a-thon is defined above as an established time period (in this case, one week) during which its participants read as much as possible. A read-a-thon is very different from a year-long challenge because of its real-time nature. Because it takes place over a compressed period of time, it is easier to observe how it encompasses several media, especially blogs and Twitter. Michelle Miller, the host of the High Summer Read-a-Thon (HSRT), describes the event as "a week of relaxed reading during which we can personally challenge ourselves and whittle away those ever looming TBR piles/shelves/libraries" (Miller, 2012). The participants agreed; one of them describing the HSRT as a "relaxed read-a-thon" during which participants could set their own pace (Almybnenr, 2012). Sixty-one participants signed up, mostly with blogs, although Goodreads, Twitter, Facebook and Google+ were also lightly represented. Curiously, some of the links to social networking accounts were not accessible to the public, suggesting that perhaps some of the participants already interact with one another on these social networks.

During the read-a-thon, new tweets and new blog updates from the participants came in frequently. In both these media, the emphasis was apparently on the collectible aspect of reading, as participants posted about how much they had read so far and their plans for the next few days. On the "starting line" post, the host encouraged participants to post their prospective reading lists on their blogs, and most did, although several noted that they might choose a different book depending on their mood.

Twitter played an important role in making the read-a-thon feel like a social event. On Twitter, many participants posted links to their blogs, but others also used it as an opportunity to encourage each other or make note of the books they had read or other aspects their lives that affected their reading. For instance, one participant

remarked on Twitter: "Tonight me, my PJs, a book and a pizza are going to curl up and not move until we're bestest friends. Or asleep." (Bookshop_Girl, 2012). Another wrote: "Here's what I have read this week.102 pages of Graceling. Going to read a bit in Anna Karenina & Middlemarch" (truebookaddict, 2012b). The atmosphere is supportive; when one reader noted that she had only read ten pages of *Anna Karenina* during a reading sprint, others were quick to point out that it is a dense text and her reading speed should not be compared to that of those reading lighter fare. Participants post more detailed updates on their blogs—some once a day, and some less often—but use Twitter for short updates which received quick responses from other participants, especially during the scheduled Twitter chats. Twitter was also the site of reading sprints—half-hour periods of time during which participants read continuously, reporting their page counts when the time had elapsed. During reading sprints, the Twitter hashtag was quiet. During this time, the participants are virtually reading together, even though they may be reading very different books in very different places. By encouraging a comparison by reading volume, the read-a-thon participates in the commoditizing culture described by Newman, but the support offered from reader to reader makes this a community rather than pure competition. The social aspect of the read-a-thon was also evident in the Twitter chat, which contained many references to the busy lives of the readers. Several expressed a preference for week-long read-a-thons, rather than shorter ones, because it is easier to find time to read. In fact, the host of the chat explained that she had chosen a week-long read-a-thon to accommodate diverse work schedules. (truebookaddict, 2012a) In the Sunday afternoon Twitter chat, several participants commiserated about the lack of reading time that resulted from needing to work, and about being behind in their reviews. Twitter also served as a place where new reading and blogging events could be organized. Chat participants organized a write-a-thon for later in the summer during this chat.

The role of blogs in the read-a-thon is a little different. Because it is easier to come back to a blog than a tweet hours or days after it has been posted, participants use blogs to posts their intended reading lists and to keep a record of the amount read per day. The blogs are also where they participate in "mini-challenges," though these are also linked and promoted on Twitter. These included the "Page 99 Chal-

lenge," in which participants evaluated a book they were planning to read based on the ninety-ninth page (Reylin, 2012) and the "illustration challenge" in which readers posted an image having to do with a book they were reading (Laura BookSnob, 2012). The comments on the blogs, much like the Twitter comments, constitute interaction among participants, mostly in the form of supportive encouragement or commentary on the books that participants had chosen. Once the read-a-thon had concluded, participants wrote wrap-up posts about their experience. Neither blogs nor Twitter comprised the entirety of the read-a-thon experience. Although the challenge was hosted and promoted on blogs, and blogs provided a space for participants to record their considered thoughts about what they were reading, Twitter was where participants went to be sociable, comment on their experience, and interact with each other.

Despite competitive elements, the real-time nature of the read-a-thon turns reading into a communal, social experience, especially for those participating on Twitter. It creates the impression that the participants are all reading together, although they may be very distant from each other geographically. This atmosphere is both supportive and lightly competitive. The read-a-thon also includes very light discussion of the books themselves, which participants might use to start further conversations or to find new books to read. Many also seem to consider the read-a-thon a motivation to read more. One participant (Potten, 2012) writes:

> Even if I don't read as much as my fellow read-a-thonners, I still find that having it in the back of my mind helps me focus. It gently pushes me back to my reading after work instead of watching TV, and encourages me to ignore the customers browsing in the shop and read, instead of giving up and playing online.

Several readers made references to prior challenges, especially ones which they had failed. One or two people said that they felt bad about choosing the same books that they had not finished in the first read-a-thon, but were motivated to try once again.

Read & Resist Tucson

In contrast to the High Summer Read-a-Thon, which had no particular content aside from whatever the participants wished to

read, Read & Resist Tucson is a reading project that began in response to a political situation which positioned certain kinds of reading as dangerous or divisive. In January 2011, Arizona enacted a controversial state law banning certain ethnic studies courses from the curriculum. The law explicitly prohibits courses that are found to advocate overthrow of the United States government or promote racial resentment (Lacey, 2012). The Tucson Unified School District gave up its program due to the threat of losing state funding, despite an audit that found the courses did not violate the law, and seven textbooks were removed from the curriculum and physically removed from the school's classrooms.

Read & Resist Tucson is a response to the removal of these books. A blogger, Melissa (2012), who calls herself The Feminist Texican online, created a reading challenge encouraging other book bloggers to read and review the texts that would no longer be taught in Arizona classrooms. She wrote:

> Teachers are no longer allowed to use a long list of texts - texts mostly penned by Latina/o authors - in the classroom on the grounds that the books promote a victim mentality in minority students and instill a bitterness towards the United States. Read & Resist Tucson challenges people to read some of the books, open a dialogue, and interpret their messages for themselves.

The goal of the challenge is not only to promote the reading of these texts but to create a database of reviews. Unlike many reading challenges listed at "A Novel Challenge", Read & Resist Tucson has a list of specific books from which its participants can choose, and it requires reviews for participation. However, this challenge it is much less directive than many of the others in terms of when they should read or how many books should be attempted. Because the goal of this project is political activism and greater awareness of the texts in question, this challenge does not have the detailed requirements for participation that some other challenges do, opting instead for inclusivity. Without these requirements, the competitive element of the community is apparently absent. Rather than keeping a monthly schedule of updates, Melissa makes a roundup post whenever there is sufficient material to warrant it. So far, she has done this in January and April.

For Melissa, there is a sense of urgency to this reading project.

She writes, "We can't just turn a blind eye to what's happening in Tucson…. We need to get people talking about and celebrating these banned books" (Melissa, 2012). Another blogger is more specific about how reading can work as a form of political activism: "While this won't introduce books directly to Tucson youth, it may shed some light on how ridiculous it is to remove these books from the classroom and get us talking about the important of a relevant education" (Mosqueda, 2012). A third blogger explains that she wishes to participate because she objects to the "outright bigotry and dangerous, ideological obfuscation of history and power relations" that this law displays (Oppenheimer, 2012).

The group of participants is very small and the updates are infrequent. Although several other bloggers indicated in comments that they would participate, as of July 22, 2012, only five have officially submitted reviews. What is striking about these participants, however, is that all those who have submitted reviews are also participating in other reading challenges which are listed on their blogs. The challenges they choose mark them out as "serious" readers; they involve books that express political ideals or have been acclaimed for literary merit, or they require that their participants read books from areas or by groups of writers that have often been overlooked. These challenges include A Year of Feminist Classics, the African Reading Challenge, The Real Help (that is, books recommended by the Association of Black Women Historians to counteract the stereotypes presented in *The Help*), the Pulitzer 2s (that is, Pulitzer winners from years ending in 2), and the Essay Reading Challenge.

Many of the participants are in several other challenges together; Read & Resist Tucson is not the extent of their interaction. Although Read & Resist Tucson is a very small project, when considered in light of the larger online ecosystem in which these bloggers are reading, they are members of a very active book club—but a club that is slightly different for each of them. They choose challenges which interest them, become acquainted with those who are participating, and join some of the same projects; in fact, the idea for this particular reading challenge was hatched in the comments of one of Melissa's blog posts in conversation with readers she already knew. Each challenge has a slightly different focus, and slightly different participants, but with greater or lesser degrees of overlap. In this case, the challenge group includes book bloggers who are interested in social

justice, but who may all address this interest in slightly different ways and with slightly different groups, although these groups may at times share members and reading materials.

2012 TBR Pile Reading Challenge

Most reading challenges are slightly more structured than Read & Resist Tucson, although the level of organization varies. The TBR Pile Reading Challenge is a useful example because it is both wide-ranging in content and very popular. Where Read & Resist Tucson is a project by a very small group of bloggers, the TBR Pile Reading Challenge is a much larger one.

"TBR" stands for "To Be Read" and is a very popular theme for reading challenges. Seven challenges drawn from "A Novel Challenge" were explicitly intended to give readers an opportunity to attack their TBR piles. Despite the competition from other challenges, this challenge was very well received. The initial challenge post drew 476 participants. Aside from the initial sign-up post, in which participants announce their intention to take on this challenge and indicate their level of participation, there is a monthly wrap-up post which provides a place for bloggers to link any reviews that fit the challenge. Rather than having a single host, this particular challenge had a group of bloggers, each of whom was scheduled to host the challenge for one or two months of the year. Each of the hosts also provided a contest in which bloggers could participate. For instance, in January, the host blogger provided a number of snowflake-shaped cutouts from book covers for participants to identify (Donna, 2012). In June, the host blogger posted three lists of words having to do with camping and asked participants to create a sentence including these words (Jenna, 2012).

This challenge is intended to give heavy readers and book collectors a chance to read books that are already in their collections. Thus, it attracts prolific book bloggers who identify as overcommitted readers and can interact with each other on that basis. If lists of books read can be considered a measure of prestige, the TBR list is a much more complicated document. Participants described their TBR lists with mild dismay and perhaps a hint of embarrassment for allowing books to sit on the shelf for so long, as the quotations below will show. However, a monstrous TBR list is also a sign of belonging in this community. Evie Seo, the primary host, appeals to what

is apparently a very common experience among book bloggers: "We all have those books. We buy them, win them, they're gifted to us. Then we put them up on a bookshelf and there they stay, collecting dust, waiting for the time when we'll finally decide to pick them up" (Seo, 2012). Participants are required to choose books that they have owned for a year or more but have never read. Like the read-a-thon, the existence of the challenge encourages participants to read; certainly the popularity of this challenge and similar challenges suggests that book bloggers welcome an opportunity to decrease the size of their TBR lists. Participant Chrystal (2011) described the challenge as something of a lifeline:

> I wasn't planning on doing any challenges for 2012 as I really didn't complete the ones I have signed up for in 2011. But this one actually works with my plan for 2012 - to catch up on my TBR pile since I owe quite a few reviews for books for this year. I had a hard time saying no to authors/publishers, but all this did was dig me deeper in a huge pile of TBR books. So this challenge should help me out greatly.

Another blogger, Valerie (2011), found this challenge more compelling than most because it allowed her to clear books from her To Be Read list:

> I keep finding great reading challenges for next year that I really want to do. I've resisted most of them but this one I couldn't pass up. You see I have so many books that I really want to read and they just sit on my shelf because I get caught up in other things.

Another participant noted that reviewing books is "starting to feel like work, which is bad" (Moirae (the fates) book reviews, 2011) and believes that this challenge will alleviate this feeling.

As the year wore on, participants linked to their challenges in the wrap-up posts. Some also commented on their progress in the challenge. One blogger who posted a wrap-up post each month was very excited about her progress in June:

> I have now read 20 books this year towards this challenge. YAYYYY! Knocking books off my TBR pile makes me feel extremely happy. If you'd like to feel this good, think about joining the challenge yourself! (Karen, 2012a)

A month later, she commented on July:

> Well... I honestly wasn't sure if I was even going to do a post for July considering that I read absolutely NO books towards the challenge, but I decided that it would help me be more account able if I owned up to it. Yep, you read that right: ZERO books towards the TBR PILE Reading Challenge. Epic fail!! … Here's hoping I have better news on my August update! (Karen, 2012b)

These posts suggest that both the challenge itself and blogging about it help the blogger to achieve her goal of reading the books that have sat on her shelf for some time. Another participant completed her goal in the challenge, but still continued to read challenge-related books: "I reached my goal awhile ago, so now I'm just seeing how far I can get. I apparently have a lot of books on my TBR" (Jenn, 2012). This challenge is popular because it helps bloggers to "get to" books that they have long planned to read.

A comparison of the January and June wrap-up posts is illustrative of the ways that the challenge develops over the course of the year. As time passes, the challenge suffers from attrition. The January wrap-up post saw 298 reviews entered by the owners of 94 different blogs, and the June one had only sixty-nine reviews from nineteen different reviewers. Since many of the intervening months were not available for examination, this does not necessarily indicate a steady decline in participation. The nature of the challenge does not require posts each month. Rather, participants attempt to read and review a certain number of books over the course of the year. As the quotations above show, some bloggers have already finished the challenge, while some may simply take a month off. One might assume that the June participants are a more faithful or enthusiastic subset of the January participants, but the average number of reviews posted by both groups is between three and four for each month. Five of the June participants had not posted in January, so new members do join the group as the year goes on; however, the other fourteen were continuing participants.

The wrap-up posts provided a convenient place for the linking of all these reviews; with challenges that do not feature regular updates of this sort, it can be difficult to find the reviews associated with a particular challenge. This is useful for readers who want to keep up with their fellow challenge participants.

The challenges build a community a very different way from the way that a well-defined social network such as Goodreads does. Many of the comments on challenge-related posts were from other participants in the challenge, which is not surprising for a large, popular challenge like this one. However, the challenge does not form a boundary to the community, as it does on a site like Goodreads. In a Goodreads community, participants all discuss books in the same online forum, which attempts to meet all its members' needs. This means that every post and every response in such a community is from the community's members, even those that are off-topic. Blog-based challenges, on the other hand, provide a way for those who are following the participants' blogs for other reasons to comment. Although many of the comments were from the bloggers' fellow TBR Challenge participants, there were also many comments from other bloggers, who they may have known from other challenges. Some comments on reviews written for the challenge were also made by non-bloggers or people who did not link their blogs. Many of the reviews "counted" for multiple challenges; in fact, this was explicitly permitted in the initial challenge description. Since many of the participants are taking part in multiple challenges, they have the opportunity to become acquainted with many different bloggers, who are not constrained to comment only on posts relating to the challenges they have in common.

Conclusion and Future Research

The community that book blogs provide for readers is very different both from other online social networks and from traditional book clubs, because it is both content-focused and decentralized. This unique set of communities should be studied from the perspective of social reading, not just in terms of their educational potential or their effect on the publishing business.

Future research could include ethnographic studies of reading challenges, similar to Sedo's (2011b) and Fister's (2005) work on virtual book clubs, but with a focus on book blogs. This would help researchers to understand how readers bond and how individuals build their own web communities around their specific interests, and how heavy readers understand reading. Interviews with book bloggers, and with the hosts of challenges in particular, could provide further insight into their experience. Quantitative research could also reveal

much about how readers use reading challenges, especially a cluster analysis showing when and to what extent these groups of readers intersect with each other. Such analysis could reveal groups of readers and show what sorts of bloggers are likely to interact with each other.

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