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Studying E-books and Reading Experiences in Ethnology

Introduction

E-books and new reading practices have recently been scrutinised from several new perspectives, which are also interesting from the standpoint of ethnological research. In particular, studies that focus on readers and their everyday reading habits come close to traditional ethnological interests. Scholars have viewed reading as a corporeal experience and also as a social and interactive activity. Virtual communication is now being combined with private reading, and literary experiences are being shared now more than ever before. New digital technologies are at the core of these changes.

This article introduces ideas and viewpoints that are the basis for my ongoing doctoral project, in which I study digitally-related changes in book culture as experienced by readers themselves. The research material consists of reminiscences in written form that were collected in 2014 by the Finnish Literature Society for the project 'Elämää lukijana' [Life as a Reader]. By using this particular material, which deals with reading experiences at different stages of life, I will study how the informants viewed books, reading and the recent changes at the time of writing and reveal the meanings attached to them. This article discusses previous studies that deal with important aspects of my research as well as the place of ethnology in the research field of e-books and new reading habits.

Although, to my knowledge, there are no previous oral history studies on digital books, oral history has been considered an important ap-

proach in the research of reading experiences. This affects both the research topics as well as the research data. New digital databases that relate to reading experiences, such as Memories of Fiction (memoriesoffiction.org) and the Reading Experience Database (http://www.open.ac.uk/ Arts/RED/), have been established to benefit researchers from different backgrounds, such as those interested in book history, cultural studies, sociology and family history (Reading Experience Database/ What is a reading experience). Researchers have become increasingly interested in readers' own narratives precisely because reading is now seen as an emotional activity, one which is related to life stories and identities. For instance, *Memories of Fiction* is a project that aims to explore how reading is shaping people's lives. The interest is in 'individual and collective memories of reading fiction' and the aim is to collect interviews from readers of different backgrounds as a means of exploring the emotions and experiences associated with books. (Memories of fiction.org/about.)

The purpose of these databases is to learn more about the reading-related and book-related experiences of ordinary readers in their everyday lives and to provide data on such questions as, how and why do people read, what they choose to read and how do these choices affect their actions and identities. Therefore, the databases are a good example of the recent interest in reading, one that may call for ethnological research. My own study focuses on similar subjects, but the viewpoint is especially on the recent changes in book culture. I believe that new reading habits and changes in the

material culture are especially issues that would benefit from ethnological knowledge.

E-books and cultural acceptance

Digital book culture represents a distinctive phase in the history of books, and e-books and new reading practices cannot be studied separately from previous reading experiences and the long cultural history of print books. At the moment, e-books are made to look like traditional books as much as possible, and they are often discussed in relation to printed text. However, the forms obviously differ from each other, and e-books should not be understood as a mere extension of printed books. At the same time, they do differ from other digital texts, as their form, composition and reception are all associated with traditional print books. The definition is not simple, especially because it does not refer to any specific format or device. (Rowberry 2015, 1–2.)

At the moment, there is still a lack of general understanding about the nature of e-books, and therefore they are challenging objects for those conducting research on reading experiences. The fact that they become visible in many different formats and devices, all of which affect the experience, makes it difficult to understand the exact nature of the object in question. Likewise, spelling has not been standardised in the different texts, and for instance forms such as ebook, eBook and e-book have all been used. However, all of them refer to the same digital object. To be clear, by e-books I am referring to all digital publications that can be recognised as books, for instance by using a form with chapters, titles, a publisher, layout and an ISBN code.

Commercial e-books are still newcomers in the literary field, although books have been digitized[1] and published since at least the 1970s. An important step was taken when Project Gutenberg was founded in 1971. From the viewpoint of larger audiences and everyday reading, e-books did not become a realistic option for print books until the 'development of wireless communication infrastructures and high-resolution screens that are portable and small enough to be used and held single-handedly [...]' (Rowberry 2015, 4). In other words, e-books became easily available and readable after the launch of portable reading devices, such as Amazon Kindle in 2007 or the Apple iPad in 2010. With the advent of wireless internet connections, they enabled easy access to digital bookstores and library services practically anytime and anywhere. With the additions of lighter weight devices, adjustable text size and backlight, tablets and e-readers made comfortable reading experiences with e-books possible.

Instead of becoming a success among the wider reading public, the use of portable reading devices has raised questions and concerns about the new reading practices. Print and digital text have been juxtaposed, for instance, in studies that relate to reading comprehension. Researchers have suggested that there is a difference between reading a text in print and in digital format in terms of understanding the text. One study has found that reading comprehension declines when people read text on a computer screen compared to on paper (Mangen, Walgremo & Brønnick 2013). However, there are differences between the various devices and not all screens can be considered the same. It would seem to make a difference whether the text is read from a computer screen or from a reading device designed especially for reading. Another important cognitive factor might have to do with the lighting; computer screens and tablets are based on technology that is emitting light, whereas reading devices such as Kobo or Kindle are e-ink based, which means that they reflect ambient light. E-ink is more similar to paper, and therefore it may be less tiring for the eyes. But the effects of these factors still call for further research. (Mangen et al. 2013, 66–67.)

The comparison of print and digital text has been the subject of many public discussions. Critics have argued that reading from screens disrupts a person's concentration, as social media and other on-line contents are available on the same device as a book. In particular, they have argued that young people have lost their interest in reading books now that literature has to compete with many other forms of (digital) entertainment. Critics argue that this will lead to a situation in which books are not considered inter-

esting anymore. Researchers refer to these types of discussions as panic discussions; such discussions are actually connected with doubts about the new technologies. The thought that e-books and new reading habits, together with other digitally-related cultural changes, are endangering traditional books and reading has been criticized by scholars (see, e.g. Lehtonen 2014, 113; Ekholm & Repo 2010, 18). Since books have long been the central cultural medium, and since their future is now being questioned, the 'panic' discussions are actually related to concerns about the future of culture on a larger scale, i.e. the future of such culture is unknown (Lauristin & Vihalemm 2014, 7).

These kinds of doubts about large-scale changes are familiar when studying the history of print culture. For instance, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Germany, when books started to become available for public consumption, people were worried about how reading might affect the intellectual development of new groups of readers, such as women and children. Critics at the time feared that 'reading lust' would harm society, thinking that a pathological desire to read would cause readers to lose any sense of self-control. These kinds of debates about books and especially the intellectual effects of reading continued until the late 20th century, until they became a part of the new series of debates on the intellectual effects of not reading books. (Mäkinen 2014, 23–25.) Before the advent of digital technologies, critics had already identified comics, newspapers, television, and radio as potential threats to book culture.

In reality, instead of harming book culture, digital technologies have made both books and reading-related activities more variable than ever before. They have also been helping break down the established traditions in book publishing. E-book platforms and desktop software have made self-publishing easier, and authors can now publish their books without needing the approval of the traditional 'gatekeepers' of the publishing business. Social media has made a great difference in the ways literary communities are formed, and now readers are able to develop groups that relate to certain authors, genres or other literary interests. (Ray Murray & Squires 2013, 5–6.)

E-books and social media are also affecting the ways in which literary criticism is disseminated, as readers write reviews and recommend readings on different websites and as a part of different services. The changes do not just concern those people who read e-books; print book readers are also changing their reading-related habits. The ubiquitous nature of digitalisation is affecting the entire book culture, and e-books are just one, albeit an important, aspect of this change. E-books offer a research subject that gives a concrete starting point for scrutinising new digital innovations, traditional print-related objects and new habits of book culture. Old and new are thus compared, yet not juxtaposed or separated from one another, since they usually go side by side in the everyday lives of readers.

Although e-books have their benefits, they have not yet made a strong breakthrough among the general Finnish reading public; the vast majority of people still buy their books in printed form (see, e.g. Kustannusyhdistys.fi/ Vuositilastot). It is interesting how most readers prefer their books in traditional forms even though they now read many other texts, such as news, articles, blogs and messages, using digital devices. The poor success of e-books has been discussed from different perspectives in prior studies. One of the problems is related to their high prices, which relate to taxation. E-books are not associated with physical goods and are actually counted as digital services. Therefore, the value-added tax (VAT) is 24% for e-books compared to 10% for printed books. This of course raises the prices and harms the sales of e-books, especially in the case of new publications.

Another negative aspect may have to do with the prices of reading devices. However, Finland is a highly technological and digitalised country, and recently people have adopted mobile phones, laptops and tablet computers as part of their everyday practices; these devices are also suitable for reading. Price ranges for e-books vary, and many service providers offer them for free, also in Finnish. Since the culture of reading has traditionally been strong in Finland, the ability to read different kinds of texts, including digital ones, exists. In fact, the biggest problem for e-

books at the moment seems be related to acceptance; consumers have not yet accepted the idea of viewing books as digital texts. (Herkman & Vainikka 2012, 28, 31, 89.)

The acceptance of e-books relates to an understanding of their 'affordances'. The concept of affordance refers to those particular features of an object that make certain activities possible; what can be done with it and how. Often certain expectations and preconceptions are associated with new technologies, and sometimes people assume that they have affordances that they actually do not. Also, whereas some of the affordances are intentionally designed, others can be discovered quite by accident via actual usage. (Suominen 2009, 268–270; see also Leonardi 2010, 6.) The affordances with respect to e-books and reading devices still seem to be unclear for many people as they view e-books and reading devices as an alternative to print books instead of what they are at their best: an addition to reading habits that offer readers the freedom to choose the best book format for different reading situations.

In contrast to acceptance is the idea of resisting new innovations altogether, which is connected to doubts and misunderstandings. This kind of resistance has been researched in cultural studies from the standpoints of conservative or reformative cultural factors as well as the internal or external actors that affect such a desire for constancy or change (Mikkola 2009, 39). In the context of book culture, this would mean studying factors that preserve or change traditional reading habits: which changes are opposed, by whom and for what reasons? From this standpoint, the roles of readers who have been the first ones to adopt e-books are important, as are the actions of such organisations as libraries and schools. So long as e-books are juxtaposed with traditional books, their possibilities will not truly be understood.

Books and e-books as material objects

One of the interesting aspects of digital book culture from an ethnological perspective is the place of traditional books in the current situation. At the moment, print books are generally appreci-ated as material objects, including by people who like to read digital text from devices (Herkman & Vainikka 2014, 106–107; Ekholm & Repo 2010, 107). Print books used to be the one and only possible ways to share and own literary content, but now that they are not the only type of book format, new kinds of meanings have been associated with them. Readers have described paper books as objects that have different kinds of aspects related to the various senses, such as feel, sound and smell. Book collections make up special environments, and paper books are individual objects that can be important artefacts in ways other than just as pieces of literature. When the material factors are considered as an important part of the reading experience, they are often connected to memories of previous reading situations, and are therefore attached to nostalgic values. (Herkman & Vainikka 2014, 104.)

These material factors have been emphasised especially since the time that digital texts became more readily available. For instance, smell is a factor that was only rarely associated with books as a positive element in the reading experience right up until the 1990s. Previously, references to published books rarely mentioned the 'smell of books', but this began to change towards the end of the century. Book collecting became popular at the same time, and as the material aspects of an object are often relevant to collectors, it might have affected the phenomenon. However, MacFadyen (2011, 2) points to digital texts and devices as the main reason many people began to view printed books at the time in a different light. In other words, the aspects of traditional books that differ most from new technologies such as e-books became worth emphasising.

Reading devices are objects that obviously also contain material elements such as feel and smell, but without cultural traditions people do not associate them with the same kinds of meanings as they attach to paper books. To my knowledge, the meanings that people assign to reading devices have not been studied, but they are related to other digital objects that have been scrutinised from the viewpoint of feelings. Digital devices have been attached to feelings of affection, love, longing and disappointment. Outdated digital de-

vices can be nostalgic objects; people use them to refresh their memories, and therefore they may be preserved even after no longer being used in everyday practices. This kind of activity may be combined with the concept of restorative nostalgia, which aims to restore something original and authentic. (Suominen 2011, 18–19.)

Material aspects have also been studied in the case of digital games by focusing on the meanings attached to their storage media and packages. As games have been dematerialised from physical copies to online games, players that preferred the physical copies have emphasised three main aspects: the ownership and reliability of the artefacts, games as a part of the home interior and games as collectable items. (Toivonen & Sotamaa 2011, 12.) All of these aspects relate strongly to the relationship between books and e-books; they also differ from paper books in terms of ownership, collecting and reliability. E-books are services that can be modified and updated after they are purchased. Therefore, they are not as stable as material books. These viewpoints relate also to the materiality of software, which is not tangible and therefore may feel less controllable.

An interesting viewpoint, one which calls for further research, is how the meanings attached to digital objects differ from the meanings attached to objects with longer cultural histories. Will they become meaningful as artefacts? If so, to whom, how and why? Digital artefacts, as with any other objects, have a cultural context, and people's relationship towards the devices is a corporeal, phenomenological experience (see Battin 2015). Mobile devices, such as tablet computers or e-readers, differ from non-digital artefacts because of their solid surface but variable content. The content as such calls for new types of theorising and perhaps for redefining 'material' as a concept. Is material only something that one can touch, or could e-books be considered material objects also? At the moment, digital artefacts such as e-books are associated with material objects, and, for instance, collecting e-books and adding them to digital bookshelves is related to collecting traditional books. To better assess these new kinds of reading habits, digital objects need to be defined for research purposes.

Leonardi (2010) approaches the question of the materiality of digital technologies by asking if software could be described and researched in terms of materiality. If the concept of materiality is strictly combined with that of tangible matter, then digital artefacts cannot be said to have materiality. In the case of e-books, this would mean that materiality would primarily be related to the devices that people use for reading. If the concept is understood instead 'to represent the practical instantiation and the significance of an artifact', then digital artefacts can be viewed as material objects. In other words, digital artefacts that have the ability to instantiate ideas into actions and/or that are significant enough to make a difference in different situations could be considered material. (Leonardi 2010, 2, 8–9.)

The way in which material is conceptualised is related to the present changes, which call for new ways of theorising the role of artefacts with respect to such changes. I also find the question of digital materiality important for the ethnological research of material culture in general. Now that digitalisation is affecting the present environments and actions to such an extent, we need to be able to create tools for studying digital objects as both virtual and material artefacts. This is important in the case of e-books because they are making a difference in the literary field. To understand their significance and role in the new practices, they should be studied as more than just digital content. They cannot be separated from materiality because they actually are a part of material culture. E-books are related to material artefacts, and they are often used in a similar manner as traditional paper books. Digital materiality is also related to the new reading habits that exist apart from e-books, and different digital artefacts are now being used to share reading experiences regardless of whether the book is read in paper form or on a device.

Sharing reading experiences both on and outside the internet

New reading habits are combinations of actions that take place in physical and virtual environ-

ments. As with any other online practices, reading-related activities on the internet consist of different functions and forms that are constantly changing. It may be difficult or even unnecessary to separate online and offline activities, since they are combined on many levels (see, e.g. Heimo 2013). However, some changes are taking place specifically because of the internet. Research has recently been focusing on online practices as well as new combinations of physical and virtual space. Methodologically, literary studies, various theories, textual analysis and different qualitative methods have been combined to analyse changing habits. Interestingly for ethnologists, scholars from different field have also turned their attention to ethnography and research on oral history as potential methods, especially in terms of understanding how reading is experienced. (See, e.g. Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013; researchingreadersonline.com.)

Reading books can be a private and silent activity, but often readers wish to share their thoughts and ideas about books with others. The sharing of reading experiences is certainly not a new phenomenon. Traditionally, it has taken the form of writing book reviews or simply discussing readings with friends, but as digitalisation has changed communication practices, people have now begun sharing their thoughts about books also on the internet. Different forms of social media are used to find and discuss books, authors, literary genres and other reading-related matters. The change has been most noticeable in the ways of sharing, as traditional habits are now being modified and new ones are being created.

One of the traditional ways of sharing reading experiences that has been adapted to fit on-line environments are reading groups. Some operate only on the internet, but at the same time it is common to use social media to build an identity for offline communities (Herkman & Vainikka 2012, 121). Offline groups use social media for activities such as conversation, commenting and planning for meetings, which may also strengthen the sense of belonging to a group. The change in these cases has been particularly noticeable in terms of communication, as most groups still function in otherwise traditional manners.

Some groups function only online, and they may be open to everyone or else the access may be limited. Online environments make it possible to form international groups and to, for instance, gather together readers interested in particular authors or genres at a global level. The main difference between traditional and online reading groups is that with internet-related communication the emphasis is on communicating by writing. Also, participation and commenting on public webpages can be irregular and anonymous, and comments can be submitted and left without further explanation. (Ahola 2013, 90–93.) This may lead to a lack of commitment to the group, but at the same time online groups are easily accessible and may lower the threshold for sharing opinions and thoughts about books.

Social media is also used to gather readers around a certain book, author or literary phenomena. In some cases, the phenomena have gained such popularity that the gatherings have become organised 'mass reading events'. [2] They have been studied from a perspective that places the readers in the role of actors rather than audiences, so that the focus is on a reader's own reading of histories, book-inspired activities and cultural resources (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 40). Readers combine aspects of oral culture with written literature, as 'events include sharing of memories, opinions and interpretations – also common activities in face-to-face book groups – combined with more formalized oral performances, such as introductions, professional presentations, readings from the selected book, panel debates and votes of thanks – elements that are not so common in private book groups' (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 209).

The above-mentioned reading groups and reading events may combine traditional habits with digital culture, especially by the use of social media, but digitalisation has also enabled reading practices that can be called new. One such reading practice is BookCrossing. The idea is to 'release' books that have become dispensable for their owners so as to benefit other readers. The books are registered on the BookCrossing website, which then gives the book an identification number. After this step, the book can be 'released'

practically anywhere, often to a nearby Book-Crossing bookshelf, and the finder may either keep the book or re-release the book after reading it. Bookcrossers can keep track of the books when the receivers insert the code onto the website. The site also functions as a conversational site, and meetings of Bookcrossers are organised on it. (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 13; see also bookcrossing.com.)

Another popular website is *Goodreads*, which can be compared to an imaginary library. Readers can find books, read and write book reviews, create and find virtual bookshelves, write and search for book recommendations and create reading communities at the site (Ray Murray & Squires 2013,15; see also Goodreads.com). The site makes participation and sharing easy, and therefore practically anyone can make their reading habits public. From the viewpoint of material culture, it is interesting how such virtual websites are strongly associated with traditional practices of reading, since the different functions are introduced and explained using the metaphors of material objects. For instance, the Goodreads.com website introduces its service as 'a large library that you can wander through and see everyones's bookselves […]' (Goodreads.com/How it works). Aspects of traditional book culture are thus being brought to the digital environment to make it more understandable and usable.

Some of the new reading networks are attached particularly to e-books and their service providers. As discussed above, e-readers and e-books are related to digital services, and readers are now being offered new ways to communicate about books in a manner that also advertises the service provider. These services can be found on the reading devices, all of which are connected to reading networks. For instance: 'iBooks allows readers to share selected highlights to Twitter and Facebook, whilst Kobo promotes their "Reading Life" application, which promises to integrate personalization, reading statistics and sharing features' (Rowberry 2015, 12). Devices keep track of reading activities, and as readers use the services, they also give information to the service providers. Privacy is therefore another aspect of new reading practices that calls for further research

from the standpoint of readers. So far, privacy issues have not been properly studied, nor have matters concerning how readers understand and accept privacy on such networks.

Conclusions

The digitalisation of books and reading is connected to digital content, but as the experiences of reading are strongly related to the senses, it is also important to notice the physical, material side of the changes. Everyday reading habits include aspects such as the use of digital and physical library services and bookstores, collecting books onto digital and material bookshelves, the choices made between e-books and print books, and the use of social media in reading-related networks.

E-books and new reading practices offer an interesting research field, one which combines aspects of virtual and material culture since the research focuses on the concrete actions and experiences attached to books and e-books as objects. The physical form of the book is significant on many levels, and it is interesting how some readers wish to keep their relationship to books as traditional as possible while others welcome the new possibilities. For some, the particular feel and smell of a paper book makes for the best reading experience, whereas for others the lightness of the reading device make the experience comfortable. The changes are a part of the digitalisation process itself, which affects, for instance, the ways in which books are bought, saved, shared, recycled or given as gifts.

The choices of book formats are affected by several factors, such as the meanings given to books and reading, previous reading experiences, the attractiveness of the digital devices and people's general relationship to digital technologies. Some people wish to keep books separate from the screens, whereas others view the screens as a basic part of reading and reading-related habits. Understanding the cultural processes behind the changes, especially those that affect readers' experiences, choices and actions, still call for new perspectives. The methods and research traditions of ethnology are specialised in understanding the

viewpoints of everyday life, and therefore they can bring new knowledge to the field. This can be done, for instance, by using methods such as ethnography and cultural analysis as well as oral history research.

I am interested in the following questions: What particular aspects of book culture have changed? How have the changes been handled? What aspects of the previous habits are considered worth saving or even of being reshaped? I wish to uncover the meanings that are attached to books and e-books and also see how virtual reading communities and digital services are described as a part of people's reading habits. I feel that the research field of book culture could benefit from ethnological knowledge, since it can provide an understanding of the phenomenon as a cultural process. At the same time, I think that the field can give ethnologists a case study whereby to scrutinise digitalisation and digital artefacts as an important part of contemporary everyday life.

NOTES

1 Notice the difference between the concepts: digitisation refers to the transferring of analogue to digital, whereas digitalisation refers to cultural changes (Rowberry 2015, 1–2).

2 Mass reading events are often inspired by a model that Fuller & Rehberg Sedo call 'One Book, One Community'. The events often focus on a piece of literary fiction and can take different forms, such as author events, workshops, theatrical dramatisations or even campouts, and they can be open, for instance to people from certain areas or sometimes to anyone interested in the book, depending on the organisers and the nature of the event. This model has been adopted in several western countries. (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo 2013, 3–4.)

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