

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Bournemouth University		
Unit of Assessment: 27		
Title of case study: Reading on Screen: enhancing the benefits of reading through engaging with digital technologies		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010 – 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Bronwen Thomas	Professor	1996 – current
Dr Julia Round	Principal Lecturer	2008 – current
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The benefits of books are well known, but until now less has been understood about reading on digital platforms. Enabled by three Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grants, researchers at Bournemouth University (BU) demonstrated how technology has transformed yet enriched reading, developing a new participatory model giving voice to a diverse range of readers. This research benefits individual readers and reading-related organisations through advocacy for policy change and influencing the working methods of partner organisations. It has also been a catalyst in enriching lives and changing attitudes. The cultural and social benefits of digital reading, such as inclusivity and accessibility are now more widely known and enjoyed.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>According to the charity, Reading Agency, the benefits of reading include improved health and wellbeing and increased social mobility. Until now, we have understood little about how people read on <i>digital</i> platforms. In fact, digital reading is often discussed in negative terms, especially with regards to the effects on children's learning.</p> <p>Research on digital reading at BU provides evidence to challenge these negative perceptions. It has provided insights into how and why people read on digital platforms and has led to the development of innovative methods capturing how technology has enriched reading, enabling new social and cultural benefits.</p> <p>The research was prompted by Thomas's early work on fanfiction; a form of narrative that has exploded in popularity with the internet whereby fans create their own stories about characters or plots. Thomas applied theories and methods developed by media and cultural studies scholars, revealing how fanfiction challenged boundaries between authors and readers, creation and interpretation [R1]. Thomas also extended this approach to the study of online literary communities, using a combination of interviews and analysis to show a thriving, productive virtual culture [R2].</p>		
Researching Readers Online [R3]		
<p>The first research project funded by the AHRC in 2012 investigated how people read online, and the insights and opportunities digital platforms provide for education and the creative industries. Thomas and Round employed a range of methods, including focus groups and a survey of 250 online readers. Findings revealed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How preferences for printed or e-books vary depending on genre; • Why readers joined online forums and how they participated; • Why users valued the informality and anonymity of communicating online; • How posting creative works in forums boosted confidence. 		

Digital Reading Network

The AHRC Research Network Award (2013-2015) brought together 29 academics and consultants from multiple disciplines to review existing scholarly models for researching reading practice. From this, the network developed innovative techniques adapted to analysing digital reading and prioritising engagement *with* readers both on- and offline.

Building on the findings from the network, Thomas and Round analysed activities in literature forums, detecting behavioural patterns to understand how users interacted with each other. They interviewed moderators of online reading forums: Myretta Robens, co-founder of the Jane Austen site The Republic of Pemberley, and Sam Jordison who runs The Guardian's online reading group. Key findings showed that groups connect users with shared interests and allow them to shape discussions themselves and moderators play a crucial role in shaping group identities and maintaining community bonds, whilst balancing freedom with good governance [R4].

Collectively this work has demonstrated how digital platforms have altered yet enriched reading. More recent research showing the ways social media transforms how literature is produced and shared has lent further weight to these findings [R5].

3. References to the research

All publications went through a rigorous peer review process. R1 has over 140 citations on Google Scholar, R2 was submitted in the last Research Excellence Framework (REF). R4 and R5 are included in REF 2021. R3 provided access to data and findings from an AHRC funded project.

R1. Thomas, B. (2011) What is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things About It? *Storyworlds*. Vol.3. 1-24. DOI: [10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0001](https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0001)

R2. Thomas, B. (2011) Trickster Authors and Tricky Readers on the MZD forums. In Bray, J. and Gibbons, A. (eds) *Mark Z. Danielewski*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. DOI: [10.7228/manchester/9780719099335.003.0006](https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719099335.003.0006)

R3. Thomas, B. and Round, J. (2012) *Researching Readers Online* [online], Available at: <https://www.researchingreadersonline.buprojects.uk> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

R4. Thomas, B. and Round, J. (2016) Moderating Readers and Reading Online. *Language and Literature*. [Journal Article in a Special Issue featuring members from the Digital Reading Network] DOI: [10.1177/0963947016652785](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947016652785)

R5. Thomas, B. (2020) *Literature and Social Media*. London: Routledge. DOI: [10.4324/9781315207025](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315207025)

4. Details of the impact

Following the body of research from Researching Readers Online and the Digital Reading Network [R1-R4], Thomas was awarded further AHRC funding in 2017/18 to establish the Reading on Screen project, involving new partnerships with the University of Brighton, the Reading Agency and DigiTales, a participatory media company. Readers from a diverse range of backgrounds aged between 18 and 87 created digital stories capturing their experiences of reading in the digital age. Incorporating digital storytelling workshops (in Bournemouth, Brighton and Sheffield), interviews and discussions, the 27 stories produced used a range of techniques including animation, poetry and live-action video (<https://www.readingonscreen.co.uk/category/stories/>). Films were screened in late 2017 at a public exhibition in Brighton and at the Brighton Digital festival.

The project demonstrated how engagement with the digital, far from being confined to younger generations, is in fact also delivering extensive benefits for the older population. It also highlighted how both digital and print reading practices and preferences are shaped by local cultures and environments but that these can change through life experiences and intergenerational interactions. The project achieved the following impacts.

Policy change

Reading is acknowledged as an important part of both learning and leisure. That is why magazines, books and newspapers are VAT exempt. VAT on digital downloads though, have made reading digitally less affordable. The 'Axe the Reading Tax' campaign led by the Publishers Association, along with the Book Trust and the National Literacy Trust, had the support of a large cross-section of MPs as well as leading authors. In direct response to the campaign, in the March 2020 budget, the Chancellor announced that VAT on digital publications would be removed from December 2020. This was brought forward, and the tax was finally removed on 1 May 2020.

Thomas worked closely with the 'Axe the Reading Tax' consultancy team to develop a new campaign strategy based on highlighting how the tax affects the most vulnerable [E1]. Reading on Screen participant Mary Bish has eyesight and mobility difficulties meaning she can now only read digitally. She became the face of the campaign with a new film based on her story featuring on local and national media, and a 3,000-signature strong petition to the government [E2]. A campaign representative writes that "your research has been of great benefit to our campaign, particularly in shifting the focus to personal stories and the adverse impact the 20% VAT on digital publications is having on the elderly" [E1]. As well as raising awareness, she notes that the new campaign strategy prompted by the collaboration was instrumental in bringing on board the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) as a "a key backer of the campaign" [E1].

Benefiting organisations and charities

The Reading Agency believe reading can tackle life's big challenges. They deliver a range of programmes to over 1,400,000 people each year and insights from this research – particularly how and why people read on digital devices – provided them with "a wealth of new learning on the nature of reading in the digital age and of the power of digital storytelling" to apply to their work [E3]. In addition, they state that "the Reading on Screen project has provided an inspiring example of how we might engage older participants in Reading Friends to share stories with each other" [E4] and outline how the model developed in the workshops has "demonstrated how it is possible to create opportunities for people to gain new skills and build confidence at their own pace" [E4].

DigiTales run digital storytelling workshops with young people, refugees, and the homeless. After working on the Reading on Screen project, an executive at DigiTales explained how they have adapted their facilitator training and workshop model to reflect the requirements of working alongside academics with specific research questions in mind. She states that "the collaboration ... took the way in which we structure and position our work to a new level" [E5] and caused them to approach the stories "as sources of rich data" [E5]. She also relates how the project directly led to the organisation working with other universities and provided traineeships for two participants [E5].

Enriching lives

For the participants who created the Reading on Screen stories, finding their voice was a transformative experience. An unforeseen impact is the beneficial effect workshops have on participants with complex social/health issues in terms of social inclusion and emotional resilience.

Learning new skills: Participants had no prior experience of using digital technologies in creative contexts. A workshop participant writes "I have taken the skills I learnt from the course forward to other projects where I have made short films or used text in my textile work [...] I would never

have made the leaps in my own work without the inspirational, supportive and knowledgeable staff on the project” [E6]. Another workshop participant reported, “I learned a lot of skills [...] to utilise different pieces of kit” [E7].

Participants have appeared on local radio (Hope FM) to discuss the project, published stories online via Memoir Magazine, created further films and contributed to the project blog [E8].

Personal growth: Participants described how they benefited in terms of self-worth and achievement, some developing resilience and others enjoying increased social interaction: “It’s been a very enriching situation [...] If it wasn’t for the good support, then I wouldn’t have got through that day, wouldn’t have finished” [E7]; “I’ve gotten to know people that I wouldn’t necessarily speak to” [E7]; “there was a sense of coming together over the same reading material, of finding commonality in our shared experience of story” [E6].

Changing attitudes

The Reading on Screen website has had over 10,000 views to date with an additional 1,200 views on a dedicated YouTube channel. Subscribers to the project blog [E8] come from countries including Belgium, Canada, Finland and Australia.

Sharing the research in the media, at festivals and events open to the general public both in the UK and internationally, has enhanced understanding of the complex ways in which the digital is transforming reading. For example, at BU’s Festival of Learning in 2018, a workshop based on the project resulted in the participants (around 20 most of whom were 60+) producing their own Bookstagram.

The Conversation article written by Thomas contested the negative reporting of e-reading, attracting over 9,000 views, the majority from India [E9].

Interviews with participants provided evidence of increased awareness of their reading practices and preferences: “It’s led me to think a lot about my relationships with texts, about books and audiobooks and ebooks and how I use them” [E7].

Mary’s petition for Axe the Reading Tax raised awareness and motivated members of the public to support the campaign: “Removing VAT from ebooks is long overdue and if it helps Mary and people like her it’s morally right to do so. Good luck Mary.” [E2]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

E1. Axe the Reading Tax Campaign c/o Tendo Consulting (2020). Letter to Professor Bronwen Thomas, 20 February.

E2. Bish, M., (2019). ‘*End The Unfair Tax That Penalises Me For Reading Digital Books*’. [online] Available at: <https://www.change.org/p/the-rt-hon-sajid-javid-mp-end-the-unfair-tax-that-penalises-me-for-reading-digital-books> [Accessed 21 January 2021].

E3. The Reading Agency (2018). ‘*Reading in the digital age: the Reading on Screen project*’. [Blog] *The Reading Agency Blog*, Available at: <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/blog/reading-in-the-digital-age-the-reading-on-screen-project.html> [Accessed 21 January 2021].

E4. Assistant Programme Manager, Reading Agency (2019). Letter to Professor Bronwen Thomas, 26 February.

E5. Director, DigiTales (2020). Letter to Professor Bronwen Thomas, 25 February.

E6. A workshop participant (2020). Email to Professor Bronwen Thomas, 15 February.

E7. Workshop participants (2017). Excerpts from interviews with Reading on Screen participants.

E8. Thomas, B., (2017). “Who is Foo?” A story by Kit Pearce. [Blog] *Reading on Screen Blog*, Available at: <https://www.readingonscreen.co.uk/2017/10/02/who-is-foo-a-story-by-kit-pearce/> [Accessed 21 January 2021].

E9. Thomas, B. (2018). ‘Publishing’s Ratner moment: why eBooks are not ‘stupid’, *The Conversation*, 27 February. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/publishings-ratner-moment-why-ebooks-are-not-stupid-92524> (Accessed 21 January 2021).