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## Libraries: Sustaining the Digital Reader Experience

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### Abstract

As librarians involved with two online reading groups, Read Watch Play (a regular themed Twitter chat) and Read With Me (a live Web-based, face-to-face discussion using Adobe Connect), we consider how we present text in these specific online environments, and how this impacts the reader's experience. Formats and interfaces used by both groups result in different types of reading experiences – including brief, mobile-based reads (Twitter chats) or more in-depth reads (blogs). Both groups recognize that reading is a critical skill required for discussions about books. We also recognize the value of face-to-face online discussions. This presents challenges for libraries in how they connect and interact with readers: encouraging reading discussions online, offering tools focused on reading, and connecting these with the full range of reading materials available in libraries, both online and off.

### Keywords

Libraries; Online reading groups; Twitter; Adobe Connect; Reading; Blogs

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## Introduction

This article shows how different online tools used for the management and organization of online reading groups, and for the reading group discussions themselves, provide differing expectations, experiences, methods of engagement, and levels of permanence for both libraries and readers. Libraries and library staff are key partners with readers. This includes assisting readers exploring different ways of reading as well as connecting with other readers, whether in the same town or suburb or on the other side of the world. The two online reading groups we specifically focus on in this article are Read Watch Play and Read With Me.

## Reading groups

Library staff have been involved in running or facilitating reading groups (also referred to as book clubs) for many years. Reading groups can be simply defined as a discussion and sharing of ideas and opinions by a group of people around a specific book or book themes. The last decade has seen a significant increase in the number of reading groups run or enabled by public libraries. For some public libraries this involves the library itself obtaining the works to be read (whether it be print, audio, e-book, or film); for others it also involves personally facilitating the discussion. Many groups read the same book, while others use a theme approach. Some libraries have multiple sets of books for reading groups that they circulate among members; sometimes even swapping sets with other libraries. Other libraries obtain their material via interlibrary loan each month. These are only some of the many variables possible, but help show the role libraries play in enabling reading groups.

Read Watch Play is a Twitter-based discussion held over a set period of time on the final Tuesday of every month. It is focused on a new theme every month, with the theme taken from its partner weblog. Unlike other reading groups, where the focus of the reading group is a single book, the themes of the discussion are broad topics, in order to encourage followers and contributors to the Twitter discussion to share a wide range of reading interests and enable the discovery of new reading material. New South Wales Libraries (Australia) lead the discussion from the @readwatchplay Twitter account, but other partner library services around the world and their Twitter followers are also involved. The hashtag #RWPchat is regularly used to hold unrelated Read Watch Play discussions, but each monthly theme discussion uses a unique hashtag as well. Potential themes for future Read Watch Play discussions are submitted for consideration by partner library services around the world that are involved in the Read Watch Play initiative. Read With Me is a live Web-based discussion that uses Adobe Connect to encourage discussion around reading habits. This method provides the opportunity for face-to-face discussion and information sharing, even though participants may be physically based miles apart.

The online reading groups discussed in this article are for people for whom it is difficult to commit to being in a particular physical place at a set time each month, or who would like to have a discussion about reading as part of their online lives. From a library perspective they provide a framework that any library staff can use, and know other library professionals will support them. For example a library can participate in Read Watch Play with as few as two tweets or Facebook posts a month, using these to

inform their followers of its availability, scope, and theme, knowing that staff from other libraries will support this online discussion. Taking part in an online reading group discussion allows librarians to have a wider reach than facilitating a physical group. We all know how time-consuming reading groups can be, and this online discussion allows even very small libraries to participate, and connect their readers with other readers. This shares the workload for running the reading group between several libraries. Having a reading discussion on Twitter involves being able to share ideas in 140 characters or less. There can be active discussion between participants, just as in a face-to-face reading group, and people can catch up on the earlier discussion, by looking at the relevant hashtag (subject) rather than having to be brought up to date by the reading group facilitator. The use of Twitter in the Read Watch Play discussion means that instead of people needing to be in one place for a face-to-face reading discussion, they can be anywhere in the world, provided they have access to Twitter. This is a significant format change, as it means that libraries anywhere in the world can provide the service.

### **Reading tools**

The tools used influence how the reading takes place, and provide different experiences for the participants. Adobe Connect is used for the Read With Me 2014 discussions, which is funded by the Department of Culture and Museum of the Västmanland County Council in Sweden. This tool provides online face-to-face discussion and also enables the sharing of documents, so a spoken discussion involves reading what is on the screen and shared note taking, where each participant can see what the others are writing – whether in a chat discussion, which is used when participants may be having technical issues, or a shared document. Using Adobe Connect, the authors of this article have a monthly online discussion about the facilitation of online and offline reading groups, which results in a more temporary reading artefact, as they discuss readers' use of different online options.

Google Hangouts is used by the Read Watch Play organizers to support planning, and also enable face-to-face online discussions with access to shared documents and chat. Both Adobe Connect and Google Hangouts help the library participants from different countries to engage and plan using a mix of discussion and online reading. Most of the participants have not met in person, but through the use of these online tools have made strong connections with their peers in other countries, or other parts of the same country. This has helped the effectiveness of the online reading groups. Email lists are used to facilitate the connections, and sort out meeting times. They are used sparingly and provide the standard email reading experience. These are both small groups, and this works well for the communication.

Google Drive, with shared documents and tracking of editing, is critical for the effective functioning of the Read Watch Play group. The descriptive blog posts are drafted using Drive, with various planning tools also stored there. Some kind of cloud solution is essential as each workplace has different closed solutions that can only be used by employees of that workplace. The cloud solution means that several people can access, edit, and manage all the documents, and it matches the distributed management structure. The Readers Advisory wiki is another key collaborative tool as the ideas for

the themes are created and shared there, so that anyone who is a writer on the wiki can comment or add to them. It is also used to share ideas for how libraries may use the monthly themes with their communities. It is public and accountable. While the wiki is messy, a key part of the mess is deliberate as it enables collaboration. If it looks too neat people do not think their ideas and suggestions can be added. A little bit of-untidiness or chaos encourages participation because people are not afraid to mess it up. The Google Drive documents have an unfinished look as they are not public documents, and again, this makes it easier for people to add their content without feeling like they are messing something up or getting it wrong.

Twitter is critical for the reading group Read Watch Play. We know that sounds obvious, but with all the other social media being used by this group, it is important to mention. Twitter has the constraint of 140 characters. It is impressive how intense the discussions about reading, watching, and playing can be using this tool. Reading is discussed by reading and writing very short messages. People connect online with strangers who like (or do not like) similar reading. There is a different theme each month, and it is up to the participants, aided by the facilitators who are library workers, to see how they can argue the inclusion of a particular title or topic each month. It is very interesting to see the angles people use to include topics or titles. For example, using the themes for 2014, it is possible to include food within every Read Watch Play discussion:

- #questread is the hunt for the perfect recipe, or the most unusual food experience, or a new food to try growing or making;
- #urbanread could be urban food growing or restaurant and café reviews
- #munchread is all about food, and how you consume food reading, reading about food, and food related reading
- #warread could be food rationing, the history of food, food wars, or exploring ethical aspects of food such as fair-trade; and
- #spaceread could explore what food went into space, how you shelve your recipe books at home, how you fit in all the food you want to try, and how we can collectively make sure there is space for food for everyone.

This is a playful example of what is possible. This means that people can bring their own reading experiences to the discussion, and can help others see different ways of interpreting and experiencing reading each month.

The Swedish Adobe Connect and international Twitter discussions recognize that libraries and readers are key partners in the reading discussion, and the way the information/text is presented to the reader by the library service has an impact on how the reader interprets it. Both of these discussions highlight contrasting elements of language. That some of the Read With Me participants do speak Swedish is critical in highlighting the importance of using local languages in these online discussions. This further reinforces the importance of continuing to read in multiple languages. Diversity of reading languages is critical. The Bokcirklar.se discussion in Swedish, for example, takes place via chat. In contrast, the Twitter discussion takes place in English, although it has always been an option for participants to use other languages, and this

has been encouraged. There is the possibility of using tools like Google Translate for a rough and ready reading of what is being discussed in another language. It is not as subtle or nuanced as a translation by a native speaker, but it provides an indication of the content, so that a loose approximation of an accurate reading is possible and key ideas can be understood. This is another possible way to explore online reading groups.

Using Twitter provides a ready-made tool for lively interaction between a varying number of readers. Comments can be made by individuals and picked up quickly by others. As Twitter also stores tweets, people can pick up on the discussion later by searching a hashtag. Hashtags are used to connect people who do not know each other to the same discussion. The conversation can be open to many people at the same time. You can follow the discussion without a Twitter account and the discussion is public, but you need a Twitter account if you are going to be more active and participate. Some users may feel more comfortable reading rather than interacting, especially if they are part of the socially excluded groups that libraries work so tirelessly to involve. This discussion can act as the first point of involvement and ease users into developing their enjoyment of reading and indeed sharing their reading experiences. The limitation of the text that can be included in a tweet often means people are sharing focused ideas and comments about their reading habits and interest. Progression of an idea or thought can be built across a series of tweets. People can also share links to videos, e-books, websites, and images to help them convey their thoughts on reading to others. Some participants, such as Public Libraries Singapore, use the hashtags combined with text and images on Instagram for part of the reading experience.

Responses to tweets are linked to the original tweet, so the conversation thread is held together, and in some discussions the people included in a reply (via their Twitter handles) can take up an increasing part of each tweet. The ability to retweet in Twitter allows users to share comments around the book discussion made by others even further than the sender's original target audience, and thus opens the discussion to a wider group of people. It is both a synchronous and asynchronous discussion as people are tweeting with other people online at the same time, but also commenting on a tweet that could have been sent much earlier. This has challenges as a reading experience, as the tweeters/readers can see later on if someone replied to one of their comments after they went offline, and they may choose to continue this discussion at a later hour or date.

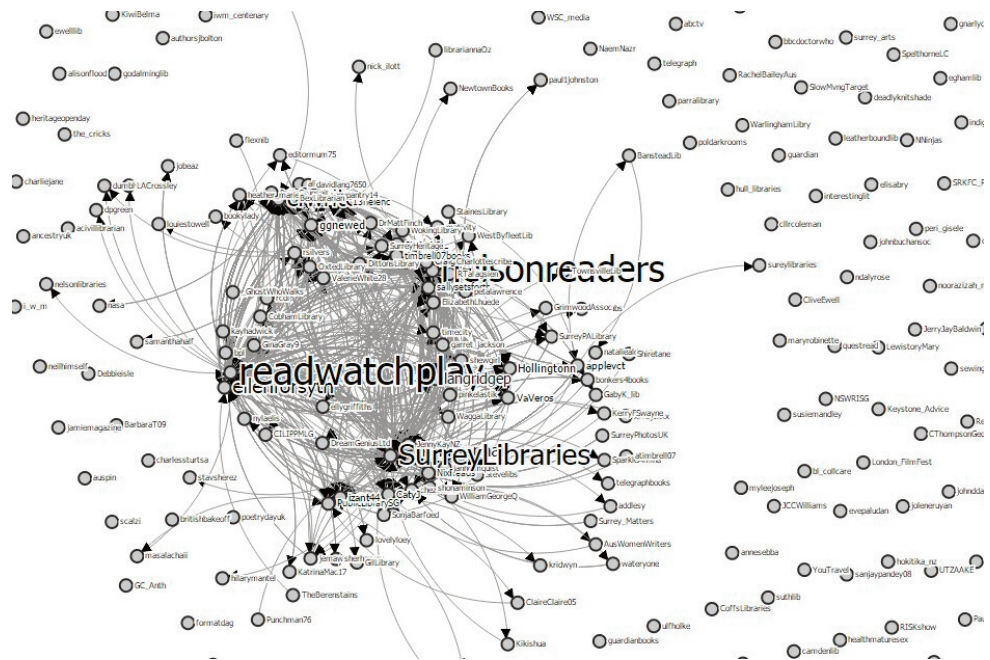
The ability to favourite a tweet also acts as a way to record a tweet to follow up later. Twitter also allows links to resources outside of Twitter to be included in tweets and this expands the discussion beyond the constraints of the system. Although Twitter can be accessed anywhere with an Internet connection, it is often seen as a mobile service and as such it means that people can be reading discussions on the move – wherever they have an Internet connection. In particularly lively discussions containing many tweets, the user is also expected to be a speed-reader.

Twitter is limited to short-form messages of 140 characters maximum, and this means that only a limited amount of information can be imparted in a single tweet. The limit can be both beneficial (it provides a focus) and problematic (it can be difficult to

condense what you want to say into 140 characters). It can take a long time to write a tweet that conveys what you want it to, or you can dash off one at speed. Typos are acceptable, and sometimes provide unexpected humour (although people are generally gentle with this). Engagement can happen at any time, even outside of normal working hours, especially when using scheduling tools to send tweets out.

The Read Watch Play discussion group runs live chats on the last Tuesday of every month at specific times, with the intention of engaging with users and other library authorities. These chats use a general hashtag of #RWPchat, as well as a hashtag for the theme that is being focused on that month. In December, for example, the hashtag was #retroread. To encourage discussion the monthly themed blog posts are shared on Twitter – they include ideas for books people could read around the theme. Moderators of the Twitter discussion, including the main @readwatchplay account, also raise questions about what the theme means to readers, and seek a diverse approach to be inclusive of different reading interests and styles. Though there is a main Twitter account for Read Watch Play, partner libraries' accounts (e.g., @PublicLibrarySG and @SurreyLibraries) also help moderate and encourage discussion. It helps to see a range of libraries participating so even if people do not see their own library online, they know library staff are happy to discuss reading.

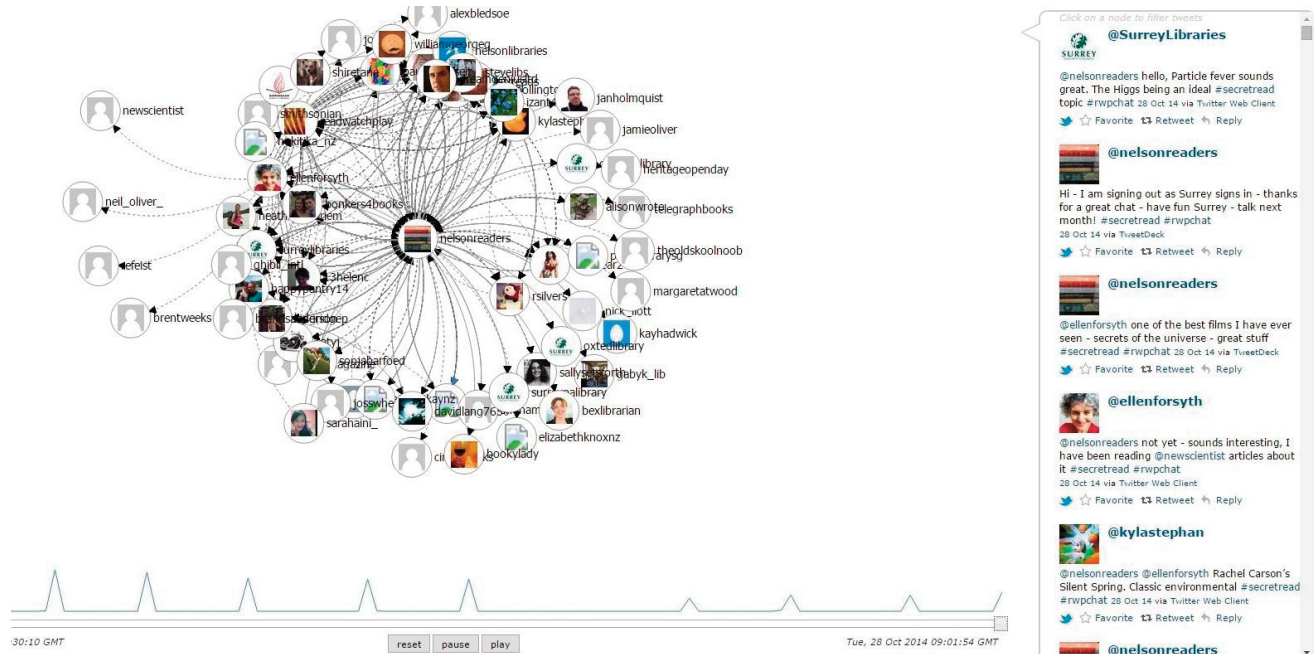
**Figure 1: This is a visualization of part of the TAGSExplorer data. The dots that are linked show conversations between people tweeting, the lone dots are isolated tweets, which can be seen as isolated readers, or even reading, which is isolated.**



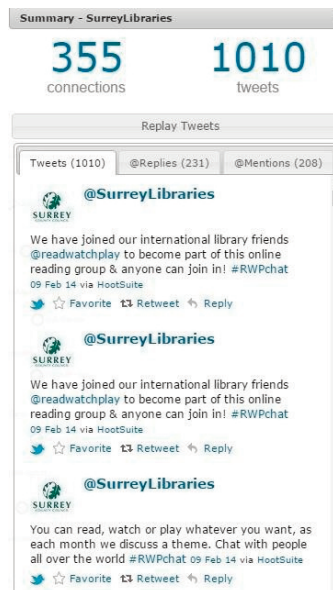
There are millions of tweets sent everyday and they can disappear from your live tweet stream very quickly. Twitter still records them and many can be found at a later date via search tools, and the Library of Congress in the U.S. collects them. By using other tools like Storify and TAGSExplorer (see Figure 1) a more permanent record can be kept of these tweets. TAGSExplorer allows readers to search for tweets around a

keyword and draw on older tweets for inclusion in current discussions. Additionally, TAGSExplorer visualizes the tweets so you can see the reading interactions and read the actual interactions, which is also part of the online reading experience (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

**Figure 2: This shows a summary of the conversations that Nelson Library, using its twitter account @nelsonreaders, has been participating in. You can read your way through every tweet it has contributed using the #RWPchat tag, and you can also read the conversations it has participated in.**



**Figure 3: This shows part of the Surrey Libraries discussion. It shows the total number of tweets and the replies and mentions; how you read this information can change how you see the conversations.**



Blogs give readers the chance to follow the discussion in a much longer form. Blogs can be an unlimited length and give writers the opportunity to express their thoughts in a more detailed and natural way (i.e., without limits to writing style) than say, for example, Twitter. Blog posts, with their longer length, demand more time to be focused on them by readers than the 140 characters of a tweet.

Blogs can be set up to target individual audiences through the topics they cover. For example, Read Watch Play focuses solely on discussions about books, films, music, and games and as such attracts and keeps the attention of readers who are interested in those areas. Writers of the blog can raise ideas for consideration and offer opinions for discussion by readers. The long form text of the blog gives readers the opportunity to consider the thoughts and opinions of the writer in a single place/piece, unlike services such as Twitter which, by its limitations on tweet length, may break up the discussion/train of thought. Many blog services allow readers to engage with the writer of the blog in the form of comments, which are also visible to other readers of the blog. A blog, as with other online services, can also attract the attention of those outside of the original discussion. For example, the “In Their Own Words: From the Artists” post by Fiona Campbell (2013) on the Read Watch Play blog from July 2013, was of relevance to those interested in the #artread discussion happening at the time, but would still be of interest to anyone interested in art today.

We recognize that different types of online services rely upon or lend themselves to different techniques for reading. Both short- and long-form reading is important in online reading discussions. Twitter depends upon the ability to read text condensed into 140 characters, with the artefacts often being the tweets themselves – a stream of ideas and preferences for reading material from multiple people all fed into a single location that could, in theory, be read by anyone. This is complex reading, sorting through and following the different ideas or threads, and choosing which ones to respond to, and which ones to watch and see what someone else may choose to say. Through using other tools, such as a blog or Tumblr, we can also see that long-form reading is just as important. Some discussion sessions have featured Twitter streams as the reading content being discussed because, for many areas of reading, Twitter is a good fit – from the biographical aspect of reading peoples’ Twitter streams to reading tweets about the classics and current or historical events.

Blogs provide a permanent record of the discussion. Unlike a static website (without a blog or newsfeed), which would have information overwritten by more up-to-date information, new blog posts are added regularly, which builds up a collection of articles that can be read at any time. For example, the most viewed blog post on the Read Watch Play blog is written by author and academic Anita Heiss (2013) and is called “Top Ten Indigenous-authored Children’s Books.” It was written in 2013, but continues to attract a significant number of readers.

Pinterest is a visual bookmarking/sharing site. It can act as a visual introduction to a book. The old proverb says, “Never judge a book by its cover,” but a particularly eye-catching cover that has been added to Pinterest can draw a reader in to find out more and borrow that book. Text can also be included within the description field, and this



can be used to give the book some context (acting as a taster) as to why it has been bookmarked. The ability to pin any image on Pinterest, and for anyone using Pinterest to see it, means there is plenty of opportunity for other people to take an interest in an item that has been pinned, whether they are involved in book discussions or not. Users can comment on pins, like them, or reshare them, illustrating that users can engage in the reading experience in a new way. The Read Watch Play boards on Pinterest are collaborative, so if someone follows a board they will be invited to pin to it, and some people choose to do this. Instagram and Tumblr (when focused on image sharing) also provide similar experiences and engagement opportunities. A key feature of Facebook, the “like” gives an indication of how engaged the reader is. Facebook also allows further two-way interaction with the reader in the form of comments in response to Facebook posts and status updates.

## **Conclusion**

As librarians, we need to consider how we present text in the online environments we choose to hold our discussions in, especially as different services use different communication protocols. For example, the leisurely pace of a blog in contrast to the speed-reading of Twitter. The difference in how the text or information is presented provides the readers with different experiences. Similarly, individual readers define how they prefer to read via the tools they use, and how they use them. There are some readers who think the idea of a discussion about reading on Twitter is impossible. Without exception they are people who have not participated in this kind of discussion and choose not to explore the possibilities provided in this format. That is fine, as they are choosing to continue reading in other ways, and we each need to read in ways that appeal to us, and not be pressured into exploring other options. Readers can be enticed to try different methods of reading, and that is how some libraries have been promoting the Twitter reading group. It is not the kind of reading that will appeal to everyone, just as reading the same book and talking about it with others does not have universal appeal.

The different interfaces used by both groups result in different types of reading experiences – brief mobile-based reads (dipping in and out of Twitter) and more in-depth reads (the blog). Both groups recognize that reading is a critical skill required to move book discussions on. With Adobe Connect talking about reading and physically seeing other people respond to your comments, is part of the reading experience. Similarly, emoticons are sometimes used in Twitter discussions to soften a comment, as the aim is to encourage friendly discussion, not to have people be scathing of the reading habits or opinions of others. When very different opinions are raised they are done with sensitivity, respect, and sometime gentle humour.

Both forms of discussion document some of the ways people experience information as readers, in a very specific way – Twitter is very brief (140 character limit), while the other format does not have this constraint. It also demonstrates that we have different ways of talking about our reading, sometimes a short simple response is perfect, other times it takes many tweets to adequately convey the idea, and it may need tweets from several people for the most effective representation. This requires careful reading from the various participants, as well as occasional explanations of cultural heritage. This is

particularly noticeable around the discussions on children's books and some works by authors that may not be widely read, or even available, outside their country of origin.

This presents challenges for libraries in how they connect and interact with readers, through encouraging reading discussions online, offering tools focused on reading, and connecting these with the full range of reading materials available in libraries, both online and off. It also requires that library staff have a broad view of who their clients are, as the participants in the Read Watch Play discussions are from several countries with diverse social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. These challenges are opportunities to connect readers to each other, and to assist them in exploring different ways of reading.

### **Websites**

Bokcirkklar.se, <http://bokcirkklar.se/>  
Public Libraries Singapore, Instagram, <http://instagram.com/publiclibrarysg/>  
Read Watch Play, <http://readwatchplay.wordpress.com/>  
Read Watch Play, Eventifier, <http://eventifier.co/event/rwpchat/tweets>  
Read Watch Play, Pinterest, <http://www.pinterest.com/readwatchplay/>  
Read Watch Play, Storify, <https://storify.com/readwatchplay>  
Read Watch Play, TAGSexplorer beta, [http://hawksey.info/tagsexplorer/?key=oAsmcD5ziFsg\\_dEVCQmc4RW1veTQ5bHJqUzM5c1U2eHc&sheet=oaw](http://hawksey.info/tagsexplorer/?key=oAsmcD5ziFsg_dEVCQmc4RW1veTQ5bHJqUzM5c1U2eHc&sheet=oaw)  
Read Watch Play, Tumblr, <http://read-watch-play.tumblr.com/>  
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