

## Personal Readings and Public Texts: Book Blogs and Online Writing about Literature

By Ann Steiner

### Abstract

The blogging culture has become an important and integrated part of the book trade and has influenced the publishing, marketing and distribution of literature in North America and in many European countries. However, it is unclear how this potential agency among bloggers operates, and thus far most research has concerned politics, media systems and larger social structures. The present article is a study of the Swedish book blogs during the autumn of 2009 and an attempt to address a small, but significant, part of the Internet influence. The relationship between books and digital technology is complicated and manifold, but it is clear that the Internet has changed how people access books, how they read and how they communicate with others about their reading. Here, the position of the amateur is one that will be discussed in detail in terms of professionalism, strategies and hierarchies. Another issue that will be addressed is the connections between the book bloggers and the book trade, especially the publishers and their marketing departments. The book bloggers operate in a social realm, despite the fact that their writing is personal, and have to be understood in their social, economic and literary context. The Swedish book blogs will be analysed with the help of reader-response theory, sociology of literature and a book historical perspective on the dissemination of literature.

**Keywords:** Blogs, Internet, book history, book trade, reader-response theory, reading

## Introduction

In October 2007, Andrew Stevens, an editor of *3:AM Magazine* in the UK, wrote about the existential and emotional troubles of being a book blogger. How can I be a book blogger, he said, when such people are so often described as being “over-opinionated and under-qualified dilettante[s]” (Stevens 2007)? Stevens had been “outed” in a book on the subject, a guide to English language book blogs (Gillieron & Kilgarriff 2007), which gave him reason to question his own position. The article was, of course, largely ironic, and it started a friendly and humorous discussion on being in denial, acceptance and coming to terms with being a book blogger.

This discussion on who and what a book blogger is and the publication of the *Bookaholics Guide to Book Blogs* (2007) were signs that the phenomenon had become an established part of the literary scene. Two years later, when I conducted the research for the present article, the book bloggers were no longer called into question, but mainstreamed. Monthly magazines suggest book blogs, and in the daily papers bloggers are interviewed about their reading habits and literary interests. The blogging culture has become an important and integrated part of the book trade, and has influenced the publishing, marketing and distribution of literature in North America and in many European countries. The present article is a study of Swedish book blogs during the autumn of 2009. Blogging, like much of the Internet, is constantly changing, and any study of online activities has to deal with the fact that the material is elusive. It is only possible to map out and analyse the character of the blogging phenomena at a certain point in time and with geographical and linguistic limitations. Sweden is a valid example. It is a country with a small population, a single language, an extensive general knowledge of English, and widespread use of the Internet. The observations made, however, can be compared to similar findings in other countries.

Describing and analysing how books are produced, distributed, and consumed in contemporary society has many similarities with writing an historical account of the book trade in antiquity or in the early modern period. There are, of course, differences in addressing historical or contemporary material, but there are also parallels between different periods. The methods and theories underlying a perspective within sociology of the text (McKenzie 1999) or book history (Eliot & Rose 2007) supply useful methods of approaching the material. The difficulty in historical research is that a great deal of material is lost, and in a study of the present, the material is overwhelming in size and cannot be processed as a whole. Each attempt to investigate reading habits, the book trade or the production of literature in digital media has to be accompanied by a number of limitations. Thus, it is still important to make sense of contemporary development in order to address the conditions for literature.

In studying the book blogs, a number of questions immediately arose concerning reading, attributing value, the public character of the Internet, as well as marketing, the book trade, and the position of the book bloggers. For example, is it possible to study book bloggers in order to understand how general readers discuss and approach literature? Are different kinds of values employed in reviewing books than in professional critique? Is it possible to find common strategies that many readers use in their writing about literature? Two aspects immediately stood out as important; one was how amateur reviewers and professional critics relate to one another. The other significant facet was the fact that there are connections between the book bloggers and the book trade, especially the publishers and their marketing departments. The present article will cover these aspects as well as others essential to an analysis of how the book meets the digital world.

### **Books vs. Internet – Theories and Positions**

There is a surprising edginess between representatives of different media in the literary world. Many booklovers do not trust the new media to spread the word, and many IT devotees find the book old-fashioned and obsolete. Considering that they in effect owe a lot to each other, the conflict is a little startling, but still it is a recurrent feature of most discussions, articles, and even research in the field. This general observation applies to a great deal of writing about books and the Internet in recent years, but is not relevant to book bloggers. The book blog is rather the opposite; it is a place where different media intermingle and meet. Most book bloggers love not only literature, but also the book itself, and many often express that the printed book is the best format for reading literature. These readers happily use digital technology to cherish the experience of reading an old-fashioned book.

That modern media and digital technology pose a threat to the printed codex is an often-repeated mantra that has yet to be proven. In fact there are no signs that e-books, audio books, or online writing are taking over the printed codex' position. As Angus Phillips, British researcher in publishing studies, noted: "Paradoxically, the world going digital is helping to keep the book alive, with the possibility that books may remain in print indefinitely while being available to buy anywhere in the world" (2007: 547). Not only has digital technology improved the possibilities to store and print books, but book bloggers, online reviewers and BookCrossers have showed that the Internet is in fact promoting and aiding literature published in the book format.

Others would not agree with Phillips, and one of the most influential critics is Sven Birkerts who, in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (1994), argued that digital technology is a threat to literacy as well as to higher level reading skills. Our willingness to embrace new technologies endangers reading and literature, according to Birkerts, and all new media – CD-ROMs, DVDs, the Internet, etc. – have detrimental

effects on our ability to read printed text. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of his renowned book, Birkerts did admit that parts of modern technology have proven to be more useful and less harmful than he had predicted, however, he still maintains that his initial analysis was correct (Birkerts 2006: XI–XV).

On the other side of the so-called “reading wars” are those who argue that the book is a dead medium and that it is only a matter of time before this non-environmentally friendly, old-fashioned product will be gone for good. For example, in his thought-provoking text (published as a printed book!) *Print is Dead* (2008), American publisher Jeff Gomez pronounced that not only the book in codex format, but also all other kinds of printed matter are passé. According to Gomez, the reluctance displayed by publishers and distributors in the trade is the main obstacle to the development of e-books, mp3 files and other forms of digital distribution. Not only does Gomez believe in a digital future, but also he claimed that the change has already taken place in the younger generation and predicted that the process might be slow, but that we will eventually forget print and the book (Gomez 2008: 39).

Perhaps it is no coincidence that those who are for and those who are against new media have a different focus. Among those who embrace the development, there is a strong interest in the technology itself or in the social interactions between those who use it. While the critics, on the other hand, instead talk about content and how this is created and spread. Those who disapprove of the literary uses of digital technology will most often discuss quality, informed knowledge, and culture. Some are also interested in the interplay between people, but not with an enthusiastic belief in the development.

Gomez still maintained that the medium – whether it is an e-reader, printed book or broadsheet – has no bearing on the content, at least not for the readers (2008: 45–47). His argument, however, is neither elaborated nor convincing, and other theorists, such as Friedrich Kittler or Don McKenzie, would object that the medium influences and shapes content (Kittler 1999; McKenzie 1999). Most booklovers would also argue that there are profound differences between a printed book and an e-reader, and that the latter will change reading and writing in the long run.

This polarized debate has left traces in most parts of the Internet research, and neutrality is not a possible position. So yes, I still think the printed book in codex format has a future. However, supported by reading researchers such as David Reinking (2009), I also believe that digital technology will have profound effects on literature and printed matter in general. The competition between different media may take a different turn than expected, as has been suggested by American media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999). They argued that new media technologies integrate older, already established media forms and content, it is in this sense “remediated”. A similar line of reasoning can be found as early as in Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1964), where he claimed

that all media exist in constant interaction with each other. These ideas can be applied to the book, as well as the other media used for texts and literature that have become increasingly important. Henry Jenkins has also suggested that the meeting of different media in the present “convergence culture” is not a technological shift, but should be seen as a process: “Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences” (Jenkins 2006: 15). His argument is useful for addressing the book blogs and their relationship to literature, as the encounter is not merely a physical and technological meeting; instead it is process in which the audience, the texts and the market re-negotiate their positions and responses.

Media studies have tended to dominate the research on the Internet, but many other fields have contributed to our knowledge, for example law, economics, and linguistics. The present approach is from a literary studies perspective. This means, among other things, that some of the theories and concepts, e.g. the ideas mentioned by McLuhan, Jenkins, Bolter and Grusin, are standard to a media theorist, but new when applied to literary material. There is a rift between literary studies and media theory, but in combination with a book historical perspective, which in reality is the study of a single medium’s history, it is possible to address contemporary literary material in new ways. The book historical view is that the conditions for media production constitute an important historical link to understanding literature and the construction of knowledge. Within book history, an often-used theoretical basis is that of Robert Darnton and his view of the book as a process: “the communications circuit” (Darnton 2002). Others have questioned the usefulness of Darnton’s model for the contemporary book trade (Svedjedal 2000: 125–126). One particular critique is that the literary circuit, as described by Darnton, reduces the reader to a passive recipient of texts (Pawley 2009). However, in this context, Darnton can be employed to analyse and clarify the structure of the book trade and the position of the book blogs within the literary system.

As argued before, book bloggers are part of the market at the same time as they are readers and consumers, and in this respect, it is possible to make use of theories inspired by Michel de Certeau and his concept of “poaching”, i.e., the reading strategies employed. According to de Certeau, an active reader will fight back against an oppressing system based on the assumption that production and distribution exist above consumers and beyond their control (de Certeau 1984: 165–176). Christine Pawley thus argued that the criticism of Darnton could similarly be directed at de Certeau (2009). They both regard the producer and the consumer, the author and the reader, as separated from each other, but this is an opposition that is no longer valid. Furthermore, according to Pawley, de Certeau places the reader in a hierarchy below the author and the publisher, which is a simplifying model.

Pawley’s arguments provide tools for understanding the position of the reading process in contemporary society. The drawback is that in criticizing both Darnton

and de Certeau, she leaves a theoretical vacuum. If the objective is to make sense of reading strategies, it is hardly possible to dismiss both the socio-economic layer as well as the individual psychological one. In order to understand book bloggers, I suggest that a very open use of Darnton's set of functions could provide a solution. Instead of applying the functions to individuals, they can be used as a method for mapping out different activities in the trade, such as marketing, writing, or evaluating. This will help us make sense of the actions of companies, individuals and different agents in the book world. As suggested by others (Svedjedal 2000: 130–132), the contemporary book trade does not differentiate between various tasks in the manner of early trade booksellers, printers, and binders. For example, the Internet bookstore Amazon sells books, distributes, markets, evaluates, publishes, etc., all at the same time (Svedjedal 1999, Steiner 2006). Therefore, it appears to be necessary to question the separation of audience and trade.

A general difficulty in applying theories from book history or sociology of literature to a single phenomenon is that it has proven to be complicated to show how societal change affects individual actions. The connection between a wider sphere and an individual person or phenomenon tends to be vaguely described, and however important and interesting the questions are, the answers often leave methodological issues unresolved. Christine Pawley suggested that, in order to understand how literature links individuals with society, organizations and social institutions such as libraries, government agencies, and literary societies should be studied. Another possibility, only hinted at by Pawley, would be to study readers as groups. Others have proposed similar concepts, i.e. Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" (1983), Stanley Fish' "interpretative communities" (1980) and Elizabeth Long's "social infrastructure of reading" (2003). Long is particularly useful in this article as she has examined readers' uses of literature.

One of the most significant arguments in debates over the consequences of the Internet has been about the changes – positive as well as negative – in social structures. Media theorist Manuel Castells mapped out a new world, *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), where information technology dissolves existing social patterns and creates new ones, unknown and difficult to grasp. This is a drastic and thought-provoking idea if applied to literature. People are already becoming more publicly social in relation to literature – book clubs, blogging and Internet bookstores are examples of how people interact in the public realm with both friends and people unknown to them. On websites like these, readers are no longer passive consumers, but instead actively promoting and discussing reading and literature.

When different forms of digital media became widespread in the 1990s, many expected a rapid development that would revolutionize the book trade. However, a number of previous setbacks have caused the book industry to be cautious with regard to other media. One not-yet-forgotten failure was the miscalculated ventures into CD-ROM publishing in the mid-1990s, when many small and large pub-



lishers alike made investments that did not pay off at all. The so-called “dot.com-crisis” around the year 2000 added to the unwillingness among traditional publishers to venture into new technologies. Besides, the printed book sells very well. A survey among American publishers showed that they are keen on creating websites, online marketing and new distribution channels, but have no interest in new media for publishing (Healy 2008). Established websites such as Amazon and Facebook or sites specifically dedicated to certain kinds of genre fiction, such as *Fantasy Fan*, are useful for marketing purposes, and these are being used more frequently. The relation between the freedom of the Internet, the commercial interests and the uses of the public sphere is intricate, and will be discussed further in the article.

### **The Book Blog in Sweden 2009**

In Sweden, use of the Internet is widespread, among the highest rates in the world along with the other Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. A survey from 2009 revealed that 77% of the Swedish adult population uses the Internet on a regular basis (Findahl 2009: 15). Blogs may be a much-talked-about phenomenon, but only 37% of Internet users read blogs and only around 5% of the adult population spends time creating or developing a blog. The statistics also show that it is women who blog, while men spend more time file sharing and playing online games (Findahl 2009: 22, 31–33).

Bloggging arose as a phenomenon already in the mid-1990s, generally attributed to the web diary of Justin Hall in 1994 (Rosen 2004), with the first Swedish counterpart in 1997. In Sweden, the web diary, later referred to as weblog or blog, became widespread in 2004. With well over 100 million blogs worldwide, the numbers and the variety of the blogs are still, in 2009, rapidly growing with new blogs being created every day. The blogs dedicated mainly to literature were common already in 2005, and in autumn 2009, the number of active blogs about literature in Sweden, depending on the definition, ranged from 150 to 250.

The survey conducted for the present purposes was based on the book blogs that could be found through three major portals, one general (*Bloggportalen.se*) and two specialized in book blogs (*Bokbloggar.nu* and *litt.se*). The collecting site *Bloggportalen.se* claims to have 3 000 registered blogs about writing and literature, but this figure also includes bloggers writing occasionally about literature who link themselves to this category. The lists from the two more specialized portals gave 300 blogs, but after going through each link, the number was significantly lowered. Several blogs were inactive and others wrote more about other things than about literature. Attempts to find unattached book blogs gave some newly started ones. In the end, the list comprised 220 blogs about books, literature, and reading. The requirement for being included on the list was regular postings (minimum two per month) and more than half of the postings had to be about litera-

ture, the book trade, authors, or writing. There are a large number of general cultural blogs that also write about literature, but those are not included in this study. Many other bloggers writing web diaries about their daily life also comment on books they have read, but these bloggers are also not included in the material. So it should be noted that blogging about literature is much more extensive than this survey indicate.

Defining the book blog was difficult in several ways; one hard line to draw was determining the differences between an online literary magazine and a book blog. There are several group blogs that resemble online magazines. A common, but not always valid, definition is that the online magazine publishes a number of articles at the same time, making it an issue with a number (often with some kind of theme). The articles in the magazines also tend to be longer and edited. In contrast, the book blog article is rarely edited, the articles are generally shorter and they give a sense of “immediacy”, both in publishing and content. However, for the present purposes, the blogs and the magazines have been allowed to define themselves, i.e. the sites that call themselves magazines have not been included.

A general observation is that it is hard to maintain a blog dedicated solely to literature. Most people do not read at a steady pace. A holiday may result in more postings, and work in dry periods. Some bloggers solve this by writing reviews that are published at a later date. Also, many bloggers express that they find it difficult to have something to write about apart from reviews. The result is that most single bloggers have a short life span, rarely more than one or two years, while group blogs (made up of more than one blogger) usually last longer. As the person behind the blog *Rubus Libri* expressed it: “I can now look back on more than a year of blogging, and observe, as expected, that it was harder than expected [!]” (*Rubus Libri* 2009).<sup>1</sup> This blogger complains about the difficulties of being a creative writer, the lack of visitors, and worse, the even lower number of comments. It is clear that book blogging, like most things, requires time, hard work and dedication. As a result, less than 20% of the single bloggers started before 2007 and had maintained their blog for more than two years. At least 20% of the single bloggers (probably more as these tend to be more difficult to trace) started in 2009, the same year the survey was conducted. I made a similar study of book blogs during the autumn of 2007, and at that time the majority of the blogs had been started in 2005. Two years later, most of them were deactivated. However, it can be argued that the intention of the blogs is not to be permanent or fixed. The nature of the format promotes a short life span.

Other general observations that can be made concern age and gender. The book bloggers are usually, in cases where age is presented, between 30 and 40 years. This is a higher average age than bloggers in general, as most blog creators are between 16 and 24 years (Findahl 2009: 31). Accordingly, book bloggers more often have families, and they also generally have university degrees and jobs. Furthermore, most of them live in smaller towns around the country, although quite a



few live in one of the three larger urban areas: Stockholm, Göteborg, or Malmö. The book bloggers are also almost all female. Among the single bloggers, 75% of those who state their sex are women and only 8% men. These figures concur with blogging in general, as women spend more time on creating and updating blogs than men do, but women are even more common among book bloggers than they are in the rest of the blogosphere.

In Sweden, the most popular (visited) blogs are written by young women (between the age of 15 and 20) writing about gossip, fashion, and their daily lives. Bloggers like Blondinbella, Kenza and Kissie have between 600 000 and 700 000 visitors a week, and have duly become minor celebrities. These bloggers get invited to parties, are written about in evening papers, and mentioned on TV – blogging has become a route to fame. Yet these bloggers are in most respects far different from the average book blogger, who is older, writes more or less on one subject, is less personal, and does not have as many readers. The only book blog with plenty of readers is *Bokhora*, a group blog that will be analysed in more detail, with approximately 15 000 visitors a week (Björkäng 2009). Most book bloggers, on the other hand, only have a few visitors, ranging from less than ten to 2 000 a week.

Book blogs could be mapped out in different ways depending on the criteria, e.g. content, themes, and style. To give a general overview, I have divided them into four groups based on the blogger, or bloggers, i.e. their actual number (one or more), purpose (commercial or non-commercial), and profession (professional or not). The groups intersect and overlap, but give a sense of the nature of different kinds of blogs. The following groups are described: “professional commercial book blogs”, “professional non-profit book blogs”, “non-professional individual book blogs”, and “non-professional group book blogs”. The “non-professional individual book blogs” form by far the largest category and are also important, as they represent a group that did not previously have the same kind of access to the public sphere.

### **Professional Commercial Book Blogs**

These are blogs written by authors, bookstores, newspapers, magazines, journalists, etc. Most of them are created in order to market a brand, a name, or a company. Some are simply commercial marketing, while others have a versatile and sophisticated content. The professional blogs tend to be nicely designed and do not have so many banners. The blogs produced by publishing houses and bookstores generally post comments on an irregular basis. Newspapers and journals, on the other hand, often make a daily posting written as a way to comment on current debates or events. None of the four large daily papers in Sweden have cultural blogs any longer (they used to have them), but the large evening papers have several (e.g. *Aftonbladet*'s Kulturbloggen). These professional bloggers generally have a surprisingly slight influence on the debates in other blogs, with a few ex-

ceptions, such as prominent authors (e.g., Bodil Malmsten). In the survey, there were twenty publisher blogs (e.g., *Svante Weylers blog*) and six belonging to bookstores (e.g., *SF-bokhandeln i Malmö*). The authors' blogs are more difficult to define, as these tend to be about more than literature. Many of these are literature in their own right, while others are simple marketing for the author's persona.

### **Professional Non-profit Book Blogs**

These are blogs written by a single librarian, or more commonly a group of librarians, connected to a local city library. The aim of these blogs is to inform the public about books and literature in general. A few of them are directed at other professionals, and will also give general information about the book trade, authors, events, etc. These are popular, while the blogs written by single committed librarians have fewer postings. The most influential in this group is a book recommendation blog, *Boktips.net*. Library blogs have become increasingly popular as a way to reach readers outside the house, especially the blogs written for children and teenagers (e.g., *Skolbibblan*). There were forty library blogs on the list.

### **Non-professional Individual Bloggers**

The single-writer, non-professional blogs are the most common (e.g., *BookyDarling*, *En annan sida*, and *Lyrans noblesser*). The search for active blogs of this kind gave 140, but there are likely more. New blogs are started daily, while old blogs become inactive. The variety among these is large. Some write short postings about a book they have read, followed by a very similar review of another book, and then another. Others write ambitious long texts about literature in general, compare books they have read, or discuss literary trends they have discovered. Most of the bloggers are personal in their views of literature, and some also relate their reading to personal experiences. Most postings are on popular literature published in paperback by the large publishing houses. There are only a few book bloggers who discuss less known literature or poetry. However, most of them read a great deal, and overall many different kinds of literature are brought up.

### **Non-professional Group Blogs**

Blogs run by more than one person are less common, but on the other hand more active, long lasting and well established. At the time of the survey, there were thirteen active non-professional group blogs. Some of them are devoted to a specific field: crime fiction, children's books, or paperbacks. The most talked about book blog, *Bokhora* [Book Whore], is a group blog, and the oldest book blog *Dagens bok* [Book of the Day] started in 2000. The level of writing in the group blogs tends to be higher than among the single bloggers, probably due to discussions within the group, and in some cases an editor goes through texts pre-publication.

## **Bloggers as Critics and their Role in the Book Trade**

The grouping of the book bloggers served the purpose of making structures apparent, and it illuminates differences between the blogs. The professional bloggers, whether commercial or not, used the blogging technique mainly for marketing. Much of this work is a development of pre-existing strategies among publishers, authors, and librarians alike. An important part of the professional's work is to get attention and to reach an audience, and the blog is simply another means to achieve this end. The non-professional bloggers, on the other hand, developed new strategies and structures, and the main interest here is in examining how this is done and the effects it has had. The following section deals with the non-professional bloggers in general, in what sense they are literary critics, and their role in the trade. The subsequent two parts will discuss examples among the non-professionals: the group blog and the single blogger. The purpose is to analyse more closely how a few of the book bloggers operate.

The non-professional book bloggers might be idealists, and unconnected (as a whole) to the trade, but they are still part of the book market. Marketing, distribution, publishing formats, media attention, and literary trends are factors influencing which books the bloggers write about. Only a small proportion of the books published will be discussed in the blogs. In Sweden, approximately 2 000 new works of fiction are published each year.<sup>2</sup> A single, fast reading blogger might manage to write about less than 100 works. The group blogs generally cover 200–300 titles of mainly new fiction, but still the majority of new titles will not be reviewed or discussed to any great extent. The number of new titles published each day, in Sweden as well as globally, makes the proportion of reviewed titles tiny in relation to all the texts never mentioned.

The book bloggers are part of the book trade in the sense that they contribute to the attention a particular work receives. The need to orientate in the book world, or the book flood, has become central in all dealings with literature, as so-called over-publishing has been called the greatest threat to the book. In 2008 there were over 100 000 titles published in the UK, over 80 000 in Germany, more than 275 000 in the US (some of the UK and US titles are the same) and 75 000 in Spanish (from different countries). Swedish book production in 2008 amounted to a modest 4 500 titles printed for the public (all printed books is a much higher number, but this includes governmental reports, etc.), but since most Swedes also read in other languages – especially English, but also maternal languages, Scandinavian neighbouring languages as well as French, German and Spanish – in reality the number of books on offer is much greater than a few thousand. The import of foreign language books make up at least 10% of the trade and the two large Swedish Internet bookstores offer between two and three million titles, where books in Swedish only comprise less than ten percent (Steiner 2005). The number of published titles the book blogger can choose from is enormous.

The increasing book publishing is a problem for the trade as a whole as well as for the individual reader. As the Mexican author Gabriel Zaid remarked, “Books are published at such a rapid rate that they make us exponentially more ignorant” (2003: 22). Even an imagined extensive fast reader going through a work of fiction a day would miss thousands published any particular day. In a year, the unread books make up a massive amount. Books given as a gift, books I got as an intellectual challenge, and books bought for fun – all the unread books on my bedside table giving me a bad conscience. “Humankind writes more than it can read”, says Zaid, which is a fact that readers have to find strategies to deal with (2003: 30). Perhaps the previous economic and practical restraints on publishing had advantages over the present system. Today, however, these are gone, and print-on-demand publishers such as *Lightning Source* and the Swedish *Vulkan.se* have eliminated the last impediments. Everyone can publish anything at a very small cost. But who shall receive these texts? The professional critics will not, and cannot, write about everything as the produced texts are too many and the large daily papers decided long ago to limit their reviews.

When too many titles are published, visibility becomes the key to success in the trade. In reality, this applies to most media, as the expansion of the information flow has required new ways to become known. In “the attention economy”, being seen is the most difficult and important task for authors, publishers, and other agents in the book trade (Davenport & Beck 2001: 2–3). It has become easy to be published, but difficult to receive attention. Visibility has become the most desired, and the least accessible commodity in the new economy, and in book marketing it has become essential to “whip up a hype” or “create a buzz”, PR phrases in publishing. It is not only the avant-garde trendy or hip products that are buzz-worthy. Generating hype can be done regardless of content and setting, with the right target group anything can be achieved. Market strategist Renee Dye argued that not all costumers are equal, some are vanguard, highly influential, first adopters and others are followers (Dye 2000). If you aim at the middle-class reader, the critics at large daily papers are influential, but the young, globally oriented, and ideologically aware groups of readers that blog and comment on different online communities may be equally important. These readers can create a buzz, as they are the real things – the authentic readers. While Dye suggested that PR groups and branding people create most buzzes, there is evidence that on the whole publishers of general fiction do not have the means, technical know-how, or funds to fully employ such strategies. When it comes to the previously mentioned Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005–2008), Dan Brown’s *The Lost Symbol* (2009), or other titles with a substantial market, these schemes are used, but in Sweden very few works of fiction have enough pull to allow for advanced marketing.

There are exceptions, and a few of the large publishers have experimented with new marketing schemes (Thoresson 2010). One example was in the summer and early autumn of 2007, when the largest publishing house in Sweden, Bonniers,

aimed at the bloggers in a marketing campaign. They promoted a debutant, the pseudonym Tim Davy, and the novel *Amberville* (2007). The strategy included sending out 100 copies of the unedited manuscript, although nicely bounded as a book, to bloggers well before publication, in order to create a buzz. The manuscript was followed in the mail by a lighter, then a kitchen sponge, and finally a large leek – all with quotes from the book tied onto them (Cato 2007). The campaign was not particularly successful in creating a sense of authenticity, and most of the bloggers wrote about the marketing scheme and the leek. However, the book was much talked about, and by mid-October it was the most discussed novel on all Swedish blogs. The fact is that a large proportion of the 100 bloggers did read and write about the text, prior to its official publication.

Despite the economic limitations of the Swedish publishing houses, and perhaps also the lack of know-how, it is clear that the Internet is a part of modern marketing strategies. There are courses given for publishers' employees to ensure up-to-date knowledge, and in 2008 the trade magazine published an issue dedicated to online marketing (Westlund 2008). It has also become more or less the norm for publishers to send out review copies to the more influential bloggers, and occasionally more sophisticated schemes are employed. In the early days of the Internet, publishers merely presented books on their websites, but during 2008–2009 marketing moved into areas where the readers were already active – Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, and blogs – preferably through discrete infiltration, in what is termed “social media marketing” (Westlund 2008: 15–16).

An often-repeated critique of how literature is discussed and spread through the Internet is that there are no gatekeepers offering judgements. Considering that book bloggers might be one group of gatekeepers, there is a risk that they will be used for marketing purposes. What position does the book bloggers take in balancing personal interests, publishers' influence, and other kinds of inspiration/authority? Are bloggers general readers, or are they part of the contemporary book trade? In analysing the Swedish book blogs, I would argue that it depends on the blog, as these are so diverse. The bloggers as a phenomenon operate with a variety of functions: marketing, displaying, recommending, reviewing, gossiping, and consuming. Some act as gatekeepers, but this is not a prominent feature. Instead, the book bloggers tend to promote reading in general, rather than single titles. Most book bloggers also affirm the opinions and views spread in other media as well on other sites on the Internet.

### **The Non-professional Group Blog – the Example *Bokhora***

The book bloggers are readers and studies of readers, historical as well as present, are marked by methodological difficulties. The previously mentioned reception studies researcher Christine Pawley argues for two different methods. One can study readers as individuals, with one or more examples, but the problem is the

difficulty in determining the general accuracy. Using the second method, it is feasible to group the readers based on characteristics, but as a consequence, some individuals might not fit into the groups constructed by the researcher (Pawley 2002). Despite these valid objections, I have divided the book bloggers into groups to reveal general patterns. This is supplemented by a more in-depth analysis of some examples, the first being the non-professional group book blog *Bokhora*. It is the most established and talked about book blog in Sweden.

*Bokhora* is a group blog created in 2006 by five women around the age of 30. In many ways, these women represent the typical book blogger – not only in age and gender – but also in that they all have university degrees, and three of them have studied literature in college. Despite their education, they present themselves as “general readers”, i.e. non-professionals. Their double nature as amateurs with an education raises questions about professionalism. What are the differences between writing by professionals and by amateurs? This is a significant question that has to be examined and discussed from different angles. A traditional way of differing the professional from the amateur is if someone is paid for the job or not. The five women in the *Bokhora* group are not paid to blog, on the other hand have they are often invited to do other, but connected, work that is waged.

One notion is that book bloggers and others alike (such as the critics on the Internet bookstore Amazon), unlike most professionals, write about all kinds of literature. They include genres generally not reviewed in daily papers or literary journals – crime fiction, chick lit, fantasy, etc. – and they also write about a mixture of newly published titles and back list (even out-of-print books). The mix of texts seems to be a goal in itself. In some ways, it reflects how people generally read – an inexpensive paperback, an old book, a borrowed recommendation, or a brand new expensive hardcover. “We go to bed with any kind of literature” is the *Bokhora* mantra (Rydin 2009).<sup>3</sup> But a further exploration of the titles reviewed at *Bokhora* shows that this is not quite the case. Most of the reviews published August-October 2009 on their blog were of new novels published by one of the larger established publishing houses in Sweden. The reviews of older books were only of English-language titles and were written by the same person, Helena Dahlgren, who is the only one presenting herself on their site as semi-professional. There are also other kinds of books mentioned on *Bokhora*, but these are rarely reviewed in their own right, instead these are titles referred to in general discussions on a theme or a presentation of an author. The reviews make up only part of the blog, and it is in the other postings that a wider range of books can be found.

The reviewed titles on *Bokhora* indicate that they operate in much the same manner as professional critics. One can question whether the five contributors to *Bokhora* are amateurs, and on their blog there is a constant balance between their semi-professional character and their image as general readers. While they often promote themselves as amateurs, it has become increasingly difficult to ascertain this position. They have in many ways moved from the amateur to the profession-



al sphere. For example, they are presented in styled press photos as smart, good-looking, intelligent middle-class women, they appear at the annual Book Fair in Gothenburg, they have published an issue of the literary magazine *Album* at a large publishing house, and they travel around the country talking about reading and books. They sell advertising space on their website, and occasionally they link to an external book sales site. In daily papers and monthly magazines, they are presented as the new generation of readers (Rydin 2009; Eklöf 2009), they are quoted on book covers, and *Bokhora* is also included in the “new reviews” list in the trade magazine. Most of the members in the Bokhora team also participate in paid activities connected to the website, for example they talk about reading and literature in libraries and bookstores. In the summer of 2010 one Bokhora, Johanna Karlsson, started working for a small independent publisher, X Publishing, and thereby definitely crossing the traditional line between the amateur, unwaged, and the professional, paid for a similar line of work. There are plenty of examples of how they are no longer amateurs, and it is possible to argue that their professionalism lies, among other things, in being able to read and write like “anybody”, something that perhaps traditional criticism has failed to do.

There is no evident or clear division between professional and amateur criticism in the present (Steiner 2008 & 2009). It has been argued that a new kind of amateur has emerged, a group called “the Pro-Ams” (Leadbeater & Miller 2004). According to Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller, a new kind of amateur has appeared that operates in a more professional manner than previous individuals or groups have done. They are knowledgeable, educated, committed, and have large networks. Leadbeater and Miller argued that pro-ams question traditional hierarchies, though obviously many amateurs reinforce the very same as they climb towards professionalism. However, what is more important, the pro-ams do not regard themselves as professionals, rather they use their amateurism as a tool for networking, writing, and creating new structures. The term amateur has traditionally been used in a derisive manner, to explain that someone is lacking in knowledge, education, and standards. But that is not a useful way to apply the word to contemporary non-professionals. They may lack a certain degree, or the right job title, but they can often work in new and experimental ways. There are also examples of how the pro-ams have influenced and inspired professionals, and this is also the case within the book trade.

Are the book bloggers pro-ams? In some ways, but the range of book bloggers is wide, from the near professional to the dabbling amateurs. At one end of the continuum, there are 14-year-old book bloggers writing personal accounts of their reading experiences. At the other end, there is *Bokhora*, the most professional of all the Swedish book bloggers in the sense that their educational background, present occupation, and position on the literary scene are not characterized by amateurism. However, they did start out as non-professionals, and they can be seen as part of the large group of semi-professionals – such as journalists, authors,

critics, translators, and librarians – who have their own blog. Most of the bloggers are somewhere between amateur and professional, and among the group bloggers, many have studied literature at the university level and/or work with books. Moreover, 30% of the single non-professional bloggers present themselves as having a background or job related to literature. One example is the blogger Anna Winberg [*Anna Winberg Knows Good Books*], who has a degree in publishing studies and has worked both in bookstores and in publishing. Another example is Sara Britta Jadelius [*Brittas böcker och bibliotek*], who has a degree in literature and librarianship, and is working as a librarian and web designer, marketing herself through the blog. The line separating the professional from the non-professional is dissolving, and is it probably no longer a valid distinction. Many of the non-professionals, including *Bokhora*, use professional strategies, values, and language to reach their readership.

Some say that online reviewing poses a serious threat to professional criticism. In the US, a number of critics started *The Campaign to Save Book Reviewing* in an attempt to create awareness of the differences between professional and amateur writing. They argued that the reviews in daily papers are threatened not only by the Internet, but also by under-qualified journalists and large media companies selling short reviews. One of the defenders of the professionals, Rónán McDonald, wrote in *The Death of the Critic* (2007) that only printed criticism can create renewed understanding of literature and deepen our perspectives, “quantity is no substitute for authority” (2007: 3). To McDonald, a public sphere has to have limitations, there needs to be an authoritative voice, and the fact that anyone can be a critic will diminish choice and agency for the reader (2007: 16–17). Objections can be raised to the elitism in his arguments and the structure of canon formation, but these are rejected by McDonald, who claimed that only the professional, printed critic with a strong link to academic literary studies offers the source of authority that can challenge people in their reading.

The purpose of professional literary criticism has been debated many times, and the selection processes, power, canonization, and literary value have been called into question. The professional critic is a gatekeeper who consecrates and canonizes authors and their works, and with this power follows a complicated relation to the book trade, the authors, and the literary world. The professional critic may have authority, but is at the same time often a person linked in different ways to the literary world. A critic also needs to market and position him- or herself in relation to others. It is easy to criticize book bloggers for being susceptible to clever marketing, publishing trends, or other bloggers’ views, but not even the professionals are able to isolate themselves from such things.

The example of *Bokhora* shows that book bloggers may be amateurs in some respects, but have a great deal in common with professional literary criticism. In this sense, they are similar to the American book blog *Book slut*, or the British *Ready Steady Book*-blog. These also began as amateurs, but have developed into a

semi-professional sphere with an impact on the book trade. The authors of the popularly written *The Bookaholic's Guide to Book Blogs*, Gillieron and Kilgarriff, decidedly played down the polarization and animosity between print criticism and the Internet (2007: 170–171). They also argued that the most influential book bloggers are the professionals: publishers, booksellers, journalist, and critics. Their UK examples are indicative of this, but the study of Swedish book blogs also showed that the amateurs have become increasingly important, and that some of the amateurs have become part of the literary establishment. However, the hierarchy in the blog world is a defining trait, and there are huge differences in the status and position of *Bokhora* and the book blog of a 14-year-old schoolgirl.

### **The Diary of a Book Blogger – the Non-professional Single Bloggers**

*Bokhora* is an interesting example of a non-professional group blog, despite the above discussions on professionalism, as it is the most established book blog existing in Sweden. But selecting equally good examples from the large group of single non-professional bloggers is not easy, as they are all different and very few have a large readership. Instead the following analysis of the single bloggers will use a number of different examples to show the variety and complexity of this writing.

One general observation of these blogs is that they are often written in an intimate style, similar to a diary. Others have already observed that the blogs are blurring the line between public and private – being written in a personal manner in a space open to anyone. It has been argued that the Internet offers a place for a collective society where individuals connect in large networks. Manuel Castells, on the other hand, claimed that regarding the Internet as a community is misleading, instead it has provided forums for a stronger focus on an I. The process is what he calls the “privatization of sociability” and a “networked individualism” (Castells 2001: 129–130). Individuals may create large networks, but these have specific interests, values, and tastes that have little to do with the Internet in general. A network, whether interested in science fiction literature or Tecktonik music, is developed in social interaction, but is always based in individual selves. Being social has become privatized, but according to Castells, the Internet is not made up of a mere collection of individuals, and it is not in conflict with the individual; instead the Net has become the self. The process is one of an individualist consumerism that often stresses both consumption (possessing, buying, touching) and the individual reading experience (the act). The differences and links between these two concepts have been debated in the research, but if applied to individual book bloggers, it is clear that they are deeply intertwined (Squires 2007).

Almost all of the book blogs written by one person have a personalized style of writing, regardless of whether the person behind the blog has a professional back-

ground or not. In the posted reviews, there are often comments on the blogger's private life, the postings about literature are also often intermingled with writing about a cat, walking in the autumn sun, feelings on a rainy Monday morning, etc. These texts promote the blogger as a person, but they are also necessary to give a blog a personalized style. It is not possible for a blog reader to identify the character of someone solely writing about literature, and the main function of the personal postings is to create a relationship with the readers. The more private writing in many ways defines who the blogger is: "Like the writing of paper diaries, blogging is a process that helps shape subjective feelings and identity through affective connections, thus defining a sense of self in relation to others" (Dijck 2007: 73). Even though a book blog is about literature, the personalized tone is necessary to attract readers. A de-personalized blogger without passions leaves no impression, and tends to have few visitors. Consequently, as van Dijck argued (2007: 73), bloggers use technology to express individuality and a self. In this way the blog and the diary resemble one another, and even though the handwritten diary may appear private and secret while the weblog is public and open, the similarities in the act of writing are evident. The blog can also be understood as a ritual process defining an I in relation to others (Dijck 2004). Seen from this perspective, book blogs are only a matter of literature to a certain extent – the main issue is positioning the self in relation to culture, society, and other readers. However, this would not be the first time that media negotiate a self in society. Print, radio, TV, etc. have already transformed the position of the individual in the public sphere, and in this sense transformed people from objects to subjects (Thompson 1995).

Despite all the personal elements, the most common way a single book blog is organized is simply by adding one review to the next, an example being *Ylvas läsdagbok* [Ylva's reading diary]. Depending on how many books have been read, the number of postings varies greatly. Some bloggers write long reviews, but most write a short paragraph on what they thought about a particular book. This writing is reminiscent of a primary, or early teenage, school activity, and an exercise book with a list of read novels followed by short reviews. These book blog reviews do not appear to have been written for an audience; instead they have a self-preserving, documenting form. The blogs resemble a diary, photo album, or other kinds of saved documents from a life. Not all book bloggers write like this; many seem to have a readership in mind and will direct questions, tasks, or ideas towards an intended reader. However, "I blog for my own sake" is an often repeated stance. The blogger "Mårten" writes that he blogs to develop his writing, as a process of seeking something, but never for attention because he has never received any (*pocketpocketpocket* 2009). But even if many bloggers make similar comments, it is difficult to understand why anyone would bother creating a blog if they did not want to be seen. Part of the success of many sites and activities on the Internet is the possibility to participate, share, and network. Charles Leadbeater

argued that those who are part of the Internet movement identify themselves not by their possessions or professions, but by what they put online: “You are what you share” (Leadbeater 2008: 1), the underlying logic being that if your games, videos, texts, etc. are visible on the Internet, you exist. It is fairly easy to disrepute his claim on several accounts, one being that people online are also their profession, their fame, their skills in real life (IRL), and showing these online is an important part of the sharing. However, the reason for allowing Leadbeater into the argument is that he is right about there being a strong desire among many bloggers to display themselves. Sharing yourself with others is an important part of being someone in today’s society.

A number of the book bloggers express their intention to have a professional career in the literary world, and part of the purpose of their blog is to attract attention or give credibility to a CV. Being seen online may be a path to a desired job, or as stated on the video site YouTube: “Broadcast Yourself”. This is mainstream media becoming personalized. However, as British author Andrew Keen argued, there is a risk that everyone is talking on the Internet and no one is listening. Broadcasting yourself, according to Keen, is one big narcissistic move in which people are not meant to digest or distribute culture, but only to produce it themselves (Keen 2007: 15–16). In the case of the book bloggers he has a point, as most of them have very few readers. Apart from *Bokhora* and a few others who have received attention, most of the book bloggers will have only five to 200 readers a week. Everyone can share, but as these numbers show, there is a strong hierarchy in recognition. Although “[s]haring, recognition, participation” are seen as keywords in understanding the blogging movement (Leadbeater 2008: 222), not everyone is recognized. The position of a particular book blogger is evaluated through the number of visits, being on other bloggers blogrolls, nominations to the book blog of the month, review copies from publishers, or comments from other readers. The single non-professional book bloggers confirm that sharing is easy, but that recognition is difficult to attain.

The third keyword, participation, is essential for an understanding of the purpose of the individual book blogger. For most kinds of social networks participation is important, and for the book bloggers it is a way to be a part of the literary scene, to be an authentic consumer guide. The relation between a blogger and the potential readers is very important, and many postings express a desire for a link to other people. A blog reader can post comments and argue with the writer, and in this there is a contradictory combination of distance and intimacy. The physical distance and the limited knowledge of the person writing the blog creates a space between the blogger and the blog-reader that allows for a different kind of intimacy. The anonymity of the media allows us to be more open about who we are. One consequence is that there are often heightened emotions of all kinds, as writing bland texts gives little to a blog reader. There is a tendency towards what some

researchers have seen as a widened social freedom, where people can express themselves more openly and freely (Katz & Rice 2002).

The existence of non-professional individual bloggers is evidence that readers cannot be reduced to passive consumers. They have become, what Jeff Gomez called, “prosumers”, i.e. a portmanteau for producers and consumers (2008). The term is more often applied to phenomena such as fanfiction, YouTube, or MySpace, but is relevant in describing the complexity of book bloggers. The bloggers are in constant negotiation with literature and literary quality. In this sense, book bloggers have redefined how people make use of and deal with literature; they have also questioned the traditional division between production and consumption of texts.

### **Book Blogs and Literature in a MySpace Global World**

There is an often-repeated view that the Internet is global, but anything that is to reach outside national borders has to be in English. The Swedish book blogs are not. They are almost always written in Swedish, and although some will review or comment on books read in a different language, the most of the reviews are of books written in or translated into Swedish. The book blogs have little to do with the blog mantra of globalism, democracy, or being part of a mass collaborative community. This is not co-created knowledge shared for free, what has been called “wicinomics”, i.e. “Wikipedia-economics” (Tapscott & Williams 2008). The aspirations underlying the book blogs differ in many ways from what is generally written about the digital revolution. Often-repeated code words such as collaboration, democracy, global, or participation culture only apply to a limited extent to this material. Most of the often-repeated and spoken of Internet analyses have been written about the same phenomena: Linux, Wikipedia, YouTube, Skype. But these are nothing like the book blogs, which appear to follow a logic of their own, more related to a literary sphere than to other media. Initially I argued that Elizabeth Long’s concept of the “social infrastructure of reading” (2003) was a useful tool for understanding book blogs, and as has been maintained throughout the article, the bloggers operate in a network with other readers and people interested in literature, and only to a lesser extent with other media consumers.

There is a claim that the blog has become the 18<sup>th</sup> century coffee house transformed into the 20<sup>th</sup> century public sphere (Tapscott & Williams 2008: 40). A general critique of Jürgen Habermas’s initial concept of the public sphere is that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women and people of the lower classes were excluded from the coffee houses, and in this sense these places were not public at all. And perhaps the blogs are equally excluding of large groups, as less than 30% of people between 16 and 74 read blogs (including people who do not use the Internet). Furthermore, this figure excludes the 30% of the population, younger and older, who



most likely read blogs to a varied extent. If blogs are today's coffee houses, they are still excluding places. It is also a fact that some voices are privileged, although it would take a much more in-depth survey into bloggers to map out exactly how the hierarchies are structured and how power is controlled.

In the introduction, I proposed that the book bloggers have become part of the book trade and as such are actors on the literary stage. Their impact has not been as radical as was previously predicted (Nelson 2006), and most book bloggers, as I have shown, have very few readers. Still the blogs, together with other kinds of social forums, have changed how publishers view the audience and how marketing of literature is carried out. One of the most tangible changes within the book trade has been a shift in production, distribution, and consumption from divided functions to co-productions or co-operative projects. Up until the 1970s in Sweden, and to a certain extent even up until the early 1990s, each part in the process of making a book was carried out by a separate individual or company. One person wrote the book, one was the editor, one the publisher, the printer, the book-binder, the marketing person, the distributor, the bookseller, and one the reader. This is a slightly simplified model, but as a whole a good description of the pre-1990s conditions. The last fifteen years' digital development, however, has changed the structure of the book trade radically (Söderlund 2009: 87–89). In the contemporary trade, many functions converge in one person, organization, or company. As argued initially in the article, applying Darnton's (2002) or Svedjedal's (2000) book trade functions to the book blogs makes their position visible in the overall structure of the book market. First of all the book bloggers are readers, but they are also book buyers, library visitors, and part of the audience at different literary events. These actions, of course, belong to the traditional realm of the reader; what is new is that bloggers also function as reviewers and in this way proliferate texts and market books and authors. As many of the book bloggers work as journalists, librarians, authors, translators, publisher's readers, and bookstore assistants, they often take on a number of other functions as well. Book bloggers may still make up a tiny part of the book trade, but they are not insignificant, and if seen in a wider perspective, they provide evidence of a transformed trade that is changing the structure of the production, distribution, and consumption of literature.

**Ann Steiner** is a research fellow in literature at Lund University. Her research focuses on 20th and 21st century literature and book trade. She has written *I litteraturens mittfåra* (2006) on subscription book clubs, *Litteraturen i mediasamhället* (2009) on contemporary book trade, and articles on literature and digital technology. E-mail: [ann.steiner@litt.lu.se](mailto:ann.steiner@litt.lu.se).

## Notes

- 1 "Jag kan nu se tillbaka på över ett år av bloggande, och konstatera att, som väntat, var det svårare än väntat."
- 2 The number comes out of the statistics in the National Bibliography (collated by the Royal Library) and is based on fiction for adults in Swedish original as well as translated into Swedish, but not including new editions. Another source, the Publishers Association, claims that their members (i.e. the large publishers) only published 618 titles of fiction for adults in 2008. The great discrepancy can be explained by the large numbers of small independent publishers as well as a large variety of self-publishing and Print-on-Demand-systems (Carlsson & Facht 2010).
- 3 "Vi går till sängs med vilken litteratur som helst".

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