

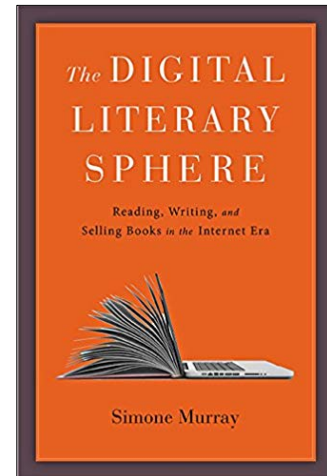
Simone Murray, **The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era**, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019, 256 pp., \$39.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Simone Murray's book, ***The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era***, is a spirited endeavour to snap literary studies out of its digital slumber. Expertly written and with remarkable interdisciplinarity, Murray embarks on charting what she terms the "digital literary sphere"—a Habermasian look into the new context of literature and literary culture in the age of the Internet. She enumerates five dominant processes of the traditional literary sphere and explores how these processes transform online. In order to chart the digital literary sphere not only as a digital culture phenomenon but also as a burgeoning topic of literary studies, her introduction includes literature reviews on book history/print culture studies, media studies, and electronic/digital literary studies. With these foci, Murray can discuss how historically dominant practices from the print era have shifted in the digital world, as well as imagine how multiple fields can attend to the digital literary sphere in new ways.



Each chapter addresses how an aspect of literary culture has been digitally remediated. Through this mapping, Murray skillfully strikes a nuanced balance between the democratizing potential of Web 2.0 for literary culture (a historically hierarchical space defined by cultural capital and authority), as well as the digital sphere's capacity to quantify and commodify aspects of this culture in problematic ways. For example, in her first chapter on "Performing Authorship in the Digital Literary Sphere," Murray investigates how digital media have reconstituted the ways that authors enter into and self-perform within the digital literary sphere. Digital media, Murray argues, has "[amounted] to a do-it-yourself (DIY) revolution in authorial construction and ongoing control over an author's public persona" (p. 29). With new expectations for self-made and -maintained author websites, as well as interactivity with audiences via social media, authors take on the former role of literary agents to engage with their publics and promote their works. Now, rather than approaching publishers and editors with a manuscript and being evaluated near anonymously, an author may be picked up according to their Twitter following because their audience already proves a potential market to publishers. New platforms and technologies for self-publishing also lead to "disintermediation," where publishers are no longer the exclusive link between authors and their readers. While at a glance this phenomenon appears to democratize literature and authorship, cultural hierarchy persists. Writers are still only considered "legitimate" in this hierarchy once they obtain a hard-copy manuscript. Murray argues that holding onto this "continuing legitimating function" is the only way publishers can stay relevant in the digital literacy sphere without "disintermediating themselves out of a job" (p. 80). Both publishers in a world of digital self-publishing, and book reviewers in a landscape where anyone can publish a book review on Goodreads or Amazon (as discussed in chapter 4), need to adapt to the digital literary sphere in order to maintain their Bourdieusian authority to "consecrate" cultural artifacts.

Though her work is primarily situated at the intersection of literary studies and book history, Murray is intentional about detailing its relevance to the communication, media, and cultural studies fields. She argues that book historians have drawn a “false disciplinary line” between print-born and born-digital texts (p. 163), and that both material and disciplinary flexibility could benefit the refreshment of book history and literary studies. She proposes a political-economic through line to close this gap, easily linked between book history’s critique of the commercialization of the reading act and communication studies’ material perspective on algorithmic bias and commodification of online retailers (p. 165). Amazon is her biggest exemplar of these two merging forces. Murray draws on scholarly historical and critical technology studies research, literary community commentary (such as blog posts and articles from the *New Yorker*), and the memoir of Amazon’s first staff literary editor, James Marcus, to map the evolution of Amazon, originating from its early indie bookstore ethos to its now totalizing position in the digital literary sphere. As Murray boldly claims, “So hydra-headed is Amazon’s presence in the digital literary sphere that attempting to stand outside of its systems is tantamount to swearing off online bookish engagement altogether” (p. 139). Yet Amazon’s influence extends beyond simply selling literature. Amazon’s foregrounded identity as mega online retailer obfuscates its role in transforming not just how books are sold, but how book culture manifests in general—primarily through amateur book reviews and algorithmic recommendations.

Murray draws on the work of Matthew Kirschenbaum (2008, 2009) and Lev Manovich (2013) to discuss how critical code studies and “cultural software” are heuristic tools for investigating other modes of digital culture, but that a lacuna exists in applying these concepts to book studies. Murray returns to Bourdieu to discuss how his field theory is dramatically disrupted by algorithmic culture. A transition from Bourdieu’s model of literary gatekeepers “brokering cultural capital to a model based on the workings of opaque mathematical formulas” (p. 56), or algorithms, means that the previous markers of aesthetic worth in literature (e.g., book reviews, prizes) may no longer apply. This leads Murray to her recurring concept of “community” as “commodity” in the digital literary sphere. Whether through Amazon accessing and recommending texts based on the purchases of similar consumers, or by an author’s biggest asset being their Twitter following (p. 76), the digital literary sphere appears to amalgamate “community” and “commodity” in a way previously incommensurable in the traditional literary sphere.

The community/commodity conflation even manifests on the page as one is reading—in chapter 5, “Entering Literary Discussion: Fiction Reading Online,” Murray describes the “paratextual wrapping” capacities of new e-book technologies that allow for notes and highlights from other readers’ engagements with a text to appear as you are reading the text on your Kindle (p. 155). These highlights and notes are then reproduced by Amazon to showcase the most popular and thought-provoking aspects of a text to potential consumers (p. 155). Not only does this constitute a significant privacy issue (p. 156)—Amazon is not just aware of what you’re buying but what you’re thinking about what you’re buying—but this could also be argued to limit critical thinking and personal engagements with literature. However, in her brilliant balancing act, Murray does not denigrate group reading experiences, and rather attends to the multilayered complexity of the digital literary sphere. She describes the 2009 mass-reading online forum *Infinite Summer* (an online discussion group working through David Foster Wallace’s novel, *Infinite Jest*) as a “rather appealingly disorganized, improvisational, anti-authoritarian ‘we’re all in this together’ [. . .] interpretive undertaking” (p. 159). Online reading may be easily commodifiable, but it also has potential for fostering nonhierarchical reading practices and critical discussion.

Another key contribution is Murray's thoughtful attention to how Web 2.0 creates new methodological challenges for scholars and entire disciplines. These include both the ethics and analysis of amassed reading data now made available by technologies such as Kindle, Kobo, or Goodreads. Until now, qualitative interviews and surveys have been the norm, but what concerns Murray is the potentially "awkward" nature of these methods in digital environments, as well as how "bulk accounts of reading experiences online may either not warrant close textual analysis (too brief, too poorly expressed) or the sheer scale of records is beyond the capacity of any individual researcher to close read" (p. 151)—not to mention the threat of drone reviewers tainting the data. These challenges aren't new to communication scholars—the answers to which are still being sought—but for book historians, translating decades of disciplinary approaches into digital formats creates tangible resistance to undertaking the digital literary sphere. But Murray has hope; she sees the digital literary sphere to reconcile book history's dilemma with the digital and media studies' bafflement with the book. Perhaps Amazon's homogenizing effect on book and digital culture has some benefits for academic disciplinary boundaries. After all, as Murray asks, "When every book users [*sic*] purchase—or even view—on Amazon affects that title's display via the company's Amabot recommendation algorithm, can scholars continue to regard themselves as somehow outside that which they—we, and our students—study?" (p. 178).

My only critique of this potentially field-transforming work is that Murray occasionally deploys terms that should be questioned. One example is her uncritical use of the designate "digital natives" for those digitally engaging with young adult literature—a term that has been criticized for generational assumptions about digital media use where axes of race, gender, class, and education levels should also be interrogated (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). She also uses "colonization" as a metaphor when formulating how digital media have galvanized the traditional literary sphere (see pp. 43, 51, 68). As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) teach us, there are dangerous repercussions to treating colonization and decolonization as metaphors for how, for example, our thoughts are "colonized" or our syllabi should be "decolonized." This metaphorization masks the material, violent effects of colonization as the theft of indigenous lands, and elides the responsibility of decolonization, to repatriate of land and life of indigenous peoples. I envision that Murray's future work, after attending to these questions, will continue to embolden literary scholars to ditch the "death of the book" rhetoric and make new interdisciplinary discoveries into the operation of the digital literary sphere through increasingly critical and material lenses.

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