

## BookTube, Book Clubs and the Brave New World of Publishing

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Electronic media have increasingly affected and transformed the landscape of reading experiences and the book-selling industry. The constant improvement of e-book technology and consistent increase of Internet accessibility have brought new opportunities for readers and publishers. Blogging, particularly video blogging (vlogging), has become an essential form of the media since the beginning of 2000. While the Internet is often blamed for a decline of literary sections across traditional media platforms (Briggs and Burke 300), it has also given way to online platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Websites, such as YouTube, offer different ways of collaboration for individuals and businesses through active involvement with user generated content (UGC). Publishing is one of those business spheres that followed their target audience into new media and digital formats.

Since its beginning in 2004, YouTube has evolved into a digital video site with millions of viewers and billions of videos in its archive (Soukup 3). Many users go there seeking wider interaction opportunities, and book readers are no different. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a *YouTuber* as frequent user of this video platform, especially someone who produces and appears in videos on the site (OED). YouTubers now represent a sort of intermediary between customers and companies. This unique position allows for upward mobility through the YouTube platform, creating a new class of professionals within the entertainment industry. Originally, users of YouTube were interested in sharing opinions and experiences in video format. Over time, many of them have built a significant fan base. This in turn has allowed both users and the platform to generate significant advertising and sponsorship revenue. YouTube has now become one of the giants of mainstream media. It

has evolved into a fully-fledged player in the entertainment industry and offers users the opportunity to actively engage with authentic UGC as creators or consumers. Publishers along with online and offline booksellers find an opportunity to “advertise to the max” on these platforms (Procter 148), such as by sending out copies of new books and requesting BookTubers and Bookstagrammers to publish reviews.

BookTube is the online reading community based on YouTube, and the vloggers who upload book-themed videos are called BookTubers. This article will describe structure and basic elements of the BookTube community using parallels between them and book clubs. As many BookTubers also share their content on Instagram, where the same community of book enthusiasts is called Bookstagram, this platform will also be referenced. For the sake of this article, the terms book club and reading groups are used interchangeably. Lastly, the partnership of publishers and BookTubers as active agents in the field of literary and cultural production will be examined.

### BOOKTUBE

BookTubers are not simply people talking about books on camera; they are a unique society with a shared purpose and set conventions: “BookTube may sound like a root vegetable, but it’s actually an incredibly vibrant community of people who vlog about books on YouTube” (Scott). They are united by a love of literature and books as physical objects. The role of a BookTuber is that of an endorser, someone who recommends books and shares their opinions in videos about the books they read. They tend to encourage and promote reading and literature using informal language, as if speaking directly with a friend or the viewer. Many, if not most,

BookTube videos fit into specific categories and follow established conventions. The descriptions below detail the most popular kinds of BookTube videos.

*Book tags* are challenges or games that establish a series of categories, usually with a general theme. The most popular tags are “my favourite genre books,” “books to read in summer/spring/autumn/winter,” “my unpopular book opinions,” and “my reading habits.” For each of these categories, the tagged BookTuber has to select a book or a series and explain why they have chosen it.

*Wrap up videos* are compilation videos of the books that each BookTuber has read during a particular time period (usually a month). They show each of the books, give a short summary, and share their opinions regarding the content, characters, plot, and the author’s writing style.

*Book hauls* are the videos in which vloggers show their latest book acquisitions. They usually make these types of videos on a monthly basis.

*Unboxing videos* show a BookTuber opening the book package they have received from publishers, book stores, or book box subscriptions. Viewers can watch the package being opened and the BookTuber looking through its contents. Many subscription boxes come with related book paraphernalia, such as postcards, scented candles, toys, notebooks, etc.

*Bookshelf tour* videos feature the bookshelves of the vlogger. Here book enthusiasts explain and discuss different organisation principles of their bookshelves, like colour coordination or genre unity. These videos do not usually contain an opinion on or a review of the books, but simply show off the most favourite printed books that these vloggers own.

*Reading marathons* are challenges

that any member of the community can join. There are two traditional versions of marathon, twenty-four-hour and forty-eight-hour, where vloggers take time off work and/or studies and dedicate this time to reading. They make short videos and then cut them into one large marathons review, where they share their impression and ideas while reading.

*A reading diary* is another example of book vlogging. It is usually filmed during a longer reading session (approximately 4-6 hours) and is a cut review of the highlights and impressions people get while reading. What makes it different from the impressions readers have after finishing the whole book is the immediacy of reaction to the content that BookTubers share. This aspect of BookTube could be interesting for researchers of book studies who look into reading experience.

*A collaboration video* features multiple contributors. Different BookTubers team up in order to expand the audience and produce new, varied content. They might go book shopping together, explore local book stores, or take part in games and challenges, all books-related.

Videos with ‘*top*’ lists are also very popular. They feature compilations of best or worst reads of the year, favourite books of a particular genre, best book series, worst books in a category, or best books by a particular author. These videos often serve as recommendations on how to start reading an author or how to get into a particular genre. Just as reviews, top lists serve the aim of promoting reading expansion.

*Reviews* usually last less than 10 minutes and are narrated in an informal way, with a fast and dynamic rhythm, which is far from the traditional ways of performing literary criticism. Review videos on BookTube are structured according to their own conventions: the first part

**Research of the mutual interest between BookTubers and publishers can shed light on reading experience in the digital age**

provides a short overview of the book's general plot and may include reading of the synopsis on the back of the book; the second part includes a more detailed summary of the book, usually with spoilers, and the opinions of the reviewer.

BookTubers who have more than one thousand subscribers and an active channel may receive review copies from publishers.<sup>1</sup> BookTubers represent a new category of intermediaries, wherein social media content creation and marketing may become their professional occupation. In this case we see the transition from voluntary unpaid labour to a paid creative work.<sup>2</sup> Vloggers on YouTube are also dependent on their audience. Without audience participation, channels get buried in searches, and revenue streams from advertising and sponsorship dries up. This commercial pressure makes sceptical viewers question the reliability and objectivity of BookTubers, as well as authenticity of UGC.

Despite this, book bloggers of the YouTube community are not all about marketing or getting connections in the publishing world. This online community consists of a diverse group of readers and writers who share a passion for literature. Some book bloggers even go so far as becoming writers, for example, Sasha Alsberg, Lindsay Cummings, Christine Riccio,<sup>3</sup> or creating their own publishing company, like Ben Alderson from *Benjaminoftomes* channel did (Scheuerer). Alderson founded his own micro-publishing company that publishes about eight titles a year and specialises in young adult fantasy with LGBTQ characters (Scheuerer).

Another platform that hosts this online community of book bloggers is Instagram. It started

<sup>1</sup> In this case books are free of charge and the blogger may have no obligation to make a positive review on their channel. There is still a possibility of paid contracts with reviewers, but confirmation of these deals is hard to come across as corporate data is involved.

<sup>2</sup> For example, depending on the contract with the publisher, reviews made by BookTubers can be both paid and unpaid. If a YouTube based book blogger has many subscribers (usually more than 10,000), publishers may be interested in sending them review copies of their books.

<sup>3</sup> Her Booktube channel *PolandbananaBOOKS* has 396,000 subscribers at the time of this article being written, one of the top book vloggers on YouTube.

as an image-only platform and has recently evolved into a platform with diverse functions: users can upload photos and post short texts, comment and write direct messages, and upload short videos called "stories" that will disappear twenty-four hours later. There is also IGTV, a television-like function that shows videos from users' channels. In addition, users can also stream live interviews and performances. This variety of functions allows Instagram to offer more creative opportunities to book bloggers.

Instagram is filled with a community of readers – both people who post actively about books and those who follow along from periphery. Instagram allows a spectrum of readers to get involved at their own comfort level. People are so busy and Instagram is a quick and simple way to provide recommendations and find recommendations in return (Piazza 3).

Many talks and interviews between Bookstagrammers and publishers are streamed on this platform and they also allow viewers to participate in these conversations in real time. Furthermore, numerous publishers have their own Instagram channels that they use to inform subscribers about new books and upcoming events. In her *Forbes* article, Jo Piazza describes how Bookstagrammers – as new players in the field of book sales – work:

Bookstagrammers help in that they get images of your book cover out there (and they make them look so pretty!), and readers need to see a book a couple of times, in a couple of different places, before they are inclined to buy it. (Piazza 1).

In this case, users of Instagram help publishers and booksellers with implementing a successful marketing strategy. However, marketing value aside, the motivation behind book-related UGC is more personal: it is about individual opinions, preferences, and sharing.

## BOOK CLUBS VS BOOKTUBE

The larger BookTube community is similar to book clubs or reading groups of the offline world. The first similarity between book clubs and the BookTube community lies in the prioritisation

**Websites, such as YouTube, offer different ways of collaboration for individuals and businesses**

of reading as a form of entertainment. In *Reading Across Worlds*, Proctor and Benwell describe book groups as a “...borderline formation, replicating certain values and conventions of both professional and lay readers” (21). Reading in academia, or professional reading, has a different aim and approach to the texts. Such qualities of books as “entertaining” and “readable” often carry negative connotations for professional readers (150). For the so-called lay reader, reading is primarily a solitary activity that is pleasant and entertaining (21). BookTube and offline book clubs share this characteristic. The uploaded videos are closer to lay reading spirit in their style and content, as they primarily feature entertaining and pleasant reading content. Some channels, such as Book Riot, also attempt to exercise intellectual influences on the reading audience through challenges to read more diverse literature. They promote, for example, postcolonial literature, books written by women, literary works that feature LGBTQ characters, and literature in translation. In one of their posts the bloggers from Book Riot encourage readers to introduce postcolonial literature to their reading lists that support ‘own voices’ in literature:

Maybe find a book about a colonized country written by a non-indigenous person and replace it with an #ownvoices title (especially if the book is about that Indigenous community).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Instagram post from October, 8<sup>th</sup> 2018 for #indigenouspeopleday with a call to “decolonize your bookshelf”.

The second shared characteristic is audience participation. In a book club or reading group, all involved take turns to share their opinions and reviews with the rest of the group. It allows the participants to broaden their horizons and discover things they did not notice before in the discussed literature. In the case of BookTube, there could be hundreds of participants sharing their feelings and thoughts about the book. The BookTuber, therefore, takes the role of discussion leader. Many videos, especially the reviews, tips or recommendations, feature questions that invite viewers to comment and actively engage in conversation. Whereas traditional reading groups involve face-to-face interaction and discussion, BookTube interactions are predominantly text-based and mostly limited to the commentary sections of the platform. BookTubers also make reaction videos and mention each other’s videos in their own.

The third characteristic is establishing group intimacy. Members of book clubs would normally be well-acquainted. The relationship between viewers and BookTubers, on the other hand, is more one-sided as viewers usually have more personal information about the blogger than the other way around. However, many famous BookTubers organise meetings in their home towns or during events such as book fairs, comic-cons, and conferences. There viewers can meet the bloggers in person and discuss books offline. Some BookTubers even arrange these meeting on a regular basis. These events increase the feeling of group intimacy, an important criteria for any community.

Despite these similarities, there are several differences between book clubs and BookTube. First, traditional book clubs generally have a smaller number of participants. The conditions of real-time discourse dictate the limited number of people who can join the discussion at once. YouTube, in this relation, has no limit because the viewers can react to the comments of others and the video content at any time. Online discussions involve typing rather than oral speech, which leads to a constructedness of exchange different from face-to-face communi-

cation. In addition, the books in the videos are not always chosen by the members of the audience; they are instead usually the individual choices of bloggers,<sup>5</sup> who share their opinions after reading.

#### BOOKTUBE AND THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF PUBLISHING

It is undeniable that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century publishers have to survive in a highly competitive environment (Thompson 2), striving to acquire both marketing and cultural influence over readers. The Internet is full of aggressive and omnipresent content marketing; therefore, readers are looking for something that is more authentic and personalised. Proctor and Benwell note that “[o]nline communities, in the form of book clubs and reading groups, help [authors and publishers] via an ability to reach an unprecedented number of people” (148). BookTubers and Bookstagrammers create the kind of content that attracts a high number of customers for businesses, helping publishers and booksellers to implement a successful marketing strategy.

In the expanding market, advertising must be reinvented again and again. Technological innovations and the expansion of the Internet and social networks also require development of new approaches to advertising. Before the period of new digital media dominance, publishers promoted books through events and presentations. The personality of the author also played an important role for promotion. It was a matter of bringing the writer to the public through interviews, public readings or book signings. Another form of advertising was through insertion in the media: publishers sent press releases to newspapers and radio and television stations. One more way of attracting buyers was through the exhibition of attractive books in shop windows. Although these methods are still in use, the propagation of the Internet has reinvented the advertising model.

<sup>5</sup> Some vloggers ask their viewers to choose the next book to read and review from the books they already have in their to-be-read pile. As an alternative, viewers come up with their own recommendation for reading and ask for the review.

Now, with promotion through the Internet, the dissemination of a book through social media channels reaches a greater number of people than used to be reached through traditional channels/outlets.

Future of the book and publishing consists of the adoption of practices, structures, and systems anchored in the Internet culture and more specifically in the Web 2.0 culture, in which transparency, communication, and collaboration are instituted in nuclear work formulae. (Cordón-García 158)

These practices include making comments, subscribing to channels, approving or disapproving of uploaded videos, giving ratings, communicating via direct messages, and creating more visual content in response to already existing videos.

This article only scratches the surface of the ways BookTube can influence publishing in the digital market. With its similarities to book clubs, YouTube offers readers an outlet for conversation and creative collaboration with each other, authors, and publishers, while also offering the latter a new way to talk to bibliophiles and engage with newcomers to the reading market. Further observation and research of the mutual interest between BookTubers and publishers can shed light on reading experience in the digital age, as well as uncover the tendencies and currents of the contemporary book market.

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