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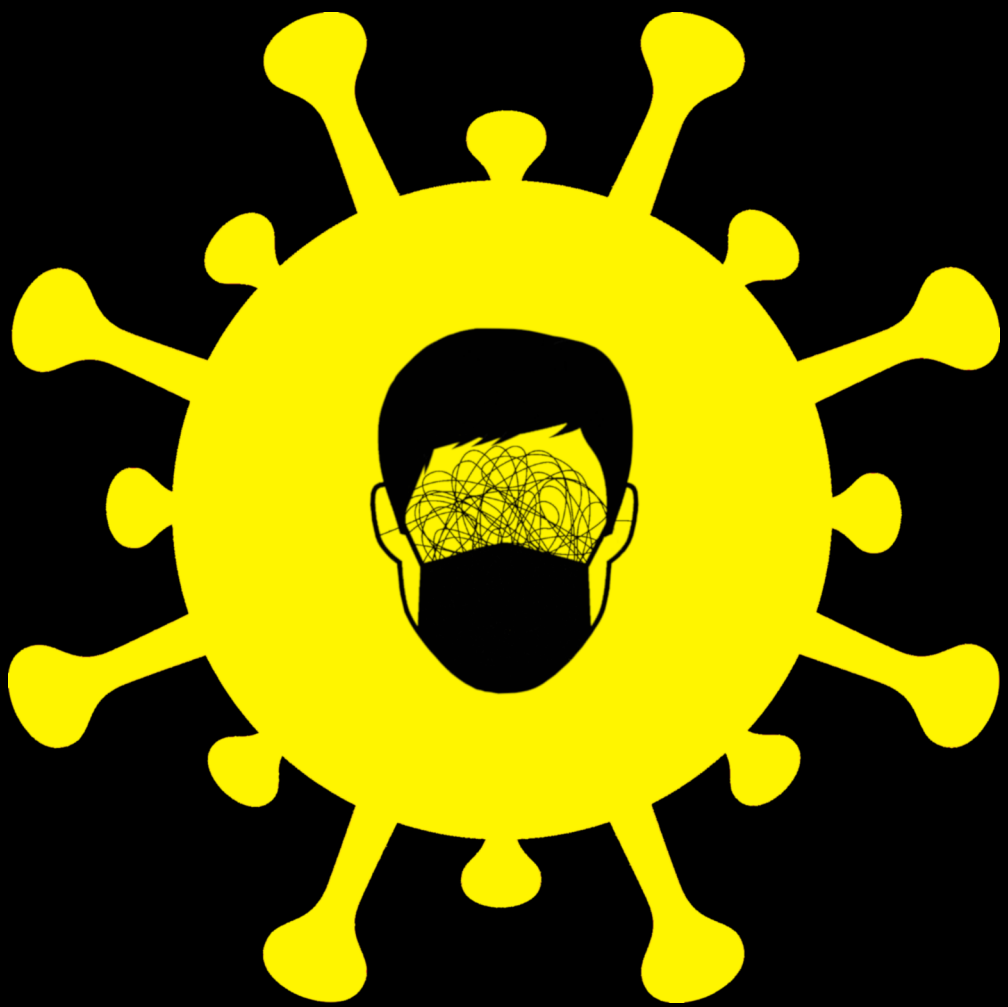
Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



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Lockdown, literature, and online culture: opportunities and challenges. Insights from the West Midlands.

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Abstract:

This article – originating from a paper presented at the Conference "Pandemic Perspectives 2021: Reflections on the Post-Covid World" – has a twofold aim. Firstly, it seeks to identify and discuss the ways in which readers, writers, and cultural organisations have used digital platforms to re-create literary practices throughout the pandemic. Here, literary practices encompass attendance at festival events, the fact of monitoring one's reading progress and reflecting on one's reading habits, and the various interactions between readers, authors, and editors. Secondly, and relatedly, the present article endeavours to point out the opportunities and challenges arising from our new ways of engaging with literature and culture. As a Doctoral Researcher working in close collaboration with the Birmingham-based literature development agency Writing West Midlands, the data and textual evidence I provide mainly proceed from research carried out (online) in the West Midlands.

Keywords: COVID-19, lockdown, literary practice, West Midlands

Covid-19, online culture, and hybridity: An overview

Throughout the crisis, literature development agencies have been increasingly solicited to respond to the cultural needs of society. This is not surprising given the longstanding relationship between mental health and the literary arts (Doche 2021: 336). A survey published by The Reading Agency in April 2020 revealed that 31% of people increased their reading time during the first month of lockdown. On a similar note, research carried out by The National Literacy Trust has found that children's enjoyment of reading has increased during lockdown. Between January and March 2020, 47.8% of children found reading enjoyable; in June 2020, the percentage rose to 55.9%. In April 2020, Publishers Weekly launched the #BooksAreEssentials campaign in response to the shutdown of all but "essential businesses" in the United States. The hashtag #BooksAreEssentials became viral on Twitter, where it gathered and connected authors, publishers, and readers from across the globe (Thomas 2020).

Although restrictions in the UK meant that bookshops remained closed for about five months in 2020, the latest data from official book sales monitor Nielsen BookScan evince that the volume of print books sold grew by 5.2% compared with 2019 (Flood 2021). Given the data presented, it is fair to conclude that lockdown(s) facilitated an appetite for reading.

The pandemic not only saw increases in reading, but it also led to major changes regarding individual and collective literary practices. As Thomas (2020) points out, readers became increasingly keen to monitor their own reading attitudes, behaviours, and consumption. Abigail Boucher, Chloe Harrison, and Marcello Giovanelli pinpoint that readers found lockdown to be a great opportunity to fill in gaps in their knowledge. Specifically, readers report having sought out books written by non-white authors, partly due to the significant media coverage of racist behaviours and protests over police brutality (Boucher, Harrison & Giovanelli 2020). As readers discovered new authors, literary festivals engaged new audiences. For instance, The Hay Festival and The Cheltenham Literature Festival – which used to be particularly popular among white middle-class audiences – reached their largest audience in 2020 (Thomas 2020). The 2020 online edition of the Birmingham Literature Festival (@BhamLitFest; hereafter BLF), curated by Writing West Midlands (hereafter WWM), reached an audience of nearly 5,000 people in the UK, USA, India, South Africa and beyond, making the festival the most accessible it has ever been (WWM 2021: 9). The audience feedback received by WWM reveals that, despite the organisation's commitment towards making creative writing workshops and events widely accessible, in-person events could not be attended by some people working unsociable hours, some people with disability or mental health problems, and some people living in areas with few transport facilities:

"I really liked being able to do it at home when I have time - I am a single carer so have not been able to get / commit to previous courses. This was more accessible for me." (A participant of the "Starting to Write" short course).

"I think online events are very good for people who are isolated because of MH issues or disabilities." (A respondent of the "Culture Restart" survey).

"I live in the country and costs of travel and accommodation make cultural trips a rare and expensive treat. Since Covid, I have been able to access cultural events online that I wouldn't otherwise have been able to 'attend'." (A respondent of the "Culture Restart" survey).

The use of digital platforms has enabled WWM to reduce its expenditures. This cut has had two positive outcomes: (i) WWM was able to remove many barriers to engagement – including high ticket cost and limited number of bursaries – and (ii) used the time they would spend negotiating venues to deepen their work with readers, writers, and audiences. Throughout the pandemic, WWM has increased the number of bursaries offered for paid events.

The agency intends to make these changes long-lasting. To do so, WWM plans to re-introduce limited in-person activities whilst maintaining the option for online engagement (WWM 2021: 18). This hybrid model of working responds to the expectations set by their funders, i.e. the public funding body Arts Council England (hereafter ACE) in their latest "Let's Create" strategy (ACE 2021: 49) and delivery plan (ACE 2021: 7). Additionally, offering both online and offline content would meet the expectations of writers and readers as many of them have expressed the wish to see online events remain. At the Kendal Poetry Festival held online in June 2021, the poet Hannah Hodgson – who lives with life-limiting illness – noted that attending courses and giving readings online has propelled her career forward. She pointed out that the opportunities she was able to seize should not disappear once restrictions ease. In a nutshell, there is a case for diversifying cultural offers – i.e. for curating both online and offline events and workshops – insofar as it would address both institutional (top-down) and audience- and creative-led demands (bottom-up).

Moving online has enabled literary development agencies to generate a greater quantity of literature and to create new content – indeed, this online shift has encouraged creativity for both writers and their supporting bodies. For instance, BLF (starting January 2021) commissions Midlands-based writers to produce monthly reflections of their past and ongoing experience of the pandemic in a dedicated writers' blog on the BLF website.

In light of the observations made in this section, it seems that the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have enabled readers to spend more time reading, reflecting on their reading, and attending festival events. At the same time, the literature development agency for the West Midlands WWM realised that inclusion could be improved and developed thoughtful and *response-able* ways of engaging new audiences and participants.

Covid-19, aesthetics of bookishness, and representations: Insights drawn from readers', publishers', and writers' media platforms

In a similar vein as Writing West Midlands, individual readers and writers have used the affordances provided by new technologies to partake in cultural life throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. While the alarmist rhetoric about the death of the printed book (Gomez 2007) and the death of literature in the digital age (Hammond 2016) has resurfaced at the turn of the twenty-first century, Jessica Pressman argues that "the book [does] not become obsolete with new reading platforms, but rather, change[s] and develop[s] new incarnations and readerships" (2009). "To-be-read" piles, #shelfies and "unboxing" pictures became very popular during the pandemic: this "aesthetic of bookishness" (Pressman 2009) reaffirms the value of the book's materiality by presenting it as a visual artefact (as opposed to a cultural or intellectual artefact).

On blogs and social media, "to-be-read" piles tend to generate engagement on the part of peers, i.e. other readers. Similarly, on Twitter, hashtags such as #lockdownreading have given readers the opportunity to share and discuss their readings throughout the pandemic (Thomas 2020). Although interactions between peers have been significant, we ought to note that readers, editors, and authors have actively sought to interact with each other:

Figure 1. Reader sharing their newly purchased PBLJ issues with PBLJ publishing editors. Retrieved from Twitter.

In the picture above, a reader shares their recent purchase of the *Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal (PBLJ)* 2019-20 set on Twitter. By tagging the usernames of the *PBLJ* editors, the reader directly addresses them. However, the openness of social media platforms implies that the scope of the interaction is never limited to the featured participants. Effectively, this tweet engages followers of the author of the tweet and – since the content has been retweeted – followers of *PBLJ*. This example embodies Jenkins's (2006: 5-6) concept of "participatory cultures" which – based on the blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers (Fairclough 2003: 8) – can broadly be defined as cultures "in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins 2006: 5-6). Though our increasing reliance on social media make these cultures more "visible", one could easily argue that participation in cultural life has always existed (unlike social media!). On the occasion of BLF 2021, the in-person events – held at the Bramall Music Building of The University of Birmingham – ended with some kind of direct interaction between panellists and audience members.

During the pandemic, readers have increasingly become "wreaders" (Landow 1992) by creating epitextual materials – defined as the elements outside a literary artefact which mediate its relation with readers, such as interviews, social media interactions, and author's blogs (Genette 1997: 344) – surrounding the literary artefacts consumed. Thus, online readers play an integral part in the "ontology of visibility" permeating online environments (Citton 2017: 69).

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to in-person book launches being cancelled. Authors and publishers have remedied the problem by organising online book launches, which, in certain cases, attracted many more viewers than a real-world setting could have accommodated. For example, the launch of Jonathan Davidson's poetry collection *A Commonplace* on YouTube was viewed by 663 people. This figure seems particularly significant considering that Davidson's publishers, The Poetry Business, counts 159 YouTube subscribers and that poetry book launches are often smaller events which do not tend to attract big crowds. To help create awareness for their newly released books, some authors have created new practices:

Figure 2: "Unboxing" pictures shared by authors Rosie Garland and Gregory Leadbetter. Retrieved from Twitter.

Contrary to shelfies and social media interactions between readers, writers, and publishers, unboxing pictures have emerged during the pandemic. It is worth pointing out that authors have also come to fetishize the book-bound nature of the reading object. However, the "aesthetic of bookishness" (Pressman 2009) displayed on social media does not seem to be an end in itself. Rather, emphasising the materiality of the book has functioned as a means to engage and sustain dialogue between literary production (writers), literary dissemination (editors and publishers), and literary reception (readers). According to Taboada (2011: 251), "online readers [and writers] primarily write for each other". Given that increasing social connectedness during lockdown has resulted in lower levels of stress and negative emotions (Nitschke et al. 2020), it is hardly surprising that readers, writers, and publishers

have developed interpersonal relations. As such, the book as a visual artefact can better be thought of as an *artefact-in-interaction*. Through photography, a representational medium drawing attention to its intense immobility, online readers and writers present literature as a space for intense mutability, "teeming with the full set of possibilities of [the conversations which] might come to be" (Barad 2007: 354). On a practical note, the increasing online presence of readers and writers mean that both audiences and creative practitioners have been able to provide immediate feedback to newly publicised books, workshops, and events. As far as WWM is concerned, this has allowed for a more informed decision-making on the part of staff members (WWM 2021: 3). This makes me wonder the extent to which cultural organisations and publishers could use the multimodal affordances of bookishness to increase engagement.

(Post) Covid-19, digital transformation, and *re-presentation*: A note of caution

In March 2021, WWM took part in the national art survey "Culture Restart". The survey was disseminated through the agency's mailing list and was completed by a total of 428 respondents.

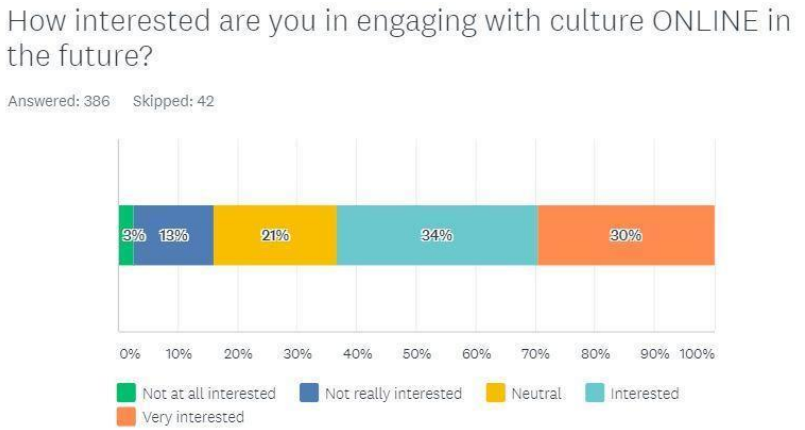

Figure 3. "Culture Restart" survey carried out by Writing West Midlands in March 2021.

As the above figure shows, 64% of the survey's respondents are either interested or very interested in engaging with culture online even after in-person events resume. This data coheres with new funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (hereafter DCMS), granted as part of the Culture Recovery Fund. In March and April 2021, the DCMS announced 1 million pounds for the digital boost of Edinburgh Festivals and 400 million pounds in grants and loans to facilitate the overall digital transformation of the cultural sector, including literary festivals (DCMS 2021). The government's recovery investments show its commitments to fulfil the aims set out in the "UK Digital Strategy" policy paper, published in 2017. This paper argues that giving people "the digital skills they need to fully participate in society" will enable the UK to become a "world-leading digital economy" (DCMS 2017). Of course, the superlative in "world-leading" cannot be deemed innocent: it suggests that the digital transformation encompasses various and perhaps conflicting interests, such as the desire to maximise accessibility on the part of cultural organisations and the desire to maximise profit on the part of the government. It is worth keeping in mind that, although the DCMS distanced itself from the campaign, the government backed up "Cyber First", which encouraged young people to retrain and consider a career in the technology sector:

Figure 4: The dancer in the government's Cyber First campaign. Photograph: HM Government.

Although cultural organisations and creative practitioners have reported positive changes emerging from the crisis – especially in terms of inclusion – let us resist a romanticised picture which would lead us to believe in a digital realm "living on thin air, de-monetised peer-to-peer exchanges and free access, on zero marginal costs and non-competing goods" (Citton 2017: 67). As a result of "free access", the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) – initially created to gather secondary rights for writers – now works hard to make sure that Google and other big data companies do not make copyright materials available for free.

The *re-presentation* – i.e. the new presentation – of literature through the noticeable rise of online content may exacerbate what Georg Franck terms "mental capitalism" (2011: 13). This concept has mainly been used in broader discussions pertaining to "the attention economy", which stipulate that our information-rich world consumes the attention of its recipients (Simon 1971). The economic metaphor emphasises how attention discourses have come to be embedded within economic discourses. Simon (1971) notes the deep imbalance between the plethora of semiotic resources available and the scarcity of the human attention needed to attend to these resources. Such imbalance creates competition for the reception of cultural goods. While one could certainly argue that this competition has always existed, the perceived horizontality of online environments enables invisible, and thus unfair competition. To illustrate my point, I would like to briefly consider the London-based production company Fane, which defines itself as a "dynamic and market-leading live and online production company" (2021). In the digital realm, it is possible for Fane to place restrictions on how their authors engage with other literature audiences. Such restrictions were typical with high-profile in-person events but had not typically impacted on literature programming. However, since being online makes everyone a competitor with everyone else, high-profile online events could potentially impact programming. The effect of such competition has yet to be shown.

Increasing the amount of online cultural events necessarily requires creating more online paratextual materials such as advertisements, trailers, interviews with authors and social media engagement, to name but a few. Depending on audiences' measured engagement – i.e. views and clicks – with a specific event or author, automated algorithms make assumptions and predictions about what they (may) like and will accordingly filter the epitextual materials which are presented to them. According to Yves Citton (2017: 47), the digital environment functions as an "*echosystem*, understood as an infrastructure of resonances conditioning our attention to what circulates around, through and within us". While both popular content and content matching our online behaviours will be brought into the foreground – and thus resonate powerfully – unpopular content and content seemingly divorced from our habitual behaviours will remain in the background. Echoes have a homogenising effect which hinders "the plurivocal and dialogical otherness" structuring human discourse (Petrilli 2008: 274). The etymology of the term "attention", *ad-tendere,* suggests that *it tends towards* something: "it calls for

an exit from oneself, [a stretching,] a broadening of horizons" (Citton 2017: 109). As such, it indicates a *potential* rather than an *actual.* As far as online cultural events are concerned, one may wonder if liberty means the right to show people what they do not know they may want to watch, read, or experience. Since its inception, the literature development agency Writing West Midlands (2013: 3) has sought to incentivise people to "broaden and deepen their [literary] tastes and interests". Jonathan Davidson (2021:17), Chief Executive of WWM, writes:

We give people what they want and we give people what they do not yet know they want. Our development as an organisation is entirely based on the meshing of these two processes. As a result, we have developed artists, audiences, and participants from a wide range of backgrounds.

On several occasions, the poets and cultural mediators Gregory Leadbetter and Jonathan Davidson have argued that, as far as literature is concerned, supply creates demand rather than the opposite. This argument matches the ethos and doxa of the West Midlands Readers' Network (WMRN), which mailed mystery books to readers during the pandemic, in collaboration with Warwick Books and local novelist Susan Fletcher.

Conclusion

Within the remit of this paper, I have attempted to explore the breadth of the changes brought about by the move online following the first Covid outbreaks. I began my mapping out the shift in orientation in readers' engagement with literature, after which I exposed the responses of ACE and WWM. I then discussed the book as a visual artefact having the potential to generate various forms of interaction between readers, publishers, and authors. While the arguments developed in the first two sections portray the move online in a positive light, I closed this piece with a note of caution. It seems that, as far as online platforms are concerned, competing interests and priorities – combined with echo effects – may make it difficult for readers, writers, and cultural organisations to give their focused attention to qualitative (and potentially transformative) aesthetic experiences escaping scalarisation. In this context, the main challenge lying ahead may be one of agency: choosing – rather than passively accepting – what we want to *pay* attention to.

Competing interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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