

The materiality of reading and its affective implications in people's everyday lives: Insights from the reading conversations

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Abstract: Numerous studies focus on media in everyday life, but although reading is also a media practice, it is rarely considered as part of this agenda, and despite the fact it mostly happens at home, domestication theories largely bypass it, too. Reading as a media practice is usually acknowledged only sporadically, e.g. when it refers to reading magazines or following news on cell phone. Even digitalisation, enabling us to read whenever and wherever, did not secure reading a more central topic in media studies. On the other hand, in reading studies, digitalization spurred new interest for the material specificities of reading behaviour, and this provides a framework also for my research interest. In this contribution I will focus on the ways in which books play a role in people's everyday pursuits and undertakings, not only through reading as such, but also through their material presence. My research is based on individual semi-structured interviews or so-called reading conversations with people who have voluntarily agreed to talk about their reading behaviour. I was interested in reading habits and practices, with an aim to analyse reading as embedded in time and space and performed through different kinds of rituals. In this paper I focus on

the findings referring to affective materialities. Considerable attention is given to the methodology and the analysis of the research process, and some reflection dedicated to the importance of complementing media and reading studies.

Keywords: reading conversations, affective materiality of books, media vs. reading studies, self-reflective research process

1. Introduction or Epistemological reflection on the topic of everyday reading

I have always been intrigued by the contextual aspects of the reading (especially pleasure reading) experience, by which I refer to the tangible, material, environmental, as well as physical, that is bodily dimensions of the reading act, that all exceed the textual dimension. This was partly because of my own self-reflective observations of my readings and partly because of my interest in the history of reading which is among others also a history of changing postures, places, rituals as well as different textual objects and reading props. This 'infrastructure' is also what, among others, constitutes, defines and in fact eventually makes possible the everydayness of reading, and I believe it was exactly the practical integration of reading in the quotidian context that importantly contributed to its establishment as a leisure and pleasure practice back in the eighteenth century (e.g. Vogrinčič 2008, Brewer 1997).

However, the notion of everyday seems to be much more at home in media and communication studies, which offer a lot of useful conceptualisations and research methods (e.g. Ytre-Arne 2023, Markham 2017, Baym 2015, Bakardjieva 2005, Bird 2003, Moores 2000, Drotner 1994, Bausinger 1984), but do not seem to so readily accommodate reading and books as one of their central domains:

there are definitely not that many prominent examples which address reading in terms of media practice, even though there are of course some notable exceptions, as is the case with the work by Janice Radway (1991) and Joke Hermes (1995).

In media and communication studies, interest in everyday life has been particularly central to theories of domestication (e.g. Hartmann 2023, Berger et al. 2004, Hirsch and Silverstone 1992), founded on the process of gradually integrating media technologies in the home (Ytre-Arne 2023, 3). But even though the majority of people predominantly read at home, there is – again with a couple of recent exceptions (e.g. Salmi-Niklander and Dalbello 2022; Vogrinčič Čepič and Kotrla-Topić 2021; Mackey 2016a and 2016b) – surprisingly little research on contemporary home reading practices that would explore domestic reading habits as a phenomenon in itself and not in terms of ‘home literacy environment’ (see e.g. Johnson, 2014), assessing its importance for developing life-long reading skills. This may be because of the firmly rooted and still predominant understanding of media as primarily *mass* media, historically conceptualized in 1930s as the ones with the power of influence and control (Scannell 2007) on the one hand, and because of the common equation of reading with reading books on the other. Books as such are not only falling out of the category of classical (periodical, general interest) mass media, but also have a more marginal role in structuring and scheduling the everyday life, simply because reading books on an everyday basis is much less common, wide-spread and frequent than checking-up the news on one of the possible devices, and also less central to public connection (for the concept of public connection, see Couldry et al. 2010). As such reading has – except for the daily news consumption – habitually remained on the brinks of mainstream media studies concern.

Debates about media and everyday life usually give precedence to one medium: while being originally concerned with the television (e.g. Scannell 1996, Silverstone 1994, Morley 1992), the attention has in the last two decades switched to all-inclusive smartphones (see Regehr 2025, Ytre-Arne 2023, Drusian et al. 2022). Ironically, with digitalisation and smartphones becoming our key media, we are not only reading more and definitely more often than ever, but our reading is also more embedded in our everyday chores and less anchored at home. Even so, the fact that we now live in the era of digital orality (Pettitt 2012, Logan 2010, Sauerberg 2009), communicating by reading and writing more than ever before, and that our written communication often resembles conversation, which means that we are now reading what we would otherwise verbalise, has not been acknowledged enough by media studies in a way that would make more room for rethinking the changed nature of reading.

On the other hand, with the digital turn, studies of reading have begun to more systematically consider the material specificities of reading behaviour and the different affordances of various reading devices, thus making media studies with its everyday epistemology again a very useful frame of reference (see e.g. Engberg, Have, Stougaard Pedersen 2023). The fact that the changing materiality of reading has sparked a new curiosity about the book as an object and about everything this implies not only increased the awareness of what used to be taken for granted for so long, but notably facilitated approaching people (in the interviews and focus groups) with questions tackling reading from the extra-textual perspective, emphasizing the material, as well as bodily and emotional dimension of reading, simply because readers had by now acquired the comparative print-versus-digital experience, which made it easier to address the above issues via differentiation.

As someone being primarily educated in comparative literature, I quickly realized that I will have to look elsewhere in order to grasp the phenomenon of reading in its situated, embodied and embedded existence. I found a lot of useful insights on the crossroads of sociology, cultural and media studies, anthropology, and in ethnographic research. Aiming to learn about ordinary people's reading behaviour, but also to observe how they verbalize it, I used one of the most straightforward and seemingly simplest research methods – semi-structured interviews about reading or so-called reading conversations

2. Reading conversations – development of a method

I began conducting reading interviews in 2018 simply because I wanted to talk to ordinary, not necessarily avid readers, about how they read and what role reading plays in their lives, and I was curious to see how they articulate their reading experience and wanted to gather some live, real-life, first person material. After all those years that I have been undertaking these interviews, I came to believe, that not only this was a very useful and efficient way to grasp the quotidian quality of reading, but has many beneficial consequences to which I will refer to during this talk.

These conversations with whoever was willing to participate were organized at the small cultural centre in Ljubljana, called *Vodnikova Homestead: House of Reading, Writing and Storytelling*, where I conducted 43 individual reading interviews between the spring 2018 and the spring 2023. The invitation was first weekly and then at least monthly published in the cultural centre's newsletter and on its Facebook page and sent to the list of subscribers. It was written in an open and friendly manner and explicitly addressed all kinds of

readers, even those who might have stopped reading long time ago or those who perhaps only read comics or online news, because I wanted to hear their views on reading, too. (However, especially at the beginning, my interviewees turned out to be mostly elderly women, who read a lot.) I held reading interviews roughly once or twice a month, they took place on the premises of the cultural centre and lasted between one and two hours.

My research method was basically a semi-structured individual interview (Denscombe 2010), however, in practice, these interviews often turned into more loose and dialogical conversations, which is why I use the terms 'reading interview' and 'reading conversation' or 'conversation about reading' interchangeably, especially since the conversational atmosphere was deliberately encouraged. It was only gradually that I discovered how to best conduct the interview, learned what worked and what did not, and slowly developed a specific approach of talking about reading that allowed me to understand and also take advantage of the opportunities and challenges it offered. I will first present my main conversational guidelines, then focus on the findings, emphasizing the ones that refer to the affective materiality of reading, and conclude with the uses of such reading-related discussions.

I detected and defined three core pillars of my approach. First, in the reading interview, the focus has to be on reading and not on the text. Second, reading should be considered in its various aspects: cognitive, physical-material and emotional. And third: this kind of conversation requires a personal approach.

I believe that by focusing on the reading behaviour, habits and experiences, rather than on a specific text or texts, we make the discussion much more open and accessible, because everyone can

say something about his or her reading in general, simply because everyone in the developed world has at least some reading experience, even though he or she might not be an avid reader or might not consider herself/himself to be a reader at all. I find this important, because I think this makes it possible even for the reluctant readers to participate in the debate, to feel invited and included.

This standpoint provides a common ground, inviting different readers – seasonal and dormant, digital- or genre-only-, used-to-be-readers etc. – to join in the debate. Text-centred discussions on the other hand risk excluding or even losing those who do not feel up for it, who do not want to analyse and interpret the thematic and formal aspects of the narrative and may be driven away exactly because of the pressure of the tacit expectations of such debates, which often imply that one should read the book in advance, form and share an opinion, and possibly even have some knowledge about the author. This quickly privileges the ones who might know more about the writer or are more articulated and skilful in critical discourse. However, by avoiding the pressure of the text, conversation about reading quickly becomes much more inclusive and connecting, presupposing that we are all some kind of readers, not necessarily passionate, but readers nevertheless.

Putting reading in the centre of the debate does not mean that the text finds no place in it. It is impossible to converse about our reading without referring to the reading material and concrete textual examples – titles, authors etc. – however, prioritizing the practice of reading over the reading matter makes a difference as the respondents feel more at ease, realizing their contribution is valuable regardless of what or how much they read.

What can this conversation then be about if it avoids tackling the text? This is where my second pillar comes in: reading conversation addresses reading, the act of reading in all its heterogeneous complexity. Reading inevitably takes place in a certain place at a certain time, in a concrete reading position and in a specific mood. It is affected by the materiality of the reading object (be it a paper text, an e-reader, or an audio device), and by the characteristics of the reading situation, and it evokes feelings. Rather than treating reading merely as a cognitive, rational, mental act of deciphering meaning, we should consider it also as a physical act, a bodily practice and as an emotional experience. Once we open reading to all these aspects, we substantially enhance its potential for discussion and reading quickly becomes a topic that can be talked about at length, it becomes much more discussable. This multidimensional perspective boosts its capacity for debate, even when putting the text aside.

I strongly believe, all this can be more easily achieved by using a personal approach, which is the third pillar of my reading conversation method. According to my experience, conversations function best if the interviewer allows him or herself to act as a fellow reader with his own reading life, sharing his or her reading experiences and attitudes, thus establishing an equal dialogue in which the interviewee is prioritized without exempting the interviewer from the conversation. I welcomed the questions from my interlocutors, and my experience was that bringing my perspective, and attaching my readings to my different roles as a mother, daughter, wife, professor etc. enabled an open and relaxed interaction and stimulated the conversation.

These three core pillars importantly defined the structure of the interviews and the way they were conducted. My main task was to

assist my respondents to reflect on their personal reading experiences and put them into words.

The easiest way to strike up a conversation was by first letting my participants speak freely about their reading, which is why I first asked them what they thought when they thought about reading, and to describe what kind of readers they considered themselves to be. One can say a lot already from what they focused on as well as from what they did not mention. Also, it was obvious that there were some questions they anticipated and prepared for and felt eager to share (such as, what do you like to read and how much do you read), so using those for an introductory warm-up was also something that worked well. It was only afterward that I began to steer participants toward the topics that addressed the contextual particularities of their readings and to inquire after seemingly mundane details, always allowing them to talk freely about their reading experiences.

Below is a list of open queries and topics:

- everyday reading: 'day in the life segments' (morning to evening)
- typical and ideal reading session
- time and place of reading
- different reading practices: reading aloud, reading on the go, listening to audio books
- public vs. private reading
- reading memories, remembering reading, rereading
- biographical changes in reading practices
- the book as an object, storing books
- leisure vs. obligatory reading

- reading choices and quantity of reading
- different reading devices
- reading and emotions
- reading postures, reading and the body

At the end I have always also asked the interviewees about how they felt during the interview, what they thought of the questions and what they made of this experience.

For the sake of illustration, here are some examples of questions in arbitrary order:

How has your reading changed over time, throughout different ages of life?

What are your ideal reading circumstances (e.g. your preferred reading spot etc.)?

What is your first / your favourite reading memory?

How is your reading affected by the weather or the time of year?

Do you visualise the story and its characters, do you see and hear them?

What does the intensity of your reading depend on?

Do you have reading rituals?

What is your usual reading posture, and does it depend on what you are reading?

Do you prefer to read when you are alone, or you like the presence of other people?

Do you talk about what you read with anyone?

What motivates you to read? Do you reread books?

Have any books been of particular importance to you?

How exactly I addressed these topics and in what order was not strictly determined and I quickly realized that I must invent a new path of conversation with every collocutor, depending on what he or she is telling me and how he/she responds to my query. I listened to recordings and tried to understand what makes the interview better, experimented with different versions and learned on the way. It was essential that I, myself, answered the questions first, because this made me more sensitive and more alert for the nuances of the responses I received in the interviews. As rightly observed by Pink, “knowledge about the embodied and sensory realms can only be gained through reflecting on the researcher’s own sensory engagements and memories” (Pink 2009 in Koskinen-Koivisto et al. 2024, 4). Autoethnography and reflexivity (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023, Koopman et al. 2020, see also Nolan Stinson 2008) therefore became an additional tool of my approach.

The key thing was that my interviewees realized that they cannot provide wrong answers, and as soon as that happened, they quickly became comfortable. It was paramount that I treated them as experts from their own experience (Čačinovič Vogrinčič and Mešl 2019), which is exactly what they were since they obviously knew the most about their readings. And the fact that I am interested in what only they can say something about gave them confidence and stimulated them to engage in conversation. It aroused a kind of self-inquiring curiosity in them, that helped me investigate their reading behaviours together. In what follows I will quickly summarize the main findings and then turn to those referring to affective materialities.

3. The findings

3.1. General findings

I deliberately dedicated some attention to the performance of the conversation itself, because what surprised me most were not only some insights I gained, but rather the many positive effects of our conversations about reading, which is something my interviewees acknowledged as well.

To think about one's own reading allows people to see themselves from a different perspective. It reveals yet another layer of our identity, the reading identity. Many admitted that they had not thought before about a lot of issues I brought up and felt intrigued by their new self-discoveries.

Talking about one's reading, especially reading for pleasure, is in fact one of the ways to talk about ourselves, and this is why it often turns into autobiographical narration as the interviewees are inclined to evaluate their reading behaviour through their life story, which came to the surface especially when talking to the elderly.

Reading conversations also seemed to have a significant motivational potential. For example, interviewees often said, that from now on they would pay more attention to their reading habits and observe themselves more closely, but they also felt encouraged to try something new. Our exchange thus often motivated them to explore reading in its various forms and to look for new reading pleasures. It stimulated them for reading.

I will now turn to the observations made by the interviewees that I labelled as affective materialities, because they demonstrate the attachment to the physical object of the book and reveal the uses and pleasures of books beyond reading.

3. 2. Findings on affective materiality

Even though my questions presumed the importance of material aspects of reading, the role of the environment etc., I was nevertheless surprised by the various forms of material attachments that were expressed and especially by the significance of the mere presence of books that was often emphasised in our conversations. Observations from the interviewees listed below demonstrate these various manifestations of physical, tangible relationships with books. Some are more common and predictable, such as the ones expressing the importance of owning the books and of exhibiting them at home. Bookshelf arrangements present a special topic, especially the relationship between a display for the visitors and the more intimate, less exposed collection, often arranged next to bed (see also Kajander 2022). The importance of taking the books along on a bus and on some errands which usually require waiting is also very common, simply because books add another layer to the surroundings or the situation, and they often bring comfort. As observed by Collinson: “By creating such reading places readers actually construct their everyday cultural worlds [...] The everyday value of reading in this instance is not to be found in the text, or in the aesthetic, but in the way reading allows readers in a given location to transform it, albeit temporarily, in to a ‘place’ partly of their own making” (2009, 55).

Some other responses, however, were more intriguing. As claimed by Paul Willis, ethnographic method has the capability to surprise researchers, allowing them to reach knowledge not prefigured in their starting paradigm (1990, 90). For example, some of the interviewees said they carried a certain book around as a talisman. Some tucked a book under the pillow at night for inspiration, to

gather wisdom, and for memorisation. Some carried the book they were currently reading around the apartment (e.g. to the bathroom and to the kitchen) to remain close to the characters, treating books as accompaniments. Some personalised the object of the book by wrapping it up, adding notes, using ex libris, specially chosen bookmarks (etc.), and some referred to books as friends, treated them as 'beings' (and sometimes even talked to them). Quite often the observations of my interviewees revealed that books also function as mediators of memory, as materialized memories (Salmi-Niklander and Dalbello 2022, 1). In this sense, books can be characterized as biographical objects, which function as tools for autobiographic elaboration, a way of knowing oneself through things (Hoskins, 1998).

Here are some quotes that demonstrate what I have been referring to:

I never use bookmarks and therefore leave books lying open face up. I like how in this way, books are somehow present in the space, as if they'd integrate, became part of what's going on 'in the real world.' (W17)

I always wrap my books in gift paper and put them carefully away before turning in, because you cannot leave books lying around among files of socks or pots. (W2)

I even bring along my book in the bathroom, when I'm taking a bath, but then I always worry it'll get wet, so I never actually read it, but it's there, lying next to the bathtub... (W10)

I think the book is also grateful if you treat it with love and care, I have the feeling that it also has a soul of its own. I treat a book as a living being and sometimes I even thank it and say: My darling, you have given me so much pleasure. (W6)

This all signifies that the corporeal existence of the books itself already has an affective power and is emotionally charged, which is what the concept of affective materiality broadly refers to (see Koskinen-Koivisto et al. 2024, 2).

In order to facilitate talking about the non-textual part of reading behaviour, which is something my interviewees were not most used to, I asked them to bring to the interview a selection of five books or five reading items (of their own choosing), not only for me to see, but primarily to help them evoke feelings and remember the details about the circumstances and the process of reading them. Particularly books that contain dedications and underlined passages or even some drawings, and those that show signs of use, have coffee stains or smell like sun cream, are sometimes very revealing. It is often difficult to verbalize material and sensory aspects and bringing the actual book(s) often helps.

In analysing what they said, I found it useful to draw on the studies on embodied cognition, which argues that we do not only think with our brains, but always also with our bodies. In that sense reading – as any other cognitive act – is also always *embodied, embedded, enacted* and *extended* (Schilhab and Groth, 2024).

It is embodied, because it is an engagement of the body with the reading material: the very act of holding the text or scrolling it, the body posture, the control of the gaze, all that is reading embodied. It is enacted, because we are always performing gestures of reading, which become inscribed in the knowledge of the body through habits and rituals and conventions. Reading is also always situated in a particular situation and organized in accordance with its constraints and availabilities. We read differently in the nature than in the

classroom or on the bus. And reading is often also extended as it draws on the materiality of the reading situation, in order to understand the text better or to memorize it more easily, for example by underlining, making marginal notes, using post-its and page tabs, similar as when counting, we help ourselves with our fingers.

The embodied perspective which has been popularised as the four Es, provides a nice tool for thinking about emotional attachment to the materiality of the book and reading, and brings this dimension to the forefront. It also helps us understand that a big part of the pleasure of reading is in fact gained from the non-textual, ritualistic and performative dimension, what is also obvious from readers' responses.

The physical aspects of the reading ritual are very important to me: holding the book in my hands, opening it, flipping through its pages, feeling its pages between my fingers, its weight, its smell. (W5)

There's a sequence of small things I always do and prepare before I begin to read ... something to nibble, cushions, the lights, I have to undress, I need some props ... (M14)

I have to read before going to sleep no matter what. The mere fact of holding a book and following the lines brings me comfort, even if I'm too tired to grasp a word. (W31)

A mere presence of books on the one hand and a sheer set-up for reading (an installation of reading) on the other already has an effect, often a substantial one. What is being read is frequently of secondary importance, which is why, rather than talking about the 'use of

literature' (Felski 2008), which emphasizes what is being read, I talk about the use, or rather, the function of books as mere objects, i.e. as only a promise of reading. As implied in the quotes, the 'setting' for reading, the 'reading installation' itself already has its effects. Or, as observed by Thumala Olave, "the material presence of books during the day is in itself a support" (2022a, 40). Thumala Olave introduces the concept of books as icons, which corresponds to the sentiments, articulated in the reading interviews. "Books afford aesthetic, lived experiences; they are quotidian, mundane icons [...] The fusion of the material, surface properties of books, the valued cultural goods that books represent, and of the act of reading is essential to books' iconic power and appeal" (2022b, 143, 145).

It is significant that my interviewees expressed affective materiality exclusively with regards to paper books. This could be attributed to the fact that many of them self-defined as 'older, traditional readers' (almost half were over 60 years old), implying their lack of experience with (as well as aversion to) digital reading. However, affective materiality of reading is not limited to print, but can just as well relate to e-books (see Thumala Olave 2022b).

4. Discussion, conclusion and further remarks

What these reading conversations have taught me is that talking around, rather than about the text, addressing precisely these material aspects, has at least three beneficial effects. First, it is a way into talking about the everydayness of reading as it allows us to grasp the quotidian nature of engaging with books. Second, it facilitates the inclusion of reluctant readers in conversation. And third, it increases curiosity about reading and the books. The latter became especially obvious when I applied reading conversation to a focus group of not-

only-avid-readers (Vogrinčič Čepič 2023). The method evidently works well also in a group interview and, I think, could be used much more often, especially in educational context. Despite its many benefits, talking about reading is in my view an underrated and underexploited tool for reading encouragement. According to my experience, even reluctant teenage readers feel intrigued by the questions and show some interest in books and reading (Vogrinčič Čepič 2023). Significantly, one of the topics that they relate to most easily is the book as a personal item, a possession of special meaning and appreciation. It seems that the iconicity of books extends even to people who do not make books so central to their lives (see Thumala Olave 2022b), which is exactly what makes it an effective common denominator for an inclusive reading conversation.

Observations from other research that I was involved in the last few years, confirm that the tangible presence of reading material stimulates reading conversation. As part of an Erasmus+ project on reading for pleasure pedagogy (see Setting up a Reading Motivator project webpage), we have in 2024 carried out a series of reading-related workshops in primary schools and realized that one of the things that children liked the most was when reading motivators brought piles of books and literary put them in front of their noses for children to look at and browse through, creating a visible and tangible book environment. Again, the fact that books were there to hold and examine made a crucial difference.

Being part of a broad research on youth media habits in Slovenia (n = 3489, Oblak Črnič 2025) and analysing a series of transcripts of focus groups with primary school teenagers (n = 27, 12 – 15 years old), I was intrigued to learn that reluctant readers, those who do not buy or borrow books to read voluntarily, when asked whether and what they

read, reported how they sometimes browse through print magazines, newspapers, and most often, free of charge bulletins or even commercial flyers that they come across at home, either finding them in the mailbox or laying around on furniture surfaces in the living or dining room area, and thus implying that they actually have to be directly confronted with the reading material to start engaging with it (Vogrinčič Čepič 2025). With newspapers 'disappearing' into various devices, there is less opportunity for such chance encounters with physical reading matter, which apparently does make a difference. Aiming at analysing the media repertoires of the young (Hasebrink and Popp 2006), this research addressed various cross-media practices, including reading, and offered a nice way of linking media and reading studies, which – as argued in the beginning of the article – could both benefit from a more intensive interaction, especially in the context of contemporary reading behaviour.

In this paper I tried to show that the above presented approach of reading conversation with the focus on affective materialities enables us to effectively grasp the everydayness of our media practices.

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