
Simone Murray’s *The Digital Literary Sphere* has a set of ambitious and interrelated objectives. The book proposes to understand digital writing as the product of an industry that is also becoming digital, touching on the ways that the digital sphere creates its own conceptualizations of authorship, marketing, book reviewing and reading. *The Digital Literary Sphere* additionally features a rationale for thinking of “the digital’s significance for literary culture” (1) via some of the methods and concerns of book history, media studies, and a specific aspect of electronic literary studies. Along the way, Murray considers, and for the most part discards, other ways of understanding digital writing, including literary studies more generally, the Digital Humanities, cultural studies, approaches making use of Bourdieu’s conception of the literary field, and literary sociology.

Murray’s call for a more nuanced digital literary studies is timely, as digital composition, publishing and reading become more widespread across a variety of platforms. I am in full agreement with Murray that “what is urgently needed is a digital literary studies that is both contemporary and contextual” (9). It is true that many of the methods of literary criticism do not serve digital texts very well at all. At the same time, the discipline of book history does have methods and concerns suitable for understanding the rapidly-changing digital (and becoming-digital) publishing industry.

Unfortunately, the promise and urgency of Murray’s challenge to methods of studying digital writing, production and consumption is ultimately not realized because of two difficulties: the
fuzzy conceptualization of “literary” in *The Digital Literary Sphere*, and some confusion about the audience for the book. The idea of the literary is central to the premise of *The Digital Literary Sphere*, but it is hard to see why, or even how. Murray does not ever say what the literary means, beyond remarking that it is not the “culture” of cultural studies because that term includes too many objects (15, 21), or that it is merely what the digital sphere says it is (20). Murray undercuts both points when she says that “even a Jane Austen fanfic is unlikely to be recognized by any but the most dyed-in-the-wool cultural relativist as ‘literature’” (28). It is not clear why not. Murray says that there is no consensus in interpretative communities about fan-fiction, but she provides no evidence for that. Does it matter whether digital writing is even literary? It seems to matter to Murray regardless, but “the literary” operates more as an organizing principle in *The Digital Literary Sphere* than writing, publishing or reading within “cultural industries” (Hesmondhalgh 2019) or a way for publishers and booksellers to market books as “literature” (Squires 2007). Murray’s method for thinking about the literary is to examine publishing web sites for the categories of authorship, marketing, book reviewing and reading, but the idea of what literature is remains a negative category. In her chapter on reading, “the literary” also appears to mean only the novel genre, and only the codex (138, 143). In fact, there is a thriving online industry devoted to poetry, comics, book-length and short form nonfiction and short fictional prose found in born-digital journals, in blogs and podcasts devoted to contemporary writing, and on social media platforms, notably Twitter and Instagram.

The insistence on and deflection from the literary has consequences for the book’s audience. Murray appears to be writing for book historians, urging them to rethink the idea of the literary critic as an authority in an age when anyone can write about literature online (178), and asking them to turn away from Digital Humanities and towards media studies in the study of digital paratexts (179-80). But her insistence on the literary as an organizing category, something most book historians do not in fact do, signals that her audience could be literary scholars who have yet to understand digital communities in their own terms. If this is the case, Murray’s commendable attempt to “map” the digital literary sphere and argue for its importance needs a rationale for the literary as a category of inquiry to match its ambition and scope.

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References