
The Democratization of Reading: From the Printed Pocketbook to the Ebook

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ABSTRACT

The form and use of the book as an artefact have changed under the influence of technological, formal, and cultural factors. The appearance of the printed book contributed to the increase in learning how to write and read. The faster multiplication of texts, within reach of a wider audience, with the desire to enable the transport for reading or consult at any time, increased the demand for books in small format, in a “portable format”. The emergence of a reading public, directly associated with initiatives to promote education, the various transformations in the book production process, as well as the reconfiguration of the book format and its availability in pocket size through decisions focused on the needs of the readers, have contributed significantly to the popularisation of books, and reading. Today, it is possible to read printed books with various formal characteristics and from different digital formats on various reading devices, such as computers, tablets, e-readers, and smartphones. This context has contradicted the idea that the printed book would “die” and reinforced a scenario of lasting coexistence of printed and digital books, in which both play a part in democratizing book reading. Through a literature review, this paper aims to understand the role of the printed pocketbook, and now the ebook and its reading on mobile devices, in democratizing reading.

Keywords: Pocketbook, Digital book, Democratization of reading, Portable book

INTRODUCTION: THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE BOOK

In the history of books and their production, changes have been brought about by the characteristics of the media, the production processes, and the readers’ needs. According to Manguel (2020), from early on, readers demanded that the format of books be adapted to their intended use. Even before the printed book, the codex had already been designed to be portable, i.e., small enough to allow the reader to hold it in their hands while reading, carry it anywhere and easily consult part of its text. On the other hand, larger books met the needs of other readers, as was the case of some liturgical works, in which large format allowed for reading from a distance.

It is important to remember that before the invention of the printing press, the book had a restricted audience. However, the reduced time needed for production and the consequent increase in the number of books available changed the reader’s relationship with this object, which ceased to be

exclusive, allowing several readers to own identical copies of the same book. Furthermore, as more and more books became available, more people learned to read and write (Manguel, 2020, pp. 182-188).

THE POCKETBOOK

It was in Venice (Italy), in 1501, that Aldo Manuzio (c. 1449-1515) published the first model of the paperback, in an edition composed with a new typeface – italic – designed by Francesco Griffo (1450-1518), to solve the need to produce smaller and less expensive books (Meggs & Purvis, 2009; Borsuk, 2018; Manguel, 2020). After this first edition, Manuzio will have published in small format several classic works. Borsuk (2018), in her work *The Book*, refers to this moment as “The Aldine Revolution and the Portable Libraries” (2018, p. 94) and reflects on the critical impact of Manuzio’s work on the reading and aesthetics of the page, both from the point of view of its composition and the readability of the text.

However, Manguel notes that, despite the emergence of small, portable books of various formats, which could be read anywhere by their characteristics, “The paperback as we know it today appeared much later”¹ (Manguel, 2020, p. 190).

In *The book in Society*, Robinson (2014) clarifies that books and readers exist based on a dynamic synergy and that this relationship depends on literacy. According to him, a mass readership was developed due to a series of initiatives to promote access to education in the late nineteenth century (Robinson, 2014, p. 116). As Martins (1999) points out, there are “... those who consider, in the history of the ‘democratization of the book’, two major moments – the emergence of the anonymous reading public in the nineteenth century and the explosion of the paperback book in the last post-war period...”² (Martins, 1999, p. 209).

During the 19th century, softcover books were already being produced, but these covers were often temporary, discarded, and later replaced by a binding. As early as mid-1840-41, the publisher Bernhard Tauchnitz (1816-1895) in Leipzig (Germany) is said to have published a collection of cheap softcover books. Nevertheless, it was only in the 1930s that there was an increase in the production of cheap softcover paperback books intended for wide distribution (Robinson, 2014; Manguel, 2020). In 1932, the German publisher *Albatross Books* started a series of softcover books that identified literary genres through a colour code (Robinson, 2014, p. 122). In 1935, Allen Lane, in London, after identifying the need for a collection of cheap but good-quality paperback books, launched *Penguin Books* (Robinson, 2014; Borsuk, 2018; Manguel, 2020). Also, in 1939, Robert de Graff, in the United States of America (USA), started a project similar to Lane’s – the *Pocket Books* – which were initially sold at a tenth of the cost of a new hardback book.

¹Our translation of “O livro de bolso tal como o conhecemos hoje, apareceu muito mais tarde”.

²Our translation of “... quem considere, na história da ‘democratização do livro’, dois grandes momentos – a emergência do público-leitor anónimo no século XIX e a explosão do livro de bolso no último pós-guerra...”

Unlike traditional hardback books, these new softback books became available not only in bookshops and train station stands but also in department stores, tea rooms, stationery shops and tobacconists, thus becoming an accessible and widespread consumer good (Robinson, 2014; Manguel, 2020).

Several authors refer to the importance and popularity of *Penguin* paperback books. For example, Labarre (2005) states that “The mass book was born in England in 1935 with the ‘Penguin Books’ at 6 pence and became widespread during and after the Second World War”³ (Labarre, 2005, p. 94) and Smith and Ramdarshan (2018) state that “These iconic paperbacks sparked a Publishing revolution: ensuring that affordable, yet well-designed, books were accessible for a mass audience.” (Smith & Ramdarshan Bold, 2018, p. 20).

As Manguel (2020, p. 196) states, in addition to its intrinsic characteristics (format, price, quality, diversity, ease of acquisition), *Penguin* books’ most significant impact on the history of books and reading “was symbolic” since these books represented the ubiquity of the book and the reader, of reading anywhere.

Still, in this contextualisation of the democratization of reading through the development of the paperback, we cannot fail to highlight the factor that Borsuk (2018) points out as fundamental to the long-term success of *Penguin* paperbacks: the quality of the design of these books, responsibility of Jan Tschichold (Borsuk, 2018, p. 105).

Thus, we can state that the various transformations in the book production process contributed to the democratization of reading and the reconfiguration of the book format through decisions focused on readers’ needs, namely regarding typography and layout.

READING BOOKS IN PRINT AND DIGITAL FORMAT

As already mentioned, the appearance of printed books has contributed to the increase in learning to write and read. Therefore, we believe that the importance of the book today is unquestionable as a graphic object indispensable to the intellectual development of individuals, fundamental in cultural training and the automation of reading over time. As Manguel (2020) observes, to know how to write, one must first be able to identify and understand the existing social system of signs through reading.

Reading is a fundamental condition transversal to all knowledge, a multimodal literacy competence that combines different languages, texts and formats, and a human right with a direct impact on the personal growth of individuals, the economic, social, and cultural development of the country and the quality of democracy, inclusion, and citizenship (Quadro Estratégico. Plano Nacional de Leitura 2027’, 2017).

The way books are produced and consumed in the present is highly influenced by the context of the rapid technological development in which we live.

³Our translation of “O livro de massas nasceu em Inglaterra em 1935, com os ‘Penguin Books’, a 6 pence e difundiu-se durante e depois da Segunda Guerra Mundial”.

These influences significantly impact reading practices, as we have moved from reading only on paper to reading in multiple media.

Considering the possibilities of the media for reading the text, Chartier (1997, p. 22) notes that “the text does not exist outside the media that allows us to read it (or hear it); therefore, there is no understanding of a writing, whatever it may be, that does not depend in part on the forms through which it reaches its reader”⁴ and adds, “Authors do not write books: no, they write texts that become written objects, manuscripts, recorded, printed (and today computerised)”. The passage of the text from the printed book to the digital book changes the conditions of its reception and understanding through the media that present it to the reader.

It is, therefore, essential to understanding the practice of reading books, both in print and digital format. For this purpose, we considered two survey-based studies that address issues related to book reading, considering the internet and digital reading, focusing on Portuguese reality. The first study dates to the early 2010s and has an international geographical scope, where data on Portugal is included. The second (Inquérito para as Práticas Culturais dos Portugueses 2020 – Survey for Cultural Practices of the Portuguese 2020) presents data from 2020. It has national coverage, although it occasionally makes a comparative analysis with Spain.

At the International Conference “Books and Reading: Challenges of the Digital Age”⁵, held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 2013, Cardoso (2015) presented a study that provided data on reading and the reader in the contemporary context of 16 countries. This study sought to answer the question of the impact that the electronic transmission of texts had on readers, their practices, and perceptions, not only from the point of view of reading the book but also on digital reading beyond the book. To stabilise the concept of reading for the study in question, Cardoso (2015, p. 94) suggests using two designations: formal reading for the “dimension formally and socially understood as reading, as in the case of reading a book or a newspaper”⁶ and informal reading for the reference “to what although it is factually reading is informally understood as such”⁷, as is the case of texts on social media.

This approach is considered significant, given that informal reading is increasingly part of everyday life and that, as Cardoso (2015) states, “we read many more texts than those we define as ‘reading’”⁸. One reads more and more in other media than in books, newspapers, or magazines.

The data obtained by the study mentioned above shows that pleasure is the primary motivation for reading (47%) and that with the addition of digital

⁴Our translation of “o texto não existe fora do suporte que nos permite lê-lo (ou ouvi-lo), por conseguinte, não há compreensão de um escrito, qualquer que seja, que não dependa em parte das formas através das quais atinge o seu leitor” e acrescenta “Os autores não escrevem livros: não, escrevem textos que se tornam objetos escritos, manuscritos, gravados, impressos (e hoje informatizados)”.

⁵Our translation of “Os livros e a Leitura: Desafios da Era Digital”.

⁶Our translation of “dimensão formalmente e socialmente entendida enquanto leitura, como no caso de se ler um livro ou um jornal”

⁷Our translation of “ao que embora seja factualmente leitura é entendido informalmente como tal”

⁸Our translation of “lemos muito mais textos do que aqueles que definimos como ‘leitura’”

to paper, the time dedicated to reading has increased in part (29%). Regarding the reading of books in printed format, we can observe a pattern in the number of printed books, but the highest number of books read per individual in this media occurs in China and the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Regarding book reading in digital format, 58% of Internet users in the countries considered had already read a book in this format, with the figures for the number of individuals increasing again in the case of China and the BRIC countries. The countries in Europe were those where there were fewer people reading books in digital format. In comparison, Portugal, Spain, and Italy had approximately the same number of Internet users who had already read digital books. The analysis, which focused on Internet users, revealed that socio-demographic characteristics such as level of education and university attendance were strong indicators of technology use and digital book reading practices. Regarding the genre of books, both in print and digital format, the most read were novels and crime, thriller, and mystery books. In the second place, in digital format, were technical or academic books, which in print format occupied third place.

According to Cardoso (2015), it is impossible to establish a direct relationship between being a great reader in print and being one in digital format, although this probability may increase. On the other hand, it is plausible that individuals who have not read any book in print in the last year have yet to do so in digital format either.

Another issue addressed in the study that seems relevant is that the different ways of reading on the internet may contribute to the transformation of reading, including book reading in which the “domestication of the screen as a reading space”⁹ (Cardoso, 2015, p. 111) may play an important role. As the author also refers, digital reading does not exist because there are books in digital format, but because there are books in digital format, portable screen technology, and the imagination of all those who create new forms and spaces on the internet that create the conditions for the proliferation of new reading practices (Cardoso, 2015, p. 114). The study concludes that there are new forms of reading and new readers. It suggests that, currently, talking about reading implies talking about reading in digital format while continuing to talk about reading on paper, the coexistence of printed books and digital books.

The second study considered – *Inquérito para as Práticas Culturais dos Portugueses 2020* (Survey for Cultural Practices of the Portuguese 2020) – was presented in February 2022 at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In this, the panorama of cultural practices in Portugal was outlined, namely regarding reading practices in print and digital format. The data was collected at different times regarding reading inside or outside libraries and archives, given that on the date of application of the survey, and some spaces were closed due to the Covid-19 effect.

Regarding the reading of books, this study highlights the high percentage of respondents who responded that they had yet to read a single printed

⁹Our translation of “domesticação do ecrã como espaço de leitura”

book in 2020 (61%) and that only 10% had read digital books. This data is worrying regarding the consumption of books by the Portuguese.

It is also important to note that it was found that, similarly to the study mentioned earlier, the majority of respondents identified the pleasure of reading as their most significant motivation for reading books. However, another relevant piece of data for this research is the confirmation that the smartphone is the device most used by internet users to access the internet, signalling a change in the pattern of use of mobile devices (Machado Pais, Magalhães and Lobo Antunes, 2022).

THE SMARTPHONE AS MEDIA FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY POCKETBOOK?

According to Tea Uglow, cited by Smith and Ramdarshan (2018, p. 62) “Books can seek to engage the next generation on their phones and in print. E-reader use is declining while phone offers countless new way to construct a narrative and read deeply. These books can compete for attention on the phone via dynamic literature.”

The technological advances of the late 20th century and early 21st century, the evolution of the internet and the ubiquity of mobile devices have transformed cultural consumptions such as music, books and more. For many individuals, these mobile devices may already be the primary contact with reading and the written word (Chartier, 1997). Currently, reading on mobile devices is facilitated by their tangibility and the fact that most of their users master the usage of touch screens.

González Martín (2015, p. 135) points out that the introduction of mobile reading devices has been a factor of global change in the publishing landscape and has generated a more complex transformation in the reading ecosystem. The author associates dedicated reading devices – e-readers – with the *confined book*, where the device functions as a warehouse of textual content, where the reading dynamic is close to that of paper. To multifunctional devices, where it is also possible to read books, González Martín associates the idea of *connected book*. Besides storing books, these devices allow other functionalities from their internet connection (for example, links to other content, connections between readers, sharing of readings and books that connect to books).

There is a tendency for people to read on the devices on which they carry out other activities, so it is essential to study readers’ relationship with these devices and the screen reading experience.

In the report by West and Chew (2014) for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Reading in the mobile era: A study of mobile reading in developing countries*, mobile devices, more specifically mobile phones, appear to be the ideal mechanism for bringing books to the hands of the most impoverished populations. According to the same report, these devices are the most ubiquitous information and communication technology in history, present in places where books are scarce. Although mainly used as a primary means of communication, they are increasingly a medium for reading long texts (2014, p. 16).

For all this, we consider that this may be the path that will lead us to a new understanding of the pocketbook in a new process of democratization of reading – now in digital media.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we address the book as an object of democratization of reading through a literature review that covers its significant moments of transformation. In this journey, we highlight the emergence of pocketbooks in the 20th century and digital books in the 21st century. The digital book has undergone several transformations, caused mainly by the inconstancy of its media, whose technology is in permanent evolution. Although it exists on computers, tablets, e-readers and smartphones, smartphones have the most considerable potential for democratization, as it is the most ubiquitous medium, even in less developed countries. In the context of this investigation, it is necessary to deepen the research of more studies related to mobile reading, both in the context of developing and developed countries, to reinforce our conviction more solidly.

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