mediastudies.press • Social Media & the Self: An Open Reader

Preface

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The [Budapest Open Access Declaration](#), the founding document of the open access movement, begins with a manifesto-like flourish: “An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good.” The Declaration, released in 2002, cited scholars’ longstanding practice of writing for free—that’s the old tradition. The new technology was, of course, the internet. And open access (OA) scholarship is what they, together, made possible: “the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature” for free.

There’s another old tradition that, so far, has remained true to its tolled, print-bound origins: the course reader. “Schoolbook” compilations were, as Leah Price has documented, a derivative of the literary anthology—a collection of often-abridged works of poetry or literature. Books like Vicesimus Knox’s 1783 *Elegant Extracts*—addressed to “school-boys”—flooded the English market in the late eighteenth century.¹ The first American schoolbook “reader” was Noah Webster’s 1785 *Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, a miscellany of textual extracts intended to help students learn to read—hence the term “reader.”² By the turn of the century Lindley Murray’s *English Reader* appeared and spread in popularity—and the form was more or less fixed.³ Tens of millions of competing readers were sold to schools throughout the nineteenth century. But a different sort of teaching anthology, centered on specific subjects, broke free from reading instruction in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴ The new purpose was to gather together and arrange excerpts as a textual companion to topical teaching, especially at the college level. A course in English literature, for example, might require a “reader” for its literary examples: conveniently packaged and thoughtfully juxtaposed excerpts meant to support the professor’s lectures. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and the late twentieth-century Xerox’d course-pack are the descendants—if not quite spiritual heirs—of Noah Webster’s eighteenth-century grammar primer.

Social Media & the Self is intended to serve students enrolled in media and communication courses. It’s at least notable that the discipline’s first textbooks weren’t, in fact, textbooks at all. Wilbur Schramm, the English-trained scholar who helped establish communication research in the U.S., cobbled together fifteen papers into the field’s first reader, *Communications in Modern Society* (1948).⁵ The next year Schramm published a sprawling successor collection, *Mass Communications*, with nearly 40 chapters: “There has not appeared, however, and probably will not for some time appear, any integrated introduction to mass communications... This volume has

been designed to meet part of the need for such an introduction.”⁶ Since then, and across updated editions and countless new entrants, the *reader* has played an outsized role in the upstart bundle of fields that study media—a concession, perhaps, to these fields’ polyglot spread. Regardless, the course-reader format has advantages over its textbook rival: The multiplicity of voices, yes, but also the substitution of genuine scholarship for the textbook’s forced dilutions.

The catch is that the typical course reader, seventy years after Schramm’s first attempt, is often *more* costly than the notoriously pricey textbook, thanks to copyright payouts.

So this volume is a variation on an old theme: It’s an *open reader: a collection of works available on the open web, selected and ordered with university courses in mind*. Each of its component works already carries an open access license, or—in the case of copyrighted items—links to a web version. The open reader, as a format, is a subset of a larger class of open materials centered on teaching and learning, often called *open educational resources* (OER). The prototypical OER is the open *textbook*; the open *reader* is its anthologized counterpart. The reader form is distinguished by its compilation of found items—pre-existing publications and works. The open reader has a number of advantages over its closed, print or paywalled predecessor. The most obvious is that the open reader is free to faculty and students, set against the often-usurious price for the tolled reader. But the fact is that many faculty have, for years, posted PDFs on Blackboard or Canvas for their students; those downloads are free too, if not exactly legal. Likewise, many academic libraries bundle digital course “reserves” at an instructor’s direction, then wade through the legal thicket of copyright and fair use. The resulting course-specific article collection is, typically, free to enrolled students for “check out.” So these options are costless too, at least to students.

What the open reader offers over Blackboard piracy and the librarian’s e-reserve option is universal access. The open reader is freely available on the web, not locked behind an learning-management-system password. The open access reader has its own unique identifiers—the [ISBN](#) and [DOI](#)—a stable url, and listings in library catalogs and other directories. It’s discoverable, in other words: unfenced by cost or course-specific lockdown.

The open reader is also an invitation to iterate. With an open license (like the [Creative Commons BY-NC 4.0](#)), readers like *Social Media & the Self* can be modified, rethought on different principles, or even dismantled for parts. The whole point of an openly

licensed work is to encourage remix and mash up. It's true that open readers are a drop in the free-culture ocean, and that they're limited by their constituent chapters' licenses (which, in some cases, may restrict the scope of reuse). But open anthologies contribute, nevertheless, to the free-and-open share of humanity's cultural stock.

The open reader's invitation to iterate is extended to the original creator, too. These collections' light, digital footprint makes it easy to update, to roll out new versions. The legacy course reader could also be updated, by way of a published "second edition," for example, or by a professor's semester-to-semester course-pack revision. But open readers afford cumulative and ongoing iteration, tracked by a versioning system modeled on software updates; there's no need to wait for the punctuated overhaul of the old "edition" approach. Tweaks, like typo or formatting corrections, are a few keystrokes away. A new idea—like the embedding of interactive assignments—can be rolled out in a stepwise fashion. Fresh outbound links, and newly published works, can be swapped out as they reveal themselves online.

Yet another advantage of the open reader is its ability to host a running commentary. *Social Media & the Self* is built on [PubPub](#), which includes its own public annotation feature. Most other platforms are, or will be, capable of hosting conversations too, at the very least through the web-annotation tool [Hypothesis](#). The resulting marginalia is public by default, enabling not just reaction to the main text but also back-and-forth among the comments. The open-reader article wins a new, layered life, one that resembles post-publication peer review but set in conversational exchange. A U.S. college student might reply to an annotation by a South African scholar, itself a response to the original author's clarification to a Chinese undergrad's query. There's a Talmudic promise to the open reader with, however, space in its margins for the uncredentialed.

The open reader is, finally, another platform for the open access scholarship otherwise anchored to journals. When a researcher opts for OA, she may pay a prestige penalty: Most disciplines' flagship journals are suspended in tolled-access amber. There's lots of evidence that OA articles—out from behind the paywall—get read and cited more nevertheless. But the open reader is another way to boost these scholars' visibility, to reward the good but unnerving choice to publish OA. The open reader, in short, is an amplification device for the deserving.

In its 250-year history, the course reader form has adapted to shifts in technology and law. The reader is an old tradition, and new technologies keep changing its shape. The

internet-enabled open access movement is only the latest perturbation, with the potential to ventilate the genre. It's fitting that the original "schoolbook" readers emerged, in England at least, after perpetual copyright was snuffed out by the House of Lords in 1774.⁷ That decision established what we now call the public domain, and gave rein to anthologized reproduction. So the open reader is a return to the form's roots.

Footnotes

1. Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3, 67, 71. Charles Carpenter, in his history of the American textbook, identifies a 1776 German book, *Der Kinderfreund*, as the first "reader" in the relevant sense. Carpenter, *History of American Schoolbooks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 57. [↵](#)
2. Carpenter, *History of American Schoolbooks*, 58. [↵](#)
3. Carpenter, *History of American Schoolbooks*, 62-63. [↵](#)
4. Carpenter, *History of American Schoolbooks*, 162-65. [↵](#)
5. Wilbur Schramm, *Communications in Modern Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1948). [↵](#)
6. Wilbur Schramm, *Mass Communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), vii. [↵](#)
7. Price, *The Anthology*, 3-4. [↵](#)