

# The Societal Impact of History Texts: Lay Readership and the 'Altmetric' value of Goodreads

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An altmetric is both a social medium and an object of information for study. Some academics contribute to the medium, some are analysts of the object, and some do both. Here we assume the role of analysts, and we are interested in what the altmetric can do for the scholarly Historian who wants his or her work to be read and valued widely. Our objective is to study the altmetric value of Goodreads, which is "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations" (Goodreads, 2013). Although Goodreads possesses similarities to the book section of Amazon.com, it is the first platform to encourage people to interact with one another through their love of books; to share information about their reading habits, and produce opinion ratings and written reviews.

Although Goodreads is most often associated with fiction, the lay public has also reviewed many texts of scholarly non-fiction. For instance, 49 distinct texts, written by Nancy F. Cott, a historian from Harvard University, have been registered for review. So far, Cott has received 28 reviews, 276 'quality' ratings and an average 5-star rating of 3.66 for her recommended oeuvre (Note: search conducted in 2013 and will be updated for the presentation).

With respect to citations, a search via the Web of Knowledge reveals that Cott's books have also been cited frequently in articles published in scholarly journals, for example, the *Journal of Social History*, *Gender & Society* and *Family History*. As an academic author, readers beyond the scholarly communication system have embraced her: she is what we might call a 'valorized' historian. With this in mind, the present study is guided by following questions:

- *To what extent do scholarly monographs cited in research journals appeal to or do not appeal to the lay public and achieve reader ratings on Goodreads?*
- *Why are some scholarly writers better than others at attracting recognition (i.e., by citation) from members of their own academic society as well as readers and reviewers from the wider public?*

- *Does the societal 'success' of a scholarly book on Goodreads depend mainly on the subject of the text, the profile of the author, how the text was written, or the publisher responsible for producing and marketing the work?*

Our research is focused on the field of *history*, and includes a review of current perspectives on the societal value of historical analysis. In the first part of this review, due credit is given to researchers who have pioneered 'altmetrics', using a variety of different social networking platforms. To our knowledge Goodreads has not yet been studied as an altmetric resource for research evaluation, even though it has much to contribute to a scholarly book's impact. The book titles that we have chosen to evaluate are texts that have been cited in Scopus journals from 2007 to 2011. Publisher information for the cited book titles is matched with and obtained from the OCLC-WorldCat® union catalog.<sup>1</sup> Full methodological details pertaining to our data collection procedures and analyses, including our use of Goodreads as a book review platform will be presented at the workshop.

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<sup>1</sup> WorldCat® is a union catalog that itemizes the collections of 72,000 libraries in 170 countries and territories. All libraries participate in the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) global cooperative (see <http://rlin21.rlg.org/worldcat/statistics/default.htm>).