



**Invited Perspective on Research
Ethics in Response to “The Right
to Read Without Being Read:
Research Ethics in the Study of
Digital Reading Behaviour”**

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Abstract:

This invited perspective is a response to the position paper “The Right to Read Without Being Read: Research Ethics in the Study of Digital Reading Behaviour”. From the point of view of the researcher behind one of the case studies discussed in the position paper, this paper highlights three perspectives on research ethics: 1) the potential negative effects for individuals of studying book streaming data as in the project design are minimal, and ethics have been discussed continuously in the project; 2) the question whether this kind of data is to be considered sensitive data or not is not simple, and it is important to restrict this label to data that is indeed sensitive; and 3) questions concerning privacy evoked by this kind of reader data are recurrently addressed in the research by the author.

Keywords

Audiobooks; reading studies, book streaming, platform studies, research ethics

Invited perspective on research ethics

I very much welcome the ethical discussion raised in the position paper *The Right to Read Without Being Read: Research Ethics in the Study of Digital Reading Behaviour*.¹ The author provides a nuanced argumentation and presents several important reflections.

During the running time of the now finished research project that is taken as an example in the article,² we continuously discussed the ethical issues related to the datasets investigated, not least when we presented work to colleagues in various fields. I agree with the author that there are no easy or ‘correct’ answers here. We landed on the decision to carry out this research also with a privacy discussion in mind. I will try to explain why by forwarding three arguments.

First, the potentially negative effects for individuals due to this research are really minimal. In the book *Reading Audio Readers: Book Consumption in the Streaming Age*³ I discuss research ethics related to the data in a two-page section in the introduction, titled “Data access and ethical concerns”. Among other things, I write:

Since the data includes information about the reading patterns of real individual readers, ethical considerations need to be thoughtfully applied. The dataset is completely anonymized, which means that the project group has no information regarding who the users are. Nevertheless, there is a risk of personal integrity intrusion if patterns of individual readers’ book reading are showcased as examples. I therefore make use of user groups and proxy readers in all such sensitive cases, which guarantees that no individual reader can identify themselves.⁴

The data included in the dataset was logged sessions of book streaming for a selection of 500 fiction bestsellers (children’s literature not included). The main research question concerned how the audiobook medium affects people’s everyday reading practices. Thus, what we studied was how people – in general – interacted with mainstream crime fiction, romance/“feelgood”, and prize-winning literary fiction in the audiobook format. In my view, if patterns regarding audiobook streaming of such literature are discussed on an aggregated level, on subset level, and by means of proxy readers instead of real readers when highlighting examples, it is an ethically respectful way that does not threaten the privacy of individuals in any problematic way.

Second, the author claims that the datasets investigated are to be considered as containing “sensitive personal data”.⁵ While it is definitely personal data – albeit anonymi-

1 Karolina Andersdotter, “The Right to Read Without Being Read: Research Ethics in the Study of Digital Reading Behaviour,” *Privacy Studies Journal* 4 (2025): 1-24, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/psj.v4i.150182>.

2 “Patterns of Popularity: Towards a Holistic Understanding of Contemporary Bestselling Fiction”, SRC 2020–2024, PI: Karl Berglund.

3 Karl Berglund, *Reading Audio Readers: Book Consumption in the Streaming Age* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

4 Berglund, *Reading Audio Readers*, 26.

5 Andersdotter, “The Right to Read Without Being Read,” 8.

zed – it is more unclear whether the data is sensitive or not. One could argue that the recreational reading of fiction bestsellers indicates the political opinions, the religious or philosophical beliefs, or the sexual orientation of the reader. But one could as well argue that it does not. I deem it to be important to restrict the label *sensitive data* to data that is in fact sensitive. Otherwise, researchers might back away from doing research on certain subjects just by the assumption that data might be sensitive, which would be problematic.

Third, discussions on reading privacy are recurrently addressed in my research on streaming audiobooks. One of my key points is how by definition *un-private* most of our contemporary digital reading practices are. As I phrase it: “to read books on these platforms is also to be read”.⁶ I highlight this fact by explicitly pointing out what just a tiny snippet of these platforms’ data can reveal. It is a way of trying to show, understand, and discuss the implications of the data-driven book streaming economy for our book and reading culture.

I thus agree completely with the author when they state that “the privacy of the reader and the right to private reading should become more present in the study of reading as more data and methods become increasingly available”.⁷ To me, this argument should also include other kinds of reading data. For instance, posts and other forms of reader-related activities in digital social reading networks like Booktok, Bookstagram, and Goodreads are made public by the users themselves, but does this give us as researchers the right to re-use them as examples of various trends in performing a readerly identity online? This is another grey area. Most researchers using such data treat it similarly to what I propose above. For instance, in her influential article on Booktok, Margaret K. Merga highlights that “[c]areful consideration needed to be given to using publicly shared videos outside their original context for the purposes of research”, which leads her to use verbatim quotes “with caution so as to not be identifying”, and instead use paraphrasing “so the direct voices of the CPs are not featured”.⁸

Personally, I think it would be unfortunate if researchers stopped working with reading data quantitatively in cases where it is not possible to obtain consent from all the readers involved. To me, it seems possible to do ethically aware and respectful work also on such data: by working with larger patterns, with paraphrasing and proxies, and by including discussions on the core privacy problem, namely all the information collected by these platforms every minute.

A related problem might be that commercial companies stop sharing data with researchers completely. If this happens – as already seems to be the case in the Amazon-dominated Anglophone publishing contexts⁹ – we end up in a situation where commercial companies know close to everything about peoples’ reading preferences and what they

6 Berglund, *Reading Audio Readers*, 5.

7 Andersdotter, “The Right to Read Without Being Read,” 19.

8 Margaret K. Merga, “How can Booktok on TikTok inform readers’ advisory services for young people?,” *Library and Information Science Research* 43 (2021): 7, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2021.101091>.

9 Simone Murray, “Secret agents: Algorithmic culture, Goodreads and datafication of the contemporary book world,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 4 (2021): 970–989, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419886026>.

do with books (information they can use practically however they want), while the reading research community knows very little. To my mind, such a scenario would be the most problematic – also from a privacy perspective.

Disclosure Statement

To the best of their knowledge, the author has no conflicts of interest pertinent to the contents of this article. The author and Andersdotter, the author to “The Right to Read Without Being Read”, worked together as librarians at Uppsala University Library for two years (2018–2020).

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