

## 'May We Meet Again': Rereading the Dickensian Serial in the Digital Age

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Most contemporary readers encounter Dickens's fiction as a single-volume book, replete with an introductory essay, bibliography, chronology, footnotes, and, occasionally, small, easily missed asterisks to demarcate the original weekly or monthly parts. The digital reproduction and re-presentation of Dickens's work in its multitude of original formats, though, has allowed the attempted recreation of some aspects of the initial reading experience, encouraging us to re-encounter Dickens's novels serially, engage with the materialities and rhythms of Victorian serial publication, and reassess our relationship to the Dickensian text. All of Dickens's novels were serialized and his readers encountered his fiction 'visually, aurally and orally'; they read his work in a variety of formats, heard him give public readings, saw illustrations and theatrical adaptations, and heard his words spoken aloud by others.<sup>1</sup> As a genuinely mass culture developed in the mid-nineteenth century, Dickens 'was instinctively aware', Juliet John observes, 'of the changed context of art', and he 'consciously exploited newly available modes of mass dissemination to create an image of himself as "The Most Popular Author in the World"'.<sup>2</sup> Digitalization, therefore, constitutes another multimedia mode of disseminating Dickens to a mass audience, to accompany the Victorian formats and the cinematic, televisual, and radio adaptations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As David Vincent has observed, Dickens's readers have always been 'multi-media consumers', while 'new technologies of reproduction, circulation, and broadcasting have accelerated these processes in unprecedented ways'.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, there have been several online reading projects that engage with Dickens's novels serially: Discovering Dickens: A Community Reading Project, based at Stanford, followed *Hard Times* (1854), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1860–61) between 2002 and 2005; in 2012, a project jointly run by the University of Leicester and *Dickens Journals Online* <<http://www.djo.org.uk>> followed *A Tale of Two Cities*; The Drood Inquiry, an interactive, multimedia exploration of *The Mystery of*

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<sup>1</sup> David Vincent, 'Dickens's Reading Public', in *Palgrave Advances in Charles Dickens Studies*, ed. by John Bowen and Robert L. Patten (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 176–97 (p. 191).

<sup>2</sup> Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in John Bowen and Robert L. Patten, 'Introduction', in *Palgrave Advances in Charles Dickens Studies*, ed. by Bowen and Patten, pp. 1–10 (p. 4).

*Edwin Drood* (1870), Dickens's final, unfinished novel, included a serial reading of the novel's extant parts from April to September 2014; and finally, running from May 2014 to November 2015, the *Our Mutual Friend* reading project, run by Birkbeck, University of London.<sup>4</sup>

This article focuses on the experience of two of these projects — the 2012 reading of *A Tale of Two Cities* and the 2014–15 reading of *Our Mutual Friend* — and explores how reading Dickens serially via the digital enhances our understanding of how literary culture is constructed, enacted, and felt. Following a Dickens novel according to its original format and rhythms of publication brings us closer to the work's initial modes, cadences, and temporalities, while also encouraging us to think about the relationship between Dickens and his readers — then and now. These digital reading projects demonstrate that slowing down and encountering the novel in rigorously, temporally separated instalments over an extended period opens up spaces that facilitate discussion, analysis, ambiguity, deviation, and fantasy. James Wood has recently argued that 'stories produce offspring, genetic splinters of themselves, hapless embodiments of their original inability to tell the whole tale', which means that 'the readerly act is also the writerly act'.<sup>5</sup> This article contends that the serialized novel gives us formal spaces or gaps in between instalments that encourage the proliferation of imaginative surpluses. It also considers how the online mediation of this experience helps us consider the relationship between the body, memory, and technology, in particular contemporary anxieties about concentration, attention, and recall. These digital projects draw attention to the mediating role of what Bernard Stiegler, the philosopher of the digital, has termed 'technics', the materialization and exteriorization of our internal, conscious processes via technology, and this article deploys Stiegler's work to interrogate how the digital both enables and mediates encounters with the original Dickensian text. Each of these projects also forged an online community, mostly formed of thousands of silent readers, but also constituted by lively contributors and commentators. If novel reading is traditionally thought of as a solitary experience in which dispersed, separate readers are, in the words of Laurence Scott, 'harmonised across space and time by a shared idea', then reading the Dickensian serial digitally can be seen as giving life to Dickens's vision of the radical communality of reading.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Another interesting online project is Digital Dickens, an interactive website for students reading *Great Expectations*, which includes HTML pages of the novel's serialized parts and essays by, and video interviews with, scholars on the novel's biographical and historical context, themes, and symbols. See <<http://www.digitaldickens.com>> [accessed 2 October 2015].

<sup>5</sup> James Wood, *The Nearest Thing to Life* (London: Cape, 2015), pp. 35, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Laurence Scott, *The Four-Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World* (London: Heinemann, 2015), p. 78.

We know that Dickens enjoyed, and worked hard to deepen and cultivate, a special, intense, and transformative relationship with his readers. He felt that his fiction enacted the radical potential of imaginative work to create sympathy and build and strengthen the emotional and social bonds that bind together disparate peoples. He championed democratic, accessible art forms that act as mediums through which feeling can manifest, flow, incite, and excite. Thus, in his famous two-part *Household Words* article ‘The Amusements of the People’ (30 March and 13 April 1850), Dickens hoped that the ‘congeniality’ of ‘passion’ roused by an evening at the theatre would bring together ‘a Duchess’ and ‘Mr Whelks’, his working-class Everyman.<sup>7</sup> Venturing into another’s imagination via fiction, drama, or performance rouses feelings that engage and attach, forging new relationships and radically transforming the everyday. Melodrama was the aesthetic mode of the uneducated and the non-elite, reaching a mixed mass audience via illegitimate theatres, cheap fiction, and non-literary journalism, and Dickens advocated a melodramatic stylistics through which he could speak directly and clearly and unite ‘the people’. In her groundbreaking *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (2007), Sally Ledger asserts the centrality of melodrama to Dickens’s radical politics, his special relationship with his readers, and his sense of the purpose of fiction and fantasy.<sup>8</sup> As Juliet John observes, Dickens’s ‘grasp of the power of fantasy was cultural and political as well as personal’ (p. 33).

Dickens encountered his readers almost daily, via his enormously popular, famously gruelling public readings, and through letters, reviews, personal encounters, and the rather harsher measure of sales. At his first professional public reading, in Covent Garden on 29 April 1858, the ‘capacity audience of three thousand received him, recalled Edmund Yates, “with a roar of cheering which might have been heard at Charing Cross, and which was again and again renewed”’.<sup>9</sup> Writing in the *Daily News* the following day, Yates observed that the event was not like a public entertainment, ‘but rather “a very large family party, gathered round the kindest, the dearest, the best of their friends”’, which, Michael Slater remarks, ‘was very much the atmosphere that Dickens always sought to evoke on these occasions’ (p. 451). Dickens was sometimes displeased with or overwhelmed by his readers — as on his trip to America in 1842, when, Slater observes, ‘he was increasingly distressed and exasperated’ by the ‘frenzied and intrusive lionisation’ he encountered — but he generally maintained with his readers a genial, personal relationship that he felt was mutually sustaining and

<sup>7</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘The Amusements of the People [11]’, *Household Words*, 13 April 1850, pp. 57–60 (p. 60).

<sup>8</sup> Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 450.

enlivening (p. 196). Thus, in his preface to the single-volume edition of *Bleak House* (1853), Dickens declaimed, 'I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things. I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book. May we meet again!'.<sup>10</sup> Dickens deftly engaged with a mass readership, marrying his name to the serial fiction form, and establishing and 'conducting' popular journals that featured fiction alongside articles on travel, science, socio-economic issues, politics, and manifold aspects of mid-nineteenth-century life.

'The reader' and 'readers' thus operated as an imaginative category of particular power for Dickens. He was highly invested in his relationship with them, and he melded reality and phantasy to create a psychic object that was sustaining but also, on occasion, threatening. His readers motivated and inspired him, stressed and worried him, gratified and pleased him, disappointed and angered him, and were sometimes his primary object of concern, care, and affection. When he separated from his wife in 1858, his frantic, guilty need to appear blameless in his readers' eyes motivated him, against the advice of his confidants, to issue his famous public statement, in which he anathematized Catherine Dickens, vociferously denied rumours of his relationship with Ellen Ternan, and worked hard to shore up his readers' sense of his moral probity and continued right to espouse a domestic morality, elicit their sympathy, and enjoy their high regard. Indeed, it is telling that Dickens embarked upon his career as a paid public reader during the breakdown of his marriage, striving to bolster the close connection he felt with his readers at the moment his familial attachments were under strain. Many of Dickens's readers have reciprocated his desire, evincing a strong, even familial bond with the author. 'Dickens' continues to operate powerfully as an imaginative category in the minds of his readers, as evidenced by the celebratory outpouring of the 2012 bicentenary of Dickens's birth and his continued, worldwide popularity. Dickens stands for many as the exemplar of Victorian literature and a pattern of personal kindness and charity, while his work continues to entertain, hearten, inform, enthuse, and inspire.

### Reading the Dickensian serial digitally

With the expiration of copyright restrictions and the advent of digital humanities, scholars have been using digital tools to gather original Victorian material, which may have been scattered in separate repositories, buried in distant libraries, or lost in private collections, and make it available online, often openly and freely. Data mining techniques have also opened up material

<sup>10</sup> Charles Dickens, 'Preface to 1853 edition of *Bleak House*', in *Bleak House*, ed. by Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 7.

to more intense textual scrutiny, while computational analysis of syntax and vocabulary can help identify unsigned or unattributed authors. *Dickens Journals Online (DJO)*, for example, has gathered and curated the twenty-year run of Dickens's *Household Words* (1850–59) and *All the Year Round* (1859–70), offering free access to digital scans of the biennially collated volumes of the journals, while also using computational stylistics to attempt some new attributions. The journals included in their run the weekly serializations of *Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, along with a plethora of serialized novels by other established authors including Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton.<sup>11</sup> Engaging with Dickens's novels in their original formats — albeit converted into digital objects — can allow readers to 're-experience' something lost, to attempt to recapture a lost authenticity, and to refresh or expand their understanding of Dickens's work, especially its initial temporalities and rhythms. As Susan David Bernstein and Catherine Derose observe, rereading the novel serially can 'challenge the widespread preference for later volume editions, which are seen as superior to the initial serial form of the novel'.<sup>12</sup> We might thus address the 'critical devaluation of the serial as fragmentary and incomplete, a form containing flashy cliffhangers driven by marketplace interest in inciting readers to return for the next segment'. Encountering Dickensian fiction serially can instead 'encourage a consideration of the serial format as the primary and most significant way in which writers produced and readers consumed a great deal of Victorian literature' (Bernstein and Derose, p. 47). Reading serially can put us in touch with something 'authentic' and 'original' that has been lost or obscured, but, as Luisa Calè has observed, it also defamiliarizes by breaking the 'long form associated with the Dickensian novel' into 'a succession of discrete reading sessions separated by regular intervals'.<sup>13</sup>

Within attempts to duplicate the experience of reading Dickens serially in the nineteenth century, we may thus detect a desire to somehow get closer to Dickens, to make ourselves as his contemporary readers were, and to imagine ourselves in a more genuine relationship with 'The Inimitable'. The digital reading project enables a projective identification with the

<sup>11</sup> Most of the non-fiction articles in Dickens's journals were unsigned, but almost all of the contributors to *Household Words* were identified by Anne Lohrli, who traced the payments to authors noted in an office book meticulously kept by the journal's subeditor, W. H. Wills. The lack of such a source for *All the Year Round* has left the majority of articles in that journal unattributed; that is, until the discovery in 2015, by Jeremy Parrott, of Dickens's personal set of the journal (twenty volumes), with authors' names pencilled in by Dickens himself. This fantastic discovery means that around 2500 unattributed articles can now be matched with an author, opening up multiple possibilities for scholarly analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Susan David Bernstein and Catherine Derose, 'Reading Numbers by Numbers: Digital Studies and the Victorian Serial Novel', *Victorian Review*, 38 (2012), 43–68 (p. 47).

<sup>13</sup> Luisa Calè, 'Reading in Parts', <<https://dickensourmutualfriend.wordpress.com/2014/04/30/reading-in-parts-by-luisa-cale/>> [accessed 2 October 2015].

'original reader' and offers the promise of re-experiencing something familiar anew. Digital Dickensians thus have their own complex investments in the elusive figure of 'the reader'. Digital reading projects also forge reading communities that abound with the potential to fulfil Dickens's radical hopes that his fiction would bring different peoples together, engender sympathy, and enact social change. Virtual digital communities emulate the radical, boundless, ethereal networks that Dickens dreamed of as somehow created by, and bound to, his imagination and personality. The facilitation of these communities via technology, though, may potentially affect the modes of thinking, memory, and identification that undergird them; the digital is not simply a neutral tool that facilitates, but one that shapes and mediates the relationship between Dickens's work and his readers, thus complicating any simple or straightforward identification with or investment in the figure of 'the original reader'. New technological platforms help us recreate nineteenth-century publication objects, rhythms, and experiences, but they also reshape, remediate, and alter them, forging new objects, rhythms, and experiences. Electing to read or reread a Dickens novel in weekly or monthly instalments is a choice, rather than a condition of access as it originally was. Furthermore, we may be reading on a mobile device and distractedly abandoning the original rhythm of reading in parts to scan social media or answer emails; the material boundedness of the original part is destabilized and expanded infinitely outwards by the extra dimension of the online, which is constantly open and spread out across the everyday.

Via the concept of 'technics', Stiegler argues that we only understand our internal conscious processes through their exteriorization via gesture and writing. The human does not come before the technical; rather, the materialization of thought, its exteriorization, requires a technical support and thus the relationship between the body, environment, and technology shapes our experience of our selves and of temporality. Paradoxically, this exteriorization precedes and constitutes the interior it is supposed to supplement.<sup>14</sup> In the digital era, an incorporeal, intangible cyberspace that is nevertheless rooted in material conditions, social relations, and technological infrastructures, represents a new mode of technicity, whereby human knowledge and memory are technologically supplemented and materialized. In 'Plato's Pharmacy' (1968), Derrida observes that the ancient Greek philosopher was hostile to writing as technics because it contains 'no essence or value of its own, whether positive or negative. It plays within the simulacrum. It is in its type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc.'<sup>15</sup> For Plato, writing operates not as a simple prop to memory, but is,

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 61–172 (p. 105).

more threateningly, ‘the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory, of the prosthesis for the organ’ (p. 108). Stiegler adopts Derrida’s use of Plato’s term *pharmakon*, which ambivalently denotes how writing is both toxic and the remedy, and argues that technics are ‘pharmacological’ to the extent that they possess the potential for both harm and benefit; Stiegler is acutely sensitive to how capitalism harnesses digital technologies in ways that are toxic to the individual, society, and the planet.<sup>16</sup> Reading Dickens serially online thus helps us consider the ambivalent pharmacological — that is, both enabling and mediating — role of digital technics.<sup>17</sup>

Experiencing Victorian serial publishing via the digital also draws attention to the technicity of memory, to its imbrication in and mediation by technology (Kinsley, p. 373). Dickens’s demands on his readers, his assumption that we will remember vital elements of plot from weeks or even months before, may send us back to the text — whether a physical book or its digital representation — thus deepening the relationship between human memory and the technological props that precede and bolster it. As Holly Furneaux observes, the remembrance of complex plots across the pauses between instalments was a skill that serial readers were ‘adept at’.<sup>18</sup> Echoing Plato’s concerns about writing and memory, the digital era is also marked by particular anxieties about attention, memory, and learning, with technologies identified as detrimental to our ability to concentrate and read deeply. The physical object of the Victorian novel — and especially the hefty Dickensian tome, with its moral seriousness and educative potential signified by its material extent and weight — can be contrasted with the ephemeral nowhere space of the Internet and the ever-receding horizon of social media that delivers Pavlovian rewards while splintering concentration and incessantly distracting us.

A 2014 *Huffington Post* article, ‘8 Ways Technology Makes You Stupid’, deftly summarizes some of these concerns, precisising Nicholas Carr’s *The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing To Our Brains* (2011), which argues that technology disrupts the conversion of ‘transient working memory’ into permanent ‘long-term memory’ and hobbles our working memory by bombarding it with information.<sup>19</sup> Within this article, the novel stands in for deeper, older forms of remembering that we have lost in our heedless ‘outsourcing’ of our memories to technology: ‘People used to be able to retain really vast

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Fayat (‘cfayat’), ‘Manifesto 2010’, *Ars Industrialis*, 5 October 2010 <<http://arsindustrialis.org/manifesto-2010>> [accessed 3 October 2015].

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Kinsley, ‘The Matter of “Virtual” Geographies’, *Progress in Human Geographies*, 38 (2014), 364–84 (p. 373).

<sup>18</sup> Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Hiscott, ‘8 Ways Technology Makes You Stupid’, *Huffington Post*, 25 July 2014 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/25/technology-intelligence\\_n\\_5617181.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/25/technology-intelligence_n_5617181.html)> [accessed 2 October 2015].

quantities of knowledge — like reciting entire novels, word for word — but technology has eliminated both the need and the drive to do so.’ Furthermore, reading online disturbs the ability to absorb ‘information [. . .] as well as you would if you’d read it in a book’ because screens make ‘your brain work harder’ (Hiscott, ‘8 Ways’). The piece exemplifies the intersection of neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and alarmist cultural critique in popular discussions about digital technologies and human attention and memory.

In an era in which the inability to concentrate is pathologized as Attention Deficit Disorder, the Internet figures as particularly sapping and enervating, thus making us more reliant on it as a technological prop. However, Stiegler insists that human memory is already ‘essentially exteriorised, materialised and spatialised’, and this supports it and enables intergenerational transmission as culture.<sup>20</sup> The exteriorization of memory represents something new and distinct from both the evolutionary development of the human brain (phylogenetic) and an individual’s inherited capacity to remember (epigenetic), which Stiegler dubs ‘epiphylogenetic memory’. He has argued that ‘there’s no substantive truth of the Internet with regard to attention. The Internet is a *dispositif* that can produce loss of attention, but also increased attention.’<sup>21</sup> Stiegler thus enables us to think more deeply about the relationship between reading online as technics and human memory, attention and cultural transmission. Reading Dickens online in instalments highlights how the serialized novel is a particular technology of memory, as the medium requires high levels of skilled recall, while the habit of serial reading is conditioned by the spaces and intervals in between as much as by the materially and temporally bound part.

### Rereading *A Tale of Two Cities*

Against the backdrop of the 2012 bicentenary, the *Dickens Journals Online* project, based at the University of Buckingham, joined the University of Leicester to embark upon an experiment in reading Dickens serially using digital tools.<sup>22</sup> The bicentenary was an international celebration of

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Stiegler, ‘Relational Ecology and the Digital *Pharmakon*’, trans. by Patrick Crogan, *Culture Machine*, 12 (2012), 1–19 (p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Crogan, ‘Knowledge, Care and Trans-Individuation: An Interview with Bernard Stiegler’, p. 19 <[http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/8064/2/Crogan\\_Interview\\_with\\_Bernard\\_Stiegler.pdf](http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/8064/2/Crogan_Interview_with_Bernard_Stiegler.pdf)> [accessed 8 October 2015] (also publ. in *Cultural Politics*, 6 (2010), 157–70).

<sup>22</sup> This section of my article is indebted to a paper given by Joanne Shattock at ‘Digital Dickens: A Dickens Day Workshop’ (Institute of English Studies, London, 7 July 2014) entitled ‘Victorian Periodicals and Serial Reading in a Digital Age’. This paper considered the recent digital reading projects, in particular the interactions between academics and general readers on the *Tale of Two Cities* reading project blog.

Dickens's life and work, marking the 200th anniversary on 7 February 2012 of his birth. Educational, literary, and cultural institutions and organizations across the globe organized many hundreds of events to mark the occasion, including a twenty-four-hour read-a-thon coordinated by the British Council, in which an extract from Dickens was read every hour in various countries, including China, Pakistan, Albania, and Russia. Building on the good feeling and festivities of the bicentennial year, we were keen to try to recreate the original experience of following one of Dickens's most popular novels in weekly instalments, as it first appeared in his miscellany *All the Year Round*. After his separation from his wife and a related spat with his publishers, Bradbury and Evans, Dickens closed his weekly journal *Household Words*, and relaunched it as *All the Year Round* with exactly the same format, typography, layout, and cover price (2d). To ensure its success, Dickens sought to retain loyal readers and lure in new ones by devoting the front page to a new serialized novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, which ran from 30 April to 26 November 1859 (thirty-one weekly parts). This was a new mode of publishing for Dickens: he committed himself to write shorter instalments than for *Hard Times*, his previous attempt at weekly serialization (*Household Words*, 1854). We know that Dickens chafed against the confines of this compressed mode and complained about the 'teaspoon'-sized instalments.<sup>23</sup> Critics and scholars, however, have generally praised Dickens for the novel's focus and concision.

As almost all of Dickens's novels had been serialized monthly, *A Tale of Two Cities* was also collated and issued in monthly numbers, commencing 31 May 1859 with eight monthly parts in total (the final two parts were sold together as a bumper double issue). Each part cost one shilling and featured two original, steel-engraved illustrations by Dickens's long-time illustrator Hablot Knight Browne ('Phiz'). However, these sold poorly, presumably because readers preferred to purchase the weekly parts, and Dickens didn't repeat this format with his next weekly serial, *Great Expectations*. The weekly numbers of *All the Year Round* were also collated, bound, and sold in volume form, each covering six months (twenty-four to twenty-six weekly magazines), for five shillings and sixpence. Parts 1 to 26 of *A Tale of Two Cities* featured in volume 1 (30 April to 22 October 1859), while parts 27 to 31 were in volume 2 (29 October 1859 to 7 April 1860). Furthermore, after it finished its week-by-week run in the journal, the novel was finally published in one volume, priced eight shillings and featuring the sixteen original illustrations produced by Phiz for the monthly numbers. The serialization was published almost simultaneously in New York and also appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, reaping considerable profits for Dickens (Slater, pp. 473–74). The novel was, then, available in an array of formats, and Dickens continued to innovate

<sup>23</sup> It was Thomas Carlyle who referred to the instalments as 'Teaspoons' (Slater, p. 477).

and experiment in multimedia publishing. The digital project reproduced the novel in one of its formats — the weekly run in *All the Year Round* as it appeared in the journal's biennial volumes — and this digital reproduction might be understood as an extension of the novel's multimedia forms.

One of the earlier digital reading projects — Stanford's Discovering Dickens — followed three of the weekly serialized novels Dickens published in the pages of *Household Words* and *All the Year Round: Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*. The Discovering Dickens website hosted downloadable PDF files of scans of the instalments, which participants could read each week, with accompanying web pages giving the biographical and historical context of the novel. Participants in the 2012 *Tale of Two Cities* project similarly read scans online — albeit of the twice-yearly collated volumes — but an innovation and departure from the Stanford project was an associated WordPress blog that allowed comment and discussion, thus creating a virtual reading group. The 2012 project followed the novel's original publication dates, from 30 April to 26 November, and matching the original weeks and months of publication has become an essential, yet underexplored aspect of recent digital reading projects, as if to close the space, the temporal gap, that exists between then and now, between the physical and digital objects. Avoiding 'spoilers' quickly became important to ensure the pleasure of new readers, but also to feign unknowingness and ensure a sense of alignment with the 'original reader'. An official blog post covered each weekly instalment, but all readers were welcome to author and publish posts and comments.

With an almost unimaginable capacity to generate, gather, and store data, digital technics promise to open up new insights into the relationship between authors and their readers, particularly given the relatively democratic channels for expressing opinion: blogs, 'below the line' comments, reviews on Amazon and other online commercial outlets, dedicated review sites such as Goodreads, and social media and microblogging sites including Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, a problem for future literary historians may not be the paucity of readerly opinion, but its overwhelming digital expanse, which also carries implications for storage, curation, and analysis. The data for analysing website traffic and user engagement provided by WordPress offers some suggestive insights into Dickens's readers, although the majority of our readers remained a silent, elusive constituency. The project accrued 15,498 page views from 451 visitors in 2012, with declining page views but substantially more visitors in 2013 and a steady falling off since: 6346 views by 3873 visitors in 2013; 3797 views by 2534 visitors in 2014; and, as of 5 July 2015, 1900 views by 1108 visitors.<sup>24</sup> This implies that visitors are

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<sup>24</sup> Visitors or viewers represent the number of hits from a particular IP address, whereas page views show how many times a particular page has been loaded or reloaded — one viewer can visit several pages.

reading fewer pages before leaving the site. The three most viewed pages are the home page, an early post on the novel's publishing context, and a post on allusions to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the novel. Interestingly, 'Rousseau' and variations thereof remain the primary keywords for driving organic search traffic to the site. Google represents by far our biggest referrer, so we can speculate that it was a quirk of the Google algorithm that pushed us up the results for searches related to Rousseau. WordPress also provides statistics for the countries from which most visitors viewed the site: the US, the UK, Mexico, and India. It is unclear if the latter two countries figure so highly because of Dickens's popularity, or if the novel features prominently on curricula, or if the British Council's wide-ranging efforts to promote Dickens during 2012 had a particular impact in those countries. Web analytics can generate new questions even as they provide hard data for measuring the elusive quality of 'impact'.

Around six hundred comments were generated on the blog, demonstrating how the project marshalled a small but lively community, mostly academics but also general readers and some who gravitated from *DJO's* crowdsourced text-correcting project. This hugely successful attempt to engage the public with Dickens's journals drew in around one thousand volunteers who corrected nearly thirty thousand pages of OCR-read text.<sup>25</sup> 'Mr Booley', for example, a prolific commentator who authored over twenty posts and commented sixty-three times, was also one of *DJO's* most active text correctors. 'Mr Booley' proved a delightful commentator, often imaginatively framing his experiences of serial reading within the novel's fictional worlds. In his final post, 'The End' (6 December 2012), he describes how 'reading the whole story again in its original serial form was a challenge I could not resist'. He observes that 'the book I have just read is not the same book', and insists that 'nothing in the words has changed, nothing in the writing has changed but the meaning has changed radically'.<sup>26</sup> Other pseudonymous readers commented frequently but never authored a post, such as 'Gina', who commented on seventy-one occasions. The data provided by WordPress suggests that non-academic readers were far more likely to comment than author a post. The two most prolific and most viewed authors and commentators were both academics and, in 2012, nine of the top ten posts and pages — measured by page views — were by academics, with a post by 'Mr Booley' at number ten.

An interesting tension developed between commentators, with some accusing academics of outlandish or deliberately perverse readings of the

<sup>25</sup> Optical Character Recognition (OCR) scans images, such as book and journal pages, and translates them into text documents, which often leaves multiple small errors of layout, syntax, and spelling that require editing and correction.

<sup>26</sup> 'Mr Booley', 'The End', <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.wordpress.com/2012/12/06/the-end/>> [accessed 2 October 2015].

novel. ‘Mr Booley’ referred to these as akin to ‘the mediaeval ecclesiastic sport of counting how many angels were dancing on the head of a pin and I was happy to take part in the game’ (‘The End’). Another frequent commentator, ‘rokujolady’, who commentated fifty-seven times, was open about ‘her’ protective emotional investment in the novel: ‘This was the first novel by Dickens that I read. I have since read *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* [. . .]. They didn’t capture my imagination like this book has, or inspired much thought past the closing paragraph.’ She also observed that some less-than-referential academic readings felt hostile and destructive, arguing that the novel ‘tends to be dismissed’ by academics who consider it “undickensian” and ‘not what they expect or want from Dickens’.<sup>27</sup> These points of difference coalesced around the figure of Lucie Manette, dismissed by some as a stock melodramatic figure, lacking realistic psychological depth, while others were drawn to her virtue, self-sacrifice, and motherly care. The religious overtones and cathartic affects of the novel’s apex, which reward readers’ investments of time and emotion, meant academic interrogations of Sidney Carton’s sacrifice were met with dismay by some commentators.

The enforced gaps between instalments made us aware of temporality — including ‘the regular cyclical rhythms of publication and pause, simultaneity, synchronicity, and diachrony within the serial narrative itself’ — and how the novel thrives and expands in these spaces (Bernstein and Derosé, p. 48). As I observed in a post in week two:

Waiting a week to continue the story got me thinking about the time and spaces in-between instalments, the transitions between weekly parts, and the intermingled feelings that accompany this forced hiatus — anticipation, excitement and longing, but also irritation, frustration and boredom. The novel’s plot is thrillingly propulsive, a forward momentum that, when halted, generates an exasperated thirst to traverse the ‘empty’ space in-between as quickly as possible. With the ease of access provided by Dickens Journals Online, it is difficult to resist starting the next instalment, to disregard and rebel against the curtailment of our reading pleasure. Dickens expertly instigates this forward thrust in the opening instalment, hurtling us back in time and then dashing us forward with his breathless, faux-Manichean opening, and onwards, upwards, on to the stagecoach lumbering up Shooter’s Hill.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Holly Furneaux, ‘Week 31: “A Far, Far Better Thing”’, <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.wordpress.com/2012/11/25/week-31-a-far-far-better-thing>> [accessed 2 October 2015].

<sup>28</sup> Ben Winyard, ‘Week 2’, <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.WordPress.com/2012/05/07/week-2/>> [accessed 2 October 2015].

In the digital era, then, we are presented with a choice where the original reader faced only constraint: we can choose to resist the possibilities offered by the technics of digitalization and temporally bind ourselves to the initial rhythms and limitations of sequential publication. Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund explore the Victorian serialized novel vis-à-vis shifting notions and experiences of temporality; the sense of time expanded with the realization of geological millennia, but also contracted with new technologies of communication and travel, such as the stagecoach.<sup>29</sup> The serial novel, they argue, captured ‘this expanded sense of time through repeated sequencing of texts as well as the acceleration of time through the individual short parcels of reading matter’ (Bernstein and Derosé, p. 47).

The spaces in between instalments are not empty; they evoke speculation and fantasy. As Furneaux argues, ‘linear, teleological reading is structurally discouraged’ by serial publication, while ‘closure is only ever a temporary cessation’, thus opening up imaginative spaces that extend beyond the boundaries of plot and instalment (*Queer Dickens*, p. 67). One of our commentators, ‘Gina’, confessed that the time and space in between instalments made her ‘itch to write ATOTC/Scarlet Pimpernel crossover fanfic. [/nerd]’ (Furneaux, ‘Week 31’). Conjectures about the possible direction of the plot were amended or rerouted by the next instalment, suggesting how the serialized part might check, modify, or suspend particular speculations. Indeed, for ‘Mr Booley’, ‘the discipline of “not knowing” what came next’ was ‘frustrating at times’ but opened up more space ‘for discussion and reflection on “the story so far” [. . .] than a straight reading would allow for’ (‘The End’). As Mark Turner has observed, these enforced intervals of disruption and suspension are often ‘where meaning resides’.<sup>30</sup>

Dickens made rigorous demands on his readers. For example, part 4 of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (July 1870), which many of us were reading serially last year as part of The Drood Inquiry <<http://www.drood inquiry.com>>, contained multiple, complex allusions: snippets and echoes of Shakespeare (*1 Henry IV*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*), classical history (the Spartan stand at Thermopylae), medieval English history (the princes in the Tower, Henry II, and Eleanor of Aquitaine), French fairy tale (Bluebeard), fragmentary traces of Milton and Goldsmith, and lots of biblical allusions (Genesis, Matthew, Revelation, Thessalonians).<sup>31</sup> We often wondered whether the original readers would have noted these allusions without the benefit of footnotes. Several participants in the project confessed to failures

<sup>29</sup> Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Turner, ‘Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century’, *Media History*, 8 (2002), 183–96 (p. 194).

<sup>31</sup> I had to reach for the helpful footnotes in my Penguin edition of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* to decipher many of the allusions in this particular instalment.

of epigenetic and phylogenetic memory; they reread previous instalments, or found plot summations online, or reached for their battered paperback copy. For some of our commentators, such as ‘Gina’, Victorian readers must have simply had better memories:

I wonder if maybe people just had better attention spans and memories in those days. :-) I mean, the format he was writing in pretty much required them to have good memories. You can’t just fill half of every installment with flashbacks and reminders; you wouldn’t have much room left to tell more of the actual story.<sup>32</sup>

Robert Patten has considered that, despite its forward, linear progression, the serialized novel is actually ‘complexively retrospective’; instalments encourage readers to think back, or they may be set in earlier periods.<sup>33</sup> For example, in week twenty-seven of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens deploys a first-person narrative to fill in the backstory of Dr Manette’s encounter with the dastardly Evremonde family and his subsequent imprisonment. Pete Orford of the University of Buckingham noted that this is ‘effectively a self-contained short-story’:

This week’s instalment launches straight into the letter, told from the first perspective, with no preamble or explanation [. . .]: anyone reading this now is assumed to have been following everything beforehand, and to have been eagerly awaiting this week’s instalment with the last one still fresh in their mind.<sup>34</sup>

With characteristic verve, Orford confessed that,

At the risk of looking like an idiot [. . .] I found the twin brothers a little confusing to differentiate: and struggled to work out which one is Darnay’s dad and who killed the girl’s brother and so on. I went back a few weeks to re-read [. . .]. But I’m still not 100% convinced I got that right. Is that me being tired and not paying attention, or is it a consequence of Dickens’s decision to use first-person for this week’s instalment? It adds a great deal to the narrative, but unfortunately it disallows Dickens from referring back and saying ‘you know, the one

<sup>32</sup> ‘Mr Booley’, ‘One Joker and Two Idealists’, <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.wordpress.com/2012/11/12/one-joker-and-two-idealists/>> [accessed 3 October 2015].

<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Patten, ‘Serialized Retrospection in *The Pickwick Papers*’, in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 123–42 (p. 124).

<sup>34</sup> Pete Orford, ‘Save Him Now, My Doctor, Save Him!’, <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.WordPress.com/2012/10/29/save-him-now-my-doctor-save-him/>> [accessed 3 October 2015].

we've met already who got killed by Jacques'. (Orford, 'Save Him Now')

Another contributor, 'katieloubell', who commented thirty-three times, also admitted, 'I found myself backtracking to figure this out as well [. . .]. I'm still confused as to who's who' (Orford, 'Save Him Now'). 'Mr Booley' similarly confessed to returning to his paperback when he became confused ('The End'), which suggests that, for some, the book remains a more efficacious prop for epiphylogenetic memory. The following week, Joanne Shattock of the University of Leicester observed that Dickens expected his readers to recall an incident from five months previous, when Madame Defarge desultorily notes the likeness between Carton and Evremonde. 'At this point', Shattock writes, 'I had to flip back to the instalments for weeks 6 and 7 [. . .]. Did Dickens expect his readers to have complete recall of an episode they had read some five months earlier? The answer simply is yes.'<sup>35</sup>

However, serial reading, with inbuilt pauses that encouraged close reading, revealed some of the novel's flaws of plot, pace, and characterization. Indeed, one commentator, 'John Davis', concluded:

As for the whole novel, I have to say that in my opinion it's the worst Dickens novel I've read. Yes, there are some great moments and some characteristic Dickens passages, but there are more flaws than I'd come to expect in his work. Maybe this slow week-by-week reading hasn't helped. (Furieux, 'Week 31')

'Mr Booley' similarly concluded:

Whilst most of the writing is fine I now find the story is trite and not the old adventure I loved. My copy will go back on its shelf and I don't think I will be tempted to read it again. ('The End')

Imagining the end of the digital reading experience with the image of a physical book returned to its shelf, this contributor articulates some of the nostalgic memories of the text that motivated many to engage with the reading experiment. Other readers, though, found the slowed pace of serialization revelatory: (this comment is from 'Gina'):

Although ATOTC is my favorite novel, I've never paid such careful attention to its structure before this — I love how much I'm learning from all of you about something I thought I already knew so well! — and I'm finding the way Dickens

<sup>35</sup> Joanne Shattock, 'Week 28: Carton and Darnay (again)', <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.WordPress.com/2012/11/05/week-28-carton-and-darnay-again/>> [accessed 3 October 2015].

introduces these characters, and emphasizes different ones at different times, fascinating.<sup>36</sup>

One of the primary ways in which the fantasy of reading or rereading the novel ‘originally’ is disrupted or problematized is the intrusion of previous encounters with the novel, whether textual, visual, or aural, and, in particular, nostalgia for those old encounters. Many participants had fond memories of reading the novel, or watching a film or TV adaptation, particularly when young. Participants often noted that *A Tale of Two Cities* was the first Dickens novel they really engaged with or loved. Some of the later disappointment with the novel’s perceived weaknesses, which serial reading seemed to accentuate, arose from the tension between memory and a re-encounter with the beloved object.

### Rereading *Our Mutual Friend*

The *Our Mutual Friend* reading project is following Dickens’s penultimate novel in its original monthly instalments from May 2014 to November 2015. The project marks the 150th anniversary of the novel’s serial publication and its culmination coincides with the tenth anniversary of Birkbeck’s free, open access online journal, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*. As with Dickens’s other novels, *Our Mutual Friend* is usually read today as a rather hefty, single-volume paperback, or electronically on a tablet or e-book reader. Victorian readers, however, encountered the novel in nineteen monthly parts; each part cost one shilling and was thirty-two pages long with two illustrations by Marcus Stone and, astonishingly, over seventy pages of advertisements.<sup>37</sup> Calè describes these as an ‘ephemeral paratext’ that demonstrates ‘each instalment’s place in the marketplace, anchoring the text to its contemporary moment of cultural consumption’ (Calè, ‘Reading in Parts’). Commenting on the project’s blog, Catherine Waters (‘cwaters1960’) of the University of Kent observes that these advertisements indicate the social and class composition of the readers Dickens and his publishers were appealing to and who were expected to purchase the serialized part (Calè, ‘Reading in Parts’). Advertises for crinolines that enable ease of movement and allow a woman to “‘throw herself into an armchair, pass to her stall at the Opera, or occupy a fourth seat in a carriage” suggest, Waters argues, ‘one group of female readers with certain pretensions to gentility, while other advertisements — extolling the virtues

<sup>36</sup> Pete Orford, ‘Week Six: Double Trouble, or Blue Fly Thinking’, <<https://dickensataleoftwocities.wordpress.com/2012/06/04/week-six-double-trouble-or-blue-fly-thinking/>> [accessed 3 October 2015].

<sup>37</sup> This was a greater volume of advertisements than in any other serialized work by Dickens. See Slater, p. 526.

of Reckitt's Diamond Blacklead, for example — suggest an appeal to the practical housewife concerned with domestic economy'. The sheer multiplicity of items on offer suggests a broad, cross-class readership: Waters enumerates adverts for 'patent medicines (that Dickens himself satirized in his fiction and journalism), [. . .] perfumes, lock-stitch sewing machines, opera glasses, expensive etchings of paintings by Turner, cattle feed and cocoa', among many others (Calè, 'Reading in Parts').

By comparison, the weekly parts of *A Tale of Two Cities*, contained within the pages of *All the Year Round*, featured no advertisements, except for the fairly unobtrusive, picture-free text at the end of every issue of the journal, which promoted forthcoming issues, collated volumes of the journal, and single volumes of serialized fiction. However, the unsuccessful monthly parts of *A Tale of Two Cities* were almost identical to the monthly instalments of *Our Mutual Friend*: they came in a coloured wrapper, with many pages of advertisements, and featured two illustrations. Although *A Tale of Two Cities* was positioned as the lead article in a journal, most participants in the digital reading project focused solely on the novel; its relationship to the journal's content warrants closer analysis, though, and hints at a rich intertextuality. The publication of *Our Mutual Friend* and the return to his earlier, cherished mode of monthly publication generated much popular excitement and was accompanied by an enormous advertising campaign by his publishers, Chapman and Hall. The covers of the monthly parts were nostalgically reverted to the green used from *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37) to *Dombey and Son* (1846–48). Michael Slater observes that Dickens struggled to return to the 'ampler space of the old monthly number' after two novels published in weekly parts; he thus overwrote the first and the second parts (p. 524).

For the digital project, we are reading scans of the original monthly parts provided by Queen's University Belfast and readers can comment on an accompanying WordPress blog. An innovative aspect of the project is a Twitter retelling of the novel: dozens of people are composing tweets, which can be no more than 140 characters long, in the guise of the novel's panoply of characters. One of the novel's most famous lines is Betty Higden's delighted exclamation when the foundling Sloppy reads the newspaper aloud — "He do the Police in different voices." Similarly, the pseudonymous tweeters are taking on the voices of Dickens's characters. While following the trajectory of the monthly parts, they also take their own Dickensian flights of fancy, composing new dialogue, interacting with different characters, and even developing online lives beyond the novel's confines. In a development that would have surely delighted Dickens, some of the novel's inanimate objects, including the stuffed crocodile in Mr Venus's taxidermy shop and Silas Wegg's wooden leg, are also tweeting. These tweets are then collated on Storify, a platform that lets users curate and retell stories from their social media posts, to provide an alternative retelling that also reshapes memory

and how we remember the novel's narrative. If digital reading projects allow us to excavate and explore some of the readerly fantasies and investments around Dickens and his imaginative world, the Twitter experiment, with constraints, conventions, and rhythms that in some regards match Victorian serial publication, gives life to some of the extra-literary fantasies of readers that thrive in the spaces in between instalments.

Laurence Scott has recently argued that digitization has created a 'fourth dimension' by imbuing every object and every moment 'with the capacity for [an] extra aspect' or space that is 'nestled inside' and 'spread out across the everyday', and which is 'warping and renting [. . .] old-fashioned space' (pp. xv, xx, xvi). He observes that 'social media [. . .] makes a moment four-dimensional by scaffolding it with simultaneity, such that it exists in multiple places at once' (p. xix), which prompts us to consider how the Twitter retelling of the novel imbues the story with an extra dimension of simultaneity. The portability of the original serialized part imbued it, to some extent, with this simultaneity, enabling it to exist in multiple places synchronously. However, the physical boundedness of each instalment is in marked contrast to the constantly open, illimitable, extra dimensionality of the Internet. Also, social media 'encourages us to narrate our lives as legibly as possible, as ongoing books that invite themselves to be read' (Scott, p. xix). For Scott, we have to become characters in the story of our own lives: 'we are asked to materialize online as contained, knowable people' and we have to assume a 'consistent, amiable personhood' (p. 38). The mode in which the Twitter project reframes, reassembles, and retells the story of *Our Mutual Friend* — dividing it into first-person snippets, each narrated by a single character — reflects the contemporary desire and pressure to become a character in the ongoing, serialized instalments of our own lives via social media.

After the breakneck pace of following *A Tale of Two Cities* week by week, reading a much longer novel in monthly parts presented interesting and new challenges, as well as opportunities for different types of reflection and analysis. On the blog, Charlotte Mathieson of the University of Warwick observes that the lengthiness of the nineteen-part novel foregrounds 'the changes that occur during the production and reception of a single novel', thus encouraging us 'to think about the fluidity of the social landscape that forms the backdrop of the reader's experience' (Calè, 'Reading in Parts'). For another commentator on the blog, Shawna Ross of Texas A&M University, re-encountering the novel with lengthy, enforced hiatuses between parts encourages her to think about 'resituating my relationship to the text'.

Normally — especially at the end of a spring semester — I'd want to read in massive reading sessions, letting myself get obsessed. But I can't here, and already, I suspect I'll be waiting for the first of every month and voraciously consuming the

text, which will probably prompt some kind of stocktaking.  
(Calè, 'Reading in Parts')

Pete Orford observes the 'disorientating' opening instalment, with 'a crowd [of characters] thrust upon us'.<sup>38</sup> The novel's ambiguous title and third-person narrative also obfuscate the protagonist's identity. Another commentator, Sean Grass of Iowa State University, clarifies that the first instalment 'carried a printed slip inserted between the plates that explained, "The Reader will understand the use of the popular phrase Our Mutual Friend, as the title of this book, on arriving at the Ninth Chapter (page 84)."' However, this slip was not included in the scans we are reading, thus demonstrating how digitalization can mediate the reader's relationship to a dematerialized object that is understood as exactly re-presenting the original (Trotter and Abbott, 'Month 1').

The first of the month was designated publication day and usually witnesses a flurry of activity, particularly on Twitter. Interaction declines rapidly thereafter and so the project organizers commissioned thematic blog posts for the middle of the month. However, the project has notably failed to forge a community of active blog posters and commentators, with only thirty-six comments between May 2014 and July 2015. Anecdotally, some have ascribed this to the scholarly content of the blog posts — which have been memorably described as 'perfectly formed jewels' — but it perhaps also illustrates the ongoing demands, in the age of digital humanities, of creating and maintaining a web presence, including authoring and uploading regular content and encouraging and sustaining discussion. Furthermore, the Twitter experiment may be cannibalizing the blog as it offers a less arduous and more imaginative and enjoyable alternative to blogging. The blog thus stands as a sample and repository of contemporary critical approaches to the novel, providing a useful future resource for students, scholars, and Dickens fans alike.

Using computational analysis of Dickens's serials, Bernstein and Derosé make the fascinating claim that 'weekly instalments (more frequently than their monthly counterparts) contain words that reference past events, concrete nouns, and spatial layouts, while simultaneously making fewer direct references to characters' interiority and exteriority' (p. 50). They highlight the nineteenth part of the weekly *Tale of Two Cities* (3 September 1859), in which the peasants of France rise up and burn down the chateaux of local nobility, as an example of the ways in which Dickens foregrounds setting rather than character. They compare this with chapter 14 of the monthly *Oliver Twist*, which appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* in September

<sup>38</sup> David Trotter and Ruth Abbott, 'Month 1 (May 1864)', <<https://dickensourmutualfriend.wordpress.com/2014/05/01/week-1-by-david-trotter-and-ruth-abbott/>> [accessed 4 October 2015].

1837 and contains a contrasting emphasis on ‘characterological construction’ (Bernstein and Derose, pp. 49–57). They argue for a fundamental difference in the structure of weekly and monthly instalments: between the ‘spatially driven, concretized world of Dickens’s weekly serials’ and ‘the character-led, dialogue-oriented monthly ones’ (p. 63). While fascinating, this claim feels overly schematic, particularly with its comparison of novels published twenty-two years apart. Furthermore, this analysis elides the historical setting of *A Tale of Two Cities*, which is accompanied by a style, tone, and plot shaped by the generic conventions of historical fiction. Also, both space and place are central to many of the monthly parts of *Our Mutual Friend*, as the dramatic opening set piece on the Thames attests. We could conjecture that Dickens’s final complete serialized novel marries the spatial and characterological stylistics that previously defined and separated his weekly and monthly serials. Nevertheless, it would also be fascinating to submit *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Our Mutual Friend* to a similar computational analysis and also to a qualitative analysis by readers who have taken part in both digital projects (Bernstein and Derose, p. 63). Bernstein and Derose also found that, despite the lengthier gap between instalments, monthly parts contained few ‘setting cues, to remind readers of the story world’, which suggests, as we discovered, that Dickens made almost no concessions to readers’ lapses or failures of attention or memory (p. 50).

In terms of statistics, the *Our Mutual Friend* project is outperforming the earlier reading experiment in some regards, but not others: the WordPress blog has, as of 10 July 2015, accrued 15,893 page views from 7189 visitors, with, on average 2.39 page views per visitor in 2014 and 1.86 page views per visitor in 2015. Compare this, though, with 34.36 page views per visitor for the *Tale of Two Cities* blog in 2012 and the relative lack of deeper user engagement is evident. It is anglophone countries that are hosting the most visitors: the top four, in order, are the UK, the US, Canada, and Australia. Interestingly, though, Japan is fifth, followed by France and Germany.

## Conclusion

The propulsive, forward momentum of a Dickensian plot can make the temporal gaps between instalments spaces of frustrating unknowing. Yet Rebecca Solnit, in a piece on Virginia Woolf and the pleasures of uncertainty and inexplicability, has urged that spaces we regard as dark and empty, may be where ‘things merge, change, become enchanted, aroused, impregnated, possessed, released, renewed’.<sup>39</sup> As the imaginative engagement of our digital readers demonstrates, reading serially can transform us

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Solnit, ‘Woolf’s Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable’, *New Yorker*, 24 April 2014 <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/woolfs-darkness-embracing-the-inexplicable>> [accessed 3 October 2015].

into ‘producers rather than consumers of meaning’ who welcome ‘the slow, the meandering, the digressive, the exploratory, the numinous, the uncertain’ and remain open to ‘the unlikely and the unimaginable’. Digital reading projects give us a better sense of the original rhythms, temporalities, and modes of Victorian serialized novels and they may also enact and fulfil fantasies of reading Dickens as his original readers did. More importantly, their value also resides in opening up spaces that encourage and enable uncertainty, digression, interpretation, discussion, imaginative investment, and fantasy, giving life to Dickens’s vision of the radical communality of reading (Solnit, ‘Woolf’s Darkness’).