

# Literature Reloaded: using databases to explore literary trends

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## 1. Introduction

Since 2000, the speculative fiction genre has evolved significantly; new subgenres have emerged and the already existing ones underwent significant changes (Killheffer, 2000; James & Mendlesohn, 2003, 2012; Gill, 2013). Though once regarded as pulp, speculative fiction recently rooted itself in the mainstream, dominating large percentages of the book market (Vanderhooft, 2010; Chadwick, 2013). However, little has been written on the topic of how the publishing industry and its increasing dependency on trends (Thompson, 2012) impacted the genre; articles in trade journals show that the publishers seem to be trailing behind when it comes to identifying recent speculative fiction trends (Chadwick, 2012; Fox, 2012). Periodicals such as the Library Journal and Publishers Weekly, as well as Thompson in his book *Merchants of Culture* (2012), frequently mention the fact that no one is certain where the book market trends originate (Hollands, 2011; Fox, 2012; Chadwick, 2013). However, the publishers' trendsetting attempts likely effect subtle genre changes, and ultimately alter the ways in which a genre is perceived (Gill, 2013).

## 2. Goal of the paper

In order to successfully identify these changes and explore the role that the publishing industry plays in changing perceptions of genre, we need to reach beyond the traditional qualitative methods of research in the humanities. This paper presents the ways in which big data was used to inform research on genre and publishing industry, focusing on three particular databases:

### 2.1 Nielsen BookScan

The data on book sales in UK is collected by Nielsen BookScan, a commercial service aimed at publishing houses that gathers weekly sales figures from various UK booksellers and then compiles them into (amongst others) yearly bestselling charts. Their statistics capture over 90% of British print book market and are essential for understanding of publishing and bookselling trends.

### 2.2 Goodreads

Dubbed 'the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations' with over 30 million members and over 900 million books, it is a huge aggregator of data where people can, among other things, catalogue books they have read or wish to read via virtual shelves. The data regarding these shelves offers unique insight into the 'folk classification' of literature - i.e. readers' perception of literature and its genres.

### 2.3 Cambridge English Corpus

Compiled by Cambridge University Press, this is 'a multi-billion word collection of written, spoken and learner texts' gathered from various digital and other sources (such as books, magazines, radio and everyday conversation). Its original purpose is to inform and improve the Press' in-house English Language Teaching programme, but tracking the popularity of certain words can also tell external researchers a lot about the general public's familiarity with popular genre.

By using these databases to complement the data gathered through qualitative methods, we can get a much clearer picture of recent changes in perception and popularity of speculative fiction and its subgenres: comparing Nielsen Bookscan data (indicating popularity) to Goodreads data (indicating genre classification) can help us map past genre trends and potentially predict new ones, while Cambridge English Corpus data can shed further light on the way general public perceives genre literature.

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