Russian Readers and Writers in the Twenty-first Century: 
the Internet as a Meeting Point

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Note on translation and transliteration

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Russian and from secondary sources in other languages are mine.

For transliteration of Russian words and names, I used the Library of Congress system, with the exception of Russian names in sources which I have consulted in English, for which I have kept the spelling used in the original source.
Abstract

This thesis identifies and analyses the literary tendencies observable on the Russian Internet. In particular, it assesses which of these tendencies represent absolute novelties in Russian literary culture and which others are, instead, the legacy of traditional reading and writing habits adapted to the new media environment.

This analysis is framed on one side by Internet studies, as it represents a case study of a particular segment of the Internet, and on the other side by the history of the book, as it examines the influence of computer technologies on production and consumption of literature in the context of global developments in book history, of which the Russian case is one example.

In this context, this work proposes to analyse the changes in the role of the literary author in the era of user participation, keeping in mind how the contemporary cultural environment has been influencing the role of literature in Russia. Furthermore, it acknowledges the changes brought by the digital age to the distribution of, and access to, literature in a country as vast as Russia, where the literary market is nowadays subject to the laws of a capitalist economy rather than to central planning as it previously was. Finally, it focuses on how online developments in reading and writing are perceived within the debate about ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural expressions in the Russian literary landscape.

This study is carried out through the observation of online sources, such as literary communities, online libraries and self-publication websites. The main case studies are represented by websites dedicated to prominent contemporary authors Boris Akunin and Viktor Pelevin. On one hand, the thesis assesses how the authors’ works and public personas are represented on the respective official websites; on the other hand, it examines fans’ initiatives on websites which they themselves have created specifically to discuss their favourite authors and to share knowledge and original artistic contents inspired by Akunin’s and Pelevin’s books. A particular focus of interest in this work is, in fact, the point of view of readers and their relationship with the written text and with authors through online tools.

Through the examples provided, it is possible to describe a literary culture ready to embrace the digital revolution, but still closely related to book culture, where traditional and innovative relationships with reading and writing coexist and both find expression on the pages of the RuNet.
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Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my grandparents, Giovanni and Fernanda, who both left us last year.
Introduction

The significant changes that followed the adoption of new media on a mass scale are creating a cultural shift in several fields, including the way in which we deal with literary materials. While this phenomenon is observable on a global scale, uses of new technologies in a given local context are partly shaped by pre-existing cultural habits.

This thesis will explore the relationship between the Internet and literary culture in the specific context of contemporary Russia. The interaction between digital technologies and literature represents a topic of particular interest in the Russian context owing to several factors. Firstly, the Russian media system presents very specific characteristics: the role of Soviet mass media changed significantly in the glasnost’ era and, just a few years later, traditional media were joined by interactive technologies. Therefore, the adoption of new media on a progressively larger scale in Russia coincided with an era of political, economical, social and consequently cultural transition. The Internet thus inserted itself into a media culture which was undergoing deep changes in terms of its structure and functions. It is because of the coincidence of the technological revolution with an internal cultural revolution that the Russian case is particularly interesting in the context of reflections on how new media interact with cultural production and consumption.

Moreover, as digital technologies started to spread, Russian culture was simultaneously suffering from a ‘double shock’: the loss of the institutional and ideological backbone of the country coincided with the emergence of a mass culture in the Western sense, based on entertainment and commercial success rather than on ideological validity, as in the Soviet Union. In addition, the written word and book culture traditionally played a particularly important role in Russia, as a consequence of the historical development of Russian literary culture.

In this introductory chapter, I will briefly outline some of the peculiarities of the role of literature in Russia, in order to later assess whether these particular features still bear a significant influence on contemporary perceptions of literature, or whether they, on the contrary, have been completely dismissed in the digital era. Later, aspects related to the development of the Internet and its influence on the book
will also be taken into account, before outlining the aims and methodology of this thesis, as well as its structure.

1 - Peculiarities of Russian literary culture

1.1 The role of literature and of the literary author

Russian culture is said to be particularly ‘literature-centric’.¹ The country’s close relationship with reading culture has deep historical roots, as writing was initially connected to the Church and always held a religious or social purpose. Literature enjoyed great authority and prestige, while fictional literature was almost non-existent until the seventeenth century.² Since its separation from exclusively religious purposes during the time of Peter I, the written word assumed the role of an institution in the formation of public opinion. However, it continued to remain closely related to a higher centre of power, which was no longer the church but the State.³ In this context, the literary writer performed the dual functions of both ‘prophet’ and ‘holder of truth’.⁴ During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writers developed philosophical and political thought, becoming the bearers of the ‘Russian idea’ and thus playing a fundamental role in discourses of social and national identity.⁵

As literacy gradually spread in the second half of the nineteenth century, the writing process started to focus more on readers, while writers started to perceive themselves as intellectual professionals.⁶ Between 1861 and 1917 a commercial, popular literature emerged and reached a relatively wide audience,⁷ before being incorporated in Soviet culture and invested with educational functions aspiring to create a specifically Soviet cultural value. Literary culture worked in its own peculiar

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³ Zalambani, p. 251.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Davidson, pp. 508-509.
⁷ Jeffrey Brooks, When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature 1861-1917 (Evanston: North Western University Press, 2003).
ways under the regime and resumed a free development, albeit influenced by the habits shaped in the Soviet era, starting timidly in the years of glasnost and then on a larger scale from 1991.\textsuperscript{8}

1.2 The role of literature in the Soviet period

The literature-centric nature of Russian culture survived as ‘a complex socio-political institution completely governed by the field of power’ throughout the various phases of the Soviet era.\textsuperscript{9} The status of authors aligned with the Soviet ideological power remained high as their art was supposed to enlighten the Soviet people,\textsuperscript{10} while dissident authors exposed themselves personally with their works.

In the 1920s, a cult of reading was actively sponsored by the Soviet regime, but also fostered from below, as citizens regarded reading as a ‘prestigious’ and ‘socially advantageous’ activity. Literature was a way to promote Soviet values and literary knowledge was seen as illustrative of a good Soviet education. Reading also played the role of a powerful symbol of national identity through myths, such as the primacy of Soviet people as those who read more than anyone else in the world and through the emphasis on the significance of reading for the creation of the Soviet citizen.\textsuperscript{11}

During the Stalin era, both the act of reading and the book as an object became part of the principles of kul’turnost’, a mentality of good taste for high forms of culture and behaviour, in turn heavily promoted within literature itself. Kul’turnost’ involved cultural interests such as theatre and cinema, but also fashion and personal care, as well as discipline, educated speech, a cult of objects that were symbolic of good taste (such as white curtains and tablecloths, but also books), and a knowledge of a wide range of subjects, from literature and art, to sport and Soviet politics. ‘Cultured’ behaviour was associated with personal success, for example being a ‘good’ worker.\textsuperscript{12} Special efforts were made by the Party to promote kul’turnost’ through cultural initiatives and education, and reading represented an important part

\textsuperscript{9} Zalambani, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{10} Berg, p. 17.
of this project. Silent, individual reading progressed to represent the main tool of *kul’turnost’*, as a form of self-education leading to inner self-improvement. A close relationship with the book was deemed necessary to master the ‘Bolshevik way of thinking’.  

Books were thus valued as symbols of ‘culturedness’, both for their intellectual value and as material objects. The materiality of the book represented an aspect of particular importance, both aesthetically and practically: books were invariably hardback, and intended to be read numerous times; they were supposed to be displayed as status symbol items in the house of every educated person, becoming ‘the main transmitter and emblem of Soviet *kul’turnost’*. The symbolic value of print culture was thus an important aspect of everyday Soviet life.

As Soviet art aimed to present one single perspective through which culture and society had to be interpreted, the struggle between official culture and popular taste was one of the defining traits of Soviet media and literary culture. As the regime aspired to the creation of a Communist culture for the masses, it was necessary to shape a national literature that would be both at the same time educational and appealing, even to the less educated strata of society. It was therefore necessary to combine Soviet values with popular tastes. The artistic method of Socialist Realism was implemented in the 1930s as a tool for the creation of a homogenous, middle-brow culture, shared by all citizens, where there would no longer be an ‘elite culture’ in contrast with a ‘pulp culture for the masses’. Socialist Realism was applied to all official artistic expressions. Its function was to serve the ideological needs of the Party through precise rules, particularly before Stalin’s death. In literature, official writers were required to use standardised language, avoid mentioning oppositions to Soviet rule, and portray an optimistic attitude for the radiant future of the USSR, influencing the thinking of their readers. Writers

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13 Ibid., p. 227.  
14 Lovell, p. 68.  
15 Ibid., p. 12.  
17 Von Geldern, p. xviii.
experienced minimal autonomy and were considered to be professionals whose role it was to construct national myths.\footnote{Katerina Clark, ‘Socialist Realism in Soviet Literature’, \textit{The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature}, ed. by Neil Cornwell (London: Routledge, 2001).}

According to some critics a ‘monolithic’,\footnote{Rosalind Marsh, \textit{Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006} (Oxford: P. Lang, 2007), p. 73.} official literary culture was successfully created in the form of an accessible, ‘high’ culture with broad mass appeal,\footnote{Lovell, p. 16.} opposed only to illegal or dissident cultural representations that found expression in \textit{samizdat} or abroad. According to others, the image of Soviet literature as a single, solid entity is not accurate; besides legitimate Soviet artistic expressions, there existed forms of entertainment that would conform to the tastes of a mass public and, while still carrying Soviet values, presented some universal traits, typical of a consumer society.\footnote{Richard Stites, \textit{Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 3-4.} For example, formulaic literature received a positive response from readers in the 1960s and 1970s, the decades during which Western crime authors such as Agatha Christie were published and Russian authors created crime stories attempting to ‘synthesize ideological correctness with a popular cultural form’. However, their popular and entertainment characteristics were never discussed.\footnote{Stephen Lovell, ‘Literature and Entertainment in Russia: A Brief History’, in \textit{Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective}, ed. by Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (München: Sagner, 2005), p. 27.}

1.3 The role of readers

On their part, citizens have been playing an active role in shaping Russian literary culture. In early Soviet culture, journalistic and then literary activity by workers was encouraged, fostering workers’ participation within cultural life and aiming to shape figures of writers belonging to the working masses; amateur writing was also widespread to the point of ‘graphomania’.\footnote{Evgeny Dobrenko, \textit{The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 192-200, 243-295.} Readers also wrote letters to literary journals, or directly to writers, on cultural topics; one of the roles of the ‘thick journals’ and of newspapers was to collect these letters in which readers offered ‘direct feedback’ on literary works.\footnote{Lovell, \textit{The Russian Reading Revolution}, p. 47, 51.} Through these initiatives, the reader...
'became both writer and critic', thus contributing to shape the style of Socialist Realism.\textsuperscript{25}

A habit of active participation in social and cultural life through petitions and letter-writing had actually been in existence since the late nineteenth century, when citizens’ letters to newspapers were encouraged by the Tsarist power, aiming to reinforce political education.\textsuperscript{26} In the Soviet era, too, citizens often took a proactive approach and wrote public letters to the press and to government officials on both social and personal issues. Letters were written privately, to denounce or complain about services or people, to make confessions or simply express personal stories. On other occasions, letters were written collectively to celebrate events.\textsuperscript{27} Writing letters was a way of ‘establishing a direct line of contact with the supreme powers’,\textsuperscript{28} but also represented private communication with the authorities through an essentially public form of writing. Soviet private and public spheres thus collided in letters, with letters representing a tool for citizens to participate in something close to a public sphere.\textsuperscript{29} The popular habit of letter-writing showed a particular attitude to written communication, often nearing graphomania.\textsuperscript{30} Similar tendencies have also been observed in the writing habits of Russian Internet users and will be discussed in Chapter 3.

\textbf{1.4 Unofficial subcultures: samizdat}

Parallel to official Tsarist and Soviet culture, an important part of Russian literary and media culture has been represented by counter-cultures, such as \textit{samizdat}.

Readers were often involved in self-publishing and spontaneous distribution of written texts (\textit{samizdat}), often at considerable personal risk. \textit{Samizdat} represented a significant part of literary culture in the post-Stalin period. However, it existed and functioned outside of official print culture and official distribution, thus representing

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{28}Ibid., p. 327.
\bibitem{30}Fitzpatrick, p. 92.
\end{thebibliography}
an ‘extra-Gutenberg phenomenon’\textsuperscript{31} and anticipating some aspects of spontaneous literary production on the Internet (see Chapter 3). The samizdat text represented an unfixed text, whose reliability could be questioned because it was not validated by the authority of print: it can be said, then, that a culture contemplating the unfixed, unprinted text as a legitimate literary expression existed in the underground alongside official print culture.\textsuperscript{32} The materiality of the physical book was thus not the only support for spreading written ideas known to (some) Soviet citizens.

1.5 The Post-Soviet era

The initial post-Soviet decades in Russia were characterised by the birth and consolidation of a mass culture responding to economic laws, including readers’ demands, rather than to ideological needs. The end of the Soviet Union coincided with the end of literature understood as a higher art, replaced by a popular culture where entertainment products enjoy the same, and sometimes greater, popularity than the classics. The book has become a commodity, subject to the laws of demand and advertising, rather than a status symbol, thus losing its ‘mystical’ position. The new cult of television personalities and entertainment also contributed to changing Russians’ relationship with the prominence of literature; the high opinion in which previously only high forms of art were held is now not just exclusive of them.\textsuperscript{33}

At least at an official level, a higher literary authority ceased to exist. Preventive censorship was also officially abolished after having been continuously in place (except for a short period between 1905 and 1917) with fluctuating requirements which influenced literary production.\textsuperscript{34} Frank Ellis attributes the utmost importance to the official abolition of censorship as one of the factors which accelerated the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, by legitimising different voices and increasing the influence of electronic media, this factor played a fundamental role in changing the role of literature and of the author.\textsuperscript{35} The variety of subjects, of literary forms and of stylistic devices that Russian writers are able to explore has now become virtually limitless; the use of language is also less controlled, therefore

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Frank Ellis, From Glasnost to the Internet: Russia’s New Infosphere (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 125-137.
\textsuperscript{34} Zalambani, p 253.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp. 128-132.
blurring the boundaries of what is considered appropriate for high literary standards and lower forms of writing.

In these conditions, the way authors capture the appeal of an ever more sophisticated public, accustomed to diverse stimulation from different media and who enjoy easy access to foreign literature, is nowadays of paramount importance in Russia, as is anywhere else. As well as working on literary texts, authors also need to construct their role in Russian literary life through a media presence, utilising the tools of advertisement to reach and maintain popularity, and compete with each other for visibility. Some authors also choose to participate in public debate through television appearances and essays, while in recent years a number of established writers have been maintaining online blogs. The ‘commodification of the author’ differs from the traditional role of the writer as a prophet; following the devaluation of the high cultural status of literature consequent to the demise of the Soviet ideology, the literary author no longer represents a cultural and spiritual guide. In the words of bestselling crime writer Aleksandra Marinina, the writer is just ‘a person who gives a written account of a certain story. This story is either interesting in itself or it serves as the ground for a discourse about life in general.’

Because of the contemporary presence and intersection of all the factors outlined so far, which will be further analysed in Chapter 2 particularly, the traditional role of literature in Russian culture and society is undergoing deep transformations. Therefore, the ways in which digital culture influences, and is in turn influenced by, literary culture becomes particularly significant in the Russian context.

36 Marsh, pp. 40-41.
2- Background

2.1 The death of the book

A close relationship between the Internet and literary culture has naturally been observed beyond Russia. A considerable amount of attention has been devoted to the fate of literature and of book culture in the digital age, and will represent the main subject of Chapter 1.

The recent evolution in technology and communication systems is impacting upon different fields of life, including book production and consumption, to the extent of its having been equated to the invention of the printing press which prompted gradual, deep transformations in the way books were produced and experienced.

However, if it is undeniable that a revolution is taking place, the interpretations of its significance are varied and have sparked a vibrant debate on the future of the book. Ever since the 1990s and the diffusion of personal computers, a number of critics has been lamenting the ‘death of the book’ and of the deep reading experience associated with it, in favour of the immediacy of different activities such as watching television or playing computer games. The loss of the skills required for intense reading is viewed as a threat to individuality in favour of an exclusively social experience,\(^39\) as well as a threat to so-called high literature.\(^40\)

In opposition to the fear that the traditional experience of deep reading will die out, together with the book as an object, is the idea of new technologies as starting points for exciting new developments within book culture. In particular, owing to the possibilities for interaction offered by the Internet, readers can now create communities for discussion, moving from their individual experience of reading to a dialogue with other readers and in some cases even with writers. On their part, writers obtain direct feedback from their readers online, and can develop their creativity through new tools. At the same time, any reader can turn into an amateur writer; the formerly clear distinction between the reader as a recipient and an authoritative writer is becoming blurred as online writing allows for multiple roles to be assumed.


Publishing is also going to be experienced in a different way. The possibility for the immediate diffusion of a work through online publishing is modifying the relationship between writer and publisher, and between readers and the publishing industry, creating a virtual meeting point between the creators and readers of texts.

The implications of the debate on the death of traditional literature assume particular significance in the context of Russian culture. In this context, the revolution in literary practices followed the shift to democracy and the consequent birth of a capitalistic culture, which have been held responsible for the extinction of readers’ close relationship with the book. The ‘double shock’ of the loss of the cultural values that had been in place for decades alongside the double revolution of economic practices caused a re-contextualisation of the Russian reading myth, which runs parallel to the global technological revolution.

2.2 Online communication and literary culture

With regards to the relationship between online communication and literary culture, interesting observations have been made on the use of websites for extended reading by fans of literary authors. For example, Margaret Mackey examines an example of how a multimedia apparatus composed of advertisements, paratextual tools and, in particular, online communication through dedicated websites can stimulate the interest of young readers. Basing her argument on the observation of discussions in chat rooms and forums between British and American teenagers on websites dedicated to popular fantasy series (such as Harry Potter), Mackey argues that extratextual tools do not distract young readers from engaged reading, but on the contrary presuppose an activity of individual, deep reading prior to the fruition of extratextual elements and therefore encourage book culture.41

As well as spaces for social interaction, literary websites can function as archives. The theoretical aspects of this double function have been presented by Jens Kirk. The archival, individual use of the Internet can be interpreted through Bourdieu’s views on culture, while, argues Kirk, the community function needs a different theorisation. For this aspect, Kirk suggests Simmel’s theory on sociability,

which focuses both on the product of interaction and on the interaction itself, which is described as pure conversation.\textsuperscript{42}

The possibilities for interaction offered by the Internet thus represent one of its most revolutionary features. A discussion on the general aspects of the vast topic of online communication will be presented in Chapter 1.

2.3 The RuNet

In the Russian context, new technologies emerged and gradually expanded in the period immediately subsequent to the fall of the USSR, thanks to the new social conditions, despite the difficulties encountered in the early post-Soviet years (see Chapter 2). The Internet is a typically post-Soviet medium which did not exist before perestroika. It did not follow the same stages of development of other media in Russia and started to be adopted in an officially open society and under the conditions of a market economy. It is thus a product of these conditions, and did not have to adapt to them, therefore representing a unique medium in the Russian landscape.\textsuperscript{43} Because of the local conditions, the advent of the Internet in Russia in itself represents a particularly interesting phenomenon.

Analyses of the Russian Internet, also widely known as RuNet, often privilege a historical approach. Works by one of the early Russian Internet users, Eugene Gorny,\textsuperscript{44} and by Anna Bowles\textsuperscript{45}, describe the development of RuNet initially as an elite environment where a small number of users, now identified as ‘pioneers’, worked on a limited amount of projects. This situation developed around the second half of the 1990s into a phase where commentaries and self-reflection prevailed, and later into the contemporary phase characterised, in Russia as elsewhere, by the popularity of interactive spaces. In all these spaces, which include guestbooks,


\textsuperscript{44} Eugene Gorny, \textit{A Creative History of the Russian Internet: Studies in Internet Creativity} (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009).

communities, forums and most of all blogs, users do not search for information but can become active producers of contents (Web 2.0). Bowles concludes that from an elite phenomenon, the Internet has developed into an ‘integrated part of Russian culture.’

Both Gorny and Bowles argue that the peculiarities of Internet usage in Russia derive from the emphasis on communality typical of the Russian mentality (sobornost’), as well as the Russian attitude to literature, geographic factors, the controlling tendencies of state power and an attitude towards intellectual property which differs from that of the West. The Russian approach to the copyright of literary products is in fact influenced by a disregard to private property in favour of a common cause. Moreover, ownership of ‘intangible’ materials such as ideas, and therefore literature, is considered barely acceptable in the Russian mentality. In particular, digital works present a further ‘dematerialised’ aspect, which contributes to the feeling that they belong to the Internet community rather than to individual authors.

Due to the high number of texts distributed online, often consultable or even downloadable completely free of charge, Internet piracy of literary works is particularly widespread in Russia. Some attitudes towards the diffusion of literary texts online will be presented in subsequent chapters, particularly in Chapters 3 and 5.

Online cultural expressions, including literature and journals, as well as online forms of interaction, are tools for Russians to reinforce their views about their own identity after the loss of values that followed the collapse of the USSR. Moreover, the Internet is a particularly important tool for Russians living abroad to remain in contact with their native language and culture. Reflection on identity is therefore a recurring topic in many accounts of Internet use. For example, the edited volume Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet presents the Internet as a tool for cultural identity and as a cultural model through case studies on literature, politics and questions of identity on the RuNet, thus underlining how the role of new technologies is linked to local cultural specificities.

Moreover, there is a large interest in the RuNet as a tool for political communication. The prominence of this topic is not surprising, as the use of online

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46 Ibid., p. 33.
48 Schmidt, Teubener, Konradova.
49 For example, issue 1 of journal Digital Icons has been entirely devoted to ‘Virtual Power: Russian Politics and the Internet’ (2008) <http://www.digitalicons.org/issue01/> (accessed 4 January 2012).
spaces for the expression and dissemination of political ideas, especially alternative ones, has become an important part of political life in a country where other media are said to be too closely allied to the official power. However, views of the RuNet as an innovative democratising tool are being questioned as it is argued that most of its power is actually attributed to it by Western observers.\(^{50}\) As there is not enough private initiative to make a real difference in Russian politics, further steps will be needed for Russia’s civil society to build a relevant network of alternative political views.\(^{51}\)

It could be worthwhile to transfer these observations on the political value of the RuNet to a literary context and with this in mind I will attempt an evaluation of whether the Internet is fostering a revolutionary change in perceptions of literature in Russia, or, as is suggested to be happening in politics, its innovative force is rather an illusion and the literary RuNet is simply perpetuating traditional models through innovative means.

As far as online communication is concerned, the Russian blogosphere has become a particular focus of attention in scholarly works on the RuNet, due to its impressive ‘size and variety’. Blogs can offer an indication of people’s thoughts and attitudes, and are thus treated as potential instruments for political or social commentary; arguably they can function as substitutes for a public sphere that is absent elsewhere, much in the same way as literature did in the past.\(^{52}\) Gorny treats blogs as a space for online creativity,\(^{53}\) and blogs are also considered as examples of the vanishing distinction between amateur and professional literature online. The blurring of the boundaries between reader and writer is one of the consequences of the impact of new communication technologies on literary production, and is situated in the broader picture of the changing relationship between user and producer in the digital age. In turn, the discussion on the status of online writing is contributing to the debate concerning the dynamics of high and low cultural expressions, which represents a recurring issue in the context of Russian culture.


\(^{51}\) Fossato, Lloyd, Verkovsky.


The way the Russian language is undergoing changes through its use online, as Internet slang becomes widespread and particular communities create their own jargon, is also a subject of analysis.\(^5\)

Literary debate is also thriving on the Internet, yet very little academic literature focusing only on the literary RuNet exists in English.\(^5\) The status of Russian Internet users as amateur writers is recognised,\(^6\) and Gorny acknowledges the importance of literature in the Russian online environment, as well as the literary character of some Internet creativity.\(^7\) However, the role and features of literary spaces, both for readers and aspiring authors, have not yet been systematically catalogued in a full-length work. I will thus put the literary RuNet into context within global evolutions of online and digital culture, as well as with Russian mass media, and introduce and discuss the main literary websites on the Russian Web, taking into account their historical development.

In particular, there is little work detailing readers’ contributions as fans of particular authors, nor research which assesses ways in which Russian readers engage with the literary text through the Internet. Online spaces on the RuNet, forums in particular, have been used to study television fandom and television audiences,\(^8\) but there is no similar study of readers’ communities online in the Russian context. In two of my analytical chapters, I will focus on interactions between RuNet users as fans of bestselling writers, describing their relationship with the literary text and with the literary author.

### 3 - Aims and objectives

This thesis will analyse uses of the Internet as a space for communication by authors and readers of contemporary Russian literature. It will assess the changes in

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\(^5\) Among the existing works, a special issue of journal *Kultura* has been dedicated to ‘Notes from the Virtual Underground. Russian Literature on the Internet’ (1, 2009).


\(^7\) Gorny, *A Creative History of the Russian Internet*.

literary habits and perceptions of reading and writing in post-Soviet Russia resulting from the adoption of digital technologies for literary purposes, considering them as part of a broader context of cultural and social changes that have been occurring in Russia in recent years. In more general terms, this thesis will be situated in the field of analysis of the Internet as a worldwide phenomenon influenced by culture-specific characteristics, thus adding to the growing body of works about specific national digital cultures.

The research questions to be addressed are:

(i) the extent to which contemporary Russian reading and writing habits differ from previously established patterns and what the role of the Internet and of online communication is in shaping new patterns or maintaining continuity with traditional attitudes towards reading and writing;

(ii) the extent to which the possibilities offered by new technologies have contributed to a change in the role of the literary author in a cultural context where readers have the possibility to express themselves in a variety of ways and to become producers rather than simply consumers of literature;

(iii) how the Internet has contributed to changes in distribution of and access to literature, while at the same time demonstrating continuity with unofficial distribution channels and with popular alternative cultures of previous eras (particularly samizdat) which were fostered by the initiative of readers and relied on networks rather than on individual action;

(iv) how the impact of the Internet on the contemporary Russian literary market is situated in ongoing debates about the boundaries of high and low culture in Russia, particularly as possibilities for self-expression and visibility have been democratised and multiplied, allowing readers to contribute actively to the literary discourse with their commentaries as well as their own production.

Throughout the thesis, I will also be describing and cataloguing some of the major literary websites on the RuNet. This aspect will represent a form of historical work, as it will offer a picture of the websites treated as they appeared while I was conducting my research, between October 2008 and July 2011. In some cases, historical work has also been carried out on the websites’ content in order to trace their development since their appearance and throughout their presence online. Even
if the history of websites is relatively brief because of the recent appearance of the Internet as a mass medium, the ephemeral nature of online content makes this historical aspect of online research particularly important.

4 - Theory and Methodology

This thesis will be approached using a double framework: Internet studies and book history.

On the one hand, this work belongs to the academic field of Internet studies, since it deals with online phenomena and it utilises websites and forums as its primary sources, reflecting on their role within the new media landscape as expressions of aspects of Internet culture intermingled with a specific local culture. Theories about the Internet as a cultural space and about online communication will provide a background to the observation of literary communities on the RuNet. In particular, representations of the Internet as a space for cultural production, dissemination and debate, and for the creation of a public sphere will be looked at, together with discussions of online communication and its potential for community formation. General theory has, however, mostly been produced by studying English language, and often American-based, portions of the Internet. Such observations can represent a good reference and a function as a starting point, but the specific local characteristics concerning the use of technology and mass media in Russia will have to be considered when studying the Russian reality.

On the other hand, observations on Russian online literary culture will be situated in the general context of the history of the book and of reading, and will help disputing or confirming some of the comments and predictions about the relationship of literature with digital culture. The negative perceptions of technology as a distracting element of modern life which will cause the dismissal of deep reading and of the materiality of the book will be discussed based on findings on the literary Russian Internet, and will provide a point of departure for further debate and the questioning of the role of the Internet in modern literary cultures.

59 For example David Porter, Internet Culture (London: Routledge, 1997); James Slevin, The Internet and Society (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).
Because of the different areas of knowledge treated, extensive discussion of existing literature on each subject will be presented separately, in the appropriate chapters. Similarly, a detailed discussion of my methodology will be offered at the end of Chapter 1, following the introduction of the interdisciplinary context of my research.

The examples provided will be collected through online primary sources, such as virtual libraries, writers’ communities and self-publication websites. Two more detailed case studies will also be presented, focusing on websites relating to prominent contemporary Russian writers Boris Akunin and Viktor Pelevin.

Akunin and Pelevin were chosen as the main case studies for this project because both their official websites present peculiar and somewhat unexpected characteristics, which provide topics for reflection. In addition, they both have a very active online fan base, which has created rich websites and lively interactive communities. Moreover, both authors are very well integrated within contemporary cultural dynamics, as they are familiar with the Internet and they have demonstrated an awareness of the role of new technologies (through interviews, but also in their distribution choices and literary subjects). For example, Akunin published the Internet-based interactive novel *Kvest* in 2008 and launched his own blog in late 2010, while one of Pelevin’s works is written in the form of an online chat discussion where all the characters are known through nicknames and interact like users of a chat room.

Furthermore, these are not obscure authors, but rather well-known representatives of contemporary Russian literary culture, whose books are easily found both in bookshops and online bookstores, and successful with the public. However, despite being commercial authors (especially Akunin), their works are not unanimously considered to be of the same low status as works of popular literature that have been published in great numbers in Russia since the 1990s (see Chapter 2). Akunin’s elaborate style and the literary references he employs grant him a higher status than most contemporary writers of popular genres. Pelevin, in comparison, uses philosophical themes within contemporary settings and is successful with critics. I have therefore chosen two considerably popular authors, who also have a particularly developed relationship with digital culture.
5 - Chapters outline

This thesis is structured into five chapters, plus an introductory chapter and a conclusion.

Chapter 1 will provide the general background of the thesis, situating the discussion within the double frame of book history and Internet culture. In the first part of the chapter, I will discuss the intersection of literary culture and technology, by examining comparisons between the advent of digital media and previous cultural revolutions such as the ‘Gutenberg revolution’, and by presenting the debate on the death of the book. In the second half of the chapter, I will discuss Internet culture and its subcultures, as well as online communication. In this chapter I will also provide a more precise description of my methodology and present ethical issues.

Chapter 2 will situate my thesis within the specific Russian cultural context. With a structure similar to the previous chapter, I will first present the evolution of post-Soviet literary culture in the light of the peculiarities outlined in the introduction, in order to offer a clear idea of the literary culture to which my case studies belong. I will then describe the historical development of the Russian Internet and its position within the contemporary Russian media landscape, in order to provide an accurate picture of the environment hosting my primary sources.

Chapter 3 will offer an overview of several aspects of the literary RuNet. I will first present the RuNet as an archive of pre-existing materials through a discussion of online libraries. I will then look at the RuNet as a space for literary experimentation, at the same time offering a historical description of early literary websites. I will then move on to a discussion of Russian self-publication websites, and I will conclude by describing the attitudes of the Russian publishing industry towards the possibilities offered by the Internet. This chapter will therefore present some examples of how writing habits have changed and the distinction between users and producers of literary contents has been blurred, as well as addressing publishing issues.

The next two chapters will focus on established authors and on their readers. Chapter 4 will present my first case study, Boris Akunin. After introducing the
author and his main works, I will examine aspects of Akunin’s official website which relate closely with the settings of his books and offer opportunities to engage with the text. Subsequently, by examining some features of the activity of an online community of Akunin’s readers, I will discuss the function of the Internet as a space for interaction between the author and his readers. The Internet also represents an experimental space for the author and this aspect will be presented through discussion of the project Kvest, and of readers’ reactions to it.

Finally, Chapter 5 will provide the second case study: websites dedicated to Viktor Pelevin. I will first introduce the author’s figure, his attitude towards the virtual world, and his use of new technologies as literary subjects. I will then discuss the playful and postmodernist aspects of his official website, and his use of the Internet as a space for interaction with his public. Fans’ initiatives and their collective creation of Web content inspired by the author’s work will also be described, as well as their attitudes towards online versions of Pelevin’s texts, which provide an interesting starting point for discussions regarding the role of the material book in the digital age.
Chapter 1

Background and Methodology

This chapter will concentrate on the background knowledge that informs my thesis, reflecting on general phenomena before exploring the specific Russian context in the following chapters. As this thesis deals with the ways a national literary culture is affected by uses of new technologies by treating online environments as primary sources, it will be necessary to situate my discussion in the contemporary cultural context from two specific angles: the history of the book and new media studies.

I will now set out these two frameworks. In the first sections of the chapter (Sections 1, 2 and 3), I will describe digital literary culture as a development of book history, by looking at the impact of new technologies on literature from a historical perspective. To do so, I will first discuss the influence of previous technological revolutions on the evolution of writing and reading culture, from the reactions caused by the novelty of written communication in ancient times, to the recent alarm in the perceived disastrous influence of computer technologies on book culture. I will then compare the contemporary technological revolution with the cultural impact of the invention of the printing press. This analysis will help contextualise the discussion of changes in reading and writing habits in Russia, inserting it in a wider, global context.

In the second part of the chapter (Section 4), I will consider the Internet, and in particular online communication, both as the platform for a specific online culture containing a variety of subcultures, and as a technology whose usage trends can be influenced by local cultures, thus describing the larger environment of which the Russian Internet itself represents a specific segment.

I will then present and discuss my methodology (Section 5), consisting of the observation of websites and analysis of online primary sources, and the ethical implications (Section 6) of a project based on sources retrieved on the Internet.

1-Technology and cultural evolution

With the advent of digital technology, the process of production and consumption of literary materials has been changing rapidly, affecting some of the mechanisms and perceptions of reading and writing. However, technological
transitions that caused or contributed to subtle but important changes within cultural
habits are certainly not a novelty of the twenty-first century. Innovations and
discoveries that progressively changed the way knowledge and culture were created,
spread and perceived, have always been accompanied by reflections on their impact,
each time with both favourable and hostile comments.

1.1 Writing as a technology

Nowadays, writing is perceived as a perfectly natural and indispensable
activity in most cultures. Therefore, it feels unnatural for us to consider that writing
is, after all, a technology itself; its advent changed mental processes and represented
a turning point in the history of culture. Walter Ong argues that ‘more than any other
single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness’. Writing is artificial,
and not innate as speech is; it transformed oral cultures into at least partially visual
cultures, associating sounds to signs; it changed the way stories were created, re-told
and remembered, and ultimately became the privileged tool for organised studying,
thus allowing for the creation of literature. For these reasons, Ong maintains that the
impact of writing was even more ‘drastic’ than the impact of print or computers, as it
initiated cultural shifts and fostered mental habits that were subsequently only
intensified by print and computers, if we consider that ‘without writing, the literate
mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but
normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form.’

Similarly to contemporary technologies, writing was not received with favour
by everybody. It is known that Plato considered writing to be ‘inhuman, pretending
to establish outside the mind what in reality can be only in the mind’, as he deemed it
guilty of reducing the need for memorising information, consequently bearing a
negative impact on the ability to remember and therefore weakening the human mind.
Plato also described writing as ‘passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world’, as
the written text cannot add explanations or respond to comments. It is evident how
these arguments resemble the objections to computer technologies expressed by its
detractors, particularly about the inhuman character of computer mediated activities
or the devaluation of some human enterprises because of the ease with which they

pp.8-12; 78; 81-83; 93-99.
2 Ibid., pp. 79-80.
are performed online (a fitting example is the widespread opinion that online literature is not worth of the same consideration as printed books, which need a significantly longer process of publishing).

However, inevitably, Plato was criticising the technology of writing through the use of that same technology. The potential for the diffusion and conservation of written thought had by then already granted the written word with the authority previously retained by oral speech.³ It is therefore legitimate to imagine that the changes in cultural habits (as well as in other aspects of life, such as work and leisure) that we are starting to perceive and to debate are already part of the mentality of their opponents as much as their advocates, and that they will simply be taken for granted when they become everyday habits. Moreover, the central role of the written word in computer mediated communication is one of the aspects to consider when assessing the impact of computer technologies on our daily communication habits.

1.2 Technology kills the book?

Similar arguments to those presented by Plato against writing are being expressed over two millennia later against computer technologies, in fear that the numerous possibilities they offer, such as online reading and the possibility to consult literature online, will cause the material book to eventually disappear, and the culture existing around it to decay. Opinions are divided between two main tendencies: alarmist outcries about the death of the traditional book and of literature as we know it and, conversely, enthusiasm and curiosity towards the possibilities offered by technological novelties. Mediating positions recognise the situation of transition and logically conclude that the material book and its technological successors will need to coexist and each find their own niche. I will now outline some of these positions.

Since the early 1980s, scholars have started to reflect on how computers are changing the ways literature is created, perceived and studied, and how storing, viewing and commenting on books, from manuscripts to the – then imaginary – e-book, would be affected. The ‘future of the printed word’ was already being

³ Ibid., p. 80.
questioned, by discussing the possible applications and implications of electronic technologies in journal publishing, librarianship, education, information transfer in general, both in their technical and social aspects.\textsuperscript{4}

For example, the primary concern of the book \textit{The Literary Text in the Digital Age} is electronic editions of manuscripts or early printed books. The technical aspects of the transfer of these editions on screen are examined, as well as digital scholarly editions, which take advantage of hypertextuality for adding commentaries.\textsuperscript{5} The use of electronic technology in literary studies and textuality is described not only as a simple evolution but as a real revolution, a ‘fundamental paradigm shift’,\textsuperscript{6} to the extent that the printed book is considered, if not totally on the way to extinction, as an obsolete object which offers limited possibilities to scholarly studies.

More generally, Maurice B. Line poses ‘Some Questions Concerning the Unprinted Word’, wondering whether the prospective effects of electronic technology are inevitable or desirable. After assessing questions of access and ease of reading on different formats, the author’s conclusion is that different uses will need different media, and therefore printed and electronic publishing are likely to fulfil different needs and to coexist for a long time.\textsuperscript{7}

Similarly, Umberto Eco maintains that multimedia editions will prove very useful indeed for consulting information, but too uncomfortable for close, engaged reading. Eco therefore insists on the differentiation of purposes: computers are ‘diffusing a new form of literacy but are incapable of satisfying all the intellectual needs they are stimulating’, so that ‘books will remain indispensable not only for literature, but for any circumstance in which one needs to read carefully, not only to receive information but also to speculate and to reflect about it.’\textsuperscript{8}

In contrast, the general argument of the opponents of computer technologies is that the use of technological devices for reading is not simply distracting, but it


\textsuperscript{6} Richard J. Finneran, ‘Preface’, in \textit{The Literary Text in the Digital Age}.

\textsuperscript{7} Maurice B. Line, ‘Some Questions Concerning the Unprinted Word’ in \textit{The Future of the Printed Word}, ed. by Hills.

creates a habit for quicker, less deep mental processing, and that traditional reading is being supplanted by different practices that do not have the same intellectual value, such as watching TV or online reading. The debate was particularly vibrant in the 1990s, when computers were beginning to appear more frequently in private homes.

A very influential text in this trend, often quoted, criticised and commented upon, is Sven Birkerts’ *The Gutenberg Elegies.* A very influential text in this trend, often quoted, criticised and commented upon, is Sven Birkerts’ *The Gutenberg Elegies.* Birkerts laments the loss of what he considers to be an intimate relationship with the book as an object as well as with its contents. Through often autobiographical examples, Birkerts reflects on the experience of reading, which he describes as a deeper state of mind. He then proceeds to assess the effects of technology on perceptions of reading, memory and education, on the change in the relationship between reader and writer and consequently on the role of the author and on the once stable system of writer-publisher-reader. In Birkerts’ opinion, we are no longer able to perform the deep, close reading typical of eras when books were rarities. He argues that we have lost the ability for depth, while the necessary inwardness that allows for an all-encompassing experience of the reading activity is now perceived as a negative value that will be completely lost when the network society reaches its full development. Birkerts identifies a return to high art as the solution to this situation, and invests the artist with the mission to create the conditions for the inwardness necessary to a deep experience of literature within his work.

Birkerts strongly maintains that reading is an identity-shaping tool, and that technology will take over the reading process in a negative way by depriving it of its depth and posing a threat to individualism. However, he does not take into account the possibility for an interaction of reading culture and technology, where experiences mediated through social media, such as for example participation in literary fan communities, can contribute to shaping individual as well as social identity, by making readers accustomed to sharing their opinions and their own writings.

Moreover, there is no general agreement on the destructive effects of modern communication habits. Derek Foster argues that online communication creates a new form of individuality which, through dialogue with other members of the Internet community, allows access to a deeper understanding of the self. Even though online

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9 Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*
interaction focuses on dialogue and collective experience, Foster argues that a sense of self is needed to form a community, connecting this idea to the Augustinian concept that it is only through a sense of community that an individual can reach a deeper sense of self. These arguments reverse Birkerts’ comments about reading as an individual experience leading to another state of consciousness, as Foster judges it possible to achieve such a state through computer-mediated communication. Online communication becomes thus yet another tool for community and identity-formation, which Birkerts does not take into consideration when stating that our modern world and its technologies have killed our ability for deep thinking. Foster further maintains that in this form of communication, self-expression becomes the focus and the ‘other’ is ultimately a tool for self-building, completely opposing Birkerts’ belief that individuality has succumbed to modern technology. New media can still offer isolation, albeit of a different nature that the silent, personal relationship with literature described by Birkerts, and will thus be likely to foster a new form of introspectiveness. Furthermore, based on such theories as Walter Benjamin’s, it can be argued that it is not technology, but rather the commercial values of contemporary society, that have changed our ways of perception and our ability for deep thinking.

Birkerts’ strong positions have found numerous critics. In a review of The Gutenberg Elegies (ironically, as the author himself points out, published in an online-only journal), Matthew G. Kirschenbaum observes how Birkerts’ view of the reading experience is idealised and romanticised, and is most of all mediated through his own personal experience of deep reading, which is too often turned into a generalisation about what reading is meant to represent. Moreover, Kirschenbaum underlines how Birkerts takes the so-called ‘high’ literature solely into consideration and fails to address how developments such as the hypertext could be used for such purposes as scholarly editions. Furthermore, John Unsworth suggests that Birkerts’ focus on the transformation of the relationship between author and reader into a more democratic and collaborative one could actually be perceived as a specific preoccupation about the intellectual’s loss of authority.

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Birkerts later admits that the future of the book, both as a material artefact and the culture surrounding it is strongly related to the development of computer technologies, and that book and screen provide such different experiences that they should not be in competition. The question is therefore whether or not the specific functions of the traditional book will be needed, granting the book possibilities for survival and evolution even in a computer-dominated society.\textsuperscript{14} Similar to Plato’s view, it is impossible for Birkerts not to internalise some of the mechanisms of the era he is living in, even if his cultural formation took place with traditional books.

A position that has several points in common with Birkerts’ is presented by Alvin Kernan. Just a few years before Birkerts, whom he partially influences, Kernan discusses the place of literature within academia.\textsuperscript{15} Kernan’s focuses on the perceived death of ‘high’ literature and the loss of authority of the printed word in favour of, for example, television (Kernan is writing in 1990, before the Internet became a popular medium for dissemination and communication). Kernan’s high-brow position does not seem to consider the flexibility of literature and the much discussed potential in legitimising forms of literature that are not necessarily the classics. Kernan’s conclusion is similar to Birkerts’, as he advocates a new social position for literature and underlines the need to find a new place for literature both in individual life and in society as a whole, in order to produce a new high literature suitable for modern times. In this way, rather than outlining a form of evolution, Kernan establishes a fracture between classic literature as a product of an industrial, capitalist and print-based society, and literature suitable for the contemporary, digitalised world.

Nevertheless, there are basic contents and meanings in literature that are not changing. Rather, they are ready to be perceived through the values of the present time; the changes in the material support for the written text and the new ways in which it can be presented through new tools do not necessarily mean that the reading experience has been deprived of its adaptability to personal feelings and of its influence on human experience.

Debates on the status of literature are particularly relevant in the Russian context, where the influence of classics is decreasing and the boundaries between

\textsuperscript{15} Kernan, \textit{The Death of Literature}
high and low literary forms are being re-discussed (see Chapter 2). Moreover, in Russia, where the Internet is considered by some as a space for unprecedented visibility for one’s self-expression and for identity formation (see Chapter 2), it can be argued that the network experience is not bound to kill individuality, but rather to offer individuals the possibility to reinforce their own sense of self within the community of Internet users (see Chapter 3). This can be achieved through the ability to express personal ideas and discuss them openly, rather than experiencing reading as a solitary enrichment or as a tool for the perpetuation of pre-conceived, collective Soviet paradigms.

2- Technology and revolution

The advent of computer technologies and computer mediated communication has created new conditions for reading, writing and consuming information. Several aspects of this phenomenon have been compared to the influence exerted by the printing press for several centuries. In the long term, the adoption of the printing press deeply modified reading and writing habits. The possibility to print numerous identical copies at lower costs helped foster literacy and consequently transformed reading and studying into less exclusive activities. Eventually, reading became the primary mode of information and education and this situation allowed for the birth of the mass reader a few centuries later.

The invention of the printing press has always been described as revolutionary in terms of its technical aspects. However, the long-term cultural and social impacts of its diffusion were not thoroughly analysed until 1979, when Elizabeth Eisenstein published her seminal work *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Influenced by works such as McLuhan’s, discussing the impact of modern mass media on cultural life, Eisenstein found that most of the previous studies on the shift from manuscript to print concentrated on the technological aspects or on the switch from a primarily oral culture to a literate one. Moreover, in these studies, the importance of print for social and cultural change was only acknowledged rather than discussed in depth. Eisenstein therefore embarked on the enterprise of assessing the implications of the ‘unacknowledged revolution’, attributing to the printing press a fundamental role in the developments of thought that led to the Protestant

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Reformation, to the Scientific Revolution, and to the diffusion of Renaissance culture. The possibility to spread information in numerous identical copies allowed for considerably more rapid travelling of thought and, at the same time, the text became fixed, rather than modifiable through the work of the copyist. The fixed nature of the printed copy stabilised thought and created the conditions for a more conscious analysis of scientific facts, and in the long run for a habit to deeply question scientific phenomena, which in turn triggered cultural change.\(^{17}\)

Eisenstein’s extensive work is considered a fundamental watershed in studies on the cultural impact of the printing press, because of its clear and at times controversial outlining of the revolutionary character of the press in the development of cultures and societies in Europe. Despite writing before computer technologies held any significance, Eisenstein maintains that the effects of the printing revolution are still unfolding several centuries later during a technologically advanced era, and that they still call for further study because of the influence they continue to bear on the modern world.\(^{18}\)

It is easy to recognise strong parallels between Eisenstein’s analysis and the debates regarding the current technological and cultural transition. In fact, Eisenstein’s work is often used as a basis for the discussion of comparisons between the Gutenberg revolution and the impact of contemporary technological developments. The edited volume *Agent of Change: Printing Press Studies After Elizabeth L. Eisenstein* collects essays on three different subjects of study inspired by Eisenstein’s work. The first section focuses on yet more aspects of the printing press revolution, therefore continuing Eisenstein’s work and adding depth to the field she advocated. The second section collects essays regarding the development of the printing press and the evolution of press culture out of Europe, covering an area that did not find space in Eisenstein’s work. Finally, the third section explores the applicability of Eisenstein’s ideas on the contemporary technological revolution, decidedly inserting her work into the context of the twenty-first century.\(^{19}\)

A number of scholars advocate the necessity of considering the developments that followed the adoption of printing technology on a historical level in order to

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\(^{18}\) Eisenstein, pp. 704-705.

\(^{19}\) Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist and Eleanor F. Shevlin (eds), *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elisabeth L. Eisenstein* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).
understand the present transition. In particular, James Dewar argues that ‘the parallels between the printing press era and today are sufficiently compelling to suggest [that] changes in the information age will be as dramatic as those in the Middle Ages’. In fact, according to Dewar, our future is bound to be dominated by the ‘unintended consequences’ of the current revolution, in exactly the same way as the long-term consequences of the invention of the printing press, such as its role in the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, markedly shaped Western culture for the following centuries. According to Dewar, therefore, looking at the history of the printing press should influence policy-making regarding the Internet. In fact, in order to maximise the impact of unintended consequences, Dewar maintains that the Internet should remain unregulated because the countries where the press remained relatively unregulated were those that actually gained the most in terms of power and social development.20

Dewar acknowledges that, similarly to the printing revolution, it will take several decades before any deep cultural changes will be noticeable. In contrast, despite acknowledging that the effects of printing press were certainly not immediate, Eisenstein questioned the widespread cautious attitude of previous works in this regard, maintaining that they applied ‘an evolutionary model to a revolutionary situation’ by remarking how slowly the process of transition unfolded.21 Moreover, it is possible that changes related to the present technological revolution will develop at a faster pace than those fostered by print, because of the speed at which digital technologies are spreading, as after only a few decades since its first appearance, they are not found exclusively in the hands of a few (at least not in Western countries).

The adoption of the printing press on a large scale turned reading from the solitary activity of the scholar or the man of religion in the Middle Ages into a collective pastime in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the era of mass production and mass literacy, reading once again became an individual activity, now idealised by those scholars who do not enthusiastically accept the role of computer technologies. In some ways, the possibility for collective reading and for sharing personal reading experiences through the Internet connects twenty-first-century

21 Eisenstein, pp. 36-37.
readers to a past when reading was a social activity and not a silent, solitary one. The possibility offered by some online spaces, such as forums or some self-publishing websites, to easily edit or comment on literary works can also represent a modern, sharing-oriented version of medieval glosses, as opposed to the fixity and closure of the printed book.

The fundamental role played by print in the development of literary culture and literary genres is underlined by numerous scholars. Ong maintains that the genre of the novel with its lengthy, organised plot and round characters could have not existed without print. Kernan argues that print and literature are inseparable phenomena and that literature (which he defines as a social institution, similar to religion and law, therefore joining a whole tradition of Marxist-based theories like Gramsci and Althusser) is a product of print, bound to disappear in the digital age.

3 - Characteristics of digital literary culture

Opinions advocating a correct way to deal with the impact of literature on consciousness are based on traditional approaches, which do not yet fully comprehend the potentialities of the emerging forms of literature. It is in fact important to observe that most of the existing literary theory is not fully adequate for the task of evaluating digital and Internet-based textuality. This fact may lead to the current difficulty in considering literature of the digital age as able to lead to deeper states of mental processing, as traditional literature offered. The creation and reception of ‘cyberliterature’ (‘literature created and presented by means of a computer’) require different approaches than those of traditional literary theory, and further underline the need for amendments in the study of the humanities to accommodate the changes brought by the technological revolution. The correct tools to look at modern literary productions are not fully developed yet; new theoretical tools will have to include interdisciplinary approaches such as psychology.

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22 Ong, p. 133.
sociology, history, linguistics, and more, and should also take into consideration the characteristics of the medium as a part of the literary exchange.

There are several aspects to take into consideration for a study of online literary culture. The first among these is the loss of the materiality of the book as an object. Online reading is a different process from holding a book and browsing pages. It happens vertically and requires frequent scrolling, therefore appearing less intimate and less suitable for close reading; it allows for links to non-consecutive pages and calls for more immediate stylistic choices, but also permits the inclusion of non-textual, multimedia features. This variety of possibilities may indeed result in a differentiation of supports for different purposes, as the web page and its hypertextual structure are useful for informational reading, but usually not for engaging with novels, as advocated by Eco (see section 1.2 above). Technological novelties also allow experimentation with narrative forms, such as the creation of hypertextual narratives to be read on screen as ‘blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths’, which create a ‘perpetually unfinished textuality’. The changing materiality of the book even allows a closer relationship with game forms. For example, Elizabeth Burgess describes paper-based non-linear narrative experiments, relating them to the convergence between video game consoles and e-readers observed in recent years. Through these playful literary forms, the reader can establish different types of interaction with the material support for the text, acting as player in the narrative.

The consideration for the active role of readers is fundamental: Espen Aarseth analyses the playful, labyrinth-like features of cyberliterature, underlining the role of the reader as a ‘player’, who makes a ‘nontrivial effort’ to cross the path proposed by the text, in the ‘game-world’ created by the textual structure. However, he acknowledges that literature requiring readers’ choice through a non-linear structure existed before the era of computers, defining

25 McCullough, p.70.
the ‘cybertext’ as a ‘perspective’ rather than a revolutionary break with previously existing textual forms.\textsuperscript{29}

Electronic writing often attempts to include paratextual elements, typical of face-to-face communication, through the use of visual effects. The new era appears therefore like a hybrid between the heavily visually-oriented era of television, the era of the written word and the era of pre-written communication. Moreover, the rapidity of online exchange and the characteristics of online communication belong to a culture of secondary orality. The orality we are used to and that pervades contemporary life through popular media, such as radio and television, depends on writing and print; oral media and the written word are inseparable, as they influence each other and foster the production of further oral and written material. Secondary orality differs from the primary, natural orality that preceded literacy, and owes its spontaneity to the self-awareness and ability for inwardness that have been achieved through centuries of analytic literary culture, rather than to the simpler reflectivity of the purely oral mind. However, like primary orality, secondary orality generates a sense of community which nowadays can reach an even larger part of society, thanks to the possibilities of modern mass media, than it did during the time of ancient orators. Paradoxically, even if text-based, computer-mediated writing is comparable to orality: messages are shorter, with lower attention for correct grammar, spelling, or punctuation, as what matters is the message rather than its presentation. This represents one reason why online writing does not enjoy the same status of traditional, printed material, whose fixity led to the standardisation of correct language.\textsuperscript{30} The advent of digital technologies and the Internet can represent yet another level of revolution of human perceptions, one that reunites ancient orality with the silent reading culture of the era of print in a collective textual experience.

Furthermore, it is argued that the idea of intellectual copyright and ‘private ownership of words’ is strictly connected to the material book and to print culture;\textsuperscript{31} the issue of piracy and sharing of copyrighted material on the Internet does affect literature as well as the other arts. In addition, on the Internet there is no way to verify the authenticity of the persona who is writing and online writing often takes

\textsuperscript{29} Aarseth, pp. 4-18.
\textsuperscript{30} Ong, pp. 3, 11, 130, 135-138.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 131.
places under pseudonyms. In the era of Web 2.0 (see section 4.2 below), self-publication is easy for anyone who has something to say and the means to post it online, much more rapidly and affordably than in the past. This leads to the transformation of common readers into writers, and to a consequent loss of prestige of the written word, and loss of authority of literary writers. It also influences changes in the publishing process, as the intermediary phase of print publishing can be eliminated, and works can be shared online immediately after having been produced. Access to literature and distribution are also modified thanks to the archival function of the Internet, which can be described as a huge, worldwide library.

4 - Internet culture, culture on the Internet

In order to understand the role of literature in the environment of the Internet, it is necessary to relate it to some other aspects of Internet culture, such as the importance of online communication and interactivity in virtual environments.

4.1 Internet and communication: the virtual coffeehouse

The Internet allows its users to connect with each other regardless of physical distance and creates new modes of communication by offering the opportunity to interact through writing in real time, as well as to post public messages that are potentially going to be read by an unprecedented number of people. Just like the printing press effectively allowed communication from ‘one to many’, one of the most revolutionary aspects of the Internet is that it allows messages to be spread from ‘many to many’, or, even more precisely, from ‘any to many’.\(^{32}\) Anyone who has the technological means, a basic knowledge of their use, and something to express, can publish a message (in the form of a text, or an image, or a video) for public viewing, or start a conversation. Possibilities for visibility are therefore exponentially augmented thanks to the Internet, while the messages created can be answered to instantaneously, or remain stored and be easily retrieved at a later point.

Remote, real-time written communication with other users located in distant locations and connected to the same system caught the interest of the first users as well as scholars. One of the first practical studies of online community formation

\(^{32}\) Dewar and Ang, p. 366.
was provided by Howard Rheingold as early as 1993,33 and was based on the author’s own personal experience of participation to one of the earliest virtual communities, the WELL.34 Thanks to this work, the definition of online community and the description of its relation to offline culture still owe a lot to Rheingold’s discussion. As an enthusiast of computer mediated communication believing that the future of online interactions will be closely linked to the development of society, Rheingold writes on the possibilities of online communication for social and political uses. Rheingold’s defines the virtual world as an electronic ‘frontier’, identifying the opening of new, previously unexplored and potentially limitless possibilities offered by online communication, therefore showing enthusiasm for the opportunity for worldwide connections. This attitude was common in the early days of the Internet and will be further discussed later in this chapter (see, for example, Healy quoted later).

An interesting parallel can be drawn between online communities and coffeehouses. Brian Connery establishes an analogy between the Internet as a space for discussion and the seventeenth-century British coffeehouse as spaces where ‘public sphere’ develops.35 Coffeehouses started to appear around the same time as newspapers and became their main subscribers. At coffeehouses, like on the Internet, people could read news, sometimes from unofficial sources, and discuss them, or even respond in writing so that their ideas could be circulated more widely. In this context, writing started to take a more colloquial form and to be consciously directed at possible respondents, consequently becoming closer to conversational speech and losing its higher authoritative aura, thus creating an unfinished, unfixed discourse.36

The importance of response, the plurality of views, and the spontaneity of the voices entering the discussion contributed to decreasing the importance of a single higher authoritative voice, in favour of a more unregulated discourse in a space ‘in

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35 Jürgen Habermas conceptualises public sphere as ‘a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed’, where ‘access is guaranteed to all citizens’ and which ‘comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body’. Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere: an Encyclopedia Article (1964)’, trans. by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, New German Critique, 3 (1974), p. 49.
which all participants, regardless of their identity or station elsewhere, [were] considered equally entitled to speak and be heard’. In this space, moreover, authority was granted ‘in the course of discussion’ and not prior to it. However, similarly to online communities, in coffeehouses single speakers or authors may become figures of authority through frequent participation. Just like Dewar (see section 2 in this chapter), Connery individuates the future of the Internet to be strictly related to the degree of authority imposed on it, while acknowledging how, unlike in coffeehouses, a great number of Internet spaces for discussion are regulated to a certain extent.  

The coffeehouse culture is therefore comparable to what happens in online communities and to the way this is affecting written communication, as well as the perception of the authority of writing. This discussion is also relevant to Russian culture, where the previously unchallenged authority of the writer is now being questioned due to a variety of factors, among which is the democratising power of the Internet with respect to cultural legitimacy. Moreover, the comparison of coffeehouse culture with contemporary Russian culture is all the more fitting as the coffeehouse culture emerged in the period of the Cromwell revolution and immediately afterwards – a parallel can be established with the popularity of new forms of communication in the period immediately subsequent the fall of the Soviet Union. In both cases, the actual or virtual places for discussion have emerged after the weakening of the previous centre which established cultural values. In seventeenth-century England the monarchy was losing its absolute power, while contemporary Russia is experiencing the first period of its history when, at least in theory, official discourse is not imposed from the political power and a discussion at unofficial levels can take place. The development of computer mediated communication might thus take an even deeper meaning in a country such as Russia, where the rule of strong State authorities has always been the norm, even in official cultural life. However, Connery warns of a possible risk which might affect the Internet: the coffeehouse culture lost its popularity with the reestablishment of political authority and with the creation of niches rather than spaces open to everybody.  

So far, in Russia, the Internet has often been described as a democratising space, but its role is not necessarily so straightforward, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

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38 Ibid., p. 176.
4.2 The era of Web 2.0

Since the mid-2000s, communication and interaction have gained further prominence over searching for information on the Internet, while a growing number of users have started to create online content in addition to consuming it.39 Dedicated platforms such as blogs, virtual communities, social networks and websites featuring commentary options have emerged, where users can manage their own content and interact with each other, rather than being simply recipients of information or actors in a conversation among a relatively narrow circle of users. This state of things is known as Web 2.0. While defying a precise, unique definition, Web 2.0 is described as the use of the Web as a platform, with an emphasis on ‘interaction, community and openness’.40 Web 2.0 is most of all ‘an attitude, not a technology’, which ‘harnesses collective intelligence’ as value is created while users pursue their own interests.41 The producer-consumer mode is replaced by a model of active contribution,42 and by a ‘user as producer’ situation, which becomes in literature a ‘reader as author’ mode. Millard and Ross argue that Web 2.0 has at least partially fulfilled the core aspirations of early hypertext pioneers, the key of the similarity being ‘the lack of distinction between authors and readers’ in the original hypertext ideal. This has been implemented on the contemporary Web as a ‘collection of diverse applications’ sharing a common platform, rather than as ‘one engineered hypertext system’.43

The all-encompassing participatory culture of Web 2.0 has also been met by some with deep concern. Andrew Keen laments how the era of user participation, through commentaries, self-promoted videos and so on, is weakening traditional

43 Millard and Ross.
media and creative institutions, providing low-quality alternatives to the usual paths of media creation, as well as rising concerns regarding intellectual property. Similarly to Birkerts as quoted above, Keen’s admittedly elitist position focuses on preserving traditional values, particularly regarding cultural authority. Several other authors strongly argue against risks concerning the mental development of younger, heavy users of the Internet, and for the future of human progress in general, with a set of arguments that bear some resemblance to Plato’s judgment of the technology of writing, discussed in Section 1 of this chapter.

A fundamental contribution to the Web 2.0 tendency is provided by subcultures, both those which emerged online, and those pre-existing the Internet which have moved online, expanding the scope of their activities and taking advantage of the rapidity of exchange among their members offered by the new medium. In particular, music and television fans have always been ‘early adopters’ of new technologies, and fan communities were among the first subcultures to move their activities online since the 1990s. Naturally, expressions of fandom have existed long before the Internet, but several of their characteristics find a particularly comfortable environment online. Collaborative experience has always represented one of the main features of fandom, often leading to collective authorship of fan fiction. An attitude privileging active participation, appropriation of meanings and the blurred boundaries between authors and their audience situate fandom as perfectly fitting within the Web 2.0 environment.

As the Internet is an environment where amateur art thrives, fans share the pleasure of ‘negotiating interpretations’, and encourage and inspire each other to create fan fiction, with particular attention to experimentation, rather than artistic

44 Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: how Blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today’s User-Generated Media are Destroying our Economy, our Culture, and our Values* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2008).
46 Ibid., pp. 212-214.
quality.\textsuperscript{50} Henry Jenkins argues that, during most of the twentieth century, amateur activities, including fan activities, were in most cases ignored by the mainstream cultural industry until they emerged thanks to the exponentially increased visibility offered by the Internet. Jenkins joins the ‘re-emergence of grassroots creativity’ through the Internet to the folk art tradition of the nineteenth century, when grassroots cultural forms coexisted with professional art, and the two forms borrowed from each other.\textsuperscript{51}

Fan culture has nowadays become deeply entwined with online culture. Television fandom is increasingly studied through online forums. For example, Jenkins focuses on the impact of media convergence on contemporary fandom, and describes the role of online forums as ‘knowledge communities’ where meaning is created collectively.\textsuperscript{52} In the Russian context, Sudha Rajagopalan looks at viewers’ reflections on cultural and social meanings through the exchanges on a forum dedicated to a popular Russian TV show.\textsuperscript{53} In the same way, it is useful to look both at authors’ websites and fan websites to discuss literary culture: ‘convergence culture’ as a cultural shift leading consumers to seek information across different media and through dispersed media content\textsuperscript{54} involves the printed book and the way it is discussed and remediated online. A reading public increasingly used to transmedia stories (that is, stories that unfold ‘across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’\textsuperscript{55}) can immediately recognise the characteristics of a book that will allow textual interplay across the media and to create further meanings through online collaboration (see Chapter 4). Fans thus contribute to the remediation of products of popular culture,\textsuperscript{56} while authors work with a growing awareness of the numerous possibilities for transmedia storytelling offered by contemporary media systems (see the case of Akunin in Chapters 3 and 4).

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{54} Jenkins, \textit{Convergence Culture}, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 95.
4.3 A global Net?

While similar tendencies can be observed in Internet usage at a global level, subcultures and local cultures partially influence use of the medium and it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of a variety of Internet cultures and usages. A study of Russian writers and their readers online thus presumes a focus on the Russian-speaking portion of the Internet. Despite some common tendencies that depend on the global nature of online communication, the Internet experience is at least partly shaped by local cultures and traditions, and my study of Russian online literary culture will contribute to a discourse that takes into account local cultures as they interact with global online phenomena.

Two main questions related to the integration of Internet use into different societies will be of interest in this chapter, and will represent underlying questions to be related to practical examples in later chapters:

- does a unitary Internet culture exist, or is it in fact more appropriate to talk about cultures on the Internet? In other words, is digital culture supra-national and completely globalised, or does local culture influence uses of online technologies?
- does an autonomous Internet culture, detached from reality, exist, or is the Internet influenced by offline everyday experience?

The question of whether it is technology that shapes culture, or on the contrary, culture that shapes technology, has been a subject of debate ever since scholarly attention was turned to the Internet phenomenon. Earlier works show a tendency to consider Internet culture as homogeneous and often imply that the new technology is able to shape a whole new Internet culture, transnational and ultimately globalising in nature, and often adaptive to Western standards. More recently, because of the evolution of more sophisticated uses of the Internet and of its worldwide diffusion, and with the consequent development of the field of Internet studies, the tendency is to admit that Internet usage can vary according to local cultures and subcultures.

This development is reflected in the title of two books representing opposite answers to this question. David Porter’s edited collection *Internet Culture* treats online culture as unique and ultimately independent from other cultural contexts. On the contrary, James Slevin in *Internet and Society* advocates the need to situate
Internet culture in a broader frame of social theory. Slevin criticises Porter’s approach which considers online culture and online interactions as decontextualised and bearing no relation to everyday life and experience. He underlines the necessity to consider online culture in its relation to everyday life as ‘symbolic content and online interaction are embedded in social and historical contexts of various kinds’. Even though it is not the main preoccupation of Slevin’s book, approaching new media in their social and historical context ultimately means having to situate them within cultural traditions. On the contrary, Porter introduces the Internet as a unique culture independent from the outside world, where users input parts of their individuality in the form of written messages. Porter’s edited volume proposes to examine what the ‘distinctive, defining characteristics of the Internet as a cultural sphere’ are, as well as its impact on our sense of community, on politics and on identity, and on how all these factors influence communication.

Despite the independence of Internet culture from offline culture advocated by Porter in his introductory chapter, several of the essays collected in his book situate Internet culture within a specific American-focused perspective. Among these, Dave Healy describes the unexplored prairies of the Internet as an almost mythological territory to conquer, comparable to the American Far West and practically limitless, as it erases geographical distance and creates the conditions for the creation or reinforcement of communities and networks. Healy’s analysis is rooted in the American cultural mythology of the Far West and, like Rheingold did previously, utilises the myth of the frontier as a metaphor for a so far unexplored space, rich in new possibilities. This parallel relates to a vision of the Internet as an inherently North American phenomenon; for Healy the Internet represents a space between pure individuality and a desire for community, and this longing for a middle ground is described as typically American in character. Healy agrees that the Internet is best described as a mixture of subcultures. However, he argues that these networks do not foster diversity as they unite people with a common interest. This view ignores cases in which online communities unite people from different backgrounds under a common interest. Therefore, Healy’s chapter is an example of those works

58 Slevin, pp. 55-56.
59 Ibid., p. ix.
60 Porter, p. xii.
61 Dave Healy, ‘Cyberspace and Place: the Internet as Middle Landscape on the Electronic Frontier, in *Internet Culture*, ed. by Porter.'
focusing on the limitless potentialities of online communication, but without taking into consideration possible developments of the Internet outside of the USA.

A further approach is suggested by Gerhard Fischer, who argues that cultures are defined by ‘their media and their tools for thinking, working, learning and collaborating’, so that new media are able to change our interests and social environments, thus influencing mindset development.\(^{62}\) Nils Zurawski, instead, criticises the too frequent focus on the influence of the Internet on culture, and not vice versa. From a survey conducted in 1997, he concludes that cultural and ethnic identities are applied to the Internet by its users and argues that this is caused by the decentralised and globalised character of the Internet.\(^{63}\) In Zurawski’s analysis, the Internet is perceived as a blank container for information that is reappropriated by its users in ethnic terms. While this might not be incorrect in some cases, it is probably a too broad generalisation. Internet content is sometimes consciously constructed with a close relationship to local cultural contexts, rather than appropriated by the final user.

Manuel Castells analyses the dynamics between new systems of communication and culture, acknowledging the close relationship between them. Modalities of communication shape culture while technological innovations change it - the traditional examples being the cognitive shift caused by the advent of writing over oral culture and the diffusion of press, both of which serve to predict that the technological revolution will have a similar impact. As culture is mediated by forms of communication, Castells defines the media as expression of culture. Castells’ view is more complex than just a stance on the usually binary opposition on whether it is technology that takes over culture or whether it is culture that influences technology: the two aspects of technology and culture are in Castells’ words entwined and influence each other. The role of local culture is not taken into consideration by Castells, according to whom ‘cultural expressions are abstracted from history and geography’, and therefore particularly prone to mediation by electronic communications.\(^{64}\) However, Castells’ idea of the Internet is not detached from

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\(^{62}\) Fischer.

\(^{63}\) Nils Zurawski, ‘Culture, Identity and the Internet’ (1998)
Retrieved on <http://www.uni-muenster.de/PeaCon/zurawski/Identity.htm> (accessed October 2009, now unavailable)

reality, as he deems it necessary to analyse issues such as gender, identity, and politics before formulating a precise idea of contemporary society in relation to the technological revolution.65

The development of the Internet and the rise in the number of its users (estimated at 30.2% of the world population in March 2011, with a growth of 480.4% since 2000)66 created the possibility for transnational interest-focused communities to develop, but also for local users to influence the perception of the Internet, thus creating new boundaries. The enthusiasm of early Internet researchers made them perceive cyberspace as a completely borderless space; more recent and particularly less US-focused approaches underline how borders do exist. Firstly, Internet access creates a boundary between those who have this privilege and poorer or less educated members of society who do not (the so-called ‘digital divide’). Secondly, language (and therefore cultural) barriers do represent boundaries, comparable to national borders, online as they do offline: early approaches ignore the fact, less relevant at the time because of the prevalence of North American, English-speaking Internet users, that English is not the only language used online and the Internet is not, or no longer, an American phenomenon.67 For example, in 2007 only about 29% of Internet users were English speakers.68 However, it is true that the greatest amount of online information is still stored in English.69

The edited volume Internationalizing Internet Studies: Beyond Anglophone paradigms (2009) decidedly argues against the notion of the Internet as a homogeneous and boundary-less whole, and underlines issues of local culture while advocating a less Anglophone-centric development in Internet studies. Through a variety of case studies, the book offers an extremely diverse and yet coherent series of arguments in support of the need for Internet studies to focus more on local

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65 Castells, The Rise of the Network Society, p. 469.
69 Ibid., p. 12.
realities and to acknowledge the strict relationship between local culture and the use of electronic media, calling for the necessity to challenge Anglophone-based views and paradigms, as they no longer represent the only developed Internet culture. Areas of particular focus in this volume are the Far East and Islamic cultures, possibly because of the emerging importance of their cultures and economies in world dynamics; one chapter is also dedicated to Russian grassroots humour website Anekdoty.ru. None of the essays in the collection focuses specifically on literature, as the main topics are society, politics or languages. However, the variety of approaches in the analysis of blogs or online communities has provided valuable methodological examples for my analysis.

In their introductory chapter, Goggin and McLelland denounce the lack of diversification of cultural studies of the Internet despite the rapid growth of non-English speaking portions of the Internet in recent years. Scholarship in English rarely focuses on non-Anglophone case studies, while existing local studies are seldom translated into English and possibly often perceived as not relevant enough to a global discourse. This situation fosters an Anglophone-centric culture of Internet studies and limits the importance of local cultures and local uses of the Web in the context of a worldwide discourse. The purpose of the essays collected in this volume is therefore to testify how uses and perceptions of the Internet vary within different cultures and how Internet culture reflects the current state of society and internalises traditional values rather than changing them drastically. For example, one chapter in Goggin and McLelland’s volume analyses a virtual community of second-generation Indians in Germany in order to reflect on the concept of boundaries. The existence of such a culturally-linked portal reminds us that, after all, the infinite possibility for a borderless Web actually gives space to new boundaries, as niches are formed where individuals with a precise cultural identity, or simply just using the same language to communicate online, meet each other. Even more importantly, the author argues for the impossibility of detaching Internet use from offline experience, as cultural and social identities (such as that of being a German-born Indian) shape

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70 Part III of the book is dedicated to ‘Islam, Modernity and the Internet’; Part IV to ‘Asian Cybercultures’.
72 Goggin and McLelland, ‘Internationalizing Internet Studies’.
the way a user will experience a particular tool, or how they will feel within a particular virtual community.\textsuperscript{73}

In conclusion, it is logical to view the development of the Internet within national cultures in a perspective that accepts how technology and local culture influence each other:

the insight that technology does not determine culture, but that they are co-determining, co-constructive forces, is a crucially important one. With our ideas and actions, we choose technologies, we adapt and shape them. To this realization it is also critical to add that our culture does not entirely control the technologies that we use, either. The way that technology and culture interact is a complex dance, an interweaving and intertwining.\textsuperscript{74}

This ‘\textit{Netnographic}’ perspective will be informing the rest of my thesis, where the observation of literary phenomena online within a particular cultural context will be accompanied by the awareness that some aspects of these phenomena are part of a global use of technology, while others are shaped by local specificities.

5 – Methodology

My project describing the intersection of Internet culture and literary culture in the Russian context is by nature interdisciplinary, as it involves both some social aspects of online communication and the context in which literary works are created and received. There was therefore no methodological tradition for me to follow: while online methodologies have been used for various types of studies, there was not one single, established methodology I could apply for a study of online literary culture in a context that would take into account the history of book and the literary market in a specific national context. The identification of a suitable methodology is

\textsuperscript{73} Goel. The only study in this book in which some respondents privileged a globalised view rather than one underlining national identity is a study of Chinese lesbian communities, where the shared sexual identity with other members of the community is perceived by some users as more unifying than a shared national culture (Fran Martin, ‘That Global Feeling: Sexual Subjectivities and Imagined Geographies in Chinese-Language Lesbian Cyberspaces’, in \textit{Internationalizing Internet Studies}, ed. by Goggin and McLelland).

\textsuperscript{74} Robert V. Kozinets, \textit{Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online} (London: Sage, 2010), p. 22.
one of the challenges of online research in the humanities: it was therefore necessary to combine different methodological trends.

The majority of methodological examples of online research are found in the social sciences, where computer-mediated communication was initially perceived as an enhancement or a convenient substitute for offline methodologies. For example, early literature suggested that in the case of research on sensitive topics, participants felt more comfortable to discuss these in the anonymity of the Internet.\footnote{Nicola Illingworth, ‘The Internet Matters: Exploring the Use of the Internet as a Research Tool’, \textit{Sociological Research Online}, 6, 2 (2001). Available at <http://socresonline.org.uk/6/2/illingworth.html> (accessed 16 January 2012).}

Traditional methodologies, such as interviews and participant observation, have been transferred online and analysed against their implications for online research. However, face to face interviews and direct observations and their online counterparts are not simply different applications of the same methods, as they differ in some important aspects and serve different purposes in different studies. The decision on which methodology will prove more beneficial for each research project must thus be evaluated carefully in each case.

Advantages and disadvantages of online methods have been analysed extensively. On the positive side, online sources reduce the need to travel to obtain data, since computer mediated communication allows the researcher to reach or be reached by the research participants without travelling. Online research also eliminates the necessity to spend great amounts of time on transcripts or field notes: conversations take place in writing and can easily be saved on a computer, if not simply retrieved again online. Moreover, the asynchronous nature of some forms of online communication can result in a less rapid exchange, potentially allowing for a deeper reflection in the formulation of the opinions shared online or via e-mail.\footnote{Patsy Clarke, \textit{The Internet as a Medium for Qualitative Research}, paper presented at Web 2000 Conference (Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, South Africa, 6 September 2000). Retrieved on <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~rosenl/InternetFocusGroups.pdf> (accessed 16 January 2012).} This aspect can have both positive and negative effects on communication, according to the specific case and expectations of the researcher.

Among the disadvantages of online research are issues of identity and authenticity; as spontaneous Internet writing is often anonymous, it can be sometimes impossible to verify who is actually writing. Furthermore, one major drawback of written online communication is the absence of paratextual elements such as gestures, facial expression, tone of voice, and visual cues; relying only on the
written word requires more careful elaboration not to incur misunderstandings or oversimplification. Consequently, online communication requires a higher degree of articulation:

Because writing is an activity that has to be formally learned, written text contains more structure and explicitness than spoken. As the writer needs to add context and meaning that are lost, there is the tendency to ensure meaning through an explicitness not found in spoken language.\(^7^7\)

Written language skills can thus be developed through participation in online research, and also by the researcher when formulating questions. In the context of the relationship between technology and written communication described earlier in the chapter, all these elements contribute to a deep relationship with writing, which the researcher needs to take into account when evaluating the conditions of research.

In addition, the online environments chosen for a particular study, such as discussion forums or blogs, might change significantly over time, or even disappear with short notice. The lack of fixity of the medium is a well-known issue of Internet research, which requires the researcher to store information which might potentially be lost, and to accept the constant flux and evolution of Internet-based materials. The changeable nature of the medium also means that observations made in the 1990s (for example, partial scepticism on the real impact of e-mails for research purposes\(^7^8\)) are already outdated due to the nature of online research, which adapts to the rapid changes in technologies and consequently in trends of use of the Internet.

Reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of research through online methods are accompanied by an awareness of the impossibility to simply apply the existing theoretical frameworks of qualitative methods of the social sciences, which are based on the traditional face-to-face experience, to online environments. As online communication and digital culture are becoming global phenomena, at least in the industrialised world, attention needs to be drawn to their values and processes,


and a fully developed theoretical and methodological framework for research not only through the Internet but also about the Internet needs to be elaborated further and be constantly updated. A significant amount of theory and methodology of Internet research from the 1990s and early 2000s showed a preoccupation in defining how online tools could be used, especially for research that was not related to the Internet itself. The need to gain familiarity with the new tools gradually gave space in more recent times to an attempt to render them adequately suited to online research, and to find special methods for online environments, suggesting that the interest of researchers is no longer on how to treat the methodological novelty, but on reflecting on the Internet as a research environment.\textsuperscript{79}

However, online research is not only used in the social sciences. With a shift towards audience research and cultural studies, the humanities have been increasingly moving towards human subject research during the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{80} Online research can therefore represent an important tool for arts and humanities, both for the study of recipients of artistic expressions, and for the study of creative processes involving new technologies. Interdisciplinary approaches will thus become of great importance in order to adapt to specific research projects, which will have characteristics of both social sciences and humanities.

With this background in mind, I decided not to apply participant observation to online forums, and not to conduct online interviews, as I had initially considered, because I wanted to keep my work strongly focused on cultural and literary studies. In addition, the material I collected by simply observing websites as an external visitor, without direct interaction with members of online communities, proved to be not only sufficient for the scope of this thesis, but also abundant and extremely rich in contents. The analysis of primary sources exclusively published publically on the Internet thus represents one of the aspects of originality of this thesis, and an example of a productive approach which treats digitally-based sources as the focus of the research, and not just as a tool. This method also allowed me to demonstrate how

\textsuperscript{79} Other works consulted on online research methodologies are: Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart, \textit{Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: a Handbook for Researching Online} (London: SAGE, 2000); Raymond M. Lee, Nigel Fielding and Grant Blank, ‘The Internet as a Research Medium; an Editorial Introduction’, in \textit{The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods}, ed. by Nigel Fielding, Raymond M. Lee and Grant Blank (Los Angeles; London: SAGE, 2008).

the vast amount of material on a given topic that can be retrieved online can become central to a research work focusing on the Internet itself.

All my primary sources are therefore websites. Moreover, a significant amount of background and contextual sources are also represented by articles found online, either of a journalistic nature, or written by websites users. The quality of these materials varies, but it sometimes nears academic scope on websites dedicated specifically to an analysis of online literary phenomena (such as for example Setevaia Slovesnost, see Chapter 3). The amount of sources I collected in this way witnesses the self-reflective nature of the Internet as a cultural space.

Throughout the project, I have observed and commented on the structure and contents of literary websites and forums, and analysed prose and communication presented on those environments that I believed to have a cultural value and to offer interesting points to the discussion framed by my research questions. In addition, I considered the literary market as an underlying force motivating authors’ and readers’ choices in their online interactions, and as a factor influencing the development of literary phenomena on the Russian Internet, next to the development of technology. My approach therefore differs from literary analysis, and focuses on the context in which literary production and consumption happen, through a multidisciplinary analysis of phenomena which are observable online but need to be treated with a combination of methodologies.

6 - Ethical Issues

Finally, there is one further issue typical of sociologically oriented research that needs to be adapted to the online world: ethics and confidentiality. Ethical issues still represent a very unclear aspect of online research and it is agreed that the application of general guidelines is relatively flexible to the single research, as fixed rules cannot contemplate the wide variety of cases that can be encountered.

The Association of Internet Researchers distinguishes cases in which content is to be considered private, such as small e-mail groups and environments protected by passwords, and cases in which the content can be considered public (blogs, posts to large e-mail groups, home pages), which generally require less obligations.81

However, the AoIR’s guidelines were devised in 2002 and no longer fully reflect the variety of Internet spaces that has emerged over the years, focusing on newsletters and types of communication that are nowadays not as common as in the 1990s, and not considering spaces like social networks which became largely successful later.

A great amount of content published online is posted on spaces that have no form of restriction such as a password access, and can therefore be viewed by any Internet user. The cases in which consent should be sought for the use of material freely published online should therefore be judged according to the circumstances and whether or not the research is potentially harmful to subjects. A similar case by case approach should be applied to establish which degree of anonymity and confidentiality can or needs to be preserved.

Amy Bruckman notes that a sociological approach is normally applied to the treatment of online material, resulting in a tendency to treat users as the subjects of sociological research, and thus to protect their identity. However, with the growing incidence of humanities-focused research using online materials, Bruckman suggests treating Internet users not as ‘human subjects’, but as ‘amateur artists’ who use the Internet as a ‘playground’, through which they obtain much greater visibility than they would have had in the past. For this reason, Bruckman argues, material retrieved online on public spaces should be considered as ‘semi-published’. Just like the boundaries between professional and amateur art, the boundaries between what is public and what is private have also become blurred in online environments, and the distinction between ‘published’ and ‘unpublished’ is no longer clear, but has rather become a ‘continuum’. 82

Considering the Internet user as an amateur artist, however, poses a further problem: as artists need to be credited for the contents they create, protecting heir identity might result in not fully acknowledging their authorship. Moreover, a great number of Internet users are known through nicknames, which make identification harder if not impossible, therefore complicating the attribution of authorship. Bruckman suggests that the way to treat users’ data has to be assessed case by case, and a higher or lower degree of data disclosure has to be decided depending on the impact of the study on the subjects quoted. 83

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82 Bruckman, p. 226-228.
83 Ibid., pp. 224-230.
Observation of opinions on literature is not generally a particularly sensitive topic. During my research on literary websites and fan communities, I exclusively used materials publicly available online and observable without needing passwords or registrations. I however contacted the administrators of the forums I studied to make them aware of my intentions and seek their approval (which was immediately granted), clarifying that I would maintain the anonymity of the users I quote, and that I would reference materials appropriately. I have in any case decided to omit the nicknames of the forum users I quote, as my focus is on their exchange on the website rather than on their identity and social background. I however had to apply some nuances, as I differentiated forum participants from self-declared amateur artists. While I disguise forum participants who simply enjoy sharing their opinions in an online environment where they would not expect to be quoted (Chapters 4 and 5), thus using a ‘light disguise’ in Bruckman’s classification,\(^8\) I decided to leave unchanged the names of the writers I quote from self-publication website Proza.ru (Chapter 3). In fact, the latter are amateur literary authors who publish artistic prose in an open environment and often use their real name. In contrast with the polished works crafted for an amateur writing website, forum communication is similar to a conversation, as messages are (usually) brief, colloquial, and probably unedited. While opinions of single users need to be credited, their posts are part of the dynamics of a fan community rather than stand-alone works of art.

7 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided the context for further discussion regarding aspects of literary culture that have been influenced by the advent of the Internet. The way we can now obtain a copy of a text and interact with it, as well as with other readers and writers, has changed since the widespread adoption of computer technologies, and in particular of online communication: the activity of close, solitary reading is no longer the main way to relate with the literary text, as it had been in recent centuries. This revolutionary process is predicted to be comparable to the long-term effects of the invention of the printing press. While there is a preoccupation regarding the fate of the printed book, it is more likely that, rather than a complete death of book culture, contemporary evolutions will lead to a further

\(^8\) In the ‘light disguise’ described by Bruckman, the name of the community is clear, direct quotes are used, but names of users are not explicit. Bruckman, p. 230.
transformation of literary culture, which will include stimulations from different media and new literary forms which utilise technological means, eventually leading to a differentiation of supports according to the functions and characteristics of a text. All of these factors are in act in Russian literary culture, and will represent the background of the discussion presented in this thesis.

In this cultural atmosphere, the Internet creates a social environment which can be related to past forms of aggregation encouraging intellectual exchange, such as the seventeenth-century coffeehouse. For Internet users, this factor means the possibility to share information, but also to expand collective creativity online, turning from passive users into producers of cultural meanings in a Web 2.0 environment. While the Internet is at some level a globalising medium, where some general similarities and patterns of use can be observed, it is more and more frequently recognised how local cultures do play a role in shaping expressions of digital culture. The characteristics of the user as producer model in the RuNet, with particular regard to the authority of previously accepted cultural traditions will represent a point of interest in this thesis, which will use online sources to describe a variety of behaviours of Russian readers and writers online.

Some of the opportunities and challenges the technological revolution and the characteristics of the online medium create for authors, readers, and publishers in the Russian context will be discussed in the last three chapters of this thesis. In the next chapter, I will move my scope from general considerations to the specific Russian context, providing the local background regarding literature and mass media.
Chapter 2

This chapter will provide the necessary specific cultural background to the thesis. By presenting some contemporary developments of Russian literary culture, I will contextualise my analysis of the Russian literary Internet within post-Soviet literary tendencies and within the post-Soviet book market. I will also describe the development of the Russian Internet (RuNet) and of Russian-language Internet culture, which represents the environment in which the examples I will discuss in later chapters are situated.

Similarly to the previous chapter, this chapter will also be divided in two parts. In the first, I will discuss the role of literature in the cultural and social life of contemporary Russia. I will briefly outline the main changes that have occurred in Russian reading culture since glasnost and the fall of the USSR, both in the relationship of the public with reading materials, and in the growth of a commercial publishing industry. I will then contextualise these changes historically in the post-Soviet period and contrast them with Soviet habits. Two factors have shaped current literary offerings: the differentiation of reading materials and the new conditions of the book market. I will then devote some attention to historical perceptions of contemporary Russian literature and to the current debate around Russian postmodernism, and discuss the perceived ‘end of literature’ in the context of the dichotomy between high and low literary expressions.

Various sources were consulted for this part of the chapter, all offering precise descriptions of reading habits and market conditions at various stages of Soviet and Russian recent history. In particular, Stephen Lovell’s book The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras provides extremely detailed information and discussion about reading culture and publishing from the early Soviet period to the turn of the millennium. Lovell endeavours to study the interaction between readers and publishing in the context of Soviet and immediately post-Soviet Russia. By providing a history of the Soviet reader, Lovell analyses the mechanisms of distribution and consumption of literature, underlining
their importance in Soviet cultural mechanisms, for example in terms of nation-building, and contrasts them with immediate post-Soviet reading culture. Lovell’s volume represents an important tool for a social background on how Russian literary culture developed during the Soviet decades and in the years immediately preceding the Internet revolution.¹

Before dealing with the intersection of literary culture with the Internet, it will be necessary to describe the Russian Internet, and to consider its role in the wider picture of post-Soviet Russian mass media. In the second part of the chapter, I will describe how Internet use spread in the country during the 1990s, and how a Russian Internet culture developed, presenting some local peculiarities next to the tendencies of use of new technologies generally observed worldwide. I will then contrast the position of the Internet against television, which represents the main competitor of both the Internet and books for the attention of Russians in their search for knowledge and leisure. A brief, historically grounded discussion of the role of television in the Soviet and post-Soviet context is necessary to fully understand the role of the Internet within the Russian media landscape. The relationship of both television and, in comparison, the Internet, with political power will also be taken into consideration in order to discuss the controversial perception of the Internet as an independent medium prompting societal change.

Finally, I will discuss cultural perceptions of the Internet through the Russian categories of samizdat and kitchen table talk, providing some examples from the use of blogs and social networks by Russian Internet users.

1 - Post-Soviet literary culture

In addition to the effects of the revolution in communication technology on literary culture which were outlined in Chapter 1, Russian literature is also affected by the sharp change in the conditions of the country caused by the collapse of the Soviet system, and by the consequent transitional situation occurring in Russian cultural life. The ‘end of literature’ has been described in Russia primarily and initially in the context of the immediate post-Soviet years, while the Russian public’s

increasing thirst for other sources of information and entertainment is parallel to the loss of values experienced by Russian society after 1991.

Moreover, other factors have influenced literary evolution in Russia during the past two decades. Firstly, the competition of other media and of other life preoccupations has meant a reduction in the symbolic importance of reading activities, and, on a more practical level, in the number of active readers. According to a 2005 poll, ‘more than half of Russians do not buy books, one-third of Russian citizens do not keep any books in their homes, and 37% of population do not read any books at all’. ² Similarly, figures from 2009 suggest that 39% of Russians do not read at all (compared to 20% in 1996), while 42% read only ‘sometimes’ (49% in 1996).³

The price of books is often quoted as a reason for lower sales,⁴ while the unstable and competitive conditions of the turn to a capitalist economy leave people with less time and energy to dedicate to deep reading. In the words of actor Valery Zolotukhin:

People usually read books and look for the meaning hidden underneath when they are certain of what tomorrow holds in store. Today's life, in my opinion, does not agree well with reading. People spend all their energy making both ends meet day by day.⁵

While reading is now a less central activity for Russians than it was for Soviet citizens, different literary phenomena have taken prominence over the past two decades.

1.1 The transition: reading materials

Reading can be described as both a subjective and a social activity involving, besides the reader, the whole publishing and distribution industry. In the Russian context, the dynamics between these forces have now been altered by a change in the

⁵ Ibid.
conditions influencing cultural life: readers are no longer citizens to educate, but consumers, while writers are no longer ‘holders of truth’ (see Introduction). The change in the relationship between power and the culture it imposed, and the reader, who became simply a target of commercial practices, represents today’s Russian ‘reading revolution’. This ideological revolution precedes the technological one and enters into dialogue with it, creating dynamics that are absent in cultures which did not experience such recent and traumatic transitions.

Soviet Russia was the set of a true ‘reading myth’, according to which all its citizens were avid readers. Reading was considered an enlightening activity, and the individual experience of personal growth through reading appropriate materials was part of a collective culture where one’s relationship with the written word as well as with the book as an object was an important part of kul’turnost, as well as part of one’s position in society and affecting social relations.

The phase immediately preceding the fall of the USSR was characterised by a rediscovery of previously forbidden classic literature, often with a focus on historical subjects and on the memory of the national past. In fact, with the advent of the glasnost policy in the mid-1980s, Russian readers could become acquainted with formerly censored classics and with important works of the Soviet period which had not previously been published (such as Pasternak’s Doktor Zhivago). A real ‘reading boom’ occurred in the last years of the Soviet Union, when ‘a mass reading public with enormous curiosity and pent-up demand came into contact with an entire century of literary heritage over a period of two-three years’. At this time, unofficial literature such as émigré literature and samizdat also emerged from the underground and became part of the Soviet heritage in post-Soviet culture. Similarly, but more deeply than in the years of Khrushev’s ‘thaw’, in the late 1980s the Russian public rediscovered important parts of its national literature and was

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6 Lovell, The Russian Reading Revolution.
8 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
10 Lovell, ‘Literature and Entertainment in Russia’, p. 28.
12 Martini, p. 87. Martini describes glasnost’ as the ‘third thaw’ (the first being represented by the NEP years), underlining how, however, this definition still situates it as a continuation of Soviet history and not as a sharp break with it.
granted the unprecedented opportunity to reflect on its recent history. According to Rosalind Marsh, this cultural situation altered Russians’ perceptions of history and contributed to create the conditions for the fall of the Soviet system.\(^{13}\)

However, once Russian readers had ‘satisfied their immediate curiosity about the missing pages of their history and culture’, their attention turned to other sources of knowledge, like television; literary fiction then gradually became a source of entertainment rather than of information and education.\(^{14}\) Moreover, the lack of social stability created further desire for escapism in the reading public. In particular, serialised and formulaic fiction gained popularity in this phase, as their characteristics contribute to the creation of a sense of stability through repetition of characters and situations.\(^{15}\)

The switch to a market economy and the opening of the Russian market to foreign products after the fall of the USSR thus created the conditions for reading for entertainment to gain prominence. A second phase in the transition of Soviet to post-Soviet literature can be described in the early 1990s, when a real ‘flood’ of Western popular literature (detective stories, romance novels and thrillers), often of such poor quality to be defined as ‘junk’, invaded Russia and caused a real ‘craze’ for these types of genres, which were uncommon in the Soviet union. Mikhail Epstein argues that Russia has been absorbing the multiculturality typical of the twentieth century in the West within a short period of time rather than several decades, and thus now finds itself with an abundance of cultural stimulations. Epstein advocates the need for a transcultural approach to contemporary culture in order to understand its wholeness and complexity.\(^{16}\)

After the market for Western ‘pulp’ literature almost reached ‘saturation’,\(^{17}\) a tendency started towards the mid-1990s for local Russian writers to appropriate these genres. In fact, despite showing a different and exotic world, Western-produced


\(^{16}\) Mikhail Epstein, After the Future: the Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture, trans. by Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 296. For Epstein, Russian transculture differs from its Western counterpart because it focuses on wholeness and not on individualism, and looks at European cultural messages rather than exotic.

\(^{17}\) Lovell, The Russian Reading Revolution , p. 132.
‘pulp’ novels did not fully address values and situations relevant to disoriented post-Soviet citizens. Russian authors were able to cater for this need, and to successfully adapt to local tastes the genres preferred by the public of the time: adventure novels, romances and crime fiction. Authors of detective stories, in particular, were able to create positive heroes representing stability in the chaotic environment of the 1990s, when crime was on the rise and was for the first time reported in full on the news. Russian citizens turned to crime stories where stability was eventually recovered, to turn away from the disconcerting reality of the early post-Soviet years. At the same time, the simple role of the detective as an exemplary citizen triumphing over enemies of a stable system was no longer valuable. With the loss of the Soviet ideology, Russians also lost a value system where the boundaries between good and bad were clear. Crime fiction writers of the end of the twentieth century presented stories which stimulate reflection by portraying honesty and crime as not always clearly distinguished or distinguishable, but as part of a complex, multifaceted reality which Russian readers find realistic and can relate to. Some of these aspects explain the success of Akunin’s historical crime fiction stories; aspects specific to Akunin’s works will be analysed in Chapter 4.

The genres popular in contemporary Russian literature are nowadays varied, allowing for an unprecedented differentiation of reading choices. While the variety of fiction works on offer to the Russian reader has increased, the predominance of fiction over other types of literature has decreased since the Soviet period. Post-Soviet Russia has thus seen the emergence of self-help books on a variety of practical subjects (medicine, manners, gardening, but also religion and faith) as well as on professional topics, which were not normally addressed by books or were topics of shortage items in the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, in the post-Soviet era, the perception of the materiality of the book is also undergoing modifications: books no longer have ornamental functions in Russian apartments, and neither are they supposed to be solid and long-lasting.

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21 Lovell, The Russian Reading Revolution, pp. 138-139.
Paperback editions are becoming increasingly common, despite their traditional association with poor literary quality and ‘pulp’ literature.\textsuperscript{22}

Visual culture is also becoming an important factor in the way literature is discussed and perceived. For several decades already, literature has had to confront itself with an ever-growing visual culture. Literary adaptations were common in Soviet cinema (ekranisatsiia), and became an important television phenomenon of the early 2000s, so much so that it is argued that television adaptations help literary classics reach a mass audience.\textsuperscript{23} In post-Soviet television, literary adaptations do not only involve classics, but also contemporary popular novels, often already existing in a serialised form in their original, literary version, and turned into television serials. The open-ended structure of the television serial offers an illusion of social movement in times of political and cultural stagnation, like the 2000s (and, previously, the 1970s), but also implies the existence of a relatively stable economic structure. The success of Russian serials of the 2000s, ‘based on books with an end and a narrative target, is indicative of the population’s content with the status quo, lulling itself with the illusion of social development’.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Ekranisatsiia} is not the only way literature interacts with television culture. Stephen Hutchings argues that literary culture works as a mediator between Soviet and contemporary identity on the one hand, and between Russian and Western, globalised identities on the other, by inserting itself as an element of popular entertainment programmes through ‘paraliterary elements’ such as narrativity and references to well-known classic literary works, for example in titles of programmes inspired by lines of poems. Thanks to this device, Russian television of the twenty-first century plays on both nostalgia for Soviet kul’turnost through high-brow literary suggestions, and appropriates Western formats by applying Russian ‘logocentric’ devices. In this way, references from high literature enter mass culture through contemporary, commercial television.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} Lovell, \textit{The Russian Reading Revolution}, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 170.
1.2 The literary market: publishing and distribution

Contemporary Russian literature is supported by a literary industry that differs deeply from the Soviet times, having to compete for the attention of readers but also to accommodate their demands.

The switch to a market economy and the changing social and political conditions of the country also exerted a major influence on the ways books are produced and distributed in Russia, in turn allowing for the emergence of a popular literature based on reader’s demand rather than on State planning and ideological needs. In the Soviet Union, both the titles published (which had to perform educational functions and conform to the Party’s ideological line of the moment and to characteristics of style) and the print runs were planned from above, without taking readers’ preferences into consideration, privileging works which would contribute to the creation of a cultured Soviet reader.\textsuperscript{26} This situation often created shortages of the titles which were more in demand, and created a ‘book hunger’ that was only satisfied after 1991.\textsuperscript{27}

With the switch to a capitalist system, private publishing houses started to emerge. After an initial period when State publishers coexisted with new, private publishers, the system was reorganised in the early 2000s, when most state publishing houses either merged or were privatised.\textsuperscript{28} The unstable economic conditions of the early 1990s naturally affected the book market. However, the publishing industry was one of the sectors of the economy which better resisted those turbulent times, publishing more and more titles every year after having reached the lowest point in 1992.\textsuperscript{29} The Russian book market also recovered rapidly after the

\textsuperscript{26} Lovell, \textit{The Russian Reading Revolution}, pp. 14-21.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 60-71; Lovell also describes several ways in which it was attempted to overcome shortages, such as black market trade. Naturally, there also existed ways for circulation of officially unpublished works of literature through \textit{samizdat}.
\textsuperscript{28} Kristine Bushnell and John Bushnell, ‘Russian Publishing, 2000-2001: Threats to Freedom of Information, but a Record Year for Books. A Report to the 2001 Summer Slavic Librarians’ Workshop’, \textit{Slavic and East European Information Resources}, 2, 3/4 (2001). In several yearly articles published from 2000 to 2006, Kristine and John Bushnell offer extremely detailed information on book sales in Russia, describing the state of the industry, reading trends (through figures offer by the Russian book chamber), prices and the impact of the situation of the Russian market on American (academic) importers. Some of the information from these articles will be quoted in the next paragraphs.
\textsuperscript{29} Kristine Bushnell and John Bushnell, ‘Boom. Bust. Rebound. The Russian Book Trade in 1998 and Early 1999: A Report to the 1999 Summer Slavic Librarians’ Workshop’, \textit{Slavic and East European Information Resources}, 1, 1 (2000), p.111. Print runs are more difficult to count as, failing the State system, publishers did not have any interest in providing precise and correct information about their print runs. Kristine Bushnell and John Bushnell, ‘Russian Publishers, the Media, and Government
financial crisis of 1998, thus demonstrating its solidity and proving in the following years to be ‘one of the most dynamic sectors of the post-Soviet economy’. By the mid-2000s, the Russian book industry was productive and diversified, presenting ‘a core group of twenty-five publishers’, mostly private and run by young managers and editors, ‘each putting out at least 250 titles per year’.

Another important feature of the Russian book market is represented by distribution issues that a country occupying such a vast territory inevitably faces. As book publishing in the Soviet Union was subject to central planning, an established quota of books was sent to each area of the Union through distribution agencies. After the collapse of the State distribution system, together with the rest of the Soviet infrastructures and institutions, the most successful of the emerging publishing houses established their own distribution channels and even started to contribute to the development of bookshops. However, the system is still not able to efficiently and simultaneously provide every shop in the Federation with newly printed titles, often causing delays between the publication or advertisement of a book and its actual appearance on the shelves of bookshops, sometimes even in the main urban areas. In addition, the collapse of the centralised distribution system has resulted in an even more significant gap in access to printed editions between the Moscow and Saint Petersburg areas and provincial regions. The Russian publishing industry is in fact heavily Moscow-centric, possibly as a result of these distribution characteristics. Even in 2000, reading habits in provincial areas appeared to be more ‘conservative’, showing a preference for classics and translated fiction. Moreover, the demand for Russian-language books extends to areas that were previously part of the Soviet

36 Ibid.
Union but are now different states where considerable numbers of Russian speakers still live.

The Internet is likely to contribute to major changes to this situation, thanks to the possibility for purchasing printed books via online shops, and to the advent of electronic books. The influence of the Internet revolution on publishing and distribution in Russia will be illustrated in Chapter 3.

1.3 Contemporary Russian literature

Historical perspectives and postmodernism represent the most common approaches for the interpretation of post-Soviet literature. Rosalind Marsh extensively analyses historical themes in post-Soviet literature. In the 1990s, while popular culture was emerging, historical themes still existed in the foreground and once again became preponderant in the Russian literature of the new millennium. After the rediscovery of history during perestroika and the 'junk' literature flood of the early post-Soviet years, ‘Russian writers’ and readers’ interest in history has by no means diminished, but simply developed and changed’.38

An often overarching question is whether post-Soviet Russian literature represents the natural continuation of Soviet literature, or rather a break from it. Italian scholar Mauro Martini describes a break in the modes of presentation of literary subjects. He situates this break at the turn of the century, indicating in Pelevin’s Generation II the groundbreaking work separating two eras, and defining the years 1999 – 2000 as the end of the post-Soviet transition; while the 1990s reiterated Soviet motives despite the clear desire to move away from them, in the year 2000 finally the necessary break was experienced.39 However, Martini also individuates the impossibility for Russian culture to completely distance itself from the Soviet experience and become a new Russia.40

Mikhail Epstein describes the development of Russian literature as having taken place in cycles, each of them containing a social, a moral, a religious and an aesthetic phase. This cycle has taken place three times, roughly lasting a century each time: from early Russian literature of the eighteenth century to Pushkin, from

38 Marsh, p. 13.
39 Martini, pp. 3-6.
40 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
Pushkin to the beginning of Soviet literature, and finally the Soviet phase. The post-Soviet phase represents the beginning of a new cycle.\textsuperscript{41} Similarly to Epstein, Frank Ellis interprets the historical development of Russian literature, as it had been intended and interpreted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as halting after glasnost. His final argument is that literature still has a place in Russian culture, although different from its traditional role.\textsuperscript{42} The Internet can then be the medium bringing together contemporary developments with the traditional cult of reading.

Numerous contemporary forms are described as postmodernist. Postmodernism in Russian culture and literature raises an issue, however. It is debated whether it is just a concept imported from the West and applied to the Russian reality without really belonging to it, or rather it is a tendency that developed within the Russian cultural situation in a way that parallels Western postmodernism.\textsuperscript{43} According to some Western approaches which consider postmodernism to be endemic to a mature capitalistic society, the existence of a Russian postmodernism is not possible because of the different historical development of the country and because Russia did not experience a modernist phase.\textsuperscript{44} Both Epstein and Mark Lipovestkii instead consider Russian postmodernism as an existing tendency of contemporary Russian artistic discourse, representing a culturally specific manifestation of a global literary phenomenon.\textsuperscript{45} According to both scholars, a phase of Russian modernism is to be placed in pre-revolutionary culture.\textsuperscript{46} For Lipovetsky, the basis of postmodernism is built on the emphasis on freedom of the avant-gardes of the 1920s and of the unofficial literature of the Soviet period, which used artistic freedom as the very origin of textual creation.\textsuperscript{47} Epstein considers Russian postmodernism to represent an ‘evolution of the same artistic mentality that generated Socialist Realism’,\textsuperscript{48} thus identifying in Soviet culture the roots of Russian postmodernism.

\textsuperscript{41} Epstein, pp. 79-88.
\textsuperscript{42} Ellis, pp. 125, 138.
\textsuperscript{44} Marjorie Perloff, ‘Russian Postmodernism: an Oxymoron?’, \textit{Postmodern Culture}, 3, 2 (January 1993). Perloff’s and other Western opinions are discussed by Lipovetsky, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{45} Epstein, p. 188; Lipovetsky, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{46} Epstein p. 206; Lipovetsky, p. 12, 145.
\textsuperscript{47} Lipovetsky, p. 245.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p. 189.
The regime-imposed style of Socialist Realism employed a mixture of literary styles and clichés, and emptied words of their actual meaning by decomposing them, basically reducing them to simulacra through devices that are akin to those of postmodernism. In this context, ideology substituted for capitalism as the context for postmodernism. Soviet ideology was ‘a system of metanarratives’, and, argues Epstein, totalitarianism ‘commodified culture and ideas’ to bend them to the power of ideology, eventually resulting in a postmodern pastiche. Soviet society and culture were constructed to strive to reach a ‘radiant future’. With the fall of the USSR, this future never happened and turned into contemporary Russia’s past, causing a shift in historical perspectives so that Russia now finds itself ‘after the future’. For this reason, Epstein interprets post-Soviet Russia not as post- but proto-, as the start of a new era. Importantly, Epstein notes that postmodernist discourse in late Soviet culture related to high culture, while in contemporary culture it is used for a variety of literary expressions. Postmodernism thus turned from a high-brow, foreign concept, to a term that nowadays tends to be applied to popular literature.

According to Natal’ia Ivanova, the foundations of Russian postmodernism are to be traced back to the 1960s-1970s, in the works of writers who did not belong to a specific context (either official or unofficial). The sudden freedom to publish more varied material from the mid-1980s onwards caused these authors to simultaneously emerge into the mainstream, thus influencing new literary choices. From its previously underground character postmodernist literature assumed a topical position in the 1990s; its unification with mainstream literature into a single-layer literary environment represents the ‘metaplot of modern Russian literature’, whose ‘aesthetically dominant direction is postmodernism’.

1.4 The end of (high) literature

The evolution of Russian literature into a commercial literary culture led to the alarmism in Russian intellectual circles about the end of literature, for reasons

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49 Ibid., pp. 95-96, 206.
50 Borenstein in Lipovetsky, p. 5.
51 Epstein, p. 7.
52 Ibid., preface.
53 Ibid., p. 280.
54 Ibid., p. 188.
55 Ivanova, pp. 38-50.
related to the historical moment of the country, rather than exclusively to the role of technology, as is the case in other cultures (see Chapter 1). The quality of contemporary literary materials is being questioned; for many, the end of literature in the Russian context primarily refers to the loss of what was formerly perceived as ‘high’, traditionally intellectual and educational literature, in favour of literary forms appealing to the masses, in the capitalist sense. Since writers are no longer expected to insert their work into an ideological discourse and since they have ceased to play a prophetic role as deliverers of higher truths, it is now the public deciding what is popular.

One of the significant differences with the past is the gradual and partial legitimisation of so-called ‘low literature’, which is now produced in large numbers, very differently from the shortages of the Soviet period. This type of literature enjoys vast commercial success, thus creating more demand for it in a market that is now completely working according to the laws of a capitalist economy. The bestselling genres of the 1990s were frowned upon in Soviet times and considered bourgeois. Detective novels, romance, and other genres that were absent, underground or in shortage in the Soviet Union are now in demand. V.D. Stelmakh witnesses the rapid birth of mass culture in Russia through the phase of discovery and then the demise of previously unpublished classics followed by the craze for so-called junk literature. Stelmakh individuates the causes of these phases of development in cultural aspects, namely the fact that reading has lost its position as a status symbol; other causes are identified in the new system of dissemination of culture, and in the possibility to choose specific readings rather than the unifying readings selected by the regime.

This situation provokes mixed reactions among critics and commentators. Some do lament the end of literature, at least the demise of what is conceived as ‘high’, educational literature. At the same time, others welcome the advent of new and original texts, especially those written with careful language and style. In this

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56 Marsh, ‘The Death of Soviet Literature’.
57 In the Soviet Union, culture could not be ‘popular’ (populiarnyi), as such definition would have implied the existence of a part of Soviet culture that was not popular, therefore not for everybody; it could also not be popular in the national sense (narodnyi) as the Soviet Union was a multi-national state trying to homogenise different populations. See Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, pp. 19-20.
sense, authors like Akunin and Pelevin situate themselves in a somewhat hybrid position. They enjoy immense commercial success, but also employ high quality literary devices; in particular, Akunin is contributing to raising the status of the *detektiv* genre with the elaborate style of his historical novels. Akunin’s and Pelevin’s roles and opinions in the debate about high and low culture will be discussed in the dedicated chapters.

The categories of high and low literature, constantly subject to discussion but previously clearly defined by the Soviet canon, are nowadays often overlapping and entering into a dynamic relationship. For example, lower products are likely to attract the educated reader as something different, with a different purpose, and are therefore worth reading for curiosity or simple escapism.  

Perhaps contemporary popular, bestselling literature can be described as ‘mainstream’, as defined by writer and Internet personality Viacheslav Kuritsyn, and discussed by Dmitrii Kuz’min as a category in which to place those products of ‘popular’ literature which are canonised by the publishing industry and the market in general, because of their commercial success.

While previously the canon was established by the traditional thick journals, these have lost high numbers of readers and consequently their social function in the post-Soviet years. Traditional journals still exist, albeit with a different role than the one they previously held. Instead of the main authority of the canonisation of authors and an important arena for literary debuts, journals nowadays represent the privileged environment for high-brow literature and literary discussion. However, they have lost their unique quality as they now have to coexist with numerous other journals, in the traditional format but also online, and with a variety of literary and cultural environments. In the absence of literary authorities such as those the thick journals used to represent, Kuz’min argues that a major role in the canonisation of literature in the disconcerting post-Soviet cultural environment is performed by publishers with their choices of which titles are to be published and in which quantities. In a certain way, the Internet is also contributing to the establishment of a new contemporary canon, by offering visibility to authors that are not the ones

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61 Quoted in Kuz’min. Kuritsyn’s online column contributed to spread the success of Pelevin’s *Generation Π*. Martini, pp. 26-27.
63 Kuz’min, p. 8.
chosen by publishers, and by making publishers acquainted with new talents. Use of the Internet by aspiring authors, publishers, and online journals will be examined in Chapter 3.

Norman Shneidman discusses the relationship between high and low literary expressions, arguing that the Russian literary scene is suffering from a paradox. As readers prefer fiction for entertainment and leisure, writers need to turn to popular literature rather than serious prose in order to sell their products. In this way, even if the number of titles is constantly growing, ‘the number of readers of serious prose, and the artistic quality of most narratives published, are in the process of decline’. In Shneidman’s view, older authors, who began to write during the Soviet era and are therefore ‘the product of Soviet upbringing’, find themselves ‘split between old values and a new reality’; the appearance of younger writers has brought new ideas and new themes but, because of their lack of experience, the style of these writers is sometimes poor. The overall judgement made by Shneidman on contemporary Russian fiction is negative overall. Shneidman’s argument contrasts with that of Irina Skoropanova, who defines ‘modern Russian literature as a new social, cultural and aesthetic phenomenon, which proves the powerful surge of the creative energy in the unchained country’, and which ‘resists the pressure of mass culture’. Skoropanova analyses tendencies of contemporary Russian literature in the context of the epistemological change, individuating several roles played by Russian literature between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Most notable among these is literature’s influence on everyday life in the era of transition ‘from totalitarian standards of existence to the more liberating and humane ones’ (which she relates to the transition of mankind between the modernist and postmodernist eras). Other trends described by Skoropanova are the function of literature in the creation of national identity, and the birth of an ‘Internet literary environment’ that, through the use of modern forms of networking, originates new literary forms, as well as to a new kind of audience who actively participates in the literary process with its comments and ‘enters into interactive conversation with literature’. Skoropanova is

thus one of the critics that accord the necessary importance to the Internet in understanding contemporary Russian literature.

2 - Mass Media and the Internet in Russia

The contemporary situation of Russian mass media is characterised by the rapidity of change. While new media are evolving at an unprecedented speed all over the world, in Russia major changes in the structure, content and role of mass media, which in the West happened throughout the twentieth century, occurred over the space of just a decade.66

While the Internet is based on the same technology and on the same basic concepts everywhere and allows national cultures to become part of a global online culture, it is undeniable that some characteristics of each culture will influence the way the technology spreads and is used (see Chapter 1). In the case of Russia, multiple factors play a role in shaping use of the Internet. Firstly, the coincidence of the rise of technology with the first years after the fall of the Soviet Union, which were characterised by weak institutional power, created social and economic conditions that had an impact on the way the Internet spread in Russia. Secondly, the geographical aspect of the size of the country is the cause of a centralisation of infrastructures and economic wealth in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and, less significantly, in other urban areas. The Internet is seen as a potentially decentralising power; while Moscow and Saint Petersburg still boast higher figures of Internet penetration, the situation is changing rapidly (as data quoted in section 2.1 will show), and questions of central and peripheral online identities are starting to be addressed. In addition, there is a significant presence of Russians abroad that adopted the Internet earlier than citizens of the Russian Federation, and who utilised it immediately to maintain a contact with their native language and culture and contributed to the creation of the earliest Russian-language pages.67 Robert Saunders argues that the activities of minority ethnic Russians abroad who use the Internet are

de-politicised, and that these Russians are less likely to identify with the Soviet Union and to engage with a global culture rather than with their own nation, while Russians resident in the Federation are more likely to use the Internet for nation building. Questions of national identity, regarding both Russians in Russia and Russians abroad, are in fact central to numerous fields of Russian studies, including media studies.

In the next section I will provide more detailed examples and discussion of these factors as I describe some aspects of the rise of the Internet in Russia.

2.1 The rise of the RuNet: elites and peripheries

A glance at the historical development of the RuNet is necessary in order to offer an accurate picture of the environment in which the examples I will use in the following chapters have emerged. Eugene Gorny in his very detailed chronology of the Russian Internet in the 1990s situates the birth of the RuNet in 1994, with the creation of the .ru domain.68 Two tendencies of the RuNet user base’s development have been described: Elena Vartanova underlines a phase of exclusive academic use from 1991 to 1993, while in later years businesses started to develop their online presence and to provide a model for private use.69 However, Gorny describes various experimental uses of the Internet in the early 1990s outside of academia, for which private initiatives were of fundamental importance (see also Chapter 3). In addition, Anna Bowles describes the development of the RuNet ‘from an elite club to an integral part of the modern Internet’.70 From a social point of view, the most common descriptions of the early RuNet in fact distinguish a phase when Russian pages were created and frequented almost exclusively by a group of so-called ‘pioneers’. Numerous pioneers remain active to this day in the RuNet. For example, Eugene Gorny is a prolific RuNet scholar whose work covers a variety of historical, social and creative aspects of the RuNet71 and has provided important sources for this

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thesis. Another pioneer, Roman Leibov, is notorious as the ‘first Russian blogger’, that is the creator of the first page in the Russian language on LiveJournal in 2001, as well as one of the first Russian users to explore the community potentialities of the LiveJournal platform. Furthermore, Artemii Lebedev, the son of established writer and blogger Tatiana Tolstaya, is a renowned graphic designer involved in important projects, including literary projects, as well as a popular blogger himself. Several of these pioneers were Russians living abroad, and they were usually scientists or linked to academic environments, where they could gain Internet access before it became widespread at a mass level. The birth of the Russian Internet is therefore closely related to the Russian diaspora.

The initiatives of this small group of individuals were not commercial, and were often consciously aiming to build a Russian Internet culture. The project Zhurnal.ru. Vestnik Setevoi Kultury started in 1996 with the participation of practically all the Russian journalists and writers involved in the emerging Russian Internet culture. The involvement of the main Internet personalities of the time contributed to the consolidation of a Russian Internet culture. The aim of the project was to ‘make a journal about the Internet’, reflecting on the development of the Russian-language Web in its informative, creative and educational functions, and promoting the Internet as a space of cultural creativity. Seven issues appeared, five of which had a parallel print version; the homepage still reports the last update date of 11 December 1999. Similarly, the website Russkii Zhurnal appeared in 1997 with the purpose of creating a space for intellectual discussion for the elites, and still exists as an online cultural publication. Unlike Zhurnal.ru, the starting point of Russkii Zhurnal was not the anti-hierarchical Internet culture, but the role of the

74 For example, Leibov and Gorny are linked to the University of Tartu, Estonia, while others (for example Manin and Delytsin, mentioned in Chapter 3) resided in the USA.
78 Ibid., pp. 151-155.
79 Zhurnal.ru.
cultural elite on the Net. This ideological difference is reflected in the literary projects supported by each of the two websites. Zhurnal.ru’s initiative Setevaia Slovesnost’ was created with the function of spreading online literary culture and reflecting on it, and later became a separate web page; Russkii Zhurnal was instead the starting point of the high-brow page Zhurnal’nii Zal, which collects online versions of the traditional thick journals (more details about both projects will be presented in Chapter 3).

Literary initiatives therefore represented an integral part of the endeavours dedicated to Internet culture since the beginning. It is interesting to note that several of the RuNet pioneers occupied themselves with literary projects online, and often wrote and actively reflected about them. Their initiatives and writings will be analysed in Chapter 3.

During the mid- and late 1990s, Internet use was still exclusive to the intellectual elite, particularly in Moscow and, to a lesser extent, in Saint Petersburg. Home computers were not widespread and access often took place from workplaces; structural problems such as the relatively low penetration of home telephone lines prevented the technology from spreading faster. Throughout the 1990s the ‘average’ Internet user was ’male, young, urban and affluent’. The Internet elite of the 1990s was a ‘closed circle’, basically representing the new intelligentsia and the core of the network society in Russia.

While Internet access spread more rapidly during the 2000s, nowadays Internet use is still mostly concentrated in urban areas and among educated and younger people (aged 18-34). At the end of 2010, according to the Russian Association of Electronic Communications (RAEC), 46.5 million Russians were Internet users, and specifically ‘40% of Russians go online at least once a month, and 27% of Russians do it every day’. In February 2011, the FOM (Fond

82 Vartanova, p. 91.
83 Bowles, p. 25.
84 Vartanova, p. 87.
85 In comparison, according to data from website Internet World Stats, in June 2010 Internet penetration in Russia was 42.8% with Russians representing 12.5% of European users (the website considers the whole Russia as part of Europe), second in number only to Germans. Internet penetration in Germany was 79.9%, while it was 82% in the United Kingdom. In the post-Soviet space, the Baltic countries boasted the highest penetration (75.7% in Estonia, 68.2% and 69.5% in Latvia and Lithuania respectively); Belarus also had higher penetration than Russia at 46% while Ukraine fell behind with 33.9% (‘Internet Usage in Europe’, Internet World Stats
*Obshhestvennoe Mnenie*) estimated a growth of 7% from the previous winter for spring 2011, and further estimated an overall penetration of 46%, that is 52.9 million users over the age of 18. According to the same report, 44% of Russians over 18 use the Internet once a month, and 33% (39 million) are active online every day. 83% of the population between the age of 18 and 24 uses the Internet, while the penetration is 72% among Russians aged between 25 and 34. The larger rates of growth are, however, found among the higher age groups; 57% of citizens in the 35-44 age bracket, and 35% of 45 to 54-year-olds are now online, representing a growth of 7% and 9% respectively for these age groups.\(^8\) FOM predicts that by the end of 2014, 80 million people will use the Internet in Russia (71% of Russians aged 18 and over).\(^8\)

The highest rates of growth are described in provincial areas, where technology arrived later. However, there is still a high discrepancy between the capitals and the provinces.\(^8\) While the RuNet has been described as primarily Moscow-centric, according to recent data Saint Petersburg actually has the highest rate of users, at 72% against 66% in Moscow.\(^8\) Naturally, differences between the two capitals and other areas are still significant. Data from FOM describe 53% of the population accessing the Internet in cities with over 1 million inhabitants. However, a growth of 6% in cities with a population of less than 500,000 and of 11% in villages was registered between winter 2010 and spring 2011.\(^8\)

According to FOM, 31% of village inhabitants are Internet users. The Internet represents an important factor of decentralisation in a country where the differences in infrastructure and cultural environments between centre and periphery have always been significant and clearly distinguishable. Henrike Schmidt analyses three case studies in order to gauge at which level the presence of the Internet affects the redefinition of the once clear boundaries between centre and periphery, and whether the Internet represents a tool for cultural emancipation for rural areas or rather a further instrument of control from the centre through the rapid and effective

\(^8\) <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>), Central Asian countries with high Russian presence like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan reached respectively 34,1% and 26,8%. (*Internet Usage in Asia* <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>). All data are from June 2010 or estimates for 2011 (website accessed 18 July 2011).
\(^8\) FOM, *Internet Auditoriia Rastet Bystree, Chem Ozhidalos’*. 
\(^9\) Ibid.
travelling of information online. Schmidt argues that in recent years the peripheries have started to ‘blog back’ to the centre, utilising the Internet as a ‘bottom-up means of self-representation’, with different results. While a redefinition is in act, argues Schmidt, the concepts of the centre as the location of educated media elites and the periphery as an exotic, sometimes idyllic, far away space, still exist and prove influential, preventing the formation of hybrid identities. As Internet culture remains deeply connected to urban culture, online reports from the villages create a contrasting image and work towards the utopia of a no longer peripheral Russian village. However, in all of Schmidt’s case studies, the view of the village remains ‘constructed’ for an urban audience.\(^91\)

2.2 Post Soviet Russian media: television, the Internet and power

The main rival of the Internet, both in the field of information and in leisure, is certainly television rather than print culture. In contemporary Russia, television remains the privileged media, both for information and entertainment.\(^92\) Dunn describes a ‘two-tier’ information system, where the majority of the population uses television as their primary, and often only, source of information, while a small but steadily growing number of Internet users, defined as ‘professional’ readers by Anton Nosik,\(^93\) actively search and obtain a wider variety of information and points of view.\(^94\) Similarly, Leon Aron describes a ‘television nation’ distinct from the ‘Internet nation’, and argues that members of the latter are more politically active.\(^95\)

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\(^{92}\) The predominance of television in the daily life of various groups of people, with different education and in different locations, is analysed through focus groups by Ellen Mickiewicz, Television, Power and the Public in Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).


The relationship between Russian media, with an emphasis on television, and power, is explored in a wide variety of works, especially relating to the 1990s.\textsuperscript{96} The importance of this relation has historical roots: control of media, and of television in particular, was of paramount importance to the Soviet power. When the regime realised the potential of television as a medium able to reach a vast part of the population, including its least educated members, television spread throughout the Soviet Union. By the 1970s, television represented the main source of information for most of the Soviet population,\textsuperscript{97} reaching 93\% penetration by 1986.\textsuperscript{98}

Soviet television was devised according to Lenin’s theorisation of broadcasting and of mass media such as cinema and radio, and was based on Marxist principles of class interest; its mission was to serve regime-oriented purposes and demonstrate commitment to the party.\textsuperscript{99} Eventually, by propagating official discourse and avoiding or marginalizing forms and topics of information or entertainment that were judged not to belong to the Soviet discourse,\textsuperscript{100} television was no longer serving the people, but the political elite. Consequently, viewers became alienated and unreceptive to its messages.\textsuperscript{101} By the 1980s, the Soviet concept of ‘newsworthy’ no longer satisfied the demand for more information, particularly about events out of the country, and for multiple points of view, of the Soviet population.\textsuperscript{102} The policy of \textit{glasnost} is considered to be an important element among those that led to the disintegration of the Soviet system at precisely that moment in time. In particular, Frank Ellis underlines how the role of censorship proved to be ‘decisive’ in keeping the Soviet system in power, and argues that opening to the ‘global exchange of information’ was one of the key factors in accelerating the demise of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{103}


\textsuperscript{99} McNair, ‘Television in a post-Soviet Union’, p. 304.

\textsuperscript{100} Naturally, entertainment had to respect the ideals of \textit{kul’turnost}, and therefore emphasised films and cultural programmes, as well as sport and children’s programmes. Serials were not numerous and mostly appeared from the 1970s onwards. Beumers, ‘The serialisation of culture’, p. 159.


\textsuperscript{102} Mickiewicz, \textit{Split Signals}, pp. 29, 32-35.

\textsuperscript{103} Ellis, p. 52.
After opening to a plurality of views in the glasnost era and in the period immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian mass media are now reported to be once again heavily controlled by the official power. The role of television remains of fundamental importance: the liberalisation of economy in the early post-Soviet years allowed for the birth of at least partially privately owned channels and for rapid differentiation of contents. However, several of these channels were involved in ‘power struggles’ throughout the 1990s, until the State started to exert a strong influence again.\(^{104}\)

The contemporary Russian television system presents a coexistence of national and state-controlled channels, and private and local channels, whose offerings resemble Western systems in catering for different social groups rather than for different nationalities like in the Soviet Union.\(^{105}\) Contrary to the Soviet era, entertainment now occupies the largest part of airtime.\(^{106}\) Following the same pattern as literature, the early post-Soviet period saw a flood of broadcasts of foreign (mostly American or South American) soap operas through which Russians could savour glamorous Western life or identify with ordinary people in different, exotic settings, and be distracted from the social and economical problems the country was facing.\(^{107}\) As time passed, and especially after the financial crisis of 1998 that made it more convenient to produce locally rather than buying foreign titles, Russian production of serials developed, also generating vital advertising money for the channels. The television serial is now one of the preferred genres of Russian television, representing a Russian-made exception next to American thriller serials on television.\(^{108}\) Serialised literary adaptations were discussed earlier in this chapter.

However, the Russian television system is also characterised by a form of self-censorship where certain topics are ignored and the range of views expressed is relatively poor.\(^{109}\) Instead, the importance of the Internet in Russia has been indicated in its independence, as it is described as a free space in contrast with the influence of political power on other media. Great importance is attributed to the allegedly unlimited freedom of speech granted by the non-hierarchical structure of the Internet, in a country where traditional media are still very close to the centres of power and

\(^{104}\) For a more detailed discussion see Birgit Beumers, ‘The serialisation of culture’, pp. 159-160.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., p. 160
\(^{106}\) Dunn, pp. 43-44.
\(^{109}\) Dunn, p. 44.
where censorship was a reality until recent decades. In addition, the Internet is considered as an environment where civil society is shaped in the absence of a fully open democratic political situation. Similarly to eighteenth-century English coffeehouses (see Chapter 1), Leon Aron suggests that the Internet in Russia is ‘the main alternative public platform and the engine of grassroots self-organization, at once a national ‘town hall’ and party headquarters, vital to the emergence and maintenance of thousands of social and political movements’.  

The perception of the Internet as an exclusively innovative environment where societal change takes place is however more controversial. Elena Vartanova argues that the myth of a ‘revolutionising potential’ is attributed to new technologies as their development is seen as fundamental for improvements to the social and economic situation of Russia. In particular, new media are expected to ‘support the creation of new democratic institutions in post-communist Russia instead of the outdated social and political structures still existing in the political environment’. The role of a substitute for inadequate political structures, which was once performed by literature, is now indicated in the informative and interactive potentialities of computer mediated communication. However, Vartanova underlines how the influence of official power is still present on the Internet, and defines the idea of an individualistic-minded ‘Internet reader’ actively choosing the contents he/she reads, as ‘simplistic’.  

In addition, Fossato, Lloyd and Verkovsky argue that alternative political activities online have no ability to really subvert political power, and therefore simply replicate old models of underground activity which cannot bear a real influence on power, rather than creating new political opportunities. New forms of engagement through technology are not the only condition necessary for the democratic progress of society, when the rest of the structure is not ready and Internet penetration not high enough to make a significant difference in activism. Rather than contributing to the building of the new civil society, the Internet is

110 Aron, p.1.  
111 Vartanova, p. 87.  
112 Ibid., p. 93  
reflecting and preserving the same kind of alternative space that underground movements provided in the past, without necessarily aiming at subverting power.\textsuperscript{114}

The official power, however, is not simply a spectator of Internet activity but, after an initial phase during which institutional presence, funding and regulations were practically non-existent,\textsuperscript{115} the State actively started to encourage Internet literacy\textsuperscript{116} and to promote the inclusion of the Internet in a wider cultural discourse through media events and awards to projects with a significant impact on the development of the RuNet.\textsuperscript{117} However, some of the regulations put in place since then show ‘mistrust’ on the part of the government for socially active organisations and aim to maintain some form of control on forms of communication which threaten officially regulated information; nevertheless, complete control of a medium which, by its nature, combines information with interaction and publication is not feasible.\textsuperscript{118}

Institutional presence has also developed online, allegedly with the intent to spread more officially sanctioned information and therefore somewhat control the medium through a form of self-censorship.\textsuperscript{119} Vladimir Putin’s interest in promoting new technologies ‘complements’ his ‘youthful, energetic image’\textsuperscript{120}, while Dmitrii Medvedev is reported to be a keen Internet user. The Russian President has a website\textsuperscript{121} and institutional videoblog,\textsuperscript{122} whose content also appears on Medvedev’s official blog on \textit{LiveJournal}.\textsuperscript{123} Both the videoblog and the \textit{LiveJournal} page are open to comments from readers. The videoblog and the comments facilities were moved to \textit{LiveJournal} in 2009, with an explicit invitation from Medvedev to Russian citizens to utilise the opportunity for interaction with the official power, where he


\textsuperscript{115} Vartanova, Gorny.

\textsuperscript{116} For example, by implementing initiatives such as the ‘Electronic Russia’ programme. See Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener, ‘“Our RuNet?” Cultural Identity and Media Usage’, in \textit{Control + Shift}, ed. by Schmidt, Teubener, Konradova.

\textsuperscript{117} The inclusion of the Internet in an official discourse is thoroughly analysed by Henrike Schmidt and Katy Teubener, ‘(Counter-) Public Sphere(s) on the Russian Internet’, in \textit{Control + Shift}, ed. by Schmidt, Teubener, Konradova. Schmidt and Konradova also underline the alternative, but generally not dissident character of online initiatives.


\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., p. 218.

\textsuperscript{120} Bowles, p. 24.

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Prezident Rossi}i <http://www.kremlin.ru/> (accessed 20 July 2011).

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{videoblog Dmitriia Medvedeva} <http://blog.kremlin.ru/> (accessed 20 July 2011).

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Blog Dmitriia Medvedva} <http://blog-medvedev.livejournal.com/> (accessed 20 July 2011).
underlines the importance of such a space for direct information and for communication between citizens and institutions:

I also would like to say that I have made a decision to widen the possibilities for discussion in my blog; you’ve written to me about that. Now it is becoming part of LiveJournal: a community is created on LiveJournal where recordings are broadcast, and where it is possible to do what [the public] had wanted to do for a long time, that is to comment on the comments. So if you want to reply to some of the visitors of the blog, I mean reply directly, whatever you want to say - which used to be rather difficult - now you have such an opportunity. Feel free to use it!  

The relationship of power with the Internet is, therefore, often ambivalent, as interaction is encouraged but also regulated and controlled, especially if channelled via official spaces. As argued by Aron, however, one function performed by the Internet in a social/political context is that of providing ‘societal feedback’ for the official power; while citizen’s Internet-based political activity in some ways favours the official power by allowing citizens to ‘let off steam’ through online activism.  

2.3 Internet and Cultural Adaptation

A specifically Russian media theory has not been devised. While the simple applicability of Western paradigms is not entirely feasible, a Russian-centric, slavophile theory would also prove incomplete to describe the environment of contemporary Russian media, which are influenced by the legacy of the Soviet regime and incorporate some elements of similarity with Western popular culture and institutions. Karina Alexanyan argues that, because of the unique character of the Russian media system, Western understandings of Internet culture cannot be applied to Internet use in Russia. Hedwig De Smaele instead suggests a ‘Eurasian’ model as a ‘third way’, which mediates the influence of Western patterns, the elements of

125 Aron, p.1.
Soviet heritage, and the emerging specific traits originating from Russia’s own cultural position.¹²⁷

The Internet itself was initially perceived as a foreign form of technology, which belonged to American culture and was inseparable from the English language, and therefore bound to become a tool of ‘cultural colonisation’.¹²⁸ Early RuNet pages were written in Latin characters. Only from the mid-1990s was it possible to create web pages in Cyrillic. Bowles attributes utmost importance to this factor in finally suggesting to Russian users that the Internet could become part of the Russian experience rather than a simple adaptation of American technology.¹²⁹ By 1999, the Russian segment of the Internet had adopted enough Russian peculiarities to be considered as a prime example of how ‘society colonised the technology’ rather than a technology able to transform society.¹³⁰ According to Gorny, the characteristics of online communication reflect the Russian cultural traits of sobornost’ and literaturnost’, to which he attributes the success of the LiveJournal blog platform in Russia. Bowles discusses the uniqueness of the Russian online experience and underlines how the RuNet retains Russian characteristics such as concern with censorship and emphasis on networking,¹³¹ while according to Rohozinski this latter factor reflects the phenomenon of blat and a habit of Russians to structure their life in networks and to utilise their acquaintances for their purposes.¹³²

The description of the Russian Internet as a unique adaptation of a global technology is widespread among Russian commentators. In particular, Eugene Gorny is notoriously an advocate of the intrinsically Russian character of the RuNet. These positions can be understood more generally as reflections on the Russian character in contrast with the West, as a continuation of the debate between Slavophiles and Westernisers.¹³³

¹²⁸ Ellis, pp. 160-162.
¹²⁹ Bowles, p. 21.
¹³⁰ Rafal Rohozinski, quoted in Fossato, ‘Web as Adaptation Tool?’.
¹³¹ Bowles, p. 21.
¹³³ For an example of this debate, see Eugene Gorny, ‘The Virtual Persona as a Creative Genre on the Russian Internet’, in Control + Shift, ed. by Schmidt, Teubener, Konradova, pp. 158-159.
The Internet has been described as ‘virtual coffeehouse’ (see Chapter 1), utilising culturally anglo-saxon paradigms. In the same way, Russian-specific models have been used as interpretations of the Internet. In fact, the Internet is often compared to samizdat, and to ‘kitchen-table talk’.

The experience of samizdat is so important in Russian culture that it pervades the online environment: numerous references to it are made in the names of websites, especially literature-related ones. The parallels are very strong: the Internet, like samizdat, contains different genres of writing, as its contents simply depend on what authors decide to publish or spread; however, in both cases there is no control on the quality or accuracy of materials. Both online and in samizdat, questions of authenticity are posed, as texts are not always signed, or it may be impossible to verify the real identity of an author. Similarly, there is no control on the recipients of the text, and readership is not homogenous: both in samizdat and even more on the Internet, it is not possible to determine with certainty who will find the text and whether they will read it or not. However, one significant difference is that on the Internet there is often a possibility for readers to interact with authors and vice versa, as the medium allows contact between writers and their audience. One significant example of this dynamic is represented by self-publication websites, which will be analysed in the following chapter. In addition, both in samizdat and on the Internet, it is not possible to know exactly what is available as texts are not catalogued. On the Internet, directories exist on single websites and search engines are able to locate what is being looked for and provide more results of interest; however, a global and complete catalogue is impossible to compile.

In some ways, the Internet can be considered as the ultimate form of samizdat. Anyone with access to the necessary technology and a basic expertise on how to use it can publish original content without requiring the presence of a third person to copy and spread the materials. Furthermore, naturally, online publishing does not pose any kind of risk for its practitioners, as was often the case with samizdat. However, samizdat materials were not only politically charged; numerous materials simply belonged to alternative cultures that were not accepted by the regime, but did not aim to oppose it either. Counterculture and underground or alternative cultures are also the backbone of the Internet, where they coexist with official discourse, as shown earlier in this chapter.

135 Komaromi, p. 631
In addition, one more experience typical of Soviet culture can be applied to the dynamics of Internet culture. During the ‘Stagnation’ period of the 1970s-1980s, the kitchen of communal apartments became the place where private discourse developed among Soviet citizens, as an alternative to the officially imposed cultural discourse. Gorny compares this experience to the thriving and sharing of individual, not necessarily officially sanctioned experience on the page of the Internet, and relates it to the stagnation of official media in the 2000s.136

Similarly, Vartanova argues that:

One of the reasons why Russians have taken to the Internet so enthusiastically might be explained by its potential to increase the scope of personal liberation and the possibilities for individual choice, which have traditionally been very limited in Russian society. The significance of the Internet in the personal life of Russians has not been studied in depth as yet, but it is clear that Runet [sic] attracts a great number of users who spend their leisure time online.137

Vartanova maintains that the enthusiasm regarding the Internet as a space for communication and creativity is more justified out of the political field and in the private sphere.

In this sense, the sensation of the Russian Internet is its very developed and vibrant blogosphere, represented in particular by the platform LiveJournal (whose name is often used in the Russian context as a synonymous for ‘blog’138). Gorny argues that the popularity of this particular blogging website among Russian-speaking Internet users is due to its intrinsic characteristics. LiveJournal was in fact one of the first blogging platforms offering a high level of connectedness and seemed designed for community-formation (grouping favourite authors or readers in ‘friends’ lists similar to those of contemporary social networks. Gorny notes that the ‘friends’ feature is used more enthusiastically by Russian users than their American

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137 Vartanova, p. 96.
counterparts). Gorny relates the preference of Russian users for these features to a ‘national character’ deeply influenced by the traditional concept of *sobornost*, and a general need of Russians for ‘affiliation’, arguing that Russians are the national group of users who mostly take advantage of the socialisation options of the *LiveJournal* platform.\(^{139}\)

Another important factor favouring *LiveJournal* in Russia is the possibility to create debate through its interactive functions, such as commentaries. Unlike the American section of *LiveJournal*, which was used by younger people to post on personal, everyday events, Russian *LiveJournal* initially represented a ‘playground for intellectuals’, at a time when the Internet was still mostly widespread among urban professionals. In addition, the multi-language nature of *LiveJournal* encouraged Russian users to express themselves without needing English, and the location of the servers of the website out of Russia granted more freedom of expression as not subjected to Russian jurisdiction.\(^ {140}\)

Karina Alexanyan observes that Russian blogs present little differentiation between private and public forms of expressions and blur the line between blogging and social networking.\(^ {141}\) In recent years, the attention of Russian Internet users has also moved to social networking websites. Russians are among the most avid users of social networks in the world: social networks rank high in usage statistics,\(^ {142}\) and Russian users spend a great amount of time browsing them.\(^ {143}\) According to data from 2008, 71% of active Russian Internet users have a social network profile.\(^ {144}\) Analysis of social networks in the light of social engagement and identity formation suggest that:

> These social networking services attempt to construct a floating (currently lacking) national identity by means of immersion in an entertaining environment. While the principal task of global networking in general is to discover the most desirable versions of the future, networking in the Russian

\(^{139}\) Ibid., pp. 238, 241
\(^{140}\) Ibid., p. 244, 252.
\(^{142}\) Aron, p. 2
\(^{143}\) Alexanyan, ‘The ruNet – Lost in Translation’, p. 6
\(^{144}\) Ibid., p. 10
Internet, in contrast, aims for the invention of an alternative past built on the Net in a smooth and less traumatic manner.\textsuperscript{145}

To summarise, while the real importance of the RuNet for political change is questionable, the environment it provides for communication and creative sharing represents an important phenomenon which is likely to bear some importance on all cultural expressions appearing on its pages, and helps foster personal and national identity.

3 - Conclusion

This chapter has provided background information on both literature and mass media in Russia, creating a context for the specific examples which will be discussed in the following three chapters.

Factors of change in the role of literature in Russia are represented by the loss of the Soviet value system, which allowed Russians to discover further perceptions of their history, and the new social and economic conditions of the country which resulted in the unprecedented success of escapist literature. This situation allowed the birth of a capitalist mass culture at a time when the structure of the market was also being transformed, adapting both to the new economic conditions and to the new features of literary audiences.

While reading is now a less central activity for Russians than it was for Soviet citizens, different literary phenomena have taken prominence over the past two decades. After a period of rediscovering the classics and Russian history during perestroika, and a phase of assimilation of commercial literature in the 1990s, post-Soviet Russian literary culture has become diversified. Readers are now offered a choice of local authors who are able to address the worries and values of the contemporary Russian citizen, creating topical works that enjoy huge commercial success and that can be inserted in a wider media culture involving television adaptations, but also in a growing Internet culture.

The new literary course is considered by some as a sharp contrast with the past, causing the perception of the end of the high mission of literature and of the

literary author. However, the two levels of high and low literature continue to coexist and their boundaries become subtler as mainstream forms of literature are canonised through commercial success. It is in this context that the case studies presented in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis are situated, representing hybrids between commercially successful entertaining literature, and higher, traditional literary expressions, as will be discussed in the relevant chapters.

At the same time as this transition in literary culture is taking place, a Russian Internet culture is also emerging. The Internet is spreading relatively rapidly in the Russian Federation, after an initial phase when ‘pioneers’ and intellectual elites were practically the only users. The Internet is now described as the environment where independent information is generated, with television considered too aligned with power. Alongside political activity online, the use of computer mediated communication for self-expression represents a significant aspect in the RuNet, as well as a potential tool for the connection of geographical peripheries with urban centres. The collective nature of the RuNet, as noted by Gorny, Bowles, Alexanyan on social networks, and Aron plays a central factor in contemporary Russian media culture, and also shapes some of the characteristics of the literary RuNet.

While some aspects of literary uses of the Web are naturally homogenizing Russian users with the rest of the world, the infrastructural and socio-economic conditions of Russia influenced the way in which literary phenomena emerged on the RuNet. Online literary phenomena in the early and contemporary RuNet will represent the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 3

The Russian Literary Internet

In this chapter, I will describe and discuss some examples of websites in the literary segment of the RuNet, in order to offer an impression of the cultural and creative atmosphere of this part of the Internet, where my case studies will be situated.

The RuNet offers a vibrant and productive literary scene for literature enthusiasts as well as writers, both amateurs as well as those who have already been published in print. It also represents a decentralising force, allowing authors connected from every area of the Russian Federation to have the same opportunities for visibility and affirmation in literary circles as those living in Moscow or Saint Petersburg.¹ For example, websites like Novaia Literaturnaia Karta Rossii were created specifically with the purpose of devoting as much attention as possible to regional literary centres and to authors living in every area of the country.²

This situation democratises literary participation and influences publishing: as writers make their debut online, the very process of the consecration of an author changes, and it is no longer necessary to be published in print to become an officially acclaimed writer.³ Established literary hierarchies are thus undergoing discussion, together with the definition of literary quality and, ultimately, of the authoritative status of literature itself.

These factors contribute to create a complex environment, where boundaries between literary forms and between roles become blurred and intangible. Amateur and professional authors, classic and contemporary, or even experimental, literary expressions, and high and low cultural elements, all coexist in the space of the Russian literary Internet (sometimes referred to as RuLiNet⁴).

¹ Mauro Martini, ‘Internet e provincia, le nuove risorse della poesia’, in Mauro Martini, L’Utopia spodestata: le trasformazioni culturali della Russia dopo il crollo dell’URSS (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), pp. 78-90. Martini argues that the Internet contributes to the loss of a clearly established centre, previously represented by Moscow, in post-Soviet Russia.
³ Martini, p. 83. Martini refers his arguments specifically to poetry; however it is possible to apply these ideas to the environment of prose as well.
In my analysis, I will first discuss the function of the RuNet as an archive and a tool for the dissemination of traditional texts, by describing the role of online libraries within Russian online culture. Secondly, I will present spaces where experimental literary activity takes place, such as collectives of writers where production and dissemination of texts are completed by reflection on contemporary literature. I will then move on to a discussion of online self-publishing. Naturally, there is overlap between the characteristics of websites in each section, and these categories are not perfectly separate. Throughout the discussion, both traditional and innovative typologies of texts and of literary processes will emerge, as well as different types of interaction between website creators and users, and among the users themselves. Finally, I will consider the reaction of the publishing industry to online publication, to the issues of piracy typical of the online literary environment, and to the emergence of electronic reading; some space will also be dedicated to online forums related to publishing houses.

In general throughout the chapter, and in particular in the section regarding literary spaces and self-publication, I will keep a mostly chronological focus, as the evolution of the Web coincides with different phases during which different types of websites started their activity. Furthermore, because literary aspects of the Russian Internet have received relatively little scholarly attention in English, the main sources of information and reflection are provided by the main protagonists of the literary RuNet themselves. The Internet elite of the 1990s, who created and maintained the first literary websites, also reflected on the significance of the phenomena they were creating. On some occasions, literary spaces become useful catalogues through pages listing external resources through hypertextual links, which provide important sources for research. However, it has not been uncommon during my research to find pages which no longer exist and it is interesting to note how numerous links to early literary websites are no longer working. Consequently, working on websites

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which started to exist during the 1990s often resembled historical work, as well as representing a constant reminder of the ephemeral nature of online resources.

1 - The Internet as an archive of traditional materials: libraries and journals

The Internet can be considered as a worldwide virtual library. Personal web pages and websites where aspiring authors can publish new contents coexist with online journals (either online versions of already existing journals, or created to be read exclusively on the Web) and online libraries, thus illustrating one of the functions of the Internet: archiving and collecting pre-existing contents.

The phenomenon of online libraries is very relevant in Russia, where this type of websites enjoys great popularity. One reason for their success is the fact that not all readers have easy access to bookshops, and prices of books are still sometimes too high for less affluent readers (see Chapter 1). Traditional libraries are also often not an option for readers to acquire anything beyond old editions of the classics of literature. The library network of post-Soviet Russia is in fact too unstable; while a market-driven publishing industry emerged promptly in the 1990s, public libraries stalled without the institutional support that had been lost together with the rest of the Soviet state structure. On the contrary, finding an online version of a Russian book, to be read on screen or downloaded, often free of charge, can be an immediate and practically effortless task.

In addition, online collections of literary texts in the Russian language allow the Russian diaspora (as well as of course Russians residing in the Federation) to easily maintain a contact with their native culture, and even to use the discussion spaces of these platforms as a virtual meeting point. Online libraries function as ‘repositories of collective memories and imagination’ and become, therefore,

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environments where a communal, national identity and culture are shaped and cultivated. Members of the online community are often aware of the role of such spaces:

Online libraries are an exceptionally large intellectual fund. They lessen the effect of so-called ‘brain drain’, permitting people to stay in the orbit of Russian language and culture. Without online libraries the useful effect of Internet and computers in Russian education system is sharply lowered. A huge, openly available mass of Russian literary texts is a foundation permitting further development of Russian-language culture, worldwide.\(^\text{10}\)

Furthermore, the popularity of online libraries and the enthusiasm of both their creators and their public, who often actively participate in their development, offers the illusion that Russia still is (or is close to being) ‘the most reading country in the world’.\(^\text{11}\) Moreover, it also suggests an emphasis on the social function of the written word, rather than on its economical value, thus contributing to perpetuate Russian cultural myths.\(^\text{12}\)

Some of the spaces which grew to be perceived as online libraries did not start from a consistent plan, but were developed through the accumulation of texts and consequently assumed the role of libraries in the environment of the Russian Internet.\(^\text{13}\) A reflection on the defining features of online libraries, as well as a review of the main Russian online libraries, in contrast to European (not only-English speaking) examples, has been offered by Eugene Gorny and Konstantin Vigurskii in 2002,\(^\text{14}\) while Henrike Schmidt also discussed some of them in 2009.\(^\text{15}\) I will therefore only focus briefly on two examples of two different models.

\(^\text{11}\) Schmidt, “Holy Cow” and “Eternal Flame”, p. 4.
\(^\text{12}\) Strukov, p. 9.
\(^\text{13}\) Schmidt, “Holy Cow” and “Eternal Flame”, p. 4.
\(^\text{15}\) Schmidt, “Holy Cow” and “Eternal Flame”.
One of the earliest and often considered as the best-known of these spaces on the RuNet is Maksim Moshkov’s library.\textsuperscript{16} It was founded in 1994, through a private initiative like most of the first pages of the RuNet: one of the peculiarities of Russian online libraries in contrast with their Western counterparts is that private projects were, at least in earlier days, more frequent and meaningful than institutional (even academic) ones.\textsuperscript{17} This is not surprising since, as mentioned in Chapter 2, the early RuNet thrived on private initiatives as the interest of the state for the new medium only developed later.\textsuperscript{18}

Moshkov’s library was initially based on active collaboration from users, who would ‘continually scan and submit new texts’ (both from published and unpublished authors), thus reflecting their varied tastes on the website, which worked as an early form of ‘social network’.\textsuperscript{19} Social and collaborative uses were prominent in the RuNet ever since the 1990s, perpetuating the tradition of samizdat as a mechanism of copying and spreading written material. The concept of an online library where readers choose the materials to archive is closer samizdat than to traditional libraries which, historically, in Russia had always served the local organs of power and the Soviet state afterwards, and were influenced by censorship.\textsuperscript{20}

Moshkov’s library contains a wide variety of texts, from classics to detective novels to scientific texts, divided into numerous sections, which include a self-publication journal, appropriately called Samizdat, and a section dedicated to travel writing and life abroad, popular with Russians émigrés.\textsuperscript{21} A forum is also present, and still active.\textsuperscript{22} The graphic aspect of the website is consciously minimalistic, as

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item<sup>17</sup> Gornyj and Vigurskii.
\item<sup>18</sup> For example, Moshkov’s library started to receive funding from the Federal Agency for the Press and Mass Media in 2005. Schmidt, p.7.
\item<sup>19</sup> Mjør, p. 83 Instructions for users willing to send texts can still be found at: ‘Instruktsiia dlja blagodetelei i tekstodatelei’, Biblioteka Moshkova <http://lib.ru/TXT/incoming.txt> (accessed 19 June 2011)
\item<sup>20</sup> Stelmakh, p. 3
\item<sup>21</sup> The peculiarities of this section and the clear sense of belonging to a virtual community of its users have been explored by Natalja Konradova, ‘The Formation of Identity on the Russian-Speaking Internet: Based on the Literary Website Zagranica’, in Control + Shift, ed. by Schmidt, Teubener, Konradova.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Moshkov chose to favour organisation and practicality over aesthetics, and declares not to have any intention to ever change this preference.\textsuperscript{23}

However, users of Moshkov’s library no longer have the possibility to submit, and therefore to choose, the materials presented, as the library now limits its materials to books which are no longer subject to copyright, or to works by contemporary authors who authorise their online publication. The reason for this is due to a copyright trial faced by the website in 2004. Previously, Moshkov’s policy simply consisted of deleting books from the website at the request of their authors.\textsuperscript{24}

The trial against Moshkov mobilised active participants of the Russian online community. Some initiatives appeared in favour of the library, showing the level of interconnection in the Russian literary Internet environment and the popularity of Moshkov’s library in Internet culture.\textsuperscript{25} One of these initiatives was the ‘Manifesto in Defense of Maksim Moshkov library’, issued by the ‘International Union of Internet Professionals ‘EZHE’ - a professional union, a self-regulating organ, in fact a kind of a guild of Russian Internet movers and doers’. The subscribers lament the still incomplete legislation and inconsistent attitude to the rights of authors online and suggest that ‘[n]on-commercial, free online libraries must become de-ju[r]e public libraries’, on the basis of the fact that:

The old-fashioned, offline libraries always provided free access to all published works. Are we to be left without this most important public resource a[f]ter the transition to digital technologies? Should we refuse the possibility to use a library from our home over the Internet only because the technologies of controlling access so as not to infringe on the rights of the authors are not yet in place?

\textsuperscript{24} Schmidt, pp.6-7. See also ‘O kopiraitakh i dr.’, Biblioteka Moshkova <http://lib.ru/COPYRIGHT/> (accessed 22 June 2011).
\textsuperscript{25} The case has become famous and even has its own entry on English Wikipedia, as a popular fact of Internet culture. Gevorkyan v. Moshkov <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gevorkyan_v._Moshkov> (accessed 19 June 2011).
The Ezhe collective underlines the lack of development of regulations regarding the rights of authors, but faces the question from the point of view of users, for whom online libraries are useful and convenient. The collective strongly suggests opening a dialogue in order to find a public agreement on ‘some kind of licensing […] or some other techniocal [sic] or legal solutions’, believing in the importance of a ‘combined effort’ to ‘work out the rules and technologies that would be acceptable for everyone.’

Significantly, the Ezhe Manifesto also underlines how Moshkov’s library is the ‘result of many years of unpaid work of hundreds of volunteers and a ‘de fact [sic] national treasure which doesn’t have any direct analogues in the world’, and takes a strong position against ‘allow[ing] harm to be done to the Library or it’s [sic] maintainer in order to satisfy someone’s purely commercial interest’. The free circulation of literary materials is therefore paramount to the vision of this group of supporters of Moshkov’s library.

The ‘lighthearted’ treatment of copyright in numerous RuNet projects, such as Moshkov’s, is attributed to the attitude to intellectual property typical of Russian culture, which privileges the common cause over private interest. It is also a consequence of historical conditions, as lack of control on the Internet is a byproduct of the Russian Web’s absence of regulation in the 1990s, which fostered the belief of a part of the RuNet community’s that the copyright of literary materials is opposed to the collectivist nature of Russian culture.

Besides being part of the ongoing discourse regarding the rights of authors and of readers, it is suggested that Moshkov’s library, as well as other spontaneous online literary initiatives, is contributing to a subtle subversion of the literary canon and the creation of an environment where ‘aesthetic judgment’ is based on the public’s choice rather than on an official cultural authority. In this space, the

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26 All quotes in this section are from the web page hosting the English version of the Manifesto In Defense of Maksim Moshkov Library (see Footnote 10). I reported here the original text showing the spelling mistakes that are found in it, in order to keep the flavour of a text written online without particular accuracy to correct language. Poor attention towards language is considered one of the characteristics of (some forms of) online communication and situates this text as typical of Internet culture not just for its message but also in the way it is delivered.

27 Gornyi and Vigurskii.


traditional hierarchical structure is replaced with a searchable environment, where the classics appear next to contemporary and amateur texts, and can become the starting point for new literary projects.\textsuperscript{30}

In contrast, other projects present a more traditional approach based on granting access to a large selection of texts whose importance is not established by readers, but by an academic canon. The Fundamental Electronic Library of Russian Literature and Folklore\textsuperscript{31} was created in 2002 and, perhaps for chronological reasons, it did not experience the lack of institutional influence that characterised the RuNet environment of the 1990s. Unlike Moshkov’s project, in fact, the Fundamental Electronic Library received institutional funding since it first appeared online. The library, known on the RuNet as FEB, is an archive where dissemination happens on a ‘one to many basis’, rather than representing a social environment. The library consists of digitalised official scholarly editions and maintains a clear academic focus, aiming to contrast the perceived imprecise and amateur status of other online libraries. Its ambition is to grant the accuracy of its editions, and to become the most complete online Russian library. It strives to do this by offering a professional, high-brow attitude to the written text and to the choices of material presented, ultimately attempting to preserve a traditional, ‘conservative’ canon still based on the Soviet notion of \textit{kul’turnost’}.\textsuperscript{32} In this sense, this project fully replicates the function of a traditional library, as it is based on the authority of printed editions transferred onto a new medium, rather than being directly influenced by its users. However, it promises a typically digital ‘dust-free’ academic life, thanks to the considerably easier and more rapid search options offered by an online search in comparison with the consultation of numerous physical volumes.\textsuperscript{33} The website also offers an element of interactivity with its users through a guest book, where editors respond to readers’ comments.\textsuperscript{34}

In addition to online libraries, other archival spaces are represented by the online versions of the traditional ‘thick journals’. The importance of the Internet for

\textsuperscript{30} Strukov, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{32} Mjør, pp. 83-87.
\textsuperscript{34} Comments and replies are discussed by Schmidt and Mjør.
the literary life of the country was soon realised by these previously unchallenged literary institutions. The texts of new issues, and some archives, of the main journals are collected on the website Zhurnalnyi Zal (see Chapter 2). The website was opened in 1996 as a ‘federation’ of online literary journals. The journals were originally presented in ‘digest’ form as supplementary and promotional materials to the paper journals. However, after several years the editors of the website realised that the printed journals and the online versions attracted different audiences ‘almost without overlapping’, and publication of complete issues of most of the journals started.35

The choice of journals appearing on the website follows precise criteria: the aim of the website is to collect articles from journals devoted the dissemination of ‘aesthetic’ knowledge, thus rejecting journals occupying themselves with non-literary subjects and with a too narrow literary focus, or those presenting political or ideological affiliations.36 The Zhurnal’nyi Zal project is consciously ‘high-brow’ and represented ‘one of the first professional literary websites’, attracting 7000-7500 visitors per day by 2005.37 The website claims a precise space in Russian literary and online culture; rather than just a library of materials from tolstye zhurnaly, it aims to represent an expression of the ‘journal culture’ unique to Russia. Even through the online medium, the project endeavours to respect the functions of the ‘thick journal’ not just as a collection of texts but as a structured, single conceptual unit which is not exhausted within one issue but opens a discourse lasting for years. Zhurnalnyi Zal thus transfers ‘the literary-artistic ‘thick journal’ as an aesthetic phenomenon of Russian culture’ online, contributing to the continuation on the pages of the Internet of a ‘literature-centric’ culture, where classics and contemporary literature share the same cultural space on the page of the journals, together with literary criticism and essays.38

The Internet also favours smaller, less influential journals from the provinces. The opportunity for online editions means they can potentially obtain the same visibility as journals from the capitals, thus further contributing to the decentralisation of the cultural hierarchy.39 In addition to journals, more or less

37 Kostyrko.
38 Kostyrko.
39 Martini, p. 82.
authoritative, whose existence pre-dates the Internet and which are still closely related to their paper editions, a myriad of original online-only journals have emerged thanks to the RuNet. Officially, the first among these is considered to have been created by RuNet pioneer Leonid Delitsyin, with the name DeLitZine.\(^{40}\) While it is quoted on several online sources and linked to on numerous websites, it is unfortunately no longer possible to reach its page.

As well as introducing digital versions of texts, the Internet opened the way for new literary forms only existing online. In the next section I will discuss the development of online literature on the RuNet

2 - The development of the Russian literary Internet

In the early days of the RuNet, literary uses were among the first to emerge. The first experimental literary enterprises show a tendency to playfulness and interactivity, which has characterised the RuNet since the 1990s, in some ways anticipating some of the features of Web 2.0. The early RuNet was used by intellectuals often living in different countries, taking advantage of the opportunity for visibility and rapid communication offered by the new medium to establish and maintain contacts with each other, and to develop collaborative projects.\(^{41}\) Most of the pioneers of the Russian literary Internet were members of the Russian diaspora. It is also of note that none were a professional of literature, and that several were scientists working at foreign universities, where they had the opportunity to access the Internet before it became widespread in non-academic environments and in Russia.\(^{42}\)

In his chronology of the first years of the Russian Internet, Gorny quotes several literary games and experiments.\(^ {43}\) As early as 1995, the ‘first Russian-

\(^{40}\) Gorny, *A Creative History of the Russian History*, p. 199. As the majority of other early Russian Internet protagonists, Delitsyn also lived abroad, notes Gorny.


\(^{43}\) Eugene Gorny, ‘Chronology of the Internet in Russian’, in *The Internet in Russia: On the Eve of*
language game on the Internet’ was developed. Created by émigré physician Dmitrii Manin, it was inspired by ‘bout-rimés’ a game popular in French literary salons of the seventeenth century, and utilised a computer programme to generate rhymes for the player to complete, thus involving the machine itself in the creative mechanism. Bout-rimés also became the first interactive space on the RuNet, as the game was played collectively, and was followed by the first web bulletin in Russian. In 1997, a website dedicated to another ‘interactive literary game’ appeared, based on Japanese collective poetry Haiku and created again by Manin and by Roman Leibov.

Notably, then, the first creative literary experiences on the RuNet were inspired by foreign forms. The re-elaboration of already existing literary forms is one of the postmodernist features of contemporary literature; in these cases, its sources are not the classics but literary games coming from other cultures. While postmodernist re-elaboration is not just exclusive of the Internet, it is part of the international character of Internet culture.

As well as literary games, original literary experiments also took place ever since the 1990s on the RuNet. Roman, the first ‘experience in network prose literature’ appeared online in 1995, still on the initiative of Leibov and Manin. The text is a ‘complicated conceptual work’ (so much so that it needs lengthy instructions to be read), with an ‘intentionally’ banal plot (a roman, a romantic affair) constructed as a hypertext. Its experimental nature makes the text extremely difficult to read; the focus of the initiative is clearly on its experimental nature rather than on

Great Changes (Moscow: IREX, 2000).

44 A glance at Manin’s personal website offers a clear example of a number of Internet tendencies. Manin, a physicist, opened his own personal website in 1994 or 1995; in later years, he consciously left it unchanged as a ‘museum item, remaining perhaps one of the few pages still existing online who have not ‘essentially changed’ since the 1990s. Dmitrii (Mitia) Manin’s Home Page <http://centrolit.kulichki.net/centrolit/manin/> (accessed 22 May 2011). On the website, which is entirely in English, Manin offers for free use and distribution a ‘Cyrillic mode’, to write in Cyrillic without a Cyrillic keyboard, thus making use of the Internet for a collective cause. CYR.EL version 2.32, Feb 4, 1998 <http://centrolit.kulichki.net/centrolit/manin/cyr.el> (accessed 22 May 2011).


In this project too, great importance is attributed to interactivity and collaboration. Following the different chapters requires active choices from the reader, thus implicitly stimulating the user to engage with the website and with the text. In addition, the authors themselves invite contributions from users: ‘the most important thing: this is not a novel for readers. This is your novel. Keep on writing!’ it is suggested. However, Schmidt suggests that the purpose of Roman was to demonstrate the impossibility ‘to create a story in a collaborative, non-hierarchical way’, and that Leibov’s experiment remained unique as it proved that ‘a further development of the hypertext genre would [not] be productive’ in Russia.

Roman, together with the early literary games, is considered to be one of the earliest examples of seteratura, ‘net literature’. The debate around this word was fervent in the late 1990s/early 2000s: A whole page on website Setevaia Slovesnost’ is dedicated to articles about seteratura, most of them posted in the late 1990s/early 2000s, but up to date to 2001. The website also archives a lengthy discussion which took place in 1997-98 on the guestbook of literary competition Teneta, representing one of the earliest examples of online long-term discussion, happening over several months and dedicated to only one specific subject.

Seteratura can be defined on two different levels, either broadly speaking as any form of literature originally published online, or specifically as literature that makes use of features of the Internet (hypertext, multimedia literature, collective authorship). Eugene Gorny considers Internet creativity as an independent literary genre, which includes guestbooks and commentaries as early forms of online literature, and blogs as literary spaces. On the contrary, according to Dmitrii Bykov, online literature is a concept that cannot exist as just like manuscripts or typewritten works did not define a different genre of literature, the web is for Bykov just ‘one

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50 ‘Kak chitat’ Roman’.
51 Schmidt, ‘Roman’.
52 Scheltijns; Gorny, Chronology of the Internet in Russian.
55 Scheltijns.
more library, rich and diverse but in no way the birthplace of a new genre’. Bykov continues:

The texts which are usually included within the notion of *setermina* are simply works which for some reason did not find space on a literary journal or a book. In this sense the literary Internet is nothing different from a continuation of *samizdat*, with all the underground complexes and the tireless, ardent struggle with self-respect inherent to it.\(^{57}\)

However, the whole innovation around the Internet is bound to exert some influence on literary culture. Technical advancements in the past did create different possibilities which had an impact, sometimes as fundamental as that of writing and of the printing press (see Chapter 1), not just as tools for writing but also and perhaps more importantly because of the cultural environments they created and attitudes they fostered. A creative environment free from censorship and technical limitations (besides the need for a device connected to the Internet) and where visibility and communication are easy to achieve can create a wider impact on literary activity than a simple archival space or the illegal activity of *samizdat*. The innovation in communication is also especially meaningful in the Russian context: in the environment of self-publication websites (see Section 3 in this chapter), it is reminded how even obtaining a typewriter in the Soviet Union was often no simple task and, as material from each typewriter was recognisable, writing inappropriate material was dangerous. However, ‘now no one remembers about this and everybody writes what he/she wants’ in the space of the Internet.\(^{58}\)

### 2.1 - Literary portals

Since the 1990s, the RuNet pioneers enthusiastically explored the possibilities to utilise the new medium for literature-related initiatives. As the Internet slowly grew in number of users and in importance, countless websites


dedicated to literary activities emerged. The most interesting of these are vast websites with several literary-focused purposes, which can be defined as 'literary portals'. This type of websites offer visibility to original literary works as well as collecting theoretical articles and reflections on contemporary literature, and in particular on online literature. This metaliterary aspect is of great importance as it stimulates active literary discussion between Internet users and creates sources for every interested user to consult. Several of these websites are related to online literary journals and are often connected to various other initiatives through a hypertextual structure. The Internet is therefore both an archive and a creative environment, not only for new literary contents but also for self-reflective materials.

Among these websites, *Setevaia Slovesnost*, founded in 1997 as an extension of cultural website *Zhurnal.ru*, is to this day a point of reference for the literary RuNet. The project is presented as an ‘online literary journal, an electronic library and a laboratory of research on Net literature (*seteratura*)’. While this definition can sound contradictory, the website is actually an innovative hybrid space where literary enterprises are created and discussed, combining simple storage of information with critical reflection and interaction. In fact, *Setevaia Slovesnost* is not a traditional literary journal, because it does not have pre-planned and periodical issues, but rather it publishes texts ‘in a continuum of individual and collective creation (*tvorchestvo*)’. It can therefore be perceived as a library, as it collects literary and critical works. However, unlike traditional libraries, the texts presented here are published on the website for the very first time. It therefore mediates aspects of a journal and a library, but is also a ‘laboratory of literary activity in the electronic medium’, both at a theoretical level (with articles reflecting about *seteratura*, as well as about traditional literature) and in practice, by hosting multimedia literary experiments. In addition, it is linked to external projects, including the previously mentioned first literary experiments (bout-rimés, haikus, *Roman*), as part of a ‘community of literary websites’. The community aspect of the Web and in particular of the early RuNet is thus of paramount importance to this project.

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61 ‘O proekte’.
The precise and at the same time multifaceted self-description of *Setevaia Slovesnost*’ wants to ‘reflect’ the literary environment of the Internet, which, as expressed in the introductory page of the project, ‘dilutes the borders between traditional institutions and various forms of textual activity; new hybrid, changeable forms are born, which could have not existed before, and whose precise name still needs to be found’. Clearly, the creators of this project do believe in online literature not just as the circulation of traditional texts online, but as a possible separate literary genre, presenting recurring characteristics related to the digital nature of online texts, such as the presence of screen-based or multimedia literary contents. In fact, they underline that preference for publication on the website will be given to works ‘which utilise the possibilities granted by the electronic medium (hypertext etc.)’.  

Despite this explicit encouragement towards experimental texts, a large number of texts presented on the website use traditional means (they include short stories, poetry, theatre plays, but even whole novels).

However, the *Kiberatura* section leads to a whole outside world, opening on an external page depicting a planet wrapped in a spider web on a black background, with a graphic style that looks at cyberculture, in contrast with the plain and professional light brown of the main website (see Pictures 1 and 2). The opening page invites its visitor to enter to a website listing works of ‘cyberliterature’. *Kiberatura* is here defined as an ‘autonomous genre of literature’, and described as literature that cannot be printed on paper because it utilises multimedia devices that would be lost outside of the computer environment. Cyberliterature is enthusiastically defined as ‘the highest form of literature’ because it offers the possibility to abandon the traditional physical book, described as ‘reasonable and good, but not eternal’ and slowly agonising. The break with print culture is symbolised by a game on the main page, through which it is possible to virtually smash Gutenberg’s machine (Picture 3).

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62 Ibid.

The actual works of *Kiberatura* are hosted back on the main website of *Setevaia Slovesnost*, and they include a variety of hypertexts, but also works which use sounds and Flash animations, or even Powerpoint presentations. Some works do not represent proper narratives, but are closer to games: for example, *Znaki* (Signs) is played on anagrams and animations. Some graphic arrangements of poems also recall the style of Futurism. A comparison can be suggested between the enthusiasm of cyberliterature’s supporters with their determination to make use of all the possibilities offered by technological tools to create works where narrative is sometimes secondary, and the original ideas of Futurism. The myth of progress and of the machine is present in both ideas, as they both are products of eras of excitement for new technological and social possibilities.

A different case is represented by the literary community *Vavilon*, whose existence pre-dates the era of the Internet. It was founded in 1988 as a ‘union of young writers/philologists’ (*literatorov*), where ‘young’ refers to writers belonging to the contemporary generation, rather than to those at the beginning of their career, and went online in 1997. Its focus is therefore not primarily on online publication and innovative forms of writing, but rather it is a community that has taken advantage of the online medium to expand its scopes and audience. The journal connected to the activities of the community evolved from a *samizdat* publication to a typographic publication first, and then to a website collecting various other journals. Online literary expressions are here considered as a world which ‘parallels’ real literary culture; crucially, the creators of this project still maintain hierarchies between high

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70 For example: Alexroma, ‘Stikhotvornaia Golovolomka’, *Kiberatura* [http://www.netslova.ru/alexroma/puzzle.html] (accessed 29 May 2011);
71 ‘Thanks to the support of Artemii Lebedev’ - once again one of the RuNet pioneers is involved in a literary project. ‘Vavilon: chto eto takoe?’, *Vavilon* [http://www.vavilon.ru/xplain.html] (accessed 29 May 2011).
and low culture, and address issues of authority in the virtual world. Since its appearance online, Vavilon positioned itself as a more high-brow environment than most other online literary spaces, underlining how, at the time when the website first appeared, the literary Web was ‘dominated’ by projects of amateur authors, and attributing a negative value to them.

Vavilon immediately situated itself in opposition to these amateurial spaces and as a place for ‘professional’ authors, established by people with ‘inside’ knowledge and experience of contemporary literary culture. The website explicitly informs that ‘mass (massovaia) literature will not be represented in any form (in any case, not while the border between high and mass literature is felt so clearly within Russian culture)’. At the same time, the more ‘serious’ existing websites, such as the online versions of the tolstye zhurnaly, are described as not collecting enough material of sufficient quality and suffering from ‘inertia’ inherited from the Soviet period. Therefore, the stated purpose of the online presence of the Vavilon community is to ‘make the Russian literary Internet habitable for high literary art’, with the collaboration of other websites dealing with ‘high’, professional literature and with offline literature.

Setevaia Slovesnost’ and Vavilon both represent early RuNet literary projects uniting pioneers interested in the literary world. However, while Setevaia Slovesnost’ accepts works from both ‘known and unknown authors’, Vavilon, whose existence as a community is not dependent on the Internet, caters for professionals and underlines its relation with offline literary culture; an area of the website, called Literaturnaia Zhizn’ Moskvy, used to collect lists of events and information about literary clubs of the capital. The missions of the two websites are therefore different: while Setevaia Slovesnost’ was created as an online project and belongs completely to RuNet culture (among its founders are RuNet pioneers like Gorny and Leibov),

73 ‘Vavilon: chto eto takoe?’ ‘Professional’ is here defined as ‘not only and not so much having a professional legitimisation, that is the acknowledgment of these or those authoritative institutions, but mainly the self-determination of the author directly reflected in the texts: a professional of art sensibly places himself in the context of the contemporary literary situation’.
75 ‘Press-reliz 1997 goda’.
76 ‘O Proekte’, Setevaia Slovesnost’.
showing utmost interest for experimental expressions of digital literature, Vavilon focuses on so-perceived ‘high’ literature. Both communities collaborate actively with other websites with similar aims, in the typical communal spirit of the Internet, and of the early RuNet as a relatively small and closed élite environment. Setevaia Slovesnost’ is still active and regularly publishes new works; Vavilon ceased to exist as an active community in 2004, when a successor project named Argo was announced, as ‘a complex of initiatives in support of contemporary Russian literature’.78

2.2 Literary prizes go online

Both in the Soviet Union and early post-Soviet Russia, a long tradition of literary prizes existed, which, however, did not always reflect the merits of a work, but rather an author’s political or ideological stance, or celebrated his career as a whole.79 Ever since the very early days of the RuNet, online literary prizes appeared. The contest Teneta first took place in 1996 (but on that year, the competition judged works from 1994 and 1995 too), yearly until 1998 and then in 2000 and 2002.80 Teneta aimed to represent ‘a way to support publication of online literature in the Russian language’.81 The importance and novelty of the competition is that participating works needed to have been published exclusively online, on any platform (literary journals or websites, but also forums or personal websites) during the current year.82 Aspiring participants were required to candidate their work through a member of the organising committee. From the small scale of the early years, the competition evolved: winners were initially chosen by a jury of Internet pioneers dealing with online literature, while later a jury of professionals of literature was instituted next to the online one, thus legitimising the role of the competition further and investing it with further authority.83

Moreover, since 1998 the competition included categories dedicated specifically to online literature, including hypertexts, and literature-related projects such as literary journals and virtual personalities. The consideration for web-based genres within a literary contest was a feature unique of Teneta: other online literary competitions, described by Schmidt, excluded works that could not be printed, therefore ignoring the most innovative works.

In particular, the contest treated the virtual persona as a ‘recognised genre of web-based creativity’, whose creation is ‘the realisation of a poetic strategy of self-invention’. The virtual persona is thus something between a real person and a literary character, close to artistic creation. Gorny considers this treatment of the virtual persona as a Russian specificity, claiming that, for various reasons including the ‘literature-centric’ character of Russian culture, virtual personas are seen as expressions of creativity rather than in their social and technical characteristics, like in the West. As often, Gorny’s view is criticised as relying too much on stereotypes and on the Westernizer/Slavophile dichotomy.

The purposes of the Teneta contest were to create a hierarchy among the large amount of literature posted online, and to ‘orientate the reader’ to the best of the RuNet, thus underlining the lively activity of the literary RuNet. Teneta was in fact not simply a way to discover new names in the literary field: the critic Il’ya Kukulin considers the competition as a tool to create a selection and to ‘notice the most interesting works’ among the great amount of literature of various kinds published online. The nomination system was also in place in order to guarantee the quality of the works accepted to participate in the contest.

The competitive spirit, the control of quality and the visibility that victory in the Teneta contest offered to online writers sought in some ways to contrast the notion that online literature is just ‘the literature of passionate computer enthusiasts,

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87 Ibid.
88 Schmidt, ‘Literaturnyi russkoiazychnyi Intenet’.
90 Schmidt, ‘Literaturnyi russkoiazychnyi Intenet’
created for other computer enthusiasts (komp’iutersshikov)’. As critics of online literature maintain, this sense of community is bound to lead to a weakening of literary qualities because ‘even if an author who would be able to create something with talent appears, he will weaken and spread on the Web something poor, done sloppily. Because what’s the point in putting an effort, if it’s for “us”? ’. The attention to quality and for selection of the most worthwhile works through online competitions suggests instead that members of the online literary environment do employ some care in the creation of their products, and need to select the best artistic expressions within the wide choice offered by the literary RuNet.

Literary contests and the literary portals environment which encouraged their existence still involved a limited amount of authors. As the RuNet developed and more Russians gained access to the Web, self-publication communities started to appear and to contribute to the literary atmosphere of the RuNet.

3 – Online self-publication: samizdat of the twenty-first century

All the types of websites described so far present at least one traditional aspect. Even when they deal with works published online for the first time, and offer the same opportunities to unknown authors and to those who have already published some works, they maintain an established hierarchy as well as an editorial board who assesses and publishes the texts received.

Self-publication websites differ from this model as they allow every registered user to directly post texts that will immediately appear on the website, therefore completely bypassing any editorial process and any form of selection. In addition, this type of spaces encourages interaction between users, offering the possibility to review and comment on other users’ works and therefore working as virtual communities, where the success of a work is determined by users reading it and criticising it. It is on these spaces that the transformation of readers into writers, according to the model that sees users as producers of contents, takes its most complete form, granting immediate publication without the need of a third party. The possibility for each work to be reviewed by other users establishes an important

opportunity for authors to receive feedback and for readers to interact directly with authors. Because of all these reasons, self-publication websites represent very developed examples of the Web 2.0 tendency.

The pioneer of literary online communities based on interaction is considered to be Moshkov’s Samizdat, which was established in 1997 and is still active. However, this space too is moderated by editors.92 Self-publication communities are usually situated in a more recent position in the historical development of literary websites in Russia. The first and largest spaces dedicated entirely to self-publication on the RuNet are Proza.ru (prose) and Stihi.ru (poetry), both of which appeared in 2000.93 Here, users can publish their own works autonomously after completing a registration. Reasons why users choose to join such websites may vary from personal aspirations to eventually reach print publication to a simple desire to share one’s own literary efforts in a dedicated environment and engage in discussion with other authors.

The Proza.ru and Stihi.ru websites have exactly the same layout and work in the same way, the only difference being, naturally, the type of texts they host. I will here mostly refer to the prose website. However, several aspects will be similar within the poetry community. The main page looks busy and professional (see Picture 4), and greets the visitor with a constantly updated count of the number of works and authors present on the website (2,052,751 works by 119,321 authors for prose, and 13,546,340 works by 361,890 authors for poetry on 20 June 2011. The number of authors, however, does not correspond to the number of registered users, which includes users who read and comment on works by other users, without posting their own94). Besides obvious links such as those to published works and searches for works or authors, the home page also offer lists of literary events taking place in Russia,95 thus establishing a relationship with the offline world, which underlines the role of the website as an actor in a wider literary culture. The attention

of literary websites for external events testifies how the Web has really become an ‘extension of everyday life’ rather than simply a place for experimentation on the part of an elite.


Visitors to each of the authors’ works in the previous weeks are recorded on the website (Picture 5), together with the number of commentaries and reviews received and written by each author. This means that authors have access to their audience and can monitor the popularity of one work or, if the reader is a registered user, they have the possibility to in turn visit their works. This model fosters the community aspect of the website.
Proza.ru and Stihi.ru were founded by Dmitrii Kravchuk, one of the first Internet experts formally educated as such. Because of his background, Kravchuk differs from the Internet pioneers of the 1990s who started to use a brand new communication system without knowing its full potentialities. Perhaps due to his experience as a specialist, Kravchuk demonstrated a very clear awareness of the dynamics of the RuNet in his choice to create an environment for self-publication. Guessing the potentiality of online social networking before it became central to Web 2.0, Kravchuk wanted to create a space for interaction between Internet users. At the same time, he realised that the possibility to autonomously post literary works online (without any form of editorial process) was still exclusive to those Internet users who had the necessary technical knowledge to create their own Web page. As he found this situation to be unfair, as well as at risk of excluding those people with an interest in the humanities rather than technology, he decided to offer amateur

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As stated on his personal website, Kravchuk (born 1977) was one of the first graduated of the course ‘Networks and systems of telecommunication’ (Telekommunikatsionnye seti i sistemy) of the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technoligies. ‘Biografia’ <http://www.kravchuk.ru/bio.html> (accessed 31 May 2011).
writers a space to post their works. His choice fell specifically on literature because text requires less technical structures, as well as less web space, than other forms of expressions, and it is easier to edit than music or images. In fact, the textual forms collected on the *Proza.ru* and *Stihi.ru* do not usually utilise multimedia tools and are structurally and technologically rather traditional; their innovation is rather on the immediacy of the publishing process.

The natural comparison is once again with the process of *samizdat*. However, the focus of these spaces is not on publishing or community formation per se, but rather on fostering a ‘creative environment’ by providing a ‘meeting place’ for writers and readers. Self-publication websites represent ‘a significant cultural phenomenon with a unique creative atmosphere’ and, according to Torlina and Kazakevitch, their ‘fundamental democratic principles’ will have an impact on the individuals who frequent them and, in the long run, will be able to ‘affect societal change’ by creating new form of organisation as well as new meanings and ways of communication.

On the contrary, according to others, the democratisation of writing online is simply fostering graphomania and amateurism. Ellen Rutten isolates two tendencies in criticism of online literary phenomena: support for amateur publishing in the almost utopian free space of the Internet, as opposed to negative opinions on the modern ‘cult of the amateur’. One of the supporters of the negative tendency is writer and literary critic Dmitrii Bykov, who compares the environment of the Russian literary Internet to the Dostoevskian underground. Bykov makes a distinction between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ writers, presenting the latter as ‘underground types’ thriving in irrelevance and in endless, often heated discussions, not recognising ‘one of literature’s fundamental conventions: the postulate that literature is something to be performed by the chosen ones’. The Russian literary Internet is to Bykov the realm of ‘nonprofessionalism’ and a symbol of ‘recreation, indolence and irrelevance’ intruding on the ‘hierarchy of values’ that is the basis of

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96 Torlina and Kazakevitch, pp. 272-278
literature by attempting to blur the boundaries between amateur and professional art, thus creating an ‘essentially postmodern’ situation. Even interaction among writers is not considered by Bykov as necessarily promising, while the possibility for readers to comment creates a polyphony of disparate, often not authoritative voices that is seen as ‘a genuinely Dostoevskian situation’. Bykov’s reading of the Russian literary Internet implies a clear distinction between high and low literature, where there is no potentiality for texts to be valuable if they have not appeared through a traditional process which takes into consideration the canon and traditional hierarchies. Bykov is therefore part of those commentators who condemn ‘amateurism’ in online writing, considering it guilty of ‘lowering cultural standards’.  

Discussion concerning the irrelevance of online literary expression is unavoidable in an environment where an enormous amount of texts are collected and where there is no universal control on quality. It is also impossible for materials to be of interest for everybody. The websites’ creator Dmitrii Kravchuk highlights the value of a space where everybody can find expression, regardless of its quality, and where it is the reader’s role to select what is of interest to him/her. The example provided by Kravchuk is a particular author who published on Proza.ru his memories of his time in jail; even if not professionally crafted, such material will be appreciated by someone having a particular interest in that specific subject, and it represents an important opportunity for the author to document his personal experience.

It is interesting to note that some of the amateur authors on Proza.ru declare in their personal introductions that they are only beginners, or perhaps not even writers at all, which may appear surprising given that some have published printed books and obtained literary prizes. This display of modesty could be related to the traditional motivations expressed by Bykov regarding writers involved in online writing, who are thus aware of not being at the same level of ‘real’ writers,

100 Bykov, ‘Dostoevsky and the Psychology of the Russian Literary Internet’. It is notable, however, that Bykov himself has frequently published on the Internet even if he defines himself as not active online. He recognises the advantage of being able to publish online works that he would not have the chance to publish on paper, and the importance of receiving and discussing feedback, even admitting to intend to use parts of an online conversation as material for one of his works (pp. 72-73).
101 ‘Interviu dla bloggera miku.ws’.
traditionally performing a ‘higher’ mission.¹⁰²

Rather than their status as a writer, some of the authors involved in online self-publishing focus their enthusiasm on the possibility of being part of such stimulating literary communities, not only as writers but also as readers. One regular user of Proza.ru describes his experience as such:

The fact is that already for a long time I have not been able, besides rare exceptions, to read those books that our publishers print in mass print-runs, since that is not literature, but a collection of any texts in poor Russian language. And, suddenly, it turns out that literature lives right here on Proza.ru, and not in the bookshops. No idiotic ironic crime fiction, no tears of the rich from [affluent Moscow neighbourhood] Rublyovka, no memoirs of shallow so-called ‘stars’, but real life with its bitter, scary, happy, wise truths stormed into my life. I didn’t only discover a multitude of new names. The reading material on the contemporary book market did not offer me a representation of how my fellow citizens in Russia, in the ex-Soviet republics and abroad live, about what they think, argue, dream of. Now, finally, I know. And I am glad. I discovered the most important thing – that Russian literature lives everywhere – in America and in Germany, in England and in the Baltics, in Israel and Australia, in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, in Siberia and in the Volga Region, in the Far East and in the Caucasus. And that means that, despite all the cataclysms, we remain one nation like before.¹⁰³

This very articulate passage represents an opinion shared by other users of the website, as expressed in the comments following the text. Even more importantly, this text addresses several topics concerning the relationship of literary culture with the online world. First of all, the author takes part in the debate about high and low culture by expressing disapproval for the low-brow literature that became popular in post-Soviet Russia. In contrast to Bykov, he finds that low quality literary

expressions are those published by the traditional book industry, which dedicates most of its editions to popular genres which, according to the author, do not represent real life. Clearly, this author’s definition of (high) literature involves stories he can relate his own experience to, while Bykov considers the way online authors treat their topics as an expression of the unchanging ‘underground’ mentality of the average Russian. Unlike Bykov, this author concedes that quality literary expression can, and in fact does, come exactly from amateurs who write online rather than from authors publishing commercial genres.

Secondly, the nature of the online publications appreciated by this user helps foster a sense of community. Reading on Proza.ru helps him understand how other users live their lives, and helps him connect on a deep level with people living far away who share the same interest in literature. Thirdly, as a consequence of this communal feeling, he implicitly recognises the role of the Russian diaspora in shaping online culture and online literature, as he includes in his list of places where Russian literature is alive some of the typical areas of Russian emigration or ex-Soviet countries with a high Russian presence. In this user’s words, a real ‘virtual reunification’ of Russians all over the world takes place on Proza.ru. Sharing life experience through literature makes this user feel closer to fellow Russians, whatever their location, and shapes a sense of belonging to a Russian nation, united by Russian literature through the Internet.

### 3.1 Everyday writing: graphomania and blogs

The immense variety of online writing is sometimes defined as a display of collective graphomania. However, graphomania is not a product of the Internet age, but rather a concept which has been applied to Russian culture on numerous occasions. Svetlana Boym offers an overview of real and fictional graphomaniacs throughout Russian literary history, defining graphomania as ‘any practice of writing perceived as unhealthy in its own time, whether excessively prolific, excessively banal, ideologically incorrect, or culturally improper’. It reveals a tension ‘between literature, which in some cultures constitutes the core of national identity, and

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everyday writing, which could jeopardize it’. As ‘everyday writing’ is now publically exposed on the Web, it can represent a threat to the concept of literature as a higher force. In the realm of the Internet, graphomania is manifested by writing copious amounts of works, sometimes of poor literary quality or not particularly brilliant: the Internet offers the possibility to all the country’s graphomaniacs to stop writing for themselves, and share their texts with a prospective audience. According to Boym, ‘the persistence and survival of Russian graphomania tells us a great deal about the deep-seated national belief in art and in the possibility of aesthetic emancipation against all odds’. However, Boym had wrongly predicted the extinction of the Russian graphomaniac in the post Soviet era. The ‘literary disease’ is, instead, more alive than ever on the pages of the Internet, where ‘pure, unadulterated love for writing (without the will to power)’ persists and is very much topical since graphomania, just as online writing, ‘poses the problem of the boundaries of literature, of the relationship between writing and the making of the self’. Cultural boundaries are continuously questioned by artistic expressions on the Internet, while personal as well as national and cultural identity is continuously negotiated through online communication.

Irrelevance and graphomania are features often attributed to the Russian blogosphere as a writing environment (see Chapter 2). Despite their obvious literary qualities, blogging platforms are not exclusively literary websites and they do not generally define themselves as such. Their character is rather of ‘okololiteraturnost’, nearly-literature, a form of unprofessional ‘literary communication’ which has as its centre expression rather than art. The LiveJournal environment offers its users (‘users’, and not ‘authors’) the illusion that everything can be posted on the website, from long texts to external articles or even photographs, and will be commented upon, while the community’s structure (see Chapter 2) creates the conditions for an individual relation between the author of a post and its readers. The feature of ‘okololiteraturnost’ is considered to be specific to the Russian segment of

106 Foster in Internet Culture, ed. by Porter; Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, ‘Our RuNet?’ Cultural Identity and Media Usage’ in Control + Shift, ed. by Schmidt, Teubener, Konradova.
LiveJournal, which represents for its users a ‘diary, a forum, memoirs, essays, poetry, lyrical prose, chapters from novels, real stories, letters, announcements, notes, pillow books, recordings and excerpts - any, usually brightly expressed, clearly differentiated discursive form and genre’. The ‘incompleteness’ and ‘fragmentation’ of LiveJournal fosters the development of a creative community, rather than the idea of a collection of short texts without any relation to each other. In this sense, both blog platforms and self-publication websites perform an important role, much wider than the function of simple archival spaces: they collect texts from users with an interest in the written word, who interact with each other and form a community. The community aspect is thus of paramount importance in the creation of a literary environment on these virtual spaces.

Furthermore, blogs become self-publication spaces for established authors as well. For some authors, LiveJournal is a space to experiment with literary projects and ask their audience for feedback. For others, the online personal blog becomes a space where materials out of their official literary production can be written, often employing a higher degree of spontaneity, as well as a lower control on grammar accuracy and on style, which is sometimes voluntarily kept as far as literary style as possible. There is no clear opinion on whether or not writers’ blogs should be considered as part of the corpus of works of an author, or perhaps as paraliterary materials, similarly to writers’ diaries of the past. However, writers’ blogs pose methodological questions for literary researchers. Ellen Rutten identifies a difficulty in classifying blogs, because of the variety of messages they contain and their use of multimedia materials. Moreover, online writing generates issues with authenticity, as it is not possible to verify a writer’s identity online.110

The literary author-turned-blogger becomes accessible for his/her fans, just like any other blogger, contributing to erase the higher aura of the book writer, who now participates in forms of discussion on the same level with his readers, and where attention to literary quality is not strictly necessary.111 The boundaries of professional

108 Ibid.
111 Ellen Rutten has considered linguistic aspects of writers’ blogs in ‘Wrong is the New Right. Or Is It? Linguistic Identity in Russian Writers’ Weblogs’, in From Poets to Padonki. Linguistic Authority
and amateur writing and the clear separation between the world of authors and of readers are thus being blurred, not only because the writing activity has been democratised on the Internet, but also because professional writers can work in the same creative environments as their readers.

4 - The Internet and publishing in Russia

In the environment of the RuNet, where private initiatives gain extreme importance and resources can easily be found online, print publication is no longer the exclusive route for literary texts to obtain visibility. As their counterparts in the rest of the world, Russian publishers in the digital era need to broaden and at some levels reinvent their activities in order to attract readers and select which books to print, and even to justify their existence in the era of online self-publication. With the advent of the Internet, the traditional relationship between writers, publishers and readers is no longer straightforward, as print publication is no longer the exclusive route for a writer to spread his works.

Literary authors can choose to self-publish through the Internet, or can turn to alternative media after rejection from traditional publishers. This is the case of science fiction author Dmitrii Glukhovskii who self-published his novel Metro 2033 on a website he created specifically for this purpose in 2002 after the book was rejected by several publishers. After advertising his personal website on fantasy and science fiction forums, Glukhovskii received feedback from visitors and started to edit his novel according to their comments, then submitting the new drafts to their judgment. This initiative created a real phenomenon of collective writing, where the main author still retained the final decision. The process of writing itself was strongly influenced by the medium, and the book became interactive and almost a serialised ‘Internet drama’. Through this experiment, Glukhovskii added several chapters to his work and was convinced by direct contact with readers to change the ending of the novel in the same way publishers had suggested. The novel was

and Norm Negotiation in Modern Russian Culture, ed. by Ingunn Lunde and Martin Paulsen (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2009).

eventually published in print in 2005, and even turned into a computer game.\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Metro 2033} is therefore a product of the era of the Internet and an example of a successful transmedia enterprise.

Literary debuts are thus transformed by the new possibilities available. Glukhovskii highlights the power of the Internet for writers in search of popularity, and indirectly alludes to the secondary position of publishers in a writers’ search for a reading public:

Internet is that jungle where the strongest survives. If your book is original, interesting, and simply well written, Internet users will spare you the costs of publicity. They will share your texts with each other and make you famous. Just make sure your books are original, interesting and well written.\textsuperscript{114}

At the moment of print publication, Glukhovskii’s novel already had a following of online readers. The author actively took advantage of the Internet to find readers for his book, and is even recognised as having inspired a category of Internet users interested in fantasy, such as teenagers, to approach the reading of the book once published in print.\textsuperscript{115}

Contemporary readers are used to an abundance of titles and to complex stimuli from several media sources and, consequently, attracting readers to books has become a priority of publishers. It is important to remember how a market-driven publishing industry has only emerged in Russia in the 1990s, adapting rapidly to the new conditions and overcoming the economic instability of the 1990s (see Chapter 2). At the same time, Russian publishers have had to develop awareness of new technologies and of their role, both as competitors for the attention of readers, and as new possibilities in aid of the book industry. The ongoing challenge for publishers is to learn to incorporate these technological possibilities within their market strategies, as well as to help readers obtain the desired books, overcoming the distribution problems which are typical of Russia due to the size of the country and to the

\textsuperscript{113} Alejandro Serrano, \textit{Fantasymundo entrevista a Dmitrii Glukhovskii por Metro 2033} \url{<http://www.fantasymundo.com/articulos/1985/fantasymundo_entrevista_dmitri_Glukhovskii_metro_2033>} (accessed 20 June 2011)
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
incomplete transformation from a state distribution system to a purely commercial one.

The main Russian publishers have established their own websites, some of them even as early as the late 1990s.\textsuperscript{116} The websites of some major publishers present information on the business and on published titles and authors, as well as recent news targeted to readers or to booksellers.\textsuperscript{117} One section is always present addressing aspiring authors with the details of the publishers’ selection process. In this sense, online information is also helping the traditional book process, informing prospective writers on how to move the first steps towards printed publication.

In addition, two of the websites examined, Eksmo’s and Zakharov’s, present discussion forums for interaction between users. Interestingly, Eksmo’s forum is mainly frequented by aspiring authors, while Zakharov’s forum collects questions from readers.\textsuperscript{118} The forum on Zakharov’s pages presents topics related to readership, where users enquire about where a book can be purchased, about when a particular edition will be published, or about editorial choices. One user complains that the new editions of Akunin’s books do not look good when the book is standing next to old editions,\textsuperscript{119} showing a preoccupation for the aesthetic and ornamental function of the book as an object which recalls Soviet kul’turnost’. The forum in this case is a useful tool for readers to enter into direct contact with the publisher regarding questions related to the material book and the traditional book market.

On Eksmo’s pages, instead, the forum is not used by readers to collect information on book editions, but it is frequented by a number of active amateur writers. Several sections are dedicated to the world of publishing, with particular attention to questions on how to achieve publication; a whole section is dedicated to

\textsuperscript{116}Bushnell and Bushnell, ‘A Report to the 1999 Summer Slavic Librarians’ Workshop’, p.112.
\textsuperscript{118}Forum Izdatel’stva ‘Zakharov’ <http://www.zakharov.ru/component/option,com_kunena/func,listcat/Itemid,127/> (accessed 16 May 2011);
‘questions about the reception of manuscripts by the publisher’. One example of a topic discussed here is a lengthy informative post titled ‘I wrote a book, what to do?’ offering detailed instructions on how to offer a work to a publishing house. Already existing literary works are discussed, however, this forum is mostly utilised as a self-publication space, and a space for literary exercise. Rules on the sections where users’ literary efforts are shared are often very formal, and a clear separation of strictly defined genres is invoked. The type of literature created and discussed remains therefore in the frame of traditional forms. A very interesting initiative is represented by ‘literary duels’, where two users compete on a pre-selected theme and their works are judged by other users. Literary games have been popular on the RuNet ever since the 1990s, and the popularity of this section testifies their unchanged prominence on the Russian literary Internet as online culture evolves.

Eskmo’s forum represents therefore a space where aspiring authors can share their works and achievements, as well as confront themselves with other authors, both comparing their literary efforts and obtaining information on how to come into contact with publishers. Printed publication is generally sought by authors and most of the literary forms presented on the website are not experimental: the forum is a social space and an important channel for collaboration, rather than an experimental space itself.

Publishers’ websites often include a section on ‘where to buy’ their books, demonstrating the necessity to inform readers about which bookshops offer the titles published by each publisher. However, as well as physical bookshops, publishers’ pages also suggest online shops and online distributors of books, as alternative choices for the purchase of books. Online shops where printed books can be purchased have already become familiar to the technologically-aware Russian reader.

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The main Russian online shop, Ozon, utilises a similar formula to well-known American company Amazon, offering not only books but also music, DVDs and technological products, as well as products for home and beauty, among others.\(^{125}\)

When it was opened in 1998, Ozon represented one of the first examples of e-commerce on the Russian Web: literary distribution was at the forefront of the evolution of Internet services. Because of its pioneering nature, Ozon had to face challenges that had not been faced by other Russian websites before. Among these were the low rate of Internet penetration at the time, the scarce familiarity of Russians with electronic payments, the habit for forms of retail typical of Russia but different from the West, and the low income of Russians customers. Importantly, these problems pertained to the Russian internal market, but were not a barrier for Russians abroad who had higher income as well as more familiarity with card payments; the website became an important site for the Russian diaspora to obtain Russian books.\(^{126}\) Nowadays, Ozon also represents a place where Russian readers can obtain foreign books, especially in English, and even old and out of print books. As of early 2011, Ozon accounts for 50% of all online book sales in Russia, and offers eighteen types of payment and fourteen delivery options.\(^{127}\)

While online sales help readers locate the books they want, a digital book market is slowly developing. The e-book market represented only about 5% of the Russian book market in 2010 – a figure that doubled from the previous year\(^{128}\) and followed a virtually non-existent e-book market in 2008.\(^{129}\) It is recognised by all publishers that the establishment of a more developed market for the digital book needs to become a priority in order to attract readers to new products and to cater for an ever more technologically-minded public. LitRes, the largest digital provider in Russia, established in 2007 and currently boasting 400,000 registered users and a catalogue of 45,000 e-books, complains that not enough publishers are proposing their newest titles in digital version.\(^{130}\)


\(^{127}\) ‘Publishing in Russia – Special Report 2011’, Publisher Weekly, p. 22.


\(^{129}\) ‘Publishing in Russia 2011’, p. 23.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., pp. 21-22.
Ozon is concretely working towards the development of an e-book market by partnering with publishers to convert titles into e-books.\textsuperscript{131} A whole section of the website is dedicated to digital books and offers explanations about what they are, how they are read and on which devices, how their costs are established.\textsuperscript{132} In addition, Ozon offers its own e-reader, Galaxy, offering ‘a galaxy of possibilities’ in the ‘universe of books’, as the website advertises.\textsuperscript{133} The e-reader allows the user to write commentaries and listen to music while reading; among its features it is explicitly mentioned that, thanks to the technical characteristics of the screen, it allows for such easy reading that ‘you will not feel the difference between reading an electronic book and a paper book’, and ‘the eyes will not feel more tired than reading on paper’. The reference to the difference between reading on screen and reading on paper addresses one possible preoccupation of contemporary readers, who are approaching e-readers for the first time. However, from the reviews on the page, it appears that those readers who have already tried this device have no complaints about the comfort of reading, but are rather disappointed about the e-reader’s technical qualities.\textsuperscript{134} Nevertheless, Ozon’s attempt to be at the forefront of technological novelties offering a modern e-reading product is a signal of the growing interest of both readers and publishers for digital books.

Alongside the challenges created by the e-book market, one other important issue that Russian publishers need to face is the particularly high amount of piracy experienced on the RuNet, either through direct downloads (both from Russian or foreign websites, thus not subject to Russian laws), or hosting services and torrents.\textsuperscript{135} However, it is suggested that the reason why so many readers turn to illegal downloads is that the offer of legal digital books is still too poor. Paradoxically, the interest for pirated digital copies seems to indicate that there would be enough interest from readers for digital books, and that a significant

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., p. 22.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
number of Internet users are already familiar with this type of reading.\textsuperscript{136} Legally purchased e-books usually cost about 30-50\% less than paper editions,\textsuperscript{137} allowing technologically up-to-date readers to save on the costs of the book and potentially solving book distribution problems in provincial areas of the Russian Federation or the near abroad. It is believed, however, that publishers are moving too slowly on formulating a clear strategy, also because of uncertainty about electronic rights and correct pricing, which is delaying publishers from conquering an important and fast-moving market.\textsuperscript{138} Naturally, these efforts are followed by the need to provide the reader with a digital product that it is worth paying for. Engaging readers and persuading them to purchase a book, whether it is on paper or in digital format, instead of downloading a free version from the Internet, is another of the fundamental challenges faced by contemporary Russian publishers.

The topic of piracy is strongly felt also by authors.\textsuperscript{139} Boris Akunin explains how, after realising how many copies of his texts were downloaded illegally, he felt the need to employ strategies to motivate his readers to purchase a copy of a book. The author recognises the importance for writers to introduce digital elements which need to coexist with the text without distracting from it, in order for the digital aspect to become an incentive to purchase the book, rather than a competitor for the attention of the reader. For Akunin, the solution is to make the printed book an artefact, an aesthetically interesting product that book collectors and fans of an author will desire to own, thus playing both on the traditional significance of the material book and on the loyalty of collectors typical of fan culture.

One of the ways in which Akunin endeavours to achieve the goal of attracting readers to the physical copy of the book is by actively using illustrations. His popular ‘Fandorin series’ is being re-published in an updated edition with new illustrations, which are more difficult to render digitally. In addition, Akunin is planning to produce digital editions with different illustrations from the corresponding paper versions, so that readers passionate about his works would be interested in both, and

\textsuperscript{136} Information presented at London Book Fair – Russian Focus (April 2011).
\textsuperscript{137} Information presented at London Book Fair – Russian Focus (April 2011). Ozon’s website explains how the cost of e-books can be kept lower as there are no expenses for paper, typographical costs, storage, transport, etc. Cfr. ‘Tsifrovye knigi. Chasto zadavaemye voprosy’.
\textsuperscript{138} Information presented at London Book Fair – Russian Focus (April 2011).
\textsuperscript{139} The following discussion is a summary of selected information from a presentation by Boris Akunin at London Book Fair – Russian Focus (April 2011).
to use illustrations as integral parts of the narrative in some of his cinema-inspired novels. Other initiatives include the active use of digital technologies for literature. Akunin also plans to write some novels which need to exist on the computer; they will remain text-based but will include passages that need to be seen or heard. Yet another solution is novels that involve both a paper and a digital edition like the Kvest project (see Chapter 4).

However, Akunin does recognise that such strategies are only viable for best-selling authors, as they need a degree of support and financial investment from publishers that is not usually granted to new talents. Through all these initiatives, which come from the author himself rather than his publishers, Akunin demonstrates an intelligent reading of the contemporary literary situation. The crime fiction author becomes a pioneer in the search for innovation in a cultural environment where traditional literature, as Akunin himself points out, has no future without creative choices that treat the book as part of a wider literary project, and without a broader approach to literature that includes other media. Transmediality becomes for Akunin the answer to the preoccupations concerning the fate of the book.

5 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I catalogued and discussed some literary uses of the RuNet, both as an archival space and as a space for the creation of original texts, ranging from the first playful expressions created by the pioneers of the 1990s, to the more recent emergence of self-publication websites with numerous participants. I also analysed the relationship of publishers with the Internet, their attitude towards technological innovations (like the e-book), and towards the issue of piracy. Reading and writing habits informed by the use of contemporary technologies emerge from this overview, as well as the awareness of Internet users, both as readers and as writers, for new means of literary distribution and access to the literary text.

The boundaries of high and low literature become blurred in the virtual world. Some literary projects, such as the academic library FEB and offline-based writers’ community Vavilon are based on traditional values and consciously deal with ‘high’ literature, with a focus on quality and on a traditional canon. Grassroots projects
which emerged spontaneously and exclusively online, such as Moshkov’ library and 
*Setevaia Slovesnost’* are instead focused on users’ choice and user-based production, 
and utilise different types of literary formats, contributing to create a totally different 
canon which includes popular and Web-based literary forms. Online libraries with a 
grassroots influence thus contribute to a modification of literary canons, and 
therefore to a blurring of the different worlds of high and low literature, as they 
collect texts from classics to contemporary literature, from celebrated and unknown 
authors alike. Literary quality is often debated and attempts to create a hierarchy can 
be seen, for example, in the online literary context *Teneta*, which strived to bring 
forward the most valuable works among the large amount of literature published 
online.

The emphasis on the prestigious role of literature is still present in online 
literary projects. However, there is also great emphasis on reader’s choice as readers 
can now select reading materials according to their taste and interests, rather than to 
what is imposed by ideological or commercial publishers, and they can suggest or 
even create their own works of literature to share with other Internet users. The role 
of readers is therefore not passive, and it weakens the boundaries separating them 
from authors and even publishers. Users can perform both roles by posting their own 
texts online as authors and commenting on the works of other users, thus acting as 
readers.

Literary portals and self-publication websites, but also on a certain level 
online libraries, serve as virtual meeting points between Russian-speaking Internet 
users with an interest in literature: writers can obtain feedback and engage in 
collective writing both with their readers and with other writers. A sense of 
community among amateur writers and readers develops and contributes to the 
creative atmosphere of virtual environments.

On its part, the literary industry has opened direct communication with 
readers and with aspiring writers through online forums. This is an enormous change 
from the previously strictly state-controlled industry of the Soviet era. Russian 
publishers in the digital era find several challenges, among which is the need to
stimulate the interest of a reading public, made of customers and no longer of citizens to educate, who has less time and interest for the book as an educational tool and a precious object, and is now able to look for reading materials through the Internet. Publishers need to face the issue of digital piracy but also to keep the pace with modern technology and develop an e-book market. Similar challenges are being faced by the publishing industry all over the world, following the trends that the digital revolution is imposing on the history of book.

In the next two chapters I will focus specifically on the relationship with the Web of two authors of bestselling fiction who consciously use the online medium to establish a contact, even if indirectly, with their readers. I will also pay attention to the point of view of their public and to the way their fans engage with the literary text and with the authors through the Internet.
Chapter 4

Boris Akunin: Historical Research and Online Communication

In this chapter I will discuss my first case study: websites dedicated to writer Boris Akunin. I will firstly introduce the author and his role in the contemporary Russian literary scene, highlighting his attention to contemporary cultural dynamics and to new media. I will then discuss Akunin’s online presence, focusing on his official website Boris Akunin – Sochineniiia. Polnoe Interaktivnoe Sobranie, which will be referred to as Akunin.ru, and on fan website Fandorin! Ofitsialnyi Sait Erasta Fandorina (which I will refer to as Fandorin!, as its users also call it). In particular, I will look at how some features of these two websites relate to Akunin’s texts by establishing visual and contextual links to the historical environment of the novels which stimulate the engagement of readers with the literary work.

In addition, Fandorin! presents a decidedly interactive character and I will therefore focus on how its users engage with the author’s work, with the author himself and with each other through the website, and especially its forum.

On the Fandorin! Forum, a small but interesting sample of Russian readers takes advantage of contemporary technologies to expand their knowledge or interest in literature, and share it in a collective online conversation. These readers participate in an experience of literature that incorporates modern tools, rather than being distracted from their intellectual engagement by new technologies. While this kind of experience is not representative of all contemporary Russian readers, and at the same time it is not unique to Akunin’s fans, the activity of readers in this virtual environment represents a significant example of the engagement of Russian readers online.

Through observation of the forum, I will analyse some aspects of the interaction of readers with the literary product and with its author. The forum becomes a meeting point for readers, but also a place through which they can reach the author. Forum users discuss Akunin’s world and engage in virtual and real

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exploration of ‘Fandorin’s places’. The settings of the novels are remediated online through multimedia contents and collaborative action by the fans.

Finally, I will discuss Akunin’s experimental novel *Kvest*, a transmedia project inspired by the world of videogames and taking full advantage of the Internet as an integral part of its construction. The forum will once again serve as an important tool to examine readers’ reception of this innovative work.

Furthermore, Internet spaces can also serve as research tools on contemporary literary phenomena in the absence of large amounts of academic literature. For this chapter, materials from the forum and from online newspaper articles retrieved through the forum will represent my most important source of information and commentary on Akunin.

1 - Boris Akunin

Boris Akunin is the pen-name of Georgian-born Russian writer, expert on Japan and translator Grigorii Chkhartishvili. Akunin rose to fame in the late 1990s with a series of historical crime novels set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which have as their protagonist the fictional detective Erast Petrovich Fandorin. Success was not immediate: Akunin’s first and nowadays arguably most famous novel *Azazel’* (translated in English as *The Winter Queen*), which by 2006 had sold more than fifteen million copies in Russia, initially only sold 600,000 copies when it was first published in 1998 by emerging publishing house Zakharov.³

However, the Akunin phenomenon exploded in 1999 with his fifth book in two years, *Osobye Poruchenia* (*Special Assignments*). Since then, the combination of intriguing serialised stories, his high-quality writing style and clever marketing choices has granted Akunin a loyal following and the certainty of high expectations from his fans. His 2006 novel *Nefritovye Chetki* (not yet translated into English), was published with ‘the largest initial print run for an individual Russian author since the Soviet era’, with demand and enthusiasm being comparable to the craze for the Harry Potter books.⁴ Akunin’s popularity in the Russian cultural scene is thus summed up

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by the publishers of a book about Fandorin: ‘it is possible, even nowadays, to find someone who has not read Boris Akunin’s novels, but you really will not find anyone who has not heard of him.’

Akunin’s series often exist in interactive dialogue with other media: theatre and radio versions were produced in the early 2000s, while film and television adaptations of some of Akunin’s novels have appeared in Russia, and a Hollywood production of The Winter Queen has been planned for years and is due to be completed in 2012. In fact, besides being an established name in Russia, Akunin enjoys some success abroad, as several of his works have been translated into other languages.

Historical settings and serialization are two of the main features of the Akunin enterprise. With the Fandorin series, for example, the author’s stated purpose is to produce one novel for every subgenre of detective fiction: sixteen novels have been planned, as Akunin ‘counted sixteen subgenres of crime novel, and sixteen types of human character’. Each novel addresses one of these subgenres and one of these characters, presenting subtitles such as ‘conspiracy mystery’, ‘political mystery’, ‘Dickensian mystery’, etc. Up to 2009, fourteen of the sixteen planned novels have appeared, set between 1876 and 1914, and have turned Fandorin into a cult character. In addition, a related series (‘The adventures of the Master’, four novels between 2000 and 2009, set in the 1990s and during the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries), has as its protagonist Erast’s grandson Nicholas Fandorin and deals with the Fandorins’ ancestry, alternating chapters in the present and in the past and featuring computer games as parts of the narrative. Other projects by Akunin include ‘the adventures of Sister Pelagia’ (‘provincial crime fiction’, three novels between 2000 and 2003, set at the turn of the twentieth century), ‘Genres’ (four

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10 ‘The Death of Achilles: a Fandorin Mystery’.
novels so far), and ‘Bruderschaft with Death’, a series of cinema-inspired novellas (roman-kino) composed of ten parts (‘films’), five of which have appeared so far since 2007. These last two series are also set in different historical times. An intricate interplay between genres and historical settings is already evident from the subjects of the novels, and represents Akunin’s trademark as well as one of the most original aspects of his work, which also bring Akunin’s literary production close to some tendencies of postmodernism.

Time is especially fundamental to the Fandorin series. Akunin declares to be ‘charmed’ by the ‘riddle of time’ and regards history as the most important of sciences. In particular, he considers the late nineteenth century, when Fandorin’s adventures begin, to represent the height of Russian culture, because at the time “[Russian] literature had worldwide significance”. Even more importantly, this particular temporal setting allows the reader to compare the time of the novels with the present. The late nineteenth century represents a time of relative stability in Russian history, following a period of major reforms when cultural values were being reassessed. The abolition of serfdom in 1861, and the reforms that accompanied it, had a deep impact on Russian society and mentality, just as the switch to a market economy had in the 1990s. It is easy, therefore, to find a parallel between Fandorin’s time and the present, an era of transition from the turbulent 1990s, when Russians in the post-Soviet space are starting to make sense of the new world order. The decades preceding the Revolution are nowadays often nostalgically idealised as the golden age of Russia, a prosperous time of stability before the course of history changed; however, the use of history in Akunin’s work is not aimed at promoting a nostalgic view, but rather at deconstructing this idealisation by showing the negative as well as the positive aspects of this era, and

their relation to the contemporary time, by presenting a ‘projection’ of contemporary values in a historical setting.

In addition to their commercial success, Akunin’s literary products have gained critical approval and obtained some literary prizes. Akunin’s works are considered to be more sophisticated than most other crime fiction, thus granting the author a higher status than other writers of detektivy. This is because Akunin’s novels are written in an elaborate style (for example, in the Fandorin series, reminiscent of nineteenth century prose), and are carefully crafted through the use of allusions to historical facts or popular literature. Akunin describes his ‘favourite method’ as: ‘take a certain style, mix a criminal topic with it […], a bit of manipulation – and there you have a detektiv.’ Moreover, his characters are often modelled on existing historical personalities:

I tried to be precise in the historical detail. I treat history quite freely, but when I take a historical figure, I change his or her name a little bit so it will be clear that it is a fictional character, bearing a resemblance to [an] actual historical figure.

The reader can therefore remain intellectually stimulated throughout the reading experience, and play with the literary and historical references disseminated in the novels, which are punctually ‘dissected’ by readers in order to recognise all the author’s sources and allusions, but also his historical mistakes. It can be argued, then, that there are two levels to Akunin’s stories: the reader can ignore the allusions and be captivated by the plot, while the more ‘sensitive and cultured’ reader will play along with Akunin’s game. The ‘richness, density and concentration’ of references in Akunin’s work is defined as ‘astonishing’, as if his works were ‘manufactured’ with the aim of stimulating reactions in readers with different tastes and different levels of knowledge, to the point that the mass-oriented character of the novels can be

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16 For example, Writer of the Year 2000 and Antibooker 2000. See ‘Biografiia g-na Akunina’.
17 ‘Akunin otevechaet na voprosy posetitелеi “Fandorina!”’
18 ‘The Death of Achilles: a Fandorin Mystery’.
attributed not primarily to their captivating plot, but rather to the layers of cultural allusions. This playful aspect is easily exploited online, as will be shown through examples later in this chapter. The game played by the author through the style, subjects and mechanisms of his books becomes for the readers the possibility to ‘exercise their knowledge’, and the Internet is the perfect environment to share the richness of stimulations suggested by Akunin’s novels. The author offers his readers an ‘invitation and challenge to a literary game’, which the readers ‘enthusiastically accept’ with

Reviews, articles, letters, television and radio programmes, but most of all on the Internet. It is not true that Akunin writes in ink: he writes with the computer. He plays. From the magical hat of his keyboard he draws names of people and places. And the computer is the privileged instrument with which his readers play with him, uncovering the most unexpected, often improbable associations, reacting to a kaleidoscope of stimulations, many of them perhaps self-generated (but this is a reciprocal, interactive game).

Extra-textual aspects, including a clever use of the Internet, represent important tools in building Akunin’s and Fandorin’s celebrity status. In this context, the proliferation of online spaces devoted to specific literary phenomena alongside traditional printed magazines contributes to the consolidation of their celebrity status, and to an ‘intensification’ of fans’ activity.

Despite the careful research involved in the creation of the historical environment and of the cultural credibility of his novels, Akunin considers himself as a commercial author, as he declared in an often quoted interview:

There is literature with small letters and with capital letters, in other words élite literature and commercial literature. I write commercial literature and I do this absolutely deliberately. First of all, I don’t consider myself a real writer in the Russian sense, because a real writer pours his soul on the paper

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20 Ibid.
and writes with his blood, while I write with ink. But this is not even the most important thing. A real writer writes primarily for himself. Even if no one read him, he would write anyway. I am a fiction writer [belletrist], I write for my readers. [...] I constantly remember about the readers I write for and about the readers I will entertain, if they wish. And if they will not read my books, I will stop writing and I will occupy myself with something else.²²

Akunin thus demonstrates his awareness of the dynamics in act between ‘high’ literature and entertaining genres, and has a clear and honest position on this matter, presenting a traditional view of the role of the writer. At the same time, he is aware of not being a writer of ‘junk’ products and rather, he is consciously filling a gap between so-called ‘low’, commercially-oriented literature, of which the crime genre is considered a representative, and higher, thoroughly researched and tastefully written literature. Akunin is thus catering for a new kind of reader which is emerging in Russia together with the newborn middle class, which ‘is in need of everything a class needs, like ideology, ethics, aesthetics and, well, easy reading’.²³ It is in fact said that Akunin started writing with the purpose of demonstrating to prospective authors how to write high-quality entertaining literature for the emerging middle class.²⁴ According to another version, Akunin started to write detektivy for his wife, who enjoyed this genre but, like many other Russians, was ashamed to be seen reading it. Akunin therefore endeavoured to create crime stories with good literary quality, so that lovers of this genre could enjoy it without having to conceal their passion for it.²⁵ Whether these stories are true or not, they underline the need for Russian contemporary literature to assimilate and situate popular, leisure reading as a legitimate literary form, not necessarily lacking depth.

The hybrid status between an intellectual author of elegantly written historical plots elevating the status of a traditionally lower genre, and a self-declared writer of commercial fiction counting on a solid marketing strategy contribute to the

²² ‘Menia zavorazhivaet zagadka vremeni’.
²⁴ Ibid.
peculiarity of the Akunin phenomenon in the landscape of contemporary Russian literary culture, as well as to the progressive bridging of the gap between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, whose boundaries are becoming less and less clear.

2 - Akunin’s presence online and the websites chosen for this project

A discussion of how Akunin’s readers engage with his novels online, both on his official space and on interactive, communication-based spaces, will have to be contextualised with the author’s wider online presence. On the RuNet, pages collecting all or part of Akunin’s works for download exist on several virtual libraries and general literary websites, often accompanied by biographical notes. Moreover, his work has generated a huge number of articles, interviews and commentaries on literary websites, news sites and web journals, as well as online encyclopaedias; needless to say, his books can be purchased from any of the main online bookshops on the Web. Pages devoted to the author exist on the English-speaking Internet as well, including an official US website.

As a representative of contemporary literature, Akunin is aware of the role of new technologies in literary culture, and of the possibilities they offer to writers of fiction. In addition to the initiatives mentioned in Chapter 3, a computer game based on the Fandorin novel *Nefritovye Chetki* was planned, but never saw the light because Akunin, notoriously passionate about computer games, was not satisfied with the final product. Eventually, in 2008, Akunin launched the experimental

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27 For example, entries about Chkhartishvili/Akunin on portal Lenta.ru (<http://www.lenta.ru/lib/14183665/> accessed 10 October 2009), and on Liudi, a website containing information about celebrities and important personalities (<http://www.peoples.ru/art/literature/prose/detectiv/akunin/> (accessed 10 October 2009).


project *Kvest*, whose innovative aspects and impact will be discussed later in this chapter. Furthermore, since November 2010, Akunin has launched his own blog on *LiveJournal*, which he uses to discuss historical facts he came across during research for his books, and to keep in contact with his readers through the commentary features typical of the blogging platform.\footnote{Liubov’ k Istorii. Blog Borisa Akunina <http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/> (accessed 27 October 2011).} With his initiative, Akunin has updated his online presence within a Web 2.0 environment; through his blog, the writer becomes an active author and administrator of Web contents, stimulating further interaction and production of meanings among his readers.

Previously, the writer’s personal webpage had existed for several years already and, despite not offering updated materials or spaces for communication, it represented a clever use of online resources.

### 2.1 Akunin.ru: the official website

Akunin’s home page has been online at least since July 2000, but the website was completed and officially inaugurated on 6\textsuperscript{th} September 2000 in what was defined as ‘the main online literary event of the year’.\footnote{‘Akunet’, *Fandorin!* <http://www.fandorin.ru/akunet.html> (accessed 30 January 2012); Aleksei Makarnin, ‘Ot Marininoi do Akunina’, *Segodnia* (2000?), retrieved on <http://www.fandorin.ru/akunin/articles/akuninsite.html> (accessed 1 February 2012).} According to a commentary from an informative section of fan website *Fandorin!*\footnote{‘Akunet’.}, written by the website’s owner and administrator, Akunin is himself a ‘very advanced Internet user’, and as such he would sooner or later feel the need to have his own homepage. The author of this commentary proudly specifies that this choice was not made in order to boast Akunin’s popularity, but rather because of the role of personal web pages as the ‘business cards of a person on the Internet. You get to know someone, you want to know more – go on his page. This is not fashionable, this is contemporary, and Akunin is interested in all that is contemporary’.\footnote{‘Akunet’.}

On its home page, *Akunin.ru* is presented as a ‘full interactive collection’ of online versions of Akunin’s works. However, only his earlier works, published until
around the year 2000, actually appear on the website. Moreover, the news section on the main page has not been updated since February 2005, giving the impression that the site has been abandoned since. Only two of the novels, *Azazel’* and *Pelagia i belyi bul’dog* [Pelagia and the White Bulldog], present interactive games, respectively a test with multiple choices and a simple matching game. However, these two games are the only items on the website requiring action and choices from the user. The website is in fact based on a deeper form of interactivity, taking place through engagement with the setting of the novels.

The equation between the time of Akunin’s stories and the reader’s time is not only subtly present in the novels, but it is made explicit on Akunin.ru. The graphics and contents of the website are all based on this temporal shift. Despite the absence of real interactivity, a clear sense of play with the time and the atmosphere of the novels is evident even at a first, superficial glance. The visual features of the website aim to create a nineteenth-century flavour on the pages, through the use of colours reminiscent of old pieces of paper and documents, images of objects such as old spectacles, and retro-looking fonts (Picture 6). These graphic choices allow users of the website to immediately relate with the time of the novels.

Picture 6: The home page of Akunin.ru <www.akunin.ru> (10 February 2012)

The graphic aspect of the website has been provided by Artemii Lebedev’s studio, rated as the main design studio in Russia. The studio has designed large, highly visited websites such as search engine Yandex and news site Gazeta.ru among others. It also maintains a connection with the publishing industry by dealing with the design of book covers. Lebedev himself is a well-known personality in the RuNet and one of the pioneers of the Internet in Russia (see Chapter 2), representing a figure of contemporary culture who is involved in and strongly influenced by Internet culture. This kind of personalities travel naturally between new media environments, allowing different compartments of modern popular culture to meet and collaborate: web design meets literature in a project like Akunin.ru, whose aim is to represent a particular aspect of the author’s work.

While the graphics hint at the novels, the contents of Akunin.ru are also very visually-oriented, with little text, usually just captions, and an emphasis on visual material. The whole website looks at the past: the materials presented are all related to the nineteenth century and function as supplementary materials to the novels, allowing the reader to better understand, and most of all to visualise some cultural artefacts and styles of the time, and therefore to easily connect with the text. The materials presented include: a table of ranks, tables of weather signs and of the zodiac, maps of the universe, of bread distribution in the world and of the world’s population. A phrenological treaty completes the bizarre list of ‘historical facts and documents’, while a ‘portrait of the author’, only very vaguely resembling the actual Akunin, in nineteenth-century attire represents the only mention of the author on his official website (no biographical or bibliographical information is present).

A whole section of the website is dedicated to a ‘combined history of Moscow’, and introduces another important element in Akunin’s novels and in Akunin’s fandom: territorial localisation. Half a map of nineteenth-century Moscow joined with half an aerial photograph of contemporary Moscow (see Picture 7)

welcomes the user to this section of the website, and symbolises the juxtaposition of the two time frames, which continues with images of Moscow composed of modern elements (for example a parked car, or contemporary tourists with cameras) pasted into paintings or photographs of the turn of the twentieth century.  

The pictures in this section of the website play on the two time levels, and make their juxtaposition explicit in space by involving not only a time shift, but also real locations. This section thus illustrates the author’s feelings towards time and towards Moscow:

I don’t understand what to think of time, what to think of people who lived, loved, hated, had feelings and suddenly stopped existing. I have a serious suspicion that they are somewhere around us, we just don’t see them, but sometimes we feel them. And in Moscow – a city that I know well and that I

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love – there are places where this time stagnates, and where I feel that these people are really close.\textsuperscript{41}

Furthermore, the recognition of a temporal shift and of familiar places, as well as the visualisation of late nineteenth-century imagery through the graphics and the information presented on the website allows the reader to take his reading experience out of the pages of the novel and into the virtual pages of the website. In this way, Akunin.ru is more than just an archive, despite not being interactive in the literal sense. Clearly, the goal of the website is to help its users plunge into the era in which the actions of the novels unfold and feel as participants of the game starting in the book and continuing on the computer. The website becomes an independent work of art, and not an appendix to the collection of works. Evidently, the future of electronic literature is precisely in such online continuations of printed books.\textsuperscript{42}

This comment from a review of literary websites is extremely insightful on the role the Internet can perform as an interactive platform for literature, where the reading experience can evolve and be enriched by further stimulations. Akunin’s work serves this purpose perfectly: the use of a different historical time that can be related to the present, and of literary and cultural references create a strong ground for the production of original reflection outside of the pages of the novels, even in the absence of multimedia content, spaces for commentaries or direct interactivity between users. This aspect is taken further and inserted in a decidedly interactive environment on fan website Fandorin!.

\subsection*{2.2 Fandorin!: the readers’ initiative}

Similarly to the fans of any contemporary author or celebrity, Akunin’s followers play a role in Internet culture, often through their own spontaneous initiatives. On the RuNet, fan websites have developed, some of which pre-date the

\textsuperscript{41} ‘Menia zavorazhivaet zagadka vremeni’.
\textsuperscript{42} ‘Ot Marininoi do Akunina’.
actual birth of the official website.\textsuperscript{43} For example, the fan website Erastomania,\textsuperscript{44} which simply archives news and articles about Akuinin, is considered one of the pioneer websites, having existed at least since June 2000. However, its activity seems to have ceased not much later than 2001, as a lot of the links to articles and the ‘literary games’ it hosts are not functioning; its guestbook, instead, presents some activity up to 2008, but the large amount of spam messages among the most recent entries suggests that the space has not been moderated in several years. Another unofficial website\textsuperscript{45} presents Akunin’s books with links to online shops where it is possible to purchase them, as well as a space for readers’ comments; however, this website too has had very low observable activity since 2005.

In comparison to other websites, including Akunin’s official space, Fandorin! appears to be the most active. It is also the most developed and the least amateur-looking among the fan websites. Fandorin! is a fan-owned website, where collective creation is fundamental: materials are not only produced and collected by a webmaster, but visitors of the website are encouraged to create contents and launch initiatives. Until 2010, the news section on the home page was updated frequently, offering an impression of vibrant activity.\textsuperscript{46} The subjects of news range from new additions to the website, to links to external websites where something of interest has appeared, as well as updates and announcements about prizes awarded to the author and about new works being published, either Akunin’s or other materials related to his work, including films and foreign editions of his books. Sources of news are always explicitly mentioned and, if online, linked to, showing serious research and contributing to the professional aura of the website.

The website’s appearance also hints at professionalism and authenticity: the colour scheme and the fonts it displays clearly recall those used on Akunin.ru, therefore establishing a visual parallelism with the writer’s official space and further underlining the close relationship between the two websites. A special section of the website, called ‘Akunet’, puts Fandorin! in historical context with other Akunin-related web spaces and in particular with Akunin.ru, underlining the privileged

\textsuperscript{43} ‘Akunet’.

\textsuperscript{44} Erastomania <http://erastomania.narod.ru/> (accessed 10 October 2009).

\textsuperscript{45} Akunin.net <www.akunin.net> (accessed 10 October 2009).

\textsuperscript{46} ‘Novye Materialy v Delo’, Fandorin!, <http://www.fandorin.ru/main.html> (accessed 30 April 2010) Looking at current news and at the news archive, since the first news appeared in 2001, new information has been consistently published on Fandorin!’s home page in intervals of only a few days or a few weeks.
relationship between the two websites and offering a chronology of their very early moments of existence. According to ‘Akunet’, the similarities are mostly coincidental, but in general, it is admitted that ‘we are very similar and, it seems, we love each other’. The home page of Fandorin! presents it as ‘Erast Fandorin’s official website’, therefore claiming its own semi-official status next to Boris Akunin’s website and not in competition with it or subordinating to it. The denomination of the website and its dedication to the character rather than to its author represent a first, immediate way in which the reading experience extends itself beyond the pages of the novels, as the character of Fandorin gains his own life out of the books.

Some characteristics of Erast Fandorin have, in fact, become so familiar to readers through serialisation, that he is no longer a simple fictional character: he is treated by readers almost as a historical persona (having been modelled on real prototypes of the time, as most of Akunin’s characters), worthy of his own website. The author himself, in interviews or dialogues with readers, often treats his character as a separate person with his own existence, and not like someone whose story he has created from imagination. For example, asked why Fandorin’s birthday is on 8 February, Akunin answers simply ‘because he was born on that day’.

To understand the importance of a fictional character so popular as to almost live his own independent life out of the novels in which he appears, a digression on his features is necessary. With Fandorin, Akunin consciously wanted to create a ‘positive hero, of which there is not enough in Russia’, and wished ‘that Russian boys play at being Fandorin and that Russian girls fall in love with him’. In fact, Fandorin is to the Russian reader a hero to admire and be inspired by. He is modelled on the best qualities of ‘the Russian intelligent, the English gentleman and the Japanese samurai’; he is elegant, good-mannered, educated and charming, vaguely reminiscent of some of the ideals of kul’turnost. However, he is also ‘practical, pragmatic, attentive to detail, energetic, competent, physically fit, disciplined, and...”

47 ‘Akunet’  
49 ‘Menia zavorazhivaet zagadka vremeni’.  
50 De Lotto, p. 4.
capable of long, hard work’.\footnote{Leon Aron, ‘A Private Hero for a Privatized Country’, American Enterprise Institute, 21 June 2002 <http://www.aei.org/outlook/14112> (accessed 27 May 2010).} In contrast with the traditional intelligentsia of his time or with the Soviet ideal citizen, Fandorin is a self-made man who defines his own moral code, based on his relation with other people and not with the state. This type of hero acts by following his personal ideals of honour and dignity which, according to Akunin, have long been lacking in the Russian national character but are being deeply felt nowadays.\footnote{Aron, ‘A Champion for the Bourgeoisie’.} Fandorin therefore incarnates the values of the newly born middle-class, which is developing an entrepreneurial character for the first time in Russian history. The new middle-class knows that it has to rely on itself rather than on higher institutions in a society where values are no longer dictated from above; it is also aware of having to work hard in order to build a position for itself in the post-Soviet society, where for the first time it is possible to make a difference through personal effort.\footnote{Ibid.} In this way, Fandorin becomes a role model for the contemporary Russian citizen.

As well as through the name of the website, Fandorin ‘comes alive’ through its contents. The website is structured as Fandorin’s ‘personal file’ (lichnoe delo), as announced on the title page. The news are therefore ‘new materials in the file’ and the biographical sections, one devoted to the author and one to his character, are named ‘dossier on Mister Akunin’ and ‘dossier on Mister Fandorin’.\footnote{‘Dos’e na g-na Fandorina’, Fandorin! <http://www.fandorin.ru/fandorin/index.html> (accessed 30 May 2010).} Here we find Fandorin’s own biography, which includes not only his personal data, but also his physical description through quotes from the novels; his personal characteristics from the point of view of other characters and in his own words; and even an extremely detailed genealogical tree.\footnote{‘Genealogicheskoe Drevo’, Fandorin! <http://tree.fandorin.ru/> (accessed 30 May 2010).} The personification of the fictional character is thus taken care of in great detail.

Alongside Fandorin’s personal information, the website hosts a large amount of material, divided into numerous sections. Archival sections collect interviews and information on any aspect involving Akunin, including adaptations of his work for ‘other muses’ like cinema and theatre; self reflective sections serve as precious sources of information regarding the history of the website and offer important insights on its role in the RuNet. Although the archival sections of the website have
not been updated in years and some links published in the early 2000s are no longer functioning, the materials collected on Fandorin!, or connected to it, represent the most complete archive of Akunin-related material that can be found in a single virtual space. The website thus represents the main reference point for all those interested in everything surrounding Akunin’s works. While this archival aspect is important, in the discussion that follows I will focus on some collaborative and interactive aspects of the website.

A varied range of original, often collectively produced material can be found on Fandorin!, which thus also serves purposes comparable to a self-publication website. A section called Akunistika contains ‘popular creation’, that is fan fiction, both in the form of texts (including anecdotes, limericks, a collectively written detective novel) and drawings (portraits of Fandorin). It also collects lists of historical facts, sources, allusions, curiosities, and mistakes found in Akunin’s novels. Most of these have been suggested by readers, underlining the collaborative nature of research on Akunin.

The game of recognising allusions or historical facts is taken very seriously by Akunin’s readers and users of Fandorin!. In the same way the author researches his subjects thoroughly, his readers attentively collect information on his sources. The seriousness of their endeavour is such that they ironically define themselves as akunists, practitioners of the ‘science’ of akunistika. Even if there is no real pretence for scientific claims, and the akunists treat their subject as a hobby, they strive to precision and in some cases invest a considerable amount of effort in their research. For example, one section contains ‘encyclopaedic’ lists of each character of four of the Fandorin novels, including minor characters, with indication of the page where they first appear and a brief description or quote, carefully and patiently researched by two users, and then shared online for everyone to consult.

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Even more than on the website itself, incessant activity and exchange are visible on the forum. In line with the Web 2.0 tendency, the focus on user-generated content and collaborative interaction has in recent years taken further importance. Nowadays, practically all of the original and up-to-date material on Fandorin! is created and archived on the forum, where it can be posted by users without the mediation of a webmaster, and further commented on at later times. In addition, as the number of users of the website has grown significantly over the years, it is now more comfortable to archive materials on the forum rather than moving them on the main website, where updates have become more sporadic.

2.3 The Forum

Fandorin!’s forum has been active at least since 2001; its activity is not enormous, but it is steady. New messages are posted almost every day, particularly in the sections dedicated to Fandorin and to Akunin, which are the most popular and attract more frequent activity.\textsuperscript{60} By the end of May 2010, the forum counts 3974 registered users, however, as it often happens in these environments, only a minimal number of these actually actively participate. According to a list of registered users, seventy-one of them have posted more than a hundred messages each and can probably be considered a core of most active users. Among these, looking at information on their messages and at the information some of them have entered in their profiles, several write from Moscow, and a lower number from Saint Petersburg and other Russian cities; users from the ‘near abroad’, mainly Belarus and Ukraine are present, as well as Russians residing in other countries.

On the forum, readers make use of all the possibilities for multimedia sharing, enriching their discussion with photographs and links to other websites, in order to share their knowledge and help each other discover more and more about Akunin’s work and any topic surrounding it. Research on Akunin’s cultural references and on the historical environment of the novels is very precise and produces long, ongoing discussions. Each one of the Fandorin novels, and most other works, has a thread for the discussion of ‘allusions’ and ‘bugs’ (mistakes) found by readers in the text; each

\textsuperscript{60} The ‘other literature’ section contains more messages than any other, but activity is, in the period of my observation, not as frequent as in the area of the forum dedicated to Fandorin.
of these threads collects at least 100 posts, often reaching over 200. Research also involves particular details or situations of Fandorin’s time, for example, a topic about the weapons used by Fandorin in the books, which includes pictures of different guns, spans for fifteen pages (216 messages), written by the forum users over three years, from August 2007 to June 2010.61

A rich variety of topics is discussed on the forum including fan fiction and topics not strictly relating to Akunin, such as other literature, music, cinema and TV and ‘free’ discussions on general topics, which contribute to building a community around the interest for Akunin’s books. Collective experience is one of the main characteristics of fandom (see Chapter 1) and in my further analysis I will focus on some aspects of the interaction of readers with the literary product and with its author. I will also use materials from two particular sections, the one discussing ‘Fandorin’s places’ and the one dedicated to the novel Kvest, as examples illustrating the engagement of forum users with Akunin’s texts and with extra-textual elements through online interaction.

3 - Readers and the author: the forum as a meeting point

Through several topics on the forum, it is possible to notice how Akunin’s readers who are also Internet users are aware of the role of their favourite author in the contemporary literary market. In March 2009, a user created a poll asking other users whether or not they read Akunin’s novels more than once.62 As often happens in online conversations, the topic immediately turns into more than just a poll about users’ personal reading habits, and as such contains some exchanges about Akunin’s marketing strategy. One user asserts that he thinks that the ‘brand’ Boris Akunin should have been used only for the Fandorin series, and maybe for Pelagia, but not for Chkhartishvili’s other literary experiments, and that it would be more useful and comfortable for readers if each experiment had a different brand name, so that they

would not base their expectations on previous projects. A discussion follows in which another user notes that:

of course, after Fandorin, the film-novel and Kvest make a shocking impression. But, I think, without the ‘Akunin’ brand, no one would have simply paid attention to them!’ (16 March 2009).

The exchange continues with the first user maintaining his position:

Yes, certainly, sales under a ‘high’ brand would be higher, even if the quality of the product is inferior to the ‘standard’ with which the brand grew. But this is on a short-term perspective. Strategically, the level of the brand must be kept, or else the disillusion of the user for the product that goes under that brand is inevitable. In this case, [this is] the reader. (I think, unfortunately, in the case of the Author, a lot of forum users agree with me). I apologise for bringing real life into art, but in my commercial image the conception of sales in literature is not very different from sales, for example, in the automobile industry. (16 March 2009).

A third user enters the conversation and agrees that there is no need for a division of genres through different pen names:

I wouldn’t start dividing the novels between the ‘Akunin’ project and the ‘non-Akunin’ project. It is a single universe, all the same family. Yes, the Author does not write always in the same way. Yes, he tries to experiment, and the results of this experimentation are different. But this is still the game director Akunin, playing games. And besides this, creating a new brand would mean that the author divides his novels between ‘favourites’ and ‘non-favourites’, ‘quality’ and ‘non-quality’. I am against such segregations. (16 March 2009).

This conversation shows how Akunin’s readers reflect on the world beyond the author’s texts and are aware of the commercial nature of the literary industry.

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63 All previous quotes are from the thread ‘A vy perechitivaete Akunina?’. 151
Both the necessity for good sales and the ‘comfort’ of readers towards the product are taken into consideration in this discussion, demonstrating an interest in how the author’s choices are determined both by marketing dynamics and by the relationship with his audience. Akunin’s production is particularly suited to stimulating such reflections, because of the variety of genres the author experiments with.

The relationship of readers with Akunin reaches a deeper level thanks to an important initiative of Fandorin!: online questions and answers sessions with the author. Questions are collected on the forum and periodically sent personally to Akunin via e-mail by the website’s owner, initially at unplanned intervals and, more recently, regularly every season. At earlier stages, they were published on the main website, while now they remain on the forum, always visibly on top of the section dedicated to Chkhartishvili/Akunin, so that they can be easily retrieved and receive comments even a long time after their publication.

Users ask questions about everything relating to the author’s work and other cultural subjects: his relationship with his own characters; anticipation about new books; his methods of work; what he thinks of current films or books; questions about cinema adaptations of his books; his future work plans; and every other kind of curiosity. Akunin answers patiently to most of them, sometimes choosing not to answer to personal questions, or not to explain some aspects of his work because, he maintains, ‘not everything in artistic literature has to be explained. Since it is artistic, and not educational, it contemplates a variety of interpretations’. 64

The Internet is therefore facilitating the special relationship of the author with his most faithful and knowledgeable readers. Moreover, Akunin once declared that he visits the forum, and he is periodically asked by users whether he continues to do so. On one of these occasions, he answered with significant words:

Yes, almost every day. As a matter of fact, it is my only possibility for reciprocal contact with readers – I do not sign books in shops, I do not take part to various tours. Of course, I understand that to the Forum generally participate people who relate favourably with my books. But, honestly, it is not for this reason that I like you. I appreciate the spirit of tolerance, of general civilisation of your exchanges. In fact, everybody who looks at your

64 ‘Akunin otvechatet na voprosy posetitelei “Fandorina!”’ – 3’.
Forum observes this. [...] Oh, if all the inhabitants of our country communicated with each other with such respect and formality! It is important to me how the participants to the Forum value my books, it is interesting for me to know which problems they occupy themselves with. Here I find out which reviews have come out and where. I look at illustrations. And this notorious hunt for mistakes, of course it is useful to me too. A ‘colour’ edition of the Fandorin series recently came out with [publisher] Zakharov – in it, I corrected some real blunders that were noticed by forum members. Arigato.65 (posted 29 December 2003).

The forum represents a source of pride for Akunin, who considers it an ideal virtual community from the point of view of human relations. Moreover, the activity of collection of materials by readers on the forum keeps the author himself up to date on reviews of his work. Akunin’s attention to the forum gratifies his readers and attributes a central role to them: they are not only passive recipients of the literary work, but they can actively offer their feedback and receive attention from the author, in the form of visits to the forum, of the commitment to answer their questions, and of an improved literary product. The critical work of his fans gives the author the possibility to perfect his work; the book is edited remotely by the readers themselves, thanks to the visibility the forum gives to their comments. In this way, readers give a small but important contribution to the fabrication of the literary product, or at least to its further editions. This possibility improves the reading experience and places the reader at the centre of the whole literary enterprise. At the same time, the status of the author is somewhat lowered as he becomes more reachable while readers gain some relative authority. The text is no longer a fixed piece of work, but it gains a flexibility it had not seen perhaps since the invention of print. In the same way as manuscripts were modified by copyists, often unwillingly, the contemporary text by an established author can be modified with the help of his readers online.

4 - In Fandorin’s museum and ‘Around Fandorin’s places’: a case study of space and time

The depth of readers’ research work on Akunin’s production is evident from their attention to the question of space and time in the Fandorin series. Underlining the role of Fandorin as an almost realistic character belonging to a carefully described historical era, a virtual museum has been dedicated to him. The museum contains ‘web companions’ (some of which are in English and Bulgarian, therefore acknowledging Akunin’s relevance out of Russia) to some of the Fandorin and Pelagia novels. The ‘web companions’ consist of view and maps of areas of nineteenth-century Saint Petersburg and Moscow where the action in the novels takes place. The museum also presents portraits of the influential people of the time who might have served as prototypes for Akunin’s characters. In addition, like in a real museum, we can be instructed on railway travel and culinary habits of the time, among other topics.

Similarly to the materials on Akunin.ru, the museum aims to reinforce the relationship between the readers’ experience and the time of the novels, allowing the reader to catch a glimpse of the world through his hero’s eyes. In particular, the ‘web companions’ encourage readers to take a virtual tour of Fandorin’s time by ‘follow[ing] Mr. Fandorin through the streets and squares of St. Petersburg and see the same places, just as they appeared in the late nineteenth century and were pictured on antique photos, postcards and paintings’. Even without explicitly mixing pictures of different historical periods, the effect of the web-companions is similar to Akunin.ru’s ‘combined history of Moscow’: the time of the novel and the present time are superimposed in the imagination of readers. Through the museum, readers can immerse themselves in a different era and see how the places they might have walked past if they live in (or have visited) Moscow or Saint Petersburg appeared at the time when their favourite novel series is set, and notice what

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differences time brought, thus juxtaposing their real life experiences with life in Fandorin’s stories.

Even more actively, willing readers can combine the reading experience and the virtual experience and make them real by purposely visiting these places through the eyes of an akunist. Walks around ‘Fandorin’s places’ actually happen thanks to the efforts of Fandorin!’s users. The first walks were organised in the early 2000s, and detailed reports, complete with photographs, were posted on the website, in a section called ‘Around Fandorin’s places’ (Po Fandorinskim Mestam). The forum also hosts a section by the same name, and it is there that the reports have been posted in recent years, underlining the central position of the forum within the website. Since the start of this initiative, dates and details of the meetings are also discussed and arranged through the forum, and every visitor of the website is invited to attend if interested. Through the walks, once again the character of Fandorin becomes alive, at the level of an existing historical character: for example, one of the suggested walks is directed to Fandorin’s house.

Naturally, the possibility to join a collective visit to the places of Fandorin’s adventures is almost exclusive to those readers who live in Moscow or Saint Petersburg (or indeed close to these cities). However, thanks to the opportunity offered by the forum to share the experience of the walks through pictures and tales, more distant readers can know about them and feel closer to the novels. Users who cannot attend the walks thus wait impatiently for the reports. In the forum thread for the organisation of a walk around the settings of the novel Koronatsiia in the occasion of the 110th anniversary of the coronation of Tsar Nikolai II, a user writes:

The idea is simply super, but unfortunately I cannot participate! I do not live in Moscow, and I’d really want to, even more because I’m writing an assignment on Akunin’s books. It would be interesting material…When you come back from the walk, do tell [about it]. (21 April 2006).  

72 ‘Progulka l Jubilei Koronatsii’, Fandorin! Forum
Fandorin’s fans thus exploit one of the most immediate advantages of the Internet: impressions about experiences can be shared rapidly and easily with readers who do not have the possibility to realise their own reading experience in the same way. The space of the forum becomes a virtual shared space for users to organise initiatives and communicate their impressions to others.

Aside from the walks, one of the main activities in this section of the forum involves posting and discussing pictures of ‘Fandorin’s places’, usually situated in Moscow, or of Akunin-related places users have visited out of Russia. For example, a thread collects pictures taken in the French town of Saint-Malo, where Akunin owns a house, while photographs of Fandorin’s places in London from the novel *Azazel*’ have been collected by a user on a website created specifically for the purpose of adding to the information present online about Fandorin in London, which so far existed only in the virtual museum.73

The research stimulated by Fandorin’s adventures has also inspired two published books which have become sources of further discussion and commentary on the Fandorin! forum. *Fandorinskaia Moskva* (Fandorin’s Moscow) by Andreii Staniukovich is warmly received by users of the forum.74 As usual, users exchange information on where to buy the book and at which price it can be found in different shops. The author of the book also writes a message introducing himself and starts a conversation with the users, asking for feedback about mistakes users might have found in his books. He explains how the idea of the book was generated:

All my life I have been dealing with scientific issues, which could be summarised with the expression ‘complex source studies’. As I knew Akunin’s work almost by heart, when I was asked to write this book I agreed immediately, and decided to approach the Fandorin novels as they were

historical sources. This is how I wrote. Only, my book is not scientific at all. (26 March 2008).

There is immediately total empathy between Staniukovich and the participants in the discussion, as readers soon realise that the book is written by a passionate reader of Akunin: ‘[The book] shows that Andrei Kirillych is involved in the game of *akunistika*, and does not speak as a critic without passion’ (16 April 2008), comments a reader. Readers welcome the author to the forum and express their enthusiasm for the book with warm messages:

I even wanted to know you! I will buy it and read it with pleasure! It was a fantastic idea to write such a book! Thanks. (02 April 2008).

I think I’ll read it in parallel with *Azazel*, so that it would supplement [the novel] with pictures and photographs. (02 April 2008).

I read it with great pleasure. Now we have a guidebook for Fandorin’s places and a competent commentary to our favourite books. And if [the author] will like it here, a historian-akunist-researcher of mistakes. (16 April 2008).

I laughed to myself, as five or six years ago I had a similar idea myself. I read with a pencil all the Moscow-based books about Fandorin, I climbed heaps of manuals in the search of information about the places where Erast Petrovich set foot, I went around Moscow with a camera. In a few days I’ll definitely buy and read the book. I’ll compare it with the information I managed to find by myself. (08 July 2008).75

On this occasion, the forum allows interaction between the author of a published research book and the primary, intended audience for that book, becoming the space where a fruitful exchange of opinions and information between the two can take place. Users who are passionate about history and engage in active reading can

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see how their passion is shared by professional writers and is legitimised by its collection in a printed book.

The second book, *Moskva Akuninskaia* (Akunin’s Moscow) by Mariia Besedina does not obtain the same degree of success among users of the forum.76 One reader criticises the style of the book and ‘the way the author relates to Akunin’. In particular, discussing the ‘zealousness’ with which Besedina ‘discloses’ Akunin’s mistakes and ‘ambiguities’, this user comments:

It makes me feel like telling her ‘Mariia Borisovna, Erast Fandorin didn’t exist AT ALL. Can you imagine. Totally not. And it’s useless to argue about whether or not there was a hotel in that place, in any case he didn’t stop there’. (10 March 2008).

This argument somehow contrasts with a good part of the activity of this forum, whose users are involved in research about Fandorin’s places. In fact, soon afterwards, a different user ‘wanted to defend Ms Besedina’ from criticism in previous posts:

It might be that Besedina is simply not a writer, but a historian and for this reason her stylistic faults are justifiable. In the end, she is not obliged to treat Akunin with piety, and getting to know where was what – it really is interesting. In Akunin’s novels this mysterious and perhaps mythical city […] remains mysterious and mythical […]. Unusual, incomprehensible names: did this all exist at all, did it not […]. And I long to know about what really is there and what was there.

And then I found out that Ms Besedina is also some sort of woman detective-writer (*tozhe kak-by babo-detektivshchik*). And I understood: it’s envy. (10 March 2008).77

This user’s words explain with precision one of the main interests of users of *Fandorin!*: research on the actual existence or on details about the real location and

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function of ‘Fandorin’s places’. It is interesting to note that a woman detective writer is defined with derogatory terms, to indicate her lower status in comparison to Akunin, who is the highest authority in these readers’ worlds. One user jokes that ‘evidently, Besedina is not informed that the right of disclosing Akunin’s mistakes belongs exclusively to the akunists of this forum’ (9 March 2008), showing awareness for the importance of the research taking place on the forum and, through a joking remark, confirming the exclusion of Besedina from the community of active fans and researchers of Akunin’s world.

In fact, historical research is not left exclusively to published volumes, but is meticulously practiced by akunists online. Akunin’s readers, like their favourite author, pay great attention to historical detail and invest a lot of energy in research while they actively try to relate the space they live in to the places where situations from the novels are set and where characters of the novels have supposedly lived. The juxtaposition of times is expressed once again visually: several threads in the ‘Around Fandorin’s places’ section of the forum show contemporary pictures, usually of Moscow, often taken by users themselves, next to old pictures, usually found on the Internet. Here, old maps are compared with contemporary ones (often simply pasted from Google Maps) in order to find the exact location of a certain event of the novels. Pictures and maps are often examined and analysed carefully, as in this example:

On this forum, a lot has already been said and shown about [Moscow district] Khitrovka, and I am not going to add anything, but I cannot avoid discussing [a certain character’s] house. Staniukovich in his book supposed (but did not insist) that she lived at number 10 on Yauzskii Boulevard. The house he mentions looks like this:

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78 Ibid.
79 Several websites exist, which specialise in Russian history and often rely on pictures. For example, Moskva, kotoroi net, ‘a historical and culturological project about old Moscow’ <http://moskva.kotoroy.net/> (accessed 2 June 2010).
It really faces Yauzskii Boulevard with four windows, on the level of the second and third floor.

On maps of Khitrovka in different years, it looked like this:

1850

2008
What else do we know about this house?

[The question is followed by several quotes from Akunin’s *Liubovnitsa Smerti*]

It seems that everything really leads to number 10. And the entrance door faces East, and at that time it was possible to see it from the end of Pokrovskii Boulevard. Only, in the maps it is clearly visible that at the point where one boulevard meets the other, there is no bend. Maybe the Author was following the map from 1881 […]. On this map there is a bend between the boulevards, but house number 10 is not visible.

[it appears that the map from 1881 was posted at this point, but it no longer appears on the webpage] (18 September 2008).  

While certainly not all readers will become involved in such thorough research, this user’s efforts demonstrate how Akunin’s work is suitable for this kind of speculations, and can represent the starting point of a treasure hunt the willing reader can participate in if he is passionate about history, geography and literature. The reader engaged online can share this knowledge with other fans, while those

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who would not endeavour to conduct such detailed research can find useful information on the forum thanks to other users, and not just in books. These efforts are received with enthusiasm and gratitude:

[Username], I can’t help thanking you so much for the photographs and for such interesting information! Now walking around the centre of Moscow will be twice as interesting! (6 October 2008).  

What one user creates, discovers and shares becomes a precious source of knowledge for other readers, who in turn might provide original information at other times. The Fandorin! forum, like other fan communities, works therefore as a ‘knowledge community’, based on ‘collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies in response to various artefacts of popular culture’, and turns the forum into a space where ‘knowledge culture meets popular culture’.  

In addition, readers note that Akunin seems to ‘mix’ spaces, for example situating a building, which he describes accurately, at a different address than the one where it actually can be found, leaving his readers to guess which house is actually the one he is describing in a given passage. Readers use the forum to share their findings and guesses about the exact location of buildings. For example, after an exchange between two users about a particular building, one of them concludes:

This means that once again the author has presented us with a collage: in Moscow, there is no Trekhsviatskii Street with a marble mansion, and there never was; however there was and there is a renting house between Tverskoi boulevard and Malaia Nikitskaia. (6 January 2009).  

The territorialisation of Fandorin’s places is brought further thanks to an initiative of a forum member, who suggests posting the forum users’ pictures to photography website Panoramio, which periodically selects pictures for Google

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81 Ibid.
82 Jenkins, ‘Interactive Audiences?’, p.137.
83 ‘Google Earth i Fandorinskie mesta’, p. 5
Earth.\textsuperscript{84} This initiative further illustrates how the activity of the forum is not isolated, and how forum members are eager to use other websites to enrich their experience and to spread Akunin-inspired knowledge throughout the Internet. The thread opens with inviting words:

Do you love Moscow (or London) and you’re quite good at photography? Do you read Akunin and know every building mentioned in his books? Do you even keep photographs of Fandorin’s places? Now you have the possibility to show them to the whole world! (18 March 2007).\textsuperscript{85}

The thread quickly becomes one of the primary areas of the forum where Fandorin’s places are compared with contemporary places. Moreover, it illustrates how collaboration is a strong element of online communication. Collaboration between users represents an important part of the initiative, uniting users in the common purpose of taking pictures and posting them to Panoramio. The user who initiated the thread, in fact, offers to help those users who do not have the time or the skills to register on the photo-sharing website, by adding their pictures or even signing up on their behalf. One user confesses:

I’d be happy to do it… I have a few pictures… But I don’t know how to deal with the website… we speak different languages. (24 March 2007).

To which the answer is:

Go here [link] and register (that’s in Russian). Then send me privately your login and password. You can attach the pictures here, or the link. I’ll do it for you’. (24 March 2007).\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{84} Panoramio <www.panoramio.com> (accessed 30 April 2010).
\textsuperscript{85} ‘Google Earth i Fandorinskie mesta’, p. 1
<http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/showthread.php?s=15090fd62badcc1c559865cdf3e6b0d&threadid=4525&perpage=15&pagenumber=1>
\textsuperscript{86} Both quotes ibid.
The Google Earth initiative was quite successful, with some users’ pictures actually being selected for Google Earth and indicating in their photo captions that these places appear in Akunin’s novels.

Thanks to activities like the walk around Fandorin’s places, the exchange of pictures and information on Moscow’s topography, as well as the Google Earth initiative, the literary experience for a fan of Akunin who is involved online can travel back and forth from the printed page of the novel to the virtual world of the website, and further to the ‘real’ world of known places. The Fandorin! Forum offers an experience of remediation of literary contents through users’ activity, as well as a friendly atmosphere based on collaboration between users.

5 – Kvest, the ‘universal book’

The final case study for this chapter brings together the author’s attention to modern cultural dynamics with the observation of readers’ reactions online. As described in Chapter 3, in recent years Akunin has demonstrated awareness of how to incorporate new technologies within his literary production in order to captivate his readers and transform the literary text into a multimedia and transmedia product. One of his most complex experiments so far is the novel Kvest (2008), the fourth and to date the most recent episode of the Genres series. Kvest is a clear example of transmedia storytelling (see Chapter 1) existing both in a computer version and a paper version, which complement each other rather than being simply two versions of the same text on two different supports. The online version is hosted on a dedicated website offering exclusively electronic books and audiobooks.

The novel is inspired by the computer game genre of the ‘quest’, a kind of game that ‘contain[s] storytelling elements, usually adventure games or roleplaying games,’ and it is structured like a computer game, based on ‘levels’ which can be reached after answering questions or making choices related to the story. The online

version contains ‘games, footnotes, thematic digressions and other elements of interactivity and hypertext’ that are not (and cannot be) reproduced in the traditional, printed book. In turn, the paper edition contains a ‘secret level’ that is absent on the online version and represents ‘a novel within the novel’. The secret level is also sold in a separate edition of the book, without the rest of the novel, for those readers who do not want to purchase the whole book on paper after having enjoyed it online with all the extra possibilities. The book version is completed by a book of ‘codes’ that should help the reader solve the riddles that allow access to the next level. This project is indicative of Akunin’s curiosity for experimentation with digital technologies, and contributes to the discourses about how new technologies can be used creatively and to the advantage of literature, rather than representing a rival to literary culture.

In the online version, the introduction and initial chapters are offered online free of charge, together with some games and some informative materials on the era when the book is set, in line with the traditional play with time typical of Akunin. To continue to further levels of Kvest, however, the interested reader needs to pay a sum (through online banking methods, payment terminals or even via a text message). To reach higher levels, other payments are required, but only if the reader cannot solve the riddles presented in the story: those who guess right can access the following level free of charge. Naturally, as Akunin himself underlines, a reader who has read the book version before accessing the electronic version will already know the answers and will not need to pay any extra money to access a ‘mass of additional materials, some of which are rather amusing’. This ‘experimental project’ is defined by Akunin as ‘unibook’, universal book, a ‘text which makes use of the most diverse possibilities of computers. This book can be simply read, or you can play with it, or look at the scopes of narration.

and so on’. With this enterprise, Akunin hopes that ‘people who read the book on paper and will be interested by it, will then go on the website to see how it looks like online. How Moscow looked like at the beginning of the twentieth century, how New York looked like, what happened there’. Even more ambitiously, Akunin considers that ‘perhaps, I succeeded to turn some [Internet] users to the book, including the paper book. I have no doubt that I succeeded to demonstrate to a big number of people that the Internet is not scary and bad, but on the contrary, it is very interesting’. Akunin is thus not simply using the Internet to his advantage, but he is also promoting the use of new media through interest in literature.

On the Fandorin! forum, Kvest was allocated its own section for discussion. Through the forum, Akunin himself asked for feedback through one of the question and answer sessions. Assuming that some of the forum users would read the electronic version first, while others would start from the printed book, and would therefore have different perceptions of the project, Akunin declared he would be ‘grateful’ if they could share on the forum their impressions on the advantages and disadvantages of the two versions.

Some users expressed worries that the riddles would prove too complicated and that it would be necessary for them to purchase the right to access each level; some of them were consequently worried that this would be expensive, while one user reassured them that the cost to access each level would be ‘less than a portion of ice cream from a stall on the street’ (13 August 2008). A younger user expressed her disappointment, maintaining that the author in this instance did not think of ‘those who do not have their own money’; however, another user kindly offered to ‘treat’ her to this ‘ice cream’-value present. This is an example of how relationships within an online community are often based on collaboration and on helping each other, offering one’s particular skills or, like in this case, wealthier position, for the benefit of the community or of single members who need some form of help to satisfy their passion, in this case for the purchase of Akunin’s latest literary product.

94 ‘O proekte’
95 Markelova.
96 ‘Pliusy i minusy elektronnoi i bumazhnoi versii’.
Other forum discussions regarding *Kvest* offer examples of this collaborative nature. Regarding the worries concerning the level of difficulty of the riddles to solve in order to access higher levels of the game, one user suggested:

As a last (LAST!) resort, as usual, the maxim [...] will be applied: ‘an *akunist* is a friend and a companion (*tovarishch*) to another *akunist*, and [will reveal] the password to the next level’ 🌡️. (13 August 2008).

Again, collaboration becomes central to the online exchange: a reader who knows the answers would probably be happy to help another reader complete the reading of the story.

The emphasis on sharing the experience with other readers is also clear in an exchange between two users, based on culinary metaphors:

[...] Are you perhaps planning to eat the fresh meat [i.e., enjoy reading the fresh material] in silence? 🌡️ Are we not going to discuss the entrance codes in parallel to the reading of the electronic version? Is each of us going to be on his/her own? 🌡️ (19 August 2008).

The answer to this post is reassuring:

What are you saying?! Certainly, we are going to eat (and discuss) in friendship the electronic *shashlyk* from the chef with the Georgian surname. And let all the rest wait [for the paper version] as they decided not to take a look to the spoiler discussion. (19 August 2008).

However, a considerable amount of messages dealt with concerns about the technical aspects of online payment. One user declared that he is not ‘disturbed by the fact that we have to pay’, but rather worried about ‘the complications of paying on the Internet’. He continued:

So what, to participate in the project it is necessary to have an online account? Or you will need to have a credit card number? And obviously, the
main question is the problems [this would pose] to foreigners, of which I am one. I have a credit card from Belarus… (13 August 2008).

This user demonstrated scepticism on the practical aspects of the methods of payments, and raised the question of accessibility for readers with foreign bank accounts. Some users expressed wider views and considered that ‘those who will receive our money have already thought about this issue. It makes no sense for them to restrict us to only one method [of payment]’ (13 August 2008), and even tried to guess what innovative methods would be employed, such as SMS-payment, Paypal, or ‘electronic money’. However, scepticism for some users remained: two users recalled how they had previously tried to set up ‘Yandex-money’ but failed, while one declared not to understand ‘how money ends up on the Internet. The mechanism of this process’ (13 August 2008). From previous experiences, one user remembered how ‘the overwhelming majority of akunists are total beginners (chainiki) with the issue of electronic money’ but concluded that ‘it doesn’t matter, the pretext will make us cope with it! Bravo, Akunin’ (13 August 2008), suggesting that Akunin’s initiative represented an occasion for his readers to become acquainted with new technological means of payment, and that perhaps the occasion was even created on purpose, with the exact aim of making his readers ‘master the systems of electronic payment’ (13 August 2008), as expressed by another user.97

When some problems with payment did appear, the complaints and frustrations of users, notably those from countries outside Russia, for technical and organisational issues were collected and shared in a dedicated thread. However, at a later date the whole text started to be accessible to all without payment (as it is now). Readers participating in the Fandorin! forum once again show understanding for market rules, guessing that this would be a marketing operation aiming to raise the sales of the ‘codes’.98

The outcome among forum users of Akunin’s experiment with the videogame nature of the electronic version of Kvest was measured by a poll posted by a user at the end of September 2008, only a few weeks after the novel was first published online. Out of fifty-one voters, twenty-six (50.98%) immediately bought a ‘ticket’ to

97 All quotes in this section are from the thread ‘Plusy i Minusy Elektronnoi i Bumazhnoi Versii’.

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access all levels of the game, without waiting to know if they could guess some of
the answers which would have granted them free access to the next level. Thirteen
users (25.49%) paid for more than one level, while six (11.76%) paid for just one,
and only two (3.92%) managed to read the novel to the end without having to pay for
access (besides the first, obligatory payment). In addition, four voters (7.84%)
admitted to having accessed the online game without paying, by using someone
else’s login or answers. It is of course impossible to determine how representative
this poll is of Akunin’s readership, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that
several of the users of Fandorin! had little confidence regarding their ability to solve
riddles, or were simply extremely eager to read the whole novel without
interruptions. In fact, one user explained her reason for paying everything at the
beginning as thus:

If I answer correctly (I haven’t finished reading, I just started), I will be
pleased. If I don’t – then I don’t have to wait while the payment goes through,
and pay every time the phone company too (I paid via SMS). (25 September
2008).

Another reader commented on her own decision with a probably very common
reason for doing so, judging from the worries generally expressed before Kvest was
published:

I paid for all levels at once because of one reason: I really don’t like all these
Internet payments with cards. So I decided to suffer only once! I wasn’t
hoping to pass all levels by myself. (23 September 2008).

Moreover, one user even decided to pay for the whole novel at once because
she felt ‘in debt’, having had to illegally download one of Akunin’s previous novels
because it was sold at a particularly expensive price in Kiev. Distribution issues
can therefore still be at the basis of readers’ choices. In fact, another user from the
Ukraine complained that readers using some telephone operators from the ‘near

99 ‘Golosovanie dlia tekh, kto oznakomilsia s elektronnoi versei’, Fandorin! Forum,
<http://www.fandorin.ru/forum/poll.php?s=ae423b1c6c478ec5463a3f92495c9e&action=showresult
s&pollid=246> (accessed May 2010)
100 Both quotes from the thread ‘Golosovanie dlia tekh, kto oznakomilsia s elektronnoi versei’
101 Ibid.
abroad’ were not given the possibility to pay via SMS for the whole book, and thus decided to wait for the sale of the paper book, having no intention of ‘wasting time’ with bank transactions or payment terminals.

Reasons for preferring to pay for the whole novel at once can thus be individuated to a combination of lack of confidence on the part of the readers in their own ability to solve Akunin’s potentially elaborate riddles, and lack of familiarity with online payments. However, a major role was also played by readers’ eagerness to secure immediate possession of the whole text instead of risking having to wait until they can pay or until they find the correct answers. These users preferred not to play along with Akunin’s game completely, privileging a more traditional approach to the novel in order to avoid any involuntary disruption to their reading experience.

When the discussion turned to the methods of reading, users’ reactions to the project differed. One user declared that:

Even though I am on the side of book-reading in the traditional paper format, this time I will read the electronic version (if you take part in the experiment, then [you should] participate in its more interesting part). (13 August 2008).

Akunin therefore succeeded in creating expectations and curiosity, even in more traditionally-minded readers, with his innovative project. Another user instead decided to ‘combine the pleasures: I will read the electronic version at home, and the paper version on the metro’. (18 August 2008).

Scepticism towards the electronic version, however, remained. When one user who planned to read exclusively the book version was asked about his opinion regarding the possibility to miss the additional materials provided in the online version, he declared that he interpreted the author’s words about the project to mean that nothing would be lost in the printed book, and that he thought that ‘experiments, that’s good, but I cannot stand to read on the screen’ (19 August 2008). However, he was promptly reminded that

The same title Kvěst, and the various details of the project show that this will be most of all a computer game. So you have to decide yourself, if you want
to play first, and then read, or read the subject first and then play. Or if one subject is enough for you. (19 August 2008).

The sceptical user maintained that he was ‘not convinced that this is a game’ but underlined an important factor: if the Kvest project ‘turns out to be something radical’, he would always have the possibility to change his mind and try the electronic way.

The videogame-inspired nature of the project did initially confuse readers further. The difference between the two supports for the text proved fundamental for one user who could not imagine how the format of the ‘quest’ genre would be realised in the paper version:

in the interactive version, with an incorrect answer and without additional payment you cannot proceed to the next level, but in the book turning the page is enough, so that all the point of the genre is lost in the paper version’. (04 October 2008).

The book version works ‘like a usual gamebook’, another user informed, which directs the reader to a different page according to the answer given. In this way Akunin’s paper-based novel does not represent any particular innovation: it runs parallel to the electronic novel and its additional games, tests, and informative sections, which represent the novelty of the Kvest project.

The reception of Kvest was controversial, as it was not appreciated by some readers with the same enthusiasm as Akunin’s more classic series, partly because of the weaker story line (which is, however, a conscious feature of the project, being typical of the ‘quest’ genre in games). In this sense, part of the public focused more on the literary qualities than the technical, experimental aspects, and some readers were disappointed by such a novel editorial form. Other readers were, however, fascinated by the unusual features of the project. In addition, the printed version surprised readers when they discovered that ‘Akunin was once again smarter’: chapters from the actual novel and from the ‘codes’ attached to it are supposed to be read in parallel. The discovery of this method made one user ‘look in a different way
at the [...] straightforwardness of the subject and [...] lack of originality of the riddles.’

Other users exchanged opinions on whether it is better to read the codes in parallel with the novel or at the end. One of them suggested that ‘if you read them one after the other, a lot of details and parallelisms will be left out. It’s a different impression’ (6 March 2009). Another decided to ‘approach the matter from the opposite side, [by reading] in parallel, but with the chapter from the codes first. In this way, a third impression emerges’ (7 March 2009). The versatility of the experimental structure of the novel influences the paper format and allows a variety of ways in which the book can be enjoyed. 102

With Kvest, Akunin used technology to expand his possibilities to create a project that can be enjoyed in a variety of ways and stimulate different impressions according to how it is read. In this way, it is possible for the author to engage the attention of even the most demanding readers who search for entertainment not only in adventurous plots but also in interesting and innovative extra-textual contexts, to the point of generating discussions and predictions before the appearance of the project. Through initiatives like Kvest, it is possible for a writer of entertaining literature to satisfy a modern readership, accustomed to diverse and sophisticated stimulations from a variety of mass media and of products of popular culture.

6 - Conclusion

The example of Akunin’s websites demonstrates how both the author and his readers benefit from the possibilities offered by new technologies. Despite the seemingly traditional subjects of his books, temporal shifts and a multi-layered writing style represent postmodernist aspects of Akunin’s work, which are met with enthusiasm by readers, and make Akunin’s novels suitable for being remediated in the playful environment of the Internet.

Akunin’s website Akunin.ru maintains a close relationship with the novels through the online re-elaboration of the nineteenth century settings through visual choices and through the materials presented, becoming a continuation of Akunin’s

102 Again all the quotes in this part of the discussion were taken from the thread ‘Pliusy i minusy elektronnoi i bumazhnoi versii’.
literary production. The switch between different historical times and the representation of urban spaces in the present and in the past represent explicit links between the reading experience and the online experience, and are central to both Akunin.ru and to fan website Fandorin!. Through Fandorin!, the interested reader can engage with literature in an active way, both at the individual level and through sharing and collaboration with other users of the website. Collective effort and collaboration are fundamental to the activity of the forum, and are applied to the most diverse situations. Each user can benefit from the information collected by other users, and will receive support in the researching of information or of solutions to technical and practical problems related to obtaining Akunin’s books.

Through engagement with cultural, historical and geographical references, the reading experience of an involved fan of Akunin’s books online travels back and forth from the printed page of the book to the virtual page of the website. Literary passion becomes a starting point from which to take the online experience into the real world. Through the forum, readers elevate their experience beyond the two levels of text and virtual, and incorporate it in the ‘real’ world of known places, by relating both the engagement with the text and the online activity to the contemporary world and to their surroundings. This experience would not be complete without the participation of a wide group of readers with whom information and initiatives on a common virtual space can be shared, allowing the solitary experience of close reading to expand in other directions, virtual and collective, without losing any intensity. The text is thus the beginning, not the end of media consumption. The Internet is not a distraction from reading and from a close engagement with the literary material, but an extra tool enabling a wider reading experience.

The Internet, and in particular the Fandorin! forum, is also a space for readers to enter into contact with the author, and for the author to obtain feedback from his most faithful readers. Akunin explicitly shows his interest for the virtual community of his fans, who in turn actively seek a dialogue with the author. The literary author becomes accessible to his readers through direct communication online, and a relationship of mutual respect and collaboration is thus established between authors

Jenkins, Textual Poachers, p. 278.
(Akunin, but also less known authors Staniukovich and Besedina) and their audiences.

In addition, the Internet is for Akunin a space for literary innovation. Through Akunin’s fondness for online communication and experimentation, readers enjoy the unique possibility to interact with the author and are encouraged to become familiar with digital technologies, knowing that they can hope for a closer connection with the author and with his texts. Akunin stimulates his readers to become acquainted with online reading and even with online payments, actively promoting use of new technologies in connection with literature.

Akunin’s and his fans’ online activity creates a reading experience which consciously integrates the stimulations offered by new media. Users of the Fandorin! website are aware of how to use the tools of the online medium (e.g. for research of pictures and sources), and of how to take advantage of the rapid exchanges offered by the environment of the forum, which becomes a literary virtual coffeehouse, and an online literary salon where erudite discussion takes place, despite the mainstream character of Akunin’s books. Online communication and shared research become part of the reading habits of these technologically aware readers.

The relationship between the readers and the author becomes special thanks to the possibility for a virtual meeting offered by the Internet. While Akunin is for his fans a celebrity, providing an ideal hero through the character of Fandorin, the author becomes more accessible through direct communication with his audience, and loses the traditional aura of a writer as a bearer of truth by acknowledging the historical inaccuracies of his books that are pointed out by readers. Readers also become collaborators of the author, and their online activity becomes for the author the opportunity to obtain direct and honest feedback, both on his texts and on his extra-textual, technologically-oriented initiatives.

In the next chapter, I will deal with aspects regarding the relationship with new technologies of another prominent post-Soviet Russian author, Viktor Pelevin, and of his fans online.
Chapter 5
Viktor Pelevin and his readers

In this chapter, I will present my second case study on websites related to writer Viktor Pelevin. Three main topics will be examined: Pelevin’s attitude towards technology and his interactions with his fans through the Internet; his fans’ online activity; and considerations on online reading in contrast with traditional reading, following from the discussion of Pelevin’s online texts.

After describing Pelevin’s position in contemporary Russian literature, I will discuss his relationship with new technologies, both as a literary author and as a public figure. As a writer, Pelevin demonstrates his fascination with new technologies, while the reflections about the Internet which emerge from his interviews show evolving, and sometimes contrasting, views on the subject. In his role as a contemporary celebrity writer, Pelevin has experimented with direct interaction with his fans through the Internet, while his official website offers his reader indirect allusions that encourage reflection.¹

At a further level, some of the initiatives of the users of website Pelevin.nov.ru will be analysed to demonstrate how readers engage with each other through the Internet, and play with Pelevin’s literary texts and with his literary figure.² A playful relationship between readers and the author appears, where readers admire the author but also consider his work and public image as starting points for the creation of further contents and meanings. This creation often becomes a collective task, thanks to the characteristics of the virtual environments where it takes place.

Finally, the treatment of Pelevin’s texts on his fans’ website and the online distribution of one of his novels will be discussed, providing important examples of how attitudes towards traditional reading are gradually evolving while at the same time being still influenced by traditional attitudes.

² Sait Tvorchestva Viktora Pelevina <ww.pelevin.nov.ru> (accessed 15 February 2012).
From this chapter, further suggestions about how the relationship between readers of fiction and literary authors is evolving through twenty-first century technology will emerge. In addition, more examples of the collective creation of content by readers of literature, taking as a starting point the work of a popularly acclaimed author, will be provided. Furthermore, examples of how bestselling authors can take advantage of new and different possibilities for visibility, and reflections on how the literary text can be treated by readers and distributed by writers and publishers, will also be presented.

As in previous chapters, because of the abundant Internet resources on the topics treated in contrast with the only marginally relevant subjects of academic resources, numerous references next to the primary sources will be provided by articles and interviews found online.

1 – Pelevin and his work

1.1 Pelevin the author

Fiction writer Viktor Pelevin plays an important role in contemporary Russian literary culture, to the point of having been defined as ‘the main [contemporary] Russian writer’. He was also named ‘the most influential Russian intellectual’ as a result of a contest that took place on news portal Openspace at the end of 2009 and had resonance on all media. The contest collected votes from visitors of the portal in order to ‘diagnose the frame of mind of the country at the end of the decade’; according to the website editors, ‘Pelevin’s victory shows that the traditional influence of literature on social conscience is as big as before’.

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4 ‘Samym vliiatel’nym intellektualom Rossii priznan Viktor Pelevin’, Openspace, 21 December 2009 <http://www.openspace.ru/news/details/15143/> (accessed 19 October 2010). Other personalities in the top ten of the contest were television presenters, bloggers and one religious leader, while the absence of scientists and academic is noteworthy. The editors of website Openspace then conclude that the intellectual spheres influencing more heavily the cultural life of the country are ‘literature, television, the Internet and the Church’.
Pelevin made his literary debut in 1991, immediately obtaining critical acclaim when he was awarded the 1992 Booker Prize, but also enjoying commercial success, particularly with his 1999 novel *Generation П* (translated in English as *Babylon*), which quickly sold 200,000 copies in Russia.\(^5\) His books are also widely translated abroad,\(^6\) and a film based on *Generation П* was released in Russia in spring 2011.\(^7\)

English-language academic literature on Pelevin (the most academically studied Russian writer abroad, according to newspaper *Izvestiia*\(^8\)) often focuses on the social value of his texts in representing the transition Russian society and (popular) culture are undergoing. Pelevin ‘shows in his stories and novels a strong preoccupation with the political, economic and cultural transformation of Russia from the perestroika-period onward. […] In Pelevin’s work the late- and post-communist years are an uncanny, apocalyptic period, in which even eternity appears to be not everlasting’, and the protagonists embody ‘cultural in-betweenness’.\(^9\)

At the same time, Pelevin offers his readers a highly metaphysical view of life: one of the author’s passions found in his work is in fact philosophy and in particular Buddhism and oriental spirituality.\(^10\) In interviews, the author is frequently questioned about his opinions on abstract subjects such as mind and conscience, often in their relationship with visual culture and virtuality. As the author declares: ‘Mind is the ultimate paradox because when you start to look for it you can’t [sic] find it. But when you start to look for something that is not mind you also can’t find it. Mind is the central issue that interests me as a writer and as a person’.\(^11\)

Literary and cultural allusions abound in Pelevin’s work. However, they do not only refer to Soviet history and Russian literature, but also to popular, consumerist culture, with an emphasis on Western pop culture and Western objects,
and on visual culture and advertisement.\textsuperscript{12} Despite an influence of Western consumer culture, Pelevin’s work is solidly grounded in Russian culture, with unmistakably Soviet or post-Soviet settings and references. Like Akunin, Pelevin is offering a game to his readers, based on a pastiche of cultural references, as well as on the incorporation of subtle satire of Soviet life within contemporary topics such as advertisement and computer culture. All these topics are mediated through postmodernist devices, where also literature and literary classics are treated with mockery.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, considering the interpretation of a literary work to be completely subjective, Pelevin’s stories are often left open-ended: ‘in the act of reading only one real participant is involved, that is the reader’, he declares.\textsuperscript{14}

At the same time, it is argued that Pelevin’s plots and style are not very elaborate and that the characters are not particularly well-rounded,\textsuperscript{15} because the real focus of his stories is on ideas ‘and it is the ideas, not the actual character, which enter in conflict with each other’.\textsuperscript{16} This aspect creates the possibility for a comparison with Dostoevsky,\textsuperscript{17} and contributes to the inclusion of Pelevin’s works within ‘high’ literature. In the context of contemporary Russian literature, Pelevin’s status is in fact higher than that of other bestselling writers, including those who employ careful stylistic choices like Akunin:

A serious writer does not only worry about his bank account. He tries to transmit to the reader some thought, some idea, maybe even absurd, utopian, but still an idea. It is here that the border lies between Pelevin and commercials authors, like Akunin.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{12} For example, Pink Floyd are quoted in the novel \textit{Omon Ra}, while Che Guevara plays a role in \textit{Generation II} and appears on many versions of the cover of the book, as well as being often reproduced in association with Pelevin’s work, becoming therefore part of Pelevin’s iconography.


\textsuperscript{16} Kochetkova.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Beliakov.
Pelevin is often described as a representative of contemporary Russian postmodernism. However, his name is also often related to science fiction, cyberpunk, virtual reality, and dystopia. Sofya Khagi analyses *Generation II* as a fundamental ‘fin-de-siècle expression of dystopian imagination’: as opposed to some of Pelevin’s early works written during perestroika, such as *Omon Ra*, ‘mainly preoccupied with the deconstruction of Soviet utopia, [...] *Generation II* is the first major post-Soviet work to come to grips with the introduction of consumer capitalism and global pop culture’. In *Generation II*, Pelevin re-appropriates American consumer culture in the Russian context, following a trend typical of the early 1990s. At the same time, notes Khagy, while parodying consumer culture, the novel is placed as a consumer product, therefore satirically undermining itself. In Pelevin’s world, in fact, capitalism and the consequent commodification of life have taken the place of ideology, while advertisement is now a substitute for propaganda, thus representing the postmodernist substitution described by Epstein and Lipovestky (see Chapter 2). It can therefore be argued that social values have not been completely reversed by *perestroika* and by the demise of the Soviet ideology. As noted by Noordenbos, ‘commercial and ideological manipulation’ might not after all be ‘opposites’, since the ‘generation P’ did not really choose the ‘new consumption culture’, but accepted it somewhat passively as a feature of the times, just ‘like their parents accepted Brezhnev’, as Pelevin’s novel suggests.

Pelevin’s writing style often involves very descriptive, fast-paced action passages, almost reminding the reader of scenes from action films. This feature of Pelevin’s style can be related to the importance of images in contemporary culture, as a legacy from late twentieth-century heavily visually-based culture. In *Generation II*, for example, reality is ‘mediated through marketing and TV’ and literature itself is challenged by the ‘ubiquitous influence of the camera’. The primacy of visual culture is not simply a competitor for the readers’ attention, but, at a deeper

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19 Sally Dalton-Brown places Pelevin in historical context with Russian postmodernism in ‘Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair?’.  
22 Noordenbos, pp. 92-93.  
level, it represents a mode of living where the image is fundamental and the screen becomes the symbol of modern life. 25 The computer screen in the twenty-first century is, by Pelevin’s own admission (see section 2.1), the natural evolution of the television screen in playing a central role in our intellectual and cultural life.

New technologies are incorporated as literary settings in two of Pelevin’s works. The short story Prints Gosplana (Prince of Gosplan, 1991) is inspired by the world of the first popular computer games, in particular the game Prince of Persia. It has no ‘chapters’, but ‘levels’, and its protagonist finds himself in alternate moments in real life and in the game. The novel Shlem Uzhasa (The Helmet of Horror, 2005) is a re-elaboration of the ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, published as part of an international series on myths. 26 The novel is structured as a chat room conversation, therefore employing a new form of communication which inspires an original literary structure, based exclusively on dialogue and presenting characters whose real personalities are hidden by nicknames, entering or leaving the conversation without transitions or explanations. It also employs emoticons, most notably placed to separate different sections, instead of chapter numbers or headings. The characters describe their situation to each other as they find themselves in separate rooms where they can only communicate through a computer in an environment which ‘is not the Internet, [it] just looks like it’, 27 and discuss dreams and metaphysical questions in order to understand where they are and who the Minotaur is. Throughout the dialogue, they always maintain an awareness of their position in an online chat room. The helmet of horror contains the brain of the Minotaur which, like the ‘brain’ of the computer, is everything and imagines everything. One possible interpretation of the story could therefore situate it as a reflection on virtuality, where the characters exist but are not necessarily what they say they are, or cannot fully comprehend their own situation. The virtual world becomes another level of consciousness, but, unlike in Prints Gosplana where the levels of reality and virtuality coexist, virtuality represents here the only setting. The

25 Ibid.
26 ‘The Myths is a long-term global publishing project where some of the world’s most respected authors re-tell myths in a manner of their own choosing’, in order to offer ‘a modern look at our most enduring myths.’ Launched by publisher Canongate in 2005, the series is proposed as ‘the most ambitious simultaneous worldwide publication ever undertaken’. The Myths <www.themyths.co.uk> (accessed 15 October 2010).
*Helmet of Horror* is therefore closely related to contemporary forms of communication, and assumes awareness on the part of the reader of the mechanisms of a chat room in order to be fully understood.

1.2 Pelevin as a public figure

Despite his great popularity, Pelevin is known to actively avoid public appearances, television appearances, and even being photographed. In fact, the rare occurrences when Pelevin allows a new photograph of himself to be circulated become real pieces of news to be discussed. For example, on the occasion of his participation with a specially written story to the magazine *Snob*, the way his recent picture was acquired and on which conditions (Pelevin refused to be photographed by the magazine’s official photographer and in the requested pose, and preferred to submit his own picture) is profusely discussed in three paragraphs on the editor’s blog.  

In addition, Pelevin notoriously rarely offers interviews, intentionally creating an aura of mystery around his public character as part of his strategy for popularity. On one occasion, newspaper *Izvestiia* boasted that:

The fact that Viktor Pelevin avoids contact with the press and never gives interviews is already well-known. Luckily, in the past few years he has made exceptions for a columnist from *Izvestiia*.  

It is interesting to note one reader’s reaction to this interview, as it appears on a forum post:

I have the impression that Pelevin is always prepared for interviews, the questions of each interview are stipulated in advance. The answers are always too refined and polished. And most of all, in Viktor Olegovich’s interviews, which he doesn’t give, I like that every interview, which the writer once again didn’t give, is preceded by the sentence about how Pelevin doesn’t give

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29 Kochetkova.
interviews. I think that if you collect all the interviews that Pelevin has not ever given, then they will surely be one more than every other writer’s. This time Viktor Olegovich not only did not give an interview, but he also did not let himself be photographed posing.\(^{30}\) (31 October 2009)

This reader’s sarcastic attitude demonstrates that, at least to the most attentive fans, Pelevin’s presence in the media is actually evident and perceived as no less frequent than that of any other public character. Moreover, it is possible that to the fan who is engaged online, the public presence of the author might appear even more frequent, as Internet commentaries and blogs amplify news and offer wider circulation to interviews. Readers are aware that Pelevin’s advertised shyness in front of the media is actually part of a strategy of creation of his mysterious and intriguing character, and contributes to construct the author’s popularity:

The laws of popularity say: to be remembered, to be loved, to be paid, you need to constantly make yourself noticed on the mass media. […] But Pelevin does not, he does not often appear at social gatherings, his press conferences can be counted on one hand. But for some reason people remember Pelevin, and the popularity of Pelevin ‘the hermit’ only grows. His PR is more effective and efficient than the usual ways.\(^{31}\)

Because of his peculiar attitude towards public appearances, the use of technology represents an interesting feature in Pelevin’s relationship with his public.

2 - Pelevin and the Virtual World

Pelevin’s relationship with the Internet and his choices for online visibility and distribution of his work through the Web have not been thoroughly analysed yet. The use of the Internet as a meeting point for Pelevin’s fans and as a tool of visibility for the author is sometimes acknowledged, but only mentioned in passing and not analysed in detail.\(^{32}\) The author has demonstrated interest for computer mediated

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\(^{30}\) ‘Interview Izvestiiam’, Pelevin.nov.ru Forum <www.pelevin.nov.ru/forum> (accessed 24 October 2010). The struck-through sentences are reported as they appear on the original post.

\(^{31}\) Beliakov.

\(^{32}\) For example by Mozur, p. 61.
communication in several occasions, even if not always with a positive judgement: this aspect of the author’s public image will be examined in the next section of this chapter.

2.1 Pelevin and Online Communication

Pelevin has referred to his relationship with technology and with the Internet in some interviews. Significantly, on a few occasions he has agreed to be interviewed online, choosing not to interact in person with the public or even with a single journalist. Most notably, a long interview session was held online in real time on an IRC channel through pioneer RuNet culture website Zhurnal.ru as early as 1997, when Internet penetration in Russia was lower than 2%. The value of this action is therefore not in the breadth of the audience this initiative reached at the time, but rather in the demonstration of an ability to rapidly adapt to new media opportunities, both on the part of the author, who looks at the new medium with curiosity, and of Internet users of the time who experimented with the possibilities for communication offered by new technologies, involving prominent cultural figures in their pioneering initiatives. The novelty of the means is underlined in the middle of the conversation by a comment from the moderator:

My God, I’m sitting here in the office of ZR – and there’s no Pelevin here!!
He is like the Prince of the Gosplan – he exists only inside the computer.34

Virtual reality is alluded to in the advertisement of the event, which invites users not to miss the opportunity to meet in ‘virtual reality’ (in English) with the most inaccessible in ‘real life’ (also in English) of contemporary writers’. Pelevin’s ‘mysterious’ identity allows the creators of the event to play with ‘real life’ versus ‘virtual reality’, an aspect that represented a complete novelty in the early days of the Internet.


In addition, the interview is nowadays retrievable online both through Zhurnal.ru and on Pelevin’s fan website, and has therefore become an archived document which can be easily consulted, rather than an ephemeral chat room discussion.\(^{36}\)

In the wide range of questions answered by Pelevin in the session, some regarded aspects relating to his thoughts on new technologies and technological habits. We thus discover that Pelevin is a quite proficient user of computers (to the point of defining himself as ‘professional’), and he often describes the Internet and the chat room experience as ‘interesting’. In particular, he sees the Internet not as an ‘enemy of the writer’ but as a ‘very progressive phenomenon, in the sense that it is the only not fully commercialised network of communication in this world.’ On the validity of communication via online chat, he comments that ‘it depends not on the form of communication, but on who communicates’. Moreover, he is ‘very interested in this form of communication, where there is absolute equality of rights between who asks the question and who replies’ and he finds this aspect ‘very democratic and interesting’.\(^{37}\)

However, several years later Pelevin appears to have revised his opinions. From an interview published by Izvestia in 2005 for the publication of The Helmet of Horror, we find out that his enthusiasm has developed into a decided pessimism, partly due to the prominence in more recent years of forms of self-publishing like blogs. At this stage, Pelevin thinks that we should ‘turn off the computer’, in the same way as in the last century we should have turned off television sets; at the time, ‘there was one, general television for everybody. But with the appearance of the blogosphere, people became each other’s televisions’. Pelevin therefore establishes continuity between the mode of information of the era of the image and new screen-based written media, attributing to our technological epoch an overabundance of information of little significance. He explains that:

Like everybody, for a long time I thought that the Internet would be this virgin territory, where there is no censorship and you can find undistorted information. But then, when whole days were sinking into this hole, I started

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\(^{37}\) ‘Virtualnaia Konferentsiia s Viktorom Pelevinym’
to think – what is information? It’s a code, a set of signals, communicating something. Let’s imagine that a fire was set on the mountains for you to understand that the enemy’s cavalry is approaching. In the blogosphere, to continue the analogy, there are a lot of fires, but they do not communicate about the arrival of the cavalry, but about the fact that the neighbour saw a squirrel in his garden. There is heaps of information, but this information is of very low class […]. Information of higher status does not reach the blogosphere, because it has a monetary equivalent, and the more it is valuable, the better it is concealed. It’s an economic axiom. And yet, to rummage in the rubbish is an incredibly absorbing and cosy occupation. Each session programmes you for the next. Something develops in your consciousness, similar to a Trojan programme that starts breaking into the net every five minutes – there is nothing you need there, but you get connected anyway. And there is no point in doing so, because the absorption of useless information shortens your life – I don’t meant the amount of years you live, but its subjective duration. Life is also perception of information. And a person has a limited capacity.  

From an initial enthusiasm for the new communication frontiers (which can be related to opinions such as those of Rheingold and Healy presented in Chapter 1), Pelevin reached these conclusions after experiencing ‘symptoms of Internet-dependence’ that led him to try and ‘use the Internet only in case of necessity’. Pelevin’s opinion of the blogosphere as a space where low quality information is collected also recalls Bykov’s judgment on online writing discussed in Chapter 3.

Nevertheless, on a more recent occasion, in 2010 Pelevin once again utilised the Internet as a medium for interaction with his fans. After producing a short story specifically for magazine and social network Snob, Pelevin did not agree to a traditional interview, but he participated to a session in the style of a social network, where users asked questions to which he responded on the website (and not in real time like in a chat room). The text of the author’s interaction with his readers is still

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38 Pelevin, quoted in Aleksandrov.
39 Ibid.
40 Snob’s online page is divided into Zhurnal, with online versions of the monthly magazine, and Snobschestvo, the social side of the project, which includes blogs by important personalities, among which is also Grigorii Chkhartishvili. Snob <www.snob.ru> (accessed 30 December 2010).
available on the website.\textsuperscript{41} Members of the community wondered ‘what to ask a person who is famous for not giving interviews and why he agreed to this kind of contact this time’, to which Pelevin commented:

I never took the commitment of giving or not giving interviews. I do what I want. In addition, contact – this is a strong way to define it. If you look at the page you will see that there is no contact even between the letters (bukvy) that we are exchanging.

The author here underlines the distance allowed by computer mediated communication, and appears comfortable with it.

We discover through this session that Pelevin stopped reading blogs about himself because of personal attacks, but he is grateful to them for preventing him from ‘egosurfing’ (he does however occasionally read the \textit{LiveJournal} page dedicated to him). Pelevin is also asked for an opinion with regards to audiobooks, which he appreciates as long as ‘the voice has no defect, and the reader is not an excessively bright creative personality […]’. If these conditions are satisfied, what happens is simply a switch from the visual channel of perception to the acoustic’. Pelevin’s reaction to the contemporary possibilities for a return to the orality of literary texts is mainly positive, providing that the personality of the reader will not obscure the purely literary qualities of the work.

Through these initiatives, as well as through the occasional traditional interviews offered by Pelevin, it is possible to summarise the author’s opinions on new media and his relationship with technology and their social and literary applications. Despite his advertised shyness towards interviews, throughout the years Pelevin has utilised the possibilities offered by the Internet to enter in contact directly with his readers, therefore answering to questions in less traditional settings and without the mediation of an interviewer. The exact means with which this has happened have varied significantly in the space of little more than a decade, and reflect the communication mode that was prominent in Internet culture at each given moment; from the experimental chat room conversation of 1997, to the social

\textsuperscript{41} ‘Interv’iu s pisatelem Viktora Pelevina’, \textit{Snob} <http://www.snob.ru/selected.entry/20521> (accessed 24 October 2010). Users’ questions were collected since 24 June 2010, and Pelevin’s posts are all dated 28 June 2010.
network environment of Snob in 2010. It is however to be noted that on both these occasions, the virtual environment chosen for the exchange represented an elite setting: only a small number of users could participate in the chat room experience in 1997, as the Internet was not widespread at the time, while Snob is a closed community which requires registration and the payment of a fee in order to contribute and participate to discussion.  

While Pelevin’s direct dialogue with his readers has happened through these elite channels, Internet users can visit openly accessible websites dedicated to the author.

2.2 Pelevin’s Official Website

Online presence is nowadays almost unavoidable for public figures. Pelevin’s online visibility is the same that any widely successful author enjoys nowadays: his name is not hard to find on general literary websites and libraries, as well as online bookstores, in Russian as well as in English. However, the writer does not seem to have an official website in English, and neither an English web space entirely devoted to him. An official website is instead present on the RuNet.

Pelevin’s website, which I will refer to as Pelevin.ru presents some peculiar characteristics. It consists of a single page, displaying a black background fading into dark grey at the bottom; in the middle of the page stands a famous picture of the project for the Moscow Palace of Soviets which was not built. On the foreground of the picture, the website is announced as ‘Viktor Pelevin’s server’ (see Picture 8). Under the picture, there is only a message that reads: ‘Vitia! When you can find some time, ring me so that we can finish the website. People are waiting, and nothing is happening. My number is […]’

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42 ‘Chto daet uchastie v proekte ‘Snob’?’, Snob, <http://www.snob.ru/subscribe> (accessed 2 February 2012). Participants to the Snob project ‘live in various countries around the world, speak various languages but think in Russian’ and are ‘united by a common interest in the world that surrounds them and a desire to act in order to make this world a better place’ ‘About Snob’, Snob <http://www.snob.ru/basement/aboutsnob> (accessed 13 October 2011).

43 For example Library.ru <http://www.library.ru/2/lit/sections.php?a_uid=5>;
Amazon, in English
The message is signed ‘Tema’ and is followed, at the bottom of the page, by the logo of Artemii Lebedev’s studio, and by the writing ‘works are led by Artemii Lebedev’ - and not, for example, ‘this website was created by Artemii Lebedev’, suggesting that we are indeed in front of an unfinished work. It is easily verifiable with a simple online search that the number at the end of the message really does belong to the central office of Lebedev’s studio in Moscow.\textsuperscript{45} It is quite curious, however, that an established web designer has no other means to reach a customer, who is also a public figure, than leaving a message on the skeleton of a website, without contacting him privately or through his agent or publisher. Moreover, the message is not dated,\textsuperscript{46} making the visitor of the website wonder how long it has been there and whether Pelevin really is not at all interested in the completion of his own official website, or whether instead there is some sort of underlying message, unknown to the casual visitor. Pelevin’s potential lack of interest in an online presence seems to be out of character, considering the interest he has shown in new technological forms of interaction, especially in the early days of the Internet. It is therefore possible that the website has been carefully built exactly as we see it in order to give a message, albeit cryptic, to its visitors.

For example, the detail of the picture of the Palace of Soviet could imply that the unfinished appearance of the website is indeed intentional; as the palace was never completed, Pelevin’s readers should not expect works on the website to ever advance any further either. It is possible that the state of the website is part of the strategy of mystery of the writer, or, it appears to be even more likely that, as an author and public figure who is interested in understanding the modern world and processing it into his philosophy, Pelevin is making a statement by leaving expectations on his website unfulfilled. The purpose of this choice might be to encourage his readers to search for information in alternative ways instead of simply searching on a comfortable ready-made online archive. Perhaps Pelevin wants to emphasise the higher importance of the quest for knowledge rather than on the result, or the importance of the reader’s action. Another interpretation could be that Pelevin wants to express that he simply deems it not to be of fundamental importance to


\textsuperscript{46} An article from around 2000, when Pelevin’s fan website already existed, notes: ‘We are waiting for (Pelevin’s) personal website: Lebedev’s studio has already announced it. It will host ‘jokes - as appropriate for the website of the ‘idol of intellectuals’. Aleksei Makarnin, ‘Ot Marininoi do Akunina’.  

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provide extra material to complement his novels, as their interpretation and search for meanings should be left to an intellectually active reader. This would represent a significant difference from Akunin’s approach, which instead encourages readers’ activity by offering additional information, and therefore building a wider context around his work.

**Picture 8: Pelevin’s official website <www.pelevin.ru> (15 February 2012)**

Therefore, there are no aspects on Pelevin’s official website that can be described as informative or interactive. However, this website cleverly stimulates further thinking, without offering any ready-made material but subtly implying a potential invite to intellectual activity in front of a static image. Nevertheless, the suggested thinking is still individual, as the website does not host a space for fans to unite and share information or creativity.

Some examples of readers’ interaction suggest that Pelevin’s fans are aware of the situation of Pelevin’s website. One forum user comments on this regard that
‘people are no longer waiting, they already stopped waiting in 2001!!!’ However, this fact still stimulates the curiosity of fans: during the Snob question session with the author, one reader takes the chance to directly address Pelevin on this topic, by asking ‘why have you not contacted Tema about the website?’. Pelevin does answer that ‘the website suits [him] in its current form’, seemingly expressing that he has no further opinion about it. Pelevin’s original position on how to present himself through an official website, and the different layers of interpretation inspired by the website contribute to the perpetuation of the game of interpretations the author plays with his readers.

3 - The fan’s initiative: collective creation of contents

On their part, Pelevin’s readers actively create occasions for interaction with other fans. As Pelevin’s official website does not offer a space for readers to create a community, Pelevin-related online activities take place through the spontaneous initiative of readers.

Tribute pages to Pelevin exist on blogging communities and social networks, such as LiveJournal, or Russians’ favourite social network Vkontakte. The RuNet hosts only three websites entirely dedicated to Pelevin, besides the one I will focus on. Pelevin.org presents itself as a sort of appendix of Pelevin.nov.ru; a forum exists at the address <www.pelevin.su>, with not great amounts of activity and only 38 registered users as of October 2011. Finally, Pelevin.info is simply ‘a website about Viktor Pelevin’ presenting a detailed biography of the writer, articles and interviews about him, and also hosting the author’s complete texts for online reading, and a space for visitors to write comments. Despite an attempt to offer interactivity,
however, the website does not present high activity and the overall impression is rather static.

3.1 Pelevin.nov.ru

*Pelevin.nov.ru* is the most complete of the websites built around Pelevin’s fandom, taking the role of a semi-official website. It is also the most interactive, as its contents are created for the most part by the efforts of its users and then managed by the website’s owner with the help of a webmaster.\(^{54}\) Because of its richness and of its focus on users’ initiative, *Pelevin.nov.ru* grew to become a point of reference for all the Pelevin enthusiasts on the RuNet.

The website has been online since 2 July 2000. Its professional look and its design based on dark shades of grey recall the graphic style of Pelevin’s official website. The current version of its layout is the sixth, as the section ‘about the project’ on the website itself informs.\(^{55}\) As the project was born on the initiative of readers, it started at a small scale, hosted on a server located in Novgorod.\(^{56}\) Over the years the website’s activity has grown significantly thanks to the fundamental role played by users, and it currently hosts over 1400 files of a total size of over 250 megabytes.\(^{57}\)

According to information given on the website, the current layout is created by a studio called Web\(^3\),\(^{58}\) and designed by artist Alex Andreyev.\(^{59}\) The current server of the website is provided by a web hosting company,\(^{60}\) whose service is described as ‘the most pleasant and reasonable’, and for which the creators of the website are ‘grateful’.\(^{61}\)

The website is presented as ‘the site of Viktor Pelevin’s creative activity (*tvorchestvo*)’ and it is introduced on its homepage as a collection of information aimed at the reader:

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\(^{55}\) ‘O proekte’, *Pelevin.nov.ru* [http://www.pelevin.nov.ru/about] (accessed 18 October 2010). The websites’ first version in 2000 was described as unpretentious’ (*nezateilivyyi*) by Makarnin in ‘Ot Marininoi do Akunina’.

\(^{56}\) Makarnin. One of the earliest news in the website’s archive quotes in fact the address [http://ok.novgorod.net/pelevin/] as the address of the page that first appeared online in 2000.

\(^{57}\) ‘O proekte’. The same data has however been on the page at least since late 2009.


\(^{60}\) *Zenon* [http://www.host.ru] (accessed 19 October 2010)

\(^{61}\) ‘O proekte’
We are pleased to welcome you to the website of popular Russian writer Viktor Pelevin. We hope that the information collected on this site will be of interest to you, and useful.62

The news and other archival section of the website are part of the same area of the website, labelled under the name ‘Pelevin’. It is interesting to note that this area does not only contain texts by the author or information regarding him, but it also collects original material created by the users of the website. Users are encouraged to e-mail the webmaster with materials they created or retrieved, to be shared on the website; these include articles and literary criticism, as well as visual art inspired by Pelevin’s work.63 It is quite interesting that the website does not include a biography of Pelevin (although it does collect photos of him; all of them are obtained from external sources64).

All the possibilities offered by the Internet for multimedia content are taken advantage of on this website: visual arts are represented with readers’ illustrations, and audio content is on the website in the form of audiobooks versions of Pelevin’s novels, sometimes read by famous Russian artists.65 The audiobooks section is presented with the slogan ‘Listen, why read?’; the pun suggests a small reflection on all the possibilities for a dynamic relationship with books besides silent and individual reading.

Interactive sections of the website are collected under the label ‘Society’. Here can be found a chat room, a forum, a gallery of photographs and of profiles of active user of the website, as well as a gallery of pictures of their meetings. This part of the website also hosts a section called Sushi Bar.66 This is a self-publishing area, which collects texts written by users of the website, also sent to the webmaster via a link to his e-mail address. This space also offers the possibility for comments. The section contains about 400 texts, published between July 2003 and October 2011. However, more texts were published in earlier years (242 in 2003-2004, and only

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62 Homepage, Pelevin.nov.ru <http://pelevin.nov.ru> (accessed 2 February 2012).
154 between 2005 and 2011). Earlier texts, especially those appearing around 2004-2005, have been viewed about 400 times on average, but several among those published around 2009 have collected thousands of views each. It seems that the amount of views each text generates has risen with time, which is probably simply connected with rising activity on the website and higher numbers of Internet users in general. The trend stopped in 2010, as there were no texts posted during that year, and presents lower activity in 2011, as texts from this year have so far collected only a few hundred views despite having been on the website for several months.

Alongside the self-publication of original literary or academic works, one of the most significant contributions of users to the website is in the news section. Here, users are invited to add news by simply accessing a form with a login and password provided on the same page (Pictures 9 and 10), on the condition that they ‘reflect about whether [the news posted] will be of interest to visitors of the website’, that the news is relevant to the topic of ‘contemporary Russian literature’, and that users reference their sources. News is divided between news about additions to the website, and news related to Pelevin’s work, which are the ones to which users can contribute. Both sections are updated with a frequency varying from once every few months to two or three times per month, revealing that the website is active and up to date with what happens in Pelevin’s world.


Users’ contribution to this incessant collection and creation of content is acknowledged in the self-reflective part of the website, where alongside the people
actively involved in its development, special thanks are expressed ‘to all the people who send materials, write on the forum and communicate in the chat room, without whom it would be difficult to imagine the existence of this website’. The website thus becomes a real work of collective intelligence and a Web 2.0 environment. While some of its areas still maintain the mediation of a webmaster and of moderators, it relies on users’ initiatives to expand its contents. The intellectual exchange between readers on spaces where they are protagonists contributes to the enhancement of the literary experience, and represent exciting developments in the way we deal with literary culture, which may become very significant as online literary activity becomes an integral part of literary culture.

Through online tools, readers use their interest in Pelevin’s books to expand their own creativity and share it with each other. Like Akunin’s fans, Pelevin’s readers also take their reading experience out of the written page and into the virtual world through computer mediated communication. The literary text is the starting point for the creation of personal works of art, while the website offers the space where users’ own literary efforts are shared.

One particular project will now be examined. The Viktor Olegovich™ project closely resembles fan fiction and presents important aspects of collaborative creation of online contents.

3.2 Viktor Olegovich™

The Viktor Olegovich™ project is a collection of anecdotes whose protagonist clearly represents Pelevin, but is not the ‘real’ Pelevin himself. In this project, once again the real and virtual levels are present in parallel:

The main hero of the stories is quite indirectly related to a well-known writer, as he represents only his second derivative (the first comes from the

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68 ‘O proekte’.
69 Henry Jenkins, ‘Interactive Audiences?’, pp. 136-140.
stereotypical image of the spiritual leader in sunglasses who gives witty interviews in Japanese restaurants).\textsuperscript{71}

The \textit{Viktor Olegovich}™ stories can thus be considered as a form of fan fiction having as its protagonist a public character. The ™ symbol is part of the character’s name and is applied to the personal names of all other public characters appearing in the short stories. This choice represents a very fitting element in the context of Pelevin’s world, as it can be interpreted as a form of commodification of the human being, and specifically of the literary author, who becomes a semi-fictional character in a serialised story (even if very few stories are directly related to literary subjects). The stories are created by a website user from L’vov, who is also active on the website’s forum. The purpose of the project is ‘pure entertainment’; readers are invited to ‘use the stories by their real purpose, that is reading them, showing them to friends or publish them in other places, in which case without forgetting to provide a link to the source’.\textsuperscript{72} The stories are therefore put in the public domain, like often happens to Internet creativity. However, intellectual copyright is clearly recognised with the request to users to quote the source with a hypertextual link. Audio versions of the stories, read by the author, were added to the website for the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the project in 2009.\textsuperscript{73} However, while the stories are still retrievable online, the project, which started in 2004, has since then been discontinued, as the latest story published is dated 28 December 2009.\textsuperscript{74}

Short humorous stories (anekdoty) are typical of Russian ‘urban folklore’, and have become a popular form of Internet creativity.\textsuperscript{75} The \textit{Viktor Olegovich}™ series is inspired, however, by a precise type of short stories involving famous characters, which were made popular on the RuNet by journalist, Internet personality and blogger Maksim Kononenko. Kononenko’s satirical page \textit{Vladimir Vladimirovich}™ collects short humorous stories about Vladimir Putin,\textsuperscript{76} portraying

\textsuperscript{71} ‘FAQ/CaVo’, \textit{V. Olegovich}™ \url{http://pelevin.nov.ru/victorolegovich/faq.html} (accessed 20 October 2010).
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} ‘Viktor Olegovich™, Neskol’ko Ozvuchennykh Istorii’. \url{Pelevin.nov.ru} \url{http://www.pelevin.nov.ru/victorolegovich/audio/} (accessed 25 October 2010).
\textsuperscript{74} ‘V. Olegovich™’.
\textsuperscript{75} Gorny, ‘More Than Humor: Jokes from Russia as a Mirror of Russian Life’ p 81.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Vladimir Vladimirovich}™ \url{http://vladimir.vladimirovich.ru/} (accessed 25 October 2010).
him ‘indulgently’, as a child, and employing very simple language.77 As a well-known page of Russian-language ‘digital folklore’,78 Kononenko’s idea of writing short stories having as their protagonist a known personality was appropriated by Pelevin’s fans and adapted to their own context. Pelevin’s fans online therefore draw from Internet culture as well as from pre-existing creative forms. In fact, as a website user informs the author through the Frequently Asked Questions page of the Viktor Olegovich™ project, the origin of short stories based on public figures is rooted in the pre-digital and pre-mass-culture past: this format was first employed by Aleksei Kostantinovich Tolstoy (1817-1875) in a story about young president George Washington, which was not published until 1925. Other groups of writers also employed short humorous stories to write about world history. According to the author of this summary, this kind of stories represent a real subgenre of Russian literature and therefore has its roots in traditional literature, rather than belonging to the era of Internet culture.79

Information about the historical background of this type of stories was expanded several times as users sent further and more precise information; this contribution is acknowledged with gratitude by the author of the stories. Users also contribute with their comments, and by suggesting new themes for the stories. In addition, a related section contains artwork by a user which is considered as illustrations to Viktor Olegovich™, even if not always dependent on the stories themselves.80 Like the rest of the website, the existence of the Viktor Olegovich™ section is partly attributed to a collective effort, even though there is only one official author of the stories. The author recognises the role of other visitors of the website in ‘helping’ him create his stories with their commentaries, advice and information. The collective-oriented nature of the enterprise is somewhat underlined by the question ‘does anyone help the author?’, and is celebrated in the answer:

I am helped by my editor […]. In addition, I am helped by the visitors of the website of Viktor Pelevin’s creative activity [ie, Pelevin.nov.ru]. With great

77 Olga Goriunova describes the project in more detail at pages 181-183 of ‘Male Literature’ of Udaff.com and Other Networked Artistic Practices of the Cultural Resistance’, in Control + Shift , ed. by Schmidt, Teubener and Zurawski
78 Ibid.
79 ‘FAQ/ChaVo’.
80 ‘Viktor Olegovich™ v kartinkakh’ <http://pelevin.nov.ru/viktorolegovich/handymendy/> (accessed 25 October 2010); see also ‘FAQ/ChaVo’.
enthusiasm, they suggest to the author titles for future stories, and then they observe with interest how he develops them.

The author also acknowledges the help of his ‘editor’, who acts as his proofreader; the importance of correct spelling and grammar is also underlined by mentioning the use of a spellchecker:

I am helped by my editor, K.. She notices grammatical, syntactic and stylistic mistakes, which are missed by the built-in Microsoft Word spellchecker. She tries with variable success to teach me to write correctly the stories about Viktor Olegovich™, but she is nevertheless a very good editor.

The attention to detail expressed by the author of this project contrasts with the common criticism on the spontaneity and amateur quality of online writing. It might be possible that a tendency for a less polished style is typical of some blogs, because of their immediate character, while online writing for a young user of a literary website is worth an effort towards the correct use of language in order to achieve a ‘high’ and respectable aura comparable to that of a literary author.

The Viktor Olegovich™ project benefits from collective effort and is closely related to the website’s forum, where discussion and collective experience are fundamental parts of the environment.

3.3 The forum

The Pelevin.nov.ru forum is quite active, generating new discussions practically every day. Its layout appears as not particularly user-friendly, as it consists of a space on the left-hand side of the screen where the list of threads appears, while the right-hand half of the screen allows a message to be written or displays the message that has been selected to read (see Picture 11). This structure influences terminology, as threads here are called vetki, branches.
To participate to the forum, it is not necessary to register: it is sufficient to write a message and submit it. According to its introduction, the purpose of the forum is ‘the discussion of various literary, musical and video preferences, of situations of life and of problems, and the exchange of life experience and of professional knowledge for the resolution of these problems’.  

Personal poetry or prose, and at times drawings as well, are often posted on this space, sometimes generating numerous comments which lead to interesting debates, other times remaining virtually ignored. As numerous posts consist just of short exchanges and representing ‘pure conversation’ (see Introduction) rather than meaningful discussion, it could be said in some ways that Pelevin might be correct to deem the major part of Internet communication as a meaningless overload of information. However, at a less superficial level, it can be argued that all these exchanges are specific rather than useless, as they will be of value to a niche, in this case the restricted group of users of the Pelevin forum (or users interested in that particular thread), who, by employing a specific style, perpetuate the game started in the author’s book. Several messages in fact foster a playful atmosphere by involving

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some jokes or mockery. A contribution to the atmosphere of frequent mockery, and a somewhat cryptic aura to some discussion, is provided by the relatively large use of the *padonki* language. This is a very popular slang of Russian Internet culture consisting of voluntarily misspelling words according to their sound, similar to the orthography of a student who confuses spelling rules and uses them inconsistently. One of the most common examples is the word ‘author’, *avtor* (автор), which becomes *afftar* (аффтар). This style of writing, initially born as expression of online countercultures, has gained large popularity on the RuNet, where it represents spontaneity as well as a democratic use of language, but also a conscious intellectual game involving an artistic crossing of the norms of correct language. The *padonki* style has become a symbol of belonging to Russian Internet culture, and in particular its blogosphere, but it is also occasionally entering other mass media.

Pelevin’s fans thus demonstrate their receptivity to the various stimuli offered by the RuNet, appropriating in their community a tendency of contemporary RuNet culture. Their readiness to embrace the popular *padonki* language situates them as part of the larger Russian-speaking segment of the Internet, rather than as a closed niche.

The amount of multimedia material present on the forum also suggests how forum users are part of a wider Internet culture: numerous replies simply consist of a video or a link to an external website. The large use of external references to other online sources further demonstrates how Pelevin’s fan community is not a closed subculture, but rather it is aware of what happens in the online world in general. The Internet is a privileged environment for exchanges involving different communities or different sources of information, thanks to its possibilities for hypertextuality and multimedia content. In this way, Pelevin’s fans create a pastiche through the use of multimedia material and other parts of Internet folklore such as the *padonki* language, thus creating their own world in parallel to Pelevin’s literary creation, and continuing the author’s postmodernist game on the pages of the Internet.

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82 Henrike Schmidt, ‘The Slang of Virtual Good-For-Nothings and Its Literary Adaptations’, *Kultura*, 1, 2009, p. 13; see also Gorjunova.
83 The complexities of the role of the padonki language on the RuNet are examined by Vera Zvereva in ‘Iazyk padonkaf: Diskussii pol’zovatelei Runeta’, in *From Poets to Padonki*, ed. by Lunde and Paulsen.
The forum also presents more traditional forms of interaction, and posts aiming to simulate discussion or to inform. Some of these can offer examples on the mentality of contemporary readers. For instance, it is possible to find reflections on the position of the reader within literature, as well as on the contemporary book market. In one of these conversations, readers launch into a debate about who writers write for, which soon slides into almost metaphysical territories: ‘writers always write for the ideal reader, the way they imagine it. [...] And the ideal reader is God. Writers write for God and for eternity’, comments a user, who is soon reminded that ‘the God is rather the writer’ while, according to another user, ‘god is the reader and the writer at the same time’. The conversation reaches an important point when a user remarks that ‘the key moment is that he writes. Did you realise? The only thing that exists without doubt is the PROCESS OF WRITING’. From this exchange it can be inferred that these readers are interested in writing processes and reflect deeply about them; however, the discussion is very general and traditional: it takes place online but there is nothing in it that pertains to the online world. In this case, the Internet is a medium for an exchange that could take place anywhere else. The discussion becomes more grounded in contemporary reality as one user starts discussing how ‘today literature is a business, well calculated and planned. And the reader is a user. The whole process cannot be cynically calculated and then at the final point re-orientated to an ideal perception’. The conclusion reached by this user contrasts with the metaphysical ideals previously discussed in the thread, and is echoed by a comment that ‘today the whole life is business’. Similarly to Akunin’s fans (see Chapter 4), these readers are also aware of contemporary dynamics in contrast with ideal visions of literature.

An erudite exchange on the forum is stimulated by Pelevin’s 2009 book called t. A commentary on a scene involving Tolstoy and Dostoevsky prompts a discussion about the relationship between the two writers (who in reality never met), and about why this scene is considered so amusing:

…We talked of why it is funny (and it is really funny) when Dostoevsky and Tolstoy fight with axes. It is not just because it is absurd… Why then would Tolstoy not fight with, let’s say, Brezhnev. That is, we talked of the level of

Pelevin’s humour in the new novel and of the foundation of this humour. I will tell just a simple thought: ‘to understand the joke, you need to understand who is joking.’

Once again, readers reflect on the author’s motives. The rest of this long, debating thread shows an interest on the part of these readers for classic Russian literature, thus suggesting that the heritage of the classics is still present both for the readers, as well as for the writer himself. Besides the mockery and playful atmosphere (even this discussion starts with a request in padonki language), Pelevin’s forum can create the possibility for intellectually prepared readers to exchange opinions and expand their knowledge of literature, even if the environment does not, at a first glance, look as inviting and apt for high-brow discussion as other contemporary virtual environments.

In addition, concrete events involving the virtual community of Pelevin’s fans have been organised on this forum, similarly to what happens on the Akunin forum described in the previous chapter. Among this is a game of ‘quest for real pelevinophiles’ on the novel Numbers’, consisting of an online game and an ‘offline quest around the city of M.’, naturally Moscow. In the online part, users of the forum are invited to complete ‘assignments’, such as taking photographs of objects displaying numbers relevant to the Numbers novel, and writing a relevant piece of poetry. The offline meeting promises a game around ‘Pelevin’s places’ and here too, users not living in Moscow feel excluded and are invited to enjoy at least the online quest.

The Pelevin.nov.ru forum thus serves several, multifaceted purposes typical of literary forums. It is a space where fans can discuss the production of their favourite author, and play with other readers following the author’s suggestion, thus merging their reading experience with their experience as Internet users. The forum also provides a space where users can post their own literary materials and discuss

86 Just like Akunin’s fans are ‘akanisty’, Pelevin’s fans call themselves ‘pelevinovedy’.
their creative enterprises with like-minded fans of the same author. In addition, users create connections with a wider online culture through their use of a specific language and of multimedia contents.

Each literary forum shares the atmosphere created by the author to whom it is primarily dedicated. Pelevin’s readers appreciate metaphysical discussion and postmodernist play on words and meanings, which they create online through multimedia tools. This playful environment shows examples of erudite exchanges, and presents the atmosphere of an online literary salon, even if of a very specific nature dictated by the peculiarities of the author. Pelevin’s style as a writer of contemporary literature with a fascination for Soviet allusions, for Western culture and for metaphysical thoughts, as well as his mysterious public figure, appeal to his readers and are taken as a model by his most passionate followers. The cryptic, multi-layered, postmodernist world of Pelevin’s literature seems reflected in the characteristics of his forum, where traditional discussion does happen but is framed by multimedia, inside jokes, uses of language typical of online subcultures, etc.

The community of Pelevin’s fans is developing together with the evolution of Internet culture. A parallel community named Plevman was announced on LiveJournal in March 2010. Launched by the creators of Pelevin.nov.ru, the community aims to eventually replace the ‘social functions’ of Pelevin.nov.ru and to become ‘the first intellectual social network in Russia and nearby’. It is exclusively available to invited users, retaining therefore some exclusivity based on its intellectual foundation. Plevman works like a social network, where users can complete their profiles, host pictures, and use blogging and chat functions, and it also includes a forum. Because of its relationship with Pelevin.nov.ru, which ‘was one of the most popular resources’ for Pelevin’s admirers, it is expected that, ‘once...

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89‘Sots-set’ Plevman.com’, ru_pelevin, 12 March 2010 <http://community.livejournal.com/ru_pelevin/2010/03/12/> (accessed 20 October 2010). Vitya Plevman is one of Pelevin’s pseudonyms according to his page on Lurkmore, a Wikipedia-style encyclopaedic community informing on ‘culture, folklore and subculture from the point of view of the intellectual minority’ <http://lurkmore.ru/%D0%9F%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BD> (accessed 20 October 2010).
completed, the new platform has all the possibilities to become one of the main nearly-literary (okololiteraturnyi) spaces for discussion on the RuNet’.\(^90\)

Despite the growing popularity of social networking environments and the advent of Plevman, the forum on Pelevin.nov.ru is still active, serving as evidence of how this platform is and has been used by Pelevin’s fans for communicating with each other, and which kind of legacy it will possibly bring to its successor Plevman, if it becomes a popular online community.

4 - Online distribution and reading habits: ‘Buy and read books!’

One particularly important initiative of Pelevin.nov.ru is the presence of the complete texts of Pelevin’s works online. From the introductory text on the homepage of the website, users are immediately reassured that texts are published there with the author’s approval:

Also, we readily assure you that the short stories, short novels and novels (rasskazy, povesty i romany) by Viktor Pelevin are distributed in electronic format with the consent of the author.\(^91\)

The website is proudly presented as an archive and online library for Pelevin’s texts. Nevertheless, it shows complete awareness of copyright issues regarding the reproduction of texts online. The texts had in fact to be removed from the website at the request of Pelevin’s publisher Eskmo in October 2008, but they reappeared thanks to a ‘reorganisation’ in early 2009.\(^92\)

The texts can be accessed free of charge and without any registration to the website, and some texts are linked to audio versions hosted on the same website. However, they can only be read on screen and an attempt to copy and paste even just a word from the screen will not only prove unsuccessful, but will prompt an error message to appear on the page:

\(^91\) Homepage Pelevin.nov.ru.
\(^92\) This fact is no longer verifiable on Pelevin.nov.ru itself, but it is documented on Pelevin’s page on Lurkmore.
[We apologise, but it is not possible to copy texts from here. Not because we are like that, but because there are ten thousand external reasons. You can consider this event as an insuperable force of Nature, and let’s pretend that nothing happened.]

Each time a new work is added online, it is underlined that this happens thanks to Pelevin’s literary agent and publisher (whose websites are linked to, in a typical choice of interactive hypertexual environments), and a commentary is added as a reminder of the value of books, with insistence on their traditional features, such as the pleasure of the printed page. Some examples:

Thanks to the Author, to the literary agency FTM and to publisher Eksmo, we are pleased to make you acquainted with the works from the book *DTP(NN)*. [...] Naturally, as in the good old tradition, we recommend reading Viktor Olegovich’s books on paper, and not on screen. There the fonts are bigger and the meaning is more multilayered. No electronic copy can compare with the joy obtained from reading the hard copy of a work! Buy and read books. (*02 September 2009*).

Thanks to the Author and to his literary agency FTM, as well as to publisher Eksmo, we are pleased to introduce you to the novel *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*. Dear (*dorogie*) readers! We ask you to take into account that reading a text in electronic version is not considered reading. Whereas holding a copy of the printed edition is considered an inalienable merit. Buy and read books! (*30 March 2009*).
With immutable gratitude to the Author and to literary agency FTM, we are pleased to offer for your acquaintance and reading the text of the novel *The Helmet of Horror*. In order for you to fully enjoy the book, we recommend in your own time to obtain without fail (obiazatel’no) the paper copy of this work. No electronic copy can compare with the joy obtained from reading the hard copy of a work! (4 March 2009).

Thanks to the Author and to the literary agency FTM, as well as to the publisher Eksmo, we offer for your acquaintance the novel *Empire V*. 

Dear (uvazhaemye) readers! Once again we are eager to note that reading a text in its electronic version only brings a relative pleasure. While instead holding a copy of the paper edition the pleasure is absolute. Buy and read books! (11 May 2009).  

In addition, texts of Pelevin’s works also appear on the less popular website *Pelevin.org*, but only in partial versions that urge the reader to enjoy the full version on *Pelevin.nov.ru* (here defined as ‘Pelevin’s official website’). The texts are accompanied by a strong invitation to purchase a paper copy of the book, and once again, the appeal is to the author’s rights and to the more comfortable characteristics of the traditional book:

As the right of utilisation of this work belong to the Author, his literary agent and his publisher, we cannot reproduce here the whole text to the end. Nevertheless, you can continue reading on Viktor Pelevin’s official site. Also, we recommend in every possible way to buy the paper version of the book… at least because the paper version is very comfortable and pleasant to use. For you it doesn’t matter, and the publisher will be happy.  

The presence of Pelevin’s texts online is evidently a clever and useful way for the writer’s popularity to spread further, and to make his work comfortably accessible from any device connected to the Internet without the presence of a

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93 All quotes from ‘Novosti’, *Pelevin.nov.ru*.
physical book. This aspect can be useful for those readers who do not have easy access to bookshops or traditional libraries, or who find themselves out of Russia, providing they have an Internet connection, and it represents a way to bypass distribution problems through the means of modern technology. However, it does not substitute for the personal or printed copy, as it is not possible to download or print the texts. In this way, the initiative remains in the frame of traditional publishing in the sense that it is respectful of copyright and publishing rights. The insistence on the necessity to own a personal copy naturally coincides with the importance of purchasing a traditional, printed copy, therefore granting the author and his publisher with an economic profit and a place in sales lists. However, the underlying economic reasons are not the main preoccupation of the website, which explicitly appeals to traditional reading habits, striving to remind readers of how electronic reading only brings a ‘relative’ pleasure compared to the ‘absolute’ pleasure of the printed version, and is even ‘not regarded as real reading’. The materiality of the book is constantly emphasised and presented as the only real and fully acceptable way to read literature, with frequent references to paper, to the act of holding a printed edition, and even with a reminder of how much more comfortable traditional reading is in comparison to reading on screen, alluding to the fact that, besides the characters being more readable, it is even possible to obtain deeper meanings out of the reading experience. This latter argument seems closely related to the arguments discussed in Chapter 1 concerning the loss of deep reading in the technological age. The appeal to traditional reading rather than to the author’s intellectual rights is significant of the awareness of the transition between reading formats, suggesting that the online text is not just a way to obtain the book more easily and cheaply, but it represents an actual change in the ways of reading. This particular emphasis might be related to specific aspects of the Russian and post-Soviet attitude towards copyright (see Introduction and Chapter 3), and also be a legacy of Soviet values, according to which treating reading, and in particular the material book, in the appropriate manner was part of kul’turnost’.

Visitors of the website are strongly invited to buy and read printed books, always with the same final imperative formula ‘buy and read books!’. Similarly to

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95 A separate section of the website (‘Kupit’, Pelevin.nov.ru <http://pelevin.nov.ru/sale/> accessed 17 October 2010) further encourages the purchase of books (both Pelevin’s and recommended books by other authors, such as Sorokin, Murakami, Borges) through links to online shop Ozon.
Soviet literacy campaigns, the authors of the website seem to want to take the authoritative role of guiding the reader towards the correct way to deal with literary materials.

The website therefore appeals to the role of the material book and of the physical act of reading in traditional Russian literary culture, offering the former ‘most reading nation’ the possibility to savour contemporary means of literary distribution but at the same time subordinating them to traditional ways (and to the rules of the offline publishing industry). The attitude towards the electronic copy on Pelevin.nov.ru presents a peculiar mixture of excitement for the possibility to present complete literary texts online on one side, with a partial submission to the traditional, material book and to the traditional literary market on the other side. This is however a good example of a hybrid system where free circulation of online copies to read on screen is allowed and encouraged only on the side of traditional, paper-based reading for leisure. Electronic reading therefore still coexists with traditional reading in a world, of which this website is a clear example, where it is important to be at the forefront of innovation in order to appeal to those readers who are familiar with the Internet, but where it is also necessary to remain strongly anchored to traditional literary habits.

A further step towards the introduction of modern Internet-based technologies in literary distribution was taken by Pelevin and his publishers for the marketing of his 2009 book, simply called t.

According to news published on Pelevin.nov.ru in October 2009, the publishing house Eksmo allowed the free download of the first 20 pages of the book, on the ‘rather progressive for the RuNet’ DRM format; interested readers could then decide to pay for the rest of the novel if they enjoyed the preview. A link to Eksmo’s website was provided; here, a news update dated 26 October 2009 presented


97 DRM, Digital Rights Management, refers to ‘technologies that prevent you from using a copyrighted digital work beyond the degree to which the copyright owner wishes to allow you to use it.’ Mike Godwin, What Every Citizen Should Know about DRM, a.k.a. Digital Rights Management (Public Knowledge – New America Foundation: Washington, DC) <http://www.publicknowledge.org/pdf/citizens_guide_to_drm.pdf> (accessed 15 October 2010). The article also acknowledges the role of literary culture and the printing press in shaping the notion of copyright that was commonly used before digital technologies were widespread. See also INDICARE Project, Consumer’s Guide to Digital Rights Management, <http://www.indicare.org/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=195> (accessed 15 October 2010).
the digital version of the book, which had appeared in bookshops in traditional paper format a few days earlier. This page explains that numerous reviews of the book had already appeared, both from readers and literary critics, after the print publication of the book, underlining the interest around it. The printed version, however, could not ‘satisfy the desire of lovers and experts of the digital format to obtain an electronic version of the book’. Eksmo’s initiative catered for ‘those who prefer to read on the computer or on mobile tools’, and the book is therefore downloadable through a choice of formats and sizes described as particularly ‘comfortable’ for this purpose (PDF, RTF, and several others). The download was and is still possible through an external website dedicated to the purchase of digital content (e-books, audiobooks and films).

The online preview is visualised in the shape of a paper book, with pages that can be turned by clicking the mouse, therefore maintaining a relationship with the shape of the traditional book and the materiality of traditional reading, rather than being read by scrolling vertically. The actual file is, however, a typical computer file to be read vertically, at least in the PDF version.

Eksmo’s enthusiasm in offering a product specifically created for that part of the audience who explicitly prefers reading on screen somehow contradicts the message found on Pelevin.nov.ru, that ‘electronic reading is not considered real reading’. One difference might be, naturally, that this content is not offered for free so it is convenient for the publisher to take advantage of the novelty of digital reading to enlarge its profits by catering for more users and offering a chance to technologically-minded or simply curious readers to experiment with new possibilities. However, the assumption that some readers do prefer reading on screen rather than on paper (and therefore that this initiative will prove successful in terms of marketing and profit) can be interpreted as a small but significant sign of the changing attitudes towards technologies applied to reading materials, and of the growing interest of publishers and readers alike for novelties in reading culture.

100 Ibid. Pelevin’s book is currently (September 2010) offered at a price of 99 roubles, and is free of charge for subscribers of the website (who have paid an initial sum of money to enjoy free download of content for a month, within certain limits). Methods of payment include credit cards, Paypal, Yandex Money, SMS and payment terminals.
Despite the importance of keeping up to date with technological means of distribution, however, it is often still not possible for an already established author to rely completely on such means for the marketing of a book. As long as traditional market rules still exist, the advertisement and distribution of literary products will need to combine old and new means, taking advantage of the Internet to stimulate further interest for the literary product, but still maintaining a considerable focus on the traditional, physical book.

In order to observe how a sample of readers reacted to this marketing strategy, I looked for messages relating to the reception of the novel $t$ and in particular to its ways of distribution on the Pelevin.nov.ru forums. Several vetki appeared, with commentaries from readers who have read the books and requests of opinions from users who still have not had the opportunity to do so. Users expressed themselves with ratings and longer reviews, and even poems about the novel (it seems to be relatively frequent on this forum to respond to something with a poem, either serious or less serious). However, there are also remarks on its mode of distribution.

As the book was announced for 20 October 2009, on 21 October a reader was looking for a link to read the novel online. The answer was that ‘it is nowhere on the Internet’. All the following answers discussed the fact that ‘there is no book’ and the book ‘is in your brain’, in padonki language and with nonsense dialogues, in a very typical fashion of this forum, where the real information does not seem to always appear. However, another user received more practical replies. Asking ‘when and where can I buy $t$ in SPB [Saint Petersburg]’, he was answered with a link to popular online shop Ozon with the advice ‘order it on the Internet, don’t ruin yourself, 10$’.

It is very significant that readers come to an online forum to find out where and how to buy the book they want, testifying that publication dates and most of all deliveries are not always reliable and they do not reach all the bookshops in the country, or even in the same city, at the same time. It is also interesting and indicative that the most obvious, safe and convenient place to obtain a physical copy of the book is through an online shop, which allows readers to circumvent the book

distribution problems and differences that persist even in the technologically developing Russian Federation.

In contrast, a reader opened a discussion to announce that ‘today [he] bought the book in the province’, in the city of Tolyatti. It is important to note that the book did arrive in the province promptly (‘they brought it today’, dated 22 October 09), but much more indicative is the fact that this reader felt the need to inform the other users of the forum about it.\(^{104}\)

Finally, the electronic version provided by Eksmo was discussed in only one thread, where a user informed the others of the existence of the downloadable copy, underlining that ‘it only costs 150 roubles. In the usual shops it costs more than 300’. Users then commented on how Pelevin loses half of the income for each online copy.\(^{105}\) Other sources which allowed free download of the book were also added to the forum, in some cases before the official online release.\(^{106}\)

In this occasion, therefore, the forum represented a tool for research of information and facilitated contact between individuals who either need or offer further information on ways to purchase a digital or physical copy of a new novel.

5 – Conclusion

In this chapter, I analysed some aspects of the relationship of writer Viktor Pelevin and of his readers with the online world. An awareness of the role of technological tools in the contemporary literary market is clearly reflected in the author’s choices of use of the Internet for communication with his fans and distribution of his books. In addition, Pelevin’s fans who are also committed Internet users have taken initiatives in order to develop online spaces for the discussion of Pelevin’s world, where they exchange information and create further meanings. These aspects have represented the main focus of this chapter.

\(^{104}\) ‘Segodnia kupil t v provintsii’, *Pelevin.nov.ru Forum*, 22 October 2009 (accessed 20 October 2010).


Because of his choice of literary topics and his awareness of the influence of new media on everyday life, Pelevin is considered a ‘writer of virtuality’ who does not appreciate visibility as a public figure. Nevertheless, he has on some occasions taken advantage of the Internet to communicate with his fans. Pelevin’s singular aura of mystery is partly maintained through the distance perceived in communication mediated through the computer; at the same time, his visibility is amplified through initiatives aimed at direct communication with his readers, and by the amount of material about him retrievable online. The relationship between the mysterious writers and his fans becomes closer through online communication, as readers obtain the opportunity to interact with the author, and to learn about him.

The Internet is thus for Pelevin a way to continue his game between metaphysical and virtual realities and different levels of consciousness; his most active fans follow the writer’s example and create parallel worlds as well, inspired by his work.

In fact, on their part, Pelevin’s readers actively engage with each other and with the text in the environment of website Pelevin.nov.ru, which was originally created through fans’ grassroots activity, since possibilities for interaction are not offered on the writer’s own website. Collective experience is fundamental to Pelevin’s fans; through their initiatives, forum discussions and amateur creativity, readers play with Pelevin’s materials and recreate the writer’s postmodernist atmosphere through the postmodern, hypertextual environment of the Internet. For these readers, the use of the Internet in relation to literature does not represent a distraction from reading. On the contrary, it creates an environment where the reading experience can be expanded and shared with other fans, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet for intertextual and multimedia games, and for communication. Pelevin’s readers share news with each other in a polyphonic effort to create collective knowledge. Bykov’s arguments discussed in Chapter 3 regarding the polyphonic, underground nature of online literary activity can be applied to readers’ activities too. However, this collective of different voices does not show indolence or generate exclusively irrelevance. Rather, their exchanges foster an atmosphere of vibrant intellectual exchange where Internet use and interest for literature become a form of self-expression. After the experience of solitary
reading, these readers share their opinions and discoveries with others, and inform each other about how to purchase Pelevin’s books.

Pelevin’s fan community is for some aspects very closed. Their social interactions are being moved to a registration-only website, and the existing communication often looks complicated and cryptic to an outsider. However, like every other online community, Pelevin’s fans are not isolated, as they create connections with the rest of the RuNet and of Internet culture in general, through the heavy use of links to external websites, texts, videos, and through the adoption of slang and folklore items typical of the RuNet, such as the padonki language. Readers’ websites are therefore not only niches for the enthusiasts, but become part of a wider game which can be played on the pages of the Internet, thanks to the characteristics of the medium.

Finally, the Internet allows gradual but deep changes in reading habits through the possibility for online reading. Pelevin’s readers are on one hand stimulated to reflect on the value of traditional reading in contrast with online reading through the messages that accompany the online versions of the author’s texts. On the other hand, they are also encouraged to experiment with the emerging e-book market thanks to innovative distribution choices, which are indicative of Pelevin’s and of his publisher’s effort to adapt to the contemporary challenges of a competitive literary market. The presentation of Pelevin’s texts online and the choice to offer a newly published book in online format represent examples of the way the book market is slowly entering into dialogue with online technologies.

The attempt to use the Internet for literary distribution is combined with the necessity to still submit to a traditional book industry that relies on the sales of paper books, and with a strong influence of traditional reading habits. However, the materiality of the text is being re-discussed and the concept of reading as a physical activity is in flux through these initiatives. The material book still maintains high authority and prestige and is described as the only acceptable support for close engagement with the literary text, perhaps as a legacy of traditional attitudes towards it. At the same time, there is clear interest on the part of Russian readers who use the Internet, and of writers and publishers, for online reading and for e-books, which
might help overcome distribution problems in the country and offer a more convenient product. Traditional attitudes and a will for experimentation and innovation thus coexist in the context of the evolution of literary culture in the era of the Internet.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored and analysed the relationship between the contemporary technological revolution and literary culture within the specific context of the Russian Internet.

For centuries, reading culture had been based almost exclusively on the printed book and on the established roles of readers, writers and publishers. Nowadays, digital technologies, and in particular the Internet, are contributing to the existence of diverse possibilities which imply the blurring of boundaries between previously clearly defined roles. Different approaches regarding the authority of literary texts are also developing, influenced by the variety of material supports, graphic forms and methods of diffusion of the written text. The status of literature and its perceived functions as a tool to reach deeper states of knowledge and self-awareness are now being questioned as literature is created in large amounts and shared rapidly through computer mediated communication.

The Internet as a worldwide network creates equal possibilities for all those who have (uncensored and technologically up to date) access to it. However, as global and local cultures come into contact online and influence each other, local traditions and cultural habits have some degree of influence on the way new media are used and perceived by a specific (national or social) group. It is therefore useful to study the intersection of the Internet with literary culture through local case studies, which offer a picture of both unique and common traits.

This thesis represents at the same time a case study within Internet studies, as well as an example of the evolution of book history in a particular context. It is in fact strongly focused on Russian-specific features. The Russian case presents some particularly important aspects of interest because of the historical conditions of the country at the time when the Internet started to spread, and because of a number of pre-existing cultural myths describing a deep relationship of Russians with literature, which have traditionally influenced reading and writing. Some Russian peculiarities to consider when dealing with contemporary literature include the social functions of the written word, the mystical role of writers, and the way these features developed
in the Soviet period through *kul'turnost’* and through the emphasis on the Soviet people’s passion for high quality reading materials.

During the late twentieth century, the particularly high consideration in which literature and the literary writer were previously held started to decline. While this situation is due to the transition to a post-Soviet literary culture, the Internet is contributing to consolidate new attitudes by facilitating access to literary texts of varying quality and increasing the visibility of aspiring writers, regardless of the value of their works.

I thus proposed to assess which innovations in literary culture are observable on the Russian Internet, and to what extent Russian readers and writers online are influenced by traditional attitudes. I also examined how the roles of Russian writers and readers have been changing with the advent of new technologies and the impact of the new channels of distribution and access to literature offered by the Internet. In addition, I assessed the position of online literary phenomena in the context of debates about high and low culture. To address these questions, I framed my analysis within two general areas: the history of book and online communication. After clarifying these contexts, I provided background knowledge on the specific features of contemporary Russian literary culture and Internet culture. Subsequently, I described numerous examples of literary websites on the RuNet, such as online libraries, literary portals, online literary contests, and self-publication spaces. I then closely examined two case studies, represented by the websites of two established authors, with a particular focus on their fans’ online activity.

1 - Readers on the RuNet: new habits and traditions

While Internet usage in Russia has been spreading rapidly in recent years and is starting to involve different strata of society, the user base of the RuNet is mostly represented by urban, educated and relatively young people (see Chapter 2). In addition, a significant number of Russian-speaking Internet users offering a fundamental contribution to the environment of the RuNet are Russians living abroad.
Ever since the 1990s, pioneers of Internet use, both living in Russia and abroad, devoted great effort to the creation of literary websites, often involving elements of interactivity and playfulness (see Chapter 3). As Internet use spread, communities of literature enthusiasts grew, creating websites celebrating their favourite authors. Russian readers online show a proactive attitude in the way they actively engage with literary texts and with popular authors through online initiatives. By discussing authors’ motives on online forums and generally exchanging information and opinions on the books they read, fans of literature online consolidate their literary interest, while they create knowledge and produce further creative expressions, showing awareness of the contemporary mechanisms of literary creation and production.

In the examples of Akunin’s and Pelevin’s official websites examined in Chapters 4 and 5, the playful nature of these writers’ literary works finds a productive environment in the multimedia, playful space of the Internet. As seen on both writers’ websites, even in the absence of interaction in the literal sense, online spaces can engage readers through carefully selected materials which stimulate further knowledge based on the books and on their interpretations. In addition, both Akunin’s and Pelevin’s readers spontaneously develop Internet content based on the work of their favourite writers. Like visitors of coffeehouses in seventeenth century England or Soviet citizens in 1970s kitchens, forum users create meanings through discussion, and build communities. Differently from offline communities like coffeehouses or Soviet kitchens, online discussion forums allow for asynchronous communication, as messages posted on these spaces can be archived indefinitely and replied to at different times. Moreover, members from different geographical locations and very different backgrounds can participate in discussion through the Internet: these backgrounds can influence the conversation or not, depending on the degree of anonymity an Internet user wishes to maintain. In addition, while Soviet citizens created a space for exchange in kitchens in conditions of regime, online exchanges are theoretically free from censorship and are expression of a period of intellectual transition, like at the time of coffeehouses.
Pelevin’s fan website is an environment largely created through collective, user generated content, where even the news can be added by users, as a typical Web 2.0 environment. Similarly, Akunin’s fans are active in research about the author and about his books, creating a knowledge community on the forum of the Fandorin! website, where intellectual exchange leads to remediation of the reading experience online, and occasionally in the real world. The work of literature becomes a starting point for a collective, creative experience, while the Internet provides spaces where fandom develops further. While fan communities and reading groups are not a novelty of the digital age, readers’ engagement with the books now takes advantage of the possibilities of the Internet to further the meanings of literature through extra-textual materials and through the rapidity of the medium for sharing information and creativity across geographical distances.

2 - Readers and writers: virtual meetings and new roles

In addition, the Internet is a space where authors and readers meet. Readers still seek models and exemplary behaviours from their favourite writers. For example, Akunin appeals to readers with his elaborate parallels between historical times and with the heroic features of his character, Erast Fandorin. However, the author becomes a celebrity rather than a prophet, and his most active readers can establish contact with him through the Internet. The literary writer becomes accessible to his public through online communication, both in real time or through asynchronous question sessions. Popular writers can obtain feedback through the exchanges of their readers online and through direct interaction with readers. The relationship of professional writers with their readers thus becomes closer, even presenting some aspects of equality. Readers can find the author’s mistakes and offer suggestions, and their help is taken into consideration if the author is involved online (see the example of Akunin in Chapter 4).

Akunin and Pelevin show similarities as well as differences in their approach towards digital culture and towards their online public. While Akunin uses his official website to offer additional information on the context of his novels, Pelevin’s website reinforces the mysterious image of the author. The two writers thus show a
personalised use of online visibility, to complement their books and their public persona.

Both authors in their own way establish a dialogue with their readers online: Akunin communicates with them regularly, through the questions on the Fandorin! forum, and nowadays through his blog; Pelevin only sporadically takes part in online events, but on those occasions he does demonstrate a will to reach his public through online communication. These authors are therefore two examples of contemporary writers who are aware of how to use digital technologies for a dialogue with readers.

Even more importantly, Akunin in particular demonstrates a very clear understanding of the interaction between literature and the Internet, and proactively endeavours to use the online medium to his advantage, not only to ensure that his books are popular, but also to improve the literary product and turn it into a multimedia experience. In this way, Akunin is one of the first authors, in Russia and worldwide, who works towards a literary culture which innovatively incorporates digital technologies.

Amateur writers also take great advantage of the Internet through self-publication spaces, blogs, and dedicated forums they can receive immediate feedback and establish a dialogue with their readers and with other aspiring authors. In some cases, this meeting leads to collective writing based on an author’s idea (such as in the case of the novel Metro 2033 discussed in Chapter 3, and some of the contents of Akunin’s and Pelevin’s fan websites).

A veritable blurring of the line between creators and recipients of literary texts happens, in particular, through self-publication websites. Similarly to what happened with samizdat, users of these websites can share their works with unknown recipients. However, through these websites, users can also comment on other author’s works, therefore acting as both producers and consumers of Web contents, and of literary materials. The fundamental novelty observable on these virtual spaces is the sense of community that is built through computer mediated communication, fostering the development of creative environments. The perceived graphomania of Russians might not result in high forms of literature, but it becomes the pretext to build communities based on a shared passion for writing and for literary exchange. This community aspect influences individual and even national identity through a
The sense of belonging to the geographically widespread community of authors and readers of contemporary literary expressions in the Russian language.

3 – The status of literature

The almost mystical role of the professional literary writer in Russia has been downsized now that any aspiring writer can reach a wide audience online, and the activity of writing has become less exclusive and prestigious. The authority and literary value of materials posted on self-publication spaces or blogs is often considered lower compared to art produced and distributed traditionally; online writing is judged as simply fostering graphomaniac habits, filling the RuNet (and the whole Web) with pointless ‘underground’ expressions. Enthusiasm for the democratisation of access to a reading public and of the status of the writer therefore coexists with attitudes privileging a traditional approach which considers literature as sacred business and cannot approve of the different standards emerging online. The value of Internet writing is thus part of the broader discussion about high and low literary expression, where written materials printed in traditional book format, having gone through a lengthy publication process, still retain higher prestige. However, the democratisation of the writing activity, and most of all of the visibility it receives lead to an exponential growth of reading materials, leaving the judgment on their value to readers’ choice rather than to clear pre-established hierarchical rules.

Digital texts are treated with ambivalence, both as extraordinary innovations and as forms of literature that do not belong to a high canon; even in the presence of digital and paper copies of the same text, the higher prestige of the printed copy is still an important factor (see Chapter 5). The quality of literary materials and their relevance to specific readers, however, tends to not depend on the format, as intellectual or entertaining expressions can be found both online or in print. Some virtual spaces do operate a distinction between different levels of literature. For example, literary portal Vavilon and the online library FEB consciously situate themselves as spaces to spread high literature online, by collecting texts conforming to an established traditional canon, while website Zhurnal’nyi Zal strives to continue the Russian literary tradition of the thick journal online. Other spaces, instead,
including virtual libraries such as the famous Moshkov library, accept every type of text, thus democratising the selection of their contents.

4 – The materiality of the book and distribution issues

Distribution of literary texts is facilitated by online archives, while an e-book market is developing slowly. In this situation, the materiality of the book is undergoing significant changes. The paper book is no longer the exclusive support for the literary text, which now takes different forms, either completely digital, or involving both paper and multimedia materials. In the Russian context, the appearance of numerous supports for the written text has to be contrasted with a deeply rooted attitude of respect towards the authority of the book as an object, and its aesthetic and functional values. The legacy of perceptions of the material book as an object worthy of something close to veneration, and of the Soviet values of kul’turnost’, is perceived in the treatment of online versions of novels, which are presented with great enthusiasm but described as a less legitimate form than the printed book. The printed book is still considered by some as the only acceptable support for reading, while reading on the computer screen is still subordinated to the higher authority and to the sense of comfort of the paper format. The example of Pelevin’s texts online in Chapter 5 symbolises the hybrid situation of contemporary Russian book culture, at the same time ready to embrace the digital revolution, but still closely related to traditional book culture.

Next to the transfer online of texts existing on paper, digital editions can be a modality to present new texts. The first attempts to market new books online, such as Pelevin’s t, are presented with pride and enthusiasm. The most technically aware authors, like Akunin, endeavour to be at the forefront of technological innovation, promoting the book as a multimedia product and often as part of transmedia series (Chapters 3 and 4). Akunin’s Kvest represents an intelligent example of an experimental text involving both a printed version and an online game version. Readers’ reactions to experiments of online textuality vary from enthusiasm for the new reading materials to preoccupation with the web-based characteristics of the new product and for the Internet expertise involved, as in the case of readers on the forum
of the *Fandorin!* website discussing the *Kvest* project, described in Chapter 4. In this case, literature becomes an incentive for readers to become familiar with everyday aspects of new technologies.

However, a great number of Russian Internet users are accustomed to finding texts online, thanks to the numerous online libraries on the RuNet. Some libraries even present a decidedly grassroots character, employing direct contributions from users (for example Moshkov’s library, described in Chapter 3). As Russian readers become more familiar with reading on screen and with downloading literary products, Russian publishers are becoming increasingly aware of how the development of a legal digital market, to include the latest titles, is of paramount importance to the contemporary literary industry. The development of digital book distribution cannot be overlooked, as digital texts (both online versions and e-books) which grant access to literature in areas where it could otherwise be difficult to obtain the newest products. Moreover, a fruitful union of technology and literature can be used to enhance the creativity of writers and to attract the interest of readers, therefore gaining an advantage in the competition for visibility with the contemporary reading public.

## 5 - Tradition and innovation on the literary RuNet

To summarise, digital culture and literary culture exist next to each other and influence each other, creating a hybrid system where new technologies can be incorporated both in literary production and in the way literature is engaged with by its consumers. Legacies of previous attitudes are reflected on the Russian literary Internet. However, they do coexist with curiosity for new technologies and they do not hinder the gradual development of a digital literary culture. Russian readers and writers take advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet, while traditional publishers learn to adapt to the new literary situation.

Major innovations can be recognised in the possibility to communicate directly with the literary author, if willing, and to create collaborations between authors and readers at a large scale, as well as in the blurring of pre-defined roles and
definitions of literary authority and prestige. In a country surviving a ‘double shock’ after decades of Soviet cultural attitudes and with a strong relationship with the written word, these aspects create fascinating intersections.

While some mechanisms of literary websites are reminiscent of *samizdat*, and therefore establish an implicit continuum between unofficial literary subcultures, the immediacy of the Internet and the possibility it offers to reach a vast number of people represent enormous novelties. The Internet is thus a veritable meeting point for writers and readers, where interaction can take place between fellow amateur writers, between literature fans, and between readers and bestselling writers.

Akunin’s and Pelevin’s examples show how both collective experience online and solitary engagement with a website can encourage reading culture, as they stimulate further interaction with the literary text and with other readers. Such engagement presupposes a personal, close reading of a literary work to have taken place beforehand. It is reductive, then, to describe the Internet as a distraction from intense close reading; on the contrary, it can take the basic, personal reading experience further by transforming it into a social activity and inserting it in a different medium where further reflection happens. It might be expected that reading in the technological era will resemble the type of collective reading typical of past eras when silent reading was not the only norm, as the collective aspect of the text is re-lived through online communication. In addition, the literary text is subject to modifications through readers’ activity online, and sometimes through their feedback to authors. Fixity is thus no longer a necessary characteristic of the literary text. A further parallel can be established with the texts of the era before print, or of early print culture, when editions changed through manual work and through glosses.

However, the book is still considered as the primary support for the literary text, but its role is evolving as technology offers the possibility for multimedia materials to exist next to it and expand the reader’s experience. The opportunity for authors to take advantage of new digital tools is accompanied by the challenges they face to attract the attention of readers accustomed to various stimulations. A wise, far-sighted use of new technologies can thus represent an important tool for authors to remain relevant and successful. The challenge for publishers is even greater, as
both the market conditions and the existence of numerous digital stimulations impose to adapt rapidly to new strategies.

6 - Russian traits of a global phenomenon

Internet users all over the world share their impressions about literature as well as texts they have produced, establishing contacts with other users with similar interests. In this sense, Russian users’ habits do not differ from global trends of the Internet. Examples of engagement with literature through online communities can be described in other cultures (see Mackey in the introduction). However, the peculiar social and cultural situation of Russia at the turn of the twenty-first century means that the Russian case presents some specific traits within the global rise of Internet technologies. These traits influence the development of the RuNet, and they are in turn influenced by the use of contemporary media.

In fact, the historical conditions of the country played an important role in the way the Internet developed with little external regulations in the 1990s (see Chapter 2), and in determining its user base, particularly in early years. In the very specific media situation of Russia, where media were formerly controlled by the Soviet power and where free speech was limited, there are great expectations concerning the revolutionary power of the Internet.

Moreover, because of the geographical and economic characteristics of the country, a great number of Internet users is concentrated in urban centres, particularly Moscow and Saint Petersburg. However, the growth of Internet use in the provinces is slowly developing the possibilities for a dialogue between centres and the peripheries (see Chapter 2). The presence of a large Russian diaspora around the world also represents an important aspect: the Internet is an extremely important tool for Russians abroad to keep in close contact with their native culture, including its language and literature. Because of the importance of literature for Russian identity, literary websites often function as meeting points for Russians spread around the globe (see the example of Proza.ru in Chapter 3), fostering national identity centred around a national literature.
The success of self-publication communities and the prominence of online libraries help perpetuate the myths describing literature as central in the everyday life of Russians. The active attitude of Russian readers online also testifies a close relationship with book culture, as well as a habit for participation in cultural life through commentaries, as the heirs of public letter writing of the past (see Introduction).

Because of the mythical position of literature and of the literary writer, as well as of the book as an object, all the changes in the production and fruition of literature that are being experienced at a global scale bear a further level of significance when put in context within Russian tradition. In addition, a clear division between high and low culture used to maintain in existence a strict hierarchy separating producers and recipients of culture. For this reason, the revolutionary blurring of the boundaries between literature of different status and between readers and writers takes a deeper significance in Russia than in cultures where this debate was less fundamental.

Moreover, the widespread piracy of artistic materials on the RuNet is influenced by Russian attitudes towards intellectual property and by a propensity to consider art as a collective good, thus creating a relaxed attitude towards the intellectual property of literary materials. However, this phenomenon also makes Russian users particularly acquainted with finding materials online and using the Internet as a repository of culture. In this way, the RuNet shows great potentialities for the technical aspects of the e-book market, but it also presents a limitation from a financial perspective, creating a challenge for the development of this type of market.

Naturally, all these factors do not mean that the RuNet is the only national portion of the Internet presenting unique traits, but rather that each given segment of the Internet, either related to a national culture or language or subculture, will be influenced by the background of its users and will develop according to dynamics relating to its characteristics, rather than exclusively through patterns attributed to a unifying ‘Internet culture’. At the same time, naturally, none of these segments exists in isolation, and mutual influence and inspiration are basic characteristics of the global community of Internet users.
7 - Contribution to knowledge

With this thesis, I have provided a picture of the main aspects of the intersection between contemporary Russian literary culture and the RuNet, by cataloguing and describing several types of online literary environments as they appeared during the period of my observation. I have thus offered a snapshot of an aspect of Russian literary culture and of Russian digital culture in the early twenty-first century. This picture has included some historical aspects, as websites created since the 1990s were modified or ceased to exist. Through these examples, I have described the evolution of the role of new media in Russian digital culture and within Russian everyday life.

Because of its interdisciplinary nature, this thesis represents a contribution to several fields. Firstly, this work can be inserted in the context of studies of post-Soviet Russian literature and literary culture. I have here presented numerous aspects related both to the activities of writing and reading, as well as to publishing, from a perspective that focuses on very recent developments which have not yet been analysed in great depth from a literary perspective. In addition, this thesis adds to the body of knowledge regarding Akunin and Pelevin, focusing on the context surrounding their literary texts, and on the point of view of their readers.

In the broader picture, this thesis describes a moment in the evolutionary state of the history of the book and of reading, showing how the materiality of the book and the meaning of the activity of reading are taking different nuances compared to the recent past and to the whole era of print culture, and providing a culturally-focused account of some of the countless possibilities in the relationship between the traditional book and technology. It can thus represent a contribution to the field of history of book, as it analyses how several cultural factors and innovations are contributing to develop the book culture of the digital era.

Furthermore, I have contributed to the small but vibrant field of Russian Internet studies, by looking at the specific characteristics of some websites on the Russian Internet. I have highlighted the importance of literary websites in this portion of the Internet, and outlined which aspects of these websites reflect
characteristics typical of the RuNet environment; this also indirectly represents an analysis of how Russian users who are interested in literature behave online.

Finally, I have also looked at how the local aspects of the RuNet relate with the rest of the World Wide Web. In fact, this thesis also belongs to the wider field of Internet Studies in general, providing a case study of specific aspects relating to literature in a specific national context, and thus illustrating a local example of worldwide phenomena. From the methodological point of view, it is to be underlined how I used exclusively online primary sources, as well as online secondary sources in the absence of strictly relevant academic literature. I have thus proved how the richness of materials offered on the Internet can provide substantial content as well as commentaries for a deep analysis contained in a full-length academic work.

Further research in these areas could focus on sociological aspects, for example through interviews with readers and aspiring writers regarding their Internet-related reading and writing activities, and their perception of the phenomena they are contributing to. A focus exclusively on the relationship of online literary phenomena with the world of games, or a focus on the postmodern aspects of online literary websites, could also be fruitful. Different primary sources, such as blog and social networks, could also be analysed in depth in their relationship with literature. Comparative studies involving different national literatures would also certainly allow for interesting reflections.

As both the Internet and book culture are evolving rapidly, future developments in the evolution of the book from a printed object to a text supported in different ways, and the advent of new virtual spaces will offer further and constantly changing opportunities to update this knowledge.
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