

Mapping the entertainment ecosystem of Wattpad: Platforms, publishing and adaptation

Convergence: The International
Journal of Research into
New Media Technologies
2021, Vol. 27(2) 524–538
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DOI: 10.1177/1354856520970141
journals.sagepub.com/home/con


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Abstract

Digital platforms have reshaped the creative industries and restructured relationships between media sectors. Creative writing and reading social media platforms like Wattpad are challenging what it means to publish fiction in the early 21st century, and digital streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu and others have begun looking to these platforms to source creative content for adaptation. Praxis on creative writing social media platforms is shaped by a complex and ongoing interplay between the technocultural and socio-economic conditions of platforms and their users. This article argues for an integration of publishing studies and platform studies by applying a media ecology framework to map behaviour on Wattpad, one of the largest creative writing social media platforms, and the relationships it has developed with other media companies. Specifically, it draws on and extends José van Dijck's ((2013) *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.) microsystem/ecosystem connective media model and proposes a broader conceptualisation of the entertainment ecosystem that incorporates adaptation of content across the book publishing and entertainment media sectors. Mapping these platforms alongside legacy media and publishing companies offers a productive framework for theorising contemporary entertainment media production within the platform media landscape.

Keywords

Adaptation, cultural industries, entertainment ecosystem, media ecology, platforms, publishing, social media, Wattpad

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Introduction

In 2018, Netflix reported that the adaptation of *The Kissing Booth* was the most rewatched film on the platform globally (Khosla, 2018). The Netflix-produced young adult romance follows a teenage girl as she falls for the popular boy in school and navigates the impacts the romantic relationship has on her friendship with another boy. Textual media like novels and plays have been rich source material for film adaptations since the golden age of Hollywood, but the origin of this story is different. Beth Reekles, author of *The Kissing Booth*, originally published the story in 2011 on Wattpad, a global creative writing and reading social media platform. The story won the Most Popular Teen Fiction Watty award, the site's own literary prize, and over the following 2 years amassed more than 19 million reads and 40,000 comments. In 2012, an editor at Random House Children's Publishers (RHCP) reached out to Reekles via direct message on Wattpad and acquired the rights to *The Kissing Booth* in a three-book deal. RHCP published *The Kissing Booth* as an e-book in 2012 and as a paperback in 2013. In 2013, Reekles also sold the film rights to Komixx, a UK-based production company and 3 years later Netflix ordered the film. RHCP released a movie tie-in print edition to coincide with the film release in 2018, which featured the Netflix thumbnail image for the film on the cover. Historically, books with proven economic, cultural or symbolic capital have primarily been adapted for screen (Murray, 2012). *These logics are reinforced on Wattpad in addition to the extensive data that the platform gathers on users and popular content, which extend the metrics that indicate potential success.* The adaptation journey of *The Kissing Booth* and stories like it, from their serialised form online to print books and/or films, *is indicative of new possibilities for book publishing and media adaptation that reworks traditional processes but does not break from them completely.*

Digital platforms have reshaped the creative industries and restructured relationships between media sectors. Creative writing and reading social media platforms like Wattpad are challenging what it means to publish fiction in the early 21st century, and digital streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu and Stan have introduced alternatives for producing films and television series. Praxis on social media writing platforms is shaped by a complex and ongoing interplay between the technocultural and socio-economic conditions of platforms and their users. Popular content on these platforms can move beyond the social media sphere, to be republished by traditional print publishers or adapted for film and TV. The growing interconnectedness of these spheres, as evidenced by the adaptation of Reekle's original Wattpad story, requires an integration of publishing and platform studies.

This research draws on and adapts José van Dijk's (2013) connective media ecology model for contemporary digital book publishing, which focuses holistically on socio-economic and technocultural structures that shape platforms. van Dijk argues that social media platforms operate in two distinct ways: as individual microsystems, structured by a range of constitutive components, and within a connective ecosystem of social media platforms, where their existence is shaped by competition and cooperative relationships with other social media sites. I extend this latter frame to include other platformed cultural production, such as book publishing and film and television, in a broader entertainment ecosystem. This broader conceptualisation of the ecosystem better reflects cultural production in a media environment where the distinction between non-professional amateur and professional, commercial creativity continues to blur in the online sphere.

In order to scope the expansive entertainment ecosystem, this article focuses on Wattpad as a central node and explores the entertainment ecosystem in which it sits. In this way, we can map many different ecosystems depending on our starting point. Wattpad was launched in 2006 and is

now one of the largest global creative writing and reading social media platforms with approximately *80 million monthly users* (Wattpad, 2019c). Through its extensive reach and innovative digital practices, Wattpad opens up global and economic opportunities for writers and content in the publishing and entertainment industries as well as new scholarly inquiry down these lines. The aims of this article are threefold. It argues for a conceptual inclusion of creative writing platforms in contemporary publishing studies as they restructure established business models and relationships within the industry. It outlines the platform architecture that shapes interactivity on Wattpad and how the economic, technological and cultural assemblages of the platform shape content production and reception. Finally, it maps the connections between Wattpad and other companies and platforms in the entertainment ecosystem, revealing the influence of these new pathways and players on the entertainment media landscape. Overall, this research presents a non-hierarchical ecology model for early 21st century publishing and adaptation studies and situates the cultural industries within the platform media landscape. This in turn builds the case for an integration of publishing studies and platform studies.

Incorporating publishing and digital media studies

Beginning in the *1980s*, the rise of desktop publishing software such as Pagemaker, Quark Express and InDesign enabled authors to produce their own manuscripts for print (Ray Murray and Squires, 2013). The introduction of e-books and e-reading devices presented significant digital disruptions to contemporary book culture and reading practices (Rowberry, 2017). While dedicated e-readers have been available since the early 1990s, it was not until the introduction of the Amazon Kindle in 2007, and in particular, *Kindle applications for smartphones released circa 2009–2010 that the publication and sales of e-books proliferated* (see, e.g. Driscoll et al., 2018). Today, all publishing is digital at least in part, and platforms have become a key feature of the contemporary publishing industry. Publishers, authors and readers are increasingly entangled in the digital literary sphere through the production or consumption of e-books, branding and networking on social media sites, discovering and buying books in online bookstores or participating in book talk online (Murray, 2018). *Authors are no longer reliant on traditional publishing houses to publish their creative work as self-publishing through technology companies becomes easier and cheaper* (Parnell, 2018; Ray Murray and Squires, 2013).

Digital platforms – a term I use beyond its materialist meaning as a computational, architectural, figurative and political digital media intermediary (Gillespie, 2010) – *have reconfigured nearly all aspects of book culture*. Social media platforms work to build and consolidate networks across the publishing industry (Weber and Driscoll, 2019), as spaces to negotiate and transform symbolic and social capital around literary prizes and festivals (Driscoll, 2013; Murray, 2018), as well as to perform authorship, market books and discuss reading (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2013; Murray, 2018). *Dedicated book-based social media platforms like Goodreads and other review sites offer new spaces for the consecration of literature outside of established circles* (Murray, 2018; Nakamura, 2013). Dedicated creative writing and reading platforms host authors writing in a *variety of genres and categories including novels, fan fiction, humour, classics, comics and poetry*, and arguably enhance a global youth reading culture (Pianzola et al., 2020; Ramdarshan Bold, 2016; Rebora and Pianzola, 2018). These platforms include sites like *Wattpad, Inkitt, Radish, Swoon-Reads, Tapas, Archive of Our Own* and, once upon a time, *LiveJournal*. *These and more general user-generated social media platforms can offer spaces for new narrative forms, such as hypertext fiction, Twitterature and fan fiction* (Ramdarshan Bold, 2016; Thomas, 2007, 2011, 2014).

Incorporating social media platforms generally, and creative writing and reading platforms particularly, into theorisations of contemporary book publishing more fully acknowledges the contours of book culture in the early 21st century.

Book publishing platforms reconfigure the relationships between companies in the publishing industry and intensify business models that **operate as closed ecosystems** or walled gardens. **Amazon customers**, as a stark example, are encouraged to buy into the company's corporate structure at every stage of the reading process; from purchasing e-books on a particular ebookstore to reading via a particular e-reader device and epublication format to reviewing on the store site or proprietary social media platforms. This diverges rather dramatically from the more traditional Western book publishing process where publishers, distributors and booksellers may be interdependent but typically operate independently. This reorganisation, from interdependent actors to intra-network systems, is a **kind of vertical integration not previously seen in the publishing industry**. Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires (2013: 19), for example, observe that the link 'forged between reader and device (and the company that owns that device)' is strengthened through the walled garden approach in the digital publishing communication circuit. **On creative writing and reading platforms, these behaviours are integrated into a single application: writers write and publish and readers read and discuss works in the same technological space.** *This article adds to the emerging body of literature that integrates publishing and platform studies* (Barnett, 2014; Kirschenbaum, 2008; Kirschenbaum and Werner, 2014; Rowberry, 2017). *These fields must be conceived of together* to understand how technology models are influencing praxis in contemporary book culture and consider reading and writing applications that do not limit themselves to forms of digital literature that closely resemble codices.

While digital publishing avenues are often lauded for enabling independent producers unconnected to established publishers to enter the book industry, authors on platforms are not completely autonomous. Creative practice on digital platforms is 'intensely mediated' (Laquintano, 2016: 7), influenced by the technology companies that authors rely on to publish and disseminate their work. **Platforms and technology companies** that facilitate much contemporary self-publishing and online creative writing and reading **shape authorial and reader experiences while user engagement influences popularity indexes and visible content** (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). These platforms therefore do not completely subvert top-down models of publishing. An ecology model, which accounts for both the microsystem of individual platforms and the broader landscape in which it operates, presents an exciting opportunity for understanding how the distinctive features of each platform influence the processes of production and reception, as well as the economic and cultural possibilities of creative writing and reading platforms.

An ecology model for digital book publishing

A media ecology framework is useful for theorising the growing connections between the entertainment media and book publishing sectors. The scientific logics of the ecosystem were first applied to media studies in the 1960s as a model to examine the complex interactions between different media forms and the impact of social, cultural and political forces on media production and reception (Gencarelli, 2000; Lum, 2000). As the contemporary media landscape has become more complex, with a growing number of media types, environments and relationships, theorisations of media ecology have developed. Expanding the metaphor further, Carlos Scolari (2012) theorises processes of media evolution, extinction, survival and coevolution to more closely consider how and why media forms and platforms evolve as and when they do. This research

adopts this framework to consider how Wattpad has evolved since it was first launched to compete in a competitive multimedia environment. What affordances has the platform introduced or abandoned in the interest of survival? How does Wattpad fit into the media environment in which it exists and what partnerships has the company developed in this sphere? An ecological framework has heuristic value for connecting publishing and digital media studies as it allows for a consideration of cooperative intermedia relationships and emerging media forms that exist within this dynamic sphere of creative production.

This research approaches creative writing and reading platforms as existing within an entertainment ecosystem. This research extends José van Dijck's (2013) connective media framework. In *The Culture of Connectivity*, van Dijck draws together features of actor-network theory, which flattens human and non-human elements to consider user-technology interactions (see Latour, 2005; Law, 2009), and political economy, which provides insights into the socio-economic organisation of media systems (see Castells, 1996). According to van Dijck, social media platforms operate in two configurations: as individual microsystems, comprising a range of constitutive components including technology, users/usage, governance, ownership, business model and content; and a larger connective ecosystem, in which platforms interact with each other in distinctive and formative ways.

This article extends the latter part of van Dijck's conceptual framework beyond connective social media platforms to include other media producers, including traditional publishers and film and TV production companies in a broader *entertainment ecosystem* of media adaptation. This expanded focus aims to more accurately account for the media environments in which creative writing and reading platforms such as Wattpad exist. The term 'entertainment ecosystem' was coined by Elizabeth Fife et al. (2004) in reference to the mobile entertainment ecosystem, a similar theorisation to van Dijck's connective ecosystem of platforms. In adapting this term, I acknowledge the centrality of mobile applications and digital platforms in the contemporary entertainment media environment. While the publishing and media industries were certainly not born of the digital age, they have been largely digitised and are now fundamentally connected to digital platforms. This theoretical extension allows for a constructive integration of publishing and digital media studies and an examination of contemporary creation and adaptation processes in and between evolving cultural sectors.

van Dijck's analysis of platform microsystems remains useful for this approach to Wattpad, which seeks to map the platform's socio-economic and technocultural structures. The ownership and partnerships of Wattpad, its business model, platform architecture, algorithms and users heavily influence the content on Wattpad and its movement within the entertainment ecosystem. van Dijck (2013) approaches the components of a platform through a necessarily narrowed lens. In her original framework, technology refers to software and services rather than hardware, including the (meta)data, algorithms, protocols, interfaces and default settings strategically collected and deployed by the platforms in order to create particular computational architectures. For users and usage, van Dijck delineates both implicit and explicit use. Implicit use refers to the prescribed or default usage as inscribed in the interface design while explicit use designates how real humans interact with the platform, whether or not this is in line with the implicit use. Explicit usage also encompasses demographic and statistical facts such as intensity of use, nationality and global reach of users, type of usage and habits or practical use. Examples of explicit use in digital publishing include what genres users write in, whether they are reading or writing on Wattpad, or buying or publishing on Amazon. Content on platforms is analysed by van Dijck through three formative categories: its multimodality (e.g. video, text, images and/or music); its form and format (e.g.

length, hashtags, hyperlinks and/or embedded content); and whether its authors or the platform deem it as amateur (non-commercial and recreational) or professional (commercial and commercialised) content. These technocultural aspects of platform environments are deeply inter-related and distinctly contextualised within the socio-economic features of ownership, business models and governance.

Ownership calls attention to the ‘system of production’ of a platform as well as its status and relationships to other platforms (van Dijck, 2013: 36). It describes whether a platform is commercial or non-profit, collectively, privately or publicly owned, if it is a new start-up or an established player, if it is big or small, or takes part in takeovers, mergers or partnerships. Its business model, on the other hand, refers to how the platform as a company makes money; whether through subscription or freemium models, advertising and customisation, profits from products sold via the platform, attention and on selling of data or a mix of the above. Finally, governance is defined as the mechanisms in place that manage communication and data traffic, regulates content and delineates claims of property and privacy. Governance mechanisms are made up of a combination of technical features, such as how the platform architecture shapes interactions, and social protocols, often outlined and enforced through terms of service (ToSs), end-user license agreements (EULAs) and community moderators. As governing devices, these principles are not exhaustive but indicate the ways in which platforms produce information and creativity and channel social traffic in meaningful ways, and, for publishing studies, play a significant role in theorising the distinctly digital properties of online publishing platforms and how they are altering contemporary publishing practices. These are the primary points of analysis mapped in the subsequent examination of Wattpad’s microsystem.

Wattpad as platform and publisher

Wattpad capitalises on the multimedia sphere in which it exists by operating what is essentially a pan-entertainment business model (Liao, 2017). The pan-entertainment model is based on the integration and commercialisation of intellectual property formats through acquisitions, partnerships and in-house projects. It is a business model that has been matured by technology giant Tencent in China where nationally the pan-entertainment market was estimated to reach RMB503.09 billion in 2018 (iResearch, 2019). Although a much smaller media company in comparison with Tencent, Wattpad adopts this model on a global scale.

Wattpad integrates the user-generated content posted to its site into a number of its business models. *The company generated revenue* through venture capital investments, Wattpad Premium (a freemium model where users can pay for an ad-free experience), Wattpad Insights (monetising user and usage data) sold at places like Frankfurt Book Fair and Wattpad Next which puts stories behind paywalls that readers can unlock with ‘coins’. Data on high-performing authors or popular content are shared commercially through programs like Wattpad Words (with publishers), Wattpad Studios (with media production companies) and Wattpad Stars (with brands for native advertising). Creative works on Wattpad can be made into multimedia chat stories on its subsidiary platform Tap, and a few have been published by the company’s book publishing arm, Wattpad Books. Stories also have the potential to travel beyond the site through partnership schemes, intellectual property deals brokered by the platform and on-selling of trend data. Netflix and Hulu have adapted popular stories including *The Kissing Booth* (2018) and *Light as a Feather* (2018). Wattpad has developed partnerships to co-produce stories for film and television across the globe with iFlix in Indonesia, Huayi Brothers in South Korea and Syfy and Sony in the United States

(Wattpad, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). Wattpad has had a dramatic impact on the creative industries in the Philippines where the company has partnered with Anvil Publishing to create Bliss Books, a young adult fiction imprint, to republish stories in Filipino and English, as well as with TV5, a free-to-air television network, to broadcast the weekly series Wattpad Presents (Wattpad, 2016). Since its launch, Wattpad has continued to develop a variety of business models to sustain the platform in a dynamic and constantly shifting connective media landscape. The diversification of Wattpad's business models leverages the interconnectedness of media industries in the convergence age and the globalisation of the media landscape. The degree to which Wattpad has invested in a pan-entertainment model is distinctive in Western creative industries.

Since its launch, Wattpad has continued to develop a variety of business models to sustain the platform in a dynamic and constantly shifting connective mediascape. These include venture capital investments, Wattpad Premium (a freemium model where users can pay for an ad-free experience), Wattpad Insights (monetising user and usage data), Wattpad Books (its own book publishing venture, which launched in January 2019) and Wattpad Next (as of May 2019, readers could earn and pay for 'coins' to unlock chapters of paid stories). Although Wattpad is based in Canada, the company has a global outlook, developing partnerships in North America, Europe, the United Kingdom and Asia. The diversification of Wattpad's business models leverages the interconnectedness of media industries in the convergence age as well as the globalisation of the media landscape; however, the degree to which Wattpad has invested in a pan-entertainment model is distinctive in Western creative industries outside of mega-corporations like The Walt Disney Company, 21st Century Fox and Bertelsmann.

The coexistence of commercial, sharing, attention and product economies within the Wattpad microsystem departs radically from the product-driven economy in which traditional book publishers and Amazon operate. This commingling of economies obfuscates the distinction between recreational (amateur and non-commercial) and professional (commercialised) writing (Vadde, 2017). Writers who might be writing recreationally have the opportunity to earn economic capital through the Wattpad Next program, and all writers generate commercial data for Wattpad Insights. Writers who gain popularity through sharing and attention economies might be offered a place in the Wattpad Stars program and begin to write native content for brands, simultaneously earning money through this program and relying on readerly attention for continued success. The data gathered from readerly attention and engagement contribute to the algorithms that track popular content and influence visibility on the platform (Andrejevic, 2012; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). These data inform what content is likely to be republished and/or adapted through Wattpad's official partnerships or media companies who purchase Wattpad Insights (Wendell, 2016). Attention, traced through the exploitation of user data, influences the trajectory of different stories within and beyond the platform microsystem. The serialised format by which most stories are posted to the site adds to this critical mass of data.

Serialisation is inscribed into the interface of Wattpad and shapes how works are created and consumed by its users. Through the platform's editor interface, authors are encouraged to upload a chapter at a time. This is the format by which other users read the story; each chapter is shown on its own web page, and you click 'Next' to get to the following chapter/web page. These web pages are reflowable, adapting to whatever kind of screen that readers and authors are using. Limiting the amount of text per page renders stories easier for users to read on computer screens and, more importantly, mobile devices through which a growing proportion of social media usage occurs (Anderson, 2019). While nothing technically prevents authors from posting whole stories in one Wattpad chapter, the formatting affects how readers engage with texts. In one of Wattpad's first

official partnerships (established in 2007), for example, works from Project Gutenberg, an e-book library for public domain works founded in 1971, were uploaded in their entirety in single chapter spaces on Wattpad. Going against the site architecture in this way means that the first and only chapter of each Project Gutenberg book on Wattpad takes approximately 7 h to read. Practically speaking, if the reader does not read the story in a single sitting (or leave the window open in their browser), they will be required to scroll down to find their place rather than being able to use the more convenient method of navigating to a numbered or titled chapter. Serialisation thus has a practical use for users as well as for Wattpad's business model.

The serialised publishing structure also plays a significant role in the sharing and data economies on which the platform relies. According to Aarthi Vadde (2017: 37), the serialised format of Wattpad 'yields more site visits and enables a constant stream of conversation around a work'. The sharing economy in which this interaction is based has been theorised by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold (2016) as a digitised return to social authorship, where authors may publish for reasons other than profit and the role of the reader becomes fluid as they engage in editorial feedback and the circulation of texts. Breaking up a novel into shorter segments helps to determine popular content by providing more nuanced data to the platform's algorithms. Wattpad's algorithm is informed by a number of input data including time readers spend reading, when they read and how often they read, as well as higher levels of engagement such as liking, commenting and voting (Wendell, 2016). The outputs of these 'coded procedures' filter, among other processes, search engine results, recommendations and interactions online (Gillespie, 2014: 167). These filters differ on individual platforms but shape user participation in recognisable configurations across the web. Far from being neutral sorting machines, algorithms are encoded with political biases that influence cultural decision-making (Noble, 2018; Hallinan and Striplas, 2016). Popularity on Wattpad, as expressed by the outcomes of its algorithm, is not purely technical but rather sociotechnical as it is influenced by user behaviours. The impact of this information can be seen in the entertainment ecosystem, explored further below, through content that is republished by partner publishers or adapted for film and TV.

Readers on Wattpad, and the data and forms of engagement they produce, are therefore an important part of the platform. In true sharing economy ethos, users do not have to contribute financially to access Wattpad, and readers are an integral feature of the platform. Many Wattpad users are only involved in the reception of content, either through actively commenting or liking or more passively only reading. However, as Wattpad tracks the number of reads per chapter, which in turn informs algorithmic discoverability, reading, and looking at content more generally, is anything but passive online. As van Dijck (2009: 44) writes, 'participation is a relative term' on social media: the majority of users on social media sites are passive spectators or 'inactives', the broad middle of users simply join, comment, rate or bookmark, while only a minority of users actually produce and upload content. Readers who also comment are thus relatively active users on Wattpad. Readerly engagement varies across categories with teen fiction gaining significantly more interaction and sustained engagement by readers than Classics on Wattpad (Pianzola et al., 2020; Rebora and Pianzola, 2018). This preference by readers has an impact on the categories and genres of content that moves beyond the platform. The company's publishing arm, Wattpad Books, for example, has primarily published Young Adult fiction.

The potential for adaption of content in the entertainment ecosystem is also dependent on the profile of authors. Ramdarshan Bold (2016) identifies five kinds of Wattpad authors: brand name authors, who have been commercially published and are experimenting with new genres or forms of writing on the platform or are using it to build new readerships (e.g. Margaret Atwood, RL

Stine); micro-celebrities, who have built large followings on the platform; fan fiction authors; award winners and charted authors, who have won one of the sites Watty Award prizes; and invisible authors, who make up the mass of authors that have not been recognised through any of these consecratory means. Importantly, these author profiles are not mutually exclusive as authors and individual works may occupy more than one identifier (e.g. invisible fan fiction authors or micro-celebrity award winners). It is easily seen how some types of Wattpad authors move through the entertainment ecosystem; brand name authors have travelled from traditional publishing spaces to Wattpad and continue to exist in both while micro-celebrity authors, who accrue symbolic capital through high value readerly data and/or the site's awards are more likely to be republished by traditional publishers or adapted by production companies.

Any engagement by users on Wattpad, from commenting to publishing, is regulated by the platform's governance systems. Digital platforms govern user behaviour and content implicitly through the coded architectures of the site that enable users to enact some functions but not others and explicitly through policies of use. This includes ToSs, EULAs and policies delineating content, conduct and privacy. Wattpad's ToSs, including the Privacy Policy, Code of Conduct and Content Guidelines, shape engagement on the site in influential ways. The ToSs prohibit the use of the site for commercial reasons by users except, seemingly, through Wattpad sanctioned programs like Wattpad Stars, Wattpad Next, Wattpad Books and Wattpad Studios. Preventing users from engaging in commercial projects outside those that explicitly include the platform works to maintain Wattpad's amateurish, participatory appearance while also protecting some of the platform's revenue streams.

ToSs also work to create particular atmospheric environments on platforms and shape community behaviours in instrumental ways. Detailing the 'global community' of Wattpad's user base, its Code of Conduct furthers a representation of Wattpad as an egalitarian, unrestrictive and open platform (Wattpad, 2019c). An emphasis on positivity among its global evokes a sense that the platform is a safe space for creative freedom, though whether or not this is the case is a subjective experience. Within the digital literary sphere, emphasising positivity in the ToS importantly positions Wattpad as distinct from other book culture sites. It is not a review site and thus distinct from Goodreads and reader review blogs nor is it a dedicated space to workshop manuscripts as on Scribophile. Inscripting positivity into the ToS does not protect all users from harm, particularly people from socially marginalised communities. Governance structures play an important role in shaping the purpose and practices of Wattpad within online book culture and structure the content and user behaviours on the site.

The globality of Wattpad also presents unique opportunities for the adaptation of content in the entertainment ecosystem. The United States, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Turkey and Brazil are among the most numerous and active user bases (Alexa, 2020). Unlike the book publishing and film and television media industries, for which the transnational movement of content is organised by territorial intellectual property rights, language serves as the predominate barrier for a globalised audience on Wattpad. As with other social media platforms, a users' geographical profile also shapes what the platform's algorithm deems to be relevant content, though depending on subjects searched, it is possible to see stories in a variety of languages. The international user base of Wattpad suggests that there is a potential for a greater diversity of narratives and representations available to a global audience. In her taxonomy of the platform, Ramdarshan Bold (2016) observes that many of 150 most popular authors by follower count write about inclusive themes such as gender identity, pansexuality and Black Asian Minority Ethnic feminism.⁵ This points to the way that 'Wattpad, and self-publishing in general, can be a vehicle for expressing otherness and

offering a response to the underrepresented in traditional publishing' (Ramdarshan Bold, 2016: 8). However, 75% of these top 150 authors publish their work in English, suggesting that Anglophone readers remain the primary audience for popular content on Wattpad despite the fact that some of the platform's largest user bases are from non-Anglophone countries. These findings suggest that heterogeneity is not guaranteed in more open systems of publishing.

The ecosystem of Wattpad extends beyond organisational features to include broader cultural trends. This is further evidenced by popular content on Wattpad which reflect those of traditional book publishing. Romance, one of the largest commercial fiction genres in the world, and teen fiction, which has seen tremendous growth in the past few decades remain the most popular genres on Wattpad (Ramdarshan Bold, 2016). Instead, writing on these platforms should be viewed within a broader publishing ecosystem that often responds to and reflects institutional media production. While there is certainly more to discuss here which is beyond the scope of this article, these trends show how Wattpad exists within the broader context of popular culture.

Wattpad in the entertainment ecosystem

Social media platforms operate in a connective ecosystem characterised by interdependence and interoperability between platforms (van Dijck, 2013). Within this network, Wattpad provides opportunities for users to directly connect with other social media platforms. On their profile pages, users can link to their Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Goodreads profiles as well as books on e-retailer sites such as Amazon, Kobo and Smashwords. Additionally, while the body of Wattpad content tends to be textual, authors are able to embed rich media, such as photos and videos in the header space and body of each chapter. These may be uploaded from users' computers or embedded from YouTube or Pinterest. A popular practice, for example, is to include photos and graphics that depict the protagonists of the story at the start of the Wattpad story. The pathways created by these direct connections provide entry points for users to more readily move through a connective social media ecosystem. As is the case for authors published by traditional print publishers or on Amazon, social media is a highly effective tool for amplifying author brands and building audiences (Murray, 2015). Wattpad authors who connect branded profiles across a number of social media platforms on Twitter, and Instagram, for example, are able to further establish their professional author persona.

In addition to the more well-known social media platforms, Wattpad also exists within a more concentrated connective ecosystem of creative writing and reading platforms. Other innovative players in this practice-based ecosystem include Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing; Inkitt, a Berlin-based writing and reading platform and publishing house that uses crowdsourced reader analytics to inform publishing decisions; Swoonreads, which follows a similar model to Inkitt under Macmillan's imprint Feiwel & Friends; Radish, a mobile application for serialised fiction, which combines elements of online gaming and digital reading; and Tapas, a user-generated content mobile application for web comics. Each of these platforms demonstrates different configurations of the constitutive components described above for Wattpad. The user interfaces of Radish and Wattpad are vastly different but romance and teen fiction are the most popular genres on both platforms, suggesting an overlap in the demographic of their user bases. Creative writing and reading platforms carve out market segments within the social media sphere through the influence of their users, content, technology, governance, ownership and business models. Together, they offer opportunities for authors that challenge traditional publishing models (Parnell, 2018). While it is worthwhile considering the relationships between these dedicated creative

writing and publishing platforms, the media ecosystem in which Wattpad exists is not complete without looking more broadly.

As has been established, Wattpad has established ties to the traditional publishing and entertainment industries. Within this ecosystem, streaming platforms such as Netflix and Hulu vie for market share against each other as well as traditional Hollywood media companies like Universal Studios and Walt Disney Pictures. Digital publishing platforms like Wattpad, Inkitt and Swoon-Reads coexist and compete with each other and traditional publishing houses like Hachette and Harlequin. Social media platforms like Wattpad, Goodreads and Instagram coexist, interlink and compete with each other within the context of digital book culture. Content on Wattpad moves through this entertainment ecosystem as adaptations, which the company broker through the sale of data analytics and, in conjunction with the author, through formalised partnerships with publishing houses and production companies.

The conceptualisation of the entertainment ecosystem presented in this article extends the media foci typically conceived of in theories of adaptation (Hutcheon, 2006; Murray, 2012). Linda Hutcheon, for example, argues that in order to properly account for the growing number of adaptations in contemporary popular culture, adaptation scholars needed to broaden their scope of media forms beyond the established dyad of film and book. Theatre, opera, television, music, computer games and, I argue here, creative writing on digital platforms are all important sources of attention when theorising contemporary adaptation. Content on creative writing and reading platforms is not only adapted into film and television. Here, I expand the media foci of adapted texts to include creative content published online, novels, film and television, audiobooks and emerging multimedia ‘chat’ storytelling such as on Wattpad Tap. The stories that are adapted within this ecosystem occur through formalised business partnerships with media companies and industrial connections between sectors. Cultural, commercial and industrial factors influence processes of adaptation. As Murray notes, the ‘industrial structures, interdependent networks of agents, commercial contexts, and legal and policy regimes’ all impact whether adaptations come to be (Murray, 2012: 6). The partnerships Wattpad develop with other media companies dictate the possibilities for adaptation in the entertainment ecosystem.

The systems of value within Wattpad’s microsystem also influence what content is likely to be adapted. Visibility derived from the platform’s algorithm, for instance, influences popularity data of content and trends that are sold to third-party production and publishing companies. Stories that have won the site’s literary prize, the Watty award, or authors are endorsed through its Stars program, are popular sources for adaptation. Like *The Kissing Booth*, *Death is My BFF* by Katriona E Tonks won a Watty award in 2014 and was adapted by Sony Pictures Television (Wattpad, 2018b), and *Expiation Date* by Mikaela Bender, a Watty winner in 2016 was adapted into a digital series by Tongal and SYFY for SYFY’s digital platform (Wattpad, 2019d). Murray (2008) points to the incubator role literary prizes have had in the adaptation industry. Although different prizes bestow different kinds and amounts of capital, as an internal, digital-only award, the Watty seems to be a catalyst for adaptation. Information garnered from both Wattpad Insights and Watty Awards reflects the ‘tried and trusted’ logic of adaptation (Ellis, 1982: 3). That is, texts that have proven popularity on Wattpad, either represented by reader data or their prize-winning status, imply a level of financial security for potential adapters. However, the symbolic capital a text accumulates from its award-winning status is not always the driving factor for adaptation. Data that the platform collects on popular or upcoming users, content and trends can also inform decisions around adaptation. These digital-born metrics that indicate popular content, such as number of

reads, shares, votes, likes and comments, can be amassed across platforms in the entertainment ecosystem.

Texts do not need to originate on creative writing and reading platforms to participate in the entertainment ecosystem. Unlike Reekle's story, Zoe Aarsen's *Light as a Feather* was first published as an e-book in 2013 by Lovestruck Literary. Lovestruck Literary is a micropublisher, a model through which Aarsen alongside two other authors publish their own works. Aarsen posted the story to Wattpad the same year as its release as an e-book as part of a marketing strategy to build her audience. Wattpad provided the visibility that a vast majority of self-published, micro-published and even traditionally published books struggle to find in the sea of new books published each year. *Light as a Feather* amassed a large readership on Wattpad through the platform's in-built user-audience and technical discovery tools including hashtags for genres, tropes and categories. Readers' high level of engagement with *Light as a Feather* led to it being acquired by Hachette Audio and Hachette Romans through their formalised partnerships with Wattpad and released as an audiobook and French translation in 2017. Aarsen's story continued its multimedia success in October 2018 when *Light as a Feather* was released on US streaming service Hulu. This television adaptation was produced by Wattpad Studios and Awesomeness TV, an entertainment and media company that had its start as a YouTube Channel by Brian Robbins (*Smallville*, *Varsity Blues*) and Joe Davola (*One Tree Hill*, *In Living Color*, *Smallville*) as part of YouTube's Original Programming Initiative, and is now owned by Viacom Division Studios. Simon Pulse, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, released a media tie-in edition of Aarsen's novel simultaneously in hardcover, paperback and e-book 3 days before the series started streaming on Hulu. The fact that Radish, a mobile application for serialised fiction that combines elements of online gaming and digital reading, has acquired a new story by Aarsen, tapping into the publicity of the multimedia success of *Light as a Feather*, further demonstrates the connective nature between each of these nodes in the entertainment ecosystem.

In these cases, each new adaptation of content is affected by its previous iterations. Netflix and Hulu relied in part on the success and large readerships of the stories in their textual forms and assumed that their audiences would travel to new platforms. Likewise, PRH and Simon Pulse endeavoured to tap into the 'typical sales fillip enjoyed by tie-in editions' by releases their novel editions simultaneously with the television adaptations (Murray, 2012: 46). That an early version of *Light as a Feather* is still accessible on Wattpad, unlike *The Kissing Booth*, works to continually cultivate and reward a readership that follows stories across the entertainment ecosystem. The migration of Aarsen's story from e-book to print novel, serialised story on a creative writing platform to series on a film and television streaming platform demonstrates the hybridity of the entertainment system as it spans both print and digital and textual and multimedia formats. Texts, authors and readers move through this ecosystem with relative fluidity. In effect, no sharp boundaries exist between creative writing and media publishing in a constantly evolving, rapidly mutating entertainment ecosystem.


Conclusions

Creative writing and reading platforms are increasingly prominent in the contemporary book publishing and entertainment sectors. As new sites of cultural production, these platforms exist as microcosms for writing communities as well as pathways for authors and content to legacy forms of book publishing and film and television production. As this article has shown, distinct socio-economic and technocultural structures shape participation on these platforms and their position in

the broader entertainment ecosystem. Wattpad, and data-driven and participatory writing communities like it, generates more dispersed systems of taste in fiction publishing, powered by user analytics and platform-specific forms of capital such as platform-based prizes. The increased access to forms of cultural production that these sites provide is heavily mediated by the organisational, governance and technological structures of platforms.

While this article focuses on Wattpad as one of the largest and most dynamic creative writing and reading platforms, this framework could also be productively applied to commercial platforms owned by traditional publishers, such as Fiewel & Friends' SwoonReads, infrastructural book platforms like Amazon and its self-publishing subsidiary Kindle Direct Publishing, non-commercial fan fiction sites like Archive of Our Own and thriving non-Western publishing and entertainment territories such as Qidian and China's online literature sphere (Ren, 2014; Ren and Montgomery, 2012). It is clear that digital platforms are fundamentally changing the structures of and relationships between cultural institutions and represent a major source of creative content for adaptation. Mapping these platforms alongside legacy media and publishing companies is vital in considering contemporary cultural production.

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