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Wattpad.com and fanfiction.de On the Rise

How Online Writing Platforms
Open Up Literary Discourse

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Online writing platforms, such as the Canadian wattpad.com or its German counterpart fanfiction.de, are becoming increasingly popular. The importance of these story collection sites has grown rapidly, especially in recent years. They have established themselves as independent internet-based reading and writing locales, separate from the traditional literary scene.

Predominantly young people read, write, share, and comment on literary works hosted by these locales. Many share their first writing attempts in this way or look for suitable test readers for texts that they might want to submit to a publisher one day. However, Wattpad and similar platforms do not only have advantages for budding author – readers also benefit from the platforms' low financial and social barriers, as do publishers who are increasingly showing interest in this literary phenomenon.

The possibilities that online writing platforms offer for authors, readers, and publishers, and how they consequently open up literary discourse, will be discussed in the following article. For this purpose, it is first clarified what online writing platforms are and how they are used. Building on this, the question of why online writing platforms are (or should be) used by writers, readers, and publishers is explored. In this way, the influence of these platforms on the literary world and its participants will become apparent.

What are online writing platforms?

Online writing platforms are sites on the internet where people can read and publish texts. Access to such platforms is usually free both for readers and writers. Authors only need an account with a username, then they can upload their stories and share them with others. Those who only want to use the platforms for reading can usually do so even without an account. However, those who do not create an account are limited in terms of functions. For example, they cannot save or comment on stories, engage with other users, and are often only allowed to read a limited number of stories or chapters per day.

The texts that can be read on these platforms are primarily literary works such as novels or short story collections. But there are also occasional guidebooks or non-fiction works. The writing is done both independently and in the form of fanfiction based on existing stories (“Hi. We’re Wattpad”).

In neither case do the authors earn money from their texts. With fanfiction, this is obviously not possible because of legal problems due to copyright. Independent works, though, are usually not remunerated on these sites either. Wattpad has been offering to generate income through cross-chapter advertising for some years now, but it is not possible for authors to earn money from their texts alone. Although Wattpad and fanfiction.de are often referred to as e-book platforms, their concept differs from conventional e-book providers such as Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing. In most cases, the e-books cannot be purchased, but only stored in a virtual library within the account. Moreover, the stories can only be read in the designated application. This usually includes a website that can be accessed via a Web browser and an app (“Hi. We’re Wattpad”). The stories can thus be read on a laptop, mobile phone, or tablet, but not via an e-reader. Accordingly, the reader remains committed to the platform and is, like the author, dependent on it and its applications.

Incidentally, online writing platforms are not a recent novelty. They already existed quite a long time before they became well-known, with users across the world. Wattpad, for example, was founded as early as 2006 (“Hi. We’re Wattpad”), but it is only in the last ten years – approximately – that has it achieved explosive popularity. As of today, it is used by “a global community of 94 million people – including five million writers – who have written more than one billion uploads on the platform” (“Naver Completes Wattpad Acquisition”).

As a result of this remarkable success, these platforms are constantly being developed further and their functions expanded. Consequently, the financial aspect comes increasingly to the fore. Wattpad, for example, not only provides paid premium accounts and promotes monetisation, but also organises various writing competitions, which are partially

rewarded with prizes (“Wattys 2021”). The winning texts are, usually, determined by reader voting.

In addition to the competitions (“Writing Contests”), there are various tutorials that have been added to most online writing platforms in recent years. Usually free of charge, authors get tips on all sorts of topics related to writing and publishing. Fanfiction.de, for instance, offers its users free tips on such topics as finding ideas, beta readers, dealing with reviews and reader comments, as well as the path to a publisher (“Tutorials”). These tips are often, such as in the case of Fanfiction.de, written by users. This fact may call the quality of the content of the tutorials into question but underlines the community idea that online writing platforms follow.

Why use online writing platforms as a writer?

Using these platforms has various advantages for writers. A significant advantage is the low hurdles involved. While writers depend on the favour of publishers and editors in the regular literary market, on websites like Wattpad they are completely free in their work. All that writers have to do to start sharing their stories and ideas is creating an account. In this way, they are spared the search for the right publishing program, the writing of an exposé, the possible search for a literary agency, and the long (and often frustrating) wait for a response from desired publishers.

Publishing on online writing platforms thus has great similarities with classic self-publishing. The latter has long since established itself as an alternative to traditional publishing and is enjoying ever greater popularity among authors. But not every writer can afford the costs involved. Even though it is difficult to make general statements about how excessive costs for self-publishing are, it is clear that they are significantly higher than those for publishing on an online writing platform, since these usually amount to zero.

The reason for this is not, as one might think, the publication via a corresponding provider itself. This is indeed rarely associated with a high financial burden. Publishing via Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing

(“Kindle Direct Publishing”), for example, is free, and so are many other e-book providers. Regular self-publishing requires a substantial budget for the professionalisation of the texts. This includes editing, proofreading, typesetting, cover design, and the subsequent marketing of the texts. With online writing platforms, money is rarely spent on this. Instead, the texts are usually proofread by beta reader friends and covers are created independently using providers such as [canva.com](https://www.canva.com), or design tools offered by the platforms themselves. The typesetting of the text is usually omitted completely, as the platforms have prefabricated type areas in which the authors have only limited leeway for adjustments. The professionalisation of texts remains correspondingly low on these platforms, but so does the financial risk for the writers. In turn, however, there is little to no financial gain for the writers. While e-books can be bought by readers from providers like Kindle Direct Publishing, this is not possible with Wattpad and its likes, as mentioned above.

The financial aspect is thus not the main incentive for writers using these platforms. The motivation of writers to upload their texts to these websites instead seems to be to share their texts with others, to get feedback on them, and to be able to communicate with other people interested in literature, as well as with the other members of the fandoms to which they belong. And all this in a comparatively safe environment.

After all, the legal responsibility that comes with publishing a book should not be underestimated: authors who self-publish their books are responsible when it comes to rights infringements, as well as managing the exploitation and use rights of their book. Naturally, they are also in charge of the content of the stories they publish. On their own, they must ensure that their content does not violate any moral, copyright, or personal rights regulations. In addition, there are topics such as: how do I get an ISBN number? Is there fixed book price-legislation that I have to observe? Do I have to pay tax on my income? (van Enberg) These are all questions that self-publishers must contend with. Those who publish through a publisher are not completely spared from this but often receive help from the publisher, who can refer them to experienced industry staff. In both cases, with self-publishing and publishing through a

publishing house, legal advice is recommended. Many lawyers and law firms even specialise in advising authors, literary agencies, and book publishers (Nasson), in order to provide legal support to these players. Online writing platforms are not exempt from regulations. Copyright, moral etiquette, and more also apply here. At Wattpad there are even dedicated information pages for writers on what legislation applies to them; likewise, what rights they acquire through their publications. Wattpad, for instance, promises to have taken various measures to limit copyright infringements on their platform (“Häufig gestellte Fragen zum Urheberrecht”). In this way, it initially appears as if online writing platforms have a comparatively high legal standard to other publishing instances on the book market.

The concept of fanfiction suggests, however, that the legal aspect is handled less strictly there than in traditional literary discourse. Although it is obviously a violation of copyright to use another author’s diegesis and characters without seeking permission from them, there are 53,393 fanfictions on fanfiction.de in the *Harry Potter* – FFs category alone. In addition, there are stories about J.K. Rowling’s fictional world in the categories *Harry Potter* – MMFFs, *Harry Potter und das verwunschene Kind* (“Harry Potter and the Cursed Child”), *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*, and *Phantastische Tierwesen* (“Fantastic Beasts”). Furthermore, the platform has *fanfiction* in its name and calls itself a “fanfiction archive”. If fanfictions were illegal, this would naturally cause problems. So, why are they not, despite the obvious copyright infringement?

In fact, fanfictions are a legal grey area. “In America, fanfiction falls under the regulation of ‘fair use’” explains the German public publisher *Ullstein* on its homepage, which allows the use of protected material under certain conditions:

The condition: The texts must “serve the public education and stimulation of intellectual production” (cf. § 207 of the US Copyright Act). In Germany, writing fan fiction is in a legal grey area: even if the stories are not distributed commercially - as soon as

they are published on the internet, the rights holder is free to have them deleted ("Plagiat oder Inspiration? Ausleuchtung einer Grauzone"; translated by the author).

However, there are authors and celebrities who ban fanfiction about themselves and their characters. Those who nevertheless post stories about them on the internet risk being sued. Since online writing platforms do not want to get into legal trouble, they explicitly point out such prohibitions to their authors. Fanfiction.de, for example, has published a list of *banned fandoms* and *fandoms with restrictions* on their site for this purpose ("Verbotene Fandoms und Fandoms mit Einschränkungen"). No stories about these fandoms may be published on the platform. Since it is not possible to trace the basis on which this list was compiled and when it was last updated, it is not clear whether this list is complete or not. It does show, however, that fanfiction is not tolerated by everyone, as is often assumed. Instead, authors and celebrities can get offended by what at first glance may appear to be harmless stories.

Nevertheless, for the most part, the legal regulations of the literary market on online writing platforms are clearly suspended. This makes publishing with them easier and less worrying for authors, which is an advantage, especially because most users of Wattpad (around 90%) are minors ("Hi. We're Wattpad").

A further advantage is that websites like Wattpad give writers the chance to get in touch with their readers without hurdles. They can exchange direct messages with them via the platform, ask for feedback, and react to feedback given. This way, they can practise dealing with readers' praise and wishes but also criticism, again, in comparatively safe terrain.

The tone among users is mostly friendly and personal. Everyone is on a first-name basis and supports each other in their writing projects. Competitive thinking is almost non-existent on these platforms. Similarly, hate messages or excessive criticism are just as rare, unlike other platforms on the internet (especially social media like Instagram or Facebook). It is mostly about having fun writing and sharing fandoms together.

Why use online writing platforms as a reader?

According to its own data, Wattpad had 94 million users in 2021, of which around five million were writers (“Naver Completes Wattpad Acquisition”). That makes about 89 million pure readers. How does such an impressively high number come about?

It can be assumed that the most decisive reason for most of the readers to use Wattpad is that it is inexpensive, in most cases even free of charge. Readers have access to millions of stories that they would have to pay a lot of money for on the regular book market. On social reading platforms, they can read millions of stories, mostly for free.

The use of online writing platforms for reading not only saves them money, but also the walk to a bookshop or setting up of an online payment account to download an e-book. Both have the advantage of lowering the inhibition threshold of the mostly young readers. For online payments, minors, for instance, need the permission of their legal guardians. This means they must ask permission and thus actively report their reading plans. In terms of financial consequences, the parental hurdle may make sense, but it can build up inhibitions in the young reader that ultimately discourage them from reading. Social reading platforms can be used independently and thus without the consent of parents. Users only need an e-mail account, which – if not already available – can be created quickly and free of charge with various providers. Parental permission is rarely required for this (“Parental consent and Microsoft child accounts”).

To visit a bookshop, minors do not usually need their parents’ permission either. Nevertheless, going there can be fraught with hurdles for some people, even adults. The phenomenon connected to this is called *threshold anxiety*. The term refers to insecurity towards the unfamiliar, which triggers an inhibition in the potentially interested party to enter a certain business or, for example, the building of a public institution (“Schwellenangst, die”). The specific reason for shying away from bookshops is the fear of not being educated enough to be able to go there. Due to the limited access to books until a few centuries ago, bookshops still seem elitist to some people. Dieter E. Zimmer addressed this problem in

1971, in his essay *Bücher: Aspekte einer Strukturkrise*. Nevertheless, there are still initiatives today that try to fight this issue which often results in little reading (“Libri Campus-Ideenwettbewerb”).

Social reading platforms solve this difficulty through their virtuality and associated anonymity. Unrecognised and without social pressure, readers can browse through digital books there. In this way, they can gain access to books and immerse themselves in the world of literature without the fear of embarrassing themselves. Again, social reading platforms can thus be understood as a safe place for inexperienced people who want to give something previously unknown (in this case, reading) a chance. In addition to reading, users can also engage with other users as well as with the authors of the stories they read through commentary sections and direct messages. *Social reading* is the name of the phenomenon that is encouraged in this way (Pleimling 1). Users can comment on chapters, but also on individual sentences and even words. This enables an intensive discussion of what has been written, as well as interaction with each other and with the authors of the texts. Researchers from the University of Basel in Switzerland stated that:

[s]ocial reading is rising to prominence among all the various reading practices, namely thanks to the use of digital media. Looking ahead, we have to acknowledge that Wattpad readers are the generation of new readers. A generation who is nurturing a passion for reading being immersed in the use of digital media (Lauer et al. 39).

Apart from the digital, however, this concept of literary communication does not seem new. Instead, it is strongly reminiscent of the tradition of reading societies and salons that were widespread in the 18th-century, which we would probably call *reading clubs* today. Even back then, people talked about literature – sometimes more superficially, sometimes more intensively – and celebrated their love of the written word, whether by reading or writing. Instead of talking orally about the texts read, this is now done in writing. The advantage of the digital reading club of the

21st century is, of course, its freedom of time and place: it allows people from all over the world to get in touch with each other from anywhere, at any time.

In addition, the digital space into which the conversations have been transferred offers the possibility of indirect literary communication through reading lists. These are generally digital lists created by readers and authors in which they collect stories they have read on a particular platform and want to save for others to see. A user can create an unlimited number of lists, which can be sorted by topic, for example. Through these lists, readers can get inspired for their own reading and keep track of which stories their favourite authors have read and enjoyed (“Creating a reading list”).

Readers can also be inspired in another way on these platforms: to write their own texts. Through the low-threshold access to reading material and literary communication, readers learn – often at an early age – that the path to their own text and publication can be easier than it first seems. Thus, after some time, the platform’s readers often become writers themselves and profit from the advantages mentioned above.

Why use online writing platforms as a publisher?

Using online writing platforms as a publisher is initially less obvious than as a reader or author. Nevertheless, publishers can benefit from them, as examples from recent years prove. Think of book successes like E. L. James’ *Shades of Grey* or the *After*-series by Anna Todd. These books were first published as fanfictions, respectively about *Twilight* and the boyband One Direction, on Wattpad. Due to their high traffic volume, publishers became aware of them and, after being slightly modified for copyright purposes, they were published on the regular book market. Both book series then became worldwide successes within a noticeably short time. The first volume of the erotic novel trilogy *Shades of Grey* sold more than ten million copies in the USA in less than two months. Two months later, it was already 20 million (Reich).

Examples like these have long ceased to be isolated phenomena. Online writing platforms, primarily Wattpad, are producing an increasing number of texts that later become real blockbusters on the book market. They turn these self-made embossed writing forums into veritable treasure troves for publishers, and young people's attempts at writing thus suddenly become potential future bestsellers.

Increasingly, publishers are taking advantage of these opportunities and should do so. By looking at online writing platforms, they can (1) discover previously unrecognised writing talents, and (2) get a longer writing sample than regular publisher submissions from a text that (3) has already been tried and tested by the target audience, and commented on in a publicly readable way. Complete blunders are thus quite unlikely. However, publishers must consider that readers of stories uploaded on fanfiction.de expect less in terms of quality (both storyline and writing style) than in regular publications, for which they pay accordingly. As such, success on Wattpad does not immediately mean similar success in traditional publication – although it is possible, as *After Passion* and so on show. However, even if publishers do not locate a successful novel on these forums, they can still become aware of literary trends. A look at these pages can therefore be worthwhile for publishers in any case.

Conclusion

As shown, online writing platforms such as Wattpad and fanfiction.de hold a lot of potential for literary discourse and its actors. A distinctive feature of these platforms is their low barriers. Anyone with internet access can use them, regardless of financial or cultural background, gender, and age. This results in innovation in three directions: from the perspective of readers, authors, and publishers.

Readers, on the one hand, have the opportunity to read stories anonymously and free of charge. This makes inhibitions disappear both from a financial and a social point of view. Additionally, they can contact other readers and even authors through comment functions. This way, they can

exchange ideas with others easily on a personal basis. Authors, in turn, can share their stories with others without being dependent on publishers or restricted by editors. In contrast to the classic self-publishing, no money needs to be spent on this, because publishing is also free of charge on these platforms. For those who are looking for a way into regular publishing, Wattpad and related platforms also open up the possibility of attracting the attention of publishers. Collaborations like this have already led to multiple international bestsellers (and a film series). Online writing platforms thus provide an important opportunity for readers, authors and publishers. They pave the way for writing, reading, and discussing literature, promote exchange between authors and readers, and open a way into the traditional literary market.

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