

Reading and Writing in Online Communities

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Irina-Ana Drobot

Lecturer, Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages

Department of Foreign Languages and Communication

Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

*The purpose of the present paper is to look at how the relationship between man and machine can be seen in our interactions with respect to literature. Creative online communities have appeared, centred on reading and writing poetry, prose, flash fiction, short stories, as well as fan fiction. We can see how the relationship between readers and writers have become all the more interactive through the online environment. Previously, we were talking about the relationship of communication between writers and readers, which was recognized by the reader-response approach to any text, as it was being interpreted by the readers function of their background and function of what they could make out of the allusions put before them by the writer. Direct communication among writers and readers regarding various new writers' fresh book publications and launchings can take place on online social media. Nowadays, everyone has access to the online medium, and can start pursuing various activities with people from all over the world. This is what has happened in the case of the haiku communities, poetry writing sites such as, in Romania, *agonia.ro*, *Wattpad*, which allows young writers to imagine and share their novels, as well as their personal concerns.*

Keywords: Online Environment, Creativity, Communication, Democratization of Art, Feedback, Social Media

Introduction

Digital Humanities (Berry, 2012; Jones, 2013; Liu, 2013) can offer us a new environment for our passion for reading and writing. We can have the books we want by ordering them online and, if we do so in online format, we can have them right away. We can search through an online catalogue for the books we want from bookshops, with old and new books. While some of us may still claim that they have nostalgic feelings from the old times when they could smell a physical book, go to the library, or to the bookstore, and look through the shelves, the experience of having everything in a more organized way and in a way we can have more control over, online, does not replace the old-days' experience with books. Nowadays, book discussions in cafes, organized through online communication on social media, and book launchings in hybrid format have become part of urban life.

Yet, digital humanities ensure that we do not remain passive readers, simply looking at, as we visualize, various stories unfolding as we imagine them from what has been written by others. Digital humanities offer, by means of online communities, the opportunity to

discuss how to write a good story. The advice is given from direct experience, intuitively, as users read what others write and as they relate to the text. Various local literary magazines have become popularized in special online communities, as the users can have access to them and get publishing opportunities.

Encouraging everyone to write can be a sign of the democratization of art (Booth, 2014). Such encouragement for allowing anyone to write and share their stories can lead to better communication among people. Popular psychology articles online claim that reading enhances our capacity for sympathy.

Nowadays, we use the term story for fiction, but also for real-life stories. One of the writers dealing with this topic, and who has also benefitted from the possibilities offered by digital humanities, as he has published recently short stories online in *The New Yorker*, is Graham Swift. Indeed, stories can come, as he shows in his novels, from experience. He also claims that we always need stories, in his interviews. This could be a reason why such communities where readers and writers can communicate with each other have been so attractive and so successful. It is because they have been naturally attracted by these activities. Indeed, if we think about it, before such online communities appeared, people would gather in various areas in the village, in the neighbourhood, and they still do now in pubs, in parks, and they tell even to strangers their life stories. We can recall *The Canterbury Tales*, where the pilgrims could tell each other, on the road, stories they had heard or even experienced themselves, and, in this way, their time would pass. As children, we have all enjoyed listening to stories.

The need for stories in online communities is also visible in the practice of users writing book reviews. The practice has reached such popularity and was so much appreciated that there are specific book reviewers' communities such as Goodreads, not only individual blogs specialized in book reviews.

Materials and Methods

We could claim that, in the case of digital humanities, when it comes to literature, it is not only about storing books and accessing them online. The keyword is interaction. The online environment has become very interactive with respect to reading and writing, if we consider practices such as offering and receiving feedback in online writing communities, reviewing books and reading reviews in order to see which book we may find interesting to read. The other members of the community are very inspiring and can pass on the interest in book reading and in creative writing.

Digital Humanities can be seen as offering a perfect adaptation of reading and writing to the times we live in. The online environment provides us with references, with material to study, but also with possibilities to interact and to deliver some stories or book reviews ourselves.

This system reminds of the contemporary education system which is focused on interaction, and which has, as an ideal, an active student. Students are always encouraged to express their opinion in class and to exercise their skills through practical activities, instead of just being expected to assist passively to lectures. We can see how readers do the same in the online environment. The environment is very engaging and they take on an active role. On the other hand, the structure of everyday life at various levels is based on interaction and expressing personal opinions, even when it comes to the level of politics. We live in a low-power distance world (Rinne et al., 2012), meaning we have a relaxed position towards figures of authority, and this is also visible with respect to the variety of fiction that has been published and non-fiction books. Nowadays, everyone can publish a book, as there are a wide variety of publishing houses and opportunities. In the past, we had mainstream literature and authors, and it was very difficult for someone new to enter the literary world. We can even self-publish or publish electronic books on the Internet if we want to share our writings with others.

In Romania, in the context of criticizing school curricula for presenting, in the literature classes, literary works which are very old and which hold little if any relevance to the young generations of today, the students can take on this opportunity to show that they do enjoy reading, yet they enjoy it if it is meaningful and relevant to them. Literary works can be strongly tied to a certain context and to a certain mindset that people had during certain historical times. Very old Medieval writings from the beginning of the Romanian nation can be very difficult to understand for students nowadays presenting students with a completely different world, with a country that they cannot recognize and understand. While having an outline of the contexts of the history of Romanian literature is necessary, students do need literature that is currently being written and that treats topics which are especially relevant to their age and preoccupations. The Young Adult category of books is intended for teenagers, which has been successful. Teenagers have started using this category as a label for what they write in online communities such as Wattpad. Additionally, many young people who have started writing novels on Wattpad have then moved on to publishing their novel in print format. Teenagers are, thus, encouraged to express themselves using fiction, through being given all these possibilities by the online environment and by the publishing houses. The online environment proves a great opportunity for them to communicate among peers and to deal with their topics of interest through writing fiction.

The fact that they are encouraged to take an active role with respect to creative activities can be beneficial, since popular psychology articles regarding reading fiction show that, through reading, we can not only have access to different perspectives, cultures, and ways of life, but also with alternative means of dealing with problems. We can, once we resonate with the topic and with the way a certain character deals with life, with various ways of solving problems, and we can also start thinking about solutions to our own problems. Once we connect with a community of readers of the same age, it means that the other members have the same mindset, and that they respond to the same concerns and events in the city or country where they live.

As a general tendency, we tend to stick together with those that are similar to us. While listening to the stories of those that are different from us and talk about a completely different world can be interesting and challenging, such stories are also expected to have a universal element. As an example, in fantasy works, which are very popular with young readers, we may find characters in very different worlds and settings, with very different lifestyles and habits, but, eventually, sharing with us issues related to our psychology when dealing with relationships, the hero's journey type of plot, the fight between good and evil, and so on.

Teenagers are using fiction as a means of daydreaming in order to make hypothetical scenarios which can solve their needs for adventure, novelty, experimenting various situations, and creating hypotheses and alternative scenarios for dealing with a problem with respect to their relationship with family, friends, and persons they have fallen in love with. The fantasy setting can help teenagers feel comfortable when dealing with their own issues since they hide a bit under the pretext of presenting an artistic, imaginary world. Any fictional work, however, disguises the real situations and people, to some point, with which they deal with, making it more comfortable for the teenagers than it would be for them to write directly about their issues placed in their real life setting. At this age, they can start to keep up a diary, yet they may not feel very safe since, if it is in print format, someone can find it and read it. It may be safer online as they can post it anonymously, and simply connect with others of the same age and with the same issues. However, they will still need not to mention all of the details in order not to be recognized accidentally by someone they know. Using fiction, where they can attribute their psychological issues in the way they deal with various relationships and with various new or uncomfortable situations can be disguised to some point through fiction and all these problems can be attributed to others, to various fictional

characters. By creating different worlds, the teenagers can be regarded as creating a protective environment, where they have their privacy, just as they feel the need for having their own room. The online environment ensures privacy, since the fictional stories teenagers publish can be under a penname.

Adults also have literary communities that are suitable for their own age group. The author of the present paper can speak from experience, through netnographic research (Kozinets, 2015), as she has been a member of literary-focused Facebook groups in Romanian such as Fictiuni Reale (Real Fiction), where flash fiction is written by the members based on the theme announced by the administrator of the group. References to what is going on in the world today are present. The author of the present paper is also a member of Autori romani de haiku (Romanian Haiku Authors), where the teacher of the group, master Corneliu Traian Atanasiu posts theoretical comments and explanations about this type of poems, and comments on and helps members improve their poems. This is an example of a group where writing haiku poems is taken seriously, while other haiku themes social media groups focus on writing haiku as therapy or as hobby, without analysing them in depth or caring about the rules, as simple relaxing activity.

Fanfiction online groups and communities are definitely based on what is relevant at a certain time for fans, of various other books and films, or film series. Fans imagine other scenarios for the characters, other endings or other relationships in which the characters can engage. The personal element is also present, since writers of fanfiction may deal, like in dreamwork, as analysed by Freud (2009), with their own life issues. Thus, teenagers may be preoccupied by breaking free from their family and establish their independently chosen lifestyle, much like many heroes in films and books do. As an example, Bella from the Twilight series is a girl who falls in love with a vampire. She leaves her familiar environment for a completely different one, among vegetarian vampires.

We can see Bella's contact with the vampires as a usual teenager's contact with a group of friends. During our teenage years, the group of friends becomes more important than the family (Brown et al., 1986), as teenagers spend more time outside their home. They can acquire new values and a new lifestyle due to their connection with one group or another.

For adults, Romanian literary online groups connect them over shared values and memories. For older adults, literature can have a very well established connection with patriotic and nationalistic feelings. They often share memories of their childhood moments spent at their grandparents' house in rural areas, where they got into contact with the Romanian traditional lifestyle. They also remember with nostalgia the days of their school years, with their specific practices and with their specific relationship with their teachers. They have seen their teachers as inspiring and as models to look up to. Some teachers have encouraged them to pursue their literary and creative gift. They relate their memories to a beautiful time, since they were young and full of dreams. The past was also the time, for many, for their debut as poets and writers in various literary magazines. When they see those very magazines still around in electronic format, and accepting submissions, they live pleasant memories again. Perhaps they have lost touch with their peers sharing the same memories, and the Internet, through its digital collection of literary magazines, offers them the opportunity to meet and discuss about the old days and about practices that are still relevant to them with others like them.

Bookstores and publishing houses publish announcements and live sessions with book launchings and meetings with writers from Romania and abroad. Communities of book readers discuss in online social media groups about the most recently published books. Thus, they enjoy discussing literary works that are fresh and that are about our current concerns.

Results

We can view digital humanities in the examples studied of online communities of writers and readers as inspiring the users to participate actively in the creation of literature. Either through book reviews or through sending their own works of fiction, users are no longer in a passive position.

As a matter of fact, literature has always been a tool through which to create or support nationalistic feelings, common values, to sum up a common culture, or a common ground on which we can view our human experience that we consider specific to a certain time, place, and community.

Literary works are meant to be shared, as writers and readers are like two interlocutors, according to reader-response criticism (Fowler, 2008).

Digital humanities offers everyone the possibility to adapt literature and our activities related to it to our current lifestyle and possibilities offered by technology. Nowadays, we do not have only a national level of political organization. We also have supranational levels, such as the one exemplified by the European Union. This means that we relate not only to the specificities of our country, but also to those promoted at supranational and even world level.

The reading and writing communities offer topics that include the values and principles promoted at EU level: diversity, respect for minorities and for other cultures. We interact with more persons and mentalities in everyday life due to the world becoming so closely connected and digital humanities adapt to this tendency.

Discussion

We have recently expressed concern regarding the ability of ChatGPT to make up literary works, such as fiction and poetry. It will, however, not replace humans in this activity, not since it is not creative enough, as it only relies on background knowledge from a database, but since humans have the need to experience literature in an active, participatory manner. Literature is a natural part of our lives, through the way we tell stories without having any intention to publish them, regarding various episodes in our lives. We can go out and, when we return home, we can tell about our day to our friends and family. We tell stories about our travels, about meeting someone, and we also tend to arrange incidents in an order that makes sense when it comes to our lives.

Human beings are creative and enjoy reading literature, but also creating it themselves and interpreting it. Literature is not just about its end product. We enjoy writing reviews and literary works. Writing poetry is a frequent preoccupation during our teenage years. Literature is also a means of self-expression, which we can use to communicate and to show who we are.

Literature can prove to be a means for us to reflect about certain issues. Sometimes, creativity and thinking can intertwine, as in the cases of literature presented for the online communities in this paper. Literature is a means to make hypothetical scenarios and talk safely, under disguise, in a different setting than in real life and to attribute personal emotions and behaviour to fictional characters can lead to thinking and reflecting on a possible solution to our life issues. Our dilemmas can be expressed in our literary works, the same way that they are expressed in dreams.

Conclusions

At first sight, we may wonder about the connection between technology and literature. The two seem quite opposite at first. They can be associated, in our minds, with science, technical details, and gadgets, and with emotions and imagination, respectively. However, it depends on the way we are using them. Technology offers us the possibility to keep informed about the recent apparitions, to keep in touch with like-minded communities and to satisfy our need of participating actively by discussing issues in fictional works and by creating literary works ourselves. The Internet has encouraged active participation and communication with the creation of online discussion groups, providing a space of free expression.

The activity related to literature can help us deal with the alienation that we have experienced in the modern age due to the change of environment with the move from rural to urban areas, and then from one country to another.

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