Online platforms and everyday reading: the Russian case

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine how digital platforms influence reading practices, particularly on Russian self-publishing platforms. Drawing on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, I investigate how readers choose what to read, what books they consider interesting and engaging, and how reading on a digital platform differs from reading printed books. Based on this investigation, I conclude that the digital platform provides a unique reading experience due to the wide variety of texts, serialized publishing and a specific type of engagement manifested on the platform medium.

Keywords: reading practices; digital reading; Russian self-publishing platforms; readers' engagement; platformization of literary production

This paper is a small and unfinished part of my bigger ongoing project on the platformization of literature in relation to Russian self-publishing literary platforms. I started it at my master's stage, continued at the PhD stage with a focus on author and authorial

practices, and plan to continue further at the post-doctoral stage. In this text, I focus on reading practices and how platformization impacts them. I propose more of a descriptive case study than a high-level theoretical debate, but in the end, I will try to make some theoretical conclusions.

Platformization is usually regarded as a process of r*eorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms* (Poell et al., 2019)*.* In book publishing and literary practices, it particularly means developing special websites where everyone can publish their literary works without the mediation of publishing houses, such as Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, developing fanfiction platforms such as Archive of Our Own and Wattpad, and creating reading communities where readers can share reading experiences: rate and recommend texts to each other, review them and discuss both texts and reviews. On such platforms, reading often becomes "wreading" — in the sense that reading and writing activities intertwine with each other, and readers not only comment and review fictional texts, but also write fan fiction based on what they've read and new fictional texts.

Wattpad is the most popular resource for studying online reading and wreading. Kraxenberger and Lauer (2022) show that usage of online reading platforms, including Wattpad, Archive of Our Own, Fanfiktion.net, and specialized subreddits on reddit.com, is not limited only to adolescent users and those who read there, come to platform to find some experience which they do not have in real life: new stories that they wouldn't read otherwise, contact with people whom they wouldn't meet. Pianzola et al. (2020) analyzes the readers' engagement and shows that "social aspect of reading and genre is affecting the volume of the commenting activity" (Pianzola et al. 2020, 33), but different groups of readers read differently. Shukla (2024)

emphasizes the importance of genre on the platform and its role in platform publishing, readership, and community forming. Pristed (2020) expands the scholarship on platform reading by including the studies on Russian digital reading platforms, livelib.ru and bookmix.ru. She argues that in the Russian context, social reading platforms have a special significance because institutional reading infrastructures are weak, and "social reading networks become an important part of digital compensation strategies to counteract contemporary deficits in libraries and bookstores, and outbalance the distribution of and sales problems associated with the printed book" (Pristed 2020, 410).

Thus, reading strategies on the Internet differ from reading strategies in the Gutenberg era; they are country-specific, platform-specific, device-specific. Based on this premise, in the following sections, I will demonstrate how reading strategies work on Russian self-publishing platforms. My research questions are: for what purposes do readers read? How do they choose what book to read? How does their reading practice depend on the medium and device readers read, how their reading habits are integrated into their daily lives, and how platformized serialized narration impacts the readers' engagement in the story?

I have been conducting digital ethnography research since 2018. My main method is non-participant observation and field diary: I observe the users' activity on both platforms, read books on them, and also follow the reading communities in the social network Vkontakte, where authors and readers meet. Also, I held three series of semi-structured interviews with platform users: in spring 2020, in spring 2022, and in summer 2025, 31 interviews in total and 12 exclusively with readers. All my respondents were non-professional readers —

i.e., their professional activity is far from reading and interpreting literature — and lived in different cities in Russia.

In Russia, we have a specific history of Internet development. The Internet started in Russia as a political project (Konradova 2020; Konradova 2021), and from the very beginning, online book culture took a significant place in the development of the Russian Internet (Mjør 2009; Schmidt 2020; Pristed 2020). Such specificity was conditioned by both political reasons and technological constraints, such as the Cyrillic script; as a result, we have some local services that replicate some global social networks and other digital products. For example, we have our own Facebook, it is called Vkontakte, and we have our own search engines that work much better in the Russian context and with the Russian language, such as Yandex. LitRes, Russia's largest electronic book-selling company, focused almost exclusively on books published in Russia and in the Russian language, was launched in 2007. We also have a long tradition of digital piracy; such projects as LibGen and Sci-Hub have Russian or Russian-speaking origins. Flibusta, the largest online library in Russia, hosts a lot of pirate books, scanned and digitized books published long ago, and self-published books. In this context, it is not surprising that online platforms where it became possible not only to publish but also to sell literary works have been developed in Russia in the second half of the 2010s.

Russian self-publishing platforms are at the same time similar to Amazon, Wattpad, and the like, and different from them. They are similar in that they are algorithm-driven, they host thousands of books, and everyone can publish and sell books on them simply after registering. They are different in a way that, firstly, they operate only in the Russian language and mostly within Russia, in contrast to

Amazon, Google, or Apple books, which operate in a global market, in different countries and in different national languages, and secondly, they stand outside both traditional publishers and the publishing industry and other digital services and social networks. Unlike Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, which is a part of larger digital ecosystem including printed books seller, Russian online literary platforms operate independently and function as a standalone literary institution with its own conventions and rules.

We have different digital platforms that provide various book publishing services. They work with different business models. Some, such as Ridero, offer only a digital publishing service and the possibility to distribute the book on different platforms, including a printed book using Print on Demand technology. Some offer only digital publishing and selling books on a single platform, such as LitRes, which hosts both traditionally published and self-published electronic books, or Litmarket.

I will focus on the two most prominent platforms in the Russian digital landscape: Author.Today and Litnet.com. According to the latest industrial report, they occupy almost 20% of the Russian electronic book market (Grigor'ev 2024). The number of books published on both platforms exceeds the number of books issued by traditional publishers. For example, in 2024, publishing houses published 22,044 fictional books. There is no exact data on how many books were published in 2024, but it is possible to reconstruct this amount from the Web Archive. According to it, on the Author.Today, there were 167,268 books on November 12, 2024, and 252,686 books on August 29, 2025. So the whole amount increased by 70,000 books. On Litnet, the situation is similar: from 117,109 books on November 26, 2024, to

135,634 on August 19, 2025. In the next section, I will turn to the empirical findings, which, however, require further interpretation.

Both platforms host mainly fiction books of popular low-brow genres, such as romance novels and fantasy. Platforms have a similar design with the same structural elements, such as pages with a selection of genres and various widgets that appear on the main page, but the color scheme differs: on Author.Today, the color is blue, on Litnet it is pink. One might say that the color scheme reflects a gender specificity: Author.Today looks "masculine," and Litnet looks "feminine." The book covers also portray different themes that support such a gender division: on Litnet, one sees couples and beautiful women (see pic.1); on Author.Today, one sees men and women with weapons and magical creatures (pic. 2). Do not be fooled by the English language on the screenshots; both platforms operate only in the Russian language, and it is just an automated translation in the browser to introduce the context.

The selection of texts and audiences also differs on both platforms: on Litnet, such genres as romance novels and love fantasy prevail, and the founders stated that their main audience is female. On Author.Today, the prevailing genres are military fantasy and accidental travel. Platform administration did not state it explicitly, but among the reading and writing community, Author.Today is perceived as a male platform.

Another important feature of both platforms is serialized, or partial, publishing: authors publish their texts in installments, chapter by chapter, while writing, and readers can comment and discuss each piece of the story.

Readers who come to the platform are not young: all my respondents were above 30, and industry reports confirm that the main audience

of self-publishing platforms in Russia is 35–45-year-old. They read a lot – one book in 1-3 days, both on Litnet and Author.Today, and they perceive themselves as readers, i.e., reading is their main hobby. They read mostly for relaxation and disconnection from everyday reality. Their reading is genre-specific: readers choose which book to read based on genre, using the special filter on both platforms: they can set up a genre, then choose what genres to exclude, audio or electronic format, and so on, and within these parameters choose the specific story they want to read.

Commenting activity differs. On both platforms, readers can comment on each installment and share their opinions and emotions regarding the book. On Litnet, readers – who are mostly female readers – comment more than on Author.Today; all my respondents who read on Author.Today said that they do not leave comments, while respondents from Litnet said that it is a good form to leave a comment on a book they like. Two of my female respondents said that they tried to write their own stories, whereas male respondents said that they haven't even tried. So, "wreading" is more common within the female audience.

They read mostly from smartphones – both platforms have a reading application, and two respondents said that they listen to audiobooks, because it allows them to combine everyday activities such as housekeeping or babysitting with reading. Some respondents combine platformized reading with traditional printed book reading; some prefer only one platform because it provides a huge variety of genre texts.

Both on Author.Today and Litnet, readers look for a story with an interesting, fascinating plot – it should be very dynamic and full of suspense till the very end. Some respondents said that the author

should surprise their readers; unexpected plot twists are what make a story interesting[1].

An interesting hero or heroine whose stories are interesting to follow is another aspect of what readers want. Female respondents, who read mostly on Litnet, said that the good book is full of emotions, maybe it even has an emotional seesaw, and they want to identify with the heroine and empathize with her. On Author.Today, male respondents said that it is more important to share adventures with the hero; they feel themselves immersed in a fictional world, as if they are standing next to the hero and co-experiencing what he is doing. These opinions correspond to the emotional and experiential types of engagement defined by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) and Caracciolo (2012), respectively.

What is specific to platformized reading and distinguishes it from traditional reading of a printed book is, firstly, the unique choice of texts that the platform provides, and secondly, a specific type of reader's engagement which takes place on the platform.

As I mentioned, readers who come to platforms read a lot, and that is why they come to platforms: no publishing house in Russia can provide such a vast number of books. On an online platform with no editorial filter and thousands of authors publishing tens of thousands of stories, the production and publishing process is very simple and fast; you should not have to wait for months while your favorite author goes through the whole process of writing and printing. Every reader can find a book that matches their taste, and most of these texts will probably never appear in printed form, so the platform provides a text that cannot be found in other places.

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[1] Anna Gerasimova came to a similar conclusions, observing the reading practices on the Livelib platform (Gerasimova 2020).

Reader engagement on the platform is closely connected with partial narration, when the author publishes their text in installments, and readers receive notifications that a new installment is ready. Such a mechanism allows authors to meet readers' expectations and maintain readers' interest from the very beginning to the very end. Experimenting with the narrative structure — for instance, interrupting an action in the end of the installment[2] or dragging out time in tense moments — supports both emotional (in the case of Litnet) and experiential (in the case of Author.Today) engagement in the story. Serialized narration also creates an effect that events are happening right now; both the author and the reader do not know what happens next. The story is experienced as events in real life, as if readers were watching the relationships between their friends or acquaintances.

With serialized narration, which is realized differently on both platforms, readers are engaged in the process of creating a story. On Author.Today, serialized narration is performed on two levels: each book, narrated and published in installments, is a part of the whole series, which may last for a year or more. On Litnet, cyclization is less common; readers on both platforms prefer completed cycles and completed books. However, in the case of a liked author, readers follow them and receive notifications on the new installment. Keeping in mind that the primary reading device is a smartphone, which always lies in the pocket, the reader can spend – and sometimes spends – five minutes in the middle of their everyday routine to read this small piece, and during this time to switch himself or herself off from their current reality and to immerse themselves in another one.

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[2] Some authors I interviewed said they should finish the installment with conflict or logically unmotivated actions to keep readers interested in the book.

Even without a direct influence on the text (I haven't observed, for example, any evidence of voting on how the plot should develop, or other interactive communication), readers feel themselves absorbed in the storyworld and storytime.

At the same time, respondents noted that the degree of immersion is lower in the case of audiobooks, and they prefer reading written text[3]. When the reader has more space for imagination and should make some cognitive effort, but not too intensive, the immersion depth increases. In the case of an audiobook, this cognitive effort is lower than in the case of a written book, and an immersion in the storyworld is less intense.

Now I am moving on to the conclusions.

Platforms provide an experience of feeling in one time and one space of story. Such publishing and reading a story in a process of narration reduces narrative distance almost to zero, and the smartphone becomes a technology that connects everyday and textual fictional reality.

Serialized narration and publishing in installments by itself is not a new technique, as it was used by such authors as Charles Dickens, Eugène Sue, or Fyodor Dostoevsky in Russia. But on web platforms and via smartphones, the reading experience differs from that of the nineteenth century: installments are read on one physical medium, and the time between receiving new installments is rather short, just a few days. And this reading experience is unique and impossible with

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[3] I can't help but recall here the tweet "Ever realised how fucking surreal reading a book actually is? You stare at marked slices of tree for hours on end, hallucinating vividly" (https://x.com/KatieOldham/status/542348626711019520, accessed 30.09.2025). Though the author speaks about printed books, these words could also be applied to digital reading.

the printed book, when readers read either the whole piece or a number of installments in different periods on different physical medium.

Sharing of storyspace creates a feeling of co-living the story and the sense of community, which is further enhanced by genre. Genre reading is more than simply consuming stories; as Wilkins et al. argue, "Genre books are not merely texts; they are also nodes of social and industrial activity" (2022, 1), and recognizable genre patterns are a result of collaborative activity. In this context, choosing a particular genre means belonging to a specific reading community, with its own conventions, and readers who read a particular genre contribute to its further development and transformation.

Commenting during the process of narration also increases the emotional engagement in the story; however, "wreading" is more common among female audience, and at the same time, gendered platform division looks like a specificity of Russian culture and to some extent reflects the current gender order in Russia[4], which, despite of Soviet emancipation, is characterized by "persistence of patriarchy" (Goscilo and Lanoux 2006).

Serialized, or partial, narration looks like a universal platform mechanism that allows readers to engage in the process of creating the story and living through it. This technique is common not only

[4] At the symposium, Ze Yu, in her presentation "Global Narratives, Local Interpretations: A Comparative Study of Reader Response on Qidian and WebNovel" made the same point about gender dichotomy on the Chinese Platforms: while registering, one should mark their gender, and the recommendation algorithms and the choice of books will take into account the user's gender. It is a bit of a different situation than in the Russian case, since there are no gendered platforms; the platform is the same, but gender dichotomy still exists. This similarity requires further investigation. I thank Lovro Škopljanac for this meaningful comment.

on literary platforms, but also on social media, which is further enhanced by different metrics (Georgakopoulou et al. 2020). Thus, despite the fact that online practices often stand outside traditional literary studies, especially in the Russian scientific discourse, it is a big part of culture, and Russian culture in particular.

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Pic. 1. Main page of Litnet.com. 02.10.2025

Pic. 2. Main page of Author.Today. 02.10.2025