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Self-publishing in the digital age

A qualitative study on the role of digital publishing platforms and their impact on literary pluralism

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Abstract:

As academics, journalists, authors and other publishing industry figures decry the growing market dominance of digital publishing corporations, little attention has been devoted to the impact that the digital transformation of the publishing industry has had on literary pluralism. In this thesis, I will examine how independent writers use digital publishing platforms to publish their work and reach audiences, with a specific focus on Amazon and Patreon. The aim is to explore the new set of cultural practices in digital publishing and their impact on literary pluralism in today's culture.

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1 INTRODUCING THE STUDY

1.1 Background: Storytelling and literary pluralism in the digital age

As people, we shape our understanding of our world with cultural knowledge. Narrative, as a device that organises meaning within a frame of experienced time, is a crucial way in which we share and absorb such knowledge. For this reason, stories and literature are essential for strong foundations of a society's culture, and the multiplicity and diversity of available literature is vital for perpetuating the richness of that culture. Equipped with the meanings acquired from varying and diverse narratives, we are able to construct deeper and more complex world views. This is the importance of literary pluralism.

Because of literature's value to culture, the process of distributing literature can be seen as a cultural practice. In recent years, publishing – like many other sectors – has undergone digital transformation. The lowering of technical barriers for both large and small publishing players is an obvious effect that digital transformation has had on the publishing landscape. However, the broader implications of digital transformation for literary pluralism have yet to be examined.

With the emergence of digital publishing platforms, more people than ever are able to publish their own literature, and in doing so, new practices and methods have also emerged. Digital technologies also reshape how people engage with and purchase that content, changing the ways that independently produced literature is funded, distributed and consumed. Empowered by digital technologies, corporate players in publishing – most notably Amazon – have secured their dominance in the self-publishing sector.

Meanwhile, some content creators have found value in disseminating their work via membership platforms such as Patreon and voluntary contribution platforms such as Ko-fi. While novelists, comic book artists, bloggers and journalists are exploring and engaging with these new distribution methods that digital technologies facilitate, the market dominance of a few publishing players remains constant, and the impact that digitalisation has had on literary pluralism remains unclear.

As academics, journalists, authors and other publishing industry figures decry Amazon's growing market dominance as a threat to the self-publishing industry, a social constructionist study is needed to assess how digital publishing platforms impact literary pluralism. Furthermore, little attention has been devoted to membership platforms and the cultural practices that surround them. In this thesis, I will examine how independent writers use the digital publishing platforms to publish their work and reach audiences, and how these new set of practices affect literary pluralism in the broader publishing landscape, using Amazon and Patreon as my case studies.

1.2   Research problem: the role of digital platforms

I will argue that literary pluralism allows for a multiplicity of meaning which is beneficial for the richness of a society's culture. The general topic of this thesis is literary pluralism, which I narrow down to the social problem of literary pluralism in the digital age. Understanding how digital technology has shaped the cultural practise of publishing is needed if we are to gain insight on how that transformation has affected literary pluralism.

In order to approach the social problem of literary pluralism in the digital age, the research problem I shall address in this thesis is the role of digital self-publishing platforms in today's publishing landscape. Utilising the concept of technological ambivalence, I identify the need to examine the users of digital publishing platforms and their publishing practices. This is because the existence of

technology alone does not shape our culture – rather, it is the way in which we engage with that technology that has cultural impact. As such, the focus of my research will be on the users of digital publishing platforms.

I will approach the research problem of digital publishing platforms from a social constructionist angle as opposed to a positivistic one. This is because "a social constructionist perspective is explicitly based on assumptions of ontology, epistemology and ideology" (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2007, p26). These branches of study are generally aligned with the nature of the topic areas I explore. For example: Feenberg's work on narrative deals with the ontological issue of the construction of reality; and the concept literary pluralism is arguably an epistemic one, given that it concerns the sharing of knowledge with which we link ourselves to the surrounding world – a fundamental characteristic of epistemology (Zagzebski, 2009, p1).

1.3 Theoretical framework

Narratives offer us a way to organise events in time and extract meaning from their occurrence. For this reason, narratives are important for the construction of reality. Stories – as cultural products that utilize narrative – are therefore vital for cultures to be able to share and explore meaning that aid us in the construction of our realities. A pluralism of stories, by this logic, can only be beneficial for the richness and diversity of values in a given culture. I will draw from the work of Jerome Bruner to argue the cultural value of narrative. I will also touch upon work from Culture Studies and Publishing Studies to demonstrate that stories are a culture product, setting the foundation for my argument that publishing is a cultural practise.

Literary pluralism is instrumental to a richness of culture. Before examining literary pluralism in the digital age, I will briefly set out to define "literary pluralism" by drawing from Susan Hawthorne's advocation for "Bibliodiversity" as well as definitions of "pluralism" as the term is applied in various other fields. I will then

set out to explore the ways in which the digital transformation of publishing has impacted literary pluralism. There are a number of approaches one can take when approaching matters of technology: the technological optimist, for example, believes that humans will achieve domination and subsequent independence from nature through technological innovation, while the technological sceptic is dubious that ongoing technological innovation can produce such a positive outcome (Krebs, 2008, p507). For this thesis, I shall utilise the technological ambivalence approach, drawing from the work of Andrew Feenberg to argue the ambivalence of digital publishing platforms. The ambivalent approach is crucial for the integrity of this study because it centres around the role of the digital user – publishing is a cultural practise, and it is therefore a practise inherently concerned with the actions of people.

Having argued the ambivalent nature of technology and the importance of the digital user, I will then explore on how digital publishing platforms and their use have impacted literary pluralism. To do this, I will focus on two digital publishing platforms in particular: Amazon and Patreon. These will offer a strong basis for comparison because the differences in their functions serve as a strong example that the same technology can be applied differently to serve different means. For example, Amazon is the world's leading digital retailer allowing users to self-publish on their store. Patreon, on the other hand, functions as a membership platform that allows creators to sell their work as individuals rather than offering a centralised storefront.

1.4 Method

In the theoretical framework part of this thesis, one of the points I will demonstrate is that the role of users themselves cannot be overlooked given the ambivalent nature of technology. In order to explore how the practices surrounding digital platforms and their users affect literary pluralism, I conducted a qualitative study with a sample of fifteen independent writers who use Patreon to publish their work. I used a semi-structured interview to collect my data, designed according

to a seven-step guide framework presented in a research paper by Kallio et al (2016).

In the Method chapter of this thesis, I will present the research problem of literary pluralism in the digital age, drawing from the findings from my theoretical research. I will then describe my methodological framework in depth, demonstrating how it was constructed in order to approach the research problem.

1.5 Relevance of the research

Digital transformation has had a considerable impact on shaping the publishing industry: it has simultaneously empowered independent writers to self-publish by lowering technical barriers as well as enabling large publishing corporations to gain market dominance. The implications of these changes for literary pluralism remain unclear. While many self-publishers enjoy the tools and opportunity for market reach that companies like Amazon are able to offer, there are journalists, academics and figures in the publishing industry who warn of the long-term damages that corporate monopolisation of self-publishing could inflict on the publishing industry as a whole.

The debate on digital publishing platforms is centred around large industry players such as Amazon and does not currently consider the relevance of membership platforms. Perhaps independent self-publishers have only recently started to explore membership platforms as a publishing method, or perhaps the number of those self-publishers is too low to have garnered academic attention. In either case, this presents a knowledge gap in the subject area of digital membership platforms and how writers and audiences engage with them. This is something that needs to be more clearly understood in order to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of literary pluralism in this thesis, as well as for future studies exploring the relationships between self-publishing and digital membership platforms.

In this thesis, I will explore how technology affects literary pluralism in the self-publishing digital landscape, but with specific focus on how that technology is used by writers and audiences. This is because the application and use of technology is more relevant to studying cultural changes than the existence of the technologies themselves. Because digital platforms have changed self-publishing, we need to explore these changes to build an understanding of publishing as a cultural practise in a digital age.

2   STORYTELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

2.1 Stories, culture and reality

Stories, as a cultural product, are important for us to understand our surrounding world, allowing us access to ideas and customs that contribute to our broader understanding of the society and cultures with which we engage. This is the focus of a body of work by American psychologist Jerome Bruner. To argue that a pluralism of available stories is important for the richness of a culture, I will first argue the importance of stories themselves by drawing from Bruner's work on narratives and their role in the construction of reality.

2.1.1 Bruner on narratives and the construction of reality

Bruner identifies ten characteristics of narrative in *The Narrative Construction of Reality* (1991). The particulars of those characteristics are beyond the scope of this study, but essentially, narratives are a way for us to organise events and the meanings that arise from their occurrence. While narratives are a temporal device in that they are concerned with the passing of time, Bruner asserts that the function of narrative is different from that of a time-keeping method. While clocks and calendars allow us to structuralize and measure units of time, narrative, Bruner argues, is the only device that we can use to describe "lived time" (Bruner, 2004, p692) or "human time" (Ricoeur, 1984 in Bruner, 2004, p6). This fundamentally human endeavour of structuring meaning in time – in other words, "constructing reality" – is more explicitly outlined by Bruner thus:

> […] we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on […] transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery" (Bruner, 1991, p4).

From this, we can infer that the narratives we use in the construction of reality pass from person to person via cultural channels. In this regard, Bruner notes that it was around 1980 that some psychologists and anthropologists realised that their counterparts in the fields of literature and historiography were "deeply immersed in asking comparable questions about textually situated narrative" (Bruner, 1991, p5). This suggests that the relationship between narrative and the construction of reality has cultural implications as well as psychological ones. Furthermore, it suggests that the narratives we use to construct reality are present in cultural medium of literacy.

Bruner paraphrases the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, whose ideas on culture and reality remain popular today: "cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality." (Vygotsky, 1962, in Bruner, 1991, p3). This idea, Bruner notes, has remained popular during subsequent decades: a more recent iteration is that of "distributed intelligence", which upholds that one's intelligence is not entirely their own (Brown et al, 1989 in Bruner, 1991, p3). The parallels to Vygotsky's ideas are evident: cultural products serve as a vehicle for sharing knowledge that we use to construct our reality.

I have established that narratives are important for the construction of reality and that cultural products provide a way for us to access those narratives. To argue that published stories are therefore important for the construction of reality, I will now verify that stories fulfil the criteria of a cultural product, as well as further drawing from Bruner and his ideas on narrative and culture.

2.1.2   Literature as a cultural product

In *Measuring the value of Culture,* J.D. Snowball outlines a definition of a cultural good. Drawing from Throsby and Klamer, Snowball presents the following three main characteristics of a cultural good: their production involves a level of creativity; their output is a form of intellectual property (Throsby, 2001, in

Snowball, 2008, p7); and they are concerned with symbolic meaning (Klamer, 2004, in Snowball, 2008, p7). Published literature fulfils these criteria quite comfortably, as I will now demonstrate.

The first criterion of a cultural product requires creativity in their production. While definitions of creativity vary, they all generally incorporate originality: "Creativity [...] involves originality. When people produce things creatively, they devise novel products or novel ways of making products." (Barker, 1986, p142). In *Creativity: Theory, History, Practice,* the author offers the following provisional definition of creativity upon which the topic is explored: "[...] the capacity to make, do or become something fresh and valuable with respect to others as well as ourselves" (Pope, 2005, p*xvi*). In the conclusion of *Creativity 101*, the author notes that studies on imagination, innovation, cognitive flexibility and divergent thinking are all valuable to the study of creativity because of the issues they have in common (Kaufman, 2009, p169).

In addition to the creation of literature, the process of publishing literature is also being considered as a creative endeavour. In *Publishing and Culture,* the editors draw attention to some of the new ways in which publishing is being approached academically:

> "[...]recently Publishing Studies has evolved to embrace a wide range of other concerns, including the social and cultural aspects of publishing, and its place and value in communities as well as economies. Publishing Studies is now also exploring publishing as both a creative practice and a research activity" (Baker et al, 2019, pp.1-2).

These points demonstrate that creativity is present during both the production and publishing stages of literary works.

Secondly, literary works are classified as intellectual property by UN law. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, there are two main categories of intellectual property: Industrial Property and Copyright. The definition provided for the Copyright categorisation explicitly shows that this covers literature:

> Copyright covers literary works (such as novels, poems and plays), films, music, artistic works (e.g., drawings, paintings, photographs and sculptures) and architectural design. (WIPO, 2003)

Finally, concerning the symbolic meaning of cultural product, we can return to Vygotsky's assertion that language is a symbolic system that "mediates human thought and shapes the construction of reality." (Vygotsky, 1962, in Bruner, 1991, p3). In written or spoken form, language is inherently symbolic in its ability to evoke ideas and images in the minds of the reader or listener. (Whitehead, 1927, p2). Literary works, then, must be fundamentally concerned with symbolism: language encodes ideas that, when structured according to "lived time" (Bruner, 2004, p692), become narratives rich with symbolic meaning.

I have argued that literature is a cultural product as it fulfils the criteria laid out by Throsby. (Throsby, 2001, in Snowball, 2008, p7). As cultural products that incorporate narrative, literary works are then important to the construction of our reality. Furthermore, as the process by which the cultural good of literature is disseminated, publishing itself can be considered a cultural practice; a vehicle by which Brown's "distributed intelligence" is achieved (Brown et al, 1989 in Bruner, 1991, p3). As outlined in *Publishing and Culture,* the scope of Publishing Studies has grown to encompass its cultural implications (Baker et al, 2019, pp.1-2), further supporting the idea that publishing can be considered as a cultural practice.

2.1.3 Bruner on culture

I have argued that instances of literature are cultural goods and that the implications of this are as follows: firstly, literature is important for the construction of our reality because it is a way in which people share and experience narratives; and secondly, publishing is a cultural practice because it is deals with the dissemination of cultural goods.

I shall conclude this part of my theoretical framework by examining Bruner's comments on the direct relationship between narrative, culture and life. For example, Bruner states: "just as art imitates life in Aristotle's sense, so, in Oscar Wilde's, life imitates art. Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative." (Bruner, 2004, p692) If, then, "our precommitment about the nature of a life is that it is a story, some narrative however incoherently put together" (Bruner, 2004, p709), then art and literature, in their imitation of life and their utilising of narrative, are cultural goods that we use − if not depend on − to understand the constructed reality of our own lives.

The dissemination of such cultural goods is vital for the richness of a culture. Bruner argues that the creation of culture consists of a local capacity for accruing stories (Bruner, 1991, p19), highlighting the intrinsic link between stories and culture. Furthermore, Bruner relates culture, narrative models and our understanding of life itself, asserting his stance that narratives are essential for the construction of reality:

> [...]one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of a life. And the tool kit of any culture is replete not only with a stock of canonical life narratives (heroes, Marthas, tricksters, etc.), but with combinable formal constituents from which its members can construct their own life narratives […] (Bruner, 2004, p 694).

Access to a variety of narrative models is, therefore, conducive to enriching a society's culture. One way to facilitate this is with a pluralism of available literature. I now will proceed to define pluralism and convey its importance in literary publishing, touching on Susan Hawthorne's advocacy of Bibliodiversity as well as Rebecca Stone's assessment of Bruner's stance as a pluralist.

2.1.4 Understanding literary pluralism

In order to offer a definition of "literary pluralism", I shall start by outlining the idea of "pluralism" itself. The origins of the term "pluralism" are rooted in eighteenth century England when the term was used to describe a clergy member who held multiple positions within the Church. (Klassen and Bender, 2010, cited in Caswell, 2013, p276). Today, the non-technical version of the term "pluralism" is relatively unambiguous. In popular American discourse, pluralism is used as an "honorific" that celebrates the freedoms of speech and belief that can be exercised in matters of society, economy and religion (Rooney, 1989, p17). In academic studies, pluralism is applied to these same areas as a way of examining the implications of diversity within them. However, unlike its colloquial American counterpart, the academic usages of "pluralism" holds varying and contested definitions depending on the field in which it is applied.

For example, in his 1990 paper titled *The Pluralism of Pluralism: An Anti-theory?*, Grant Jordan attempts to offer a definition of the term "pluralism", but almost exclusively in a political context (Jordan, 1990, p286). Jordan examines the work of a number of pluralists, including Dahl's work on the democratic polyarchy (Dahl, 1984, cited in Jordan, 1990, p287) and Polsby's use of pluralism as a methodology for identifying the ruler of a community (Polsby, 1971, cited in Jordan, 1990, p289). Jordan refers to pluralism as a theory and observes that "it is difficult to cite an authoritative statement of the theory of pluralism" given that anyone who writes about it "wants to make their exceptions to any generally accepted conclusions." (Jordan, 1990, p286). Although Jordan draws particular attention to the looseness of the term, they do maintain that "any adequate model"

of pluralism would "feature explicit variety at its core (Jordan, 1990, p286). Rooney offers a slightly different definition, but it is one that seems aligned with Jordan's view that pluralism is intrinsically about multiplicity and variety: "an ensemble of discursive practices constituted and bounded by a problematic of general persuasion" (Rooney, 1989, p2).

A different use case for pluralism exists as cultural pluralism, an idea that was popularised in 20th century America, as Bernstein notes, at a time when the country saw an influx of immigrants between 1870 and 1920. (Bernstein, 2015, p347). Bernstein states that:

> Pluralism is a term that has taken on a great many meanings.
> There is a pluralism of pluralisms. But in an American context,
> there has been a distinctive history of the meaning of pluralism
> – especially cultural pluralism. (Bernstein, 2015, p347)

Not only does this reflect Rooney's assertion that pluralism is more defined in the context of American culture (Rooney, 1989, p17), this also supports the notion that pluralism itself lacks definition if devoid of context — in other words, the application of pluralism to a field of study is required in order to define pluralism.

An example of a practical application of pluralism can be found in Michelle Caswell's 2013 paper *On archival pluralism: what religious pluralism (and its critics) can teach us about archives*, in which she advocates the benefits of pluralism in archival practices (Caswell, 2013). Caswell argues that if we are to neglect archival pluralism, "we are to lose the insights of the majority of humanity and reproduce a lopsided version of knowledge that continues to privilege the powerful", giving way to "an archival universe dominated by one cultural paradigm" (PACG 2011 cited in Caswell, 2013, p288).

In just a handful of examples, the pluralistic nature of pluralism itself is evident: it has been described as a quotidian honorific and a collection of digressive

practices (Rooney, 1989, p17); a mutating theory and a model built around variety (Jordan, 1990, p286); a dynamic movement in a cultural context (Bernstein, 2015, p355); and something that allows for a multitude of perspectives to exist around a given archival text (Caswell, 2013, p276). However, in terms of the principles that make up the thing that is pluralism, a key common trait can be identified from these use cases. Pluralists argue that the presence of variety in a given body of a humanistic discipline is beneficial to its function. By applying this notion to the bodies of literature available to a society, we can form an understanding of literary pluralism.

Susan Hawthorne, a writing and publishing veteran who has witnessed the shift from print to digital over their thirty years' experience in the industry, argues the need for what refers to as "bibliodiversity". In *Bibliodiversity: A Manifesto for Independent Publishing*, Hawthorne defines bibliodiversity thus:

> Bibliodiversity occurs when both the deep soil of culture is nurtured and the multiplicity of epistemological stances are encouraged. I refer to this as *cultural multiversity.* (Hawthorne, 2014, p3)

Hawthorne's idea of bibliodiversity has two main implications: firstly, we can consider Hawthorne to be a literary pluralist. By means of comparison, Bernstein, who discusses the argument that democracy is stronger when benefiting from varying cultural groups (Bernstein, 2015, p355) describes a cultural pluralist. Caswell, who proposes "the adaptation of four of religious pluralism's main principles" in archival practices (Caswell, 2013, p288), is an archival pluralist. Therefore, it is fair to argue that Hawthorne is a literary pluralist given that her idea of bibliodiversity centres around the benefits that arise from variety – a quality that I have established is at the core of pluralistic ideals.

Secondly, there are clear parallels to daw between Hawthorne's bibliodiversity and Bruner's work on narratives in that they both argue the value of stories for a

rich culture. Furthermore, Bruner himself is a pluralist, as demonstrated by Rebecca Stone. In the paper *Does Pragmatism Lead to Pluralism?*, Stone compares the pluralistic approaches of William James and Jerome Bruner in their academic work. On Bruner's views on narrative, Stone notes the following:

> It is this inherent limitation to narrative which leads Bruner to so cherish a multiplicity of perspectives, or pluralism. Bruner asserts that 'depth is better achieved by looking from two points at once'. One narrative can never tell the whole story (indeed, the whole story can never be told), so more and more alternative narratives add more and more meaning. (Stone, 2006, p556)

This multitude of narratives to which Stone refers is perhaps the core of literary pluralism: if a society has access to a pluralism of stories, then it has access to a pluralism of narratives. Since the co-existence of alternative narratives generates meaning, then literary pluralism must therefore be instrumental for meaningful culture and reality-building.

Literary pluralism is important for a rich culture because a multiplicity of stories means a multiplicity of narratives that can be shared, understood, and used in the reality-building of the people within a society. Because the publishing landscape has undergone digital transformation, it is important to explore how the cultural practises of publishing have changed and how these changes affect literary pluralisms.

2.2   The impact of digitalization on the publishing industry

When considering how 'digital' has revolutionised the publishing industry, a number of benefits are evident, including improved accessibility, low barriers to entry, reduced production costs and wide market reach. In the case of self-publishing, the emergence of digital formats and mediums like online posts and ePub files perfectly cater to hopeful writers who would otherwise be unable to

publish their own work. As of 2018, self-published books made up almost half of all e-book unit sales in the US (theatlas.com, 2018). Uploading one's work to the internet costs practically nothing – and for the cost of practically nothing, one's book, comic or article is available to everyone around the world.

The benefits that digital technologies can facilitate in the publishing industry are not, however, exclusive to the creators of written content. The same corporate players involved in the distribution of printed books also look to reap the benefits of digital publishing. In fact, large corporations are often well-positioned to benefit from the advances of digital transformation, as Doyle explains in *Understanding Media Economics*:

> Even with a loosening up of national markets and fewer technological barriers to protect media incumbents from new competitors, the trend that exists in the media - of increased concentration of ownership and power into the hands of a few very large transnational corporations - clearly reflects the overwhelming advantages that accrue to large-scale firms. (Doyle, 2012, p38)

The phenomenon that Doyle describes occurs in any of today's media sectors: mergers and partnerships, both horizontal and vertical, are fuelled by the capabilities of digital technology and the capitalist drive for market dominance. The specific cultural and economic effects of this trend vary from sector to sector, and each call for critical examinations of its own. For such a discussion within the realms of independent publishing, we can return to Hawthorne who offers the following observation:

> The 'digital revolution' has not only opened the doors to small players, but created new opportunities for megapublishing and megabookselling to recolonise those who have worked hard to

decolonise themselves and their communities over the last century. (Hawthorne, 2014, p51)

Here, Hawthorne points out that the same technologies are available to both large and small players in the publishing industry, and both parties are using that technology to further their own efforts. This calls for an exploration of technological ambivalence, which I will soon discuss in depth.

Hawthorne claims that by utilizing technology for corporate gain, big industry players pose a threat to bibliodiversity. In *Bibliodiversity: A Manifesto for Independent Publishing*, Hawthorne argues the importance of having a diverse set of voices across the global publishing landscape.

> Small and independent publishers contribute to the cultural multiversity through deep publishing of cultural materials (e.g. books that draw on non-homogenised cultural knowledge) as well as producing books that represent a wide range of viewpoints and epistemological positions. (Hawthorne, 2014, p3)

Independent publishers are vital for promoting bibliodiversity because their voices can be expressed without having to cater to the interests of a corporate overseer. "But self-publishing too has been appropriated," Hawthorne writes, "and much of it is now in the hands of Amazon" (Hawthorne, 2014, p55). Hawthorne argues that Amazon and its corporate practices are a threat to cultural diversity and Bibliodiversity.

Given Hawthorne's argument, there is a case to be made that digital publishing platforms potentially pose a threat to literary pluralism, particularly if they act in accordance with capitalist practices. However, Hawthorne's assessment fails to consider the role of the users of Amazon's publishing services and what impact their own practices have on the cultural multiversity and bibliodiversity. I will now

explore the idea of technological ambivalence in relation to digital publishing in order to build an understanding of the role of digital publishing platform users.

2.3 Technological ambivalence and the role of users

When studying the impacts that digital publishing services have on literary pluralism, there must be a focus on how that technology is used and how people interact with it. This is important because it is not the technology itself that has an impact on the digital transformation within a given sector, but the way in which that technology is used. In the case of digital publishing, its social and cultural practices do not arise from the set of digital technologies present — those practices are a product of the way in which publishers use that technology and how writers and audiences engage with it.

In the introduction of *Storytelling and Education in the Digital Age*, Stocchetti stresses that digital storytelling should not be studied under the notion that it exists simply as an amalgamation of storytelling and digital technologies.

> The problem I am discussing here is to understand the implications associated with the rituals enforced by the digital turn. To ask this question is important because the idea that digital storytelling has all the goodies of storytelling plus the bonuses of digital technology is a philistine simplification. To neglect the changes brought about by the digital turn in the rituals, relationships and ultimately "power" of storytelling is a form of reductionism that endangers the critical assessment of this "turn" in education. (Stocchetti, 2016, p18)

Storytelling is a set of cultural rituals, and what Stocchetti stresses here is the importance of studying the change in those rituals brought about by digital technologies, not the technologies themselves. The ways in which digital technologies are used to tell stories shape how those rituals are conducted.

Similarly, publishing has a set of practices, and how the use of technology changes those practices must be examined.

Stocchetti also demonstrates that before considering any changes brought about by technology, the process of storytelling – the actual act of telling a story and the way in which that telling occurs – is innate to the story itself.

> Intuitively, an "untold" or uncommunicated story is a non-story.
> What this means is that whatever storytelling can do depends not
> only on the features of the story but also on the conditions of the
> "telling": the nature of the relations in which storytelling occurs as
> a communicative event and that the event itself contributes to
> reproduce, or subvert. (Stocchetti, 2016, p17)

Here, Stoccehtti argues that the way in which a story is told is something that is inseparable from the nature of that story, given that a story is, by its own definition, something that is told and shared. Because of this, a comprehensive study of storytelling cannot fail to examine the act of "telling". By extension, an unpublished book must go through a publication process in order to become a published book. Therefore, the nature of that publishing process inherently shapes how that published book sits within cultural practice of publishing.

The role that technology plays in social change is a key topic in the work of Andrew Feenberg. In *The Ambivalence of Technology*, Feenberg examines Karl Marx's critiques of technology and its use in capitalism and states the following:

> Marx would have attacked the ends technology serves under
> capitalism, while suspending judgment on the means. This is a
> theory of the "innocence" of technology which, as an ensemble
> of tools available for any use whatsoever, cannot be blamed for
> the particular uses to which it is put. (Feenberg, 1990, p36)

This highlights that technology induces change not by merely existing, but when it is put to use — what that change is will depend on the use to which it is applied. As such, technological advances bring about new potential ways to benefit the human race as a whole, but under a capitalist system, that potential is not realised. Instead, technology is used to facilitate "the production of luxuries and war" (Feenberg, 1990, p37).

Feenberg's work exploring the relationship between functions and meanings of technology further demonstrates its ambivalence. Feenberg states that "To recognize a function is already an interpretive act. A hammer is useful only insofar as it is recognized as such" (Feenberg, 2012, p2). To expand on this analogy, a hammer will not drive nails into wood until its potential to serve that function is recognized and subsequently applied. Likewise, an instance of digital technology serves no function unless it is applied with the intention of achieving certain means. To illustrate this, Feenberg presents a brief history of the Internet and highlights how different usage of the same technology can serve very different functions.

> Sociability was not in the original plans of the Internet's military sponsors. It was intended to solve technical problems in time sharing on mainframe computers and to transmit official information between the government and contractors on university campuses. […] But early in its history a junior engineer placed a small email program on the system and soon human communication became one of its most important features. His intervention responded to an interpretation of the system different from that of the military. He looked beyond its use for efficiently distributing computer time to its communicative potential. (Feenberg, 2012, p10)

The technology that started connecting computers was developed and applied to serve the function of transmitting and receiving official information — it was not

initially intended to facilitate new social and cultural means of global communication. However, in creating the first email program, an engineer made use of the existing technology used to share information, only in a more personal context. Using that technology in that way was the starting point of the Internet as we know it today. This supports Stocchetti's assertion that the application and use of a given technology is crucial in studies of digital transformation, more so than the technology itself (Stocchetti, 2016, p18). The process of computers sharing data has no base for a critical study because it is devoid of social and cultural context. What that information is and how people engage with that act of sharing — in other words, how the technology is being used — is far more relevant.

Technology alone did not birth the Internet — it was the way in which someone decided to apply that technology that revolutionised global communication. Similarly, technology alone has not changed publishing or storytelling because technology without application serves no function — only when its potential to bring about change is recognised and realised does digital technology serve a discernible function within society or a given cultural field.

In his examination of meaning and function, Feenberg notes that the "mediating role [of technology] is not, however, transparent. For a connection to be made a context must be supplied. That context positions the users to take specific types of initiatives [...]" (Feenberg, 2012, p10). Because the two "mediators" of Amazon and Patreon function in different ways, it is reasonable to predict the behaviour of their writers and audiences — Feenberg's "users" — will differ. As such, differences in the social and cultural processes surrounding these platforms are also likely to occur. Thus, Amazon and Patreon will each present a different case for supporting literary pluralism.

2.4 The role of digital platforms in storytelling

Having explored the idea of technological ambivalence, I will now introduce Amazon and Patreon as digital publishing platforms, touching on characteristics which may have an impact on literary pluralism. The aim here is to outline the corporate and cultural practices surrounding these publishing platforms in order to lay the foundation for deeper understanding to be gained from the primary research part of this thesis, in which digital platform users will be the main focus.

In *The New Media Monopoly*, Bagdikian writes:

> If the dominant media corporations behaved in accordance with classical capitalist dogma, each would experiment to create its own unique product. In the media world, product means news, entertainment, and political programs that reflect the widely different tastes, backgrounds, and activities of the American population. (Bagdikian, 2004, p6)

The online platforms I will explore do not act in accordance to the traditional capitalist practices to which Bagdikan refers. Amazon, Patreon and other channels that can be used to distribute books do not create their own products. Instead, they have built services that profit from allowing self-publishers to sell their own products. This is an example of how digital technologies can be used to serve capitalist means as discussed by Feenberg, presented in the Ambivalence of technology chapter of this thesis. (Feenberg, 1990, p36-37). As Bagdikian points out, capitalist practices in digital media cater to a variety of tastes (Bagdikian, 2004, p6). I will now explore the impact that Amazon and Patreon have on literary pluralism, comparing and contrasting how their different models operate.

2.4.1 Introducing Amazon

Jeff Bezos is a Princeton graduate with several years' experience in Wall Street and tech companies. Before founding Amazon in 1995, Bezos was making a strong impression on his peers with his intelligence, determination and analytical thinking. (Stone, 2013, p19). The company started out as an online bookstore and grew to become the global online mega-retailer it is today. The rapid growth and current scale of Amazon as an entity is encapsulated in this paragraph from *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon*:

> Beginning in 2009, as the fog of the economic crisis lifted, Amazon's quarterly growth rate returned to its pre-recession levels, and over the next two years, the stock climbed 236 percent. [...] For the first time, Amazon was spoken in the same breath as Google and Apple - not as an afterthought, but as an equal. It had blasted off into high orbit. (Stone, 2013)

Today in 2019, ten years later, Amazon is ranked number five in the Fortune 500 list with a market value of $874,709.5 million (Fortune 500, 2019). While Amazon now retails a wide variety of products, it has grown to become a dominant player of the market in which it started: its range of Kindle e-readers launched with the first device in 2007, and by 2014, almost two-thirds of all e-books sold were bought through Amazon (Wasserman, 2014, p6). In the same year, Amazon held a 40 percent share of all new books sold (Wasserman, 2014, p6).

As one of the largest corporations in the world, Amazon enjoys a large market share of the digital self-publishing industry. Regarding its impact on the self-publishing industry, there is debate among writers, publishers and other industry players as to whether that impact is, overall, a positive or a negative one.

In her article *Authors who Love Amazon*, Alana Semuels - a staff writer at *The Atlantic* - discusses how Amazon has given more opportunities for writers to

publish their work in an industry where an extremely small minority can do so by traditional means. The article draws attention to an e-book subscription service provided by Amazon called Kindle Unlimited. Semuels writes that the nature of the service makes customers feel like they can read books for free, given that they can essentially read as many books as they wish for a flat monthly fee. This, Semuels argues, is valuable for independent authors because it means that customers who would not purchase a book outright may be more inclined to read it if they have already paid a monthly subscription fee (Semuels, 2018).

Semuels goes on to balance her argument by discussing the apparent drawbacks of the Kindle Unlimited service, most notably of which is that Amazon demands exclusivity for any e-book enrolled into the Kindle Unlimited program. By demanding exclusivity to works featured on the Kindle Unlimited service, Amazon is limiting the outlets through which an e-book is available. This runs counter to the idea that pluralism is inherently concerned with variety (Jordan, 1990, p286). This suggests that pluralism can be highly subjective even when explored within one industry or discipline, because while readers might experience literary pluralism by using the Kindle Unlimited service, the writers of those books are simultaneously denied the ability to distribute their works through other means and reach different audiences.

Amazon's Kindle Unlimited service is potentially damaging to literary pluralism in another way. Semuels paraphrases Mark Coker, CEO of Smashwords, who points out that "the Unlimited model is training people to read books for what feels like free," (Coker, cited in Semuels, 2018). The argument here is that this kind of subscription model is damaging for the industry in the long run. Although it is unsurprising that Amazon would be criticized by one of its competitors, Coker's argument certainly brings to light a valid consideration about shaping the market. On the topic of market segmentation, Doyle states that it is possible to manipulate consumer demand to favour a product that a media firm wants to supply (Galbraith, cited in Doyle, 2013, p84). By providing access to books at low prices, it can be argued that Amazon are shaping demand in a way that consumers

become more accustomed to paying less. Literary pluralism could then suffer in the long run if would-be writers believe they would not be fairly compensated for their work.

By discussing both the apparent pros and cons of publishing through Amazon, Semuels makes an attempt at a balanced argument. However, the article uses a few select success-stories to argue those pros, and while these are certainly valid for exploring Amazon's potential as a tool for achieving such success, the article neglects the vast majority of today's Amazon writers who fail to achieve the high level of readership and revenue that the article celebrates. A counter-argument to Semules' article is presented in a reader's response by Douglas Preston, a member of The Authors Guild Council. Preston writes: "There are apparently more than 3 million self-published titles up at Amazon, and the majority, by my estimate, make very little money," (Preston, 2018). If "making little money" equates to low numbers in sales, this would suggest low levels of consumption for a vast majority of work published on Amazon, pointing to weak support for literary pluralism.

Amazon's ever-increasing prominence is presented as damaging to the wider publishing industry in a 2014 article called *Amazon Unbound*. The article, featured in *The Nation* magazine, describes the negative impact that Amazon's market dominance has on traditional publishers. It draws attention to multiple examples of "cut-throat" business practices, like organised efforts to force concessions from small publishers. In seeking more profitable agreements, Amazon have also used ransom tactics in their dealings with the publisher Hachette and Warner Bros. Studio buy refusing to sell titles or accept movie pre-orders respectively (Wasserman, 2014, p8). "Today, Amazon so dominates the marketplace that it feels free to bulldoze the competition," the article reads, "dictating terms to suppliers and customers alike" (Wasserman, 2014, p8). This supports the claim that the largest publishing companies are free to dictate terms and still be a popular choice for writers because smaller publishing companies cannot offer the same advantages (Greve and Song, 2017, p7).

Amazon is not a creator of unique products - for independent publishers, Amazon offers access to the massive user base of buyers it has accrued. Having one mega-corporate entity act as the gatekeeper for so many voices is troubling for bibliodiversity: "With respect to publishing and bookselling, Amazon is increasingly a vertically integrated company, at once a bookseller, a reviewer, even a publisher, and as such it poses a uniquely disturbing threat." (Wasserman, 2014, p6). This is aligned with Hawthorne's argument discussed earlier in this thesis: in her advocacy of literary pluralism, Hawthorne claims that Amazon is the biggest culprit of the appropriation of the self-publishing industry (Hawthorne, 2014, p55).

It is clear that the Wasserman, Hawthorne and Preston are concerned with the long-term damage that Amazon could inflict on the industry. In brief, they argue that low-prices, non-negotiable terms and highly competitive business practices are detrimental to healthy consumer habits, writers' income and the niche voices' freedom from appropriation. On the other hand, Semuels summarises the argument that, by providing a variety of tools and access to a huge customer base, Amazon offers more opportunity to self-publishers to find readerships for their work. These arguments present conflicting cases for Amazon and literary pluralism and will be explored further in the research phase of this thesis.

2.4.2 Introducing Patreon

Patreon is a membership platform for building and cultivating a base of fans — or "patrons" — who pay for access to an artist or content creator's work. Patreon was co-founded in 2013 by musician Jack Cote and his roommate Sam Yam. Cote saw a problem in that millions of people were engaging with his videos on YouTube, but he was only earning a couple of hundred dollars a month from the service. Seeking to tackle this disparity between the amount that content is consumed and the amount of money that is earned, Patreon was launched with the aim of paying creators a fair amount for their work.

A user can make a Patreon account and use the service for free. They then have access to a number of tools to set up a page that fans can visit, and post and communicate with their patrons. There are currently three plans that a creator can choose from: Lite, Pro and Premium, respectively costing five, eight and twelve percent of the creator's monthly income.

Creators can charge their patrons in two different ways: monthly or "per creation". Payment tiers can be utilised for either option, where higher paying patrons can have access to more content that lower-priced tiers. The content creator decides the type of content that different tiers of patrons have access to.

The flexibility of the Patreon platform means that content creators of almost any type can use it to exhibit or distribute their work, including musicians, writers, video makers, and visual artists. Patreon handles the payment management between creators and fans (or "patrons") and deducts a small surcharge for handling the payment of the previously mentioned tiers. Patreon pays its creators monthly to avoid expensive transfer fees. This makes micro-payments possible, enabling creators to set affordable fees.

Patreon is perhaps among the best-known membership platform for creators, though a number of others also exist. Ko-fi is one example, a membership platform that lets fans support content creators by contributing money equal to "the price of coffee" (ko-fi.com, 2019). Such services are valuable as a way for fans to support creators. In a 2017 article in *The New York Times*, Manjoo notes that while large media companies are offering subscription-based services, there are smaller, less mainstream instances of subscription models that are supporting content creators.

> […] the digital economy is finally beginning to coalesce around
> a sustainable way of supporting content. If subscriptions keep
> taking off, it won't just mean that some of your favorite creators

will survive the internet. It could also make for a profound shift
in the way we find and support new cultural talent. It could lead
to a wider variety of artists and art, and forge closer connections
between the people who make art and those who enjoy it.
(Manjoo, 2017)

This is arguably promising for Patreon's case for literary pluralism if the membership platform does indeed turn out to be conducive to a wider variety of art in the field of self-publishing. However, Patreon as a service is not purposefully designed for the dissemination of literature – it offers the same set of tools for any type of content creator, whether they are a writer, video maker, musician or graphic designer. Furthermore, Patreon lacks a storefront where potential customers can browse.

The lack of a store-front in Patreon is not unintentional – it is a key characteristic of how Patreon functions as a membership platform, and the company posted a blog post in February 2019 addressing this very issue. The post was in response to a common question that Patreon had been receiving from its creators: why does Patreon not help me to grow my audience? The post states that Patreon is a membership platform, not a discovery platform, and explains that the two serve different purposes: discovery platforms such as Facebook and YouTube help creators grow their fanbase by helping people discover content they might be interested in, whereas a membership platform exists to connect a creator with an existing fanbase (Jenkins, 2019). The post also claims that if Patreon were to shift focus toward discovery, that would position them between creators and audiences, going on to say that "[…] Patreon's membership platform nurtures unique relationships between creators and their biggest fans. We simply aim to connect creators to patrons, and let creators drive the relationship." (Jenkins, 2019) This is in stark contrast to Amazon which acts as a store, and therefore a discovery platform.

Regarding Patreon's position as a membership platform, there are some parallels that can be drawn with crowdfunding and fan theory. Patreon is described by Forbes as a "membership platform that allows creators of all stripes to leverage their communities into paying subscribers" (Orsini, 2017). At its core, a membership platform allows a creator to seek funds from a community or fanbase. It is this same foundation which serves the phenomena of crowdfunding. Reporting on Patreon's micro-economy of erotic modelling, a 2017 article on *theverge.com* does exactly that in its definition of the service, but it also draws attention to its subscription-based payment method which sets it apart:

> Launched in May 2013, Patreon is a relatively new entry in the crowdfunding universe. Rather than relying on reaching individual fundraising goals, like Kickstarter and Indiegogo, Patreon functions as more of a long-term income source, with patrons typically agreeing to an ongoing monthly donation schedule. (Plaugic, 2017)

To identify the common grounds between Patreon and crowdfunding, we can contrast this definition of Patreon with that of the general digital crowdfunding phenomena: in *Financing by and for the Masses*, L. Fleming and O. Sorenson define crowdfunding thus: "internet-based marketplaces that connect those seeking funds with hundreds if not thousands of supporters, each generally providing only a small fraction of the total required or desired" (Fleming and Sorenson, 2016, p6). In this light, an examination of Patreon through the lens of crowdfunding would certainly seem valid, because at its core, it is a means to seek funds from the supporting masses. In this case, "the masses" are simply fans of a pre-existing — yet continually growing — project or body of work.

While there are vast bodies of work around digital crowdfunding, membership platforms have yet to receive the same level of academic attention. Given that membership platforms have characteristics in common with crowdfunding, I will refer to work on crowdfunding to assess Patreon's case for literary pluralism.

In *Crowdfunding: A Spimatic application of digital fandom*, Booth utilises the "spime" to examine fan engagement in crowdfunding campaigns as they exist in various forms throughout their lifespans. A spime is a technosocial concept coined by Bruce Sterling that incorporates space and time (Sterling, 2005, cited in Booth, 2015, p150). In his paper, Booth looks at the relationship of fan studies and the technology used in digital crowdfunding efforts, drawing attention to the relevance of human emotion: "Fandom is an inherently emotional experience; digital technology can facilitate and channel that emotion into new avenues" (Booth, 2015, p162). Membership platforms, designed to bring together fans of art and the creators of that art, are one such type of avenue.

Both crowdfunding and membership platforms are ways of appealing to the masses for monetary support, and so they both have the potential to make those appeals in a way that emotionally resonates with fans (Booth, 2015, p162). In order to further assess the implications of fan practices for literary pluralism, I will refer to *Digital Fandom: Mediation, Remediation, and Demediation of Fan Practices* (Lanier and Fowler, 2013, pp. 284-295).

Lanier and Fowler explore how fandom practices have changed with the emergence of digital technologies, noting that "nowhere is the rebellious, affective, and creative nature of fans more prevalent than in the digital realm" (Lanier and Fowler, 2013, p284). They go on to point out that while the positive implications of digital transformation are plentiful, so too are the negatives.

> Despite the hype over the digital revolution and the temptation
> to view these changes positively (Negroponte 1995), both fans
> and scholars view this technology somewhat ambivalently by
> arguing that digital fandom is both empowering and
> disempowering, personal and impersonal, and inclusive and
> exclusive. (Lanier and Fowler, 2013, p287)

This dichotomy of positives and negatives present in digital fandom supports the notion of technological ambivalence discussed earlier in this thesis, particularly the "innocence" of technology to which Feenberg refers (Feenberg, 1990, p36). Because the ambivalence of technology is evident within the landscape of digital fandom, it can be inferred that it is the way in which content creators and fans engage with content on Patreon that will impact the platform's case literary pluralism, more so than the existence of Patreon itself.

One particular benefit that digital transformation brings to fandom is typical of the role of digital technology – improved accessibility via the internet. What this means for fandom is that more fans can find and engage with a fanbase, and as a result, fan-based content can be disseminated across that expanded reach of people. "Digital technology, including the Internet, has vastly increased the tools and spaces for fan creation, as well as the amount of information available to fans and its means of its distribution" (Lanier and Fowler, 2013, p284). As a membership platform that gives creators a space to cultivate their fanbase – or at least a portion of it – into paying subscribers, Patreon is one such tool. Similar membership platforms include Ko-fi, Liberpay and Tipee, but these are more focused around the concept of tipping or donating to a content creator. Patreon is perhaps the only major membership platforms that focuses on turning fans into regularly paying subscribers. To support this function, Patreon features plugins for other platforms, giving users the option to integrate their Patreon page with other web services including WordPress, Discord, Mailchimp, YouTube and Google Analytics. These integrations open up many possibilities for engaging with their online following in different ways, such as emailing their patrons, adding "become a Patron" button to their website, monitoring traffic to their Patreon page, and more.

This is significant for assessing Patreon's case for literary pluralism because it suggests that the results will be largely dependent on the individual self-publisher's broader online activities. Unlike Amazon and other discovery platforms, Patreon does not put any content on display for potential buyers to

browse – it falls to the self-publisher to attract readers through other means and channels that they decide are suitable. If a self-publisher were to market their presence on Patreon to potential new audiences, they could increase their readership with those who want to engage with their content a way that Patreon offers. If, however, the use of Patreon only becomes one additional platform that a pre-existing, cross-platform reader base is made aware of, this is unlikely to promote literary pluralism. In that scenario, the voice of the self-publisher is not reaching new readers, and equally, potential readers are denied the opportunity to discover that new voice.

2.4.3   Summarising the platforms' potential impact on literary pluralism

Amazon and Patreon operate in very different ways: Amazon offers a discovery platform for buying and selling books, whereas Patreon is a membership platform, intended to nurture relations with an existing audience. Amazon's bookstore is purpose-built for the uploading, selling, promoting and reviewing of books, whereas Patreon's collection of tools is intended to have something for every type of digital content creator. The question of literary pluralism surrounding these platforms is also different. There is enough information to put forward a balanced argument for Amazon's impact on literary pluralism today. The future of literary pluralism with Amazon dominating the publishing landscape, however, is unclear. The long-term effect of a consumer demand shifted toward cheaper books is unknown.

Whereas Amazon's impact on literary pluralism today can be argued, there is not enough information on Patreon to do the same. In looking at Lanier and Fowler's work on digital fandom, we can determine that Patreon embodies traits that are typical of digital fandom: increased reach of content, increased opportunities to access that content, and cross-platform distribution efforts (Lanier and Fowler, 2013, p284, p288). As characteristics of a digital platform, they are potentially conducive of literary pluralism. However, while Patreon offers the tools to nurture and potentially grow a producer-centric fan base, it falls to the self-publisher to

effectively utilise those tools to do so. This reflects the notion of technological ambivalence explored earlier in this thesis, specifically, Feenberg's assertion that a set of tools cannot be held accountable for any actions to which they are applied (Feenberg, 1990, p36). In the case of Patreon, it is the self-publisher's responsibility to put those tools to use, and so the impact that Patreon has on literary pluralism can be assessed only by studying the users of Patreon itself.

3   METHOD

3.1   The research problem

In part two of this thesis, I argued that literary pluralism is important for the richness of culture. This is because narratives are a device that we as people use to organise meaning in "lived time" (Bruner, 2004, p692), so a multiplicity of available narratives enables a construction of reality that is richer in meaning. As such, the general topic this thesis is that of literary pluralism. To specifically investigate this topic in relation to today's publishing landscape brings us to the more specific social problem, which is that of literary pluralism in the digital age. Digital transformation changes the practices and processes of an industry – therefore, it is vital that we build an understanding of how digital technology has shaped the cultural practise of publishing in order to asses any potential impact or change in literary pluralism.

It is impossible to measure literary pluralism as a whole, especially in the scope of a single thesis. Because of this, the narrower research problem I shall address here is the role of digital self-publishing platforms in today's publishing landscape. One key change in the publishing landscape brought about by digital transformation is that technical barriers of entry have been lowered (Doyle, 2012, p38), enabling independent writers – or "smaller players" – to engage with publishing practices (Hawthorne, 2014, p51). This means that digital publishing platforms and their users must play a key role in shaping literary pluralism and are, therefore, the focus of my primary research.

I will use Patreon as my case study because little academic attention has been given to digital membership platforms. Furthermore, a preliminary check of independent writers' Patreon pages showed that they often promote other channels that they use for distribution, suggesting that independent writers on Patreon use the service in conjunction with others. Because of this, interviewing

Patreon users gave me insight into a number of different digital platforms and publishing channels.

In order to address the research problem of digital publishing platforms, my research was designed with the following research questions in mind:

- What motivates independent writers to publish on digital platforms?
- What criteria does an independent writer have for choosing a digital platform?
- What practices do independent writers employ to maximise their readership?

My aim was to investigate the writers' relationship with the digital publishing platforms that they use in order to assess the potential impact on literary pluralism as a result of digital transformation of the publishing landscape. I shall explain my research method in-depth.

3.2 The research method

In order to develop an understanding of the cultural practices around publishing on a digital publishing platform, I conducted a qualitative study with a sample of fifteen independent writers who use Patreon to publish their work. The interviews were designed according to a research framework presented in a paper by Kallio et al (2016), wherein they produce a seven-step guide for constructing a semi-structured interview.

To help develop appropriate questions for the semi-structured interviews, I also referred to *A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis* by Srivastava and Hopwood (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p78). The four steps outlined in Srivastava and Hopwood's paper are intended to help researchers better establish the relationship between data and knowledge. I will now explain my research method and framework in detail.

3.2.1 The methodological framework

I used a semi-structured interview guide for conducting my interviews. This guide features set questions that I will ask all participants, and secondary questions that I will use if the interviewee responds positively or demonstrates knowledge of particular topic areas. This guide was formulated by following the interview guide development process outlined in *Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide* (Kallio et al, 2016).

The paper, by Kallio et al, seeks to systematise the process of developing a semi-structured interview guide (Kallio et al, 2016). By examining a number of studies that use the semi-structured interview method, Kallio et al identify and define the seven steps of developing a semi-structured interview guide and producing the results. Those steps are as follows:

1) Identifying the prerequisites for using a semi-structured interview
   - The aim of this phase is to evaluate the appropriateness of the semi-structured interview as a rigorous data collection method in relation to the selected research question(s).
2) Retrieving and using previous knowledge
   - The aim of this phase is to gain a comprehensive and adequate understanding of the subject, which required critical appraisal of previous knowledge and the possible need for complementary empirical knowledge.
3) Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide
   - The aim of this phase is to formulate an interview guide as a tool for interview data collection, using previous knowledge on structural, logical and coherent forms.
4) Pilot test the guide
   - The aim of this phase is to confirm the coverage and relevance of the content of the formulated, preliminary guide and to identify the possible need to reformulate questions and to test implementation of it.

5) Presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide

- The aim is to produce a clear, finished and logical semi-structured interview guide for data collection.

6) Analyse the collected data

7) Present the findings

To help ensure that my semi-structured interview was designed to collect relevant data, I have also referred to *A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis* by Srivastava and Hopwood (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p78). The four steps outlined in this paper help the researcher to better understand the type of study they are conducting and identify the relation between the collected data and the knowledge that is sought. By considering these steps while designing a semi-structured interview in accordance to Kallio's framework, I was able to choose interview questions that collected the data relevant to this study and analyse that data effectively.

**Kallio's process of developing a
semi-structured interview**

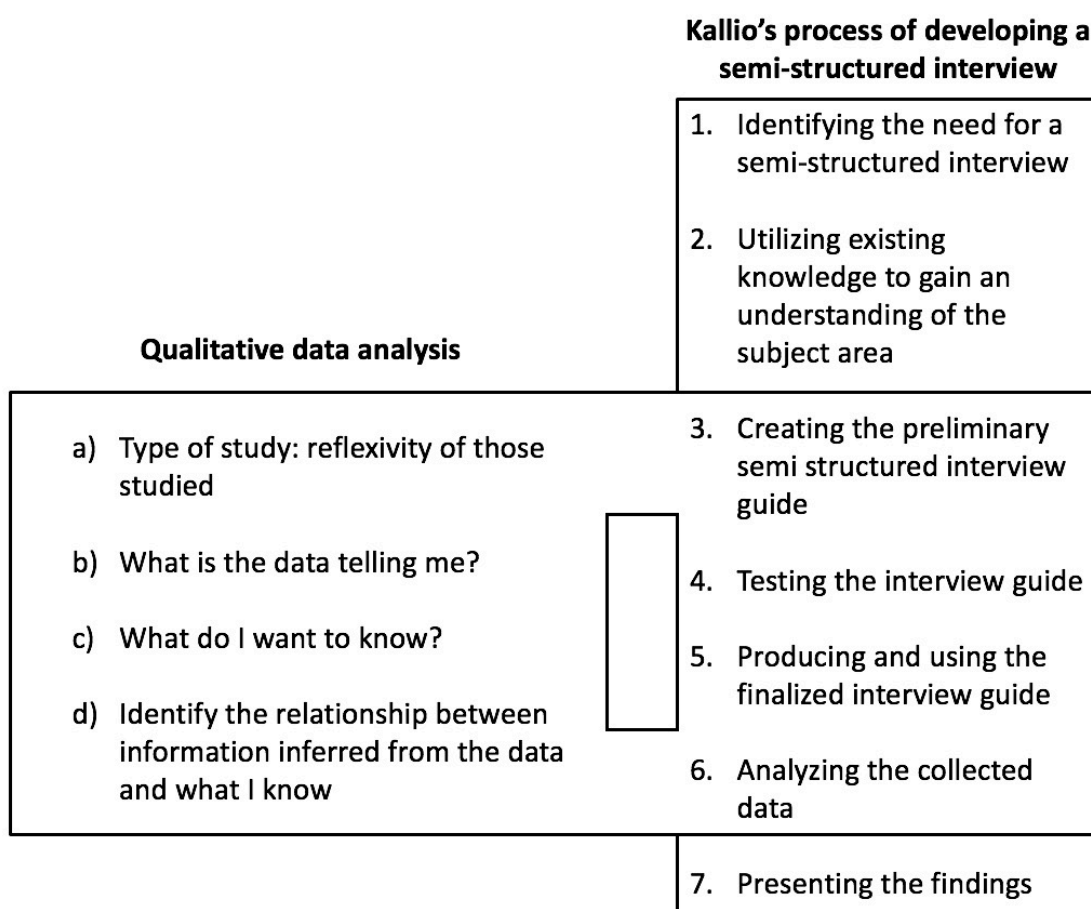| Qualitative data analysis	
	1. Identifying the need for a semi-structured interview
	2. Utilizing existing knowledge to gain an understanding of the subject area
a) Type of study: reflexivity of those studied	3. Creating the preliminary semi structured interview guide
b) What is the data telling me?	4. Testing the interview guide
c) What do I want to know?	5. Producing and using the finalized interview guide
d) Identify the relationship between information inferred from the data and what I know	6. Analyzing the collected data
	7. Presenting the findings

Figure 1: A diagram of my methodology incorporating Kallio's process of developing a semi-structured interview with a framework for analysing qualitative data.

This diagram illustrates my framework – it has been constructed using the seven-step guide presented in a research paper by Kallio et al and the four steps of qualitative data analysis presented by Srivastava and Hopwood. I will now discuss each of these steps in detail and how I applied them to design my semi-structured interview.

3.2.2 Step 1: Identifying the prerequisites for using a semi-structured

To look at independent writers who use Patreon is to look at a relatively specific group, and as such, a diverse sample of candidates could not be found in one immediate location. Contacting and interviewing people online is therefore useful because it removes geographical restrictions, helping to keep the criteria more focussed on independent writers who use Patreon.

A written questionnaire was considered as possible way of collecting data from respondents – questionnaires can be sent electronically and can be completed at a time that is suitable for the respondent. While survey methodology can be applied to obtain data from a given segment according to the needs of the researcher (Czajaa and Blair, 2005, p4), the rigidity of a survey's structure would limit the respondents' scope of answers. This could be overcome with the use of open-ended questions, because a range of potential answers are not offered in an open-ended question itself (Brace, 2008, p46). However, the one-way nature of the survey means that the researcher cannot invite the respondent to further elaborate on a particular area of their answer. Because of these limitations, the possibility of a semi-structured interview method was explored.

In their paper, Kallio et al identify two general scenarios for which the semi-structured interview is suitable:

- Studying people's perceptions and opinions or complex (Barriball and While, 1994, cited in Kallio et al, 2016) or emotionally sensitive issues (Barriball and While, 1994; Astedt-Kurki and Heikkinen, 1994, cited in Kallio et al, 2016).
- When participants have a low level of awareness of the subject or when there are issues that participants are not used to talking about, such as values, intentions and ideals.

This study falls into the first of these two categories: in order to explore the Patreon's cultural practices and their effects on literary pluralism, the perceptions and opinions of writers who use the platform in relation to their work must be examined. Furthermore, interviews allow for "spontaneous questions" which are often used to measure the attitudes toward a product or certain activity (Brace, 2008, p48).

A semi-structured interview allowed me to collect rich data because it allowed the participants to openly discuss their experience with Patreon, their reasons for using the platform, and their thoughts on other publishing services they have used. The questions were designed to collect relevant data that, when analysed, provided insight into their cultural practices in using Patreon.

3.2.3   Step 2: Retrieving and using previous knowledge

In this stage, the researcher seeks to gain a strong knowledge base of the subject with which they are dealing. Kallio et al writes that the knowledge gained at this stage will greatly determine the framework of the interview.

I have conducted background research on the importance of narrative in the construction of reality and the importance of literary pluralism for a rich culture. I have also researched technological ambivalence and, having identified the need to focus digital platforms, conducted an initial investigation of Patreon and Amazon to understand the services and features they offer their users. These findings were presented in the previous chapters of the thesis, thus fulfilling the requirements of this step of the framework set out by Kallio et al.

3.2.4   Step 3: Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide

This stage requires that I use existing knowledge of my subject area and data collection to formulate the preliminary semi-structured interview guide. In this step, I will also refer to *A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis* (Kallio et al, 2016). While this is covered in more detail in Step 6 — the analysis phase — it is important to refer to this when designing the interview guide. This is because it will help ensure that interview guide is well-designed for collecting relevant data that can be analysed in a way that is effective in addressing my research questions.

The qualitative data analysis framework can be summarised in four parts:

A. Identify the type of study

B. What is the data telling me?

C. What do I want to know?

D. What is the relationship between what the data is telling me and what I want to know?

Parts B and D are to be considered when the data is collected – these stages are covered in more detail later on where I discuss the application of Step 6 of Kallio et al's framework. For Step 3 – where the preliminary semi-structured interview guide is formulated – Parts A and C are particularly relevant, since they will help to design questions that will collect relevant data.

Part A requires that the researcher to identify the type of study they are conducting. The three types offered by Srivastava and Hopwood are "self-reflexivity", "reflexivity about those studied" and "reflexivity about the audience" (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p78). This type of study can be considered as "reflexivity of those studied" because it examines how a third-party group of subjects as opposed to myself or an audience to something that I have presented. Part C requires that the researcher identifies what they want to know. This is outlined in the research problem chapter of my thesis: in order to gain an understanding of literary pluralism in the digital age, an examination of cultural practices and digital publishing platforms is necessary. The semi-structured interview guide was developed to address the specific research problem of the role of digital platforms, with the broader social problem of literary pluralism in mind.

The paper by Kallio et al examined numerous studies which used semi-structured interviews as the research method. One observation made was the two main types of questions:

A semi-structured interview guide consisted of two levels of questions: main themes and follow-up questions. The main themes covered the main content of the research subject and

within them participants were encouraged to speak freely about
their perceptions and experiences. (Kallio et al, 2016, p7)

My "main theme" questions will centre around the following points:

Main theme question	Relation to research question
Can you talk about your background and your experience with independent writing and publishing?	Sets a conversational tone for the interview. The interviewee's background and experience in the field will be considered along with their insight to help identify patterns with their frustrations and successes.
Why and when did you start to use Patreon?	Identifying what feature of the tool appealed to them in the first place is a valuable indicator of what they were initially looking for and whether this expectation was met.
What other channels have you used for distribution?	Broader insight into the interviewee's writing and publishing experience is gained. This will also enable comparisons with other channels/services.
What benefits does Patreon offer you (compared to other services)?	Invites the subject to describe what about Patreon works for them. Where applicable, the question will be expanded to ask them to compare those benefits with those of other distribution services or methods they have previously discussed.
Is there something about Patreon that does not work for you, or something it is lacking?	This asks the interviewee to consider where Patreon is falling short for their individual expectations and/or needs. By asking how they might address this, deeper insight into the root of the frustration might be attained.

Table 1: Initial main theme questions and their relation to the study

In addition to the main theme questions, Kallio et al identify the second type of question as "follow-up" questions which can be pre-designed or spontaneous (Whiting, 2008; Rabionet, 2011, cited in Kallio et al, 2016).

My pre-designed follow-up questions are as follows:

Follow-up questions	Relation to research question

Invite interviewee to further discuss current services they use or services they might use in the future.	Many Patreon artists of other mediums — particularly video — use Patreon in conjunction with other service, e.g., YouTube. If this is true of independent publishers, the benefit of using multiple distribution channels should be explored.
Invite interviewee to discuss the number of patrons and monthly income from Patreon.	Some writers may consider these as KPI (key performance indicators) of their success. Also opens discussion as to whether any particular activity or inactivity is perceived to have affected these.
Ask the interviewee how much of their time they spend writing, and where applicable, how much of that time is allotted to work that is disseminated through Patreon.	When cross-referenced with KPIs, analysis may show correlation between amount of work and level of success.

Table 2: Initial follow-up questions and their relation to the study

3.2.5 Step 4: Pilot test the guide

To ensure that the interview guide is sufficiently structured to cover the topic areas, the guide must be piloted. Kallio et al identifies three different types of testing: internal testing, expert assessment and field-testing (Kallio et al, 2016, p7).

The initial interview guide was tested on the three independent writers who use the Patreon platform, constituting what Kallio refers to as field-testing. At the end of the first interview, I spontaneously asked the interviewee if they had any open thoughts on Patreon or self-publishing in general. This allowed the interviewee to discuss thoughts that I might not have steered them towards in my previous question. I incorporated this question into the interviews of the following two test interviews. Again, I found that it allowed the interviewees space to think about their self-publishing experiences in a broader sense without being steered by the wording of a question. Since this proved to obtain valuable data, I added this question to my list of core questions.

3.2.6 Step 5: Presenting the complete semi-structured guide

After piloting the test guide, one additional core question was added.

Main theme question	Relation to research question
Can you talk about your background and your experience with independent writing and publishing?	Sets a conversational tone for the interview. The interviewee's background and experience in the field will be considered along with their insight to help identify patterns with their frustrations and successes.
Why and when did you start to use Patreon?	Identifying what feature of the tool appealed to them in the first place is a valuable indicator of what they were initially looking for and whether this expectation was met.
What other channels have you used for distribution?	Broader insight into the interviewee's writing and publishing experience is gained. This will also enable comparisons with other channels/services.
What benefits does Patreon offer you (compared to other services)?	Invites the subject to describe what about Patreon works for them. Where applicable, the question will be expanded to ask them to compare those benefits with those of other distribution services or methods they have previously discussed.
Is there something about Patreon that does not work for you, or something it is lacking?	This asks the interviewee to consider where Patreon is falling short for their individual expectations and/or needs. By asking how they might address this, deeper insight into the root of the frustration might be attained.
Do you have any open thoughts or comments on Patreon or the self-publishing industry as a whole?	This allows the interviewee space to comment on aspects of Patreon or self-publishing that the previous questions might not have covered.

Table 3: Final set of main theme interview questions

All three test interviews were consistent in their semi-structure and core questions. Since the proceeding interviews would now follow this guide, the findings from the test interviews are valid. These interviews and their data were admitted into the study.

With my semi-structured interview guide piloted and complete, I continued to interview people from my target group. Patreon users eligible for the study were

found using graphtreon.com, a website that ranks Patreon users according by their monthly income and number of patrons. From the category of Writing, 43 Patreon users of various income levels were contacted. Of those 43 writers, 15 responded and were willing to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in an online audio-only call using a calling service or software of the interviewees' choosing.

3.2.7 Steps 6 and 7: Analysing the collected data and presenting the findings

Step 6 of Kallio et al's framework is to analyse the collected data. Here, I return to Srivastava's and Hopwood's analysis framework to effectively analyse the collected data.

A. Type of study: reflexivity of those studied
B. What is the data telling me?
C. What do I want to know?
D. What is the relationship between what the data is telling me and what I want to know?

Having analysed the collected data, this paper will conclude with my presented findings, constituting the final steps of Kallio et al's framework. Throughout the analysis process, I will consider points B, C and D of Srivastava's and Hopwood's analysis framework to ensure that the presented findings are concise and accurate (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009, p78).

3.3 Ethics review, Data Privacy and Informed Consent

All research subjects were contacted via online channels that were made public on their Patreon page or website. Dialogue was engaged with all research subjects prior to the interview where the subjects could ask questions about the nature of the study. All research subjects were made aware that the interview was to be recorded prior to the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the

interviewees were all read the same passage that outlined the nature of the study and the purpose for data collection. All interviewees were asked to consent to or confirm the following on record:

- The interviewee consents to proceed with the interview
- The interviewee gives consent that the interview can be recorded
- The interviewee confirms the name by which they want to be referred to in the study, or states if they prefer to remain anonymous

All interviewees in this study are referred to by a name which they have given consent to be used.

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the cultural practices that occur when an independent writer uses Patreon to publish their work, and then utilize that understanding to assess how those practices affect literary pluralism in the broader publishing landscape. To do this, a semi-structured interview was conducted with fifteen independent writers who use Patreon. I will first briefly introduce the interviewees with some information about their background and experience in writing and publishing. I will then present the findings according to key topic areas along with their analyses.

4.1 The interviewees

Felix Trench is primarily an actor. Their website, felixtrench.com, features a portfolio of their professional work in advertising and British television dramas. They started writing between five and six years before the time of the interview. Anything they write is created with performance in mind. Felix was not actively uploading work to Patreon around the time of the interview.

Terra Roam has been travelling non-stop for around 30 years. Their exploits have been the subject of articles by the Daily Telegraph, Red Bull, Lonely Planet and a number of travel blogs and new sources. Having collected emails and written correspondence sent and received over the past 26 years of travelling, Terra Roam is planning to compile these into a book.

Cecilie K has been publishing poetry online since their teenage years. Their work has been featured in various online magazines in the past three or four years.

Jeff Coleman is a self-published author who used Amazon for the first time in 2013 to distribute their work. Today, Jeff aims to produce a story once a month. Jeff posts flash-fiction on their Patreon account that they started in 2016.

Leenie Brown started self-publishing around four years prior to the interview. To date, Leenie has written 34 novellas. Leenie work mainly consists of Jane Austen fanfiction and Regency romance stories. Their work can be found at leeniebrown.com.

Joshua Ellis is a Pulitzer-nominated writer who works as a full-stack web programmer. His work has been featured in *Mondo 2000* and *The Huffington Post*. Joshua writes independently writing focuses on the topics of climate, culture and technology.

TowerCurator started writing online in 2015. They predominantly write fantasy fiction. TowerCurator's work can be accessed for free on their own website towercurator.wordpress.com and the story sharing website royalroad.com.

Claire Watts has been an editor of children's fiction for almost 30 years having started in children's non-fiction. They became self-employed and continued to write non-fiction and edit non-fiction on a freelance basis. Around 2013, Claire Watts tried writing fiction. Unsuccessful in their attempts to get their work traditionally published, Claire started self-publishing.

Steve Hamaker has been a professional comic book colourist for almost 20 years. Steve started his career in toy design, having worked on toys for famous video game titles including Street Fighter and Sonic the Hedgehog. Steve was later hired by American cartoonist Jeff Smith, creator of the comic book series *Bone*.

Ari Marmell holds a degree in English with a specialty in Creative Writing. Their first professional writing job was for a role-playing game on a freelance basis. Ari Has since worked on tie-in material for the *Magic the Gathering* card game and the *Darksiders* video game. Ari has published books through a publisher, worked with literary agents and has self-published a number of works.

Lucy Mawson holds an undergraduate degree in Urban Planning and an MA in Sociology. After writing a novel in high school, Lucy focused on writing online, before returning their focus to novels. Lucy has self-published 50-60 works online. Lucy feels that self-publishing suits them well because they do not want to have to change their work for a publisher or editor, allowing them the freedom to, for example, write characters that might be homosexual or autistic. Furthermore, Lucy enjoys the marketing aspect of self-publishing.

Bobby Nash first published a piece in 1992, but it wasn't until 2005 that they sold their first novel. Since then, Bobby has worked with predominantly smaller publishers. Bobby has published around 120 stories. Since their first self-published book 2012-13, Bobby has self-published a number of his books after their rights have expired with publishers. Their website can be found at bobby-nash-news.blogspot.com.

Rebecca Milton started writing in fan fiction and text-based massive-multiplayer online games (MMOs). Rebecca completed their first book in 2017 and has participated in National Novel Writing Month for 10 years. Rebecca has not had a traditional job, which has afforded them the time to work on their writing. Rebecca is aiming to publish a poetry book this year, which will be their first publication since their debut novel, *Mundane Magic.*

Aidan Wayne is a writer of queer fiction. Aidan started writing for the online original fanfiction scene – they were encouraged by a peer to submit their work to be published in a fanfiction anthology and was successful. Aidan has since written a number of original novels that they have published via small publishers and self-published channels. Their website can be found at aidanwayne.com/wp.

Jesse Wolfe is a self-published writer of comic books and video comics. With no formal training in writing, Jesse started story writing as a hobby. Jesse plans to take their work in a business direction, having founded their own trademarked

comic publishing company. Their website can be found at www.jwstorytelling.com.

4.2 Income

An appreciation for steady, monthly payments, regardless of the amount, was a relatively consistent sentiment among the interviewees. Six of the fifteen interviewees expressed money, income or financial support as a primary reason for setting up the Patreon account in the first place. Five of these six cited money or income as the primary benefit that Patreon offers them. This suggests that most of those who set up their Patreon account with an aim to earn money have had their expectations met.

One interviewee expressed a need to take a step back from upkeeping their Patreon commitments because of accepting paid work. Steve Hamaker, an experienced comic book artist, was hired by Penguin to illustrate two graphic novels. Because of this, his own graphic novel, Plox, has been put on hold (Hamaker, 2019, line 184). Steve has a Patreon account where readers of Plox can become patrons and support them, but the comic itself is free to view on its own website, plox-comic.com. While four other interviewees reported that they have either stepped back from their Patreon commitments at some point or have stopped actively using the platform, Steve is the only one to have done so citing paid work as the primary reason.

Joshua Ellis describes his Patreon account as a "tip jar" for the writing and commentary they post on their website and social media accounts. When asked about his thoughts on the self-publishing scene, Ellis draws attention to the speed at which they are able to receive funds as an independent writer using his own website.

> When I sell my book I get everything but PayPal's transaction fees. I sell a book for $4.99 and I get like $4.67 like instantly.

> There's been times I've been broke and I literally will go on
> Facebook and say "hey, if five of you buy my book right now I
> can afford to go get dinner", and they do, and it's instant. (Ellis,
> line 561, 2019)

In his interview, Joshua points out that this method earns a higher percentage of a sale and that the money is received quicker when compared with Patreon's payment schedule. As a developer, Joshua has extensive technical experience and while they explain that such a configuration is relatively straightforward, they also concede that the knowledge needed to create it is a considerable technical barrier for many.

Aidan Wayne was the only other interviewee to talk about income in the form of "tips", using the term to describe their lower-level Patreon tier. Aidan is an independent writer who has used a number of platforms, including Ko-fi, a membership platform where people can contribute one-off payments as a "tip" to thank them for their work. In their interview, Aidan draws comparisons between Ko-fi and Patreon:

> So I've had a Ko-fi that people just like "I read this thing. Here
> you go. Here's like $9." I liked it. And that's cool. But Patreon is
> designed to have the creator give something back to the people
> supporting them and that's not necessarily a bad thing. But it
> does mean that you have to continually come with content and
> that's a really easy way to burn out. (Wayne, line 500, 2019)

Aidan's comparison with the two platforms asserts that there is a pressure to create new content when patrons are paying a regular sum, while no such pressure exists in using Ko-fi and its tip-jar style of receiving payments. One other interviewee, Ari Marmell, specifically noted the difficulty in having to keep

producing content to meet their commitment to their patrons (Marmell, line 76, 2019)

4.3 Readership

Four of the fifteen interviewees explicitly expressed that maintaining or building a relationship with their readers was a key motive for starting their Patreon account, with an additional two having started their account to accommodate requests from their readership. Furthermore, eight of the fifteen interviewees stated that a relationship with their audience or engaging with their audience was a key benefit of using Patreon.

Leenie Brown discussed that a portion of their readership is very keen to support her. For example, one of their patrons buys Leenie's work separately despite the fact they already have access to the books as a paying patron.

> I don't know, they're like "well, you know I want to support you," and I even have, you know, a patron who she pays her two dollars a month but she never takes the book, she always goes and buys the book because she wants to support me in any way she can. So I think that's the kind of reader I would hope to come out of this, and I do find that as time goes on, they comment, you comment back - it starts to feel more like a relationship, like you know these people more personally than even like with an email or that sort of thing. (Brown, line 146, 2019)

Leenie is one of three interviewees who said that having friends and/or fans that wanted to support them in their writing was one of the reasons for setting up their Patreon account. Others spoke of their fan base affectionately or appreciatively. For example, Terra Roam refers to their following as "Team Roam". Steve Hamaker noted that they recognise some of their patrons as followers from other channels:

> I felt like it was and it was a lot of people like, you know that I
> recognized from other places like my Facebook page and things
> like that. So yeah, close-knit. I felt like it was a close-knit
> community of my, my peeps. (Hamaker, line 354, 2019)

These results suggest a possible trend where having an existing fanbase is a trigger for an independent writer to set up a Patreon account, as opposed to setting up a Patreon page first and then trying to build a following. This is echoed by TowerCurator who advises that Patreon is best utilised if the writer has an existing fanbase:

> Honestly, if you have quite an expansive community already
> reading your stuff, I think you can do it – I mean, make something
> of it. But otherwise, if you're a brand new writer, and you're just
> starting out, you should definitely not rely on it as a… as anything,
> really – as anything more than a sandwich in your pocket a week
> or something […] (TowerCurator, line 175, 2019)

This is in keeping with what Patreon highlights in their February 2019 blog post where they state that "We simply aim to connect creators to patrons, and let creators drive the relationship" (Jenkins, 2019). Given that half of the interviewees cited fanbase relations as a primary benefit of using the service, it can be inferred that for independent writers, Patreon is somewhat successful in fulfilling their mission statement.

4.4 Discovery features

When asked about what could be added to the Patreon platform that would benefit them, two interviewees described features of a discovery platform. Leenie Brown noted the following regarding Patreon:

> I guess… Patreon isn't necessarily the place that people are
> going to look for a book. It's not as prominent in people's' minds
> as Kindle or Kobo or, you know, whatever bookstore would be.
> So they don't necessarily think of it first. So there's that. There's
> not that built-in marketing I guess that just comes along with
> being part of Amazon, for instance. (Brown, line 268, 2019)

However, Leenie goes on to state that Patreon offers a connection wither their readership that other platforms do not, and for her, that benefit outweighs other considerations (line 274).

TowerCurator was the second and last interviewee to suggest something along the lines of a discovery feature. The interviewee considers an online community called royalroad.com in which they also post their work and considers how a similar open community could work within Patreon. However, the interviewee concedes that it would require ample testing and such a feature may not be suitable for Patreon (TowerCurator, lines 152-164, 2019).

Cecilie K, a self-published poet of four years, identified that Patreon is not a discovery platform and considers this to be a positive.

> I think they have been very clever in how they've done it – they
> aren't a brand, as with, you know, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram
> – they don't put themself forward as selling an ideal of anything
> – they are, they are simply selling themself as a platform. (K, line
> 262, 2019)

Cecilie K was the only interviewee who clearly stated a wish for Patreon not to change. Cecilie has been publishing and sharing their work online since a teenager, making them somewhat of a digital platform native. The interviewee told of their hesitation when initially started their Patreon account as they were not sure how the platform would differ from others used in the past, such as Ko-

Fi. This suggests a link between having a high level of familiarity with online platforms and having managed expectations when trying new ones. However, since the answers from only one research subject point toward this correlation, there is not a broad enough sample to argue that this is a pattern among independent writers.

4.5 Marketing and the absence of gatekeepers

Marketing was one of the most frequently discussed topics among the interviewees, with one stating that it was a part of self-publishing that they enjoy and seven identifying it as a challenge. A lot of this frustration was related to the difficulty of standing out in a crowded marketplace: because more people than ever are now able to publish their own work through digital channels, trying to stand out as a writer and finding a readership is difficult.

Jeff Coleman expressed their frustration thus:

> I think nowadays it's very hard to make money because there's so many people out there doing the same thing and there's so much content available to people […] and I think it's difficult to find, you know a large enough audience to make it a viable business, so that's something I've been struggling with. (Coleman, line 243, 2019)

Here the interviewee highlights the challenge of making money due to the vast number of independent writers publishing online. Claire Watts shared a similar frustration. With almost 30 years of experience editing children's fiction and non-fiction, Claire Watts has witnessed the various shifts and developments in the publishing and self-publishing spaces as digital technologies have become increasingly prominent. The interviewee identifies the need for self-promotional marketing in order to sell their material and admits that this is something they struggle with. After being asked to elaborate on this, the interviewee responded:

> I find it very difficult to imagine what I could tell somebody that
> would make them want to spend money on something that I was
> producing, apart from, you know, having a personal conversation
> and explaining it to them. […] I'm fully aware it's something that I
> need to get over in order to actually progress. (Watts, line 214,
> 2019)

Based on this, we can infer that in-person conversation is something that Claire Watts is more comfortable with than promoting themselves online and that the interviewee recognises this as a personal challenge for furthering their self-publishing career.

Joshua Ellis is of the same opinion that marketing is fundamental to the success of an independent writer in the digital landscape: "[…] we've substituted a world of gatekeepers for a world in which basically the primary criteria for success is how willing you are to be your own marketing agency," (line 322). Here, Joshua argues that the necessity to self-promote in the self-publishing field is linked to the non-existence of gatekeepers within it. Ari Marmell also brings attention to the role of gatekeepers and a problem that arises in their absence:

> […] as much as people decry editors as gatekeepers, we aren't-
> we are seeing the reverse problem in self-publishing, which is
> that there is so much material out there. […] there's a lot of self-
> published books out there that are very clearly not up to even
> close to professional quality. So they're not written well, they're
> not edited – and I'm not- I'm not looking to keep anybody out of
> the market, I just wish it was easier to find the… to find the self-
> publishing gems amongst the the vast swaths of material [that] is
> not up to par. (Marmell, line 442, 2019)

These responses highlight two challenges that independent writers face in a digital landscape abundant with self-published content: first, the challenge of making sales and getting paid; second, the challenge of finding quality content. Arguably, these are two different viewpoints of the same issue: writers want to be connected with paying readers while potential paying readers want to be connected with work that they enjoy. In this light, it is plain to see why those writers who adopt an effective marketing strategy are likely to be the ones that grow their readership.

4.6 Platforms used

Around 40 channels and publishing methods were discussed by the fifteen interviewees. These included social media platforms, crowdfunding, aggregation services, traditional publishers and online publishers.
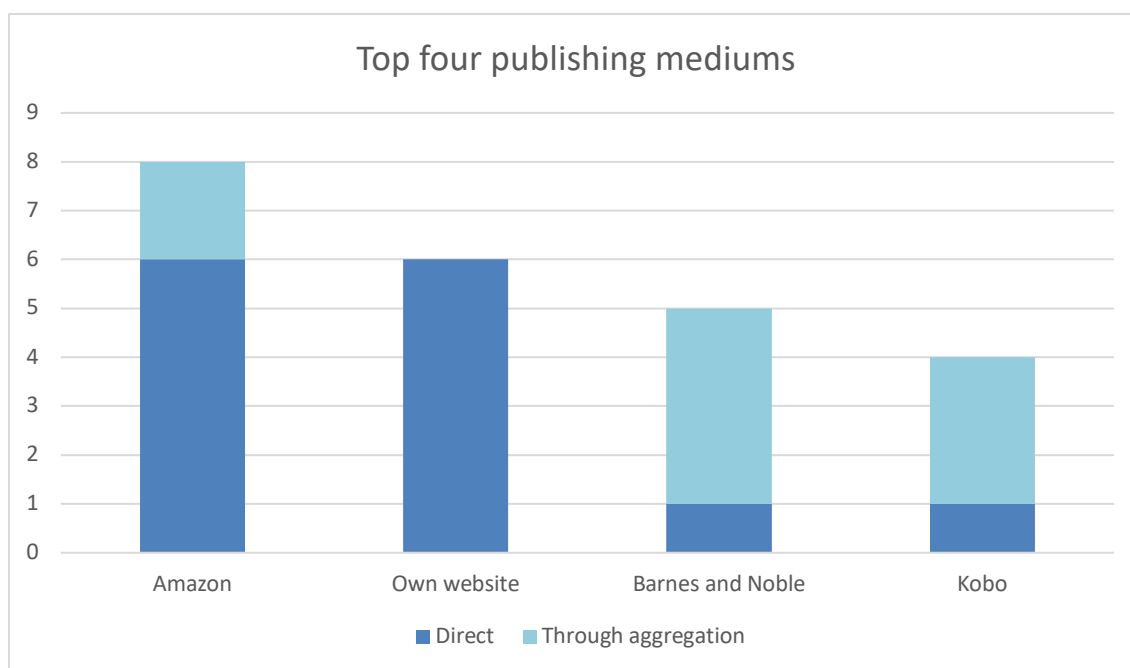

Figure 2: The top for publishing mediums by number of users among interviewees

Figure 2 shows the top four publishing mediums used among the 15 interviewed Patreon users. The majority of Barnes and Noble and Kobo usage was done via

aggregation services such as Draft2Digital, Ingram Spark or Amazon Expanded Distribution.

4.6.1 Crowdfunding

When asked about other distribution services and methods they have used for their work, four-out-of-fifteen interviewees stated that they have had experience with a crowdfunding platform. In all cases, the term "crowdfunding" was not part of the wording of the question, and it was the interviewee that initiated talks of that topic. Three of the four reported a positive experience while one expressed a neutral sentiment. Steve Hamaker was the only interviewee to compare Patreon with their experience in crowdfunding.

> I just like how its set up and it kind- it doesn't feel as needy as like some of the other crowdfunding sites. It feels like the people that are there are like true supporters and true believers in what you're doing and that kind of thing. (Hamaker, line 201, 2019)

Steve Hamaker's crowdfunding campaign was successful in funding the printing and distribution of a book. This interviewee was among those who stated that interaction with their readership was a key benefit of using Patreon. Based on this, we can infer that Steve Hamaker places higher value in the ongoing support of their fans as opposed to receiving support in one-off campaigns. Of the four interviewees to have claimed to have had a positive or neutral experience with crowdfunding, Steve Hamaker was the only interviewee to draw comparisons between this experience with their experience of Patreon. It is possible, therefore, that the overall attitude is that crowdfunding and membership platforms serve different purposes and are not directly comparable.

4.6.2 Amazon

Eight of the fifteen interviewees have used or currently use Amazon services to distribute books. Of those eight, three have enrolled or currently enrol books into the Kindle Unlimited service.

Lucy Mawson has published some of their works through Kindle Unlimited but has removed them after a 90-day cycle. Because Amazon demand exclusivity for works in Kindle Unlimited, writers cannot publish works in Kindle Unlimited and other places at the same time. However, if a writer chooses to remove a book from Kindle Unlimited, it will no longer be available on the service starting from the next 90-day cycle, meaning the writer regains the rights to publish the book elsewhere. In the case of one book series, Lucy's readership outside of Kindle Unlimited grew to be larger than the Kindle Unlimited readership, so they pulled the books out of Kindle Unlimited, allowing them to publish elsewhere. Lucy then "went wide" with the remaining books in that series without first publishing on Kindle Unlimited.

Aidan Wayne was another of the interviewees who has used Kindle Unlimited, stating that it is a practically all self-publishing writers have to use it unless they are already successful enough to pursue other channels. However, Aidan made the following observation about Kindle Unlimited and its possible impact on the future of the publishing industry:

> […] also difficult about Amazon Kindle Unlimited is its people are renting books. And so you can you pay like a flat fee you pay like $15 a month or whatever and you get to read anything you want in Kindle Unlimited. So then if say you want to buy a book and it's a $15 book, you're like, that isn't worth $15. I won't buy it. So it does skew sometimes for some people the sense of what something isn't isn't worth and I think that's really going to be hurtful, you know in the future […] (Wayne, line 537, 2019)

This observation is the same as that made by Mark Coker discussed earlier in this thesis, supported by Doyle's assertion that it is possible to manipulate consumer demand to favour a product that a media firm wants to supply (Galbraith, cited in Doyle, 2013, p84).

5   CONCLUSION

Digital technologies have opened up content creation and publishing to the masses. For writers, the technical barriers to publishing work is perhaps lower than ever, but in their place, new barriers have emerged – independent writers have to contest with the vast numbers of other independent writers also empowered by digital technologies to get their work out in to the world.

This study was conducted in order to address the social problem of publishing in the digital age, and how the new set of practices brought about by digital platforms impact literary pluralism. In order to approach this social problem, my narrower research problem was the need to explore the role of digital self-publishing platforms in today's publishing landscape. I conducted a qualitative interview with fifteen independent writers who use Patreon. The aim of using this method was to gain insight into their writing and publishing practices. The interview was designed to address the following research questions:

- What motivates independent writers to publish on digital platforms?
- What criteria does an independent writer have for choosing a digital platform?
- What practices do independent writers employ to maximise their readership?

I shall now discuss how the results of the interview address the research questions and, ultimately, what these insights might mean for literary pluralism in the digital age of publishing.

5.1 Findings

Regarding their motivation for publishing on Patreon, interviewees appeared to fall into one of two categories: one whose primary goal is monetary gain, and the other whose primary goal is a personal connection with their audience. Those

who fall in to the first category noted the importance of using channels other than Patreon to make sales and to build a following. Some interviewees identified that Patreon is not a discovery platform, so in order to grow their base of paying patrons, a wider set distribution and marketing efforts would be necessary.

The interviewees with more writing experience in either a professional or non-professional capacity tended to fall in to the second category. These writers use Patreon mainly as a way to establish and maintain a more personal connection with their audiences – something that other channels and methods do not necessarily facilitate. Some interviewees reported having a dialogue with their patrons about their work. For all of the interviewees who fall into this category, having a group of readers who continue to show their support as a paying patron holds a greater sentimental value than monetary.

Patreon is arguably more effective for the second category of writers: those who primarily seek a connection with their audience. This could be because writers in this category tended to already have an established following from their experiences as writers. However, the writers who primarily seek money through Patreon recognise its potential for higher levels of income if they are able to grow their base of paying patrons.

Irrespective of their audience size, level of income or motivations for writing or using Patreon, all of the interviewees used other channels to publish their work besides Patreon. The lowest number of other channels used by an interviewee was two. The highest numbers are harder to calculate with this qualitative data because of some interviewees' use of aggregation services. Such services, including Draft2Digital and Smashwords, distribute to several other retailers worldwide. This has interesting implications for Patreon's case for literary pluralism. When Patreon is just one platform used in a writer's publishing efforts, it is difficult to isolate the impact that the use of Patreon has on literary pluralism when, simultaneously, other distribution methods are used, perhaps each fostering their own set of cultural practices. What this study has shown is that

independent writers who use Patreon seem to develop their own publishing and distribution strategy that utilises different platforms and methods. Even Kindle Unlimited, a service which demands exclusivity, is used in some writers' broader publishing efforts without contravening the terms of that exclusivity.

5.2 Outlook

In this thesis, I set out to explore the cultural practise of publishing in a digital age with a focus on digital platforms and writers. This was done with the intention of building an understanding of the state of literary pluralism in the digital age. The nature of pluralism is inherently concerned with the benefits brought about by variety and diversity. While digital platforms have lowered the technical barriers for many people to publish their own work, the fact that the body of available literature has expanded does not necessarily mean that the richness of culture has been affected. "Multiplicity" or "variety" alone does not equate to "pluralism". Fundamental to the definition of "pluralism" is not just multiplicity, variety or diversity, but the benefits that these things can bring about. In the case of literary pluralism, this means increased access to a range of narratives that people can use in the construction of their reality, thus promoting richness of culture. There are two main issues to consider when assessing whether a larger body of available literature translates into literary pluralism: one is the quality of that literature, and second is whether access to that literature is being utilised effectively. What the results from my research suggest is that both of these issues remain a challenge for publishers in the digital age.

Regarding that quality of literature, the issue of gatekeepers was noted by some of the interviewees. For better or worse, gatekeepers serve as a barrier for entry in traditional publishing. The lack of them in the self-publishing field, however, means that the body of available literature continues to grow, unchecked for quality. While "quality" is of course subjective, in the context of literary pluralism, I use the term to refer to cultural relevance and its value in the construction of one's reality. It is interesting to speculate what form gatekeepers could take in the

self-publishing field. Perhaps online communities of specific tastes and niches could learn to become their own independent gatekeepers – a pluralism of gatekeepers. If this scenario were applied to Patreon, the number of patrons or patron-written reviews would be indicative of the quality (that is to say, value to culture and reality-building) of the author's work, less so than their ability to market themselves.

This leads to the second issue – whether an increased level of access to an increasing amount of literature is effectively utilised by readers. Some of the interviewees reported that finding an audience is difficult in a field saturated by content, meaning that a writer's ability to market themselves becomes paramount in finding a readership. When considering this issue from the readers' perspective, readers themselves may experience a similar challenge because of the saturation of content. With so much self-published work available, the author's ability to market becomes a large factor in determining what literature a reader is exposed to. A possible implication of this is that authors with poor marketing skills become overshadowed by authors whose marketing skills exceed that of their writing ability.

For this reason, a study that explores the habits of readers on digital platforms would also be beneficial in building our understanding of literary pluralism. Regarding membership platforms, this could be explored by asking paying patrons what it is they are looking for from self-published content, and if the literature they have discovered fulfils that criteria. This is something that a separate study leveraging fan theory could shed light on, perhaps by collecting and analysing data from patrons of authors rather than authors themselves.

Finally, it must be noted that writing is about more than the commodification of written pieces – it is an artistic process; a means of self-expression. To reiterate Bruner's stance on the value of stories: "our precommitment about the nature of a life is that it is a story, some narrative however incoherently put together" (Bruner, 2004, p709). Many of us consume and engage with stories, decoding

the meanings embedded in their narratives in order to increase our understanding of our own lives. It may be that writers produce their work for this same reason – by becoming the encoders of meaning, the creators of narrative and the distributors of stories, writers are building their own understanding of life and their constructed reality. If, as Bruner claims, "Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative" (Bruner, 2004, p692), then it is little surprise that some of us who seek to understand life go on to create narratives.

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