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Recruiting beta readers on online writing platforms

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Introduction

As with other cultural industries, publishing has been experiencing shifts brought on by the development of online writing and reading platforms, which have transformed dynamics between authors, readers, and publishers. The development of these platforms was first celebrated for their participatory dimension—bridging the gap between amateurs and professionals, and between authors and their readers—but the multiplication of “prescriptive interfaces” driven by the capture of online activity has become “a point of convergence for criticism against digital capitalism,” as Vincent Bullich puts it. According to Serge Proulx, this “Internet of platforms” marks a turning point: users have gone from “browsing” the Web with a “subjective feeling of relative freedom” to practices framed by the data economy. In information and communication sciences, a growing number of critical approaches have focused on the role played by the Web’s industrial players in growing “platformization of the culture industries.” However, platforms designed to engage with the publishing industry have been sparsely investigated.

This article will set out the results of an as-of-yet exploratory analysis of two French companies, Scribay and Plumavitae, which both define themselves as online incubators devoted to teaching literary writing. After laying out the conceptual framework of this essay, a series of interviews will help us show how these companies center their projects around political and commercial conceptions of literary writing rooted in entrepreneurial rhetoric of culture and registers of moral justification evocative of the “cities” model. Next, we will turn to the recruitment of beta readers, showing how Scribay and Plumavitae implement contrasting strategies to regulate and normalize beta readers’ “editorial know-how.” Finally, we will show how the strategies designed
to normalize online activities rely on the regulation and standardization of beta reading’s critical labor—the unpaid (or poorly compensated) use of which goes hand in hand with promises to access a career in publishing, or to serve as a stepping stone towards forms of acknowledgement derived from one’s status as a writer.

Theoretical and methodological framework

Writing platforms: regulating and standardizing activities

3 The term “platform” has become a self-evident staple of many texts in information and communication sciences. According to Nick Srnicek, platforms are a new kind of business which position themselves both as a mediation tool in the service of users and as the very ground where their activities take place. In the cultural industries, participatory platforms have been described as computational infrastructures bringing together cultural practices and the data economy. Scribay and Plumavitae serve as intermediary between authors and readers by affording them means of production that encourage them to learn literary writing and write critical reviews, all the while potentially tapping into data produced by these activities. Furthermore, encouraging users to produce reviews seems to be a necessary condition for these kinds of two-sided markets to deliver on their promise of accompanying young authors seeking experienced advice that will nurture their art. For these companies, growth hence relies on ongoing ways to engage users, as evidenced by the language used and by the semiotic architecture of the platform.

4 Following an approach that draws on the semiotics of digital writings, platforms can be described as “architexts.” The term refers to the growing normalization and industrialization of online practices under the influence of digital publishing tools whose recurrent and constraining semiotic forms invite users to type content into predefined fields (forms, menus...). While publishing software facilitates the act of writing by simplifying it, it also restricts it by regulating its process. As a result, Scribay and Plumavitae can be compared to architexts, whose design elements establish regulation and normalization strategies that affect the writing and critical reading processes, all the while spreading “their own set of idealized and stereotypical representations of the conditions of access to the field of literature.”

The ideological making of participation

5 Producing content is also prompted by various registers of “moral justification.” Athina Karatzogianni and Jacob Matthews have shown that the notion of “commons” is a recurring legitimization argument used by platforms, as related to ideals of sharing, collaboration, and solidarity.

6 Serge Proulx has also argued that engaging users relies on an ongoing, gradual process by which user communities internalize values and norms. According to Jacob Matthews, the “repeated tokens of adherence that the system demands from users” are all the easier to obtain because users’ perception “of the production chain is often skewed”: they are not fully “aware of the place they hold within intricate value-creation chains forged through online platforms.” The online production of literary texts and critical reviews seems to follow from the slow internalization of shared
norms, inseparable from the intellectual, emotional, recreational and affective pleasure derived by users from their creative activities. The following will show that furthering unpaid (or poorly compensated) participation from beta readers draws on a variety of registers—entrepreneurial, creative, collaborative, based in solidarity, the need for recognition, the promise of accessing the field of literature or a career in publishing—which are all likely to hold a strong appeal.

Chosen corpus

The focus of this article lies in two recently created French platforms, both launched after 2016. Scribay and Plumavitae both draw on the codes of the startup culture, defining themselves as spaces designed to accompany budding authors: first, through the organization of online training programs that teach the codes of literary writing; second, by working to normalize beta reading’s critical labor, in a way that claims to guarantee quality feedback. Writers’ adherence thus relies on the promise of being published or recognized for their talent, as well as on the presence of an environment designed to help them improve their writing.

But the platforms don’t work the same way: at the time of this study, Scribay boasted 50,000 members who had posted over 70,000 texts, whereas Plumavitae had 1,000 beta readers and 50 authors. Scribay also advertises an experimental mindset grounded in a community of authors/readers encouraged to assist each other without financial compensation, following a “free labor” model suggestive of a participatory utopia enthusiastically championed. In contrast, Plumavitae’s model relies on the partial Uberization of editorial work: proofreading and revising is (extremely poorly) compensated and strictly separated from the writing process, performed by authors in search of a publisher. While Scribay offers a “consolation universe,” the same cannot be said of Plumavitae, which taps into the promise of symbolic and professional recognition in the publishing world. Finally, the design choices made by these two platforms reflect different strategies. This article aims to contrast their different tactics of legitimization and how they strive to regulate beta readers’ work.

Figure 1

Origin stories and registers of justification

Focusing on the origin stories of Scribay and Plumavitae—as told by supporting documents and interviews conducted with their developers—helps us to better understand the ideological context and the corporate culture that run through the design of these digital devices. These stories can be viewed as a set of normative beliefs and reference points deployed to win over users’ adherence. The present analysis uses the “cities” model to shed light on their registers of justification.

The anti-model: Wattpad, or the “city of opinion”

In the cities model, the “city of opinion” defines grandeur in terms of renown and popularity. During our interviews, both developers criticized Wattpad’s model: “We want to take down the Wattpad model,” stated Plumavitae founder Kevin Bilingi, questioning the quality of beta readers’ work, thought to overestimate the value of written work and comfort writers in their illusions. Only a highly challenging training program based on a methodology developed by Bilingi himself is thought to allow for quality feedback. Scribay’s co-founder Arnaud Lavalade appears similarly guarded: “Wattpad is here to circulate and to make itself known. It’s YouTube for literature.” Expressing his desire to slow down “the race towards the construction of a digital self and self-branding,” his own platform model claims to foster patterns of mutual help.

Scribay, part “projective city,” part “civic city,” and part “inspired city”

Created in 2016, Scribay defines itself as an “environment dedicated to writing, learning, and sharing, open to all writers, both beginner and experienced.” Scribay’s origin story tells a tale of “two friends” who enjoyed challenging each other to literary games to stimulate their imagination. Manuel Darcemont is an engineer, while Arnaud Lavalade, who has a degree in economic science, is an entrepreneur. Lavalade explained that Scribay was envisioned as a not-for-profit venture, “a garden, an art project.”
furthered by a community that has taken over the reins and ensures its survival: “Members are committed to protecting this environment which was founded on benevolence, altruism, mutual help, and creativity.” This statement brings to mind the model of the “inspired city,” with techniques inspired from creative writing and writing workshops meant to stimulate members’ creativity. It also harks back to the principles of the “projective city”\(^1\): values based on sharing, horizontality, and “the network culture” are celebrated, in opposition to the hierarchy-based corporate model.

Arnaud Lavalade sees the platform as an instrument of decentralization that furthered collective intelligence: “The platform is a device that makes it possible for numerous people to create, whereas publishing is a centralized process. A platform is something that allows a large number of people to interact, produce, and engage. People come here to be free.”

This vision of Scribay as an alternative space to traditional publishing and as a common good is underpinned by ethical values derived from Lavalade’s professional experience: “We’re concerned about what big corporations do to people’s brains. Scribay is specifically meant to try and detoxify people from this cult of immediacy, this self-absorption nurtured by Instagram and Facebook. We want people to understand that if they want to produce literature that is richer and deeper in any way, they have to take the time, and have some perspective on what they’re creating.” Scribay’s design seeks to encourage users to adopt virtuous behaviors: “We wanted to create a space where we wouldn’t be chasing popularity but rather creativity and helping others.”

Arnaud Lavalade’s remarks illustrate the capitalist system’s capacity to put any kind of criticism to use: fighting against cognitive capitalism by offering altruistic design models becomes an argument legitimizing Scribay’s existence and inner workings. This call to altruism and benevolence, built into the platform’s design, is virtuous to the extent that it opposes the “shrinking of thought” championed by Twitter. We shall see later on how the presence of an “altruistic author” label embodies this strategy illustrative of the “civic city” model. On Scribay, an individual’s greatness is determined by a more or less altruistic status within the community: “Instead of creating twisted algorithms, [...] we designed a space that allows human beings to be civic-minded.”

Plumavitae, “the industrial city”

Whereas Scribay’s origin story stands at a crossroads between various “city” models, Plumavitae seems to epitomize the model of the “industrial city” and its values of efficiency. Created in 2017 under the banner “Plumavitae: the platform empowering young writers,”\(^2\) Plumavitae claims to solve some of the publishing industry’s current issues by empowering budding writers. “The publishing platform of tomorrow”\(^3\) relies on a “writer incubator”: “the nest.” Writers motivated by the hope of signing a publishing deal are coached free of charge by several beta readers—called “brigadiers”—trained in Kevin Bilingi’s method of critical reviewing. Plumavitae’s origin story tells the tale of an idealistic teenager who vowed to fight against the injustices of the publishing world by offering authors a greater chance of being published: “From a very young age, I was told I could become a writer. But as I came to discover the harshness of the entrepreneurial and artistic worlds, I resolved to put my energy and expertise in the service of writers.” Kevin Bilingi founded Plumavitae at age
24, as part of a startup contest organized by his economics and management school. During our interview, he stood by his choice of a rhetoric suggesting an almost “military”-like organization: “So it sounds like the army, in a way, and that’s part of the effort we put in for the authors, who know they’re undergoing ‘military training,’ so to speak. [...] We are at war against the injustices of the publishing industry. We are a movement.” Olivia Chambard has shown how the permeation of academia by the lexical field of business was presented as a way of “stirring things up,” of changing the world. Likewise, by wielding a belligerent and revolutionary rhetoric, Plumavitae’s founder is keen to present his platform as a laboratory for social change. Entrepreneurs and artists alike are engaged in a fight for recognition and economic survival: “Authors are entrepreneurs, they need training, financial backing, support. Entrepreneurs and authors are of the same ilk.” Plumavitae places authors at the center of their promotional rhetoric. Like a chick fallen from the nest, the author will become a phoenix and rise to recognition thanks to the support of beta readers, also called “publi-revolutionaries” [édirévolutionnaires]: “When authors come to Plumavitae, the goal is to improve their chances of being published. Authors know they come here for support. We give them the keys to publishing so they can make it work.”

Interestingly, this discourse exploits the difficult material conditions a writer’s career can be bound up with. But these arguments also target beta readers’ soft points, enjoining them to sacrifice some of their free time to help writers bring their work to fruition. In addition, pulling together the figures of the entrepreneur and of the author comes along with an idealized vision of the Gafam model: Kevin Bilingi lists Apple, Facebook and Uber among the revolutionary models that inspired him. Meanwhile, Plumavitae is presented as an answer to structural problems affecting the publishing industry, no longer capable of carrying out its duty to assist first-time writers. By hatching new talents, Plumavitae acts as a facilitator, an ambition that has publishers worried according to Kevin Bilingi: “Some publishers have told me: you want to take our job of selecting authors away from us... We’re walking on eggshells now [...]. Our purpose is to support, not to destroy.” These justifications based on criteria of performance, efficiency, know-how, and solutionism are all typical of the “industrial city.” With their revolutionary rhetoric, such arguments also echo the paradox of a platform system quick to embrace the capitalist system while simultaneously presenting itself as a revolutionary alternative and an instrument of justice in the face of the neoliberal order.
Now that we have described the registers of moral justification used to account for the existence of these platforms, let us turn to the concepts of digital labor at hand and the way they are promoted by interface design.

**Regulating and standardizing beta reading’s critical labor**

Plumavitae and Scribay operate as “mock literary fields,” replicating the latter’s mechanisms without belonging to it. On these platforms, the writer’s trade is taught through codified online teachings. Yet the prospect of improving one’s writing based on critical feedback is inseparably bound to the strategies devised to regulate and normalize reader participation.
Scribay: a semiotic call to altruism

Angelina Karpovich has described beta-reading practices as resulting from a convergence of social practices derived from the computer and publishing worlds. Beta readers’ activities have already been described from the angle of an emerging participatory culture, but a critical approach based on the notion of digital labor helps to understand these activities as typical of cognitive capitalism’s strategies. It sheds light on unpaid (or poorly compensated) forms of labor which, while they do not “feel, look, or the smell like labor,” nevertheless represent forms of immaterial labor.

The critical labor of proofreading indeed seems to partake of a principle of free labor furthered by values of solidarity, selflessness, creativity, and the pooling of talent in the service of a community. Arnaud Lavalade maintains he does not sell data produced, but the insistence on the notion of “giving/giving back” in the content of the reviews is a driving factor attracting authors onto a platform with the reputation of being “elitist.”

In this context, Scribay’s design acts like an altruistic “semiotic injunction” steering behaviors via a system of symbolic compensation.

On the website’s homepage, the “dashboard” is divided into two columns. The right-hand column lists the user’s activities: challenges, writing projects, discussions, or reading. The left-hand column features other members’ activities in a seemingly chronological order, sorted out into three categories: “Altruistic Author,” “Newcomer,” and no label.

Figure 4a

Statut du chapitre

Le statut d’un chapitre permet d’indiquer l’état d’avancement du texte et les retours attendus.

Premier jet

Le statut Premier jet s’adresse aux chapitres récemment écrits.
Il n’est pas encore l’heure de se pencher sur l’orthographe ou la grammaire : priorité à l’intrigue et aux idées générales !

Le chapitre est ouvert aux annotations :
• Intrigue & Idées

Correction / Relecture

Texte final

Enregistrer  Annuler
Illustration 4 shows the green “altruistic author” tag which showcase certain authors in the eyes of the community, placing them at the top of users’ news feed. Although Arnaud Lavalade remains elusive about the secret recipe behind this category (meant to encourage users to work in a spirit of mutual help and community), it ties back to an algorithm that calculates the intensity of users’ involvement in suggested activities. In fact, despite claims of opposing popularity-based models, Scribay does not entirely evade the classical profile-raising strategies based on quantification and gamification. Providing annotations or organizing literary challenges triggers a visibility boost. Encouraging authors and readers to simultaneously adopt both attitudes is an incentive towards textual productivity, hidden under the guise of altruistic motives.

In addition to this incitement to participate supported by algorithmic classification, the concrete design of the platform is also shaped by efforts to normalize and standardize the labor of beta readers. Readers are invited to renounce a fan-based point of view and take up that of a professional through a wide range of options that facilitate and standardize their work. Authors can arrange their texts as a “first draft,” a “revised text,” or a “final version.” With the “first draft,” beta readers are asked to prioritize plot and general ideas. In the “revised” version, corrections focus on spelling, grammar, and style. The “final draft” only allows comments.
For authors, this standardization of beta reading lets them keep control over their texts. It also creates the illusion of a professionalization of the critical process: contrary to what happens on Wattpad, comments on Scribay are supposed to rely on standards calling to mind processes used in the publishing industry.

**Plumavitae and the Uberization of editing**

In a sense, beta readers’ activities on Plumavitae partake of an Uberization of labor. The symbolic compensation they are afforded—1 euro per twenty pages—is well below standard professional rates. Beta readers are selected, assessed, and enrolled in a training program that is both regulated and hierarchy-based.

It’s a two-step training program [says Kevin Bilingi]. We ask them to write a review. Tell us about a book of your choice you liked, or didn’t like. That text alone lets us know the criteria that matter to the beta reader. They often overlook the content; at which point I or another brigadier will correct them. What can you tell us about the platform’s message? In this effort to professionalize authors and beta readers [...], we have to make them understand that a book isn’t just a plot with fun characters, there’s also a message.

These reviews rely on a template that lists the “five pillars” of publishing identified by Kevin Bilingi, based on his experience as an author and beta reader and on conversations with publishers. His “five keys to being read and (finally) published”—plot, universe, characters, content, and form—can be referred to on his YouTube channel.

While beta readers are only compensated for writing reviews, the reviewing process does not stop there: informal exchanges take place over the communication service Slack.

The conversations weren’t planned when I first created the platform. The author was just supposed to get reviews, the readers were the ones who started asking engage more [...]. If I were to tell them ‘We’re deleting Slack,’ 90% of them would leave.
His remarks make plain some of the mechanisms that encourage readers to enlist: on the one hand, the importance of the affective dynamics liable to set in between authors and their readers; on the other hand, the uncertain promise of professionalization, bolstered by the fact that publishing, like other cultural industries, relies on the mechanisms of hope labor. Many beta readers accept to work for close to nothing in the hope of acquiring skills that will let them access the closed-off world of publishing: “Some want to go into publishing. Some were looking for an internship in publishing and didn’t get it, and so they worked for a year on Plumavitae and then went on to do a master’s in publishing.” Beta readers are predominantly young (in their twenties), female at over 90%, and fresh out of the university. In their personal descriptions, many state a love for reading, which they wish to extend into a career. This digital work force seems all the easier to recruit because careers in publishing are difficult to access and highly valued.

Contrary to Scribay, beta readers’ role is shaped by mundane interfaces commonly used in project management: Slack and Trello. Trello is an app inspired by the Kanban method, developed in the 1950s as a management tool by the Japanese car manufacturer Toyota. Thanks to a system of cards and tags, this method helps visualize the current status of work in progress.

The beta reader’s training hence involves learning the digital culture of project management on top of learning the work of an editor. What might at first glance seem a hindrance to appropriation is turned into an argument in support of professionalization: “People have to be trained on Trello and Slack,” say Kevin Bilingi. “People come here to read and they learn to use tools that they didn’t know before, and they can put that on their resume, it all depends on the way it’s presented to them...”

Conclusion

This article set out to show how Scribay and Plumavitae legitimize their own existence by referencing and producing ideological discourses grounded in the “cities” model’s main justificatory principles (projective, civic, inspired, industrial), and how they implement recruitment and normalization strategies relative to the critical labor of beta reading, wielding a normative power over productions based on various systems of injunction.

Despite significant differences in each platform’s goals and justifications, the enrolment of critical workers is vital to the existence of these online sites of writer incubation. The promises made to authors go hand in hand with those made to beta readers. By accepting their work to be regulated and subjected to specified standards, some of them can entertain the hope of being trained in publishing. But this promise of professionalization is likely to fall short, as training relies in both cases on stereotypical representations of the publishing world, issued by people who are not privy to it. In further research, we would like to focus on user motivations, so as to better identify forms of adherence and resistance that have emerged in connection with these two concepts of digital labor, in-between altruistic injunction and the Uberization of editing. At the time of this study, the modes of governance implemented by Plumavitae’s founder were indeed being challenged: certain users have accused him of “torpedoing” his platform by not including them in decision-making. These internal controversies raise the issue of emerging forms of critical political thought specifically
addressed at digital devices, whose strategies do not always match the democratic ideals of their users.37

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NOTES
7. A two-hour long telephone interview with Scribay’s Arnaud Lavalade was conducted on September 25, 2020. A two-hour long telephone interview with Plumavitae’s Kevin Biligi was conducted on September 29, 2020.
25. A founding document accessible to platform users references Uber as a source of inspiration: “I figured, we connect people to order an Uber, why couldn’t I connect authors with beta readers
throughout the world; the idea was born and the platform was launched on September 14, 2017. It’s a startup, I really tapped into the codes of the startup.”

26. Several Plumavitae authors were published at publisher’s expense, the platform retaining 1% of royalties.


30. Readers can usefully refer to the work of Bertrand Legendre, including the chapter “Auteurs pluriel, bêta-lecteurs et plateformes,” in Ce que le numérique fait aux livres, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2019, p. 22-25.


34. This rate prompted the ire of copy-editors at Le Monde, with an article called “Et tout ça pour un euro?” [All that for one euro?] posted on their blog on 11 August 2019. [Online] https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/correcteurs/2019/08/11/et-tout-ca-pour-1-euro/ [accessed 18 April 2021].

35. “At Plumavitae, we’ve developed a secret weapon to assess a piece and improve its chances of being liked by readers and publishers: we call it the five pillars.” [Video excerpt] [Online] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQvsO7ZJwQg&list=PLjc9IrcZMxfhyzcK7l3Zh2kCwU1RlDBaqJ [accessed 18 April 2021].


ABSTRACTS

This article takes as a case study two French companies, Scribay and Plumavitae, which present themselves as online incubators dedicated to the learning of literary writing. We show, based on interviews we have conducted, how they put at the heart of their project political and commercial visions of literary writing based on registers of moral justification close to the “model of the cities” (Boltanski, Thévenot). Secondly, we look at the process of enrolment of beta-readers, showing that the strategies of normalization of online activities are based on forms
of framing of the critical work of proofreading. This exploitation goes hand in hand with promises of access to publishing jobs or to forms of recognition linked to the status of writer.

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**Keywords:** publishing, beta-reading, model of cities, socio-semiotics, architext, platform, digital labor

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