CONTEMPORARY ONLINE LITERACY – A MATTER OF IT SECURITY?

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Abstract:
The following article addresses the phenomenon of IT Security within the context of contemporary literature. The investigation aims at a dual approach and questions IT Security as both, intellectual content and technical surrounding of literary narratives. In both cases, current entertaining novels are reviewed. The core research questions are: 1) Do issues of IT Security serve as popular plot for broad reading audiences?; and 2) If literature is advertised online, does IT Security address them beyond the storyline? Should IT Security gaps affect the online display of literature, this might have an impact on the future marketing of literature itself. To sum it up, this article emphasizes on an ambivalent technical development of our time and its influence(s) on a traditional art form.

Keywords: Security; contemporary; online; literature; IT.

Introduction
IT Security has become a topic of great common interest as well as a broad inter – and transdisciplinary research field. Yet, usually, its origin as well as its areas of practical use are located within the technical fields; very seldom issues of IT Security are addressed within the discourses of arts and humanities and only partially in social sciences. This paper aims at investigating in IT Security from the point of view of literature studies. It will compare contemporary novels which address issues of online communication and IT security while, simultaneously, using online tools to advertise the novels themselves.

Contemporary literature of the recent years often builds its narrative around technological phenomena: the variety covers chat novels, popular teenage novels on topics such as online friendships and online romance, and on science fiction and augmented cyber reality. On the other hand, crime scene novels, thrillers and political literature deal with issues of cyber-attacks, cyber mobbing, cyber grooming or even cyber war. Overall, IT and its corresponding advantages and disadvantages inspire authors of every literary genre, be it in an entertaining or in a critical manner. However, dealing with the current phenomena of a period within its literary discourse alone is not a new trend in literature. Moreover, it is very common for authors to pack texts with explicit references or even product placements – each of them resembling a certain Zeitgeist (Bassler: 2002).

Furthermore – and very interestingly – literature also utilizes digital technology to present its narratives within digital environments. Technology has always shaped the genesis and distribution of literature, but it has had more impact on the physical production process rather than on the popularity of the literary work (Baumgarten: 2013). In this case, technology serves as displayer and multiplier of contemporary literature, using the same set of media it addresses on the content level (or the narrative). In particular, this means that, for example, a publication called Gefahr im Netz (engl: Danger on the Internet) from the novel series The three!!! is promoted and advertised in exactly the same media it criticizes; especially, online communication formats such as webpages and social media come into play for the purpose of displaying and advertising the individual novels. It is very common for publishing houses to start advertising campaigns on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat or
Instagram, as these are currently the most popular communication formats among young readers – far more than print announcements of upcoming novels and other publications. In addition, social media allow immediate response from (future) readers, which might even influence the ongoing literature production process. This explains the high amount of added value for authors and publishers provided by expanding their area of work on digital areas – whether or not they invest in related topics within their publications. Early amalgamations of popular culture and IT (security) trace back to US American television of the 1990s.

1. First traces of IT Security in popular culture

   IT Security, in particular, has been a topic of argumentation within contemporary culture ever since its beginnings. A popular example is an episode of US-American television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer, called “The Computer Demon”. A short synopsis of the matter is that in medieval times, a demon that makes people believe he loves them and kills them afterwards, is banned into a book. In the 1990s, this book is scanned (digitalised) in a library and the staff wonders why the book’s pages are empty afterwards. It turns out, by scanning the text, that the demon was digitalised as well and now lives on the Internet from where he gets in touch with various students – telling them he loves them and seducing them to meet outside the online world. I am not going to spoiler dramaturgical details here, but the usual scenery of “good conquers bad” leads through the episode, resulting in a last-minute escape from massive cyber-crime – committed by a demon.

   This rather pop-cultural and hollwoodesque example demonstrates the early awareness of even the entertainment industry of IT security issues and the threat of online crime such as cyber grooming. On another note, the actual example does not address parents to keep a watching eye on their children’s online behaviour. Moreover, it tells a story of cyber-crime in an entertaining and even funny manner. This approach, however, manifests and symbolizes the current literary approach on issues of IT security even in 2019/20. As opposed to serious and preventing measures, IT security in novels becomes a part of the mainstream entertainment without further political or educating dimension. IT security does no longer appear as a warning; it rather serves as a plot element or framing narrative for further literary storytelling. This status quo corresponds with the growing desire in politics as well as in academia to raise awareness and invest in human-centred IT security to create a less entertaining perception of potential dangers coming with and emerging from digital development.

2. IT Security as issue and narrative within contemporary novels

   On the content level, the same genre of contemporary novels often deals with issues of online communication and IT security. The German publication The three !!!, a teenage detective novel series (e.g. Von Vogel: 2020), addresses topics such as cyber stalking, virtual harassment and other online crimes. In adult literature, Elsberg’s Blackout (2012) simulates the dangers of an interconnected world in case of a central cyber-attack. In comparison with the carefree utilization of online tools on the media level (e.g. in case of online advertising), novels may potentially indeed deal with the societal and technological issues thereof. Even though Elsberg addresses severe political and societal issues, the actual novels lead the current bestselling lists rather than serve as pedagogical texts. They suit current political trends without really supporting them actively. Moreover, phenomena such as cyber-attacks, online-grooming, but also whistle-blowing and the disclosure of data manipulation (such as in case of VW) find their way into the literary narrative. It is unclear whether or not these elements are mentioned to seriously contribute to political discourse or if they just contemporize the literary framework the novel’s narrative is placed into.
An important exception from this rather pop-cultural dimension are publications by real-life whistle-blowers such as Edward Snowden or Chelsea Manning whose texts range between political journalism and autobiography. This footage leads to a sharp distinction between IT Security in fictional literature and journalistic publications. While this article clearly focuses on fictional literature, it is important to mention that various contemporary publications (in particular press or press-related) approach IT Security (issues) from a far more research and investigation-based perspective.

3. Technical use of IT infrastructures within a literary context

In 2013, German Rohde created his fictional character Renate Bergmann on Twitter. Becoming quite popular soon after the release of the account, Rohde built his first novel – also under the now well-known pseudonym. This career of a literary character and its online development on a social media platform represent the influence of online media on current authorship. Cathy’s Book, on the other hand, a sponsoring-based American novel by Stewart, Weisman and Briggs (2010), plays with the reader and immediately incorporates them into the narrative. The work complex holds accounts on Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube, as well as several other web presentations (Baumgarten: 2013). The possibility of online-interaction between the reader and literary fiction either fosters a (fictional) dialogue between the readers and a literary character of their choice or literally visualizes these characters – e.g. on Instagram (Grosse: 2011). The literary œuvre at hand illuminates the ever-growing media range literature scholars have to face in order to fully analyse not only a novel itself but also its surrounding discourses, formats and placements. Literature and linguistic studies have always been influenced by the current media of each era, but the shift from the analogue to the digital comes along with even faster cross-media-formats – not particularly developed for but automatically used by authors and publishers as literary displays (Janich: 2010).

Other novels, such as the afore–analysed work by Marc Elsberg, do not run or host own social media domains, but still are broadly advertised on these by the according literature agents and publishing houses. In addition, the majority of literary critique and discourse takes place in online media. That being said, one can notice a strong analogy between the technologies criticized within a novel and the real-life technology the novel is actually sold on. This ironic duality itself is not or at least very seldom a topic of conversation either within the novel or within discourse on social media. Furthermore, the readers show very little interest with regard to the transparency of online platforms. Sociological investigation has shown that only a very little percentage actually pays attention to the often very detailed regulations one has to accept before e.g. installing an app. An app itself, however, can easily be developed as online pendant to a novel, which leads its readers into the dark depths of data abuse on the Internet. Interestingly, while reading novels with fictional scenarios of online masquerade, the readers seldom ask for detailed information on the hosts or writers of online media in real life. Apparently, IT Security has far better chances to grab a reader’s attention than finding a broad acceptance among the exact same group when it comes to accepting IT Security issues in real life, and getting used to technology designed to provide secure online interaction.

Conclusion and outlook

Technology has always had consequences for the literary market and will most likely continue to do so. The analysis above demonstrates the current influence of technology in form of digital platforms, social media and further digital infrastructures on both plot and corporate surrounding of the literary narrative and work. Whereas, first and foremost, the entertainment industry benefits from the popularity of IT security issues, the IT infrastructures of almost all
kinds of contemporary literature utilize the technical state-of-the-art, which almost automatically includes the presence of (upcoming) literature on social media.

Currently, changes are recognized within the concept of authorship. Whereas writers used to become known for their literary work (and seldom for autobiographical sketches by celebrities of all kinds – in most cases together with the so-called ghost-writers), more and more YouTubers enter the literary market. These self-made celebrities often publish books with entertaining, journalistic, political dimension – or simply books full of recipes and tutorials on arts and crafts, complementing the individual content present on each YouTube channel. This production of literature does not only use digital technology, but it also actively emerges from the digital sphere, is carried by digital followers, and it is only discussed and negotiated. Issues of IT security are never addressed within the proper communities, except from within the given regulations of each platform. For example, several YouTubers tend to do online tombolas which are prohibited by YouTube's terms and conditions. In these cases, YouTubers work with references to other channels (e.g. Instagram or Snapchat) that do allow this kind of semi-commercial behaviour.

Overall, the literary market and its online alter ego will be subject to further legal research and development. If future legislation prohibits online marketing of books in the manner described above, this literary trend might shortly come to an end. In addition, this literary phenomenon will follow upcoming trends and fashions, giving enough room for further investigation within the field of literature, linguistics and media studies.

Bibliography