

SHIFT IN PUBLISHING PRACTICES: MANUSCRIPT ACQUISITION THROUGH DIGITAL SOCIAL READING

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Abstract. This paper examines the transformation of manuscript acquisition in the publishing industry driven by digital social reading (DSR) platforms, with a specific focus on Wattpad. Employing content analysis of Malay-language fiction titles exhibited at the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIFB) 2025 and Selangor International Book Fair (SIBF), the study identifies three key trends: the destabilisation of traditional editorial gatekeeping, the emergence of reader engagement metrics (reads, votes, comments) as decentralised validation tools, and the dominance of romance, religious fiction, and thriller genres in digital-to-print transitions. Findings reveal that publishers now actively seek authors with pre-existing digital audiences, transforming online popularity into marketable symbolic capital through strategic framing such as “1 juta bacaan di Wattpad” on book covers. This participatory culture blurs the boundaries between amateur digital authorship and professional print publishing. The study concludes that the Malaysian literary ecosystem has entered a digital-first paradigm where community-driven validation is central to industry survival, reducing commercial risk while reshaping genre preferences and editorial practices.

Keywords: *digital social reading, digital publishing, Malay fiction, manuscript acquisition, participatory culture*

Introduction

The acquisition of manuscripts has been revolutionised by technological advancement because it has become quicker and more efficient due to the emergence of digital social reading platforms. Digital Social Reading (DSR) is a term developed by Pianzola in 2018 that offers a new perspective on how to interpret worldwide trends of reading behaviours and social interaction. In turn, this interaction has broadened the current methods of the literature industry in acquiring manuscripts. This phenomenon deserves academic consideration to comprehend how it affects reading habits and the classical way of manuscript finding and publication. Parnell (2021) states that digital platforms have changed the creative ecosystem through changing the dynamics of industries and relations between media. Fiction publishing is being redefined by sites such as Wattpad, just like broadcasting is being redefined by streaming sites like Netflix and Hulu. Technological-cultural factors and socio-economic relationships between creative writing platforms and the users shape the practices of creative writing platforms. As pointed out by Rebora et al. (2021), the involvement and attention of the audience in DSR are important determinants of whether to publish the raw manuscript. Remarks, reader statistics and other interactions have emerged as desirable metrics of editor-manuscript interactions. DSR also offers interactive platforms where readers can engage directly with authors and also feel the understanding and dialogue between the two (Parnell, 2021). Moreover, in the modern world, these platforms help readers navigate their reading choices with such offers as recommendations, reviews, and rating

systems, which play a major role in influencing reading preferences and, in certain instances, help authors gain exposure.

As the emergence of DSR platforms (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2024) has become a significant issue, the changing mechanisms of talent discovery cease to be a marginal problem but a significant endeavour of the literary industry. The conventional system of acquiring manuscripts, where the editors were passively waiting to receive submissions through email, has now been changed to a more active model. More editors are actively seeking new authors on digital platforms, where popular authors are recognised by the number of people who read their work and the performance of the story (Schwabe et al., 2023). This shift is indicative of a larger cultural shift in the literary scene and has a bearing on the decisions made in publishing. With this knowledge gap, this study reviewed the books exhibited at the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair 2025 (KLIBF) and Selangor International Book Fair 2025 in order to determine the publications that may have their roots in DSR platforms, hence having an analysis of this new trend in the Malaysian scenario. Therefore, three main objectives have been identified to guide this content analysis. The first objective of the research will be to examine the reader engagement analysis (reads, votes, comments) of the chosen digital manuscripts on DSR before their traditional publication. Second, this study notes the themes and tropes of the storytelling in the chosen digital manuscript. Finally, the paper will examine the market framing applied by the publishers in the promotional content of the chosen physical books.

Literature review

In Malaysia, a similar trend was reflected in the popular DSR sites because Wattpad, Novelplus, or Cereka are interactive platforms allowing readers and writers to interact (Ayub et al., 2023). Within seconds, an audience is able to provide feedback and take part in a dynamic culture of content (McKelvey and Hunt, 2019). The publishing industry is a cultural production field where actors struggle to gain power and respect as suggested by theories of Pierre Bourdieu. This area was once independent meaning that only those gatekeepers or elite editors could dictate what was desirable to the society. However, the situation has shifted because of the introduction of DSR (DSR) sites such as Wattpad.

Participation beyond literacy

The modern publishing environment is becoming more participatory in nature, with consumers actively participating in the creation and sharing of content (McKelvey and Hunt, 2019). The reader, in this case, is a prosumer a person who provides social validation through measures of engagement. In the past, participation in the digital society had been viewed as a meritocratic activity that required high functional literacy (reading and writing) as one of its conditions. However, the present-day participatory culture can be redesigned in different participatory ways facilitated by information and communications technologies (Clinton et al., 2013). Participation is not just an independent cognitive process but rather a joint production process, which is part of social relationships and support systems. Although Smit et al. (2025) dispute the idea of formal digital literacy as a rigid requirement in order to be included, marginalised prosumers show situated agency. They use ad hoc, intuitive and pragmatic approaches to arrive through the digital society successfully passing language and technical barriers.

Readers in this new structure are no longer consumers but rather are prosumers that create literary visibility and legitimacy by measurable indicators of engagement, such as reads, votes, shares, and comments. Consequently, the working of social validation can be viewed as a novel capital in the literary sector. Based on Bourdieu, digital popularity can be perceived as a symbolic capital, which can be transformed into other fields. Author-centric business model is a major disruption in publishing industry because of the shift of a publisher-driven business model to author-driven business model (Bobek et al., 2025). Miller and Wang (2024) postulate that the pre-digital strategic orientation of a firm is an important factor in determining its reaction to the technological change. Companies that used to be particularly dependent on the creation and distribution of original material are more likely to have more stable structures of acquisition, whereas the companies with less specialised backgrounds are more open to the adoption of digital innovations. The publishing industry is no exception, and the trend of introducing DSR platforms into the manuscript acquisition process is observed. This tradition inserts digital identification into the symbolic economy of print, which allows publishers to package online popularity as a commercial feasibility and cultural validity (Ren, 2022). As a result, the distinction between amateur digital authorship and professional print publishing is becoming more unclear, resulting in a hybrid literary production where digital and traditional capital collide and support each other.

Beyond Bourdieu, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as formulated by Latour (2013) provides an additional perspective. In this context, DSR is not just a neutral platform; it is also a non-human actor that works with human actors like readers, authors, and editors to create literary value. The number of reads, votes, and comments are all required for a manuscript to be seen. These metrics don't just show how popular something is; they also decide which stories are seen, shared, and eventually chosen for print acquisition. The platform's algorithmic suggestions also give users more control by giving more weight to stories that get a lot of engagement. This shapes the field of content that can be found.

Materials and Methods

Concentrating specifically on the transition of DSR platforms into the traditional print publishing, this study employs a content analysis approach to study the evolving nature of manuscript selection in the publishing environment of the contemporary world. The goal is to find trends and important success variables that affect how digital manuscripts are turned into books that are published commercially. A purposive sample of 11 Malay-language fiction titles, clearly identified as sourced from Wattpad, was examined from KLIBF 2025 and SIBF 2025. Two independent coders examined the corpus utilizing the aforementioned analytical framework. This research method helps us understand the social and literary reasons why a manuscript becomes popular online and is then officially published in print. This gives us a look at how trends in the publishing industry are changing as readers become more engaged and digital-first. An analytical framework was developed to examine three core dimensions: (1) Reader Engagement: This dimension evaluates measurable data, such as the number of readers, likes, comments, and votes as a measure of audience engagement. These steps can be taken as hints of community involvement and market access in the online environment (Jerasa, 2025). (2) Themes and Tropes: A qualitative investigation of the repeated narrative patterns and tropes was performed to identify what kinds of content appeal to

online readers most. It involves finding the most common genres (e.g., romance, mystery, coming-of-age) and plotlines (e.g., enemies-to-lovers, redemption arcs) (Šesek and Pušnik, 2014). (3) Language and Style: This element examines the language features of the manuscripts and contrasts the use of informal and formal language, narrative tone, stylistic devices and any literary flair. The voice consistency and accessibility to the target demographic were also focused on.

This research method assists us to comprehend the social and literary motives behind why a manuscript becomes popular on the web, and is then formally published in print, to get a glimpse of evolving trends in the publishing sector when readers are more engaged and digital-first. The given research methodology addresses the social and literary issues that can lead a manuscript to the next stage of online success and formal printed publication, providing an understanding of the new trends in the publishing industry of a period when readers became more engaged and the digital-first paradigm was introduced (*Table 1*). This diagram shows the step-by-step process by which digital manuscripts on Wattpad become printed books that can be sold (*Figure 1*). Reader engagement metrics (reads, votes, comments) create social validation, which acts as a decentralized way to keep people out. Publishers seek validated manuscripts, purchase them for print, and transform digital success into market credibility (e.g., “1 million reads on Wattpad” on book covers). This chain is the hybrid model of literary production identified in the Malaysian publishing ecosystem at KLIBF 2025 and SIBF 2025. Beginning with raw reader engagement metrics on Wattpad, the process proceeds through social validation, publisher discovery, print acquisition, strategic market framing, and finally print sales. This chain operationalizes what we term the Wattpad-to-Print valorisation model, wherein platform-specific interactions are converted into mobile symbolic capital that reduces market uncertainty for publishers.

Table 1. *Analytical Framework.*

Code	Description
Reader Engagement	Number of reads, like and vote
Themes and Tropes	Common themes in selected stories
Languange and style	Informal, point of view (pov), DBP style
Editorial Changes	Differences between digital and print versions

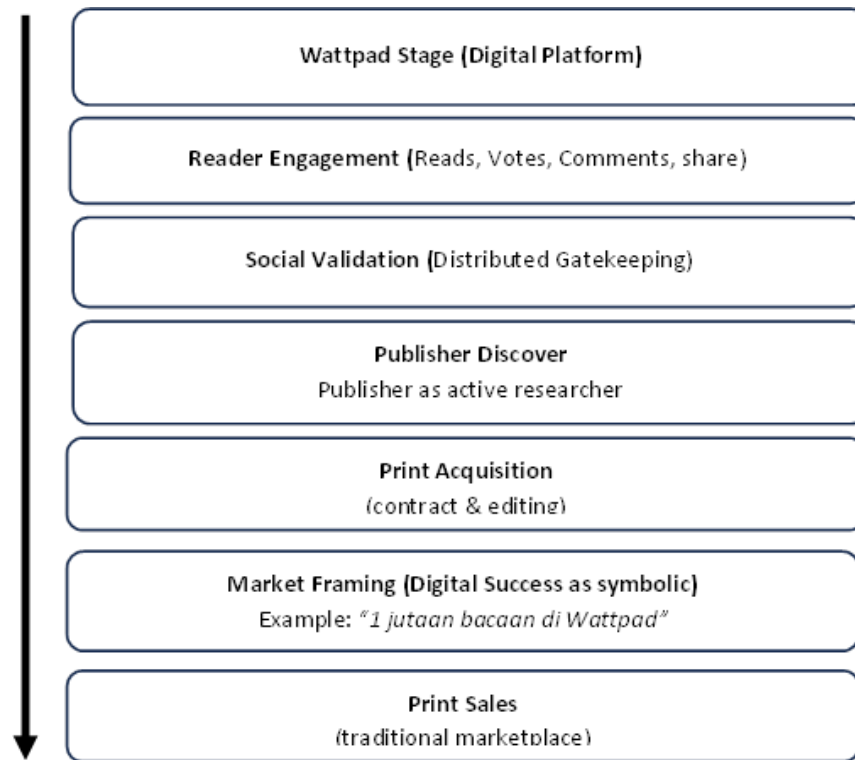


Figure 1. *The Wattpad-to-Print Valorisation Chain.*

Results and Discussion

Genre: Thees and tropes

The eminence of DSR was evidently observed in KLIBF 2025. A significant number of book launches are directly attributed to works that originated on a digital platform, which is Wattpad. Almost 30 or so titles have been physically published in the course of the event, indicating an impending intersection of online reader-led storytelling and mainstream publishing. DSR has influenced the publishing sector, and the interaction is vital in deciding whether a story is to be published and accepted in the book circle or not. In the KLIBF 2025 and SIBF 2025, we can see a distinct trend in the fiction that is being published and read, with three genres taking up the market share: romance, religious fiction, and thriller. This favour is not a random one, but it is well-founded in the culture and social life of Malaysia. There are quite a number of reasons as to why romance fiction is in the top spot. First of all, it offers an escapist and comfort method that can attract a broad audience and particularly women, the primary consumers of this genre (Chan, 2025). These novels present an escape into the world of positive narratives that guarantee positive endings in a fast and often hectic world. Moreover, the genre has also evolved to appeal greatly to local people. Many romance stories that are written in Malaysia incorporate familiar cultural backgrounds, events and conversations that allow the reader to relate to the characters and their relationships. This deception of close unity is further supported by clichés that are common and are often customised to match the social situation in the local context (Alavala, 2024).

The popularity of religious fiction can be easily explained by the fact that Malaysia is predominantly a Muslim country. These novels often serve two purposes: they are both entertaining and educative. They present stories that explore the themes of religion,

spiritual experiences, ethical challenges and the hardships of remaining religious in a secular world. Such a genre gives the reader a chance to engage with their religion in a more active way than the traditional religious literature, making complex theological ideas and historical events easier to understand through story. The fact that this genre is the leading genre shows that there is a large market niche in need of writing that speaks to individual values as well as provides guidance on life from an Islamic perspective. The top three are completed with the thriller genre. Thrillers are not as common as romances and religious literature, but they attract readers who want intellectualism and relief after reading the emotional load of other types. The appeal of the genre lies in its ability to create suspense and tension and to present an interesting intellectual challenge that appeals to the reader. The mysteries, the crimes or the mental disturbances are often a part of the novels, and the pace is quick to provide an exhilarating, adrenaline-filled reading experience. The popularity of this genre increases evidence that Malaysians have diverse reading preferences and desire to be told stories that can stimulate their mental capacities.

The role of engagement metrics in story discoverability

An examination of the basic engagement data of Wattpad: reads, votes, and comments reveals a distributed narrative validation system acting as the main discoverability tool. Unlike traditional publishing, where the editor is a kind of gatekeeper, the digital platform of Wattpad allows the community of readers to have a co-operative effect on the visibility and popularity of a story. A review of a sampled collection of posts on the Wattpad platform suggests that the reads metric is not merely a mere quantitative measure of story interactions; the reads metric is an essential and high-level means of social approval. In DSR, the individual process of a reader reading a story is gathered and presented in public thus transforming an individual activity into a significant social marker. The magnitude of this phenomenon is demonstrated by the provided data with such narratives as *Peluang Kedua Buatku* with 6.4 million readings and *The Headhunter* with 7 million reads. The magnitude of these numbers determines the number of reads as an obvious social validation. To people who have just embarked on the quest of browsing the expansive library of content, a high number of reads is a metric of quality, implying that a story has been rated and approved by a significant group of unknown individuals. The dynamics change the traditional model of discovery as a process refined by publishers to that based on the community, where the reading behaviour of the collective audience becomes the source of exposure and perceived value of a story. In addition, the open display of the metric of the reads creates a positive feedback mechanism. A high-count narrative is more likely to appear on trending lists and in search results, thus acquiring more readers and creating further engagement. This approach depicts how the simple process of reading, with a social measure on an online platform, becomes a major triggering point to make a story popular and viral.

The function of market framing and conventional publishing

Syuhaidi et al. (2020) state that this evidence suggests a more complex type of market framing. The presence of both independent publishers like Mangosteen and AHA Publication as well as the presence of such publications like Prolog Media and Fajar Pakeer on the Wattpad platform reflects a unique hybrid form of literary

production. To writers, Wattpad is viewed not just as a self-publishing tool but as a potential platform of professional publication. The high reads rate is employed as a pre-market validation technique to prove the marketing potential of a narrative and its appeal to the audience (Rebora et al., 2021). This is a very beneficial opinion to a publisher. They are no longer exclusively dependent on submissions or agents to identify new talent (Reka and Thamil Selvi, 2025). They can use the statistics of Wattpad, namely the number of reads, as a powerful tool to identify the stories that have an existing fanbase. The high readership of *Peluang Kedua Buatku* and *Stay Qowiy My Love* provides publishers with a strong commercial justification, meaning that it is a big and interested audience to these publications. The best example of this market framing approach can be seen in the example of *Serunai Maut*. It has been read more than 1.2 million times, making it one of the most-read stories, and its publisher, Mangosteens, puts the phrase “1 juta bacaan di Wattpad” in large fonts on the book cover. This marketing stance is very effective in communicating the market value of the book to potential buyers in the physical market. This minimizes the risks that are normally associated with the publishing of emerging authors and transforms the internet reading community into an informal market research focus group. Therefore, the digital platform of reading has a great impact on the market, blurring the lines between amateur writing and professional publishing.

Table 2. *Kuala Lumpur international bookfair.*

Book Title	Publisher	Sources	Reader Engagement	Market Framing	Themes and Tropes	Language and Style
<i>Serunai Maut</i> – Leena Syiha	Mangosteens	Wattpad	1.2 million Reads	“1 juta bacaan di Wattpad” – Coverpage	Thriller, Romance, Religious, Mystery	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Kerana Dendam</i> – D. Dahlia	Prolog Media	Wattpad	1.3 Million Reads	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Peluang Kedua Buatku</i> – Fairy	Prolog Media	Wattpad	6.4 Million Reads	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Mrs. Issac</i> – Fatiha Huda	Fajar Pakeer	Wattpad	104,000 Read	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Zar</i> – Tihati	AHA Publication	Wattpad	1.6 Million Read	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>The Headhunter</i>	Ideakreatif	Wattpad	7 Million Read	N/A	Romance, Action	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Stay Qowiy My Love</i>	House of Aksara	Wattpad	3.1 Million Read	N/A	Romance, Slice of Life	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Love & You</i> – Lollysnow	Fajar Pakeer	Wattpad	536,000 Read	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Mariposa</i>	AHA Publication	Wattpad	2.2 Mil Read	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Milik Mikhail</i> – luvleytien						

Table 3. *Selangor international bookfair.*

Book Title	Publisher	Sources	Reader Engagement	Market Framing	Themes and Tropes	Language and Style
<i>Peluang Kedua</i>	Bookuet.book club	Wattpad	1.7 Million Reads	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu
<i>Takdir Kita</i> – Balqis Juandy	Furtunelle Editions	Wattpad	175,000 read	N/A	Romance	Bahasa Melayu

The results of the study suggest that the publishing industry in Malaysia is currently undergoing a radical transformation due to the participatory culture. Clinton et al. (2013) state that participatory culture thrives when the fans and consumers are

motivated to participate in production and distribution of new content. This is no longer a peripheral phenomenon; the fact that over 30 titles are attributed to Wattpad origin at KLIBF 2025 and SIBF 2025 proves that reader-initiated storytelling has already become the basic element of the literary ecosystem. The main impact of DSR is the interference of traditional editorial gate keeping. In the past, the editors used to receive manuscripts passively. Nowadays, readers passively go to the digital platforms like Wattpad and Novelplus and find an author with a significant fanbase. The role of the gatekeeper has shifted to that of a single editor to a group of people. The 7 million reads on *The Headhunter* and the 6.4 million on *Peluang Kedua Buatku* are more of a decentralised validation tool as they determine the market value of a story before a hard copy is made. The modern publishing houses are going through a strategic realignment of their marketing paradigms to better realise and capitalise on the digital provenance of the serialised manuscripts. The hybrid production format is an important ontological shift in the industry, into which the historical dualism of amateur digital discourse and professional print authorship is becoming progressively destabilised. This preservation of aesthetic and structural subtleties of the “Wattpad-to-Print” transition is enabling publishers to help form a media convergence that legitimizes digital-first narratives as bona fide cultural artefacts as opposed to precursors of the traditional publication.

The key to this shift lies in the strategic use of physical social evidence as a tool of bringing the digital prestige to the conventional market. Publishers can use signalling theory to create an instant intellectual and commercial credibility by incorporating quantitative information into the claims on the cover of *Serunai Maut*, including the claim of the 1 juta bacaan (one million reads). This practice represents the platform-specific interaction as a kind of mobile symbolic capital, which essentially decreases the perceived risk of both the consumer and the retailer by staging the text as a pre-authenticated commodity with a pre-existing societal approval. The results suggest that the local social dynamics play a significant role in the prevalence of romance, religious fiction, and thrillers in the digital platform participatory culture. The heavy participation in romance provides the readers with emotional relief and an escape mechanism. The development of religious fiction on such platforms marks the need to have a narrative that allows the readers to engage in their religion and moral issues in a contemporary, approachable way. The process of converting a manuscript in the digital form into a print publication is affected by a complicated interrelation of social and literary factors. Through the adoption of participatory culture, the Malaysian publishers are moving away from publishing entirely new and unknown titles to building authors that have existing fan bases. This shift will ensure that there are more readership and discoverability in a digital-based society.

Malaysian practices in the context of global publishing trend

While the data from KLIBF 2025 and SIBF 2025 indicate a distinct Malaysian ecosystem, these changes are part of a broader restructuring in global publishing economics. The Malaysian “Wattpad-to-Print” model, in comparison with the international practices, shows similarities and specificity. This participatory validation model evident in Malaysia is part of a broader global transformation of gatekeeping. Epitomised by the rise of BookTok, the literary community embedded within algorithm ecosystem. Recent studies recognise BookTok as the key driver in shaping production, distribution and reception of literature whereby audience actively influence the success trajectory of effective text and participatory practices (Dera, 2024). In Western markets

such as The United States and The United Kingdom, BookTok primarily functioned as a catalyst for reviving backlist titles and adult genre fiction through expressive content formats (De Melo, 2024). In contrast, multinational publishers utilize BookTok interaction analytics as instruments for post-publication enhancement, leveraging viral momentum to prolong a book's commercial life. Contemporary publishing has witnessed the ascendance of digital validation mechanisms, which in certain contexts exert influence comparable to or exceeding that of traditional gatekeeping institutions. Internationally, promotional stickers bearing declarations such as BookTok Sensation or Viral on TikTok have increasingly supplanted conventional author testimonials and critical blurbs.

Conclusion

The development of the Malaysian publishing industry, based on the discovery of the Kuala Lumpur International Book Fair (KLIBF) 2025 and Selangor International Book Fair (SIBF), indicates a radical change to the traditional and autonomous gatekeeping to a participatory culture. Using the theories of Pierre Bourdieu in the context of this modern landscape, one can easily make out that the sphere of cultural production is no longer the place of elite editors. Rather, DSR has shifted the power distribution as a collective community of readers has become the main determiner of literary value. The paper has illustrated that the shift in digital manuscript to print publication is instigated by an advanced interaction between social validation and market framing. The reader role has radically changed into the prosumer one, the active participant that produces symbolic capital expressed by quantifiable metrics of participation. These metrics are a form of decentralised validation mechanism, as observed in the case of *The Headhunter* and *Peluang Kedua Buatku*, which received 7 million and 6.4 million reads, respectively. This distributed narrative validation system enables the community to approve a story and its market value much earlier than it is printed on a physical paper.

Additionally, the study points out how the conventional publishing houses are resetting their acquisition policies to reduce financial risk. Instead of adhering to the models of passive submission, editors become active in search of authors with a well-developed fanbase on DSR platforms (McKelvey and Hunt, 2019). This has seen the emergence of an in-between form of literary production; whereby digital popularity is strategically turned into marketable credibility. Signalling theory has been applied by publishers such as Mangosteen and Fajar Pakeer by making the digital success claims highly visible on the cover of books, such as the “1 juta bacaan di Wattpad” claim on the cover of *Serunai Maut*, into the traditional marketplace. This custom is successful in erasing the historical distinction of amateur digital discourse and professional print authorship (Merga, 2021). Lastly, KLIBF 2025 and SIBF 2025 gave a primary place to genres of romance, religious fiction, and thrillers, which reveals the strong cultural appeal of such digital-first stories. Digital authors create the feeling of shared identity and communication with the audience by combining the local tropes such as forced proximity or arranged marriage. To sum up, the Malaysian literary ecosystem has reached the stage when participatory culture and digital-first paradigms cease to be its periphery but are becoming central to the survival of the industry. Accepting these changes, publishers are guaranteeing greater readership and discoverability and are sailing successfully through the environment where the aggregate action of the online community is determining the future of the printed word.

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Conflict of interest

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