

## **The Voice of the Reader:**

### **The Landscape of Online Book Discussion in the Netherlands, 1997-2016**

**Peter Boot**

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**Contact: [peter.boot@huygens.knaw.nl](mailto:peter.boot@huygens.knaw.nl)**

Book discussion has been deeply influenced by the arrival of the World Wide Web.

Especially after the advent of Web 2.0 and social networking sites it has become increasingly easy to share opinions about books, on a range of sites widely differing in size, sophistication, and specialisation. Many of these sites (Amazon, Goodreads, LibraryThing), especially in the English-speaking world, have been the subject of scholarly attention. This chapter will provide a history of these sites at a national scale, in this case, for the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup>

To begin, we look at online book discussion in the Usenet newsgroup `nl.kunst.literatuur`. On the (Dutch) Web, large scale book discussion began with reviews on `bol.com`, the largest online bookseller in the Netherlands. They were rapidly joined by personal weblogs, bulletin-board style discussion forums, and later book-based social networking sites and general purpose social media.

The different types of platforms are not always easy to distinguish.<sup>2</sup> What a history of these sites will show is that, on the one hand, each of these site types has its own specific characteristics, is suitable for certain types of discussion, and attracts a certain type of visitor. On the other hand, there are also many personal connections between these sites. People divide their attention over multiple sites and move between sites as platforms gain or lose

favor. All of the sites are to some extent social: users respond to each other, they “like” each other’s posts, they strike up friendships and exchange messages. Online book discussion brings to the foreground the social dimension that has been the focus of much recent scholarship in the history of reading.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I characterise a number of paradigmatic sites. I describe their structures, their functionalities, and the writing that can be found there, and I focus on a few readers who have made these sites their home. I will not devote special attention to the question of whether these sites offer an extension or replacement of newspaper or academic literary criticism. As Katharina Lukoschek writes, book blogs and social media communities “are spaces of meaningful communication in areas where literary criticism has no institutional authority, never had, and probably never will have.”<sup>4</sup> Online book discussion should be looked at as an independent phenomenon, not as an impoverished form of literary criticism.

Constraints of space make it impossible to discuss the entire landscape of online book discussion. In this chapter, I focus on discussion platforms for ‘ordinary readers’, however defined. The readers that I study here may have a university degree, perhaps even in literary studies,<sup>5</sup> but I do not consider review sites, weblogs, or e-zines that aspire to institutional status or explicitly want to play a role in the national literary landscape. I also cannot cover (sadly) the creative response to books in fan fiction communities<sup>6</sup> or the many genre-specific forums, weblogs, and sites.

One problem of writing a history of anything Web-related is that the Web is a very dynamic environment. Websites come and go and leave few traces after being discontinued. This chapter therefore also draws on the web archive maintained by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and on a collection of downloaded websites that I have created over the last few years.<sup>7</sup>

## **Online book discussion before the web**

Online book discussion didn't start on the Web. Before the Web became an interactive platform, discussion took place in Usenet groups (later brought to the Web by Dejanews and now accessible through Google Groups). In the Dutch language area, the most relevant newsgroup for book discussion was nl.kunst.literatuur.<sup>8</sup> The first posting dates from May 1997. According to its charter, the group discusses literature (in Dutch or in other languages), and could contain book reviews, announcements of events and publications, searches for books, language humor, short stories, and poems.<sup>9</sup> Commercial postings were allowed if relevant to the group and had to be expressly announced as commercial.

The group took off quickly. After 276 threads in 1997, the group peaked in the years 1998 and 1999, with more than a thousand threads. The descent began in 2000 and continued steadily. From 2007 onwards the weekly posting of the group's charter was often the only post in that week.

The subject range of messages in nl.kunst.literatuur was considerably wider than that of later review sites. Interestingly, reviews had to be announced as such in the message header. Typical items include queries for books or books by authors, announcements of webpages with literary content, and students asking for help with their assignments. But besides these paraliterary questions, there was a fair amount of discussion about literature itself, the style and content of books and the merits of certain books or authors. Serious reviews of books often led to discussions at a level not often seen on most of today's book discussion platforms, though some threads did tend to derail into pointless chatter. While the descent in popularity of the newsgroup was partly the result of the availability of alternative platforms, the chit-chat may also explain why some participants moved to those alternative platforms.

The participants in the discussions include some of the pioneers of the Dutch internet, such as activist and author Karin Spaink. Others were poets (Martijn Benders, Gerard C. Kool), translators (Stacey Knecht, Frank Lekens), or novelists (well-known writer Marcel Möring). Linguist Marc van Oostendorp, whom we'll meet again in the section on weblogs, published reviews under the pseudonym Martin Opdop. Many of the discussants maintain or maintained weblogs of their own, such as Jan-Willem Swane and architect Hans Valk.<sup>10</sup> Others maintained sites about other writers, such as Gerrit Jan Kleinrensink about Willem Brakman and Roland Bron about Nescio.<sup>11</sup> The average participant in the newsgroup was clearly more highly educated than those who are or were active on some later platforms, and that may explain the high level of the discussions on nl.kunst.literatuur in its heyday.

### **Reviews on booksellers' sites**

Book reviews on booksellers' sites are probably the best-known form of online reviewing. In the Netherlands bol.com is the largest online bookseller and the only bookseller's site with a substantial numbers of reader reviews. It was originally the Dutch branch of German media giant Bertelsmann's attempt to move into the online realm.<sup>12</sup> It is now owned by food retailer Ahold and, like Amazon, sells many things besides books.

Reviewing on the site began in 1999 (1340 reviews), and in 2016 50,172 reviews were created.<sup>13</sup> Reviews on bol.com come with a rating and reviewers can add tags to the reviews, some of them predefined. Reviewers have to choose a nickname and can provide age and place of residence, but there is no option for reviewers to create a personal profile that describes reading preferences and/or other personal details. As bol.com, unlike Amazon and many dedicated reviewing sites, offers no way of viewing reviews by reviewer, reviewers on bol.com have little opportunity to present themselves, as persons or as readers, to other site

users. That makes the bol.com review platform perhaps the least social of the platforms that we discuss in this chapter, though users can (and sometimes do) upvote or downvote reviews.

On its site, bol.com publishes the e-zine *Lees Magazine*,<sup>14</sup> which features interviews, reviews, book fragments, and lists of recommended books, sometimes based on a subject (such as World Alzheimer's Day) or on recommendations by a writer or a public personality. The magazine also organises give-aways and a reading club, as well as a workshop in review writing.<sup>15</sup> Editor-in-chief of the magazine is publishing professional Janneke Siebelink; other editors include a thriller writer, a literary scholar, and a specialist in reading clubs. Beyond the obvious purpose of selling books, the magazine seems mostly targeted at attracting potential reviewers to the site.

The list of most frequent reviewers is headed by “clara”, who in a period of less than two years (2010-2012) contributed more than 700 reviews, mostly about theological and spiritual works. All her reviews are accompanied by ratings of four or five stars. The second most frequent reviewer is “analetter”, who wrote more than 500 reviews, mainly of thrillers.<sup>16</sup> Third in the list is “ezelsoor” (dog-ear), who reviews mostly literary books. For none of these three, have I been able to find traces of their presence on other websites. Mieke Schepens, however, the fourth most frequent reviewer on bol.com, is very active on other book discussion sites. She has a weblog, participates in several Facebook groups, and is active on Twitter. She is one of those participants in book discussion who are connected and stay in touch with others through multiple platforms.<sup>17</sup> There are many reviewers like her, such as “wendy7213” and “Barnem”.

Scholarship on booksellers' sites often focuses on the question of how these reviews compare to newspaper book reviews.<sup>18</sup> From our perspective it is more interesting to contrast reviews on booksellers' sites to reader reviews on dedicated reviewing sites. In her comparison of reviews on bol.com with those on Goodreads, M. J. Daniels found reviewers

on bol.com use a simple and direct style, and prefer strong positive or negative evaluations.<sup>19</sup> They write more about popular literature and books around which there is a hype, and less about established literature. Sometimes they address the author in their reviews (“Thank you for giving me hope again”). Their reviews often discuss the book’s acquisition and the circumstances surrounding its reading. Sometimes they are impatient with other reviewers or with the institution of literature. Stefan Dimitrov et al. found more extreme ratings on Amazon vs. Goodreads but not more extreme language.<sup>20</sup> They argue that reviews at booksellers’ sites are targeted towards buyers and buying decisions. This might be an explanation for the reviewers’ directness and preference for unambiguous language. In the downloads of the Dutch sites, bol.com reviews use much more positive emotion words than the dedicated review sites but not more negative emotion words.<sup>21</sup> In numerical terms, bol.com reviewers assign much higher ratings than those on other sites (more than half of the reviews are accompanied by five stars). An explanation could be that readers on other platforms write about all books that they read, while readers on bol.com, being less bookish, perhaps only occasionally write a review for a book that they especially liked. That would be consistent with their preference for popular and widely discussed books.

## **Book blogs**

A weblog is “a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first”.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, we will limit ourselves to single-author weblogs, as that is where we are most likely to find personal reflections on a reading experience. The word “weblog” was used first in 1997, but sites that conformed to this definition had been around for some time. The first (proto-) blogs in the Netherlands appeared from 1994 onwards.<sup>23</sup> It is hard to say what was the first Dutch

book blog, as weblogs come and go without leaving much traces.<sup>24</sup> In a crawl of Dutch book blogs that we performed in April 2017 *De rode muur* (The red wall) was the blog with the oldest posts, dating back to 2000.<sup>25</sup> In our crawl we found 15 book blog posts in 2001, 1057 in 2006, 7962 in 2011 and 24219 in 2016, the last full year.<sup>26</sup>

Single-author weblogs may appear as less relevant in a chapter that focusses on discussion, but there are many ways in which blogs are in fact part of a network. Many blogs display a list of other weblogs that the blogger is following. Usually there are comments, often from fellow bloggers. Many bloggers have their own group of followers. Beyond these blog-internal networking tools, there are many other ways the blog and its owner may be part of a network, either technically (for instance through a blog aggregator such as Bloglovin') or because the blog owner is active on other platforms as well. Tobi Zeising has investigated German book blogs, and found that they are very much networked with each other.<sup>27</sup> That network is evenly distributed: there are no blogs that are exceptionally popular and no strongly connected subgroups.

Here I focus on three book bloggers: Mieke Schepens, Marc van Oostendorp, and Femke van der Griendt, a schoolgirl.<sup>28</sup>

We met Mieke Schepens already as a reviewer on bol.com. Her weblog, called “Graag gelezen” (read with pleasure), is one of the many platforms that she uses for her reviews. Her weblog has no blogroll, but it can be followed through weblog aggregator Bloglovin (204 followers), Blogspot (89), and Google Plus (183). She is also active on Goodreads,<sup>29</sup> where she mentions that she often receives books from publishers in return for a review, “honest but with a positive attitude”, which she places on the sites she is active on. Her weblog sidebar contains a logo in the form of a picture of a heart-shaped book and the text “With a heart for stories”. She also mentions that she appreciates receiving comments. Schepens reads in many genres: thrillers, literature, general novels, children’s books, psychological thrillers, and more.

She uses her weblog mostly for publishing reviews, but also for announcing new books (which she may have received in advance from the publisher).

The reviews on her blog often have a similar structure. The review of Johan Zonnenberg's *De schaduwbokser*,<sup>30</sup> for instance, begins with a picture of the cover, then gives some data about the book (title, genre, ISBN). Schepens then mentions she won the book in a raffle and thanks the publisher. Before the actual review she quotes the cover text of the book. The review itself is a shorter or longer text that recounts (part of) the story, intermixed with interpretative and evaluative comments. The review is often summarised in a single sentence ("Johan Zonnenberg wrote a poignant story, brimming over with emotion, fortunately not without humor"). What follows is a paragraph about the author, perhaps a link to more information, links to booksellers where the book can be bought, and finally the publisher's logo.

While for Schepens reading is obviously an occasion for sharing, Marc van Oostendorp writes that "my reading log is like an allotment garden. ... It is nice if a passer-by takes a glance at it, but that's not necessary."<sup>31</sup> Ironically, two fellow bloggers applauded his words. Van Oostendorp's weblog is called "Read. Books that Marc van Oostendorp read for fun". His is the second oldest Dutch book blog in our download. Van Oostendorp is also general editor of another weblog, *Neerlandistiek* (Dutch Studies), an academic newsletter on Dutch language and literature, where he has been publishing one article a day for some years now.<sup>32</sup> As a newsletter, that blog is obviously targeted at real readers; for the private blogger, however, "it might be rather embarrassing if they were somehow suddenly discovered by the general public". Van Oostendorp makes clear he does not want to be judged by the standards of literary criticism: "On my weblog I do what I want, so if I want to write about a book that wasn't written rather than about a book that was, that is what I do."<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere he writes "it is not my intention to do justice to the writer, but to do justice to my own reading

experience”.<sup>34</sup> Like most book bloggers, Van Oostendorp is active on Twitter, but he doesn’t usually tweet about the books that he discusses on his book blog.

The books that Van Oostendorp discusses are diverse but “serious”, for want of a better word: mostly literary novels, sometimes poems, and also non-fiction, but no genre novels. The nonfiction may be related to literature (like author biographies) but may also be about fields like biology or religion. Unlike many other book bloggers Van Oostendorp regularly discusses classic works, such as Flaubert or Goethe’s *Faust* (which he briefly dismisses). His reviews are usually organised around a few thoughts that struck him during reading. Van Oostendorp does not recount the events in a novel, but he asks, for instance, whether the Tyll character is really the subject of Kehlmann’s eponymous novel, or he focuses on the unrest characteristic of Israel de Haan’s life and poetry.

The most characteristic feature of Van der Griendt’s reviews is her enthusiasm. Her reviews are full of exclamations: “So great!” or “This is a book that leaves you contented, that’s so nice!...Really cool, I’d almost give it five stars.”<sup>35</sup> Van der Griendt is 16 years old and attends a gymnasium. She started her weblog when she was 14. Blogging is attractive to her because of the social benefits, as she mentions in an interview: contact with other readers, an invitation to serve on a jury for young people’s books, book friends with whom she visits book presentations.<sup>36</sup> Blogging can also be demanding: time and time again Van der Griendt complains that she lacks the time to write a proper review: “The idea is that I’ll blog about this one day. One day. If I get to it. Which, in the short run, I have my doubts about.”<sup>37</sup>

Like Schepens, Van der Griendt uses a number of other social media platforms in the service of her blog. She is active on Instagram, where she maintains lively exchanges with other booklovers (much more lively than through the comment facility on the blog), she Twitters, and her blog can be followed through Bloglovin’. She also places her reviews on Hebban (see below), where she is a member of the Hebban Young Adult Club.<sup>38</sup>

## **Book discussion forums**

The largest book discussion forum in the Netherlands is Ezzulia, dating from 2005.<sup>39</sup> The forum uses the familiar bulletin-board format: the discussions are organised in (sub)forums and topics within these subforums. Topics consist of an opening post and replies. At present the site hosts 556,000 messages in 9236 topics written by 3528 users. While books are the forum's *raison d'être*, somewhat more than half of the exchanges take place within nonbook forums: a general chat room and a number of forums related to games, music, film, and life in general.<sup>40</sup>

Ezzulia is the creation of Eric Herni, owner of an independent book shop in Almere. Herni, who also blogs at <http://leeswereld.blogspot.nl/> and writes columns on Hebban (see below), had been active on Hebban's predecessor Crimezone and earlier managed a website "Spanning & Thrillers" (Suspense and Thrillers). He started Ezzulia mainly to create a meeting place for readers and authors,<sup>41</sup> and about a hundred members are registered as authors.<sup>42</sup> Among them are Loes den Hollander, Simone van der Vlugt, and Corine Hartman, popular Dutch thriller writers who all frequently posted on the site. As the older participants fondly remember, there used to be a Friday night meeting on the forum, where many Dutch authors (mostly in the suspense genre) participated.<sup>43</sup> One of the favourite guests was Paul Goeken, a friend of Herni's, a thriller writer who published under the name of Suzanne Vermeer. After Goeken's early death, the Friday night meetings stopped.

The site has 1900 different posters, but as on most discussion platforms, the distribution of posts over participants is heavily skewed. Of the 241,000 book-related messages, ninety percent are written by ten percent of the participants, and just three participants (among them Herni) are jointly responsible for more than 30,000 messages.

Several members maintain their own book platforms, including a crime novel site and a weblog for suspense novels.<sup>44</sup>

Most of the discussion on Ezzulia is organised around authors. There are also genre-based subforums.<sup>45</sup> The most popular subforum is devoted to thrillers (foreign and Dutch), the next most popular is foreign fantasy and science fiction. Within the foreign literature forum, the most popular authors are Haruki Murakami, Carlos Ruiz Zafon, and J. K. Rowling.

The site also moderates “Joint reading projects”, where a group of members decides to read the same book. One of the more voluminous discussions was about *Anna Karenina*,<sup>46</sup> though most of the participants had trouble finishing it and their judgement was generally negative. A much more positive discussion took place about Dutch author Arnon Grunberg’s novel *Tirza*. Some of the joint readings involve book giveaways facilitated by publishers.

Ezzulia’s popularity peaked in 2011, when more than 40,000 messages were posted, declining to 15,300 book-related messages by 2016. In 2010 more than 500 people posted to the forum, but in 2016 only about one hundred. Authors’ participation on the site seems to have all but disappeared: they posted 2219 messages in 2008 but just 16 in 2016. The descent may be related to the rise of other book discussion platforms, notably Facebook groups.

### **Book-based social networking sites**

Book-based social-networking sites combine social networking features with book-based content. Internationally, the best-known example is Goodreads. A fair number of readers from the Netherlands use Goodreads, in either in Dutch or English. At the time of writing, by far the largest book-based SNS in the Netherlands is Hebban, which claims to have 139,000 registered users who write 50 reviews and rate 800 books a day. The users are said to have more than one and a half million books on their shelves.<sup>47</sup> The site was originally known as

Crimezone, specializing in crime fiction, but was redesigned and rebranded into a site catering to readers of all genres in 2014. The oldest reviews date from 2002. Hebban is the only large Dutch book-based SNS still in existence. Earlier similar sites were Dizzie and watleesjij.nu (what are you reading now), founded in 2008 and 2009 respectively, but both discontinued in 2016.

The history of these sites shows how publishers are struggling with the changing environment of the web.<sup>48</sup> Both Dizzie and Crimezone were started by individual booklovers. Dizzie was acquired by newspaper publisher Wegener in 2012.<sup>49</sup> Wegener neglected the site for a while, then tried to revive it in 2014, but when the company was sold to Persgroep the new owners closed down the site. Crimezone was first acquired by publisher Unieboek in 2005, then sold to another publisher, A.W. Bruna, in 2010, who withdrew in 2014. Watleesjij.nu was started and eventually closed down by publisher NDC|VBK. Boekensalon, yet another similar site, was created by the publishing branch of the library service organisation NBD Biblion but shut down when that organisation pulled the plug on its publishing activities in 2017. Presumably, all these publishers initially hoped that platforms for direct communication with readers would improve their sales, only to decide later that running sites was too much of a hassle. Hebban is now the property of a commercial company Book Communities BV, although many users of the site think they're visiting a noncommercial site.<sup>50</sup> Publishers have many ways of publicising their books on Hebban: either explicit advertisements, sponsoring giveaways and reading clubs for their books, or having one of their writers made "author of the month".<sup>51</sup> For the site's chief editor, Sander Verheijen, growth is very important: "Our ambition, and my task, is growth, growth, growth. ... We are already being approached by media companies, but from half a million [visitors per month] we become really interesting."<sup>52</sup>

Hebban is a complex site. It combines semi-expert reviews with articles, interviews, blogposts, and a reading community. All of the contributions can be rated and commented on. Users can follow other users. Authors can also be users and some try to attract large followings. The site hosts “reading clubs” where members read the same book. Members can also subscribe to challenges to read a certain number of book per year. Hebban “spots” are subsites within the larger site. They can be used by publishers or booksellers, but many members use the facility to host weblogs of their own or discuss certain genres.

Why do readers visit Hebban? The most important motives reported in a survey<sup>53</sup> were “Relaxation, fun to talk about books”, “Inspires me to make time for reading”, and “Sociability”. The features of the site that were most important to the respondents were taking part in reading challenges, rating books, receiving newsletters, cataloging their books, and reading reviews, articles, and blogs.

Only a small group of participants actually contribute reviews. The most frequent contributors sometimes have their own weblogs, maintain Goodreads accounts, and are active on Facebook, such as Mieke Schepens (363 reviews).<sup>54</sup> Cees van Rhienen (804 reviews)<sup>55</sup> has a Facebook page devoted to his reading and is active on thriller platform Thrillzone,<sup>56</sup> bol.com’s *Lees* magazine,<sup>57</sup> and the weblog Mustreadsornot.<sup>58</sup> However, there are also very frequent contributors who don’t seem to feel the need to extend their activities to other platforms, such as Mieke Piersma (821 reviews)<sup>59</sup> or bookshop manager Claar van Lieshout (323 reviews).<sup>60</sup>

The most lively interactions on the site probably happen in the reading clubs. There have been around 300 of them, each one has 15 members and produces a few hundred messages. This is a good illustration of the fact that even though the tool (a threaded commenting facility) is there, lively interaction doesn’t come about by itself: it must be organised. We will also see that in the Facebook group that we are tuning to next.

## General-purpose social media

Book discussion isn't limited to sites dedicated exclusively to books. It is taking place as well on general-purpose social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest. Facebook is without a doubt the most common platform, though Twitter is used by some to document their reading, for instance @MokumseHuis (Amsterdam Homebody).<sup>61</sup> @Twitcit used Twitter to share literary quotes;<sup>62</sup> @HetBureau did the same with quotations from a single novel. But Twitter can also be more conversational.<sup>63</sup> In 2012 literary critic Bas Heijne started a book discussion group on Twitter;<sup>64</sup> Leestweeps (Reading tweeps) was founded the same year and is still alive.<sup>65</sup> Mainly Twitter is used for book publicity by publishers or to attract readers to other book sites.

The most lively and informal Dutch-language book discussion on social media is taking place on Facebook. There are active groups with thousands of members, such as Iedereenleest (Everybody reads), Boekenfans! (Book fans), De Perfecte Buren (The perfect neighbors), and Samenlezenisleuker (Reading together is more fun). Iedereenleest is the initiative of an organisation for reading promotion.<sup>66</sup> Samenlezenisleuker<sup>67</sup> now has 9601 members, and posts may draw hundreds of comments or likes. Like many Facebook groups, it is accompanied by a weblog (or the other way around), and the group also has a Twitter and Instagram presence. On the weblog's "who we are" page the group's founders (Karin Meinen-Benjamins and Corina Nieuwenhuis, a former nurse and a cook) explain how they met on Facebook and became friends based on their shared taste in books. They publish reviews from guest reviewers as well as their own; young adult books are reviewed by a daughter of one of the administrators. They also feature reading club reports, interviews, and raffles of book copies received from publishers. The group's opening message states that conviviality and

cosiness are their main aims: “Everybody is welcome, the more souls, the merrier”. In an interview Meinen states: “What we think is important is authenticity, honesty, and staying true to yourself. We do this in our own way, full of enthusiasm and passion. That this appeals to others is a mega boost for us.”<sup>68</sup>

Sometimes the administrators take action to protect the group’s atmosphere. That was the case when a long-time member with known problems began to use strong language, and issues of foul language also arose around a blog post on the “pietendiscussie”.<sup>69</sup> (“Pietendiscussie” is a divisive issue in the Netherlands, concerning Black Pete, the blackface helper of Santa Claus.) In cases like these, the posts that announce the administrators’ action draw many positive comments (“happy I missed something”).

Though all members of the group can contribute, many of the more lively exchanges are initiated by the group’s administrators. They often open a discussion with a “Thesis of the week” (such as “Reviews influence my choice of reading”), or a question (“What are you reading?”). They regularly organise a “Friday Night Quote Night”, and there is also a weekly post where members can reply with references to reviews on their own web sites.

### **International platforms**

We saw that there are no firm the boundaries between the different platforms for book discussion within the Netherlands. Similarly, there are no firm boundaries between Dutch platforms and international platforms. Many people from the Netherlands use international platforms, such as Goodreads or LibraryThing, either in Dutch or in English. Others maintain a weblog in English. Some of those who choose to write in English do so because they live in an English-speaking country, but this is by no means the case for all of them.

An example of those who use Goodreads in Dutch only is provided by two people that we already met in this chapter: book blogger Mieke Schepens and the moderator of a

Facebook group Karin Meinen. They are friends on Goodreads. Most of their other Goodreads friends are also Dutch or Dutch-speaking. At the other end of the spectrum is “Annemieke”, maintainer of an English-language weblog (*A Dance with books*). Most of her reading is in English and so are all of her reviews, even for books that she read in Dutch. Annemieke has a very international group of friends, including many people from developing countries.

“Annabel” is one of many people who adapt the review language to the language of the book: Dutch books are reviewed in Dutch, English books in English. On Goodreads, speakers of Dutch who read other languages besides Dutch and English are a very small minority indeed, even in bilingual Belgium.

Unlike Hebban, the Dutch site most resembling Goodreads, Goodreads also supports book groups. Book groups have a book shelf, they can host challenges and polls, but their main function is book discussion. There exists a number of Dutch language groups, e.g. a group for Dutch book bloggers (many members also participate in a facebook group with the same aim), a group of ‘United girlsceen booknerds’, a group of ‘Fanatic Dutch readers’, and others. But again many Dutch Goodreads members also participate in English-language groups. “Annemieke” is a member of one Dutch group and twelve English ones, among which an *Alice in Wonderland*-inspired group, a group for fantasy-fans, and a group that discusses the Booktube Science Fiction and Fantasy awards.<sup>70</sup>

Which brings us to Booktube, an informal term for the segment of YouTube devoted to book videos or ‘vlogs’. As you would expect, there exists a Goodreads group of Dutch booktubers.<sup>71</sup> While the population of the rest of the book discussion landscape is mostly female, booktubing is almost exclusively a female occupation. In age too, booktubers are much more homogenous than other book discussants: the overwhelming majority is between fifteen and thirty years old. The focus of their reading and vlogging is often on young adult novels. Characteristic topics for book vlogs are: discussion of one or a few books, sometimes

in what are called ‘wrap-ups’, i.e. discussion of a group of recently read books; book hauls, in which the vlogger shows a stack of books which she bought over the last weeks or with which she returned from a book fair or book shopping spree; showing the pile of TBR (to be read) books; a walk around the vlogger’s (new) book case; a report from a book event or sometimes a marketing event specifically target at book vloggers or bloggers; or an ‘unboxing’, unpacking a box of books and marketing goodies received from a publisher.

The queen of (originally) Dutch book vloggers is Sanne Vliegthart with her English-language channel “booksandquills”.<sup>72</sup> She has more than 175,000 followers. Vliegthart studied English literature in the Netherlands and moved to the UK where she works with Penguin. On her channel, she notes that she is interested in giving talks about Booktube, how to be a book inflencer, about ‘building your personal brand online’. Under the heading ‘sponsorships’ she also writes ‘I’m available to work with brands, both on YouTube and on my other social channels (...)’. For Vliegthart, what may have been a hobby when she started on Booktube eight years ago has turned into an important component of her personal and professional identity: her internet and social media skills landed her her job in publishing, not her formal education.<sup>73</sup> She is very conscious of the new opportunities that the internet has created: ‘We are a new generation that has the opportunity to be friends with people all over the world. We build massive communities online and set up our own projects. We have the Internet, and that is all that you need to start something new. No one needs to give us permission. We make up the rules as we go along.’

Much less popular, but still followed by about 8000 people, is “Basically Britt”, by Britt Alsemgeest. Alsemgeest, who has a bachelor degree in media and communication, makes English-language videos about books (mostly) and lifestyle. Apart from the typical bookvloggers’ topics she vlogs about trips, sometimes about clothes, but books are the main fare. When asked in a question session why she decided to vlog in English rather than in

Dutch, she answered that she wanted to be part of the English-language Booktube community, compared to which the Dutch-language community is quite small. She also says she loves the English language and that vlogging in English has certainly improved her command of the language; her dream is to live in London. In one video she asks her viewers to tell what is so attractive about the Booktube community. The consensus is that booktubers are very friendly, that they are passionate and energetic about books and willing to share their views. Someone writes that she started a Booktube channel because ‘I wanted to feel like I am a member of one giant reading family!’

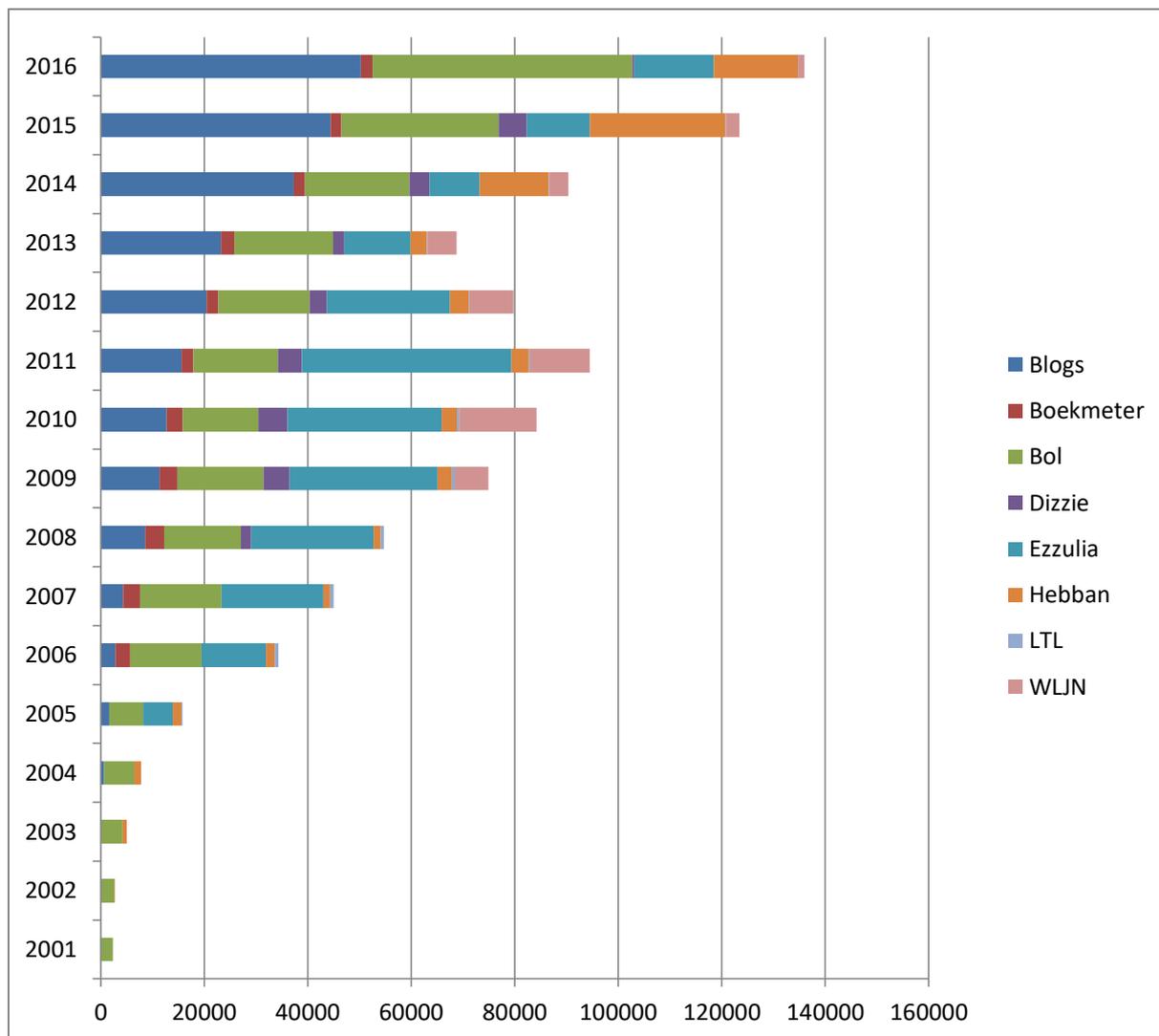
A Booktube channel that is in many respects the opposite of “Basically Britt is “De idiotoot” (The idiot) by Floris van der Pol.<sup>74</sup> Van der Pol is male, he is studying philosophy and he vlogs in Dutch. He has only 76 followers. His videos always discuss one (staunchly) literary work, sometimes a recent book, sometimes a book by a classic author such as Turgenev, Camus or Kafka. He is also unique in his interpretative approach; while most vloggers limit themselves to what they like or don’t like about a book, Van der Pol delves into the meaning and implications of a story. He also quotes passages that show something of the style of the book. In many ways he’s more intellectual than other (Dutch) booktubers. Van der Pol’s channel can serve as a warning not to be too quick in thinking all booktubers are similar.

### **Bringing it together**

Having discussed a number of individual sites and site types, let us now look at the bigger picture and briefly discuss quantitative trends, the networking aspects of these sites, their affordances (that is, how their architecture suggests their possible uses), and their bookishness.

Figure 1 shows the number of postings over the period 2001-2016. The data is not complete: I have no quantitative information about discussions on Facebook, and the reported

volume of blog posts in the past is certainly much too low.<sup>75</sup> Still, we can see a number of trends: the increasing volume of reviews posted at bookseller bol.com, Hebban's successful transformation into an all-genre site, the rise and decline of Ezzulia, the disappearance of watleesjij.nu, and the persistence of Boekmeter in a landscape dominated by much larger sites.<sup>76</sup> What this also shows is that online book discussion is not a very large-scale phenomenon. The number of messages in 2016 was about 136,000, one post per 125 inhabitants of the country. Though many more people read these reviews than write them, it should also be clear that people who participate in online book discussion are only a small part of the reading public, and their reading behavior is not necessarily representative.



**Figure 1.** Number of posts per year, by platform.

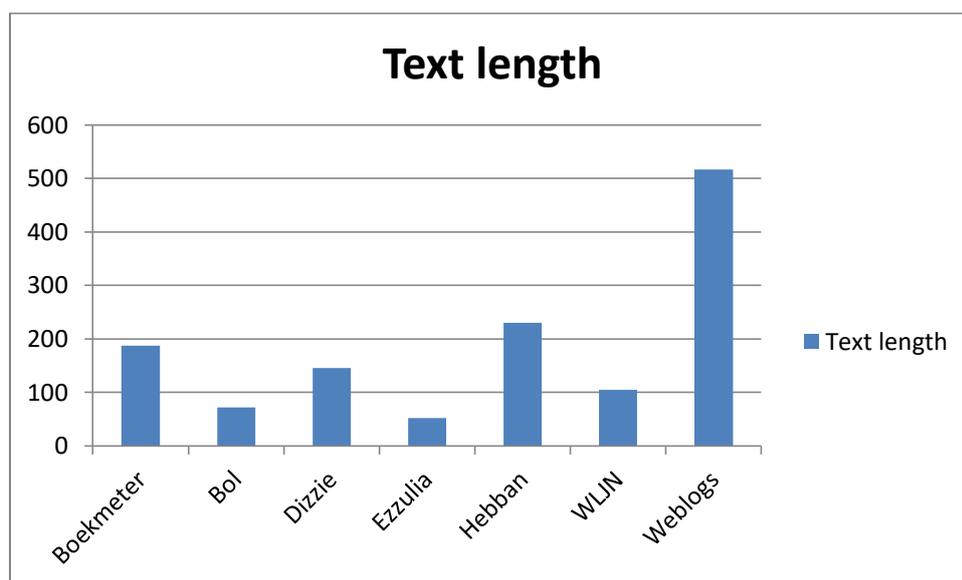
Now let us consider networking. The figures above suggest that over the coming years, the four main platforms for online book discussion in the Netherlands will be Hebban, bol.com, Facebook groups, and personal weblogs. However, as we have seen, many readers are active on multiple platforms. From the perspective of many readers, there may be only a single book discussion environment. Even on their personal Facebook pages, friends lists over and over contain the same names from Hebban and the blog world. For researchers of the phenomenon, this implies that researching a single site can never provide satisfactory answers. As Nancy Baym wrote when researching Swedish music fans: “For those seeking to

study online communities, this sort of social formation poses the methodological challenge of how to bound the object of study. It has long been the norm to go to an online space and study it... We have few studies that explore the connections amongst these disparate online platforms, despite the fact that people's online activities are almost always distributed across multiple sites."<sup>77</sup> If, for instance, we are interested in the extent to which individuals' reading is influenced by their friends' reading, which seems a very pertinent question to ask, we cannot just look at friendships on a single site. If we want to understand how people present and define themselves using books, we likewise cannot focus on their profiles and bookshelves on a single site.

This does not imply that different site types don't have different affordances. Discussion is the most essential characteristic for Usenet and for forum sites (although it may degenerate into chatting). Buying advice is the reason of existence for the reviews at booksellers' sites; discussion is not really relevant here. For the book-based networking sites, discussion is an add-on and nice to have. On weblogs, the culture depends on the blog in question. There are weblogs where every post is hailed by friends; on others the comment function is hardly ever used. But it is reasonable to ask to what extent comments on weblogs still serve the purpose of discussion. They often seem to be used mostly to create and maintain relationships.<sup>78</sup> On Facebook, discussion is a rarity; there is a lively exchange, but most responses to posts are brief, supportive, and sympathetic. It is clear that this will attract a different type of person than will be attracted by a weblog.

On the other hand, the best platform for writing a longer and more elaborate review is probably the weblog. One would expect the reviews on the social networking review platforms to be shorter than blog posts, but still fairly long.<sup>79</sup> Reviews on bookseller's sites, which have a more limited purpose, could be the shortest. The numbers in the downloads confirm these expectations. Figure 2 shows the average text lengths on the distinct sites

(reviews on the review platforms, blogs on the weblogs, and posts on the Ezzulia forum). We see the expected trend, but we also notice that there are clear differences in text length among the book-based social networking sites. Texts on Ezzulia are of course very different, as only a small number of posts can be considered reviews; most messages represent no more than a turn in a conversation.<sup>80</sup>



**Figure 2.** Post length by platform (all posts on Ezzulia, blog posts on weblogs, reviews on all other sites).

One final thing may be worthwhile to note about online book discussion: among themselves, participants can be unashamedly bookish. The “an’drei” account on Ezzulia uses a brief dialogue as a signature line:

Elend: I kind of lost track of time...

Breeze: For two hours?

Elend: There were books involved.

In the Samenlezenisleuker Facebook group someone posted “Addicted to reading? I confess, guilty”<sup>81</sup> -- and many agree. Or, again on Samenlezenisleuker, someone quotes “Her soul

belongs to words and books. Every time she reads, she is home”.<sup>82</sup> On the book discussion sites, 97 persons use the word “bookworm” in their profile. One reason why online book discussion is important, in a society where reading may be on the decline, is that it allows readers to meet others for whom reading is an essential activity.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Dutch language is also used in Flanders. Some of the sites that I will discuss have many visitors from Flanders, though most sites are based in the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Boot, “Towards a Genre Analysis of Online Book Discussion: Socializing, Participation and Publication in the Dutch Booksphere,” *Selected Papers of Internet Research* IR 12.0 (2011).

<https://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/18>.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) or for the Netherlands Marjolein van Herten, “Learning Communities, Informal Learning and the Humanities: An Empirical Study of Book Discussion Groups” (PhD dissertation, Open University, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Katharina Lukoschek, “‘Ich liebe den Austausch mit euch’: Austausch über und anhand von Literatur in Social Reading-Communities und auf Bücherblogs“, in Andrea Bartl and Markus Behmer (eds.), *Die Rezension: Aktuelle Tendenzen der Literaturkritik* (Würzburg: Köningshausen und Neumann, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> As they sometimes have. See Suzanne Van Putten-Brons and Peter Boot, “June is Dutch Literature Month!: Online Book Reviewers and Their Role in the Transmission of Dutch Literature to the English-Speaking World,” in Elke Brems, Orsolya Réthelyi, and Ton van Kalmthout (eds.), *Doing Double Dutch* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Sheenagh Pugh, *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context* (Bridgend: Seren, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For some large websites that have disappeared (e.g., the book discussion platform dizzie.nl) this personal archive may now be the only more or less complete representation.

<sup>8</sup> Most of the following discussion is based on the group archive at <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/nl.kunst.literatuur>.

<sup>9</sup> Other Usenet sites where literature was being discussed in the Netherlands or in Dutch include dds.cultuur and fido.belg.boeken. The principal platform for original literature was nl.kunst.literatuur.podium.

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- <sup>10</sup> Swane: <https://jswane.home.xs4all.nl/oud/index.html> and <http://www.janwillemswane.nl/>; Valk: <http://moedwil-en-misverstand.blogspot.nl/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.eco.rug.nl/~brakman/brakman/> and <http://www.nescio.info/extra/insula/> respectively.
- <sup>12</sup> Michel Schaeffer, *Het geheim van bol.com: Over dromen en doen, pionieren en groeien* (Amsterdam/Antwerp: Atlas Contact, 2017).
- <sup>13</sup> Numbers based on a download done over the last days of 2016. The download did not include all books but focussed on fiction, history, psychology, spirituality, and lifestyle.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://lees.bol.com/nl/>.
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1490058407899871/>.
- <sup>16</sup> One of the reviews makes clear “analetter” is a woman (<https://www.bol.com/nl/p/weerloos/1001004008287854/>).
- <sup>17</sup> Lukoschek, “Ich liebe den Austausch mit euch”.
- <sup>18</sup> Especially in Germany a large number of recent studies address that question. One example: Holger Kellermann and Gabriele Mehling, „Laienrezensionen auf amazon.de im Spannungsfeld zwischen Alltagskommunikation und professioneller Literaturkritik,“ in Bartl and Behmer, *Die Rezension*.
- <sup>19</sup> M. J. Daniels, “‘Als ik realisme wil ga ik wel een uur uit het raam staan kijken.’ Een kwalitatieve en kwantitatieve analyse van Nederlandse lezersrecensies op Bol.com en Goodreads” (MA thesis, Radboud Universiteit, 2016).
- <sup>20</sup> Stefan Dimitrov et al., “Goodreads versus Amazon: The Effect of Decoupling Book Reviewing and Book Selling,” in *Ninth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (Oxford, 2015). <https://www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/ICWSM15/paper/download/10557/10452>.
- <sup>21</sup> In terms of LIWC, see Leon Van Wissen and Peter Boot, “An Electronic Translation of the LIWC Dictionary into Dutch” (paper presented at the eLex Conference 2017, Leiden, 2017), <https://elex.link/elex2017/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/paper43.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity, 2013), 32.
- <sup>23</sup> Frank Meeuwsen, *Bloghelden* (Amsterdam: A.W. Bruna, 2010), 23.
- <sup>24</sup> The historian of the early Dutch blogosphere Meeuwsen doesn’t mention book bloggers.
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.rodemuur.nl/>. We encountered a few earlier articles, but these weren’t really book blogs. It is quite possible, however, that we missed relevant weblogs if they weren’t (in)directly linked from the seed set

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that we started with, or if our heuristics incorrectly decided that a site was irrelevant to book discussion. Blog owners may also have removed older posts.

<sup>26</sup> This does include false positives, posts incorrectly classified as being about books.

<sup>27</sup> Tobias Zeising, „Buchblogger: Eine Analyse mit Topliste, Visualisierungen und Statistiken,”  
<https://www.lesestunden.de/2015/03/buchblogger-eine-analyse-mit-topliste-visualisierungen-und-statistiken/>.

<sup>28</sup> As she is a minor, I considered withholding her name, but given the scale of her presence on the web it would be pointless.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/MiekeSchepens>.

<sup>30</sup> <https://graaggelezen.blogspot.nl/2018/02/ik-las-de-schaduwbokser-geschreven-door.html>.

<sup>31</sup> <http://marc-las.blogspot.nl/2012/03/ernst-jan-pfauth-gij-zult-bloggen-een.html>.

<sup>32</sup> One of those articles being about book bloggers: Marc Van Oostendorp, “Carnaval der burgerrecensenten,” *Neder-L*, no. 0709.56 (2007).

<sup>33</sup> <http://marc-las.blogspot.nl/2011/05/joshua-foer-moonwalking-with-einstein.html>.

<sup>34</sup> <http://marc-las.blogspot.nl/2012/07/karel-van-het-reve-met-henk-broekhuis.html>.

<sup>35</sup> <http://bibliofem.nl/recensie-haat-mel-wallis-de-vries/>.

<sup>36</sup> In an interview with the “Leesplein” website, the Dutch public libraries’ site for reading promotion for children and teenagers, [https://www.leesplein.nl/JB\\_plein.php?hm=3&sm=2&id=357](https://www.leesplein.nl/JB_plein.php?hm=3&sm=2&id=357).

<sup>37</sup> <http://bibliofem.nl/gelezen-in-juli/>.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.hebban.nl/spot/weloveya/nieuws/club-van-10-stopt>.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.ezzulia.nl/>.

<sup>40</sup> A download of the forum in September 2017, limited to the explicitly book-related forums, consists of 241,000 messages. This download is the basis for much of the following discussion.

<sup>41</sup> <http://ezzulia.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?f=223&t=3165&start=15>.

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.ezzulia.nl/forum/memberlist.php?search\\_group\\_id=8](http://www.ezzulia.nl/forum/memberlist.php?search_group_id=8).

<sup>43</sup> <http://ezzulia.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?f=205&t=11737&start=75#p675364>.

<sup>44</sup> <https://spannings.blogspot.nl/>.

<sup>45</sup> Literature, Fantasy & SF, Thrillers, Nordic thrillers, Chicklit, Non-fiction, Graphic novels, Children’s and adolescents’ books. For each genre there is a forum for foreign books and for originally Dutch books.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.ezzulia.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?f=145&t=9576>.

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- <sup>47</sup> In June 2016, 56,000 reviews were downloaded from the site. The number of active users (who had contributed at least one review, list, response to a review, or other contribution), was about 8000.
- <sup>48</sup> This paragraph is based on a number of press releases and news items, mostly from Boekblad (<https://boekblad.nl/>) and Bibliotheekblad (<https://www.bibliotheekblad.nl/>).
- <sup>49</sup> <https://www.hebban.nl/artikelen/dizzienl-gooit-handdoek-in-de-ring>.
- <sup>50</sup> A. F. N. Jessen, “Lezen als sociale activiteit: van leesgezelschap tot online lezerscommunity” (MA thesis, Radboud University, 2016).
- <sup>51</sup> [https://static.hebban.nl/files/files/hebban\\_prijzlijst\\_2018v20-3LR.pdf](https://static.hebban.nl/files/files/hebban_prijzlijst_2018v20-3LR.pdf).
- <sup>52</sup> Enno de Witt, “Vanaf juli ook Engelstalige boeken op Hebban.nl”. Boekblad, 2016-06-08, <https://boekblad.nl/Nieuws/Item/vanaf-juli-ook-engelstalige-boeken-op-hebban.nl>
- <sup>53</sup> Jessen, “Lezen als sociale activiteit: van leesgezelschap tot online lezerscommunity”.
- <sup>54</sup> <https://www.hebban.nl!/mieke4a>.
- <sup>55</sup> <https://www.hebban.nl!/Cees%20van%20Rhienen>.
- <sup>56</sup> <http://www.thrillzone.nl/>.
- <sup>57</sup> <https://lees.bo1.com/nl/article/cees-van-rhienen-over-red-cell-de-wereld-in-19-dagen>.
- <sup>58</sup> <https://mustreadsornot.com/2016/07/30/cees-van-rhienen-in-gesprek-met-jacob-vis-over-het-boek-merdeka/>.
- <sup>59</sup> <https://www.hebban.nl!/boekenworm20>.
- <sup>60</sup> <https://www.hebban.nl!/klaar>.
- <sup>61</sup> <https://twitter.com/MokumseHuismus>.
- <sup>62</sup> <https://twitter.com/twitcit>.
- <sup>63</sup> See e.g. Anatoliy Gruzd and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, “# *Ib1t*: Investigating Reading Practices at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century,” *Mémoires du livre* 3, no. 2 (2012).
- <sup>64</sup> <https://twitter.com/NRCTwitLit>.
- <sup>65</sup> <https://twitter.com/LeesTweeps>. Its web presence is <http://twitterleesclub.nl/>.
- <sup>66</sup> Joachim Vlieghe, Jaël Muls, and Kris Rutten, “Everybody Reads: Reader Engagement with Literature in Social Media Environments,” *Poetics* 54 (2016).
- <sup>67</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/451488498379185/>.
- <sup>68</sup> <https://samenlezenisleuker.wordpress.com/2016/10/25/interview-karin-meinen-door-sjors-bloem-van-boekenliefhebber/>.

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<sup>69</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/451488498379185/permalink/738598146334884/> and

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/451488498379185/permalink/721062731421759/>.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/163712-booktubesff-awards>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/193735-dutch-booktube-community>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/booksandquills>

<sup>73</sup> Sanne Vliegthart, “You know more than you think you do”. <https://www.caitlinmoran.co.uk/you-know-more-than-you-think-you-do-by-sanne-vliegthart-booksandquills/>.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMmznFeN3nyuVFjLP3giwTQ/>

<sup>75</sup> The graphic shows all posts (reviews, articles, responses) from the mentioned sites. Because of lack of data, it does not include all relevant sites: for example, the short-lived Boekensalon is missing, and so are a number of smaller sites. Blogs from the early years may have disappeared, or may not have been linked to from our seed set. On the other hand, I assume that Bol and Hebban have not thrown away data from the past. For Hebban, the download was in June 2016; the 2016 number should be at least twice as big.

<sup>76</sup> Boekmeter is a kind of crossover between a forum site like Ezullia and a review site like Hebban. Users write reviews but the reviews are parts of threads that also contain other posts. While a review is usually a monologue, with perhaps some comments and questions at the end, on Boekmeter the reviews are inherently part of a “multilogue”. Boekmeter is a reminder that in the book discussion sphere, boundaries between site types are hard to draw.

<sup>77</sup> Nancy K. Baym, “The New Shape of Online Community: The Example of Swedish Independent Music Fandom,” *First Monday* 12, no. 8 (2007).

<sup>78</sup> Some bloggers have complained about that. See Krysta, “The Unwritten Rules of the Blogosphere,” <https://pagesunbound.wordpress.com/2017/02/14/the-unwritten-rules-of-the-blogosphere/>, and the ensuing discussion.

<sup>79</sup> Hebban’s house rules require a minimum review length of 150 words, <https://www.hebban.nl/main/huisregels>.

<sup>80</sup> It is difficult to distinguish those that can be considered reviews and those that cannot.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/451488498379185/permalink/666856893509010/>.

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/451488498379185/permalink/757870764407622/>.