My talk today is based on my PhD (which I completed last summer), and describes how I dealt with ethics within it.

My research dealt with the relationship between literary culture and Internet culture in Russia – both from the point of view of established authors, as well as from the point of view of readers and amateur authors, which I referred to as "literature enthusiasts" in the title of this paper.

I conducted my research between 2008 and 2011; however some of the sources I used have been online since the mid-1990s. My primary sources have been represented by authors' websites (in particular established writers Boris Akunin and Viktor Pelevin), literary communities ("literary portals", that is websites collecting both original literary texts and reflective texts and commentaries), forums and self-publication websites. In this talk, I will focus mainly on one forum and one self-publication website.

For this type of study, there was no specific and established methodology I could follow, which would take into account literary aspects as well as the history of book and of reading, as I was planning to do. A lot of reflection on the Internet, until recent years was dealing with the Internet as a tool for research rather than the subject of research, often for social science-based research.

Similarly, ethics for Internet research are a matter which does not have precise rules, because of the variety of cases that can be encountered and the relatively new field; however, there is an evolution of reflections as studies using the Internet and based on the Internet become more common. However, think that in some ways there is still a legacy from social science research, which tends to protect the identity of "human subjects", basing on ethical guidelines that were often devised before the Internet became a mass medium.

It was initally not fully clear to me how to treat this aspect (I was thinking along the lines of "my research is not sensitive so it shouldn't be much of an issue"), as I decided not to use direct interviews but to simply use materials I could find online and that were PUBLICALLY visible online, that is I didnt need any registration to view them, and they are visible to any user connected to the Internet.

Some more clarity was suggested to me by an article written in 2002 by Amy Bruckman, which suggests considering the Internet user not as a "human subject" but as an "amateur artist". Bruckman argues that since humanities research has been dealing more and more with activities beyond the literary

text, this kind of approach needs to be implemented. Being a humanities researcher rather than a social scientist, I decided to embrace this approach.

Moreover, as the amount of literary-focused research grows on the Internet, it is necessary to acknowledge the much-talked about "blurring of boundaries" between readers and authors and between established and amateur artists and writers.

Therefore, I really like Bruckman's idea of the Internet as a "playground" for amateur artists. Ethical considerations now follow: the Internet user, rather than see his identity protected in all cases, might want his/her autorship recognised. (note: however, a lot of internet users post their materials under a nickname, which adds a layer of protection towards identification, but also creates issues of authenticity).
The Internet in fact also blurs the boundaries between "published" and "unpublished", and between public and private: Bruckman suggests considering the online text as "semi-published" (her example is that if I paint a picture and it's on my wall at home, it is private as you need permission to enter my home; if I show it in a public gallery, it is public. The internet is in between: materials can be published on personal website which are accessible by anybody, if they happen to come across it), as part of a "continuum" between openly published and unpublished, thus calling for the need for a selection case by case of the ethical approach to be followed.

So how did I deal with it all?
As mentioned before, some of the virtual environments I used were forums and self-publication websites.

In particular, the forum I mostly used was the forum of a website dedicated to writer Boris Akunin. This is a fan website called *Fandorin!* From the name of Akunin's most famous literary character. It is a space entirely created by fans, online since the year 2000, and it hosts a lively forum, from where I took several of my examples of literature fan interactions.
While initially I had thought of making users aware of my presence and even interact with them as a forum member, I eventually decided to use only what was available, as a form of methodological choice which makes a point of showing how the materials on the internet provide enough materials for an in-depth analysis.

In this case, when I quoted directly from the forum, I did not specify the names of users I was quoting – in Bruckman analysis, this is called as a "light disguise:" it is clear which community is used as a source, direct quotes are used, but names of users are not explicit. Moreover, the linguistic aspect in some ways adds another level of disguise: I translated all my quotes into English.

This approach wanta to show that my main focus was on the message exchange, and not the identity of the people I was quoting: I did not focus on the demographics of forum users, but just on their posts on literary topics: I didn't know anything about them other than their literary activity online. Moreover, I considered forum communication as a spontaneous conversation: messages are brief, colloquial, and usually/probably unedited. They work together in dialogue and in the context of the forum, but they are not works of art in themselves.

Differently, I took a slightly different approach when dealing with self-publication website *Proza.ru.*
The website is one of the earliest and largest online self-publication spaces in the russian language (currently more than 153.000 authors, and more than 3 million works of art), online since the year 2000.
In this case, I kept the names of authors when I quoted them: most users here post with (what seems to be) their real name, and they publish what they consciously perceive as literary works: it thus feels like quoting from a specific author and in some way from a more authoritative source, like a book.
It is however interesting to note how some of the authors often do not consider themselves as "real writers", as they explain in their profiles. It is peculiar because it plays on the lesser authority of online writing, which is not considered as prestigious as "real" writing.*

However, some of these authors have also reached publication in print, and their modesty seems to recall the traditional russian mentality which considers the literary writer as a sort of prophet, therefore enjoying a status that not everybody can reach.
I don't consider myself as a writer, even if I won my region's competition for the best fairy tale; I write short stories essays and novels only when I cant confront some problem with journalism
I published prose on newspapers, magazines and collections, in 2004 my first book was published…

Despite my age (51) and even if I won this literary prize (crown/garland) in 2005, I consider myself as a beginner, even more so as the prize I won was in the "debut" category…

Писателем себя не считаю, хотя уже в шесть лет выиграл областной конкурс на лучшую сказку. Рассказы, эссе, повести и романы пишу только тогда, когда не могу справиться с какими-то житейскими, философскими, человеческими и иными проблемами с помощью журналистики. Прозу печатал в газетах, журналах, сборниках. В конце 2004 года в Екатеринбурге издали мою первую книгу" […]
http://www.proza.ru/avtor/komandor60
"Несмотря на вполне солидный возраст (мне уже 51 год), и на полученную в 2005 г. литературную премию "Венец", я являюсь начинающим писателем-прозаиком, тем более что и премия получена мною в номинации "Дебют", за первую книгу."
http://www.proza.ru/avtor/furta

Conclusion:
The Internet is an essentially public space, where content is "semi-published": it's not necessarily consciously published through a process, but it is also not private.
Therefore, there is a need to consider the treatment of online sources case by case, according to criteria such as:

- the level of public access of the source used: does it need a registration, or is it open to everybody
- the type of content, of course: its level of sensitivity, the purposes of the community
- the implicit need to recognise authorship of literary content (where applicable – which might be difficult to judge)

Bibliography
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<www.fandorin.ru> (last accessed 18 November 2012)

<www.proza.ru> (last accessed 18 November 2012)