

**LITERARY EVALUATION AND READING PRACTICES
IN ROMANIAN ONLINE LITERARY COMMUNITIES:
www.clublitarar.com**

Online vs. Offline

The Internet, states the art theorist Borys Groys in one of his recent books, is a figurative space in which the “real” external world is referenced. That is to say that everything happening online is a documentation of the offline world. From this perspective, the “document” can suffer innumerable changes, because its identity (as Internet entity or phenomena) lies not in its own form, but in its external referent. For arts and literature on the Internet, this means the erasing of the boundaries between production and exhibition (or, more specifically, in the case of literature, between writing and publishing). This process (of literary production), hidden in the analogue world, is now exposed in the digital¹. Following Groys’s argument, we can say that any online community is, in fact, a digital document of a “real” offline community, or at least that its referent is placed outside of itself.

Online literary communities have similar traits to traditional forms of literary sociability, although their characterization with the aid of traditional taxonomy remains problematic. Unlike traditional literary groups that are defined primarily by a well determined aesthetic and ideological ideal (or purpose)², online communities are defined rather through the orientation of their interest and practice. According to Michael Farell, the life cycle of artistic and literary circles is composed of seven stages³, including a moment of rebellion against an established authority and the appearance of well-established roles within the group (a charismatic leader, a tyrant figure outside the group, etc.). In most cases, the applicability of Farell’s stages to online creative communities is problematic for two simple reasons: first, the large number of users (and their relatively random

¹ Boris Groys, *In the Flow*, London, Verso, 2016.

² Denis Saint-Amand, “Groupe”, in Anthony Glinoe and Denis Saint-Amand (dir.), *Le lexique socius*, <http://ressources-socius.info/index.php/lexique/21-lexique/195-groupe>, accessed September 3rd 2006.

³ The seven stages of artistic or literary collaborative circles according to Michael Farell: 1. Formation/ gathering in a “magnetic place” facilitated by a “gatekeeper”; 2. Rebellion against established authority; 3. The “quest stage”, formation of group identity, the apparition of “boundary markers”; 4. Splitting into small collaborative pairs; 5. Collective action stage; 6. Separation stage; 7. Nostalgic reunion (Michael P. Farell, *Collaborative Circles: Friendship Dynamics and Creative*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001).

connections) is inhibitory for any ideological and aesthetic atomization, and second, the status of online communities inside the literary field is ambiguous, meaning that the online practice is not received as culturally valuable by the “analogue” establishment (for example, in China, literature produced online is represented in bookstores by a new genre, labeled as “internet literature”⁴). Judged by their degree of institutionalization⁵, these types of communities (with rare exceptions, as we shall see below) are de-institutionalized, with random connections between the users, and rarely semi-institutionalized (the formation of culturally coherent groups).

A common trait of all literary circles is a type of negative adaptation to the established authority, a type of revolt against the one institution or the other, followed by the institutionalization of the rebellious faction itself (as documented by the circles of 19th century or by the avant-garde movements). Both positive and negative adaptations to the established literary institutions can be seen in online communities. Although internal evaluation mechanisms and hierarchies are developed inside the community, paper reviews and books are still published in the search for institutional validation. However, internet technology transforms the material framing of the online communities in a radical way: the fluidity of space and time (users are no longer restricted by geography or specific timelines), instant access to resources, the bodiless interaction, anonymity, hyper connectivity, etc. All these material factors shift the online literary communities to a great degree of de-institutionalization and democratization.

Romanian Online Literary Communities

In the Romanian context, the online literary communities appeared around the early 2000s, www.poezie.ro [poezie = poetry] being one of the first and biggest platforms (over ten thousand members, still active today) and around it, in time, developed various other smaller communities, such as www.clubliterar.com [club literar = literary club], www.hyperliteratura.net, www.fdl.ro etc. As a general observation, it should be noted that the members of these platforms (with the single exception of www.clubliterar.com, as we shall see further) were mostly amateurs, skipping the traditionally established evaluation filters, and finding here an open platform for their works.

⁴ Michael Hockx, “Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities”, *The China Quarterly*, “Culture in the Contemporary PRC”, 2005, 183, September, pp. 670-691, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192514>, accessed September 5th 2016.

⁵ Denis Saint-Amand, “Groupe”.

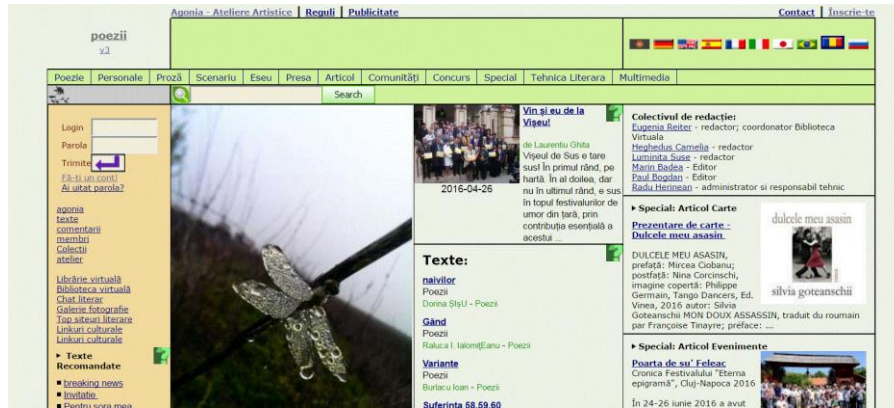


Figure 1: The interface of www.poezie.ro 26.04.2016

The majority of these communities were characterized by open access and a high degree of democratization. The interest for them slowly faded after the apparition of social media (Facebook, Twitter), but some of them are still functioning today.

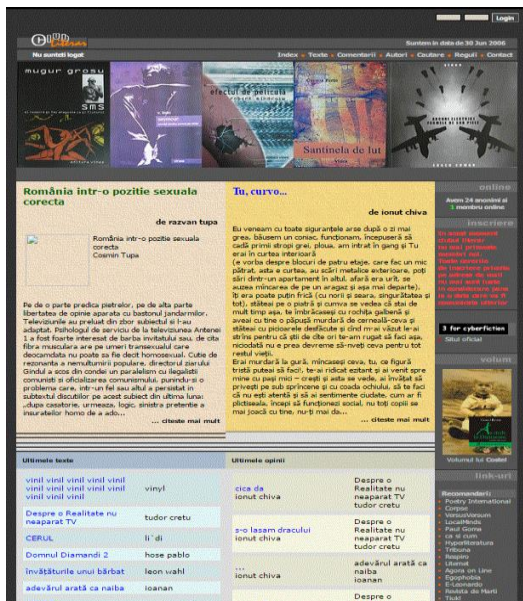


Figure 2: www.clubliterar.com interface in 2006 (with the two recommended texts in front, and the comment and text lists below).

www.clubliterar.com

In the short history of Romanian digital communities, www.clubliterar.com occupied a special position. The most important difference from the other communities being that a great part of its members were already involved in the traditional literary circuit. What at first appeared to be just an elitist movement breaking out of the giant platform www.agonia.ro transformed in short time in a digital platform for the young generation of Romanian writers, called by the critics

“Generation 2000”⁶.

The site appeared in 2003, and in its first year of existence, the users were exclusively ex-members of www.poezie.ro (selected and invited from the “mother-site” by a team of “administrators” (figures 2, 3). The site’s interface was somewhat similar with that of www.poezie.ro: a list of recommended texts, text list, comments list, author lists, and a forum (which, in this stage, was public) (figures 3, 4). A significant difference would be that, on the new site, the graphic marks of evaluation⁷ were eliminated, a greater space was given for the recommended texts, and the membership status could be gained exclusively by invitation from the site’s administrators (while on www.poezie.ro everyone could create an account).

From 2005 on, the structure of the membership changed entirely, as many of the young writers of that moment (writers with at least one book published, active in the established literary circles around the country and affiliated informally to “Generation 2000”) joined the site, such as Marius Ianuș, Ruxandra Novac, Claudiu Komartin, Dan Coman and many others. The old members of the site were, with a few exceptions, excluded by the new formation. This was possible not only by means of symbolic capital detained by the new members, but also because of the group cohesion conferred by the Romanian cenacle network still functional at that time, a professional and vocational solidarity that registered the old members as exogenous. For example, in 2006, the authors listed on the site were, in great part, the same authors present in the “Generation 2000” anthology⁸, an anthology edited by the literary critic Marin Mincu, which was considered the “birth certificate” of the group. However, this type of membership analysis is saddled not only by the incompleteness of the archives or by the volatility of author pages, but also by the so called “clones” phenomenon – artistic and social experiments made by the authors themselves, similar to Pessoa’s heteronyms, facilitated by the web⁹.

⁶ “Generation 2000” is a notion used by the Romanian literary criticism to define the poetic movements appeared in the Romanian literature after the year 2000. The two main aesthetic orientations of this conglomerate being an explicit poetics, similar to that of the American Beats, and the other, somewhat antagonistic to the first orientation, a direction in line with the high tradition of the European modernism. See also: Cosmin Borza, “Contemporary Romanian poets. Between the Visionary and the Quotidian”, *Asymptote*, 2013, January, <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/cosmin-borza-on-contemporary-romanian-poets/>, accessed September 3rd 2016.

⁷ On www.poezie.ro, the evaluation marks were called “stars”, and it was for the users who acceded at a certain “level” to use them.

⁸ Marin Mincu (ed.), *Generația 2000 [The Generation 2000]*, Constanța, Pontica, 2004.

⁹ For a detailed description of the “clones” phenomenon in “Generation 2000” see: Iulia Cornigeanu, “The Clones: a new phenomenon in the literary environment”, *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, I, 2010, 2, Fall, http://doctorat.sas.unibuc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Issue2_IuliaCornigeanu_Clones.pdf, accessed August 5th 2016.

Gen	Titlu	Înscris de	Data publicării
poezie	În fiecare noapte în mintea mea	diana	16.06.2006 - 13:22
poezie	bruce	leon wahl	16.06.2006 - 12:12
articol	„O editură este suma titlurilor de poezie pe care le publică” Un interviu realizat de Manasia cu Tzone, apărut în Tribuna	Nicolae Tzone	15.06.2006 - 18:20
poezie	fetele flirt periculos	leon wahl	15.06.2006 - 07:49
poezie	eu&maica/mea3	dan sociu	15.06.2006 - 03:52
poezie	furia II (vinil)	crisrina ispas	15.06.2006 - 00:46
poezie	interpretează: v. leac	claudiu komartin	14.06.2006 - 17:05
anunt	ANGELA MARINESCU LA BOOKFEST	miruna vlada	14.06.2006 - 10:24
poezie	capu-n maini	dan sociu	14.06.2006 - 07:25
poezie	e ceva viu în spatele ochilor	claudiu banu	14.06.2006 - 02:35
teatru	cancerul galben	ruslan carța	13.06.2006 - 17:17
poezie	la fel de adevărat	george geacar	13.06.2006 - 13:01
poezie	ce a fost	delfina	13.06.2006 - 11:35
poezie	fratele paduche	dan sociu	12.06.2006 - 23:07
poezie	oranj	ioanan	12.06.2006 - 13:52
anunt	CECILIA STEFANESCU în club A la POETICILE cotidianului + LIVIU DIAMANDI show	razvan tupa	12.06.2006 - 13:10

Figure 3: Texts list

Virtual Elites. Strategies of Selection

In fact, from the point of view of literary history at least, this digital structure was a radical innovation: a “hyper-cenacle”, a space in which the different factions of the emergent Romanian literature could debate, collaborate, socialize, irrespective of space or time limitations. “For the connoisseurs, *www.clubliterar.com* was a Mount Olympus of poetry” – wrote Bogdan Coșa in an

37	costel	Costel Babos	Windsor	Canada
38	crisi cotarcea	crisi cotarcea		
39	crisrina ispas			
40	d rossman			
41	dan coman	dan coman	b-ta	
42	dan prodan			
43	dan sociu	dan sociu	Botosani, Iasi, Bucuresti, depinde de chef	
44	daniel d marin	daniel d marin	Bucuresti	
45	daniel sur		Bucuresti	Romania
46	delfina	Silvia Calbiano	Chisnău	
47	diana	my place	tgvi, buc	
48	Diana Iepure	Diana Iepure-HB&I&U	Bucuresti	România
49	DoDu	Dorian Duma		Canada
50	domnisoara cu coasa			
51	dorin muresan	dorin muresan	cluj-napoca	romania
52	dorin		Craiova	
53	dumitru bădița	dumitru bădița	Bucuresti	România
54	elena vladareanu			
55	elephantis	Ioana Tabacaru	Iasi	
56	emilio	Emil Tudorache	Bucuresti	Romania
57	Enkidu	Sarin Olariu	Detroit	S.U.A.
58	ensign morituri			
59	eugen suman	eugen suman	Bucuresti	Romania

Figure 4: Authors list

article from *Observer cultural* literary review – “in short time it reached the status of a cult-site, because the number of users was constantly around 100, and sometimes even the established poets were rejected there. The “Generation 2000” finally found a place of its own, a place in which everybody knew everybody, and the conversations were an inside job, ignoring intrusions,

ignoring plots against Euridice Circle¹⁰ made by malicious people from inside the system, and the old writers' and literary critics' anachronisms. *Clubliterar* was a creative writing workshop, opened non-stop, where it didn't matter that you were in Arad or Botoșani, in Constanța or Bucharest, the writers were working, proof-reading, debating or, most often, they made the dust fly, but they were doing this inside their own space. In other words, literature was made in front of us all"¹¹.

Many traits defining the traditional cenacle can be also applied to this new structure: a restrictive union of writers that usually denies the literary establishment of the dominant institutions. As Glinoyer and Laisney noticed in the case of 19th century French circle, the formation seeks to establish its own legitimation modalities, and tends towards practices of collectivization¹². Unlike the Romanian traditional cenacles, that were patronized by important critics (Literary Circle of Monday, Universitas, Letters, Euridice, etc.), the hierarchical structure of www.clubliterar.com was more fluid and indeterminate, but it was far from being democratic. The power was distributed by symbolical, but also by

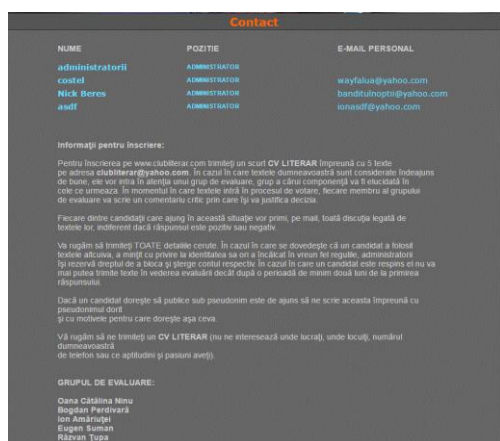


Figure 5: Contact page, with information about the evaluation of potential new members.

technical criteria. The owner and initiator of the site was Costel Baboș (a Romanian writer living in Canada) and his rights as administrator were intact the whole time www.clubliterar.com was active. He made use of his prerogatives (strictly technical – removing or adding new members, operating changes in the site's interface) only when the rest of the team (technical administrators and moderators) could not handle or decide upon a situation. This was the single fixed position in the site's hierarchy. The other administrator (called “technical administrator”) was responsible with site maintenance and was a position occupied by many people over time. Another power structure, maybe the most important, was the one

¹⁰ The Euridice Circle, conducted by the literary critic Marin Mincu, was one of the most important cenacles for the writers affirmed in the early 2000s.

¹¹ Bogdan Coșa, “Generația 2000 sau ultima generație de creație în literatură română” [“The 2000 Generation or the last generation of creation in the Romanian literature”], *Observator cultural*, XI, 2011, 346, May.

¹² Anthony Glinoyer, Vincent Laisney, *L'âge des cenacles. Confraternités littéraires et artistiques au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 2013.

held by the moderators. Their main activity was to select the “recommended texts” from the “text list”, this activity being similar to an editorial process. Also, their duties were to moderate conflicts between members, and they very often could act as censors if the site’s rules had been broken. In the formation stage of the circle, the moderators had similar roles to those held by the “gatekeepers” theorized by Michael Farell: “Often a group forms when a gatekeeper or a matchmaker who knows each member individually introduces them to one another. In other words, circles often begin as radial networks centered on a single person. The personality and values of the gatekeeper act as filters in the formation of a circle. When circles form in a magnet place out of the friendship network of a gatekeeper, the members are more likely to share a common language and set of values, and they are likely to possess similar levels of ‘cultural capital’ [...], that is, they are likely to be roughly similar in their level of expertise in their disciplines as well as in their familiarity with the elite and popular cultures of their society. In short, they can talk to each other”¹³. In the beginnings of the “new” www.clublitar.com (roughly, the year 2005), moderators were functioning less as evaluators of membership requests, but mainly as “scouts” who recruited members from the already existent offline networks of young writers and who invited them to join the site. This gatekeeper role was played especially by Eugen Suman¹⁴ and Claudiu Komartin¹⁵. Komartin was a very important actor for the group coagulation at this stage because of his extended social connections among the “Generation 2000” cenacle networks, in which he occupied a central position.

Most of the site’s activity was public (texts, commentaries, authors list) with the exception of a private forum, where only members had access (similar to a chat room). The candidates for membership had to pass two filters in order to get an account: the moderators applied a first filter through a set of membership, and the members applied a second filter, through their votes for the newcomer. Another way of access to the site was by direct invitation.

Beside literary texts and commentaries, manifestoes¹⁶, polemical reactions to different cultural events¹⁷, debates are published. It is a case of a concrete

¹³ Michael P. Farell, *Collaborative Circles*, p. 19.

¹⁴ <http://www.eugensuman.com/About-Eugen-Suman>, accessed August 7th 2016.

¹⁵ <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/27535/Claudiu-Komartin>, accessed August 7th 2016.

¹⁶ Radu Vancu’s *Poetry and individuation* and *A letter to Dan Sociu* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20071026044915/http://www.clublitar.com/text.php?tid=4511>) and Claudiu Komartin’s *Performatist Manifesto* and his other writings concerning the young generation of writers (<http://web.archive.org/web/20061010072551/http://www.clublitar.com/text.php?tid=1825>) or Razvan Ţupa’s theoretical essays (<http://web.archive.org/web/20060512192852/http://www.clublitar.com/text.php?tid=2579>), accessed August 7th 2016.

¹⁷ For example, this virulent attack against a national colloquy for young writers organized by the Writers Union in 2006. Although the text was signed by Adrian Schiop and Ionuț Chiva, as it can be

configuration (the online community *per se*) overlapping an abstract construct (“Generation 2000”, a historical and aesthetical concept).

Besides “the gatekeeper” role, another significant position in Farell’s model can be identified in the history of the group: “the boundary marker”. The importance of this role, according to Farell, becomes visible in the third stage, “the quest stage”. The boundary markers are informal roles played by members of the community that have either radical or conservative positions, and so “by arguing about and clarifying what they reject in the work of the boundary markers, the members begin to build consensus about the kind of work they value”¹⁸. A “boundary marker crisis” took place on www.clublitarar.com, when the novelist Adrian Schiop published a digital installation that was considered pornographic by the team of moderators’ and consequently he was excluded from the site (unfortunately, the installation cannot be found in the archives). This exclusion was followed by other members’ leaving the site, solidarity with the excluded one; eventually, the moderators themselves resigned and started a debate on the site’s rules and the roles of moderators and administrators, and also on the possibilities and potentialities of common actions¹⁹.

Conclusions

For literary studies, this “document” is important from at least two perspectives: 1. It is a valuable historical resource for the study of the references that are exchanged inside a community of writers; also, the historian can easily have access to the relations of influence, to the dynamic of poetics in competition, to the writers’ workshops, through which they published/ discussed/ modified their book drafts in this space for the first time, 2. For digital humanities, with the means of distant reading, quantitative research, or network analysis there can be drawn valuable results in literary evaluation, reading practices or interactions author-commentator (as done by Peter Boot on a similar community from Holland²⁰).

From an online/ offline comparative perspective, internet technology is decisive by changing the material frames in which these circles function. In the

noted in the comments section, the other members subscribed to the attack: <https://web.archive.org/web/20060620121155/http://www.clublitarar.com/text.php?tid=4116>.

¹⁸ Michael P. Farell, *Collaborative Circles*, p. 22.

¹⁹ This debate is only partially reconfigurable in the archives. Here are a few relevant links: <https://web.archive.org/web/20060620023405/http://www.clublitarar.com/text.php?tid=4371>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060623055537/http://www.clublitarar.com/text.php?tid=4445>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060620014216/http://www.clublitarar.com/text.php?tid=4360>

²⁰ Peter Boot, “Literary Evaluation in Online Communities of Writers and Readers”, *Scholarly and Research Communication*, III, 2012, 2. [Http://src-online.ca/index.php/src/article/view/77/90](http://src-online.ca/index.php/src/article/view/77/90), accessed June 6th 2016.

specific case of www.clublitar.com it can be noted how for the first time in the history of the Romanian literature, the geographical barrier disappeared (this type of conditioning was, until now, insufficiently studied, although it represented a strong determination for literary groupings – best seen in the case of 80's generation, when aesthetic discourse in literary canon formation was an euphemism for geographical/ regional criteria)²¹. Online, young writers from across the country could form, for a while, a hyper-cenacle, irreverent of the center/ province dichotomy.

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²¹ Ștefan Baghiu, "Cronologia ideii de neoexpresionism: o teorie a reacției" ["The Chronology of the Neoexpresionism: a Theory of Reaction"], *Euphorion*, 2015, 2-3. In this article, Ștefan Baghiu shows how the concept of „neoexpresionism” was in fact a regional reaction to Bucharest based postmodernism in the 80s.

LITTERARY EVALUATION AND READING PRACTICES IN ROMANIAN ONLINE LITERARY COMMUNITIES: WWW.CLUBLITERAR.COM

(Abstract)

Online literary communities have similar traits to traditional forms of literary sociability, although their characterization with the aid of traditional taxonomy remains problematic. Unlike traditional literary groups, that are defined primarily by a well determined aesthetic and ideological ideal (or purpose), online communities are rather defined by the orientation of their interest and their practice, forming technologically supported platforms in which users can develop conversations around specific interests, or engage in collaborative practices. In the Romanian context, the online literary communities appeared around the early 2000s. The majority of these communities were characterized by open access and a high degree of democratization. The interest for them slowly faded after the apparition of social media (Facebook, Twitter), but some of them are still functioning today. In the short history of Romanian digital communities, www.clubliterar.com occupied a special position, the most important difference from the other communities being that a great part of its members were already involved in the traditional literary circuit. What at first appeared to be just an elitist movement breaking out of the giant platform www.agonia.ro, transformed in short time in a digital platform for the young generation of Romanian writers, called “Generation 2000”.

Keywords: online literary communities, www.clubliterar.com, internet literature, collaborative practices, Michael Farrell.

EVALUARE LITERARĂ ȘI PRACTICI DE LECTURĂ ÎN COMUNITĂȚILE LITERARE ONLINE ROMÂNEȘTI: WWW.CLUBLITERAR.COM

(Rezumat)

Deși comunitățile literare online au trăsături similare cu formele tradiționale de sociabilitate literară, descrierea lor cu ajutorul taxonomiilor tradiționale rămâne discutabilă. Spre deosebire de grupurile literare tradiționale, care se definesc în principal printr-un ideal estetic și ideologic bine conturat, comunitățile online se caracterizează prin orientarea practicilor și a intereselor în jurul unor platforme tehnologice. În context românesc, comunitățile literare online apar în jurul anului 2000; majoritatea acestor platforme definindu-se prin acces liber și printr-un înalt grad de democratizare. Interesul pentru aceste forme de colaborare literară a scăzut odată cu apariția social media, cu toate că unele dintre ele își continuă și astăzi activitatea. În scurta istorie a comunităților digitale de limbă română, www.clubliterar.com a ocupat un loc privilegiat, cea mai importantă diferență față de celelalte comunități online fiind aceea că o bună parte a utilizatorilor erau deja implicați în circuitul literar tradițional. La începuturile sale doar o mișcare elitistă care se rupe de „site-ul-mamă” – www.clubliterar.com se transformă, în scurtă vreme, într-o platformă digitală a tinerilor scriitori români, numiți de critică „Generația 2000”.

Cuvinte-cheie: comunități literare online, www.clubliterar.com, literatură în mediul virtual, practici colaborative, Michael Farrell.