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Authors Using Social Media: Layers of Identity and the Online Author Community

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Abstract This article offers an analysis of the impact of professional social-media engagement upon authors. Authors primarily use Facebook, Twitter and there is growing use of Pinterest. Authors use social-media platforms primarily for marketing, publicity and making contact with readers. They tend to adopt a multi-layered approach to self-presentation and the lines between their 'public' and 'private' identities are blurred. The research reveals a limited author-reader community, but a much stronger online author–author community, founded upon practical support and encouragement. There are implications for the publishing industry as authors believe their publishers lack social-media expertise. The commercial benefits of maintaining a social-media presence are unclear for many authors.

Keywords Social-media · Online · Community · Author · Persona

Introduction and Rationale

The study of the impact of various social networking services is a burgeoning stream of research, and the growth of digital media calls into question the authenticity of identity (identities), relationships and our various practices in life, work and leisure [1]. While there is a growing corpus of research which examines social media and selected facets of the creative and cultural industries, social media and its use by creative artists (e.g. artists such as authors, musicians, visual artists) is

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not a common area of study. Previous research by Baym [2] examining musicians and their mediated audiences acknowledges that this relationship is rarely examined from the perspective of the artists. Beer's research [3: 233] on musicians and 'web 2.0' suggests that social media has effected a 'reconfiguration of the relations between performers and their audiences' and suggests that this topic provides a new field of research agenda for examination. Russo [4] also acknowledges that the impact of social media within the cultural sector is underexamined.

Baym and Boyd [5] explore the multi-layered publicness available to those using social media and find that 'people's relationship to public life is shifting in ways we have barely begun to understand' [5: 321]. Indeed, even our understanding of the terms 'people' and 'public' increasingly overlap and blur, as we see the growth of fan fiction, citizen journalism, beauty blogging and the growth of the social media prosumer [6, 7]. For authors, it is not new to be able to communicate with readers about their work. This has tended to take place during book events and signings in bookshops, schools or libraries, but also at literary conventions and book festivals, for better-known authors. It is assumed that social media enhances this kind of symbiotic relationship between readers and authors, but the veracity of this assumption has not been examined to date.

For the purpose of this article the term 'author' is used to denote those participants in the research. While the participants tended to refer to themselves as 'writers', nevertheless, 'authors' is used to denote a distinction between the current research which focuses predominantly upon creative, often fictional, writing and the wealth of other writing taking place online, such as blogging, advertising, website creation etc. Similarly, the term 'reader' is used to denote those communicating via social media with the authors online in the current research. In some cases, these readers are also audience(s) or fans, but in this instance, 'readers' is the term that most accurately describes most of the participating group.
The aim of this article is:

To critically explore the types and purpose of social media use by authors.

The objectives are to:

Analyse the effect of author social-media use, particularly upon the author/reader relationship and the development of online community.

Analyse the online persona of the author as well as their conceptualisation of the audience.

Explore and evaluate any impact of social media upon the holistic writing experience.

The conceptual framework informing this research is informed by literature on community, self-presentation and audience perception. This research enhances academic knowledge of how digital technology is impacting the creative process and, by extension, our wider cultural and creative communities. As outlined above, and in the literature review, there is no research which explores authors' use of social media, or the implications of this use. The scope of the research is focused

upon those authors who are not 'known' names and does not address the larger topic of fandom or author as celebrity.

Layers of Identity

Baym and Boyd [5] examine 'socially mediated publicness' and the melding of audiences and publics afforded by 'blurred boundaries, multi-layered audiences, individual attributes, the specifics of the systems they use and the contexts of their use' [8: 320]. Van Dijck [8] has also asked 'how are public identities shaped through platform interfaces?' focusing upon how different platforms impact how we can present ourselves to our audience(s). Marwick and Boyd [9] raise the issue of context collapse, where a single identity is presented to an 'audience' where a range of different 'performances' might be more appropriate, or might be what would occur naturally in a series of interpersonal communications [10]. One can also think of this as the flattening of several audiences into one [9]. As Castells [11] terms it 'mass self-communication'. Social media certainly compels us to communicate this way (if we are communicating with more than one person at a time) and at times it may be closer to mass communication than interpersonal communication (as Castells implies). Van Dijck notes the inherent pressure imposed by SNSs to have a single, consistent identity online 'by integrating the principles of connectivity and narrative in their interfaces' [8: 201]. So, while social media increases our ability to connect with others, the quality and complexity of an interpersonal (face to face) communication will usually be superior to one mediated via social media, due both to our ability to shape our different selves for different audiences in an interpersonal setting [10] as well as use paralanguage, kinesics and other forms of nonverbal communication.

Strater and Lipford's research [12] found that Facebook users conceptualised the contacts with whom they had most interaction as their imagined audience, but presumably there is a remaining 'silent audience' who may or may not be congruous with the imagined audience. Previous research suggests that social networking serves to reduce the distance between performer and audience [3]. Baym's research [2: 289] argues that the 'positioning of audiences somewhere between unequal 'fans' and equal 'friends' is itself continuously negotiated through practice'.

One must bear in mind that while there are elements of mass communication within social-media use, there may be times when an author posts a message, and no one is there. Or perhaps one or two people will read it the next day. Indeed perhaps rather than 'mass self-communication' [11: 4] for many people (perhaps especially artists) social media is more of a tool for small group or even one-to-one communication. Authors with fewer followers or readers must have a different audience interaction than those with a mass following. As Brake finds in his research, bloggers may use tools and approaches which make their blogs 'analogous to small-scale interpersonal communication', alternatively, they may aim to undertake 'mass-mediated communication' [13: 1056].

Relationships and Community Online

Baym and Boyd raise the distinction between public and audience [5: 322]. As they note, 'people have always used media to create public identities for themselves, others, and groups' [5: 321]. Baym [2] is consistent with Marwick and Boyd [9] in 'conceptualizing public figure's [sic] social mediated personae as practices rather than constants' [2: 312]. So it is a presentation of self for a particular audience, rather than a constant—although we might say that this is how we behave in any case [10], it is just that socially mediated publicness highlights this self-presentation of particular facets of our selves.

While previous research into the music industry has found that artists understand the 'illusory' aspect of any relationship with fans, Baym [2, 14] found that they were also clear about the benefits of these relationships, which were felt to be genuine. Baym [2] also found that some artists were clear about the distinction between a personal Facebook page and a fan Facebook page, as the content needed to be distinct. As Baym notes [2: 289] artists cannot 'choose their fans, cannot choose to terminate that relationship and the admiration is usually not mutual'.

Seraj [15: 210] provides a useful summary of various definitions of online communities. Elements of these definitions are drawn from our understanding of a 'sense of community' offline (SOC) which might be summarised as a sense of belonging, emotional connection, of mattering to others within the community and a belief that the group members can meet each other's needs [16, 17]. Integration, fulfilment and an emotional connection are further common characteristics attributed to SOC. The growth of technology means we become less bound to geographically fixed spaces and this also compels us to communicate virtually, thus allowing us to select our own communities [18]. Further research has tested the characteristics of SOC in the virtual community (SOVC) but this has proven challenging [19]. Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Toland and Marrington [20: 604] note that the investigation of 'connectedness' in an online context is relatively novel. Many studies of online communities focus on the belonging or *desire* to join a group as the key motivation or end point of joining [21]. This is often motivated by fandom. However, online communities often emerge as a result of product consumption and resulting reviews, or social and cultural comment.

There has been some study of book-related communities online, although these have tended to focus upon those reader communities virtually congregating around library books, rather than books as a commodity—the 'social digital library' [22]. There has also been considerable study of the bookish community centred around reading groups, both terrestrial and online [14, 23]. These bookish communities are discussed in depth by Worrall [24]. There is however a distinct difference between these communities focused upon books, and those discussed in this paper which flip the idea of community on its head and focus on the producers.

Methodological Approach

Bearing in mind the many benefits to be gained from adopting a mixed-method approach, indeed becoming a pragmatic researcher [25], the current research combines online questionnaires and telephone interviews to explore the questions under scrutiny. Maxwell [26] proposes an inherently 'bricolage' approach—one that is not constrained by adherence to a particular research paradigm, but adapts to the needs and requirements of the research [17, 27].

An online survey was distributed to authors via various online authors' sites and writing groups. This approach served the purpose of reaching many semi-professional as well as professional authors, though few were known names. This was a deliberate strategy since initial investigation of 'known' authors' use of social media often demonstrated a more conscious self-presentation around lifestyle and image. This self-presentation via social media is well documented in research (e.g. [28, 29]). This project was more concerned with authors who *needed* to make connections for the ultimate purpose of publicising and selling their writing, and to analyse their social-media use and the resulting connections, in that context. The authors were predominantly writers of fiction, including young adult, children's (and school books), crime and science fiction. It is important to note that the survey had a strong qualitative element to it, allowing participants to expand on most questions and to add their own comments and observations. The options which participants were able to select for the questionnaire were informed by previous research which had examined bookshop marketing strategy [30, 31].

Forty five questionnaires were completed. Seven were rejected as unusable, either because they were incomplete, or because they contained spam messages. 38 usable questionnaires were collected; 30 women and eight men. Researchers using and examining digital ethnography have found that there are advantages to such an online approach: usually it is easier to gain greater access and therefore greater numbers of respondents [32, 33].

Survey participants were subsequently asked whether they would be willing to undertake an interview, probing their responses in further detail. This resulted in nine semi-structured recorded telephone interviews of between 20 and 40 min. This semi-structured approach allowed exploration of individual areas of specialisms (pertaining to social media, or online persona for instance) and allowed richer data to be gathered [17, 34].

The quantitative data from the survey was analysed using SPSS. The qualitative data were subject to open coding and 'recurring regularities' were identified [35: 465]. Many interesting ideas emerged but the data-collection process is inescapably selective, and informed by the research questions and conceptual frameworks [27].

Findings and Discussion

How are Authors Using Social Media?

Probing the authors' social-media use, it was established that of the 38 respondents,

- 32 use Facebook (84%), and 25 of those 'several times a day'.
- 28 use Twitter (74%), 15 of those using it 'several times a day'.
- 25 blog (66%) but less frequently, so weekly or less often than that.

The survey respondents also referred to other social media such as Tumblr, Linkedin, Goodreads and YouTube. Several also used Pinterest as a kind of database to store useful snippets of information for planned publications, such as the correct clothing for historical novels. There is growing use of Pinterest as a professional tool, often by libraries [36], and in teaching [37] this novel platform is used both personally and professionally. Exploring the use of these platforms in more detail, the following charts (Figs. 1, 2) represent the responses.

We can see from Figs. 1 and 2 that *sharing thoughts and opinions*, *interacting with readers and fans* and *marketing and publicity* are the dominant reasons for using Facebook and Twitter.
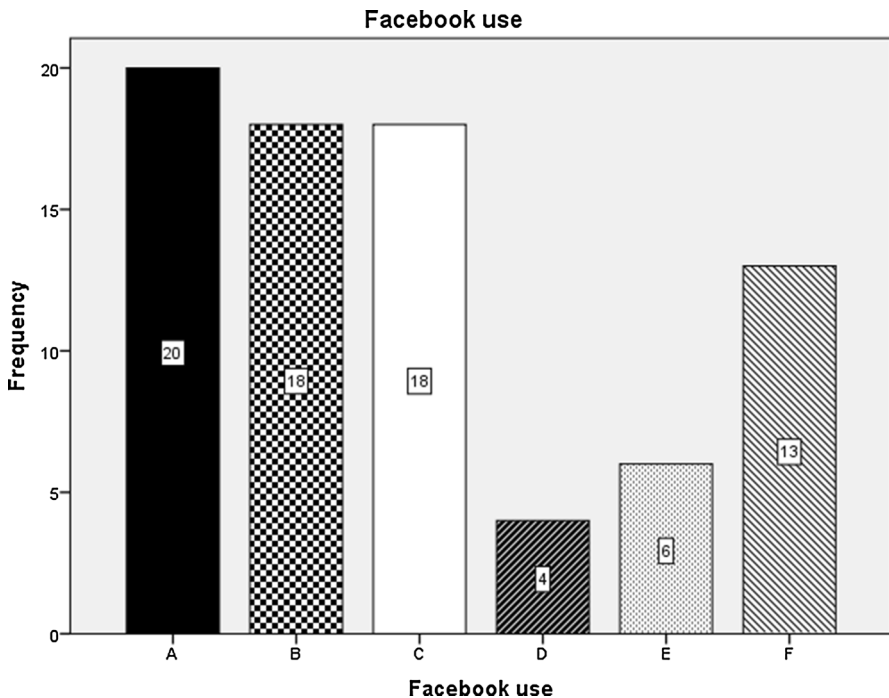

Fig. 1 Facebook use. *A* Sharing thoughts and opinions. *B* Interacting with readers and fans. *C* Marketing and Publicity. *D* Getting ideas for new books. *E* Don't use Facebook. *F* Other response
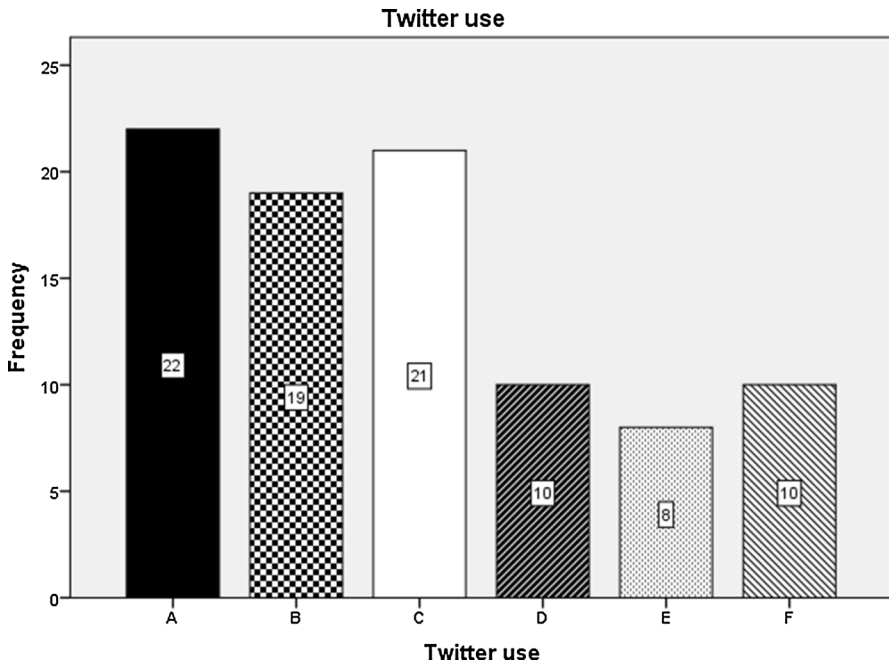
Fig. 2 Twitter use. *A* Sharing thoughts and opinions. *B* Interacting with readers and fans. *C* Marketing and Publicity. *D* Getting ideas for new books. *E* Don't use Twitter. *F* Other response

With regard to marketing and publicity, authors feel a sense of compulsion to engage with social media—there is a commercial expectation and a financial pressure applied by publishers, albeit obliquely rather than directly. As Das and Pavlíčková note, 'being a literate user of the media is important at individual and societal levels' [38: 393]. However, authors were generally unclear of the ultimate financial impact of their efforts on social media. This lack of clarity is also at times compounded by a perceived lack of social-media knowledge from publishers: 'publishers are very keen on our making a credible author platform, but have NO clue about using social media themselves'.

The idea that authors somehow feed off their readers or fans for ideas is partially supported by evidence from the research. 'Getting ideas for new books' on Twitter was selected by 10 authors: when interviewed, two participants noted that they 'get story leads' and 'many ideas for my short stories' via social media. However, this was not the driving force for using social media, and did not seem to be as important to the writers as the support they got from the online author community. Comments exploring the use of Twitter and Facebook were dominated by authors' experiences with *other authors,* rather than with fans or readers. For example authors use Facebook 'to connect with selected other writers', 'marketing other authors and their books' and for 'support from and to other writers'. Further uses for social media are shown in Fig. 3.
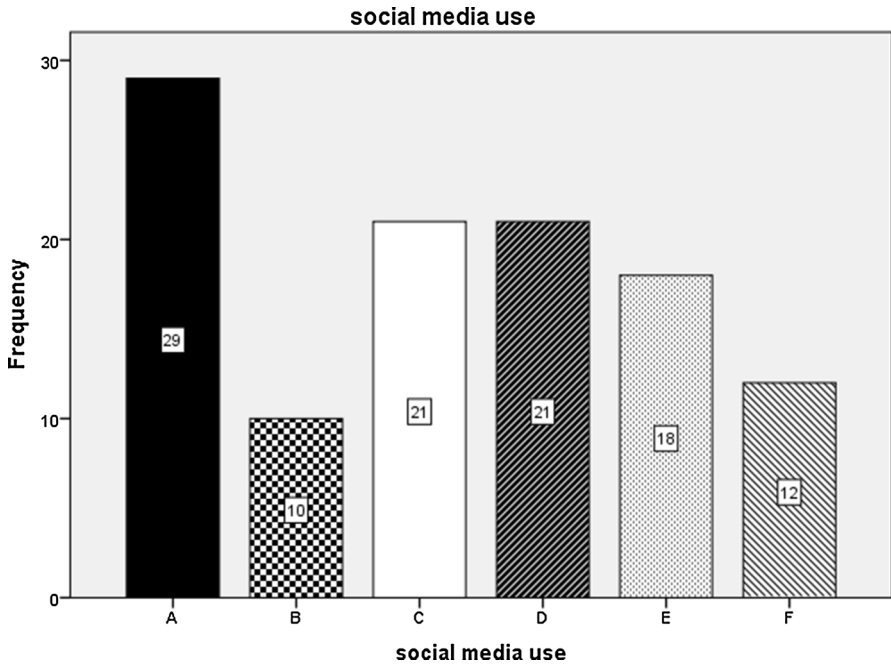
Fig. 3 Further uses for social media. *A* Sharing information about new books. *B* Sharing ideas for future writing. *C* Answering questions about my writing. *D* Sharing political/social/cultural opinions. *E* Sharing personal/family information. *F* Other response

As Fig. 3 demonstrates, there is a predictably high number of respondents sharing information about new books and answering questions about their writing. 21 participants (out of 38) share political and cultural opinions and 18 out of 38 share personal and family information. As one might predict, a key effect of increasing social-media use by authors is the growth in sharing information, with 20 sharing either 'a bit' more or 'much' more information than before their social media use commenced.

As Beer [3] found, social media serves to reduce the distance between performer and audience. Social media acts as a conduit in order to 'reveal' and enable the contact between author and reader. The isolation of writing is an age-old problem [39–41] and social media gives a voice to the isolated author. As one author commented, interaction with other authors, 'makes writing a less isolating experience'.

The Author Persona Online

There is evidence of authors using social media in order to enhance their author persona in a very conscious fashion. One commented that using social media, he practiced: 'Personal self-disclosure to given [sic] authenticity to my posts'. Another author commented:

My online persona is a professional front. It shifts with time and is sometimes closer to the 'real' me but is generally sillier, more adventurous, and more idle, interested in, for example, frivolities and socialising. The offline me would much rather be left in peace and not have to share any of this stuff with anybody.

The fact that this particular author's persona 'shifts with time' suggests that the online persona is not a single fixed one but, just like the various selves which we present offline [10], there are different selves presented online as well. As Turkle says, online we can control how we present ourselves—we can plan, edit and delete before sending a Tweet or posting on Facebook [42].

There is clear evidence of 'socially-mediated publicness' coming into play in the presentation of online personae [5], but as another participant commented, 'doesn't everyone have a separate professional persona?' This is clearly not a new idea [10] but social media offers another opportunity to shape that persona the way we want. As one author commented: 'I use Twitter in a manner that appears to be personal, but is actually mostly professional with careful monitoring as I know publishers and readers are looking', another example of conscious shaping of the author persona.

Conceptualising the Audience

Asked whether social media had helped them to be clearer about their audience identity (in terms of gender, socioeconomic status etc.) only five authors responded positively. This suggests that, despite the potential for closer contact via social media, a clear picture of reader identity is not made easier. Despite the possibility for more revelations about identity from the readers, they seem to remain a largely 'hidden audience' [43]. However, most of the participants in the current study had small audiences on social media, and were therefore unable to generalise about audience identity. While Strater and Lipford [12] found that Facebook users conceptualised those social-media users with whom they had most contact as being their 'audience', the current research found a more considered response from the participants, and a realisation that they could not extrapolate generalisations about their readers. Respondents were probed about the kinds of questions and comments that readers make (Fig. 4).

While some of these responses are as one might have predicted, there is a strong element of personal information being sought by readers and of readers commenting upon authors' culture and beliefs. When asked about any kind of 'relationship' with their readers via social media, there was general consensus that the communication with fans usually did not feel like a real relationship. One participant commented: 'One or two have become good friends. Most are just names who ask occasional question [sic] or offer intermittent comments'.

Impact of Social Media Upon Writing Content

Research participants generally found that social-media interactions with audiences had little significant impact upon their writing. Figure 1 shows that 10 authors 'get
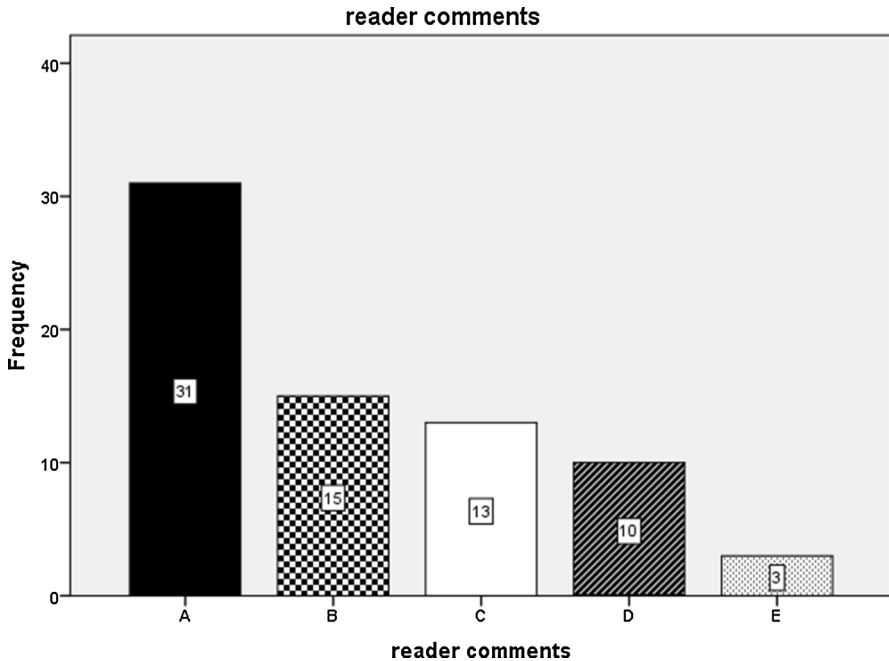
Fig. 4 Reader comments. *A* Comments/questions about my writing. *B* Personal comments/questions. *C* Ideas for new writing. *D* Comments on my political/social cultural beliefs. *E* Other comments

ideas for new books' from Facebook and Fig. 4 shows other social media is used in order to 'get ideas for new writing'. However there was very little expansion on this in the interviews and any comment on ideas from social media was quickly superseded by other discussion, usually around interaction with other authors. The main indication of impact of social-media use upon authors writing came in terms of time spent: '[It's] cheap financially, virtually free, but takes about 2 h each evening so expensive in time… is yet another distraction from writing'. The problem of the indefinability of the benefits of social media came through strongly in the interviews, so using Facebook and Twitter was sometimes seen as something that authors ought to be doing, for the sake of marketing, publicity and making contact, but the benefits were intangible so this 'time spent' was sometimes seen as time wasted.

The Online Author Community

The strongest theme emerging from the research is that of the development of an online author community, engendered by social-media use. This seems to have been completely unanticipated and unsought by authors, but has developed as a *by-product* of their marketing activities and interaction with readers on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. Koh and Kim's definition of virtual community is useful in this context: 'a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting

predominantly in cyberspace' [44: 76]. When asked whether their own social-media use changed what they wrote, one author responded:

> For me the big implication for social media has been connecting with other writers. I feel as if I belong in an online community (or communities) of like-minded people and enjoy engaging in debate on common issues, sharing experiences and receiving and giving advice.

We can see how many of McMillan and Chavis' [16] measures of SOC apply—authors spoke of the greatest benefits of using social media being the feeling of support and access to a resource of information and advice across the online author community. This support might be emotional but might also be practical—advice about historical detailing of characters, such as clothing or militaria for example. Baym and Boyd [5: 322] propose that social media 'makes visible processes that have always been at play', but this research finds that social media also reveals *new processes*. In other words, social media enables the development of an online knowledge network of authors who can advise and support each other throughout the writing process.

While the research finds strong evidence of an online author community, this seems to be distinct from other online communities, as the driving force for going online was usually to promote and market a book, and sometimes to connect with the audience. Therefore, the connections across the author network seem to have taken place serendipitously, rather than being sought out. In contradiction, those connections sought with readers seem often to be sporadic and may concentrate upon online communication with small numbers of readers or fans, rather than an online community of readers or fans.

Conclusions

Social media use by this group of authors was dominated by Facebook and Twitter use, with some YouTube, Pinterest and Tumblr use. Social media tended to be used for *sharing thoughts and opinions*, *interacting with readers and fans* and *marketing and publicity*. However, despite the assumption of the current research that an online community would exist, made up of readers and authors, this online community turned out to be strongest amongst the authors themselves. Social media 'makes visible processes that have always been at play' [5: 322] but this research finds that social media also reveals *new processes*. In other words, social media has engendered this nascent online author community who can communicate and support each other easily with the aid of social media. This online knowledge network seems to be more significant in terms of support and pooling of information rather than inspiring ideas or significantly impacting writing content, but further research is needed to fully explore the impact of social media upon creative content.

While connections between authors certainly existed prior to social media, facilitated by authors' groups and societies, and publishers, the use of social media has facilitated and enhanced the relationships and the network of support and advice which exists, certainly among the group of authors examined. In this particular

tranche of authors studied (not 'known' names, often semi-professional) any connections between author and reader tended to be on an individual basis, rather than a reader-author community, where one would assume dozens or even hundreds or thousands of fans. Using social media has also eased the isolation felt by some authors. Previous research has found that social networking reduces the distance between performer and audience [3]. The current research however finds that social media reduces the distance between the 'performers'.

The projected author persona was a concept that many of the authors had thought about, and many were strategic in their approach, being selective about the details of their writing and the nuggets of information about their lives which they released to their readership. This supports Baym and Boyd's [5] examination of 'socially mediated publicness', where social media is used as a conduit through which elements of personality both 'personal' and 'professional' are filtered and shaped.

Marwick and Boyd [9: 312] suggest that mediated personae are practices rather than constants, and this seems to be the case with the current research. One author referred to the 'various masks' they adopt when communicating on social media; another mentioned the online persona 'shifts with time'. Another used 'personal self-disclosure to given [sic] authenticity to my posts'. This approach reveals a strategic selective approach to the morsels of 'real' personality revealed to an audience, dictated by the constructed online persona of the author.

Many authors were unclear about the benefits of using social media, in terms of building a fan base, or in terms of enhanced marketing effectiveness or sales. Authors at times felt that publishers' lack of digital expertise meant they were unable to offer advice regarding best practice on social media. There is scope here for publishers to offer clearer guidance and support for authors using social media, especially with regard to their own marketing and publicity, and to provide metrics by which authors can measure any benefits accruing from their time spent on social media.

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