



Screenwriters & Social Media

In a sometimes solitary profession, social media has become watercooler, soapbox and distraction; a way for writers to get out of their heads without getting out of their pajamas.

Karen Walton is the force behind *inkcanada*, a Facebook community of writers she began out of “a sort of madness, in retrospect.” “On Facebook,” she explains, “there was suddenly this brilliant opportunity to establish an open studio where anyone was welcome to drop in, chat writing.”

That has spilled onto Twitter, where Walton gleans as well as gives benefit. “I can educate myself, I can have a little fun, I can support causes I truly believe in, pass on some enthusiasm for what we all do—all from the safety of my plaid pajamas.”

An early adopter of social media, Jill Golick first saw the potential as a storytelling platform. “I didn’t have many friends on Facebook so I started making imaginary ones,” she said. “I probably opened character Twitter accounts before I started using it personally.”

She launched *Story 2OH* for this kind of interactive storytelling, and followed with *Crushing It*, a Twitter soap that is still a watershed for the platform. She has since become part of a community of non-fictional characters. “It was this very potent way for us to be in touch every day—to share news, publicize events and just be in each other’s faces. It’s like walking around the town square after dinner and seeing everyone.”

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Before Facebook or Twitter gained popularity, blogs were the writers’ gathering places. Denis McGrath started *Dead Things on Sticks* out of “desperate loneliness and the feeling that I didn’t know any other writers working in Canada.” That helped inspire Will Dixon’s *Uninflected Images Juxtaposed* and Jim Henshaw’s *The Legion of Decency*.

“Blogging was my attempt to cheerlead, foster community and provide a view on the business,” McGrath reflected. “Facebook I use for social interaction and to look at people’s vacation photos. Which is weird, because I would never go over to someone’s house to look at their vacation photos. I don’t understand why being in track pants makes it more fun.”

With his blog on hiatus, Twitter has become something of a substitute as well as a distraction: “I’ve heard Twitter described as microblogging, and I think it’s also kind of like microprocrastinating.”

Dixon used social media to plug into the industry after he moved back to Regina and felt disconnected. “I also have ideas and opinions I like to discuss or share, and once I realized people seemed interested in what I had to say (unless they were pretending because they felt sorry for me), it provided the impetus to continue,” he said. “Plus it keeps me off the porn.”

Henshaw’s primary interest in Facebook and Twitter is still to drive traffic to his blog, where he shares “war stories” about the industry to educate younger writers and try to instigate change. “If there’s a professional benefit, it’s what I learn from other people,” he added. “Someone says there’s a symposium, or I found a great script online, or you should read this blog, so I’m getting information I wouldn’t have found on my own.”

Mark Farrell thinks of Twitter as an outlet more than a networking opportunity. “I used to do stand-up and I used to write on and produce a topical show (*22 Minutes*), so if I did think of something funny or just plain glib I had an avenue for it.”

McGrath agrees: “It’s interesting to hone and try out your *bon mots*.”

While Henshaw worries about writers exposing themselves to plagiarism, Farrell jokes “the only downside I can see is being drunk and tweeting. And I only say that because my sponsor follows me.”

Walton enthusiastically mentions the opportunity social media provides to interact with your audience, noting, “I get to ‘meet’ the most important people in my working life, the public that supports what we do. I’ve made some really amazing new friendships this way.”

But Hart Hanson is less enamoured by this immediacy. He stopped reading his Twitter replies after confrontations with angry *Bones* fans. “The trait I came up against that I could not stand was the number of people out there who believe that what they feel is what everyone feels. They’re humourless, slightly dim, maybe a little insane.” It wasn’t just his detractors who made him wary, but over-the-top praise as well. “In essence you are exposing yourself to a certain kind of stalker,” he cautioned.

Despite this negative potential, Golick, like Walton, sees the connection to audience as an essential part of this new platform for storytelling. Apart from interacting on social media as the characters in her stories, she values the two-way interaction that creates a personal bond between creator and audience. “The next time I’m creating a story I can reach out and say, hey you might like this,” she pointed out. “It’s like your favourite restaurant where they know you by name, or the cafe where they have your usual order waiting for you by the time you get to the counter. We keep going back to places where we get personal service, where we’ve been made to feel important and valued.” ■