

Rediscovering Writing in the Age of Social Media

Guest editorial by Sean Joseph McNeill

I am not a savvy social media user. It is a cautionary statement that I lead with in conversation at work and in personal life. I am part of that generational slice that grew up firmly rooted in the Web 1.0, when socializing on the Internet meant creating a cheap GeoCities web page, hand-writing the link on scraps of paper, and passing it out at school. When social media took off, I was immersed in university, with its abundance of offline campus community. Now, a decade after graduating, I find myself untethered, to put it dramatically, and cast off from my peers who have adopted the new ways.

I am not very creative. I do not normally find myself leading with that, but for readers of this Journal it seems relevant. When I was in high school I loved to read science fiction, and made many aborted attempts at writing it. Gradually, I shifted from reading it to just watching it, which I could never count as a hobby. I work in a world of systems and spreadsheets, where creativity can sometimes feel like a hindrance. I am now in my thirties, married and employed. I am not complaining about any of it, but I have felt a growing sense that I am missing something personal and meaningful to me.

I started reflecting on this about four years ago when I happened upon a large collection of vintage sci-fi magazines in a used bookstore. It sparked a renewed interest in my old passion for reading and writing. I wanted a community where I could talk about it. I found some message boards, the kind that I used to post on in high school, but these communities are difficult to access. The members are entrenched in long-running discussions, and a new user has little hope of integrating without many attentive hours spent in front of the computer. The format requires a certain level of commitment to read and post frequently, and it feels very anonymous.



Then I found Wattpad. It is a social media platform based in Toronto which is focused on networking through creative reading and writing. Users are encouraged to post their own original stories, but most are simply readers. Similar to other social platforms, it incorporates a newsfeed, commenting, voting, and following features, a personal profile and a private messaging service. It is built with mobile use in mind. Unlike other sites, Wattpad does not try to be everything to everyone. It is unapologetically about original, creative writing. The site provides many value-added services to support readers and writers, such as curated lists of trending and recommended stories, peer-support forums, and writing contests.

For an alternative social media site, the platform boasts big numbers. It claims 65 million users, about three million of whom are content creators. It has over 400 million story uploads. It collaborated with Margaret Atwood to launch the annual Wattys Awards in 2012 and has brokered some surprising deals for popular site authors with heavy-hitting publishers including Simon & Schuster and Random House. While it has raised some respectable investment capital, its monetization strategy remains vague.

I am a bit skeptical about the site, partly due to my general discomfort with social media. There is a deluge of daily content that can entrap you in a mindless scroll of information. Many users look like bots or redundant accounts and the majority of stories, not unlike the majority of Twitter posts or Facebook replies, are best classified as “noise.” In this sense, it is not much different from other platforms. It takes time to build a following and curate an experience worth returning to.

I have jumped in head-first, bravely posting a work in progress, following other writers, and doing my best to play the part of a savvy social media user. I am impressed by the stats on the most popular stories, with some exceeding half a million hits. The novels that I am following, while sometimes rough around the edges, can be as well-written as anything I would pick up at a book store. It is exciting to follow a story’s development as chapters are revealed one at a time, and there is an egalitarian quality to the experience of engaging with fellow amateur writers. It is refreshing to know that everyone on the site has the one common interest of reading good stories, and the



diversity of genres and writers opens up a wider community that I would not otherwise have access to.

Whether or not Wattpad survives the long game of social media domination, I hope that the effort to create dedicated space for creative reading and writing within social media communities continues. I imagine that many young people struggle to reconcile a passion for books with the relentless speed of online communication, yet Wattpad proves that these interests do not have to compete with each other, and that users can in fact realize new creativity through their interaction. At a personal level, I will always be sympathetic to the physical experience of books and, to be honest, I have hedged my bets by reposting my stories to a WordPress blog. But I will be forever thankful to the site for encouraging me to return to creativity, and for convincing me to dismantle at least some of the barriers I have erected to my own participation in the online social world.!

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