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Live and Public: One Practitioner's Experience and Assessment of Twitter as a Tool for Archiving Creative Process

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary article explores from a practitioner's perspective, ways in which developments in Web 2.0 technology, in combination with mobile phones, facilitate and encourage new methods of archiving creative process that result in new experimental forms of writing. It takes the author's use of Twitter as a case study. The research purpose is to consider the benefits of developments in new technology to creative writing practitioners. An aim will be to reach a new theoretical position on how social

media and mobile technology can aid and generate creativity by enabling archiving of the creative process to be an ongoing, live, dynamic experience.

Introduction

Attempting to archive creative process using Twitter might seem dangerous. Much creative process is by its nature raw. It involves half-formed thoughts and experiments. Katharine Mansfield instructed her husband to ‘tear up and burn’ diaries and journals in which she recorded her creative process, explaining in her will, ‘I desire to leave as few traces of my camping ground as possible’ (1977: 10). The freedom to make mistakes tends to be part of the appeal of a writer’s notebook. Many creative writing ‘how-to’ books actively encourage aspiring writers to splurge first thoughts onto the page without regard to grammar or even coherence. Indulge in rambling, suggest Cashdan et al (Cashdan, Luckhurst, Singleton, 1996: 261). Banish the ‘internal censor’, says Goldberg (1986: 9). Creative process often involves mess, and, Twitter is public. Yet, I have found that Twitter is a useful and stimulating way of archiving creative process. This article considers how and it is hoped will be helpful to arts practitioners and contribute to the consideration of creative writing as a research method, an area of enquiry that, although not yet well documented (Kroll and Harper, 2013:1), is growing. First, a word on methodology.

Methodology

This article is based on ongoing research and represents preliminary findings. I have chosen to take a practitioner’s stance to allow the consideration to be evidence-based.

Data assessed includes my Twitter output over a six month period (March-September 2014). I applied the '*bricoleur-bowerbird*' approach presented by Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien (2012) whereby practice-led and traditional research methods inform each other. Thus, research and writing occurs 'through the filter of creative practice' (Webb and Brien, 2012: 197) and 'draws on modes from across the human sciences' (Webb and Brien, 2012: 198). I have assessed and continue to generate and assess my Twitter feed in the light of a selection of readings of texts from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own* (1992) to Kim Wilkins's 'Writing Resilience in the Digital Age' (2014). Essays such as Woolf's helped to establish an image of the ideal writing state as a solitary one entirely free of interruptions. Works such as Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* (1949) reinforced this image. Everyday realities make this an unrealistic aim. Reflecting on my own experience – moving between different types of writing, including novels and creative non-fiction; moving between homes; moving between different ways of earning a living, including journalism and working as an editor – I began to problematize the idea that total immersion in a clinically separate space is the ideal state for a writer. The advent of social media makes this a particularly pressing issue.

There is significant pressure on writers to build author platforms on social media. Yet, the perceived need for such 'personal branding' can feel intimidating and stifling (Neff, 2012, Neff, 2014). Social media can undermine writers' creativity and productivity due to its addictive nature and the pressure it brings to break from work to post new material (Wilkins, 2014). Moggach (2000: vi) voices a concern that is shared by many writers:

'Our bond with our tools is a profound and secret one; if we venture into the new technology, will we somehow lose our voice?' In *Digital Culture* (2002: 197), Gere notes that we are living 'in a society supersaturated by digital technology'. We can experience a negative response to the very thought of having to master yet another gadget or piece of software.

In 'Creativity and Digital Innovation', however, Gauntlet (2013) explores how widespread wariness of corporate uses of the Internet to turn a profit can blind us to the innovation and creativity that the Internet can enable in individual users. I began to consider how developments in digital technology might aid creativity and productivity. Aware that I often have ideas that I want to record at inconvenient times (in a supermarket queue, for example), I became interested in whether social media could be made integral to the task of charting the creative process. My gut instinct, or, 'expert-intuition' as Susan Melrose frames it (2006: 12), told me that in order to explore this question, I needed to find a way of approaching social media that would give me a fresh perspective. In *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant (1964: 83) considers how 'a given object, through the intervention of sense, sets the imagination at work in arranging the manifold'. He emphasizes the value of play in creativity. I elected to experiment with Twitter for two main reasons. It is primarily text-based, and, as a writer, my interest was primarily in text. Although it can be used on desktop computers, it is easy to use via mobile phones away from a work environment. I could see from the outset that a combination of my phone's design, its software, different spaces and situations in which I could use it (including on buses or while walking down the street) and the interactive

nature of Twitter, would affect the content. Informed by Kant, I set out to investigate by experimenting with Twitter in a way that at times involved playfulness.

Method of Archiving Prior to the Use of Twitter:

A traditional method of archiving creative process is to keep a hard copy writer's diary. I have always found this to be limiting. A big notebook can be cumbersome to carry around. Consequently, thoughts that might be recorded in such a diary often arrive at times when the diary is not to hand, while nipping to the shops, for example. Caught without my writer's diary, I would – standing in a bus shelter or after a swim in the changing room – scribble thoughts on old receipts or tickets with the intention of sellotaping them into the writer's diary later. What I hoped would be neat, complete writer's diaries became piecemeal. Thoughts scribbled on scraps of paper rummaged out of a raincoat pocket or the bottoms of bags were often illegible.

A mobile phone is designed to be portable. It fits in pockets.

Archiving Creative Process Using Twitter:

I could have used a notebook facility on my phone to create a version of my hard copy writer's diary. Instead, informed by principles of play, I set out to investigate whether Twitter used on my mobile phone could provide a practical and stimulating method of archiving creative process.

I found that some of the ways in which Twitter can be deployed as a means of archiving process have clear parallels with traditional diaries. A whole Twitter feed can serve as a

digital notebook. Although there may be tweets (possibly a lot) that are not records of creative process, these can be quite quickly scrolled through since each tweet is a maximum of 140 characters. The 'favouriting' option is another way of archiving creative process. If others' tweets provide relevant information or stimulate thoughts, that it would be helpful to be reminded of later, they can be 'favourited' and so collected in the 'Favourites' section of a user's Twitter account. Hashtags can be deployed to explore what other users are tweeting on a particular topic. They can also be used to collect a user's own thoughts on a particular topic – and then stored on the social media platform, Storify (<https://storify.com/>). Storify is designed to enable users to search social media posts by inputting hashtags, to then 'storify' and publish the collected posts. However, it is not necessary to publish. Users can keep collected tweets as drafts. So for example, I realized, as I travelled between home and various work commitments one day, that I was interested in considering laughter. I decided on a hashtag – #thinkinglaughter – and, later, collected the #thinkinglaughter tweets and stored them as a Storify draft (I considered how 'tittering' differs from 'belly laughs'; I described, for example, hearing a laugh so infectious that it passed in the form of smiles of on faces down the street from person to person, 'a baton of happiness'). Thus drafts in a Storify account can serve as an online equivalent of pages in a writer's diary that can be given titles (such as '#thinkinglaughter'), organized and referred back to. What has proved particularly interesting to me, though, is the way in which the phone's portability and its software combine to render archiving the creative process as an ongoing, dynamic activity.

I have noted already that the portability of the phone enables me to capture thoughts in places where a traditional writer's diary might be ineffective or unavailable. A phone can be removed from and replaced in a pocket swiftly enough to tweet while on a bike waiting at a set of traffic lights. Thus the portability of the phone affects the content. At the traffic lights, I might tweet in anger about a bad driver who just cut me up. I have found too that the portability of the phone can affect word choices. If I am on a bike at a set of traffic lights, when the light is green, I have to set off. If I am at a station platform during rush hour, as the doors of a train close, I have to put away my phone and focus on squeezing in with the carriage-full of commuters. The pressure then can be to find a shorter word – 'ahead' instead of 'forwards'; 'go' instead of 'move' – in order to be able to press 'Send' on a tweet more quickly.

Software adds new dimensions. If I have to type letters into the phone's keyboard, it is better if I am stationary. Using the 'Swype' function (whereby users swipe an impression of the intended word over the keyboard with a fingertip, rather than tapping individual keys), it is possible to compose tweets while I am on the move, even if I am walking quite fast. This has increased the number of overheard snippets of conversations archived (see as examples Figures 1 and 2). It has also increased the number of tweets about my surroundings – the cloud formations I'm seeing, the bird song I'm hearing, the flowers I'm smelling, the wind I'm feeling (see examples Figures 3 and 4).

The microphone function can also affect content. One day, while walking through a park, I began to consider whether, if I spoke my tweet into the microphone rather than

Swiped it onto the keyboard, I could input a description while still looking at the scene I was describing. My hope was that the resulting tweet would be an equivalent of a photograph, a text snapshot of what I was seeing. In fact, what is said into the microphone rarely emerges on the screen exactly, especially if those words are spoken outdoors on a breezy day. The microphone hears different words. On one occasion 'Maurice' instead of 'narrative', and, 'misery morbid' instead of 'misty morning' was recorded. Consequently, as well as archiving the description as planned, I archived a reflection on the experience of the software's intervention (Figures 5 and 6).

Interactions with other users affect the content of what is archived. A tweet about a favourite book prompted me to go to the bookshelf, take down my copy of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1964) and tweet about the experience of opening it (Figure 7). The interactivity of the medium affects how tweets are composed. As noted already, there is a risk that archiving creative process via a live, public platform such as Twitter will leave the user feeling exposed. At least my annotated bus tickets were destined for private notebooks. However, as indicated, my annotated bus tickets were often hard to decipher. Thoughts that had felt fully formed and unforgettable at the time were often represented by a version of shorthand (featuring key words and abbreviations) that made little or no sense later. Because tweets are public, I take greater care over their composition than I would over notes scrawled on a bus ticket. Even if they are tweeted at speed and feature typos, their meaning is generally clear because the intention, when a tweet is posted, is that it will communicate something to

others. Unlike my annotated bus tickets, as pieces of archived creative process, tweets are likely to remain meaningful over time.

A New Form of Writing:

I have found that from the output of sometimes raw, seemingly discrete tweets, patterns begin to emerge. Particular themes can be seen to persist, certain subjects exercise a special draw. Tweets that may seem casual, clumsy or throwaway can turn out to be part of a drafting process. It is not necessarily that the wording of a particular tweet will be re-drafted. Indeed, that would make for a repetitive Twitter feed. But the experience of tweeting about the landscape or the weather may result in a tweet that feels as if it is both complete in and of itself and the culmination of a thought process. For example, Figures 8 and 9 came quite late in a series of tweets about what I was seeing during a regular car journey from London to Sussex. Each tweet presents a picture that feels to me whole (trees and their shadows; sun peeking through cloud) and features narrative tension arising from ways in which the landscape changes over time (the trees appear to be shrugging off their shadows, an act that could have a sinister or liberating edge to it; clouds have closed in to cover the sun but a small hole, leaving either the sun or the person describing the scene looking out). A series of tweets might emerge to form a story. The tweets shown in Figures 10-13 chart a few hours in the life of a poppy in a vase to the point at which the last petal falls.

Flash fiction – also termed very short, short fiction, micro-fiction or sudden fiction – has an established history and is well-documented (Nelles, 2012). Flash nonfiction – also

termed short creative non-fiction, sudden non-fiction and miniature memoir – is a newer, emerging form (Hershman, 2013). As is the case for flash fiction, the maximum and minimum word length of flash non-fiction is disputed. Jones and Kitchen (1996) suggest a maximum of 2,000 words; Moore (2012) sets the maximum word count at 750.

Clearly, Twitter with its mere 140 character limit is well suited to flash non-fiction. My contention, however, is that Twitter does not merely facilitate it. Rather, it encourages flash non-fiction by also facilitating and encouraging new methods of archiving creative process that feed and result directly in new pieces of flash non-fiction. The notes and chat and observations feed and result directly in new work.

Conclusion:

Writers' diaries, notebooks and commonplace books have traditionally been places in which creative processes are detailed. Many writers will continue to use paper and pen to record times when inspiration arrives or ideas crystallize. With the development of digital culture, inevitably, traditional methods are being supplemented. These preliminary findings illustrate that there is still a great deal more to do in exploring labour processes in creative work and the ways in which new technologies are affecting how moments of creativity are captured in an archives to be explored at later dates. Clark (2014: 5) writes: 'Just as the trauma of the First World War produced the fragmentary streams of consciousness of modernism, perhaps the age of social media will produce a new literary movement to capture its reshaping of reality.' If such a literary movement is developing, Twitter and its facilitation of new methods of archiving creative process is an exciting part of a movement towards new forms of experimental writing.

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