

Author Platform and the Boundaries of Creative Practice

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Introduction

It's difficult to say when I first noticed the term 'author platform' being used in the context of writing and publishing. Like many such neologisms, it gained currency insidiously. If one checks trade publications, writing-advice websites, agent websites, and Twitter, 'author platform' is now almost ubiquitous, albeit with a definition that remains difficult to pin down. From a creative practitioner's standpoint, there seems to be a great deal of urgency around it, as if one imperils one's literary career by neglecting one's author platform. A blog post about author platform by Lisa Cooper Ellison – who identifies on her website as a writer, speaker, and writing coach – serves as a good representative example: Ellison admits feelings of 'stress, obligation, fatigue, [and] overwhelm' when she 'neglect[s her] social media accounts' (Ellison n.d.). But Ellison, like many practitioners, stops short of drawing a cause–effect relationship between author platform and writing success. The existence of this relationship is strongly implied, as if it were a given, yet the mechanics of the process are never spelled out. Taking this near-ubiquity into account, as well as the significance that is attached to author platform, it would seem to be a natural topic for creative-writing scholars to have investigated. Yet at the time of this writing, there remains very little research on the subject. A 2010 paper by Peter Clifton in *Publishing Research Quarterly* looks at various shifts in the industry with respect to how books are marketed and what is therefore expected of authors. Kim Wilkins's paper 'Writing Resilience in the Digital Age' (2014) remains the seminal examination of the subject, however, offering definitions and parameters and flagging up concerns about the toll that expectations around author platform can take on a writer: specifically,

that spending hours online focusing on this ambiguous-but-essential task is detrimental to developing the stamina early-career writers need. This paucity of research means that any discussion of author platform and its implications for creative practice will need to draw from a variety of trade publications alongside the extant but limited scholarship.

When I first encountered the term, I understood it intuitively, or thought I did. If asked to define it, however, I would have struggled to articulate its nuances. I think this stems from my initial confusion over the vagueness of the term, the mandate (implicit and explicit) that writers implement it without specific guidance, and the implication that dire consequences would ensue if we were to neglect this aspect of creative practice. One reason for this, I discovered, was a propensity for industry professionals and the authors of writing-advice articles and listicles to discuss it as if it could be assumed the reader already knew what it was. For example, Clifton's 'Teach Them to Fish: Empowering Authors to Market Themselves Online' deploys the term without explaining it (2010). Similarly, in the 2014 book *Build Your Author Platform: The New Rules: A Literary Agent's Guide to Growing Your Audience in 14 Steps*, agents Carole Jellen and Mike McCallister approach the topic in precisely the same way. After a foreword from Jack Canfield, one of the co-creators of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* franchise, about his early experiences with book promotion, Jellen and McCallister start talking about author platform. . . again, without actually defining it. In their preface, they largely focus on introducing themselves; in their introduction, they proceed straight to a couple of best-practice examples (on which more later). My point in focusing on these two works is not to impugn Clifton's findings or Jellen and McCallister's guidance but to highlight a problem I find both obvious and surprising: the baseline assumption in these works is that writers are expected to understand what author platform is already, and merely to need help implementing or updating it. In other words, 'it's vitally important, and here's how you do it, but we aren't going to tell you exactly what it is.'

According to publishing consultant Jane Friedman, who curates a well-regarded blog as a long-time industry insider, the term 'author platform' came into circulation during the 1990s, when 'agents and publishers began rejecting nonfiction book proposals and nonfiction manuscripts when the author lacked a "platform"' (2016). In essence, it is – or was – an umbrella term that refers to the way an author can be marketed based on their online presence and public persona. Reader expectations have a great deal to do with this, in the sense that the author is known either for being an expert on a certain subject or for writing

in a certain genre. Personal identity may also play a part, in the case of a celebrity author or one who is known to the public as a spokesperson, or when a book is marketed in the pseudo-genres that exist according to the author's race, nationality, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on. My contention, however, is that even this definition is now inadequate. Author platform has, in my view, undergone four stages of evolution in the three decades since its coinage. Each of these has had its own implications for creative practice, with the current iteration being the most concerning to me as an author, publisher, and academic. In this chapter, I will discuss (briefly) my experiences with it as a practitioner, outline the way the definition of author platform has shifted over the years, survey the landscape of creative practice as it exists under the current author-platform regime, and make a few recommendations with regard to how we might manage it.

A Brief but Relevant Autobiographical Interlude

My first impressions of 'author platform' grew out of my anxiety that I'd been assigned one I didn't particularly want. As an out gay man who had written a novel and some short fiction that featured gay characters, I began to feel a certain genre claustrophobia. My editor at Haworth Press (my first publisher), put it bluntly: Haworth's imprint Harrington Park Press was a *gay press*. There would have to be partial nudity on the cover because gay readers, according to this editor (himself also a gay man), were 'just *bovine*'. Ergo, a book with a titillating cover would sell much better than what I would have greatly preferred, something tasteful, something reminiscent of eighties album covers, preferably designed by Peter Saville. Gay fiction as a genre, my editor went on to say, was like the old slogan for insecticidal roach motels in American TV commercials: 'You can check in, but you can't check out!' In essence, once you were identified with the genre, you'd never be able to publish anything else; nor would major commercial presses be interested in future manuscripts.

I had always viewed myself more as a horror writer, or horror-adjacent, occupying a grey area between that genre and literary fiction. I have known I was a writer since early childhood, and much of my self-concept accreted from what I read about the writing life in my early years. Sexual identity may be both fundamental and overarching, but is not the only aspect of a gay person's life, nor of their literary output. Author platform, therefore, seemed to represent a formalisation and perhaps a concretisation of constraints I was afraid of: *This is*

all that you are. This is all you will be able to write about. You must also write about it in this specific way. Mainstream success will always remain beyond your reach. This seemed to be an attack on the deepest parts of my identity, a reduction down to one aspect of myself.

Early on in my writing career, I was prone to ranting about not wanting to be pigeonholed, not wanting to hit a glass ceiling. This wasn't unfounded paranoia, either: although the landmark research on the existence of the 'gay glass ceiling' would not be published until 2018 (Aksoy, Carpenter, Frank, and Huffman), it had long been obvious to me that it was an obstacle in publishing as well as in other areas of my professional life. Although I wouldn't go so far as to say I ruined literary cocktail parties, I might have been asked '*That again?*' in a sharp tone of voice more than once. Somewhere along the way, author platform and its attendant imperatives had seeped into my consciousness, and I began to suspect that investing some time and effort in an author-platform upgrade might give my book sales a boost. It is difficult to pinpoint what gave me the idea because the term seemed to be everywhere. Temporarily secure in my delusions of social media as the panacea for writers more people ought to read, I spent months on this endeavour: blogging, tweeting, and offering bits of writing advice. Then reality kicked in: I found the process tiresome, time-consuming, and ultimately unhelpful. Although I didn't realise it at the time, I had – however briefly – fallen into the trap of attempting to work on my author platform without having fully grasped what it was. In the years that followed, usually when I had another book coming out, I made intermittent attempts to be Relevant Online but simply never had the heart for it. Finally, because I was in Hong Kong during the 2019–2020 protests and was concerned (terrified) for my personal safety, I exited Twitter and most other forms of social media, only becoming publicly active again once I moved to the UK in 2020.

An Evolving Definition

The first phase of author platform's evolution appears to be the original usage of the term. As pointed out in Friedman, author platform in its earliest context referred mainly to nonfiction writers who were already in the public eye and would therefore be associated with a certain topic. This could take a number of forms: a thought leader or public figure such as a politician writing about their experiences and views; a celebrity writing a memoir or taking a stand on an issue of public interest; a well-known figure from the business world promoting a

book (or pursuing a deal for one) as a part of a larger marketing strategy. Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, published by Bantam in 1988, is a good early example: its success as a work of popular science stemmed from a combination of Hawking's credentials as a prominent scientist and his celebrity as a public intellectual with a significant disability. Hawking's identity may not have been the sole basis for his author platform, but it certainly either contributed or became one facet of a wider celebrity status. Jellen and McCallister point to similar examples: the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books; Malcolm Gladwell's books *Blink*, *Outliers*, and *The Tipping Point*; Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's *Freakanomics* (2014: xxxix). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with or problematic about these authors and their books, this is an unattainable standard for most writers. Besides, a key distinction needs to remain clear: this is primarily a *nonfiction* phenomenon, and it predates today's social-media landscape. The salient point is that our hypothetical celebrity, public figure, or blogger already would already have an audience and an established reputation as an expert in a certain field, meaning that publishers could capitalise on (and effectively outsource without compensation) marketing work already done by other people.

Over time, this initial concept of author platform expanded to a second stage that included writers of fiction and other literary forms. There is no way to determine exactly when publishers and agents began applying the new label 'author platform' to the old idea that audiences expected writers to produce only certain types of books. This may be seen as essentially an update of or variation upon the Foucauldian notion of author function: 'the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others' (Foucault 1977: 124), albeit writ large in trade publications such as *Publisher's Weekly* as well as the popular online writing-advice websites. Under the guise of marketing themselves, writers are now encouraged/pressured to produce ancillary work (blog posts, articles, short stories, tweets, and so on) that will further play to the expectations of this hypothetical one-track-minded readership, thereby making it even more difficult to write and publish something different under one's own name due to the amount of time it takes to generate so much content (Wilkins 2014).

The third stage in the evolution – which I now believe is being eclipsed by a fourth, or already has been – differs from the second in terms of scale and predation. It encompasses any and all marketing efforts an author might make, although I perceive a twist in the definition: the term now seems intended to refer to *successful* marketing efforts (or the lure thereof), either *ex post facto* or ongoing, whereas anything that falls short of 'quit your day job' bestsellerdom amounts to

little more than aspirational flailing. Clifton (2010) observes the same dynamic: because of what he calls a ‘compression of time’, author platform is something a writer strives to have already achieved via some arcane combination of strategic tweeting and blogging, a dedicated Facebook page, regular Instagram updates (preferably with cats), or other clever uses of social media, regular literary output, public appearances, and so forth. Thus, the aspirational becomes retroactive. As if it weren’t problematic enough that the term is often applied in retrospect rather than at the outset of a writer’s publishing and marketing endeavours, or several books into a career, this third version of author platform is troubling in its assumption that authors today have a great deal of time and/or money to spend on these tasks. The peril is exacerbated by the trend of major publishers dropping midlist authors whose books have failed to achieve best-seller status. This phenomenon was first documented over a decade ago (Deahl 2011) and is no less pervasive today.

The fourth, and ongoing, stage of author platform is all-pervasive: I have noticed a trend in book promotion, more on social media than in traditional trade publications, that seems to prioritise representation and online interaction with readers above the stories themselves. Moreover, there is ‘a tendency in contemporary literary discourse to equate the author to the literary work produced—that the author is the work and vice versa’ (Iyer 2021: 197). As a result of this shift, story and craft sometimes seem to be lower priorities than identity and social justice. This can be seen in the way some writers market their work on Twitter and elsewhere today: via bullet-point lists containing identity-specific data about the author, the characters, and the romantic or erotic aspects of the story. Are they gay, bi, pan, lesbian, straight, queer, questioning, cisgender, trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, masc, femme, monogamous, open, neurodivergent, disabled, sober? Are superpowers involved, or the supernatural? This information is given parity with more traditional basics such as genre and plot. This is not to say that representation, interaction with readers, and participation in online communities are problematic. They aren’t, but this mindset posits the creative work as a form of *service*, the existence of which will somehow right social injustices, provide role models for those who lack them in real life, and/or make readers from marginalised communities feel valued and seen. Although there is no doubt creative work *can* serve this purpose over and above its inherent *raisons d’être* to entertain and inform, this new paradigm seems to treat the potentiality I discuss here as an imperative. Putting the cart before the horse, in other words; or, in academesque, a perilous reframing of what creative written work is *for*, as if the process of promotion – perhaps the pursuit of celebrity? – is now the goal

and the creative work has been recast as merely one aspect of the content today's creative practitioners may be expected to produce.

The Landscape Is Changing

Creative practice happens at the intersection of what the practitioner imagined the writing (or whatever other art form may be applicable) life would look like and the entangled realities of jobs, families, and other quotidian responsibilities. But where marketing – author platform – is concerned, fiction writers today are still struggling with the standards established by several early successes: E. Lynn Harris famously self-published his first novel *Invisible Life*, sold it out of his car, and took copies to beauty salons and barber shops around Atlanta. The buzz he generated by doing this led, in time, to a publishing deal with Doubleday (Aaron 2021). Amanda Hocking enjoyed remarkable success starting in 2010 with her YA fantasy novels. She made connections with book bloggers, who were becoming a collective force in book marketing then, and she was an early adopter of e-books, charging US\$0.99 for first books of the series she would go on to write (Millar 2011). Hugh Howey adopted a similar approach with his novella *Wool*, which went on to sell millions as an e-book and was subsequently acquired (in a paperback deal only; Howey retained his electronic rights) by Simon & Schuster (*Wired* 2013). John Scalzi self-published his early work on his own website and employed a voluntary payment scheme. He has since gone on to a multimillion-dollar book deal with Tor (Liptak 2017). Christopher Paolini penned his debut novel *Eragon* in his teens. His parents, who owned and ran a small press, supported him by financing not only a print run of books but an extensive book tour. As a result of this substantial publicity, the novelist Carl Hiassen's stepson discovered *Eragon* in a bookstore and enjoyed it so much that Hiassen introduced Paolini to his editors at Knopf (Spring 2004).

In each case, these authors set or modified a standard for author marketing in fiction. However, each was in the right place at the right time with the right book in some unique way: Harris was writing about Black gay professionals at a time when major publishers were largely ignoring the Black middle class. Hocking had the benefit of excellent timing, being one of the first to see the potential of (and be championed by) book bloggers. Moreover, she was working in a genre that lent itself well to the e-book format, and her pricing scheme made her work accessible to loyal, story-hungry younger readers. Howey and Scalzi both benefited from similar strategies involving pricing and active engagement online.

Paolini had preternaturally supportive parents with relevant industry experience, then got lucky by meeting an established author who helped him get his big break. Although each of these writers managed to find remarkable success, the conditions under which they did so are not necessarily replicable, a point publishers seem to overlook when they set out their demands for more of the same.

These standards and expectations were very much in place when Wilkins documented them in 2014, writing of being instructed by her publisher to spend hours producing blog posts, reviews, and all manner of other ancillary material to support a new book, and they remain in force today. If anything, the landscape is even more onerous, particularly when an unwary author discovers or is encouraged to adopt the '80/20 model', which Ewan Morrison warns about in an article in *The Guardian* (2012). Adherents of the 80/20 model encourage writers to spend 80 per cent of their time on marketing and only 20 per cent of their time on the writing itself. How is a writer supposed to develop their craft – to say nothing of getting actual books written – while labouring under such a draining, distracting, counterproductive edict? This assumes the author even has time in the first place. According to a 2018 study by CREATE, the UK Copyright & Creative Economy Centre, '[t]he top 10 percent of writers still earn about 70% of total earnings in the profession', but the average annual income for a professional writer is only about £16,000 (Kretschmer, Gavaldon, Miettinen, and Singh 2019). From this, it may be inferred that most working writers have day jobs. There are also family responsibilities to take into account, the burden of which disproportionately affects women. Thus, writers who have long, unbroken stretches of time to work are the exception, not the rule. This is not even the worst version of the writing/marketing balance that can be found online. In a 2016 article in *The Guardian*, Ros Barber warns that '[i]f you self-publish your book, you are not going to be writing for a living. You are going to be marketing for a living. Self-published authors should expect to spend only 10% of their time writing and 90% of their time marketing.' It is as if these so-called marketing experts have either forgotten how much time writing takes, or they have never known in the first place. Experienced writers and writing instructors may know that recommendations such as these are not to be taken completely seriously, but the problem is that they are now part of the mythology that surrounds writing and, as Stephen North has immortalised himself in CW scholarship for pointing out, therefore difficult or impossible to expunge (1987).¹

I would go so far as to suggest that this packaging of identity with promotion and a constant hustle is partly a response to this pressure from publishers and

agents: writers are exhorted to be ‘authentic’ on social media, to produce content that offers value to potential followers. The self is the only constant. But what is rarely made clear in these exhortations that an author develop their platform is the issue of *focus*. There is, of course, such a thing as tweeting or blogging well. As Gilly Smith puts it,

In the [I]nternet era, the process of writing has moved from notebooks and post-its scattered on the sitting-room floor to posts on a blog, chronicles of a creative process for anyone to engage with. A modern author needs to be able to test ideas in public, to hold them up for scrutiny and twist and turn them until they make sense. For . . . would-be writers, the shaping and re-shaping of ideas is an essential skill and involves taking risks if those ideas are to push at the boundaries and spawn original thought.

2010: 283

But this requires would-be writers to understand what various social-media platforms are actually for, how they work, and how to attract suitable followers/readers/audiences. This kind of thing might be taught in digital marketing programs or modules, but it is not a body of knowledge a typical writer may reasonably be expected to know. It also assumes that having more followers will lead to more sales, which is patently not the case. Certain platforms lend themselves better to certain types of work, but advocates of cultivating an author platform tend either to omit discussing these nuances or appear not to know much about them either. An author who has not done this background layer of research may end up investing countless hours attempting to cultivate an online presence but simply be tweeting, blogging, or posting random images on Instagram to little or no avail. Alternatively, from a pedagogical standpoint, a writing instructor may assume their students are already ‘digital natives’ and do not need lessons on anything pertaining to the Internet. However, this is an area that is being challenged as well, with ‘digital wisdom’ having emerged as a theme within education as a suggested approach (Prensky 2009). Ultimately, this unprocessed advocacy of author platform treats all forms of written work as if they are the same. It is disingenuous to imply, even by omission, that a fiction writer who may have sold two short stories and is now searching for a literary agent or shopping their debut novel needs to aspire to the same platform that, say, a prominent politician, scientist, or religious leader already has. I would even argue that it is unethical to do so. Industry professionals ought to understand the difference, as well as the concomitant marketing-related expectations, but purveyors of author-platform advice seem to be operating on the lucrative

assumption that writers do not. Both parties create and support a vicious cycle in which writers pressure *themselves* and the publishing industry capitalises on it.

In essence, this incessantly discussed but little-examined mandate around constant promotion and commodification of identity is, in my view, disrupting the very boundaries of creative practice. If a writer is expected to spend upwards of 80 per cent of their time on marketing and promotion, what then is the creative work? The promotion, cultivation, and curation of an online persona; the hustle; or the novel itself? Is the story still a story, or is it first and foremost a vehicle for advocacy and public empathy? Do we need to rethink why creative work exists and what purpose(s) it should serve? Under this regime, is the writer still a writer? Or should we rebrand ourselves as ‘content creators’ and embrace the nihilism of it all? This is actually not a game of semantics, it’s a sincere ontological question for the field.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The notion of author platform is not going to go away. Nor should it; not completely. In this case, the situation is complicated because author platform technically *does* work, at least where specific types of books and writers are concerned. It is not the panacea it has been made out to be, not least because it is such an ambiguous concept, but it is not without worth. What are we to do about it, then? One priority needs to be a sense of clarity around what author platform is and is not. For a nonfiction author who can genuinely claim to have a platform of the first type I described, particularly if some facet of their identity is a key component of the resulting author platform (and they are okay with that), there may not be a problem. Most likely, other aspects of their professional life have created an audience for any book(s) that might result; the marketing work has been done and/or is ongoing; there may well be a robust online presence or a recognisable public persona. For the rest of us, however, the poets and fiction writers and memoirists and playwrights, the way forward is not as obvious because this is a gatekeeping matter: it is the publishers who have shunted marketing responsibilities back onto authors, not a dereliction of duties for which authors ourselves were once primarily responsible. We need to be clear on the fact that there is a difference between being asked to take up a reasonable portion of the marketing duties and being asked to pursue social-media omnipresence as a(nother) full-time job. This is an industry-related issue, and it is more reasonable to suggest that author

organisations attempt to push back against publishers than it is for individual authors to make sacrifices in hopes of making progress toward the greater good.

Those of us who teach on creative writing programs need to be clear on these nuances, for ourselves as well as our students. In a workshop-based program, the messages a student is likely to receive are encouragements to focus on craft, to learn to read one's own work, to edit ruthlessly, to read widely, to develop a network of supportive fellow writers. British CW programs typically have an industry-facing mandate and mentality, so matters such as the selection of markets and the etiquette of submission are more likely to be part of the curriculum here than might be the case in their American counterparts (Vanderslice 2011). Conversely, what a hypothetical student will be told *outside* of the classroom (or its online equivalent) is that it is essential to spend more time marketing the work than actually writing it, all in the service of developing this mythical author platform which will then open the doors to literary excellence and undying fame. At best, this makes no sense. At worst, this is where we see author platform becoming detrimental. This is not just a disconnect in the messages that one may encounter in the writing/publishing world: the latter militates against the former; the cart is again being put before the horse. Author platform is offered up almost as a *substitute* for craft, a stance which ought to concern practitioners and educators very much. After all, if students come to believe that the process is actually 80 per cent marketing and only 20 per cent craft and mechanics (or, worse, 90/10!), where is the logic in formally studying writing? What did all those student loans for MAs/MFAs (and, increasingly, PhDs) actually pay for?

Collective action may be part of the solution, whether via networks of writers or professional organisations. The Society of Authors (UK) and the Authors Guild (US) both offer a variety of position papers and advice guides, but their focus is generally on contract terms and the professional ethics of publishing, not on the problems associated with author platform. The Australian Society of Authors leans in and takes a different approach, offering a course via Zoom titled 'Boost Your Author Profile with Google' (Ellison, S. n.d.). A reasonable starting point might be to lobby organisations such as these to develop institutional guidance and recommendations rather than accepting author platform as if it cannot and should not be challenged.

Ultimately, my argument is about resisting some of the groupthink that exists in the writing/publishing world. Author platform has become a popular idea, and why not? Author-services companies have monetised it (or weaponised it, depending on one's budget and perspective), and publishers have benefited, in some cases attempting to mitigate their own financial consequences with clawbacks of advances

paid to authors whose books either didn't perform or never appeared (Dugdale 2016). There is little incentive for the industry to change. After all, with lower expenditures on marketing as well as on advances, this arrangement is indisputably advantageous to these parties. At the same time, it creates an untenable double jeopardy for practitioners. Not every writing student will go on to pursue publication, but many will, and these writers will inevitably encounter the scenarios I have discussed. Properly understood and utilised, author platform is a useful way to conceptualise the intersection of author marketing and reader/audience expectations. However, in the longer term, this trend of author platform becoming inextricably interpellated with creative work – or, worse, becoming the end instead of the means – cannot possibly be sustainable.

Notes

- 1 It should also be pointed out that in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, North referred to this body of shared knowledge as lore. In 'Toward a Unified Field: The Complications of Lore and Global Context', however, Stephanie Vanderslice argues that there is a distinction between lore and mythology, the latter being the more problematic of the two (2020). As one of the co-editors of the book in which the Vanderslice chapter was published, I am more than happy to support her view.

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