



The Writer's Compass

Briefing 1: Digital Ink

a guide for writers on how to use the web to market yourself

Jacob Sam-La Rose

This briefing sheet draws on a Litfest professional development seminar for writers delivered by Jacob Sam-La Rose in December 2007 which was organised in partnership with literaturetraining. Litfest continues to offer writers a range of professional development seminars. For more details see www.litfest.org

About the author

Jacob Sam-La Rose is a poet, editor, artistic director and literature-in-education consultant with a strong background in web technology. He's also Editor-in-Chief and Lead Developer for Metaroar.com and has supported the development of numerous web sites for prominent literature agencies, organizations and initiatives.

Getting started

Welcome. For the purposes of this document, I'm going to assume that you're a writer (and here I'm using the term in the widest sense to include poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and so on), and that your experience of using web technology to promote or further extend your work ranges from practically non-existent to middling. Maybe you've already got your own web site or some other kind of web presence – perhaps a profile on a social network or hosted blog. Maybe you're not yet sure what a social network is, or what one looks like. Either way, you're reading this because you want to know more. I'm also assuming that you're reading this because you have an interest in letting people know about your work, making connections with other writers, exploring new ways of creating or collaborating with text, or all of the above.

Setting yourself up on the web

How can I make the web work for me as a writer?

How much time do you have? There are online magazines and journals to target with submissions of your work. You can find online workshops to get feedback on your work and further develop your understanding of the craft of writing. You can subscribe to various RSS feeds to stay up-to-date on events and calls for submissions that might interest you.

You can use the web to get organised and have reminder messages sent back to yourself about that submission deadline you'd like to work towards (through online to-do lists and productivity managers). You can join communities to establish online reading groups. You can even self-publish and sell a book of your own.

An online presence allows you to reach anyone that accesses the internet – readers, other writers, editors, agents, producers... Simply put, when it comes to making the web work for you, you're limited only by your imagination, your willingness and the time you have to explore and experiment with the facilities on offer.

What about accessibility?

This is really more a question about browsers and computers than it is about the web and is dependent on the individual user's set up. However, at a base level, most modern browsers allow users to determine their own 'stylesheets' for browsing. Using custom style sheets, users can often override the designer's intended styles (e.g. font face, font size) in favour of something that's easier to read. Most operating systems also have accessibility options built in, but your mileage may vary depending on which operating system you have installed on your computer, and even which version of an operating system.

Why do I want to use the internet to market my work?

The internet knows few bounds. It's a wide world out there, and the web allows you to connect with many more people than you'd ever be able to meet face to face. Also, bearing in mind the fact that you don't have to pay to have a functional web presence, it's cheaper than many other forms of promoting your work. It's also more compelling – you've got direct access to networks of people that may be interested in your work, and if they like your work enough, they're likely to pass information on to others. The internet can also be used to add value to your offline activities. For example, you could meet someone briefly and pass on your web address. The information on your website may answer questions they didn't have time to ask when you met, and through your site, you can keep that person updated on any new readings, or any new publications you put out. Using the right tools, you're able to build and maintain your audience much more efficiently.

What's all this talk about Web 2.0?

Most of the functionality I'm referring to here is facilitated by Web 2.0 and sites that can be defined as Web 2.0 sites by virtue of the level of interactivity and kinds of functionality they provide for their users.

There's a lot of talk about what Web 2.0 is and what it isn't. In its simplest sense, consider Web 2.0 to be a more social, more interactive evolution of the internet – allowing anyone with access to the internet to generate content, and facilitating the development of networks and groups online. Web 2.0 signifies a shift from a broadcast mechanism to a many-to-many model.[1]

Think of Web 1.0 as 'Read-Only', whereas Web 2.0 is more 'Read-Write', like the difference between audio CDs you buy from a shop that you can only put in a stereo and listen to, and CD-RWs that allow you to save and resave files. One popular idea that's often linked with Web 2.0 is the 'democratisation' of content provision – meaning that anyone with access to the web can pretty easily set themselves up with a web presence and start pushing content out online in the form of text, audio, video and pretty much any other digital format that can be distributed from computer to computer.

You mentioned the term 'web presence'. What's the difference between having a web 'site' and having a web 'presence'?

Many people use the terms 'web presence' and 'web site' interchangeably. I tend to define the terms in a slightly different way. For me, a web presence is any body or collection of information that represents you online. A Facebook profile, for example, may constitute a web presence. Your website, more specifically, is a collection of linked pages that you have more control over, that you've built yourself, or had built for you – like the site you had a friend build for you that lives on his or her server (a computer that 'serves up' files – particularly, in this context, websites).

I want to set up my own website. How do I get started?

Like most other things: try to figure out what you want before you get someone else involved. What do you want your site to achieve? What kind of information do you want to put up online? How would you like your site to represent you – right down to look and feel? Do some research – look at other writers' sites and see if you can figure out what you like about them. But, and I say this with experience as a web consultant, be willing to learn from whoever it is that you engage to develop your website. If you get the right person, there's a pretty good chance that they'll know more than you about trends in web development and design – if they tell you that blinking animated text is not the way to go, be prepared to listen...

Can I do it myself?

You could, but do you really want to? Your site should be presentable according to basic principles of graphic design, easily updateable (the harder it is to update, the less likely it is that you'll actually update it), provide RSS feeds, validate according to current HTML standards, be correctly configured for appropriate search engine placement and so on. To put it another way – some people might build their own car if given the parts, but most of us should go out and buy one instead.

To be fair, there's a range of packages that allow you to develop your own site. Dreamweaver, iWeb, the composer in Mozilla's SeaMonkey suite, NVU and a host of other applications allow you to author websites as if they were Word documents. Open source (i.e. 'free') content management systems (CMSs) and blog engines such as Wordpress, Joomla, and Nucleus provide you with a lot of what you need out of the box. But every one of these tools or packages comes with a learning curve.

If Apache, PHP, CSS, web standards, XML, cross browser coding, and SEO mean little or nothing to you, you're probably better off getting someone to build your site for you.

How do I find a web developer?

By recommendation, first. Do you know anyone that's had a site put together for them? Was their web developer/designer any good? Alternatively, look at the sites you like – some of those sites will have links to the developer, designer or studio that worked on them. Don't be afraid to email the owner of the site and ask for details of their developer if those details aren't displayed. Finally, you can try freelancer directories, such as Elance.com.

What will it cost?

The cost of a website will vary according to the experience of the developer, and what you're asking them to do. If you're lucky, and your next door neighbour's son is studying web development at university and is happy to take care of your site for experience, there are bargains to be found. I often see adverts from arts companies and individual creatives on the Arts Council's ArtsNews mailing list, asking for sites to be put together on a voluntary basis. Mostly, however, you'll get what you pay for. A decent site may set you back anywhere between £400 and £1,000. In your budgeting, also factor in your hosting costs, and costs for domain registration which won't usually be much – maybe between £50 and £100 a year for hosting, and £3 to £15 a year for domain name registration, depending on whether you want a '.co.uk' address or some other top-level domain.[2]

How much time will I have to invest in keeping it fresh?

That's a matter of striking a balance. Some people add something to their web presence every day. The important thing to remember is that if you have something new added to your site on a regular basis, you're more likely to build up an audience that will return to your site. The less regular your updates, the more your audience is likely to drop off. Note: I say regular, rather than frequent. I'd rather read your monthly update with informative content than your daily update that has little or no value at all.

How do I get people to visit my website?

That's a big question, and a detailed answer goes beyond the bounds of this document.[3] In short, your site needs to be visible. It should be set up correctly so that when people enter appropriate terms in search engines (for example, your name!) your site turns up at the top of the list. Put your web address in your email signature (a couple of lines of text at the bottom of every email you send out) and make sure your web address is listed wherever you can – from your social networking profile, on your business cards, in your bios (where appropriate) and so on. Exchange links with other site owners – you feature their link on your page, and they return the favour. Leave comments on other people's blogs and websites (make sure you actually read the content you're commenting on). You can also take advantage of something called 'pinging' – which is another automated way of letting other sites know when your site is updated – using specially dedicated sites (listed in resources below).

How do I know who's visiting my site?

You'll need to look into web statistics. If you have your own hosting account, you should be provided with some kind of web statistics package that will tell you how many people visit your site each month, with detailed information about which countries they were based in, which hours of the day are particularly busy for your site, which pages are most popular, and

even which sites your users visited before they came to yours (a good way of tracking referrals).

I'm quite a private person. Does this mean the web isn't for me?

Not necessarily. It's a matter of what you want to put out there. There's no doubt that the facility to easily post content on the web has paved the way for the proliferation of personal content online, and some of it is *very* personal, with little public value – but that doesn't mean you have to go down the same path. What information would be useful for promoting your work?

What about looking ahead – what's going to be the next big thing?

Increasing internet connection speeds will probably play a large part in the way the web develops and what you're able to do with it, but a lot of people are pointing towards the 'semantic web' as the next big evolutionary step. Without getting too technical, the 'semantic web' will essentially present the web as a more intelligent, more seamless experience, increasing the ease with which you interact with information stored in the internet. We could start talking about 'cloud computing', 'scaleable vector graphics', 'artificial intelligence', 'OpenID', 'webtops' (as opposed to 'desktops') and 'modular web applications', but I wouldn't want to scare you away. If you're feeling brave, type any of those terms into Wikipedia.

For now, have a look at things like Google documents and ThinkFree office: applications that have the same functionality as Microsoft Office, that exist online (i.e. you use them through your internet browser). Look at 'gOS' – an operating system (like Windows or Mac OS X) from Google that places web applications at the heart of a desktop operating system. The idea of the computer as a node that accesses the internet (where you do most of your work) as opposed to the computer as an individual piece of hardware isn't a new concept, but it's the next big step for a lot of regular users – having access to not just your files but your entire 'system' no matter whose computer you're working on, provided you have access to the internet, of course.

There are some wonderful things on the way, without a doubt. But if you're new to all or any of things that I've mentioned so far, the next big thing will be the way you change your thinking to embrace the technology that's already available that you're not even using yet – being clear on how you make it work for you, and what you want to be able to do with it. Once you've got the right mentality there, you'll be in a good place to evaluate whatever new technology has to deliver – and believe me, there's always something new just around the corner. Now, I've got a question for you...

Setting goals – what do you want to achieve?

There's a lot you can do, so before you do anything I suggest you start out with a plan. Why do you want that Myspace page, or Facebook profile? What is it that you're hoping to achieve? Of course, there'll be a lot of good things that'll happen that you didn't plan for, but having a plan in place can help you to stay focused in your wanderings around online. It's very easy to get lost on the web, and end up spending hours browsing through different web pages without getting anything done. Without a plan (and some discipline), maybe you'll set out to get your site a higher search engine ranking, and end up knowing everything that Paris Hilton did last week. Trust me – it happens to the best of us.

I've already listed a range of different things that you can do at the beginning of this document but it's a good start to think about what YOU want to do. For example, create a list of five goals, in order of priority.

Here's an example:

- To develop an audience for my writing – including people that may actually want to buy my books/pamphlets/publications as they're produced
- To keep my audience well informed about my activities as a writer, and so foster a sense of loyalty and sustained interest, as well as creating opportunities for further work
- To find out more about markets for my writing (journals, competitions etc) and stay informed about relevant and appropriate information within the industry/community
- To become a part of a community of writers that share similar interests or ideals
- To get feedback on my writing

Once you've done that, let's have a look at some of the tools, sites and services you might want to use to get things done.

Social networks

Simply put, social networks are web-based services that provide ways for users to interact and manage their relationships with other users. Through social networks, you can create and join communities that share similar interests, wherever they may be located in the world. Granted, you may not think an online social network would be necessary if the members of your community live in the same street, but aside from providing you with the opportunity to build international communities, social networks can provide archiving facilities (document discussions and dialogue, audio and video files etc). And regardless of how physically close your community may or may not be, social networks can be great for empowering communications when you can't get everyone in the same place at the same time.

Most of the social networks share similar facilities – you set up a profile, which allows you to post text-based updates (blog entries), images, and maybe even audio or video items. You'll be able to make connections with other people that have profiles on the network (try searching for people that you know, or people that share the similar interests), create and join discussion groups and promote events, among other things. To use a social network profile to promote your work, think about how you might use the functionality provided to share tasters of your writing, or even parts of the process you go through in developing work, your thoughts on issues related to your work, and so on.[4]

One other thing – there's a wide range of social networks available. Myspace and Facebook are particularly popular. Which one should you sign up with? Personally, I've got profiles on a range of social networks and web applications. I'm most active in Facebook – I find the relationships I've built via Facebook to have more value – but I also have a Myspace page that I update much less frequently. I have a tumblelog (jslr.tumblr.com), a Jaiku page, a Flickr account, and countless other profiles. Some of these services allow me to automatically draw in content from other services – for example, my tumblelog entries automatically feed into my Facebook page. It may look like I've got an unmanageable number of web pages to maintain, but in reality, I only have to maintain two or three, and the updates cascade through to others.

Why do I maintain so many web accounts and profiles? Consider the notion that the major value of a social network is found in the people that use it. Different people use different

social networks – and I want my work to be easy to find, regardless of which network someone is on. Remember, one of these networks – Facebook – is my main focus. That's where I develop my most meaningful relationships. My other web presences are echoes, or dedicated to specific niches.

As I write this, an application called Fuser has just become available. Fuser allows you to view your Myspace messages without leaving Facebook, and promises to aggregate mail and social networking messages from a range of accounts.

Social networking sites

Myspace – <http://www.myspace.com>

One of the best known and well-used social networks.

Facebook – <http://www.facebook.com>

Originally developed as a social network for Harvard students, which grew with open access and became a serious competitor to Myspace.

Linkedin – <http://www.linkedin.com/>

A business–orientated social network, mainly used for professional networking.

Hi5 – <http://www.hi5.com/>

'Find friends in your hometown or other parts of the world.'

Friendster – <http://www.friendster.com/>

'Friendster is a leading global social network emphasizing genuine friendships and the discovery of new people through friends.'

Virb – <http://www.virb.com/>

'VIRB is our vision of a social community – done right. A website that combines you, your interests, your friends and the things you like with music, art, fashion, film and more.'

Urbis – <http://www.urbis.com/>

Urbis is a network designed specifically for writers and poets – allowing you to post work, feedback and critique, with 'credits' being awarded for activity (e.g. feeding back on other people's work) that can be used to unlock reviews of your own work that other users have left for you.

Ning – <http://www.ning.com/>

Ning essentially allows you to establish your own social network...

Sample Myspace pages

I'm not responsible for any of the content on any of these pages whenever you go to visit them! All I can say is that, at time of writing, these were pretty good examples of writers using Myspace pages to promote themselves and their work, disseminating bios and resumés, reading schedules, and even facilitating book sales.

Tara Betts – <http://www.myspace.com/tarabettswrites>

Kelly Zen Yie Tsai – http://www.myspace.com/yellowgurl_poetry

Kalisha Buckhanon – <http://www.myspace.com/upstatethenovel>

Social media sites

Social media sites allow users to share their media items (images, audio, video etc) and facilitate groupings of users around items or categories of content.

Bebo – <http://www.bebo.com/>

Social media site. Particularly popular among younger users (teens). May be good for further developing an audience if you write for teens, or if you run youth workshops.

Flickr – <http://www.flickr.com>

Photographic sharing and archiving.

Listal – <http://www.listal.com/>

List the things you love, interact with other users...

Booklists, reading recommendations, reading communities:

Shelfari – <http://www.shelfari.com>

Librarything – <http://www.librarything.com>

Booktribes – <http://www.booktribes.com>

Produced in association with ABCtales.com – ‘explore and develop your creative writing skills, get support from our editors, publish your short stories and poems online, get feedback and writing tips and meet fellow writers, all for free’.

Goodreads – <http://www.goodreads.com/>

Anobii – <http://www.anobii.com/>

Social bookmarking

Social bookmark sites allow you to manage a repository of weblinks and urls, and share those weblinks (if you choose to do so) with other people that might find your weblinks interesting.

Delicious – <http://del.icio.us/>

Magnolia – <http://ma.gnolia.com/>

My ma.gnolia page is here:

<http://ma.gnolia.com/people/jsamlarose/>

You might be interested in all the links I've categorised as ‘writers’, or if you're a mac user, you might want to keep an eye on my ‘mac apps’ category.

RSS

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication – a way to provide a summary or the full text of the content published to a website. RSS makes it easier for users to get the latest updates from the websites that they're interested in, particularly through RSS ‘aggregators’ or ‘readers’.

Simply put, if your site or web presence doesn't provide an RSS feed, there's a portion of your audience that may miss out on your updates, or that simply may not remember to come back to your site.

How do you provide an RSS feed? Most modern hosted services (blogs etc) will provide an RSS feed for your content. For your own website, you'll need to let your web developer know that you want RSS feeds, or you'll have to get comfortable with databases and dynamic site content if you're rolling your own solution...

RSS aggregators

'a feed aggregator, also known as a feed reader, news reader or simply as an aggregator, is client software or a Web application which aggregates syndicated web content such as news headlines, blogs, podcasts, and vlogs in a single location for easy viewing.'[5]

If that's a little technical, just think of an aggregator as a piece of software that acts as an assistant, gathering information from a range of different websites via RSS and collecting it all in one place.

Online aggregators:

Netvibes – <http://www.netvibes.com/>

Google Reader – <http://www.google.com/reader/view/>

Bloglines – <http://www.bloglines.com/>

Rojo – <http://www.rojo.com/>

For a comprehensive and current list of aggregators, see also:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_feed_aggregators

Blogs

'A blog (a portmanteau of web log) is a website where entries are written in chronological order and commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. 'Blog' can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog'.[6]

Blogging platforms:

Blogger – <http://www.blogger.com>

Wordpress – <http://wordpress.com/>

LiveJournal – <http://www.livejournal.com/>

Tumblelogs

'A tumblelog or tlog is a variation of a blog, that favors short-form, mixed-media posts over the longer editorial posts frequently associated with blogging. Common post formats found on tumblelogs include links, photos, quotes, dialogues, and video. Unlike blogs, this format is frequently used to share the author's creations, discoveries, or experiences without providing a commentary.'[7]

Tumblr – <http://www.tumblr.com>

Soup – <http://www.soup.io/>

Micro-blogs (aka presence applications)

Micro-blogging is a form of blogging that allows users to write brief text updates (usually less than 200 characters) and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, email, MP3 or the web.[8]

Jaiku – <http://jaiku.com/>
Twitter – <http://twitter.com>

Podcasts and podcasting

Podcasts are digital media files (audio, video) distributed over the internet through syndication feeds (see RSS). Podcasts are distinguished from other digital media made available online (streaming media, or downloads) through their ability to be subscribed to and downloaded automatically when a new item is made available. Podcasts are enabled by XML – the same technology that powers RSS feeds.

It's pretty easy to create your own podcast. You'll need a way of creating the content (audio file), and a place to host it. Some sites provide you with the facility to record your podcast via the web, and if you've got a computer with a mic, you've got the basic tools you need to create an audio podcast. Software for editing audio is freely available via download, allowing you to polish up the quality of your audio file, add fades and jingles (if you wish), but as long as the text is clear and compelling, you shouldn't need to do too much to it.

Podomatic – <http://www.podomatic.com/>
Podcasting community – for creating and hosting podcasts

Odeo Studio – <http://studio.odeo.com/create/home>
Create and host podcasts

Mailing lists and forums

Here are a few recommended mailing lists and forums to check out. There are many, many more valuable sites to check in on, obviously, but these are a good start.

Poets on Fire – http://s11.invisionfree.com/Poets_On_Fire/index.php
Salt Publishing's forum – <http://www.saltpublishing.com/saline/index.php>
FYI / Metaroar – <http://www.metaroar.com>

Web statistics

Site traffic analysis – who's visiting your site, from where, what pages are most popular, what browsers are they using etc.

Google Analytics – <http://www.google.com/analytics/>

Mint – <http://haveamint.com/>
Self-hosted statistics analysis package – £15/site

Feedburner – <http://www.feedburner.com>

Ping sites

Ping sites allow you to draw more traffic to your site when it's updated, by informing other sites, search engines and web directories on your behalf.

<http://blo.gs/ping.php>

<http://blogrolling.com/ping.phtml>

<http://pingoat.com/>

<http://pingomatic.com/>

Self-publishing

You write your book, you upload the book as a pdf to a publishing site, they produce the actual book, place it within their marketplace, and allow you to sell.

<http://www.lulu.com/uk/>

<http://www.blurb.com>

<http://www.createspace.com/>

And that's pretty much it – for this document, anyway. There's much more out there to explore and experiment with.

Notes

- [1] See What is Web 2.0 – <http://tinyurl.com/y3uhod> – for further information
- [2] Top-level domain name = the letters which follow the last dot of any domain name – e.g. .com, .uk, .us
- [3] Steve Pavlina wrote a pretty useful blog entry that would make for interesting reading: <http://tinyurl.com/dtyks>. For further tips, see: <http://tinyurl.com/2aqmbk>.
- [4] Lifehack has a great article for building relationships and getting the most out of social network sites: <http://tinyurl.com/3yhusc>
- [5] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aggregator>
- [6] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>
- [7] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tumblelog>
- [8] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Micro-blogging>