

# The role and function of author interviews in the contemporary Anglophone literary field

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## The role and function of author interviews in the contemporary Anglophone literary field

In 2016 a new service for authors, publishers and agents launched, promising to automate the author interview. With “AuthorBot”:

Authors can answer reader queries, and chat with multiple readers in their own words—**without adding to author time** commitment or cost.

Our chatbots create an authentic conversation with readers using AI, NLP and guided elements. Authors can also **jump into conversations** to support book tours or conduct an AMA—with revenue opportunities on physical sales, ebooks and merchandise.<sup>1</sup>

An example of a “chatbot”, “chatterbot” or “conversational agent”, AuthorBot is a computer program designed to simulate human conversation. It is only the latest incarnation of a much longer endeavour to perfect interpersonal communication with the aid of the latest technology (we could trace its lineage back from Alexa and Siri, via Joseph Weizenbaum’s ELIZA and the Mechanical Turk, to Pygmalion’s Galatea). What is unusual is the use to which the chatbot is being put here, namely an author interview. Generally conceived to be the product of a spontaneous, revelatory, face-to-face conversation with an autonomous subject, the author interview would seem to be the obverse of what can be automated. Yet AuthorBot collapses this distinction, premising itself on both maintaining the appeal of that particular author–reader interaction, while

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<sup>1</sup> “AuthorBot - The future of books”, 2016, <http://www.fastbot.io/author-bot>Fastbot, Accessed 2 October 2017.

rendering it more efficient thanks to technological augmentation and reduction of author involvement.

Humanists' groans aside, AuthorBot offers us a fascinating entry point for examining the interactive role and function of the author in the contemporary literary sphere. In attempting to automate the author interview (and to sell this strategy to the publishing industry<sup>2</sup>) AuthorBot taps into a wider perception that readers today desire intimate, authentic, and unmediated interactions with an author—a perception fuelled in part by the big rise in literary festivals, author readings, platform interviews and alike: what we might call collectively “live literature”.<sup>3</sup> It also acknowledges that these interactions—live literature included—are increasingly mediated via computational technologies in the era of digital media and “platformed sociality”.<sup>4</sup> In this respect the decision by the designers of AuthorBot to replicate the author interview is a savvy one: as I argue in my book *[redacted]*, interviews have historically mediated conversation, while promising communicational immediacy. In so doing they have offered a paradoxical dream of face-to-face communication for a mass mediated culture.<sup>5</sup> Even before AuthorBot attempted to automate the author, interviews were deployed as a means to mediate and manage mass communication.

Expanding on the curious case of AuthorBot, this article seeks to acknowledge the role that author interviews play in the construction and maintenance of a contemporary Anglophone literary sphere. In doing so, I build on the arguments put

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<sup>2</sup> The announcement of AuthorBot received a degree of attention in the industry press, for example, Molly Flatt, “Watch out publishers: the chatbots are coming”, *The Bookseller.com*, 16 January 2017, <https://www.thebookseller.com/futurebook/publishers-prepare-chatbots-are-coming-470556>. Accessed 5 October 2017.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Peter Howarth for arranging the “Literature and Live Events” seminar in London and his stimulating conversation on this topic. My conception of liveness also draws on Philip Auslander’s conception of liveness as a mediated category, see “Digital liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective”, *PAJ* 102 (2012): 3-11.

<sup>4</sup> Jose van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 5.

<sup>5</sup> [redacted for anonymity during review process]

forth in my book, which examines author interviews and interviewing culture in Britain and America since the mid nineteenth century. There I argue that attending to the shifting and multifaceted deployment of interviews—both as form and method—has much to tell us about historical conceptions of authorship, publics, inscription technologies and reading practices, among other things. Interviews mediate between authors and publics, helping to construct both. They have also helped to promote two, largely oppositional, versions of subjectivity in modernity: one the highly constructed and privileged interviewee; the other, an effaced, de-privileged interviewer, whose personhood is often discounted.<sup>6</sup> The author interview’s mediating function is not neutral, whatever it’s association with automation might imply.

One significant example of this is the author interview’s championing of a purportedly autonomous authorial subject within the wider market. In *Literature and the Creative Economy* Sarah Brouillette traces the implications of the ideology of the “creative industries” (first proposed by Richard Florida and championed by Britain’s New Labour government after 1997) for contemporary conceptions of authorship. Built upon the assumption that “creativity” and “culture” can drive economic development, the creative economy in fact posits a particular model of labour drawn from the idea of the artist as autonomous subject. As she notes, “The artist–author, herself subject to market control and rational planning, has been for some time now a profitable, pervasive, regulated symbol of autonomy from routine, standardization, mechanized production hostile to individuals”.<sup>7</sup> The author interview has long been used to promote this exceptional

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<sup>6</sup> [redacted]

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014), 54. See also Angela McRobbie, “Everyone Is Creative: Artists as Pioneers of the New Economy”, in *Contemporary Culture and Everyday Life*, ed. Elizabeth Silva and Tony Bennett (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2004); and Marion von Osten, “Unpredictable Outcomes/Unpredictable Outcasts: On Recent Debates over Creativity and the Creative Industries”, in *Critique of Creativity: Precarity, Subjectivity and Resistance in the “Creative*

subject within the literary sphere. Although the form is inherently flexible and can present all manner of interactions, creative expressions and power relations, contemporary practices frequently result in interviews that, *en masse*, further promote such a model of subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> The expansion of author interviews today, automated or otherwise, deserves our attention.

### **Methods of Reading**

This article examines the proliferation of author interviews conducted and published in the Anglophone literary field since the late 1970s—a trend that has only increased with the advent of Web 2.0 and the emergence of what Simone Murray has labelled the “digital literary sphere”.<sup>9</sup> Following the contemporary story of the interview requires attending to developments across both the (print) publishing industry and live literature since the late 1970s. These developments in turn form the backstory in any account of the role and function of the author interview in the digital literary sphere.

The approach presented in this article builds on my own training within literary studies, but necessarily also draws together work on histories of reading, authorship, publishing and performance, as well as analysis of digital culture and social media. The specific history of the author interview and its function in the marketplace and in literary criticism has received surprisingly little sustained critical attention. In part this is because author interviews have often been associated with the “pseudo event”, Daniel J.

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*Industries*” ed. GERALF RAUNIG, GENE RAY and ULF WUGGENIG (London: MayFlyBooks, 2011), 133-145.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in a slightly different vein, author interviews are also perceived as a useful means of imparting advice to aspiring writers via their modelling of authorial subjectivity: a whole subset of interview series with authors has itself emerged on trade-oriented sites such as *Publishers Weekly* and *Writers Digest* to advise aspiring authors on the publishing industry, marketing and self-promotion). See my “Do you use a pencil or a pen?: Author Interviews as Literary Advice” in *Paperback Writer: Literary Advice into the 21st Century*, ed. Dirk de Geest and Anneleen Masschelein (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Simone Murray, “Charting the Digital Literary Sphere”, *Contemporary Literature*, 56 no. 2 (2015): 311-339.

Boorstin's 1961 term for an event designed purely to elicit media publicity—the original fake news.<sup>10</sup> In part it is also because the author interview's formal features, shared across examples, are often overlooked as critics and readers respond to the content of the individuals' utterances. Such readings exacerbate the tendency to privilege the exceptional authorial subject championed by the creative economy and the interview itself. As a counter to these points, I deliberately downplay the agency of the author-subject in what follows. Rather, I attend to the ways in which author interviews are perceived to have *functioned* in the literary field and the ways they have been deployed and understood by publishers, critics and readers in particular.<sup>11</sup> To do so I draw on my own extensive analysis of scholarship, published books, reviewer commentary, reader comments, sales figures, broadcasters' and publishers' analysis of audience and reader responses and other textual evidence of perceptions around author interviews.

Despite not wanting to replicate the privileging of authorial subjectivity, I do illustrate my discussion with specific case studies. My choices are influenced by a number of factors. Given the scant critical attention to author interviews, I have chosen to focus on writers who are accorded prestige within our current literary field. I am interested in examining how authors whose work has already been perceived by critics and readers to exhibit literary value have utilised a form that has functioned somewhat under the critical radar. I am also interested in engaging with extreme or limit cases—AuthorBot included—at various moments. While not all authors will choose to be represented by a natural language processing algorithm, such cases are useful not because they are representative, but because they often upset our expectations. Eliciting unease or amusement, such examples can defamiliarize norms and thus enable closer analysis.

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 11.

<sup>11</sup> I draw here on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the literary field, most extensively articulated in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

This article augments literary and historical analysis with deployment of semi-structured interviews. I do not conceive of the latter as empirical research, but rather as process, or “interviewing as creative practice”: the notion that interviews are constructed documents that “contribute to new forms and ways of being”.<sup>12</sup> The twenty conversations were conducted with individuals representing key organisations and roles in the Anglophone literary sphere. They were conceived as a means to discuss questions arising from my wider analysis of available scholarship and commentary, and to elicit reflection from literary industry players about their perceived function of the author interview, in an era in which its mediating role might be said to be under pressure. In a critical context in which author interviews have received little sustained attention, such conversations can offer useful conceptual prompts. Additionally, I also draw on two focus groups, or collective conversations, which were similarly conceived as exercises in collaborative creative practice. Attendees of an in-person author reading and interview event in 2018 volunteered to discuss their attitudes towards platform interviews and “live literature” events in the era of Web 2.0.<sup>13</sup> The event with American author Marilynne Robinson was chosen for the author’s relative prominence with both critics and readers, and for being hosted by the Unterberg Poetry Center at the 92Y, a Jewish cultural and community organisation in New York with a long tradition of conducting readings and on-stage interviews with writers. Like the research interviews, these conversations were not designed to elicit representative data, but to enable the airing of an array of voices and perspectives on a topic that has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention.

### **Author interviews today: a history and framework**

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<sup>12</sup> [redacted – xxx and xxx p. 174]

<sup>13</sup> Group conversations were conducted in collaboration with Peter Howarth, Queen Mary, University of London and with the help of Bernard Schwartz and the staff of the Unterberg Poetry Centre at the 92Y, New York. My thanks to the participants for volunteering to share their thoughts.

To understand the role and function of the author interview in the contemporary Anglophone literary field, requires the tracing of three distinct historical narratives. Firstly, we need to account for the use of (mainly print-based) author interviews in late-twentieth century publishing. Secondly, we need to trace the emergence of live literature (events that seek to offer unmediated author-reader contact), and the stage or “platform” interview in particular (where the audience is physically present for the interview encounter), in a similar time period. Thirdly, we need to account for the impact of digital culture in the literary field. These three narratives coalesce, I argue, in our contemporary moment and form the conceptual frame by which we understand the role and function of the author interview today.

### ***Author interviews in late-twentieth century publishing***

The author interview has become a core feature of the publishing industry today, but the practice of interviewing authors for publication is not new. Henry James, like many writers subsequently, would label his era the “age of interviewing.”<sup>14</sup> Modern interviews (talk conducted with the assumed purpose of publication) first appeared in American newspapers in the mid nineteenth century; author interviews would quickly follow. Interviews mediate conversation across time and space while seemingly promising communicational immediacy; they can support “para-social interactions” (one-way interactions with the illusion of reciprocity and intimacy) between the mediated subject and their public, and have proven immensely popular with readers and publishers across the decades.<sup>15</sup> *The Strand* magazine’s “illustrated interview” with Rider Haggard in 1892, for example, offered readers the author’s conversation interspersed with photographs of

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<sup>14</sup> Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 147.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction”, *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215-229, DOI: [10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049](https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049). Accessed 19 May 2018.

the author at his desk, his house interior, and a facsimile of a manuscript page from *She*—features as likely to be included in an author interview published today.<sup>16</sup> Later, while occasionally derided as symptomatic of the rise of the literary “middleman” during the interwar years, interviews with authors would periodically appear in newspapers and periodicals (and very occasionally on radio). In the postwar years *The Paris Review*’s prestigious “Art of Fiction” series would encourage authors to view the form as both a serious aesthetic document and venue for discussing the craft of writing, while the expansion of broadcast interviews (such as *Face to Face*, *Desert Island Discs*, or the *Mike Wallace Show*) would offer authors (among other kinds of guests) the possibility of conducting interviews in a format other than the written for a mass audience. Never one thing, author interviews have remained popular with readers since their first appearance.<sup>17</sup>

It is, however, since the late 1970s that the author interview has become a mainstay of publishers’ marketing departments, as waves of structural transformations have rationalised the publishing and bookselling industry. Mergers and acquisitions in publishing firms in the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the emergence of media conglomerates, followed in the late 1980s by their globalisation and, in the mid 1990s, the creation of multinationals aiming to take advantage of the opportunities associated with the internet.<sup>18</sup> Such corporate realignment and the streamlining of a traditionally “genteel” industry brought increased attention to the bottom line, putting pressure on departments and imprints to deliver year-on-year growth. The consolidation and automation of distribution and sales would further put pressure on numbers in an

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<sup>16</sup> Harry Howe, “Illustrated Interviews No VII.—Mr H. Rider Haggard”, *The Strand Magazine* 3 (January 1892): 2-17.

<sup>17</sup> This conclusion stems from my own reading across a number of sources, including sales figures for interview anthologies, broadcasters’ archival records of viewer engagement, website hits, reader comments and anecdotal evidence.

<sup>18</sup> Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago; London: U of Chicago P, 2006), 41.

increasingly crowded field—in the UK for example the number of new titles being published in 1975 was over 35,000; by 1996, even before the e-book revolution, this number was up to 100,000 and rising fast.<sup>19</sup> In bookselling, the emergence of newly national retail chains such as the Borders Group and Barnes & Noble in the US, Chapters in Canada, Waterstones and W.H. Smiths in the UK, would increase the negotiating power of booksellers. In the 1990s the arrival of the so-called “big-box” stores—who in 1997 together accounted for 43.3 per cent of book sales in the US<sup>20</sup>—along with their discounting practices, the breaking of the Net Book Agreement in the UK, and the rise of supermarket and internet sales would squeeze publishers’ margins further. Although such large-scale structural changes might seem to have little to do with author interviews, in fact these shifts have heightened the industry’s reliance on author interviews (at many levels), as we shall see.

One of the more direct effects has been the growing importance of marketing and promotional campaigns, with the author interview a core feature. Author interviews have long been deployed as a publicity-garnering device—even Henry James granted them. Indeed a growing body of scholarship around authorial celebrity, by critics such as Brenda R. Silver, Loren Glass, Aaron Jaffe, Joe Moran and others, has highlighted the degree to which authors have participated in such strategies across the twentieth century: as a means to shape their public personae, while often defining themselves against the culture of publicity and celebrity from which these strategies emerge.<sup>21</sup> While individual authors’ use of interviews can be enlightening, it is the utilisation of the form by the publishing industry at large—a shift from earlier twentieth century practice—that

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<sup>19</sup> Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Brenda R. Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999); Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980* (New York: New York UP, 2004); Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005); Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto P, 2000).

interests me here. Today author interviews are very much at the heart of marketing campaigns. In an attempt to ensure a book's visibility in the media and to boost sales, a promotional team will plan interviews with literary-oriented radio and television hosts such as Terry Gross, Hermione Lee, Michael Silverman, Eleanor Wachtel, and Oprah Winfrey, if the authors' fame, or the book's hype, is large enough. So too they will arrange for interviews to be published in the prestigious broadsheet book review and supplement sections in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *NYRB*, the *Guardian* and elsewhere as part of a wider strategy involving author appearances at signing events, literary festivals and book readings. While deployed haphazardly for many years, these strategies—what Margaret Drabble called the “modern commercial literary circus”<sup>22</sup>—, and interviews specifically, have become standardised practice, to the point that specialised companies now offer training to publishers and their authors in successfully selling their books in interviews. As Bill McGowan, self-proclaimed “author coach” for HarperCollins, Random House and Penguin, explained it, “We really help unearth the best stories that are in their book . . . so they don't get lost . . . An interview is to a book is what a movie trailer is to a full-length feature, and it should give little glimpses of the best scenes and the best points”.<sup>23</sup> In the corporate world of contemporary publishing the interview has become an importance sales pitch to readers.

Author interviews are also an important pitch to newly powerful booksellers themselves and to market the “personality” of an imprint. Along with offering book

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret Drabble, “Thank you and goodnight”, *The Observer*, 20 October 2001, n.pag [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). Accessed 27 Sept 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Clare Swanson, “Bill McGowan Works to Make Authors Pitch-Perfect”, *Publishers Weekly*, 30 August 2013, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publishing-and-marketing/article/58959-bill-mcgowan-works-to-make-authors-pitch-perfect.html>. Accessed 1 July 2017. The title “author coach” here denotes someone who provides authors with advice on promoting their own work and engaging in media appearances. Gary Shteyngart is one author who has successfully promoted his works via humorous book trailers. <http://www.garyshteyngart.com/cool-stuff/>. Accessed June 5 2018.

signings in store and tie-in interviews for website content, publishers have utilised author interviews within the books themselves. The press release announcing the re-launch of HarperCollins's Perennial imprint in the US in 2004 targetted booksellers, pointing to the new "P.S. section" in these paperback reprints, which offered "behind-the-pages insights" and "added value" "beyond traditional reprinting":

Similar to DVDs which regularly include outtakes and behind-the-scenes footage from feature films, each P.S. section will be unique; the extra 16-pages will offer readers an in-depth look at both the author and their book. The P.S. section will use interviews, essays, articles, photos and illustrations to explore the authors' sources of inspiration. P.S. may also contain topics related to the book's subject matter and show the impact a book has had since its publication.<sup>24</sup>

Although literary scholars and the publishing trade have often been keen to distinguish the book as a special kind of commodity—Laura J. Miller captures this ambivalence in the title of her book *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption*—this press release is much more market-savvy, identifying the features individuating this product and utilising a logic of fiscal, and not literary, value for money. Quoting enthusiastic reviews from Ingram, one of the largest book distributors in the United States, and a book-chain buyer, the press release emphasises reader convenience and experience: "P.S. will draw you closer to the author. I see it enhancing the reading experience without explaining the book, lending extra depth to a reader's understanding

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<sup>24</sup> Leslie Cohen, "Corporate Press Release: HARPERCOLLINS ANNOUNCES THE LAUNCH OF P.S.<sup>TM</sup>," July 29, 2004. <http://www.harpercollins.com/footer/release.aspx?id=274&year=2004>. Accessed 2 Jan 2013.

of the work”.<sup>25</sup> In discussion David Roth-Ey, Executive Publisher of 4th Estate and Harper Press UK and one of the originators of the series in the United States, explained that the aim was to create a brand with resonance that would appeal not only to readers, but to booksellers. In the case of the P.S. launch, the strategy was successful: the dominant US chain Barnes and Noble, grouped titles in the series together on a feature table across its stores, helping to drive sales. Acknowledging that contemporary authors are under enormous pressure to “entice” readers by making themselves interesting, by offering a “Freudian hook” in the form of details of their lives as a “point of entry,” for Roth-Ey the interview can also be a useful tool in the marketing of imprints themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Such transformations have also seen an increased reliance on the author interview in another arena. Squeezed by booksellers, publishers have also been under pressure from the rise of literary “super-agents” such as Andrew Wylie and Morton Janklow in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>27</sup> Advocating aggressively for their authors, instigating bidding wars, negotiating large advances, managing careers and poaching clients, these super-agents offered a useful selection tool for time-poor editors, but also but further pressure on publishers thanks to their market-orientation. Profiting from their clients’ success, these super-agents have often encouraged interviews that promote the long-term author-brand, emphasising visibility and saleability over specific book launches and publisher strategies. This general marketisation of the author-publisher relationship, whether through the activities of literary agents or in the increasing number of self-publishing opportunities, has also encouraged authors to professionalise, advertising themselves.<sup>28</sup> Author

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<sup>25</sup> Cohen, “Corporate Press Release”.

<sup>26</sup> David Roth-Ey, research interview, November 23, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity P, 2012), 62.

<sup>28</sup> For more extensive discussion of uses of interviews in the self-publishing field, see my book chapter [redacted]. Clearly only certain authors have access to the types of

interviews are a central feature in such campaigns; indicated in the degree to which not granting interviews and maintaining an elusive public persona becomes a feature of authors' commented-upon identities, as has been the case with J. D. Salinger, Thomas Pynchon and Elena Ferrante.

Within this promotional network and a crowded marketplace certain interview series have become key venues for the conferring of prestige, thus ensuring that the author interview, while a significant feature of marketing, can also be represented as a culturally significant event that signals the author's future canonisation. Series such as that in *The Paris Review* are comparable to what James F. English has called the "Prize Frenzy" of modern culture, in which "winning a prize is the only truly newsworthy thing a cultural worker can do" and wherein the citation of such awards has become a "uniquely contemporary form of cultural biography".<sup>29</sup> While one-time *Review* editor Philip Gourevitch's descriptions of the interviews as "constructed to stand as testimonial for the ages," "canonical" and an "international laurel for writers, a recognition of a mature life's work" might seem hubristic, they also indicate the degree to which author interviews in some contexts can operate as akin to the Nobel, the Neustadt, the Giller, or the Booker in generating prestigious coverage for the author.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, like the "scandalous currency" of literary shortlisting and awards, the hoax interview—for example purported interviews by Italian journalist Tommaso De Benedetti with Philip Roth and John Grisham criticising then-American President Barak Obama or Gore Vidal

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interview opportunities I am discussing. As mentioned above, I focus here on authors who have achieved a degree of prestige, bracketing questions around authorial hierarchies—with which the author interview has a complicated relationship—in order to attend more closely to questions around function.

<sup>29</sup> James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard UP, 2005), 21.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Gourevitch, ed. "Introduction." In *The Paris Review Interviews, vol 1* (New York: Picador, 2006), vii – xi; xi, vii, xi.

and John Le Carré commenting on the escapades of one-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi—helps to ensure media coverage of the “event”.<sup>31</sup>

The dominance of interviews in the marketplace has also seen them re-purposed by authors, their agents and publishers. Since the late 1970s there has been an explosion in the number of interview anthologies published. These include reprints of well-known interview series from periodicals such as *Playboy*, *The Paris Review*, *Bomb*, or *Publishers Weekly*; anthologies of reprinted interviews by journalists such as Herbert Mitgang or Lyn Barber; or with well-known individuals, done specifically for the occasion or (more commonly) edited collections of prior interviews which seek to draw on the established reputation of the subject—whether a deceased Marcel Duchamp, or a thriving Jorge Luis Borges. In other instances anthologies of interviews with different writers or artists have been deployed as a means of harnessing writers’ identities through group affiliation. Attempts to promote writing cultures or authors less familiar to British and American readers were often done via interview anthologies from the 1970s onwards, with titles such as *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, *At the field’s end: interviews with twenty Pacific Northwest writers*, *African writers talking: a collection of interviews*, *A writing life: interviews with Australian women writers* proliferated.<sup>32</sup>

This trend has only increased with the popularisation of post-colonial and “world” literature as a publishing and academic phenomenon since the 1980s and 1990s: what Graham Huggan has critiqued as the “alterity industry”.<sup>33</sup> Publishers, prize bodies and funders have followed, in English’s view, “a course analogous to that of foreign

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<sup>31</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige*, 187

<sup>32</sup> Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World* (Jackson; London: UP of Mississippi, 1992); Nicholas O’Connell, *At the field’s end: interviews with twenty Pacific Northwest writers* (Seattle: Madron, 1987); Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, eds. *African writers talking: a collection of interviews* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1972); Giulia Giuffré, *A writing life: interviews with Australian women writers*, (Sydney; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge: 2001), 8.

investment in financial capital” in their attempts to recognise writers from postcolonial nations. Interviews, like prizes, “facilitate exchange of symbolic capital between the indigenous and the metropolitan marketplace”, which can result in a “*deterritorialization* of prestige”.<sup>34</sup> This can be productive; introducing a volume of *Paris Review* interviews, Turkish author Orhan Pamuk speaks of the impact of reading William Faulkner’s interview as a young man, with Faulkner having proclaimed that “The writer’s only responsibility is to his art”. As Pamuk declares, “It was consoling to read these words in a country where the demands of the community came before all else”.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, these interview anthologies frequently deploy descriptors such as “multicultural”, “native” and “international”, labels which as Emily Apter notes, “can help launch or spotlight world-class writers – pulling them out of ethnic area-studies ghettos on the bookstore shelves – [but] also cling like barnacles to their reception and afford constrictive stereotypes of identity”. At best these anthologies promote new writers, modes of authorship and cultures to geographically distant readers; at their worst, they promote a “transnationally translatable monoculture”.<sup>36</sup>

Even in academic publishing, suffering since the 1980s from what Thompson calls the “decline of the scholarly monograph”, interview series have been of growing appeal, attractive to presses under increasing financial and institutional constraints and desiring greater sales.<sup>37</sup> Despite their “iffy status in criticism”, interviews have flourished in academic journals. Interviews with authors have become a common feature in scholarly journals such as *Contemporary Literature*, *Callaloo*, *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Modern Drama*. Meanwhile, Jeffrey J. Williams, himself a significant interviewer–player in the field, has

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<sup>34</sup> English, *The Economy of Prestige*, 271, 282, italics in original.

<sup>35</sup> Orhan Pamuk, “Introduction”, trans. Maureen Freely, in *The Paris Review Interviews vol 2*, ed. Philip Gourevitch (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007), vii – x; vii-viii.

<sup>36</sup> Emily S. Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006), 98, 99.

<sup>37</sup> John B. Thompson, *Books in the Digital Age: The Transformation of Academic and Higher Education Publishing in Britain and the United States* (Cambridge: Polity P, 2005).

chronicled the emergence of a “critical” counterpart to the “literary” interview in journals such as *Diacritics*, *Minnesota Review* (which he edited), *Boundary 2*, *Differences*, *New Left Review*, *Social Text*, and *Theory, Culture and Society*, among others. A “hybrid of the literary interview and the scholarly article”, the critical interview has become a “medial genre for criticism in the research era, crafting a more accessible mode to convey specialized discourse”.<sup>38</sup>

On the book side, academic presses have also published an increasing number of interview collections. The University Press of Mississippi (UPM), founded in 1970, has offered the most extensive example of this wider trend. Their “Conversations/Interviews” series, begun in 1984, offers an impressive list of notable writers (and later directors) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Everyone from Anaïs Nin and Betty Friedan, to Derek Walcott and Isaac Asimov is represented. The emphasis is upon American authors, with strong showings from Southern and local writers, but their coverage of well-known international authors—for example Nadine Gordimer, Bharati Mukherjee and Chinua Achebe—is also impressive. The anthologies offer a series of interviews collated from a wide range of publications, from the literary or specialist academic journals, to mass-market magazines and newspapers, and even intermedial transcripts from television and radio interviews.

Crucially, like *The Paris Review*’s “Art of Fiction”, the UPM series appeals to both general readers and an academic market. They are accessible to the non-specialist, priced at a reasonable \$25.00 and contain few notes; as (then) Director of the Press Leila Salisbury noted, “Especially for more ‘cult’ subjects (such as Hunter S. Thompson or the Coen brothers), we see higher sales through general channels (chain bookstores and online/Amazon), and I can only conclude that these books are going to these ‘general

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<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey J. Williams, “Criticism Live: The History and Practice of the Critical Interview”, *Biography* 41, no 2 (Spring 2018): 235–55, 236.

readers' and 'fans'. Of any part of our list, these books 'travel' the most widely, gaining more distribution in major bookstores and in libraries in the US and abroad". However, these volumes are also often edited by specialists and utilised by scholars: "[e]specially, in the pre-ebook age, one of the values of these collections was the fact that they often made accessible and available material from hard to locate or out of print publications".<sup>39</sup> For UPM and for many other publishers such series have proven a useful bridge between trade and academic publishing as the latter becomes increasingly unprofitable, just as *The Paris Review's* anthologies have offered useful financial injections to the little magazine over the decades.

Taken together, these various structural transformations have resulted in author interviews becoming an operational feature of the contemporary publishing industry. Widely perceived to be an effective means of marketing an author's personality—and in turn his or her books—author interviews are also potentially aesthetic objects in themselves, content to be re-purposed, re-packaged and re-read for an often-enthusiastic reading public. While authors like Toni Morrison (the intended target of the AuthorBot ad?) might complain that the interview represents the obverse of creative writing—her “trying to get to the end of it”<sup>40</sup>—and an administrative burden, for the industry interviews are a useful form.<sup>41</sup>

### *Live literature and platform interviews*

The contemporary literary sphere has seen a surge in “live literature”, events that seek to bring the author and readers into close apparently “unmediated” contact. Interviews have

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<sup>39</sup> Leila Salisbury, “Re Conversation Series - Research Enquiry,” personal email, 7 December 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Toni Morrison in Gloria Naylor, “A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison”, in Toni Morrison, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994): 188–217, 215.

<sup>41</sup> For further discussion of contemporary writers' attitudes toward interviews, see [redacted] ch 6.

proven a popular format with readers, who have long appreciated simulations of interactivity—the semblance of face-to-face conversation between author and reader. While initially inscribed in print, interviewing has proven extremely adaptable to technological innovations across its history in its attempts to convey the impression of conversational immediacy. In the contemporary literary sphere platform interviews—those encounters performed for an audience physically present with the interviewer and subject—have proven popular. Uncommon before the 1940s, platform interviews would become a familiar format thanks to the new medium of television, where authors conversed with interviewer–hosts in front of a studio audience. Contemporary literary-oriented examples include platform interviews with authors conducted by Oprah Winfrey, Richard and Judy, and the hosts of other “mass reading events” which promote “shared reading”.<sup>42</sup>

Despite being associated with the television talkshow, the platform interview also draws a heritage from the author reading, a live event often performed in a community location such as a schoolhouse, church hall or theatre—and more recently the lecture theatre, coffee shop, or bookstore. One prominent series of platform interviews is that run by the Unterberg Poetry Center at the 92Y. The Center has been conducting regular, well-regarded poetry readings with renowned writers since 1939. Platform interviews, emerging out of audience questions, would become a common feature of these events (and transcripts of these events have formed the basis of some *Paris Review* interviews, including those with Arthur Miller and Maya Angelou<sup>43</sup>). For the most famous writers, these readings and conversations take place in the 92Y’s ornate concert hall in front of a

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<sup>42</sup> Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading beyond the book: The social practices of contemporary literary culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Audio recordings of some of these platform interviews are available on both organisations’ websites: “92Y/*The Paris Review* Interview Series” <https://www.theparisreview.org/92y> and <http://92yondemand.org/category/poetry-center-online/paris-review-series>. Accessed 19 May 2018.

large audience. A 2018 event with Marilynne Robinson was relatively typical of the format in featuring the author reading extracts from her new work, a collection of essays, before being interviewed on stage by writer and editor Paul Elie.

In two group discussions conducted with attendees of the Robinson event I asked participants about the appeal of the event. Many expressed enjoyment of what they saw as the accessibility of the interview format: “the most interesting part was the interview section, probably because the way she writes is fairly dense and it is hard to interpret, it’s not great speech material, it’s beautifully written but it’s not great speech material, whereas when she’s talking off the cuff she says a lot but she says it in a way that you engage with.”<sup>44</sup> Questions had included those solicited from the audience via paper slips, which led some attendees to describe feeling part of a collective audience, “more involved”.<sup>45</sup> Again and again, attendees at platform interview events comment on their enjoyment at feeling part of a community. While the relatively formal venue and size of the audience at the 92Y event do not facilitate the sense of intimacy that a small bookstore reading might have done, attendees still commented that “There is an immediacy to it, the performer, or the artist, is in the room and you’re in the audience. You’re breathing the same air . . . you are sitting next to people that are watching the way you are watching, absorbing, hearing. You are sharing it. It’s individual and it’s also a group.”<sup>46</sup> The liveness, the collectivity, the sense of performance, the possibility even that the event might be derailed or the author lose her glasses—all contributed to an experience of intimacy, authenticity and co-presence; features that an author interview in print often seeks to convey.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Participant M6, 92Y focus group.

<sup>45</sup> Participant F3, 92Y focus group.

<sup>46</sup> Participant F2, 92Y focus group.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, author interviews have long been used as a means of constructing reading communities. In late nineteenth century *New Woman* magazines interviews were often promoted as: “One of the strongest weapons which the women’s party possesses”

Platform interviews are perceived by some programmers as effective in instilling in readers a sense of socialization (the process of both engaging in social activity and learning to conform to social norms) and para-social interactions with an author.<sup>48</sup> This success has also seen them adopted at literary festivals. Following a postwar boom and then lull, such events have exploded in number and scale since the 1980s, with annual festivals held in Austin, Adelaide, Cheltenham, Edinburgh, Hay-on-Wye, Jaipur, Melbourne, Sydney, Toronto and many more locations across the globe. Symptomatic of what Beth Driscoll has called the “new literary middlebrow” these events are predominantly attended by middle-class women and promote reading practices that are emotional, earnest and highly mediated.<sup>49</sup> Book enthusiasts appreciate the intimate interactions with star authors that these events enable, the serious discussion and a “bookish community”.<sup>50</sup> As Simone Murray and Millicent Weber note, “A key draw for writers’ festival audiences is the opportunity to see big name international and local writers ‘in the flesh’ to see how they measure up to the implied author detectable in their works.”<sup>51</sup> Platform interviews in particular can be popular in providing evidence of author’s authenticity.

Platform interviews are as popular with programmers as well as with readers. In addition to being enthusiastically received and requiring a relatively low resource commitment, a Robert McCrum points out, “talk is cheap—for festival organisers,” who

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precisely for their ability to foster such features. “Editorials. Our Interviews”, *Women’s Penny Paper*, 21 December 1889, 102.

<sup>48</sup> Platform author interviews have not received much critical attention to date, the programmers and attendees I have conversed with all pointed to this as a key part of the experience—perspectives that accord with more general scholarship on literary festival attendance.

<sup>49</sup> Beth Driscoll, *The new literary middlebrow: tastemakers and reading in the twenty-first century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4, 5-44.

<sup>50</sup> Driscoll, *The new literary middlebrow*, 165.

<sup>51</sup> Simone Murray and Millicent Weber, “‘Live and local’?: The significance of digital media for writers’ festivals,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 23 no. 1 (2017): 61–78, 67.

historically have not paid authors a fee.<sup>52</sup> In 2016 Philip Pullman resigned as patron of the Oxford Literary Festival in protest at the general failure of festivals to pay authors for their appearances. Perhaps ironically, the scandal created by Pullman’s intervention played into the general “buzz” that festivals (like prizes) seek to promote.<sup>53</sup> Calling time on the assumption that authors receive payment in kind—publicity and book sales—for platform interviews, talks and other live appearances, Pullman’s stance did see a modest rise in fees paid to authors at many festivals (this stance has not resulted in a similar shift in payment conventions for author participation in print interviews). The platform interview, despite challenges has proven a boon in the expanding arena of live literature, just as its print cousin has proliferated across print and broadcast print media.

### *Author interviews and the “digital literary sphere”*

Since the late 1990s the distinction between platform and print interview has become less pertinent than it might once have been. In the twenty-first century the affordances of digital and social media have enabled a transformation in the relations between readers, writers and publishers (or “content providers”). In this period we have also seen the advent of the “digital literary sphere”, Simone Murray’s term to denote “the broad array of book-themed websites and other digital content whose focus is contemporary literature and its production, circulation, and consumption”.<sup>54</sup> In this new digital environment we might expect author interviews to have become less significant. In fact,

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<sup>52</sup> Robert McCrum, “Talk is cheap – for festival organisers” *The Guardian*, 24 July 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/24/talk-cheap-festivals-robert-mccrum>. Accessed 4 May 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Philip Pullman, “Enough’s Enough, Authors can’t work for free” *Guardian.co.uk* Book blog, 15 Jan 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jan/15/philip-pullman-enoughs-enough-authors-cant-work-for-free-oxford-literary-festival>, Accessed 4 May 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, “Charting the Digital Literary Sphere”, 315.

author interviews have proliferated, considered a key device by which “to inspire and connect with a whole new generation of readers”.<sup>55</sup>

For readers, the advent of social media platforms has resulted in a proliferation of opportunities to interact with their favourite authors and other readers, whether commenting on blogs, following writers’ Instagram feeds or YouTube channels, annotating e-books, leaving Amazon reviews or sharing Goodreads feedback. Bulletin board systems (BBS), platforms such as Twitter, comment functions and live-streaming technologies can enable readers to bypass the interviewer, begging the question of why read an author interview if you can interact with the writer directly?

The answer, it turns out, is complex—in part due to the make-up of the digital literary sphere and the pressures face by print-oriented publishers and the new ecology of content providers and media platforms constituted by Web 2.0. The subsuming of many publishing houses within giant media conglomerates in the final decades of the twentieth century saw authors increasingly serving as “anchors for content brands spanning multiple media”, a trend that has continued apace in the new millennium.<sup>56</sup> Interviews have proven an effective means of promoting that persona.<sup>57</sup> For writers, the advent of social media platforms has in fact resulted in an expansion of interviewing possibilities and venues for the publication and dissemination of their interviews as websites look for new ways to garner hits, build online communities, and keep content timely. Under pressure by (often inexperienced) publishers to use social media to build their following and promote their personal brand and wares, authors are encouraged to submit to requests

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<sup>55</sup> Laura (Ross) Pexton, “Twitterview: Interview Your Authors via Twitter”, *The Monday Muse* <https://ncbpma.wordpress.com/twitterview-interview-your-authors-via-twitter/>.

<sup>56</sup> Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 21.

<sup>57</sup> Although, as Jamie Criswell and Nick Canty note, social media marketing is only effective where an established social media community exists, “Deconstructing Social Media: An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use in the Publishing Industry”, *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 30 (2014): 352-376.

for interviews as a means of creating authenticity via supposed self-disclosure.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, Web 2.0, with its conflation of “human connectedness and automated connectivity” (of which AuthorBot is symptomatic) has also offered writers new ways to interact with their publics and with other writers and mediators, without recourse to the traditional agents of the literary sphere—including, of course interviewers.<sup>59</sup>

We may be witnessing radical shifts in the ways that authors and readers interact in the digital literary sphere, but these new modes of interaction are often mediated via older formats, with born digital sites and platforms frequently drawing on the structure and methods of the print interview. What Murray calls “print-originated” publications have continued to publish author interviews, both in print and digital versions. In addition, author interviews regularly appear in born-digital venues such as the *Sydney Review of Books*, *Asymptote*, on literary blogs and via social media platforms.<sup>60</sup> (*Literary Hub* also offers the innovative “Interview with a Bookstore” occasional series, a lovely indication of the intertwining of online and offline realms<sup>61</sup>). The communicative technologies might have changed, but the heterogeneity of readers’ interests in author interviews, and publishers’ resultant engagement with them, remains the same.

#### *Adapting to the metaverse: publishers’ use of author interviews online*

Traditional book publishers of all sizes have doubled-down on the late twentieth-trend toward publishing more interviews in the digital sphere. They regularly upload short author interviews to their websites and across their social media channels. These interviews can work simultaneously to promote the publisher’s imprint, by highlighting the authors they publish, and market the author and her work. Since the turn of the

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<sup>58</sup> Audrey Laing, “Authors Using Social Media: Layers of Identity and the Online Author Community”, *Publishing Research Quarterly* 33 (2017): 254-267.

<sup>59</sup> Van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Murray, “Charting the Digital Literary Sphere”, 320.

<sup>61</sup> <https://lithub.com/author/interview-with-a-bookstore/>. Accessed 21 May 2018.

millennium, the formats in which these interviews have been presented to site-visitors has continually multiplied.

Penguin UK's website offers a useful example, utilising author interviews in multiple media to draw traffic to the site and promote their authors and books. Before 2000, Penguin's UK website didn't generally host author interviews, preferring to promote the book product. This shifted in a 2001 redesign of the website, which included the launch of "In Conversation", a blog-like feature that focused on publishing news and included small number of print-based author interviews designed to promote newly-released titles. Interviews also began to appear on dedicated author pages as the site expanded its promotion of the authors it published. On Nicky Hornby's profile an interview titled "Confessional, conducted by 'Penguin.co.uk'" promotes the author's latest novel, *How to be Good*. The questions are tailored to discuss the dissonance between Hornby's gender and that of his narrator, Hornby's writing habits and their import for the plot, and other topics. Despite revealing little by way of personal details, this online interview promises to "discover the inspiration behind the bestsellers" and "delve into the secret life of an author".<sup>62</sup> In so doing, Penguin's early online interview experiments continue the rhetoric of print-based interviews.

After 2001 and until at least 2010, Penguin UK's website would regularly feature such author Q&As. However, they would increasingly become much more standardised in format and question, although more personalised in their focus on the author. Naomi Alderman's 2010 Q&A is relatively typical both of Penguin and other publishers' sites in the questions she is asked: "Where/When do you do most of your writing?", "Which

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<sup>62</sup> Nick Hornby, "Confessional", *Penguin.co.uk* n.date, page captured 13 August 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20010813094525/http://www.penguin.co.uk:80/static/packages/uk/articles/hornby/index.html>. Accessed 3 May 2018.

authors do you most admire?” and “Will the printed word endure?”<sup>63</sup> Reflecting the perceived interests of readers in the author’s writing habits, reading lists and a topical concern over the future of books, this text attempts to promote the author’s persona and a feeling of para-sociality on the part of the reader. Such a format provides the “added value” discussed earlier for online readers, while requiring minimal effort on the part of the publisher. Recalling the P.S. interview format, the online Q&A is often the product of a pro-forma list of questions provided by the marketing department, which the author must complete herself and return via email.

Over the last ten years, the format of author interviews on publishers’ websites has multiplied and become increasingly interactive. In May 2018 the Penguin site was promoting, among other authors, Irvine Welsh via a number of different types of interview. His author page features a print-based interview written up by interviewer Anna James, rather than a Q&A. Promoting the Scottish author’s latest novel *Dead Men’s Trousers*, the interview focuses less on general writing questions than on the specifics of the book characters and genesis, and connections between the novel and the wider political climate.<sup>64</sup> In a market saturated by legacy Q&A interviews with Welsh (and others), Penguin’s approach is to focus its resources on producing a timely, engaging piece of prose that foregrounds the interviewer’s perspective. In addition to this interview, readers are recommended other content, often in formats other than print. The surging popularity of podcasts and their relatively low production costs (at least in comparison to video) has seen an increasing number of audio interviews with authors included on publishers’ websites. These can be produced in house and hosted directly on

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<sup>63</sup> “Naomi Alderman [Q&A]”, *Penguin.co.uk* n.date, page captured 9 September 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100909081140/http://www.penguin.co.uk:80/nf/Author/AuthorPage/0,,1000069427,00.html?sym=QUE> Accessed 3 May 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Anna James, “Interview: Irvine Welsh: I knew one of these guys had to die” *Penguin.co.uk* 2018, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/in-conversation/interviews/2018/mar/irvine-welsh-dead-mens-trousers-interview/>. Accessed 3 May 2018.

the site, or links made to the author's personal website or (less commonly) other media sites. The Welsh page features, for example, two lengthy audio interviews, one between journalist Alex Clarke, Welsh and author Marlon James at the Hay Festival (embedded via Soundcloud), the other an episode of Vintage imprint podcast *Counterculture*, which includes a conversation with Welsh about his friendship with Penguin author Howard Marks. Penguin also promotes a 2016 Twitter Q&A with the author, originally organised to publicise Welsh's book *The Blade Artist* and captured for legacy reading on the platform Storify<sup>65</sup>. Publishers are increasingly hosting author interviews in multiple formats on their websites.

Traditional book publishers are also publishing—and republishing—author interviews across a variety of social media channels. One of the most common formats has been the short vox-pop-style video interview, which can be distributed across a number of audiovisually-enabled platforms. In these videos the interviewer often remains off-screen and questions are edited out. Symptomatic is Knopf Doubleday's 2011 upload of a series videos to YouTube titled "In Conversation with Ian McEwan, author of *Solar*". Taken from one longer interaction, videos receive an individual label—"Ian McEwan's Advice for Aspiring Writers", "Ian McEwan on his Writing Process", or "Ian McEwan on Ideas and Inspiration". They are book-ended with plugs for the writer's latest title, but are framed as providing advice and insight about the writing life and McEwan's process. Viewers can (and do) comment on the videos—in the case of McEwan these are generally individual positive remarks about his books and personality ("he's a good 'en"<sup>66</sup>) or more critical comment on the quality of the video or

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<sup>65</sup> Penguin Books UK, "Penguin meets: Irvine Welsh", [Twitter interview dated 4 April 2016] <https://storify.com/PenguinUKBooks/penguin-meets-irvine-welsh>. Accessed 3 May 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Comment by John Smith on Knopfdoubleday, "Ian McEwan on the Most Interesting Question He's Ever Been Asked", *YouTube*, 14 April 2011, <https://youtu.be/2eIFiISbdqE>. Accessed 3 May 2018. The decision to cite user names in

editing. Occasionally readers engage in more extended conversation, for example in response to McEwan's remarks on his favourite film adaptation of a book, they discuss the criteria by these adaptations should be judged.<sup>67</sup> While the platform enables text-based discussion between viewers, the author interview here offers a comparatively conventional model of the relations between interviewer, interviewee and public. The interviewer—although largely effaced in this video via editing decisions—remains a proxy for viewers unable to interact directly with the author. Print-originating publishers continue to deploy author interviews, utilising new forms of media, in the expanded ecology of the digital literary sphere.

*Ask Me Anything: author interviews on social media*

New modes of (author) interviewing are emerging as distinctions between publishers and platforms begin to blur in online environments. On Reddit, a news aggregating and discussion website, one of the most popular communities, or “subreddits”, is based around the premise of “AMA” or “ask me anything”. It is a “place to interview people, but in a new way”:

The interviewee begins the process by starting a post, describing who they are and what they do. Then, commenters leave questions and can vote on other questions according to which they would like to see answered. The interviewee

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research such as this is not a clear-cut one as I try to balance expectations of privacy with claims of authorship. I have chosen to cite user names here and my decision is based on a number of factors: user names are generally pseudonymous; the comments I quote address largely non-sensitive subjects; these are comments made on publically-available websites (no password or login is required to read the comments). Given these factors, I have chosen to honour individuals' authorial rights over their utterances.

<sup>67</sup> Comment on Knopfdoubleday, “Ian McEwan: On His Favorite Book to Film Adaptations”, *YouTube*, 3 April 2011, <https://youtu.be/ucMxl3xgMJM>. Accessed 3 May 2018.

then goes through and responds to any questions that he/she would like, and in any way that he/she prefers. (Reddit, n.pag)

Founded in 2009, the “/IAmA” subreddit utilizes a BBS, where pseudonymous users can add, edit, and vote on content to crowd-source the interviewing process. Social media platforms like these offer new methods for interviewing and new modes for circulating the interview text or media.

They also present new challenges. For some the opportunity to ask Barack Obama, a “Astronaut Chris Hadfield, currently orbiting planet Earth”, or “Stoya, adult performer and generally naked lady” their own questions in real time represents the exciting connective possibilities of Web 2.0, with the democratic potential of the interview finally realised.<sup>68</sup> Writing in *The Atlantic* Alexis Madrigal offers a triumphant narrative: “In the AMA, there is no journalist, no writer, no personal brand. No one makes a living asking questions of AMA participants. There’s nothing to lose.”<sup>69</sup> For others, however, these platform-enabled interviews represent an alarming loss of accountability on the subject who can answer the questions of their choosing, and is symptomatic of the atomization of a public sphere increasingly oriented towards narcissism and self-promotion.

Historically interviews have often been the flashpoint for larger conflicts around subjects,

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<sup>68</sup> PresidentObama, “I am Barack Obama, President of the United States – AMA”, *Reddit*, 29 August 2012, [https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/z1c9z/i\\_am\\_barack\\_obama\\_president\\_of\\_the\\_united\\_states/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/z1c9z/i_am_barack_obama_president_of_the_united_states/); ColChrisHadfield, “I Am Astronaut Chris Hadfield, currently orbiting planet Earth”, *Reddit*, 13 February 2013, [https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/18pik4/i\\_am\\_astronaut\\_chris\\_hadfield\\_currently\\_orbiting/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/18pik4/i_am_astronaut_chris_hadfield_currently_orbiting/); IAmStoya, “IAm Stoya, adult performer and generally naked lady. AMA”, *Reddit*, 12 May 2012, [https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/tk0s8/iam\\_stoya\\_adult\\_performer\\_and\\_generally\\_naked/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/tk0s8/iam_stoya_adult_performer_and_generally_naked/). All accessed 21 May 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Alexis C. Madrigal, “‘Ask Me Anything’: How a Weird Internet Thing Became a New Form of Media”, *The Atlantic*, 7 January 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/01/ama-how-a-weird-internet-thing-became-a-mainstream-delight/282860/>. Accessed 5 October 2017.

publics, and the import of communication technologies, and this has not changed with the advent of social media platforms.

The majority of interviews conducted via social media still utilise the tripartite structure of the print interview with a clear distinction made between subject, interviewer, and public. However, there are also a number of sites and platforms—Reddit being one well-known example—wherein this structure is being contested or reworked.<sup>70</sup> Notably this is done via the automation and distribution of one or more role across a number of parties and platform affordances. Despite the dystopian example of AuthorBot, it is usually the role of the interviewer that is transformed.

In the case of /IAMA, the interviewer—who traditionally acts as moderator, mediator, and proxy for the absent public—is absent. Forum moderators take on the regulating function and are able to delete material deemed unacceptable. They are further supported by the articulation of explicit communicational standards in the “Rules and FAQs” wiki that seeks to guide interviewee choice and user behaviour. The criteria for becoming an AMA interviewee, for example, is clearly stated: anyone can offer themselves up for questioning, although the subreddit encourages subject matter concerned with either “Something uncommon that plays a central role” in the life of the interviewee or, “A truly interesting and unique event.”<sup>71</sup> Policing the borders of acceptable content, the wiki rules out explicit commercial gain, quotidian topics, and

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<sup>70</sup> Another example is the “Autocomplete Interview” instigated by technology magazine *Wired*. These video interviews, hosted on the magazine’s YouTube channel and Facebook page, dispense with an expert interviewer in favour of asking (mainly film star) celebrity subjects “the questions the internet searches most about them” (*Wired*, “Wired Autocomplete Interview/About”, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/WIREDAutocomplete/> Accessed 24 Nov 2017). Here authority over questions has been supposedly ceded to the public, yet a black-boxed, commercially sensitive algorithm has in fact determined selection.

<sup>71</sup> “Rules, Policies, and Frequently Asked Questions”, *Reddit*, 2017, <https://www.reddit.com/r/IAMA/wiki/index>. Accessed 20 November 2017.

stories about fetishes, addiction psychiatric disorders, and alike. It also demands proof of identity to ensure trustworthiness in an environment characterised by pseudonymity.

In addition, community guidelines seek to coach users in acceptable behaviour. In print interviews the public were represented by a proxy—the interviewer—who gained her authority through embodying that public’s “right to know”; here it is a portion of that public itself (albeit a distinct subpublic<sup>72</sup>) that is claiming that right. Seemingly enabling the removal of a layer of mediation between subject and public, the subreddit in fact devotes significant space and energy to coaching their users in how to conduct interviews. For those posing questions, the guidelines note, for example, that questions “should be original and on topic. . . . try to encourage thought-provoking, discussion-inspiring questions that OP [original poster] would not likely be asked anywhere else.” The platform encourages users to adopt the traditional role of interviewer, thus reinscribing mediation into the interaction.

Community consensus around behavioural norms is also achieved through quantification via the site’s voting practices. In up– and down-voting posts, users collectively affect the popularity rankings and visibility of material on the site and the likelihood of questions receiving a response. As the wiki explains, “Don’t hunt for questions that you want to answer, because this comes off as promotional. It’s fine to choose some other questions that are lower down the list, as long as you’re not ignoring the questions that people do clearly want to see answered.”<sup>73</sup> Breaking these norms can

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<sup>72</sup> Not all AMA readers are Reddit site users, thus there is a distinction to be drawn between those who engage in a novel model of mass-interviewing and those who reflect an older model by simply reading the resultant interaction. For analysis of Reddit users, see Pew Research Center, “Nearly Eight-in-Ten Reddit Users Get News on the Site” Report, February, 2016. Available at <http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/25/reddit-news-users-more-likely-to-be-male-young-and-digital-in-their-news-preferences/>. Accessed 5 October 2017.

<sup>73</sup> “Rules, Policies, and Frequently Asked Questions”.

result in comment deletion by moderators but it can also result in a lower ranking on the subreddit, holding contributors to account with numbers.

For some this new “form of mediation is communal, quantitative, and amateur, not subjective and professional” and thus cause for celebration.<sup>74</sup> For others such opposition of “quantitative” and “subjective” is a false one. Yet despite the absence of a solo interviewer, the Reddit interview is in fact very similar to its print or broadcast cousin. Its innovative features provoke the same anxieties around expressive and informational subjectivity, around the construction of publics, that over a century earlier had accompanied the advent of print interviewing. Deploying technological affordances to mitigate behaviours perceived to be antithetical to good discussion, /IAmA it is designed to be informative, participatory, and to promote a seemingly unmediated form of communication in a heavily mediated environment.

If we consider how writers fare in this environment, we see more continuity than change. A number of well-known authors have conducted AMAs, including Stephen King, David Sedaris, Neil Gaiman and Margaret Atwood. In 2017 an AMA was announced with the latter:

**I’m Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and executive producer of the Hulu original series based on the novel premiering April 26.**

I am the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays.

My novels include *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Blind Assassin* (winner of the 2000 Booker Prize) . . . and—my most recent novel—*Hag-Seed*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Madrigal, “Ask Me Anything”.

<sup>75</sup> me\_atwood, “I’m Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, *Reddit*, 8 March 2017,

While opening with a plug for her new series and latest book (and hyperlinking to more information), the author follows the advice of both the wiki and numerous social media advice guides for authors in ensuring that she doesn't limit her conversation to promotional topics. Among the questions Atwood is asked and that she answers are those familiar to "old media" author interviews, including "Do you have any 'writing rituals?'" and "Any advice for struggling novel writers?" Others are more idiosyncratic, often reflecting the community's in depth knowledge of the writer's work, public persona, and statements (often contra traditional media).<sup>76</sup> One questioner asks Atwood how often she is asked about being a Canadian and female writer in interviews, to which the author notes that "nobody ever asks me what it's like to be a canoe-paddling writer, or a writer who gardens, or even a knitting writer. Neglected fields! (I'm going to wish I hadn't said that.)"<sup>77</sup>

By far the greatest number of up-voted questions emphasize the questioner's fan identity. In some cases participants even showcase usernames taken from characters in Atwood's novels. Questions are regularly framed by comments that underscore the Reddit user's sense of their personal relationship with the author's works. Both in the questions they direct to Atwood and in their comments to other posters, they recall their individual memories of coming to her books (a common narrative); how her work has featured in their relations with others (whether teachers or partners) and their own sense of self; or their (prior) interactions with Atwood. The latter is demonstrated via expressions of enthusiasm at having the opportunity to interact with Atwood on Reddit

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[https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/5y91f5/im\\_margaret\\_atwood\\_author\\_of\\_the\\_handmaids\\_tale/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/5y91f5/im_margaret_atwood_author_of_the_handmaids_tale/). Accessed 25 April 2018; bold in original.

<sup>76</sup> Comments from users Elizabeth324, butterball1 on me\_atwood, "I'm Margaret Atwood".

<sup>77</sup> me\_atwood, "I'm Margaret Atwood", n.pag.

– “I can’t believe I’m typing a message to Margaret Atwood right now.”<sup>78</sup> The AMA, like the platform interview, appeals to those readers keen to feel a sense of proximity, intimacy and personal contact with the author. If interviews have long operated on the promise of delivering unmediated communication, here social media supports that fiction.

This is also a friendly community of bibliophiles (reminiscent in many ways of the live literature audience). They are keen to share reading suggestions with Reddit members who might not be as familiar with the author’s books, or enthuse about personal favourites. Such remarks promote a sense of inclusive and friendly conversation, recalling the atmosphere of the literary festival. This is something that Atwood herself encourages. Asked the “Reddit constant question: would you rather fight one horse-sized duck or a hundred duck-sized horses? Why?” Atwood, to enthusiastic comments, gamely responds:

Hmm. Good question. Are the ducks dead ducks, or are they alive? Are they Zombie Ducks? Is the horse a Pale Horse? Maybe not enough information here. I think I’d pick the hundred duck-sized horses. Easy to stampede, no? (“Scram, ducks!” Opens and closes an umbrella very fast. That’s worked for me in the past, against those weeny ducks.)<sup>79</sup>

Such humorous interactions, interspersed with more serious discussion—for example about feminist activism in the aftermath of the 2016 US election—situate Atwood as an approachable but engaged individual, responding to the specifics of the community present for the AMA. As one critic notes, Atwood is generally seen to be an “intellectually astute but also highly approachable public figure”; her AMA interactions,

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<sup>78</sup> Question by [deleted user], me\_atwood, “I’m Margaret Atwood”, n.pag.

<sup>79</sup> Question by user Anxious Finch, me\_atwood, “I’m Margaret Atwood”, n.pag; me\_atwood, “I’m Margaret Atwood”, n.pag.

like her Tweets and often well-timed platform interviews, do much to further this impression.<sup>80</sup> Such a genial atmosphere is in direct contrast to the internet's (and in particular Reddit's) mass-media reputation for online-talk dominated by flaming and trolls, and diverges from interviews with politicians, who often received tougher questions on /IAMA. The readership for these author interviews, like those printed in newspapers or conducted face-to-face in front of festival audiences, is predominantly appreciative and familiar with her work. The speed of the real-time interactions do not promote the kind of lengthy reflection, scrutiny, and revision characteristic of the usual *Paris Review* interview. However, their liveness reinforces the sense of authenticity, spontaneity, and immediacy with which the interview is so often associated.

Atwood clearly values these interactions; she is unusual in having participated in three to date (2013, 2014 and 2017). This willingness is perhaps unsurprising given her authoring of speculative fictions, her conscious manipulation of her celebrity persona, and her reputation as an enthusiastic adopter of social media—on Twitter she has almost two million followers.<sup>81</sup> Atwood has actively explored the potential of digitally-networked technologies for writers and readers. Back in 2004 she conceived of the “LongPen”, a device that enables a writer to remotely autograph books, and was a supporter of *Fanado*, a website that, using technologies such as LongPen and video streaming, would enable writers and musicians to conduct “the promotional tour online”.<sup>82</sup> Atwood has also acted as the “official Fairy Godmother” of Wattpad, an online community platform that connects writers and readers and encourages the former to benefit from the latter's feedback. Atwood's participation in AMAs, and her popularity on the subreddit (fans on the site were calling for her to participate as early as

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<sup>80</sup> Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, 370.

<sup>81</sup> For more in depth discussion see Lorraine York, *Margaret Atwood and the Labour of Literary Celebrity* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> “For Artists”, [www.fanado.com](http://www.fanado.com) 2014, Accessed 2 May 2018.

2010), reflects her broader interest in the possibilities of technology to promote reading and writing communities. Not necessarily representative of all authors, Atwood's participation does nevertheless help to demonstrate the ways in which author interviews can be adapted for a Web 2.0 environment.

Although engaging with a specific community, Atwood's AMA, like those of other subjects, are also widely picked up by the mainstream media. Her 2014 AMA for example was the focus of articles by traditional English-language media outlets such as *The Guardian*, the *LA Times* and *The Oregonian*—along with online publications oriented towards science fiction and feminist communities, general interest sites like the *Huffington Post*, and more esoteric websites and personal blogs. The articles often lead with the fact of Atwood's participation in an AMA, indicating the relative novelty of such a move (at least in 2014). The remarks themselves were often transformed into listicles and stripped of their conversational context, recalling the extent to which author interviews, in particular those conducted via social media, are widely circulated in the digital literary sphere.

#### *Livestreaming Author Interviews*

In the digital literary sphere, traditional media and book publishers not only report on the new forms of author interview enabled by social media, such as Atwood's AMA. They are increasingly experimenting with such formats to engage audiences and often turn to live literature in their hunt for models, blurring traditional distinctions between print and platform interviews in the process.

Such a manoeuvre makes sense given that live literature programmers have often been at the forefront of efforts to incorporate a digital or social media element in their events. Digital tools are deployed as a means to engage readers who are not able to attend a specific platform interview in person. Literary festivals increasingly include

questions sourced from Twitter users (based both in the room and further afield) in their platform interviews. Elsewhere the *London Review of Books* (LRB) bookstore regularly live-streams (and captures) its events on Facebook, often incorporating viewer questions at the Q&A as a way of expanding the reach of these events. The amount of interactivity between different groups can vary. The 92Y Unterberg Poetry Center, like the LRB bookshop, makes a concerted effort to offer “livecasts” of some of its events on their website and makes many more available as video recordings and as podcasts. However, unlike the LRB bookshop, interactivity is not a major feature of the experience for digital viewers. Their opportunity to communicate with fellow audience members is restricted to commenting on those short clips the 92Y posts to its Facebook page after the event. With limited resources, the organisation focuses on creating a digital legacy of these live events, preserving them for temporally and geographically dispersed publics.

Stylistically such event broadcast and capture can often prove effective when it appears to be relatively amateur and informal. In contrast to the relatively slick products of large corporate publishers, a 2014 video of a platform interview with Teju Cole appears on YouTube, part of “The Living Room Conversations” series.<sup>83</sup> Organised by Palm Print, a now-dormant platform “for exploring the rich and myriad cultures of Africa through our story as told in literature and other art forms” and Brooklyn-based The Book Club That Ended All Book Clubs, the event is set in the living room of a brownstone.<sup>84</sup> The camera is at an awkward angle, capturing Cole’s face side-on and regularly switches to record the reactions of the visibly multicultural audience, who stand, sit on chairs and the floor, drinking wine and responding audibly to the discussion and to a live musician who begins the event. A baby’s burbling can be heard in the background;

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<sup>83</sup> The Palm Print, “The Living Room Conversations - with Teju Cole” *YouTube*, 14 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LKMvmGCSy4>. Accessed 2 May 2018.

<sup>84</sup> The Palm Print, “About”, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/user/thepalmprint/about>. Accessed 2 May 2018.

someone's phone goes off. The conversation itself is topical, mentioning news events, and local, talking to the distinctions between New Jersey, Manhattan and Nigerian identities. Questions are politically engaged and also recall those favoured by the festival-goer—how much does the author relate to the narrator? This remediated platform interview conveys an experience of intimacy, presence and liveness: the sense of being in a room and talking to the author, for a digital audience.

Creating a digital legacy of an interview is particularly appropriate for authors, as various of my interviewees noted. In contrast to the frenzied news cycle, literary events are perceived to operate within a slower cycle. A platform interview might be the product of a specific time and place, but as Leila Salisbury argued, its digital incarnation can have a significantly life-span for audiences.<sup>85</sup> As [redacted] notes, literary events can have more of a “perennial” appeal and a recording of a literary discussion might “remain evergreen and interesting for a while”.<sup>86</sup> The format of these materials also makes a difference to hits garnered over time. Audio streamings and recordings of platform interviews seem to perform more successfully than unedited videos of the same events: watching a video recording of a long-shot of two people sitting in chairs on a stage conversing can be a static experience. Readers today regularly comment on the appeal of interviews packaged as podcasts, not only because one can multi-task, “tuning in while you are driving” but because the format seems appropriate to the substance: “interviews are sloppy, but it feels sort of ramshackle in a way that’s really kind of nice; they have so much time the way the podcast is set up, so they can see where the conversation goes.”<sup>87</sup>

Taking their cue from live literature programmers and social media platforms, numerous publishers and publications have, as we have seen, also experimented with

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<sup>85</sup> Various interviewees made this point.

<sup>86</sup> [redacted]

<sup>87</sup> Participants F2 and M3, 92Y focus group. This is also supported by my general observations of listener reviews of podcasts and radio interview shows and media critics' comments in the mainstream media.

social-media enabled interviews. *The Guardian* newspaper—itself increasingly engaging with live literature events in recent years—is notable for having created a successful online-only live author interview. The newspaper has conducted a number of live “webchats” (more accurately “webtypes”) on its site, including one with Allan Hollinghurst in 2017. A week before the event, readers were given the time and date and encouraged to “Leave a question for him now, or join us then.”<sup>88</sup> For a specific hour Hollinghurst types responses to questions submitted by registered site users via *The Guardian* comment platform. The format adapts the crowd-sourcing style of Reddit, although providing Hollinghurst with a larger degree of control over question selection. Interactivity between users is also enabled, conversations often heading off on tangents (such as favourite book covers). Crucially, the webchat is preserved both above and below the comment line. Above it resembled a hybrid of a more traditional author interview—thanks to its inclusion of a photo of the author in his study and a header promising the revelation of the “secrets” behind his works—and a reverse-chronological live blogging of the questions and answers posted. Below the comment line the interview appeared as merely one comment thread among the many user discussions that existed across the website. In so doing, the website underlines the interview’s interactive aspect.

The success of *The Guardian*’s webchat is, however, something of an oddity. Author interviews conducted solely on social media—in particular Twitter-views—are generally perceived by the industry at large to have a high failure rate (although this hasn’t limited their number). [redacted]—a publisher with a social media personality widely admired within the industry—is representative in describing such events as generally “flops”, noting that rather than being participatory, “organic” and “just having

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<sup>88</sup> “Alan Hollinghurst webchat – post your questions now”, *Guardian.co.uk*, 26 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/live/2017/sep/27/alan-hollinghurst-webchat-post-your-questions-now> Accessed 4 May 2018.

a conversation”, “all of a sudden it feels like homework” for those involved.<sup>89</sup> Having ties to a traditional media outlet helps—whether it is *The Guardian* or *The Paris Review*. Reflections from staff at the latter organisation are particularly relevant to the discussion in light of its long-term association with author interviews and its active and popular social media presence. [redacted] suggest that, while interviews offer curatorial possibilities, it is in fact the perceived contrast between the heavily “curated” author persona presented on social media and the affordances that long-form author interviews enable that is operative in this context.<sup>90</sup> Although Twitter encourages the distillation of a long thought to a limited number of characters and on “Reddit you can skip that question”, the face-to-face interview requires “a sustained attention that forces a resolution”, as [redacted] eloquently puts it.<sup>91</sup>

Author interviews, with their promise of communicational immediacy, might seem redundant in a digital literary sphere often negatively characterised as dominated by ephemeral “book talk”, persona-marketing and reader-driven sociality, they can offer an important supplement (and even antidote) to such experiences. In contrast to what we might expect, author interviews have flourished over the last fifty years. Despite live literature and social media operating on the (age-old) promise of demediation, the author interview’s offer of conversational immediacy retains valence for many contemporary readers. It is for this reason that AuthorBot can claim to provide a useful service to a publishing industry.

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<sup>89</sup> [redacted]  
<sup>90</sup> [redacted]  
<sup>91</sup> [redacted]

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