

Celeste A. Mitchell. Creating the Website 'Connections: A Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy Author Social Networking Database'. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. November, 2009. 29 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm.

Social networking websites provide a unique opportunity to allow authors to talk with their readers, generate interest in their works, and build their fan bases. However, these profiles are scattered across the Internet and may not be easy for readers to find. This paper describes the process of creating the website 'Connections: A Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy Author Social Networking Database' as a resource to fill this gap and examines how authors are using social networking websites to connect with their readers.

Headings:

Social networks

Web sites/Design

Young adult authors

Young adults' literature/Internet resources

Science fiction/Internet resources

Fantasy/Internet resources

CREATING THE WEBSITE 'CONNECTIONS: A YOUNG ADULT SCIENCE
FICTION AND FANTASY AUTHOR SOCIAL NETWORKING DATABASE'

by
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Introduction

Before the advent of the internet, the only way for readers to connect with their favorite authors was by writing them a letter, or meeting them at a book signing, or perhaps giving them a phone call. All that is changing with the recent rise in popularity of sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Social networking websites (SNSs) provide a unique opportunity to allow authors to connect with their readers, generate interest in their works, and build their fan bases (Rendell).

However, these profiles are, by their nature, scattered across the Web. Many authors have their blogs and Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts linked from their homepages, but others do not. Aside from a lot of tedious searching, there is no easy way for fans to locate these authors' online profiles, no one central place where this information is collected and made available. Recognizing this deficiency, I decided to create a resource—specifically, a website—to fill the gap.

This paper will give a brief overview of social networking, describe the process of creating the website 'Connections: A Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy Author Social Network Database,' and examine the ways in which authors use these social networking sites to connect with their readers.

Social Networking

A social network is not in and of itself a technology. Rather, it is a concept as old as the human race. Humans naturally gather together into groups and maintain ongoing relations with each other—that is, they create social networks— for a wide variety of reasons. These reasons may be general—i.e., they may be friends, or share family ties—or they can be more specific—i.e., they may all take part in a weekly role-playing game meeting, or they all work on the same project at their job, or they are all fans of the same author (Clemons, Barnett and Appadurai).

Social networking websites therefore are not really creating anything new; they merely make visible the connections that already underlie society, and facilitate the formation of new connections. Although no two social networking sites are exactly alike, they all share certain common characteristics. These characteristics are:

- 1) the ability to create a personal profile;
- 2) the ability to connect with other users with whom they share commonalities¹; and
- 3) the ability to view the web of connections between users of the site (Boyd and Ellison).

The first social networking site, SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997. It allowed users to create profiles, add other users as Friends, and view their Friends lists. It was ahead of its time, however, and was unable to become profitable; it closed in 2000 (Boyd and Ellison).

A number of social networking websites with similar features rose up in its wake, including Friendster, founded in 2002, and LinkedIn in 2003; in addition, social networking features were gradually incorporated into many other kinds of sites, such as blogging sites. Blogging evolved in the early 1990's from the practice of putting up online diary entries on a personal website. The first blogging site to incorporate social networking features was Livejournal.com, which launched in 1999. It allowed users to mark other users as 'Friends' in order to follow their journals and manage privacy settings (Boyd and Ellison).

However, no social networking sites really hit the mainstream until MySpace launched in 2003. It attracted users who were put off by Friendster's restrictive policies, and its flexibility and willingness to add new features based on what its users wanted made it attractive to many—including authors, who saw opportunity in the ability to connect with their current and potential audience (Bussel).

Facebook launched soon after, in 2004; at first open only to Harvard students, it was soon made available to college students in general, and then to anyone at all. By 2008, its popularity had eclipsed MySpace's (Stelter and Arango B3), and in 2009 it became the second most popular website on the internet (Alexa.com).

Due to the growing popularity of social networking sites, more specialized sites began to be created, focusing on specific technologies or niche interests.

Twitter, the first of the micro-blogging services, opened in January 2006 (Carcaddon and Harris 24). Inspired by text messaging services on cell phones and adapted to work through the internet, members can post messages up to 140 characters long. Users can follow the posts—or “tweets”—of other users, and converse back and

forth. The site experienced a quick rise in popularity thanks to its use at the South by Southwest Festival in 2007 (Douglas), and currently boasts 23.5 million unique visitors a month (Compete, *Site Comparison*).

Goodreads, a book recommendation sharing social networking site based around the idea that readers would prefer to turn to friends for book recommendations rather than someone they didn't know, was launched in 2006. Users input the books they have read and can add ratings and reviews, and view their friends' bookshelves as well. It has approximately 2.5 million users (Chandler).

Methodology

In order to create the initial database, I had to complete three tasks. These tasks were:

- 1) Choose which social networking sites to include.
- 2) Compile a list of authors to research.
- 3) Locate the authors' SNS profiles.

Social Networking Sites

There are countless numbers of social networking sites out there—from the largest, such as Facebook, to tiny start-ups with barely a hundred users. In choosing which sites to include links to, I examined lists of the most popular social networking sites. According to the Nielsen Company (Nielsen Media), the top five social networking sites are:

- 1) Facebook
- 2) Myspace
- 3) Blogger
- 4) Twitter
- 5) Wordpress

Blogger and Wordpress are both blogging platforms; for simplicity's sake, I decided to combine them into a single “blog” category. I gave Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter their own categories.

In addition, I decided to add Youtube as a fifth category—although more typically viewed as a video-sharing site, it does include profiles and the ability to “friend” other users, which is the classic definition of a social networking site. Thus, I decided that for my purposes it would count.

Finally, for the sixth category, I decided to add Goodreads, a book social networking website where authors and readers can connect. Users have their own profile pages, and can post about books they’ve read and talk with other readers and authors. I considered including two other similar book social networking websites—LibraryThing and Shelfari—but in the end chose Goodreads because it gets more traffic, and more authors are officially associated with the site. ("Social Networking Strategies for Professionals." 29-31)

SNSs chosen, I went on to creating the list of authors.

Authors

In order to keep the sample size from being unmanageably large, I had to select a genre in which to work. I chose to examine Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy authors because I was already familiar with the genre and because the authors tend to be more web-savvy and likely to connect with readers over the internet.

I then set a goal for the number of authors I would be examining. One hundred authors seemed like a reasonable enough number for the time being, with the understanding that I would continue adding to the list in the future.

Next, I put together a list of criteria for the authors going on the list. These criteria were:

1. The author must have published at least one, but preferably more, YA SF/F novels through a legitimate publisher. Self-publishing would not count. Debut authors whose books hadn't yet come out would also not count, but once their book had been officially released I would add them.
2. Authors would have to have an official profile on at least one sort of social networking site. If they only had a website and nothing else, I would remove them from the list. Unofficial profiles, such as those created by fans, would not count.

Once these rules were set, I began gathering together the initial list of authors. I did this using several different methods.

First I went to the largest online book database there is—Amazon.com. There I searched for author names by going to the “Teen” section, and then the subsidiary “Science Fiction and Fantasy” section. This strategy provided approximately 15,475 search results, which I subsequently sorted by bestseller status. This ensured that I didn't miss any of the most popular books. Because there were so many search results, and I only had limited time to spend going through them, I chose to only go through the first thirty pages of results.

I had to be selective when going through these results, however, since many of the books were either reprints of authors long dead and thus unlikely to have a presence on social networking sites (H.G. Wells, for example), books clearly not meant for young adults (*One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*, by Dr. Seuss), or books that weren't fantasy at all (*The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton). It was unclear why these books were included in a category they clearly did not belong in.

Having finished going through these results, and still coming up with fewer than 100 authors, I then moved onto a venue that I felt would be more likely to have a concentrated number of authors that suited my purpose— the YA section at a local Barnes & Noble.

There, I examined the contents of the books to determine whether or not they were science fiction or fantasy, and wrote down author names until I had a list that, combined with the list of names I'd pulled off Amazon, was approximately 120 authors long. I deliberately overshot my target number, knowing that some of these authors would subsequently be crossed off the list due to a lack of presence on social networking sites.

List of authors in hand, I went straight to work researching the SNS profiles of the authors.

Research

In order to locate the official SNS profiles of each author, I first identified their official web page and examined it for links to any of the selected social networking sites. Frequently, the authors had already linked to at least some of their profiles elsewhere, which made my job much easier. Genuine profiles on Goodreads were also easy to identify, even if they hadn't been linked from the author's website, since Goodreads includes automatic author verification. Twitter has something similar, a 'Verified Account' feature, but as it is still in beta not all authors had chosen to take advantage of it.

If I was unable to find profiles in this way, I then went to Valebrity.com, a website that verifies that celebrities on social networking sites are really who they say

they are. The site is more focused on movie and television-style celebrities, but it does include some authors as well.

If I still couldn't find links to an author's social networking sites, I turned to Google. Using search terms such as "Author Name + Facebook" or "Author Name + Twitter" usually pulled up possibilities, which I then attempted to verify in a couple of different ways. First I looked through the Friends list of the profile; if other authors had friended the account, chances were that it was legitimate. I then checked the information that had been posted to the profile against the information the author had included on his or her website and other social networking sites, and checked to see if the writing style matched up. If it was fairly clear that it was a legitimate profile, I added the link. If it was at all doubtful, I didn't add it. In a couple of cases where it was very unclear, I emailed the author to find out what they had to say.

If I found that an author had no presence on any social networking sites, I removed his or her name from the list (see Appendix A).

By the end, I was left with a list of 100 authors who met my criteria for inclusion.

Creating the Website

In order to make the website, I had to decide two things: where to host it, and how it should look.

Hosting the Website

At first I debated hosting the website on Blogger and using CSS to customize the design. However, although it would have been much easier, I didn't feel that the way I wanted to organize the information (each author with his or her own page) really lent itself to the blog style, no matter how pretty the CSS. Instead, I decided to code my own website and host it on my personal webspace. During the course of the creation of the site, this was located at http://www.unc.edu/~cemi/masters_website/, but it will find a permanent home at <http://www.elsewyse.com/connections>.

Designing the Website

I knew the website would need several basic features. These were:

- 1) a header, where the site title would be located;
- 2) a way to navigate the site;
- 3) individual pages where the author's links would be located;
- 4) an about section, to explain the purpose of the site;
- 5) and a contact form, whereby others could submit information about authors not included in the database, or notify me of changes that needed to be made.

With these requirements in mind, I then laid out a site map that covered these five features, and sketched out a few design ideas to visualize the "look" of the website. I

chose a fairly traditional design, with a sidebar for navigation on the left (authors ordered alphabetically by last name) and the main content on the right. I chose to have a color palette of creams and browns to evoke the color of books, and selected teal as the contrasting color.

Design in hand, I then used HTML and CSS to turn the sketch into a real website.

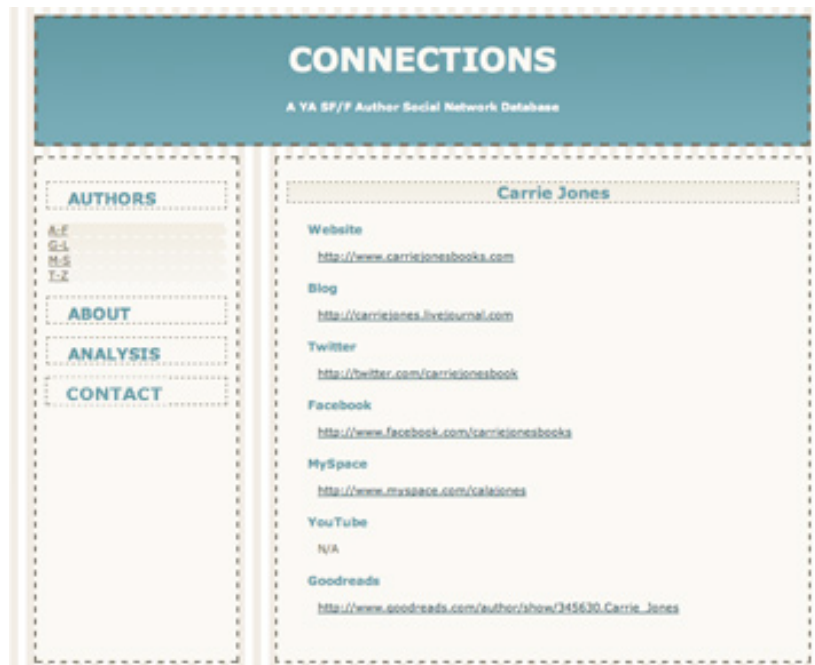


Figure 1: Sample Author Page

Connecting With Readers

As I examined the authors' various social networking sites, distinct patterns began to emerge as to which sites were the most popular among the authors, how often the profiles were updated, and what kind of content the authors posted. It soon became apparent that each SNS serves a different function within an author's social networking strategy.

Blogs

Blogs were by far the most popular of the six social networking sites. Out of 100 authors, ninety-four had a blog of some sort. (Some authors, such as Michael Grant, even had multiple blogs.) Frequently the blog was set as the front page of an author's website; this keeps the website's content fresh without having to expend much effort updating them (Rosen 6).

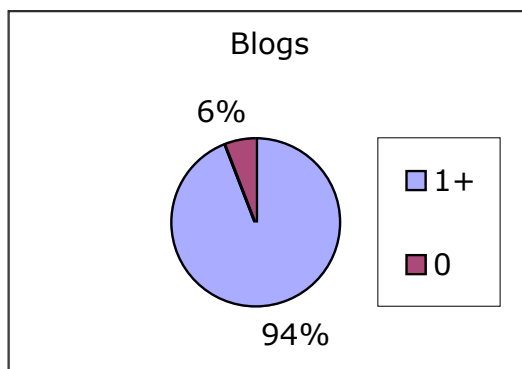


Figure 2: Percentage of Authors with Blogs

It quickly became apparent that greatest portion of an author’s time and energy went into updating their blogs. Posts were frequent (usually averaging two to four times a week), and often at least several hundred words long.

In addition, the widest variety of content was posted to blogs. This content can be broken down into ten subject categories:

1. News/Discussion about the author’s books
 - This was the most common of the subjects discussed. Authors announced new book deals, showed off cover art, talked about the content of their books, posted book trailers, and more.
2. News/Discussion of upcoming events
 - In order to keep their fans up-to-date, authors frequently post notifications of promotional book tours, signings at local bookstores, and book launch parties.
3. News/Discussion of subjects that relate to their books
 - For example, Arthur Slade, whose book *The Hunchback Assignments* is a Victorian/Steampunk novel, regularly posts “Odd Victorian Factoids” on his blogⁱⁱ.
4. Writing samples
 - Authors frequently shared short samples of their writing—for example, Maggie Stiefvater posts free short stories once or twice a monthⁱⁱⁱ, and other authors post snippets of their works in progress.
5. News/Discussion of other authors’ books

- Authors are generally also readers—thus it comes as no surprise that they discussed and recommended books by other authors. For example, Megan Crewe regularly posts book recommendations on her blog^{iv}.

6. Writing in general

- Writers often get asked to share tips and tricks about their craft by those hoping to become authors themselves. For example, an entry by Maggie Stiefvater describes how to critique/edit a novel^v.

7. Promotions

- Authors host giveaways and contests in order to promote their books. The prizes might be an Advance Reader's Copy of a new book, a copy of an audiobook, trinkets inspired by the book, or anything else that encourages readers to become invested in the author's blog, and thus their work.

8. Personal Life

- Authors write about the mundane things that are happening in their lives—things they did that day, their kids, their pets, the person in front of them in line at Starbucks, etc.

9. Conversations with readers

- Blogging platforms (such as Blogger, Word Press and Livejournal) allow readers to enter comments about a blog post. Authors can do the same to reply, and thus conversations are made easily possible.

10. Miscellanea

- Under this category go the funny pictures, the links to interesting news articles, the videos, and all the other miscellaneous items they want to share with their fans.

Much of this content was posted first to the blog, before other SNSs— Twitter being the notable exception in certain situations—and a good portion was posted *only* to the blog. And while the other SNSs often included either links back to blog posts or syndicated feeds of blog posts, blogs linked to other SNSs only infrequently.

This suggests that an author's blog is seen as the main place to look for original and unique content, and that the other SNSs are subsidiary to it, important more for how they are able to connect with readers than as a place to post their own original content. Considering how much time it can take authors to maintain their social networking profiles, this isn't surprising—having a single place to post content and then linking to it elsewhere significantly reduces the amount of time and energy spent on SNSs instead of other activities, like writing.

Facebook

Facebook was the second most common of the social networking sites; 71 authors had profiles there.

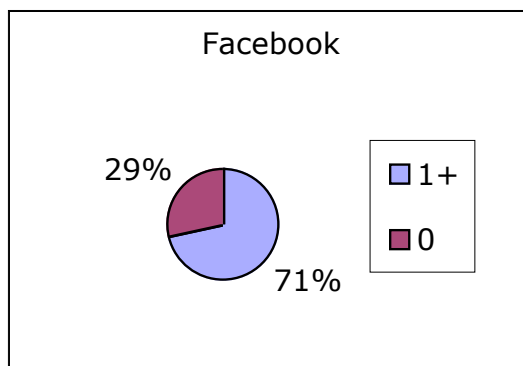


Figure 3: Percentage of Authors with Facebook Profiles

Unlike blogs, these profiles mainly serve as a way to connect to fans who are also on Facebook, rather than as a place to post original content. Many authors updated their Facebook profiles using syndicated content from their blog and/or Twitter. Therefore, the type of content posted to Facebook profiles directly reflects the type of content posted to blogs and Twitter.

There were a few features unique to Facebook, however:

- The information posted on an author's profile—such as their location, their interests, marital status, groups they're a part of, etc—reveals information about the author that may not be as easy and as obvious to find on other SNSs.
- Because of the ease with which photos can be uploaded to Facebook, there are more photos (both of and by the author) on Facebook than on any other SNS.

- Due to the nature of Facebook’s “Wall,” which people can write on, fans were more likely to try to strike up conversations with the author unbidden, or ask questions, or just mention how much they love the author’s books. Although this happens on the other SNSs as well, it is not as frequent an occurrence as it is on Facebook.

Twitter

Twitter was the third most popular of the SNSs, with 67 authors maintaining accounts there, but it was the most frequently updated of the six SNSs; authors posted anywhere from one to twenty times a day. This is likely due to the fact that it takes so little effort to update; posts can be no more than 140 characters long, so they’re easy to dash off in a second or two, and there are many clients that make it simple to post from mobile devices.

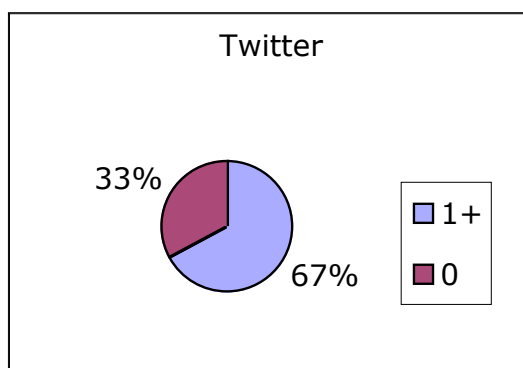


Figure 4: Percentage of Authors with Twitter Accounts

Twitter’s popularity is surprisingly high, considering that it has only been around for three years, since 2006; MySpace and Facebook have been around since 2003 and 2004, respectively. In addition, Twitter has fewer overall users than either site—about

23.5 million unique visitors a month, versus Facebook's 124.5 million and MySpace's 50.1 million (Compete, *Site Profile*). The high percentage of authors with Twitter accounts suggests that authors see Twitter as a particularly valuable marketing tool for their work.

The content posted to Twitter was decidedly more informal and personal than the content of any of the other SNSs. For example, in a recent "tweet," John Scalzi posts the following: "Got orchestra seats, third row center, for the touring show of "Wicked," as requested by wife. Feeling very petit-bourgeois."^{vi} In another, Tera Lynn Childs posts, "Am cold, pumpkin spice latte is a severe disappointment, and don't know how to get out of this scene."^{vii}

Twitter was also used upon occasion to post breaking news, even before the information was posted on the author's blog. For example, Michael Grant posted that he had won the 2009 SCIBA Book Award for a Children's Novel on Twitter before he posted it anywhere else.^{viii}

Authors also used Twitter to post links and pictures of interesting things, to carry on conversations with other Twitter users, to notify readers that new blog entries had gone up, and to remind people about upcoming events.

MySpace

MySpace was the fourth most popular of the SNSs, with 61 authors maintaining MySpace profiles, and also one of the least frequently used/updated. In many cases they had not been updated in several months, if not years. Maggie Stiefvater had actually ceased maintaining her MySpace account as of August 2009, stating that she is “completely not a fan of MySpace” and prefers to use the other SNSs^{ix}.

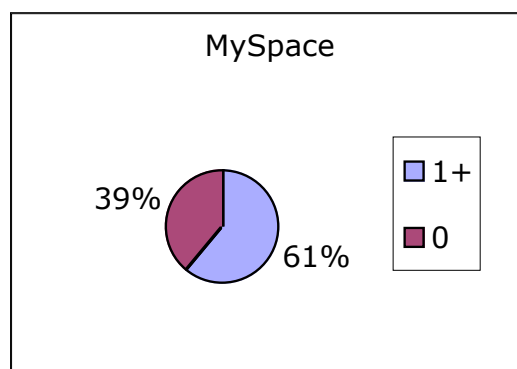


Figure 5: Percentage of Authors with MySpace Accounts

A few authors, Arthur Slade among them, had blog and Twitter feeds set up to post to MySpace to give the account some semblance of life, and most authors continued to accept friend requests, but there was little evidence that these authors posted original content or made any further effort to connect to readers through MySpace. This reflects the site’s overall lessening popularity—since early 2009, MySpace has been steadily losing users to sites such as Facebook (Stelter and Arango B3).

Goodreads

Goodreads was the second-to-least popular of the SNSs examined, with only 30 authors maintaining a profile there. This is unsurprising, as the site has a rather small web presence compared to a lot of the larger social networking sites—it gets approximately 1.2 million unique visitors a month. Therefore, although it is heavily populated by the kinds of people who would be interested in buying books, it is likely that many authors feel it is not worth spending their time maintaining yet another SNS.

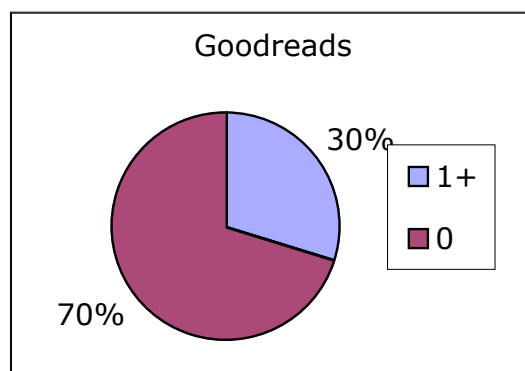


Figure 6: Percentage of Authors with Goodreads Accounts

The authors that did have a profile there mainly used it to keep track of books they were currently reading, monitor how well their books were being rated, and engage in discussions with fans.

YouTube

Although a very popular video sharing site (with 84 million unique visitors per month (Compete)), YouTube was the least popular of the six as a social networking site; only 26 authors had a profile there.

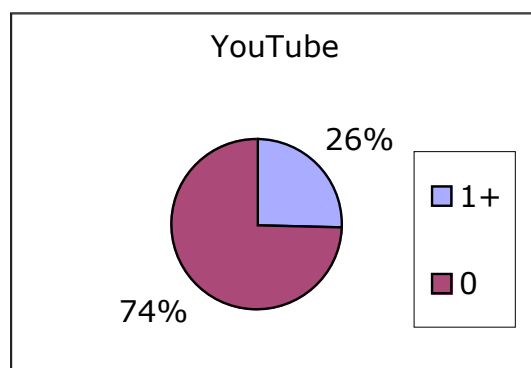


Figure 7: Percentage of Authors with YouTube Accounts

This is unsurprising; video is less useful as a marketing tool for an author, since books are not a visual medium. Although book trailers have come into vogue the last few years, and authors may be videotaped giving a presentation or lecture, many authors do not host these videos on their own Youtube channels—they have the creator of the video, such as the company that made the book trailer, or the group that put on the lecture, host the video. It makes no real difference who posted the video when linking to it from outside websites, and so authors may not see Youtube as an important part of their networking strategy.

Jackson Pearce was a noticeable exception—she regularly posts new videos, including book reviews, commentary on the writing process, contests, and other videos relating to the writing life. In short, she uses it as a video blog.

Conclusion

Authors have been putting up profiles on social networking sites in order to connect with their fans; however, there is no one easy way for fans to locate these author's profiles. This paper has examined my process of creating a website to fill in this gap for the Young Adult Science Fiction and Fantasy authors. It has also discussed the information gained during this process about how these authors are using blogs, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube and Goodreads to connect with their readers. However, there is still much to be learned about the connections being developed between authors and readers.

It is my hope that the website I have created and the paper I have written will serve as a useful resource, and help to connect readers with their favorite authors.

Notes

ⁱ These connections may be called a variety of terms: “Friends” and “Fans” are the two most common.

ⁱⁱ <http://arthurslade.livejournal.com/49183.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://community.livejournal.com/merry_fates/82675.html

^{iv} <http://www.megancrewe.com/blog/?p=488>

^v <http://m-stiefvater.livejournal.com/108509.html>

^{vi} <http://twitter.com/Scalzi/statuses/5287854001>

^{vii} <http://twitter.com/teralynnchilds/status/5261684501>

^{viii} <http://twitter.com/thefayz/status/5140351804>

^{ix} <http://blogs.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendId=105885315&blogId=506772315>

Appendix A

The following authors, although considered for inclusion in the database, were eventually not selected due to their lack of presence on any social networking sites.

Hilari Bell
Marianne Curley
Jeanne Duprau
Nancy Farmer
Esther Friesner
Simon Holt
Elizabeth Knox
Ursula K. Le Guin
Christopher Paolini
Gillian Shields
Reade Scott Whinnem

Elizabeth Chandler
David Clement-Davies
Alex Duval
John Flanagan
Stuart Hill
Brian Jacques
Kathryn Lasky
Eden Maguire
Philip Pullman
Suzanne Weyn

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