

Is it OK to be "Seen" Online?

By Andrew Micheli

We all started someplace as writers: The crumpled up note thrown at the back of a classmate's head perhaps? Changing the lyrics of a favorite or hated song in order to make it funny for our friends and garner support and recognition for our growing and formidable talent? Do it again they'd ask, do it again. And we did. We flung together whole plays in an afternoon, scribbling down lines and forcing our nascent thespian siblings and neighborhood rats to memorize them.

Then one day, the awe of our public fading, the novelty of the quick laugh thinning, we branched off on our own and tried a few lines that weren't connected to a hit song and that weren't, heaven forbid, written to be funny. This strung together group of words and lines became our first original piece. A poem. And this poem was something we cherished and couldn't or wouldn't share with anyone, although we desperately wanted everyone to know of our great creation. Thus was born our work, and with that birth, the search for a market.

That's more or less how it started for me. Early on I didn't have any idea, of course, how or what I was doing was going to end up. When it came down to finally sending my work out, I sent it only to what I thought were the top five to ten literary magazines and glossies. My research consisted of looking in the back of *Best Short Stories* of the current year for suggestions on where to send my own work.

John McMally, in the DVD, *Submit! The Unofficial Multimedia All-Genre Guide to Submitting Short Prose*, suggests a typical path that a fiction writer might take in his career: start with the literary journals that are most likely to publish emerging writers, climb up the ladder to the more established journals thus gaining some prestige, maybe you hit a few of the huge glossies, publish a collection of short stories, then maybe you get to your novel.

Can you start your publishing career with online journals? Do they count? That is, would an editor or a publisher take those credits seriously and would they help you establish credibility?

Jason Sanford, editor of the online journal *storySouth*, relates:

"I began thinking on this subject after receiving an e-mail from Maryanne Stahl, an

author I published in storySouth, the online magazine I edit. According to Maryanne, the editor of an upcoming anthology (to be published by Crown/Random House) saw her story in storySouth and liked it so much that this editor contacted Maryanne and asked her to submit some work to the anthology."¹

Sanford continues:

"When I asked Maryanne if I could share this good news with people, she replied with a humorous note from her literary agent. This agent, it seems, was excited about the anthology but felt that Maryanne should avoid doing 'any online work, which frankly (in the editors' minds) is more ephemeral and less helpful to your career.'"²

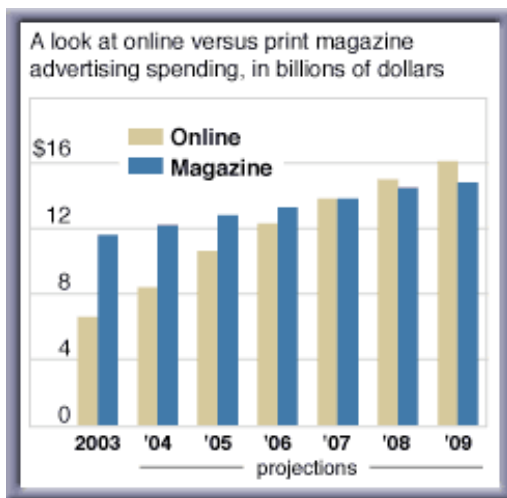
In determining if online publication is a worthy "credit" for a writer, we have to look at the state of the web and web publishing – consumer (readers, editor, publishers) perceptions and behaviors. We, as writers, can and should take ownership and help to develop the presence of the market – its content, its marketing and distribution and, finally, its credibility.

The chart below tracks advertising spending trends for online and print magazines. Spending is shifting to the internet and online publications. This suggests that the internet is a respected market, but it may have more to do with utility – database publications like the listings in

¹Stanford, Jason, "How to Expose New Writers: Online Versus Print Magazines"; storySouth; 2002, republished 2005.

² Ibid.

the *Chicago Reader* or *Time Out*. But it all points to the growth in credibility of the internet. It isn't just a place where geeky techs know how to build a site and throw their content out there. The sites themselves are turning more and more into legitimate, profit earning businesses. The boom of the 90s is over and the reality is that the format works.



Source: JupiterResearch; Wall Street Journal ; www.wsj.com

Significance of the Data:

- Online advertising will match dollars spent on magazines by 2007
- Sign of how the Internet is rebounding
- Marketers will spend \$8.4 B on online advertising in 2004
- Magazine ad spending to be \$12.2 B in 2004
- In 2008, online ad spending surges to \$15 B
- Print magazine ads projected to be only \$ 13.8B

In an interview with William Pierce, Senior Editor of AGNI Magazine (a prestigious literary journal), that

appeared on New Pages, an online writer's resource portal, Pierce points out the necessity of the web to AGNI.

"Another point: it's essential to have a vibrant presence on the Web. This is probably the first thing today, more important even than direct mail. We have over 17,000 visitors to AGNI Online each month, and the website has become an important, steady source of new subscriptions from people we probably couldn't have reached before the internet came along."³

So what if the internet makes good business sense. Its content is inferior. Period.

Is the reader predisposed to a belief that online work is in some way inferior to printed work? Perhaps. But you can read the same stories *The New Yorker* prints in its weekly glossy on their online site as well. Hmm. Oh, well, that's *The New Yorker*. So, does the perception of quality of the work rest solely on the reputation, and not necessarily the current content, of the journal? And, if

³ Powers, Jessica; "We believe in *reading*, in what our founder would call "aesthetic bliss." An Interview with William Pierce, Senior Editor, AGNI Magazine"; *NewPages.com*; Fall, 2006.

so, how long does it take before an online journal gains a respectable place at the literary journal table? Should online journals solicit the big name authors? Would that help establish an online presence of literary journals that rivals their printed brethren?

Of the two key factors that determine a website's success, user utility and user experience, online journals fall, arguably, exclusively in the latter. Theirs is a mission of entertainment and it cannot necessarily take and use the printed journals model in order to find success.

Online journals are not yet at the point of being substitutions to printed journals but they can be complementary. One example: I might find it most pleasing to take my reading on the couch, being able to flip through my dead-tree journal, where I find an author I love, and if I want to read more I will search for him online. I think that's a pretty fair assessment of how most first-step research starts. If I see that author's been published in an online journal I may become a new reader of that journal and thus the growing begins. Respect is just around the corner. Maybe, maybe not, but to a degree, that's one way credibility grows.

The emergence of researched, practiced and continually developed methods and tools for e-marketing, specifically

driving traffic to your website using email marketing, links, online advertising and promotions – much of which takes time and *not* money – points to the ability for online journals to flourish and, perhaps, walk step for step with their printed counterparts. In a business that has no money and makes no money, it makes sense that the online market should and will exist, and betting on that success, if you are an emerging writer, is a fairly safe wager. As with any journal one would submit to, research is paramount to understanding who they are and if they fit *your* needs. Own your work and don't send it to a journal you wouldn't be proud of appearing in. That seems like an obvious thing, but isn't it just so easy to hit send?

Online journals surely have a growing foothold. The *Novel and Short Story Writers Market* now carries a dedicated section to online markets. The CLMP directory lists numerous exclusively online journals. Webdelsol.com is a respected portal for strong writing. With the Mississippi Review, AGNI and others, there is a growing list of "top ten" online publications.

The online presence of *The New Yorker* stands strong as an advocate to online publishing, whether they feel forced to, due to market demands, or feel like a pioneer in publishing great fiction and established writers online. By

association, the web isn't a bad place to be, but just as in the print world, online journals are not all filled with good work. It's like Chicago theatre – the Goodman and Steppenwolf help draw the attention of a market, but the other, sometimes stronger, smaller theatres often win the market's allegiance. The smaller theatres have to be careful not to produce crap, though. Without a long and solid reputation, one bad show may take years to overcome. Online journals might want to look at that model when making their editorial decisions. It shouldn't be about how much work they get out, but how good the work is that they're getting out.

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