Self-Censorship and Self-Promotion: How Social Media Shapes Fiction

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Abstract

Self-censorship and self-promotion can be seen as the two parallel axes of performance of identity in the novels dealing with the cyberworld. "Cyberbehaviour" studies the shaping of our interpersonal and intrapersonal communication on the internet. At the same time, the two axes of identity performance share a complementary relationship. This paper is an attempt to study the effects of such identity performance on the narrator. The study explores the complexities of self-censorship and self-promotion as experienced by narrators in different contexts through an analysis of selected novels: *Follow Me Back* by A.V. Geiger and *Dear Committee Members* by Julie Schumacher etc. The "chilling effect" deals with how the narrators in these texts are silenced and stifled in their ability to speak freely owing to a fear of facing an adverse audience. They struggle with introspection and mask their genuine feelings. Self-censorship on the part of the narrators serves as a strategy for survival, security, and social acceptance. This paper aims to examine the psychological, social, and political aspects of self-censorship by delving into these narratives. Fear of retribution, acceptability, and the necessity of navigating inside systems of invisible rules of the internet are some of the motivations explored for the narrators' self-censorship. How the narrators' self-censorship impacts their agency, relationships, and sense of identity is revealed through this approach. The potential societal effects of self-censorship, such as the loss of truth, the falsification of history, and the stifling of individual agency, are also examined. The paper also aims to study self-promotion as an act of attention-seeking behaviour in terms of tactical ignoring, narcissism and validation seeking.

Keywords: Chilling effect; Cyberbehaviour; Self-censorship; Self-promotion; Social media novels.

Introduction

According to Dr Mary Aiken, human behaviour on the internet, known as cyberbehavior, frequently changes as people interact with other people. She proposes to study this phenomenon under the header of "cyberpsychology" (4). Additionally, there is a subgenre of literature called "cyber-socialization" fiction (ibid. 5). Due to the prevalence of internet regulation and censorship, states are actively involved in online surveillance, and their cyber-policing capabilities are advancing worldwide. Consequently, as has been established, there is growing apprehension about the occurrence of regulatory "chilling effects" on the internet. The term "chilling effect" refers to the "regulatory context" of the Cold War period. This relates to the notion that if laws, regulations, or governmental surveillance are put in place, people may be discouraged from enjoying their liberties or practising legal transactions online. These issues are now more important than ever, commanding greater public significance (Penny).

Scholars have observed the factor of the "presentation-of-self phenomenon" persisting in internet-based communication as well. They have noticed that individuals exhibit multiple identities while engaging in online communication and display varying behaviours depending on the social group they interact with within the virtual space (Farnham & Churchill). As an extension of cyberbehaviour, "Social media also affords users the ability to type out and review their thoughts prior to sharing them. This feature adds an additional phase of filtering that is not available in face-to-face communication" (Das & Kramer 120). This is what they call "last-minute self-censorship" (ibid.): a type of censorship that is twice removed from the original thought. They note that the tendency of censorship is more prevalent in male "users" of social networking sites (SNS) who have more male friends than female. Studying this as a strategy of boundary regulation–a coping mechanism–the paper further points out that individuals "who experience episodes of "regret" for sharing content that is inappropriate for parts of their audience might resort to self-censorship to avoid repeating a similar episode" (Wang et al. qtd. in Das & Kramer 121). This is how the chilling effect can be seen at work in real-world online communication.

Social Media Novels

With the popularity of social media and live-streaming websites, the internet has given rise to "micro-celebrity" tactics for self-presentation and promotion. This performative behaviour is described in terms of "a mind-

set and set of practices in which the audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others" (Marwick and boyd 140). The representation of these two axes of identity (self-promotion and self-censorship) has been one of the greatest themes of modern literature and by extension postmodern literature. Twitter, like other social media, gives birth to a "context collapse" (boyd qtd. In Marwick and boyd 145) "in which multiple audiences, usually thought of as separate, co-exist in a single social context" (ibid.). Social media has crept into the structures and plots of fiction as well. Fiction that is concerned with the issues of "cyber-socialization" is loosely grouped under the header of what Michael F. Miller calls "social media novels" (28). It is in this fiction that the chilling effect of the narrative takes place, which in turn is deployed by the authors as an "objective correlative".

Social Media and *Follow Me Back*

Follow Me Back, defined as "dysfunctional romance about a dysfunctional romance," aptly explores the relationships that take place on an SNS ("Follow Me Back"). As a social-media allegory (something that has passed Frye's "naive allegory" stage), the novel (and it might be true for most social media novels) deals with a world in which Twitter handles, usernames, email IDs or even hashtags stand for the mood, mindset and the personality of the individual. Therefore, @Tessa*Hearts*Eric shows her obsession with Eric while an otherwise straightforward @EricThorn is now @EricThorn*Sucks* because of the attention he simultaneously craves as well as detests, and therefore the present 'vibe' is that he 'sucks' (my italics). Even the stalkers express their personalities, or in fact, perform their personalities as a cult of "stalker-iffic parasites" (Geiger 20) using their share of epithet by employing the hashtag #EricThornObsessed. The story revolves around Tessa Hart, a young recluse, and Eric Thorn, a well-known pop musician with a sizable internet following. Thorn is a musician turned celebrity whose PR team tries to monetize the obsession of his fans by posting pictures and tweets that further 'tantalise' them. He is out to 'follow' people in order to get more followers (a phenomenon that has come to be known as "#follow4follow" in social media jargon). What John Thompson refers to as "mediated quasi-interaction" in the relationship between the "celebrity" and the fans enables the "celebrity practitioners to create a sense of closeness and familiarity between themselves and their followers," (Marwick & boyd 147). The fans are made to believe that they are partaking in the private lives of the celebrity, a "performative intimacy," which can be achieved through live-streaming, casual daily vlogs,

sneak peeks, bloopers and leaks. This is done by the celebrity (or their team on their behalf) for recognition, fan maintenance, taking control of situations like rumour mongering etc. and is usually achieved through a made-up quasi-backstage scenario. Tessa (just another fan for Thorn), an avid fan, writes fanfiction about Eric's life, and as a result, her work gains enormous internet popularity. Eric's (virtual) agoraphobia is similar to Tessa's (actual) agoraphobia. This is depicted as a symptom of excessive crowd exposure, making her restrict herself to the world of the internet. Paradoxically, her agoraphobia does not prevent her from seeking more followers and addressing crowds on the internet. This is a cat-and-mouse game for Eric, with the usual unidentified stalker using the hashtag "#EricThornObsessed" (whose identity is indicated by the handle). Eric is aware of the pressures of being a celebrity (and maintaining oneself as a celebrity) and how he must participate in the games that his followers create for him. For instance, his PR manager tells him that "They just want you to do a little follow spree" (Geiger 22). He has a simple solution for Eric: "Follow a few fan accounts. You know the drill" (ibid.). Tessa becomes the right candidate for Eric's PR team since she "hearts" him and has recently written a fan-fiction story titled "Obsession" about Eric. Her identity and her fictional work converge on Eric Thorn to become one.

The novel aptly renders narcissism (over self-promotion) as a product of modern society. McCain and Campbell maintain that while there is not much evidence to claim that social media has exacerbated narcissism, "these media platforms allow individuals to broadcast information about themselves to a wide audience at any given time–ostensibly appealing to people's growing desire for attention and praise…" (2). They argue that social media plays an important role for people in the virtual space such as "promoting and enhancing the self… so narcissistic individuals will be drawn to social media to fulfil self-enhancement needs" (3). Furthermore, their findings show that grandiose narcissism has a positive relation with the time a user spends on social media as well as the frequency of updating posts.

> He couldn't focus. His mind kept turning back to the same topic. How far had that photo travelled in the hour since he posted it? How many memes had it spawned, calling him out for his self-absorption? Did it break the Internet, like that famous picture of Kim K's ginormous naked ass? (Geiger 56)

In trying to depict the upward mobility of the main characters, the book tries to bridge the gap between real and "unreal" (to borrow the title of

one of the chapters) lives as well as between the conversation one has face-to-face and over the internet (DMs, tweets and posts) thereby trying to demonstrate the effects of the unreal over the real world. The difference between the two in fact highlights how closely they are related to each other: "But you did, in fact, lure Tessa Hart into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona, correct?" (Geiger 141). In doing so, it plays with the structure of the book which is made flexible enough to accommodate the characteristics of internet communication like slang, jargon, leetspeak etc. The novel shows us the world of tweets and trends which are all fun and games until someone gains the attention of a serial stalker. These are the common tropes of social media novels. Eric comes to realise that the people who claim to be his fans do not love him for the reasons he hopes to be loved. He has an epiphany as he stares at the like-count of his recent post: "The numbers only confirmed what he already knew in his gut. His so-called fans would much rather stare at silent pictures of his body than listen to any song he bothered to record" (30). Thorn stands for the obsession that the crowd has with his virtual image and does not represent their admiration for his music, something that spurred him to join social media in the first place. Therefore, he has to be advised by his PR team to modulate his posts according to the whims of his audience. Notwithstanding such epiphanies, Thorn still strikes the Faustian Bargain with his PR team by following Tessa back and closing in on her.

The novel, therefore, shows how "respectability politics"– described as the way users "present themselves on social media by self-censoring, curating a neutral image, segmenting content by platform, and avoiding content and contacts coded as lower class" (Pitcan 163) – dictates the terms of their online behaviour and interactions. For instance, Tessa carefully manages her online interactions and relationships, choosing who she engages with and how much she reveals about herself, thus strategically trying to maintain control over her virtual connections. Moreover, in an attempt to maintain a certain image or reputation (especially how Eric sees her), Tessa suppresses her true emotions and opinions on certain matters. This self-censorship results in a presentation of herself that does not fully align with her inner thoughts and feelings. On Eric's end, he has to filter his thoughts time and again and has to be directed by his PR team regarding his posts, all of which are geared towards the maximisation of his fame. This is a fine instance of what Marwick and boyd call the careful construction of self-presentation.

Portrayal of the Luddite in *Dear Committee Members*

Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members* is what Corrigan sees as a farcical treatment of the classic epistolary genre, with each chapter a letter of recommendation (LOR) written by Professor Jason Fitger, a self-proclaimed "Luddite", at the request of his students. Praising the epistolary style of the novel, Katy Waldman comments: "Missives pull something from more intimate epistolary genres: love letters, poison-pen notes. They are at once inescapably authored and achingly unmediated."

As much as the novel tries to comically portray the possibilities of resistance to new forms of online communication in the form of an old-school professor who still relies on writing recommendation letters and refuses to fill in online forms, it certainly points to the queer anachronism and therefore an unnecessary paranoia of the narrator. The narrator professes that:

> Though technically capable of e-mail, I remain leery, given the fiasco of my "reply all" message in August…. Call me a Luddite, but I intend to resist for as long as possible the use of robotic fill-in-the-blank quantifiers for the intellectual attributes of human beings. (Schumacher 38)

The paranoid professor even grows narcissistic as he associates his out-of-fashion style of letter writing with his personality and even antagonises surfing the web. Upon being requested by a website to download certain software (perhaps Adobe Flash) onto his "own irregularly functioning computer (no, I will not)," (Schumacher 128) he starts to see the website as an external invasion threatening his "own" world, an attack on his personality, for his computer is his own and he will not be ordered by others to download anything on it. In fact, he has already started to see the internet as the enemy of the "future of education" owing to the freely accessible knowledge on it (77). At another point in the novel, he expresses his indignation about inferior research on Wikipedia (71). Seeing Prof. Quam's community college "hiring adjunct faculty members exclusively, bypassing the tenure track with its attendant health benefits, job security, and salaries…" the narrator mockingly suggests that his college should "cut to the chase and put its entire curriculum online" (77). For Prof. Fitger, putting things online for students to access would be a final step towards the replacement of human teachers by robots. Fitger's paranoia grows into xenophobia as he tries to distinguish (in a negative manner) between the laid-back, almost aristocratic manners of his generation and the narcissis-

tic self-promotion of the "up-and-coming generation [who] post drunken photos of themselves at parties, they share statuses, they emit tweets and send all sorts of intimate pronouncements into the void—but they are incapable of returning a simple phone call" (128). It can be argued that the narrator's use of the word *e-mail* (with a hyphen) rather than the common noun form *email* throughout the text highlights the desire to distance himself from the world of the internet and electronic communication of this form while at the same time maintaining his hyphenated identity between the world of mail and electronics. The narrator's self-censorship in terms of his refraining from internet usage manifests as a coping mechanism and rationalisation, effectively perpetuating the demarcation between his "elite" generation (who like a grammar Nazi likes to point others' attention to needless apostrophes in simple plural nouns) and the beleaguered generation.

This act of an inward-looking narrator who rejects the future while openly claiming to "look to the future" (10) in his letters must be seen as self-promotion: a promotion of an anachronistic behaviour if not absurdity (the opening letter is dated "September 3, 2009") that others must suffer because of his position in the power equation he shares with his students and those addressed by him. His decision to use old-fashioned letters to recommend his students is parallel with the author's use of epistolary style in an era where it is seen unfavourably. The case would not be problematic if the decision were as innocent as it seems upon a cursory look: Prof. Fitger's decision to use letters instead of emails and online forms affects the career of students who approach him and is therefore loaded with significance. As an argument for his choice of letters as a medium, Prof. Fitger refers to his failure to use the modern medium of the internet without causing himself embarrassment as evident in his "reply all" fiasco.

MacLuhan's slogan "medium is the message" stands true for the novel since the channel of communication deployed by Prof. Fitger, being the Professor of Creative Writing and English, Department of English, Payne University (pun intended by the author) and in a position to potentially influence the decision of different recruiting agencies, his decision (whether a personal whim or arrogance based on his position) takes the shape of bureaucratic inertia and a ruthless lethargy wherein anachronism becomes a powerful tool that keeps the old ways in which they have been trained going. Not only does the medium help Prof. Fitger express his personality but it also helps the addressed to develop a specific perspective on, in fact judge, the candidate being recommended. This highlights a sort

of hypocrisy on his part: while he detests the democratic self-promotion (in very different terms) of his students who actively 'post' their lives on social media, he is happy to be the enabling agency for their self-promotion through his recommendation letters (something that resembles outsourcing).

Because of the nature of internet-based interpersonal interactions, self-censorship works through an individual's act of isolation from the electronic world of emails and messages. The fact being that the internet is open to "all" and the privacy of one-to-one conversations facilitated by letters is threatened by the very broadcasting nature (almost self-promotional) of the internet. Letter writing in the wake of technological advancement has not only been seen as outdated but also as an act full of intent that is out to make a point. The professor chooses the "more accurate anachronism of a letter" against the data required by the online form, preferring to exert his identity rather than being compliant. In this connection, Oliver Harris aptly points out:

> The effect of email is to render the conventional letter imaginatively impossible. Like any technical innovation, it is more than a matter of updating acceleration. The ease and immediacy of electronic mail does not just make the physical process of letter composition, packaging, and mailing seem dull and ponderous, it renders the very idea of it interminably futile by visualizing a marathon of avoidable labor. (159)

This is one of the many ways the novel tries to resist (and foregrounds what it resists) online communication and depicts the self-inflicted (internet) censorship of the narrator because of the many reasons that he divulges consciously and subconsciously throughout the text. Notwithstanding his peculiar reasons, the resistance to virtual communication and stubborn attachment to the older forms of communication (which is the written word) can be seen as a form of logocentrism. Saussure saw language as constructing our world and not merely mirroring it the same way Prof. Fitger sees his identity evolving with the evolution of his writing style.

Moreover, it can be argued that the older generation sees electronic communication and automation as a kind of assistive technology for them. There are certain barriers like "frustration, physical and mental limitations, mistrust, and time issues" that give rise to the self-inflicted censorship of the older generation (Gatto and Tak 800). This explains Prof.

Fitger's misgivings about the communication skills of the younger generation. However, Prof. Fitger's refraining from using the internet cannot be dismissed as something typical of his age. He has been a "wired senior" in the past; therefore his avoidant behaviour must be seen in the light of his past trauma and embarrassment. In fact, he understands the role of "Tech Help" in his recommendation letter for Mr Napp:

> For example, let us imagine that a computer screen, on the penultimate page of a lengthy document, winks coyly, twice, and before the "save" button can be deployed, adopts a *Stygian façade*. In such a circumstance one's only recourse—unpalatable though it may be—is to plead for assistance from a yawning adolescent who will roll his eyes at the prospect of one's limited capabilities and helpless despair. I often imagine that in olden days people like myself would crawl to the doorway of Tech Help on our knees, bearing *baskets of food, offerings of the harvest, the inner organs of neighbors and friends*—all in exchange for a tenuous promise from these careless and *inattentive gods* that the thoughts we entrusted to our computers will be restored unharmed. (Schumacher 103; emphasis added)

His mythicisation of computer usage reflects his distrust of computers as something of a superstitious ceremony carried to his generation, a sort of curse for the people with lesser means. It also shows his fear of dependence on "yawning adolescent" which is a direct threat to his authoritative position. However, the narrator is not naive to not know the merits of the internet; the narrator does not see the broadcasting nature of the internet as a problem as long as it does not concern private conversations/business. In another instance within the text, the narrator demonstrates a willingness to express his emotions through email, as long as the same is done using a "public e-mail" platform (148).

The pressures exerted by the external world, leading to self-censorship of the individual, are reflected in both of these novels: while Prof. Quam's letters directly point out his hesitations thus deeming himself unfit to "print his mind" as Milton would have it, Eric's self-censorship is revealed in his hesitation while choosing the best caption to describe "What's on his mind" (a question posed by SNS) as he tries to be nonchalant, pretending to be indifferent about the reception of his public posts. Reading the texts (especially *Dear Committee Members*) against Milton's *Areopagitica* is rewarding as it draws parallels between censorship as a political act and self-inflicted censorship. The chilling effect accounts for the inhibitions,

gaps, hesitation and self-inflicted anachronism of the narrative. Self-promotion and self-censorship are seen as two axes of the same phenomenon which simultaneously share a paradoxical relation of complementarity and opposition.

Conclusion

Self-censorship and self-promotion as two opposite ends of the spectrum of self-presentation are represented in the form of fiction. While both of them as a form of self-inflicted censorship (as presented in this paper) have been a conventional trope (almost run of the mill) of novels ranging from the Victorian era to the present age, their depiction as co-existing and even feeding upon each other in the present context is relatively new. The nature of the communication that takes place over the internet fuses them so that the individual at once is stupefied and silenced into nothingness. Moreover, on the surface level, the novels *Follow Me Back* and *Dear Committee Members* seem to depict two different attitudes towards the facilitation of wireless communication and the sense of freedom it comes with: *Follow Me Back* shows the physical ("real") world completely submerged into its virtual counterpart ("reel"); on the other hand, *Dear Committee Members* depicts a world that tries to stand against the current of the internet that seems to sweep away the traditional form of significance that the written word symbolised. However, the novels share a common theme which is the different ways the individuals try to deal with infobesity or information overload. These novels aptly depict how social media is bringing a change to the way narrative works in the fiction in present time. Narrative strategies employed by the authors, as explored in the paper, depict what has been called the chilling effect.

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