

# THRUST INTO THE PUBLIC

## The impact of social media on writers

By Katherine Brodsky

Not too long ago, you'd be hard-pressed to find a TV fan who actually knew the names of any of the writers behind their favourite shows. But in this era of the rise of the showrunner and social media, things are rapidly changing. These days, writers are increasingly thrust into the spotlight and social media has become not merely a way to promote a show, but to influence and shape it as well.

Rachel Langer, a writer for SyFy/Netflix's *Ghost Wars*, jumped on the social media bandwagon in 2008, as a relatively early adopter. She likens her interactions via the various platforms as an "open source conversation." Initially, social media was a way for her to meet showrunners and other writers. It was a place to connect.

On the other hand, Sarah Glinski, a writer on *Degrassi*, would classify herself more as an observer of sorts than an active participant. "I really just love seeing what people write, I think it's such an interesting character study. To be aware of what's happening in the world and what different people are saying about different things. There's people from all different groups, cultures, and socioeconomic — just a lot of different opinions. That's truly how I use social media."

But why the influx of interest from fans towards writers, who, until now, have mostly stayed in the shadows? What's propelled them to Comic-Con stages and thousands of followers on platforms like Twitter? The answer may lie within the increased transparency of the process. "I remember when I grew up watching and living vicariously through all my favourite shows as a teenager, I didn't know there were showrunners, I didn't know how shows were made but everyone's just that much more aware right now," says Glinski, "They know that there's someone who is controlling the stories and they know that that person is called the showrunner and they want to hear from that person because those are the

people that control the destinies of their favourite characters. I just think that they want to get inside their heads."

There may have been a time when fans thought actors just made up the lines, but nowadays showrunners and screenwriters are truly being recognized in television in a way that's unprecedented. That also means that there's pressure on the writers and showrunners alike to be the voice of the show on social media, and to have a relationship with the fans.

So how much influence do fans really have on their favourite shows?

Peter Mitchell is the showrunner for *Murdoch Mysteries*, one of the longest running series in Canadian TV history. The show's Facebook page has over 130,000 members, who aren't afraid to share their detailed critiques of each episode. "So we have a general sense of what turns the fans on and what turns them off. We kind of monitor it more towards what we're going to do in the future," says Mitchell. But, he's quick to add, "Just because the fans didn't like it doesn't mean we're not going to do it again." Fan feedback can, however, occasionally have some influence on what historical events and characters *Murdoch Mysteries* explores, as well as the mystery-romance equilibrium.

Still, the fans have to follow the lead of the show, not the other way around, says Mitchell. "I think following the fans is a recipe for — you know, give them exactly what they want. Well nobody's ever surprised because as far as they are concerned they came up with it ... you kind of disappoint them a little. I engage in conversations, but I never ask people what they want."

Langer agrees that giving fans exactly what they want may be the worst idea for the show. "I mean, I'm sure that you would have gotten just so many fan requests for Scully and Mulder to get together after season one of the X-files, but the show wouldn't have worked if they had."



Clockwise from top-left: Sarah Glinski; Heather Conkie; Peter Mitchell; Rachel Langer.

Besides, more often than not, by the time the first episode airs, the season has already been written and shot.

“I think it allows you to sort of test whether you’ve achieved your goals,” says Glinski, “It’s an interesting tool.” When Glinski was working on *Degrassi* the series tackled a lot of difficult topics. “It was really exciting to see once the shows aired whether people who had struggled with any of those issues and were very close to them, how they felt about what we did or whether what we were trying to do with a story was successful.”

If the response wasn’t what was intended, it allowed the writers a chance to tweak a character or storyline a bit going into the next season. “But we’ve never been like, ‘fans don’t like a couple together therefore we’re gonna break that couple apart,’ that’s never how we reacted to social media. We would never let them tell us how to tell our stories. But I think we’re aware of when the stories we’re trying to tell didn’t work in quite the way that we wanted.”

Social media also allowed the issue-based show to listen to fans when they were talking about specific topics or were looking for certain kinds of characters to be represented. “We ask ourselves in the writers’ room why we haven’t talked about it yet? If you have the information you can’t turn it off, it’s there.”

For a long-running show like *Heartland*, according to EP and writer Heather Conkie, fan reaction can sometimes influence the importance put on a certain character. If the charisma of the character, or connection with another character really takes off, then the show may put more emphasis on it, whereas if there’s no interest, they may play it down going forward.

“I think the ways where the fans have a lot of power is letting us know which characters they really respond to,” agrees Langer, “It’s easier for them in American television, because a lot of the times the

shows are on the air while they’re still writing, so they actually can change the show based on fan reaction. But for us in Canada, our rooms are so short and our production schedule is so short that by the time it’s on the air, it’s kind of sealed. So then — we could do something for a second season.”

“Television isn’t necessarily meant to be responded to in real time,” she adds. “As a writer on the show sometimes you feel like you’re getting people’s knee-jerk responses to something when they don’t know the full picture.”

Netflix is also having an impact. When *Degrassi* was on TV, tens of thousands of people were watching and interacting at the same time. “Once we were on Netflix and it was airing 10 episodes at the same time, you never had that big mass fan reaction,” says Glinski, “People are watching it different ways at different speeds, we don’t have everyone tweeting at the same time. So you don’t have that same feeling online, you don’t have the same feedback mechanism and real community feeling.” But, she admits that it’s also “cool to see that six months or a year later, people are still discovering and tweeting about episodes when you thought people aren’t watching this anymore.”

It isn’t always easy for writers to ‘read the comments’ — social media brings a frenzy of unabashed feedback, both good and bad. But whether they love it or hate it, at least they are talking about it.

“Our job is making people feel things and they’re not always gonna be the feelings that you want to feel. So I think as long as they’re talking about it and debating decisions ... then we’ve done our job. We’re trying to start a conversation,” says Glinski.

“I always think it’s fun when people are really mad or really passionate or really excited,” says Langer, “If I made someone mad, then they’re passionate and engaged. If we made someone excited, then they’re

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loving it and that’s really cool. So I just kind of like to see what the response is, but it’s quick, I don’t sit there and read them for hours at a time, just because you know, it’s a rabbit hole.”

For many writers, social media also represents a perfect tool for research, allowing unprecedented access into the minds and conversations of a diverse range of people around the world — without even having to leave home. “You can go on Tumblr and you can read first-hand accounts of what people are going through, or you can go on Twitter you can find a group of teenagers that are talking about something that you’re interested in, and see how they’re talking about it and what language they’re using,” says Glinski.

When it comes to expectation for writers to be active on social, there’s increasingly a pressure to participate. “We certainly get requests to go on social and live tweet our shows and host promos,” says Langer, “And I get it, I mean it’s free advertising and it’s more interesting for the viewers if the creators and anybody who works for the creators are engaged.” But it’s also free work, so while Langer will often support a show she loves, she tries to do it on her own terms.

As she gains more attention on social, she has also learned that just because someone tweets her, doesn’t mean she is obligated to share anything with anybody she’s not comfortable with, and that it’s not always realistic to talk to every single person that reaches out. “That one was tricky because it was so weird and narcissistic but, you know, you just need to protect yourself a little bit. A lot of people really want something from you and it’s just not feasible to give it to them.”

As social media grows, it increasingly becomes an extension of the shows — and the characters themselves. *Heartland*, which has the largest digital social media footprint across all CBC’s shows, is also active in the realm of transmedia, expanding on the character of Georgie by giving her an Instagram page, *Georgie Rants*, which she runs in character. *Murdoch Mysteries* has also been successful in creating

webisodes with beloved characters that take place in a parallel universe, as well interactive mysteries.

Social media allows creators to take a show beyond the small screen, and keep audiences engaged through content and interactions, keeping them interested and active even when a show is not on the air.

“I think, to a lot of people, our show’s characters are real,” says Conkie, “I mean I know that sounds bizarre, but they’ve known them now for so long. When the show started the main character, Amy was 15 turning 16 and now she’s married with a baby. So people feel like they’ve lived their lives over the last 11 years. So they’re very involved with whatever any of the characters do.”

Langer believes that social media will stay polarized forever among writers. “We’re such a weird breed where we like being in a group and talking to other writers and sharing our ideas, but sometimes we’re very weird about being in public — some writers just hate social and I get that. I’m not that way but I just don’t think we’ll ever get everybody on the same page.”

No one sees social going away anytime soon though. “You know, I think sometimes people are engaged it for ego stroking,” jokes Mitchell, “and every writer likes his ego stroked, so I don’t think it’s going to disappear.

When Conkie was first adjusting to the influx of social media response for *Heartland*, it wasn’t easy. “There could be ninety nine really positive wonderful things said about the show and one negative thing is the one that stays in your mind.” But she grew up with it over the past few years and grew to find the interactions eye opening and useful.

“I can’t even imagine what we did without it, in a weird way now. And I think because of it, the showrunners and the writers are more visible and they’re more recognized. It’s not just about the actors. The people realize that there’s a whole team behind these shows that they need to hear from. And I think that’s really healthy. I think it’s terrific. And it’s also so incredible to have so many crazy fans who take the time to write and express themselves.” ■