

At what point do I stop looking at the world only through the lens of my last great idea, and tweeting and posting messages about it?

The Audacity Of Hype

Authors need to publicize their books, but not forever.

BY MELINDA BLAU

A year ago, encouraged by all who stood to benefit from the sale of my book, I set out to become a "presence" on the Web. I joined Facebook, at first feeling like the older clubgoer who stands on the sidelines, watching "the kids." Gradually, though, I got the hang of it and started accumulating an army of new acquaintances—friends of friends; old bosses, co-workers, and classmates; readers who knew my work. For a journalist, it was intoxicating to peek into hundreds of people's lives every day. When important media types accepted me as a "friend," it buoyed my spirits. Then I started blogging and tweeting about my book. I monitored traffic on Google Analytics and began obsessing about how many people I could reach. And down the rabbit hole I disappeared.

It was a slow slide, as addictions usually are. Whereas I initially felt self-conscious posting my "status," I soon became a sideshow barker. I posted videos of myself talking about the book. I promoted my blog and media appearances (though I also commented on others' posts and shared cute stories about my grandsons). Today, I not only have a home page but also a group page and several event pages—and that's just on Facebook. It requires attention. My eyes burn; my back aches; I'm constantly distracted. My loved ones express concern, but I can't seem to stop myself. I am



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powerless over social media, and my life has become unmanageable because of it.

In turns, I worry that I'm overdoing it and that I'm not doing enough. I'm chasing the perfect wave. It all seems worth it when I receive an affirming note, a thank you, praise for my writing. If I were in my right mind, I'd recognize that "your book looks interesting" is far from a rave review, but even a throwaway comment like that amounts to my next fix.

Call it Hype 2.0—this notion that we just need the right combination of social media to connect with readers. Blog it, and they will come. Legions of Web sites and new media mavens fuel the frenzy, advising authors to be self-starters and, at the same time, inveterate connectors. They admit it requires "work" (read: every waking moment), but look at Kelly Corrigan, a newbie whose self-made publicity blitz for her 2008 memoir sold 80,000 hardcovers and 260,000 paperbacks. I hear her story and think, I can do that. (The old guys in Miami who comb the beaches probably felt that way when the amateur "metal detectorist" discovered a million-

dollar treasure trove under the sand.)

Last January—light years ago in Internet time—a Ph.D. who studies this stuff told me that the likelihood of a book going viral is right up there with getting an invitation from Oprah. I didn't want to believe him. I've actually been on *Oprah*. I've already had a bestseller. Like a good addict, I keep thinking I'm different; I can bear the odds. But I haven't. Even worse, I'm not a journalist anymore. I've become a publicist. I'm still churning out words by the thousands—and some interesting ideas—but much of it is in service of my latest book.

When I was a fledgling editor and writer, a mentor told me my gift was the ability to digest a complex body of knowledge and make it accessible to everyone. I've been doing that for decades: picking brains, analyzing, and illustrating my points through other people's stories and my own. I've always loved that my profession allows me to delve into a great idea and then leave it behind, moving onto the next. But Hype 2.0 changed that. So, I've begun asking myself, at what point do I stop looking at the world only through the lens of my last great idea, stop tweeting and posting messages about it?

The answer has to be: now. Therefore, my 2010 resolution is to do what journalists always do when they finish an assignment: move on. I'll use social media, but mainly for my own pleasure and edification, not to sell books. As a friend recently pointed out, "Your success will be an act of God, not an act of Melinda." I will continue to blog, connect with people, learn from them, and, with their permission, tell their stories. I will become a writer again. ■

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