

# What the Web Can Do for Your Career

Or, why we no longer need agents, publishers, or flacks BY ART JAHNKE



FOR HIS LATEST book, *Fans, Friends & Followers: Building an Audience and a Creative Career in the Digital Age* (CreateSpace, 2009), Scott Kirsner talked to dozens of successful filmmakers, musicians, visual artists, writers, and comedians known for using social media and other Web functions to boost their careers. In some cases, readers may suspect, Kirsner knew a bit more than those he questioned. He has built his own successful career writing about how technology has changed our lives for the better. In addition to writing the *Boston Globe's* "Innovation Economy" column, Kirsner (COM'93) writes regularly for *Variety* and has been a contributing writer for *Fast Company*, *BusinessWeek*, and *Wired*.

For the sake of consistency, *Bostonia* used the ancient Web function known as e-mail to contact Kirsner and ask a few questions about what he learned from his subjects and how he used the Web for his own career advancement.

## ***Bostonia*: Did you use one of the online publishers you mention in your book that publish manuscripts writers send to them?**

Kirsner: I've done books both the old way and the new way. With *Fans, Friends & Followers*, I used CreateSpace, an on-demand publisher that Amazon.com owns. The advantage for me was speed — I just didn't want to wait a year or eighteen months for a traditional publisher to get it to the market, since the subject matter is pretty time-sensitive.

## **What are some other reasons to go with an online publisher and what are the reasons not to?**

One of the pros of on-demand publishing is that you print exactly as many books as you have buyers, which means it can be cost-effective to publish books that are intended only for a niche audience. The biggest con is that it typically falls to the author to do most of the promotion, organizing readings and events and reaching out to reviewers, since you no longer have a big publisher's publicity department working on your behalf. At this point, it feels like the book publishing business is very much in transition. Publishers want to continue publishing books with brand-name authors that can be heavily promoted and sold by the zillions in airport bookstores — that kind of thing. But

many other books are shifting to on-demand publishing.

## **Many people, and many businesses, are trying hard to find ways to promote their products using social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Can you tell us how to use these sites?**

I think a lot of people get too obsessed with being on a certain platform, like Twitter or Facebook, when it's really all about doing something interesting or useful or entertaining on that platform. That might be a restaurant tweeting on Twitter about their off-the-menu, for-regulars-only specials or a hair salon posting photos to a Facebook group of bad celebrity hairdos. If you just decide to have a presence on some new social network, it'll be a chore to attract an audience. But if you're doing something valuable or fun, it just seems to happen.

## **How does the influence of the old ways, like a newspaper or print magazine review, compare to the influence of social networks?**

I think if you can get a review in one of the few national or global publications that really matter — for instance, a book review in the *New York Times*, a movie review in *Variety*, or a record review in *Rolling Stone* — that's certainly still valuable. But to be honest, online reviews

tend to have more longevity, and if they link directly to your Web site or to a place where people can buy your work, they'll have a far greater impact on sales than most print publicity. So one thing I recommend in my book is creating a list of some of the most influential bloggers who cover your field — ones who have already built up a substantial audience — and concentrating on getting them to review or write about your stuff.

**With a book like yours, about using technology that changes fairly rapidly, there must be a market for updated versions. Do online book publishers offer any advantages there?**

Definitely. You can put out a new edition whenever it's warranted. The question is whether new editions will really have an impact on sales — will they slow down a slide or cause sales to pick up again? I'm not sure yet.

**How can we use the Web or social networks to determine if there is a market for a book before we write it?**

I think that's already happening with blogs that build up an audience and then eventually spawn a book. It's

**WEB EXTRA** Through October, Scott Kirsner will take your questions about building an audience in the digital age at [www.bu.edu/bostonia](http://www.bu.edu/bostonia).

probably happening — though I don't know of any examples yet — with Facebook groups or Twitter feeds that attract followers first and then become books. But the Web is definitely a powerful platform for market research and for figuring out what resonates with people before you turn it into a book, movie, album, or museum show. Then, once you do, you have a built-in army of people who will help spread the word.

**Why not just put the book online and sell ads around it?**

Ads are a good way of monetizing content that's going to get a lot of views — for instance, a YouTube video seen by millions. Is there an audience of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of people for the typical book? Probably not. That's why I still like the idea of selling paperbacks, selling e-books and Kindle versions, and giving excerpts and samples of the content away for free.

**Since you published your book, have readers suggested things you didn't think to include?**

Absolutely — there are lots of examples readers have cited of artists who are pursuing new paths to success, and strategies I hadn't thought of. One cartoonist sent in the idea of putting work up for ransom — i.e., he

won't release it for free online unless he raises a certain amount of money, like \$100, from fans. I make my e-mail address easily findable on the book's Web site and it's published on the last page of the book, so I hear from readers regularly.

**In the spirit of seeking guidance from one's audience, what important questions have I not asked?**

Well, the high-level question is, what's the big transition that's happening that is affecting all kinds of artists — from writers to musicians to filmmakers to painters? And what's the answer?

My thesis is that in the old world, the way you "made it" was to do your thing and hope to get discovered by a publisher, record label, movie studio, or art dealer. I think we're now living in a world where those entities are all under economic stress. They're spending less time and less money looking for new talent. So what is happening is that emerging artists are developing all kinds of new digital strategies to build up their own audience and earn a living doing what they want to do. What's interesting to me isn't just how that changes the economic model of being an artist, but also how the direct connection with an audience will change the work that gets made.

## Fiction

### BALKAN CAESAR: A NOVEL OF WORLD WAR II

Peter Lucas (CAS'60)

#### Aberdeen Bay

TWO YEARS AFTER publishing a history of America's involvement in pre-Communist Albania during World War II, Lucas returns to the topic, this time with a fictionalized



account. The inherently dramatic story is a natural for fiction: Office of Strategic Services operatives, here a motley crew of Bostonians,

are given the task of undermining Hitler in Albania. That means working with the charismatic but brutal Albanian Communist Enver Hoxha, real-life leader of Albania from the end of the war until his death in 1985, in a morally ambiguous mission many come to regret after Hoxha's rise to power. "You can't make a movie these days about being on the wrong side," laments one character, an OSS member-turned-actor, as the Cold War kicks into gear. Maybe not, but between Lucas's dedication to the subject and the book's endorsement from Albanian-American director Stan Dragoti, anything's possible. *Katie Koch*

### CAMPING DAY

Patricia Lakin (DGE'63, SED'65)

and Scott Nash

#### Dial Books for Young Readers

CROCODILE FRIENDS SAM, Pam, Will, and Jill are back for their fourth adventure, and this time they're taking to the woods. Off they dash, with maps, packs, lights, and tent. On their hike, they pause to check out the view, the flowers, the birds, and the trees. But when they settle in for the night, the