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Introduction

In early 2012, a British teenager called Sam Gardiner set up a Twitter account. He was a devoted soccer fan, and wanted to use that social networking site to connect with people who shared his passion for Arsenal Football Club, and for football generally; he hoped to gossip about player transfers and the hiring and firing of managers, to analyse recent games, to speculate about future results, and so on.

Yet he quickly became frustrated. ‘No one was taking me seriously’, he told The Observer’s Tim Lewis. ‘Adults don’t want to listen to 15-year-olds and I don’t blame them, to be honest … I love football, I love talking about football and I just wanted to air my opinions to as many people as possible’ (‘Trick or Tweet’, The Observer, 23 March 2014).

Tired of only having 300 followers, Gardiner made a decision: he would pretend to be an adult who worked as a freelance football writer – someone with connections, someone
who could break stories before the mainstream media did. Using his knowledge of European football, Gardiner began to invent and circulate rumours via Twitter – and because he occasionally made accurate guesses about future events (correctly predicting that Chelsea FC would sack its manager Roberto Di Matteo the day before the club actually did so in 2012), he soon amassed a large following.

By the time he was found out, Gardiner – posing first as a ‘Dominic Jones’ and then as a ‘Samuel Rhodes’ (both invented personae) – had over 20,000 followers on Twitter, many of whom were established journalists, football agents, and players. The revelation that he had been pretending didn’t do him much harm: he has reportedly been hired to write about football under his own byline by Yakatak, a company that develops sports apps. He claims that his impulse in creating those fake identities was not malicious: he merely wanted to prove that a 15-year-old might have an opinion worth listening to.

The case offers a neat illustration of a key fact about social media websites: they are spaces in which people perform identities. Sam Gardiner’s Twitter personae were false, in that he was pretending to be someone he is not. Yet those identities also revealed a truth about Gardiner: his adult avatar allowed him to gain credit for knowledge and insight that he actually possessed (albeit that he also benefited from lucky guesswork); it allowed people to appreciate characteristics in him that had gone unseen due to his age. The construction of his online persona was an act of creativity, but it was also an act of self-expression, a revelation of something authentic about the real person.
Also important is that Gardiner’s performance was enacted not just before an audience, but also amongst a network of followers. He explicitly describes the value of his identities in terms of how many connections he had gathered: he was dissatisfied to have had only 300 followers under his own name, but took pride in the 20,000 people who followed him under his false identities. This illustrates how one of the essential elements of social media is that (as the name implies) it is social. Value is determined not simply by the quality of what we post – or by who we really are. Instead it is grounded in the reach and impact of our posts, by the connections that we have forged with others. This shifting conception of value in turn places strain on our understanding of the authentic self: in social media ‘performances of identity may feel like identity itself’, as Sherry Turkle puts it in her major study Alone Together (loc. 468). Social media, she suggests, blurs distinctions between solitude and intimacy, between the real and the virtual, between the valuable and the worthless.

In the pages below, I set out to explore the idea that social media is a space for the performance of identities – a space that can be seen in many ways as theatrical. We can analyse cases like Gardiner’s by thinking about theatre: by drawing an analogy between his online performance and the behaviour of actors and their audiences. And thinking about theatre also allows us to analyse social media applications such as Twitter, by proposing that the computer interface works rather like a stage does. Such analogies, I suggest, allow us to explore anew many of the categories that have become
confused in social media. After all, the theatre too is a space in which we can be ‘alone together’, a space in which fictions can reveal truths, a space in which individuals can find their ‘real self’ by pretending to be someone they’re not. Analysing social media in this way requires us to draw on concepts from theatre and performance studies: ideas such as the suspension of disbelief, liveness, and audience expectation. The first part of this book lays out these suggestions in detail.

A further question is this: if social media is a performance space, how do theatres and theatre-makers act within it? In a section called ‘Social media in theatre’, I consider how theatre-makers represent, explore and respond to social media on stage, asking how their attempts to do so affect theme, form, and other elements of theatrical composition and reception. And in section ‘Performing authorship, performing consumers’, I move the focus to the audience, exploring how theatre productions now encourage us to use social media to re-stage some of the things we have seen in professional productions: to cover songs from musicals, to link moments in our own lives with events from plays that we have seen, to post photos of ourselves in costumes from favourite productions, to write messages that might appear onstage and online simultaneously, and so on.

Audience-members’ online activities can extend a production both temporally and spatially, pushing plays beyond the boundaries of the stage, and beyond the performance of the action in real time. Do such ‘performances’ give more power to audiences, democratising creativity and confusing the distinctions between amateur and professional? Or
do they instead allow theatre producers to use their fans’ labour as a form of highly effective free marketing? And what, if anything, do they do to our conception of the theatrical performance?

By exploring such questions, my overall suggestion is that social media is a performance space that can alter our understanding of all performance spaces: it forces new ways of thinking about authenticity, creative proprietorship, authorial intention, and the relationship between artist and audience, among many other urgent issues. Those changes inevitably will alter the way in which theatre is made and received. This book, therefore, sets out to consider what some of those changes might entail – and what their consequences might be.

**Social media and performance**

**The pre-histories of social media**

In his 2013 book *Writing on the Wall*, Tom Standage makes the case that social media has always been with us. He begins his critical history in the Rome of Cicero, suggesting that letters between high-profile Romans were often seen as semi-public documents, which were intended not only for their named recipients but also for other readers and intermediaries. Many of those people would transcribe sections of letters that struck them as interesting, and would then circulate copies through their own social networks. As a result, the correspondence of figures such as Cicero and Julius Caesar was widely distributed and discussed.
Standage claims that there are many examples in Western history of the transmission of user-generated content through formal and informal networks:

Other notable examples include the circulation of letters and other documents in the early Christian church; the torrent of printed tracts that circulated in sixteenth-century Germany at the start of the Reformation; the exchange and copying of gossip-laden poetry in the Tudor and Stuart courts … the stream of news sheets and pamphlets that coursed through Enlightenment coffee houses … [and] the pamphlets and local papers that rallied support for American independence. (loc. 57–8)

Standage does not include significant reference to oral and vernacular cultures, but they too can be considered examples of socially transmitted cultural forms: as Alan Liu puts it, ‘oral culture was the origin of what we today call network, complete with a data architecture of node and relay’ (‘Friending the Past’, p. 9). The oral transmission of stories and legends involves circulation through social networks: oral tales were shared from one ‘user’ to another, often taking on modifications and improvements as they passed through communities. Vernacular cultures are similarly important in the pre-history of digital social media. It is revealing, for example, that users of Facebook are invited to post messages to each other’s walls – making a direct
analogy with street graffiti, a medium that can itself be seen as functioning via social networks in that it is generated by individual users who identify themselves by using ‘tags’ and because it is then subject to subsequent ‘editing’ by others.

And although Standage focuses primarily on Western culture (as does this book), there are of course many examples of pre-digital social media in non-Western cultures. Pamphlet wars took place in China before they took place in Europe – and countless other examples can be cited, from Bengali scroll-paintings [described by K.G. Subramanyan as the ‘comic strip of the Bengal village’ (1985, p. 50)] to Japanese Ukiyo-e (woodblock prints that circulated amongst Japanese elites during the Edo period). In such cases, artworks and messages are circulated through networks of linked individuals, sometimes being modified as they pass from one person to the next. These examples illustrate that ‘for most of human history, social networks were the dominant means by which new ideas and information spread’, as Standage writes (loc. 58).

In the late 1990s, we witnessed the development of what came to be known as Web 2.0: a version of the Internet that allowed users to interact with each other rather than merely receiving content from static webpages. This development revealed itself in the rapid emergence of large numbers of digital social networking sites, such as Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003), LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), Bebo (2005), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006). We often hear that the invention of such resources represented a radical
departure from the past. But, following Standage’s interpretation of the past, perhaps it could be suggested that the anomaly in cultural history might be the era of mass media, which began in the nineteenth century and which may now be coming to a close. When we take the long view, it is apparent that the transmission of information generally has not involved the passive consumption of mediated content by mass audiences, but that it has been dominated by the circulation of user-generated (rather than centrally created) messages and artworks through relatively small, and often informal, networks. This does not mean that digital social media (as we can more accurately describe today’s online platforms) are necessarily benign. Then again, neither were earlier networks for the transission of media: as Standage points out, the inexpensive transcription and circulation of Roman letters was possible only because of the existence of slavery, which he describes as the equivalent of broadband infrastructure today (loc. 360).

This book specifically explores digital social media, but Standage’s argument allows for an important point to be made: if social media has in some sense always been with us, then it seems reasonable to infer that it has always been present in the theatre too. Indeed, if we accept Standage’s definition of social media as involving the circulation of any semi-public ‘user-generated content’ through networks, then modern Western drama has almost always featured social media.

For example, the plays of Shakespeare contain an estimated 111 letters, which, according to Alan Stewart, appear
in all but 5 of the 36 First Folio plays (Shakespeare’s Letters, 2006, p. 5); they are also the most commonly used stage property in Shakespeare’s dramas (p. 21). Shakespeare’s letters are not just used to advance the plot or to provide exposition; nor are they always private correspondence: they are vital sources of information that are often received and read in public. In Shakespeare, the composition of letters often acts as a form of performance within the play so that, as Stewart points out, letters do not just have a stage life but a social life too (p. 22).

The use of letters and other messages also allows Shakespeare to show the differences between his characters’ public and private personae (one of his major preoccupations). For example, one of the funniest scenes in Antony and Cleopatra occurs when a messenger is attempting to pass on some bad news to Cleopatra: that Antony has married Octavia, the sister of his rival Octavian.

**CLEOPATRA:** What say you? Hence …
Horrible villain! Or I’ll spurn thine eyes
Like balls before me; I’ll unhair thy head …
Thou shalt be whipp’d with wire, and stew’d in brine,
Smarting in lingering pickle.

**Messenger:** Gracious madam, I that do bring the news made not the match. (2.5. pp. 78–83)

Cleopatra’s willingness to punish the messenger because of the message he carries is entertaining in performance, and
it allows us to understand better her passion for Antony. But it also reveals much about Antony himself. This message is delivered publicly rather than by means of the semi-public or private document that a letter would have been. Antony has chosen to allow the information about his marriage to reach Cleopatra in the presence of other people: in a setting that will humiliate her, displaying to her courtiers and servants both her distress and her degradation. The apparent indifference to her feelings signals the seriousness of Antony’s attempt to break with Cleopatra – just as his unwillingness to pass on the message himself shows the weakness of his resolve.

The public performance of apparently private messages extends into Shakespeare’s treatment of letter-writing generally, as evident in Polonius’s recitation of Hamlet’s letters to Ophelia, in the trick played upon Malvolio in Twelfth Night, or in the links between courtship, credit and letter-writing in Merchant of Venice. In such plays, letters and publicly performed messages display Shakespeare’s characters in their social contexts, from Shylock to Iago, from Hamlet to Macbeth, from Benedick and Beatrice to Malvolio and Olivia.

Shakespeare’s plays also feature the distribution of sonnets through social networks – another of Standage’s examples of pre-digital social media. Hamlet’s abovementioned letters to Ophelia reveal him to be a mediocre poet – a trait he shares with Orlando from As You Like It, a character who, in the role of courtly lover, writes a series of
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