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From Text to Screen: John Green and the Rise of Digital Literacy

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Social media is rapidly becoming more prevalent in modern society. Businesses, politicians, and educators are using social media as an increasingly important tool of communication and information. In my thesis, I examine the implications of the growing importance of social media on young adult authors and the way that literacy is perceived. While social media is often seen as existing purely for entertainment, many educational professionals are bringing aspects of social media into classrooms as instructive and informational tools. Through close examination of the works of John Green and his activities on social media, this thesis addresses the ways in which social media has contributed to the role that young adult authors play in their adolescent audiences' developments

and the ways that young adult authors can help guide their audiences to have positive, productive interactions with social media and with each other.

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Literacy in the twenty-first century is continually being redefined and expanded through the innovations of new media. Particularly, the use of social media has expanded greatly beyond pure entertainment; leveraging social media platforms has become increasingly essential in business, politics, and education. Twitter and Facebook, for example, are platforms for social, economic, and political discussion, through which people from various parts of the world with various backgrounds and ideologies can come together and share ideas easily. The internet and social media have allowed for global communication and connections to develop with unprecedented ease without concern for physical boundaries or, in many cases, translation complications. It is increasingly important for young people to be able to navigate the various digital media to benefit from the information available and learn to contribute constructively to discussions on topics of interest to them. While many young people are fluent in using social media for entertainment, they must be encouraged to see the educational and social implications that the resources available on the internet can have. Young adult authors, such as John Green, who utilize social media themselves for constructive social purposes and comment on the uses of the internet in their literature, contribute to this education of their young readers. John Green not only offers commentary on technology through his texts, but also

expands beyond text through various internet platforms, demonstrating by example how to open social discussions and make connections with others.

The face and the role of authorship is morphing and changing thanks to social media. Authors of young adult literature are often seen as role models and teenagers look to their novels for guidance and support. It is crucial for authors of young adult literature who include references to the internet and social media in their novels to provide insight into the usefulness and the potential dangers of social media. John Green does this in his novels and in his own conduct on the internet.

Importance of *critical* digital literacy

In their article, “At The Intersection Of Critical Digital Literacies, Young Adult Literature, And Literature Circles,” Janette Hughes and Laura Morrison discuss the importance of digital literacy instruction for young adults. They define “critical digital literacies” as the ability to use digital media in a reflective way to explore social issues. Their goal is to demonstrate to their students that anyone can be an agent for social change through the use of digital media (Hughes 35). Media literacy has become a “critical twenty-first century civic engagement skill” (Boyd 253). They first gave their students the tools to create

their own digital texts, encouraging them to find social concerns that they felt most strongly about and to address those concerns through their digital creations (Hughes 36). The creative aspect of digital literacy education is equally as important as the reading and consuming, because students are “able to take ownership of their learning by making meaning through creation” (Hughes 40). The students come to a deeper understanding of the issues they are reading about by using their own experiences to add to their interpretations and then translate their ideas back into a literate form. Hughes and Morrison then gave the students the platform on which to share their texts and comment on others, demonstrating within the confines of the classroom how communication and collaboration exist in the larger world of social media. The students learned how to “gain understanding of others using contemporary media texts” (Hughes 36). The internet and social media have erased the physical boundaries that exist between different ethnic and cultural groups, allowing us to learn about other cultures and enrich our educations with others’ beliefs, ideologies, and experiences. In a society of information and technology, digital literacy and openness to and awareness of other cultures and ideologies is important for “the peaceful development of civic societies” and “the growth of sustainable economies and the enrichment of contemporary social diversity” (Boyd 258).

Civic engagement can take many forms; while taking physical action is the most obvious form of engagement, being informed and aware of social issues is a form of engagement itself. Social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, can be instrumental in providing information on social issues and leading to the development of political attitudes and ideologies, especially for young people who are frequently engaged with social media. It is also important, however, that young people are taught to be critical of the information they find on the internet. Understanding the dangers of the freedom for anyone to post information on the internet and how to verify the information that is presented is a crucial component of digital literacy. “The purpose of media literacy education is to develop informed, reflective, and engaged participants essential to a democratic society” (Boyd 260). It is important to understand that even news media is not exempt from bias; one must question who determines what classifies as news and what aspects of events in the news are being presented and what parts are being left out. “The media present stories about the events” rather than straightforward facts about the events (Boyd 261).

The issue of corrupt, misleading, and blatantly incorrect information pervading the internet became particularly prevalent during the 2016 United States presidential election. Some “fake news” consists of stories that have been completely fictionalized by those looking to make a profit from the results, and

some consist of incorrect information that is presumed but not checked for accuracy before being shared. The rapid nature of activity on social media allows these fake stories to spread rapidly before being debunked; one incorrect post about people being brought in on buses to pose as protesters during the 2016 election was shared “at least 16,000 times on Twitter and more than 350,000 times on Facebook” (Maheshwari 1). If each of the Facebook users who shared the story only had three friends who saw it, the number of people exposed and possibly influenced by the false information already reached over one million; it is impossible to determine how many people, through word of mouth or seeing the story online, could be affected by these lies masquerading as true news. The Twitter user who made the original incorrect post acknowledged that he did not know if he was stating fact when he tweeted; in his defense, he described himself as a “very busy businessman” who does not “have time to fact-check everything” he puts on the internet (Maheshwari 2). While it may seem excessive to require “a private citizen” with a “tiny Twitter following” to verify all of the information he posts online, it is certainly not excessive to require that information be verified before being shared hundreds of thousands of times on various platforms by various social and media groups (Maheshwari 2). This particular story passed from the social media site Reddit to a discussion forum called Free Republic to a blog called Gateway Pundit, gaining support and readers along the way, until it

was finally referenced by the candidate Donald Trump himself on Twitter, being alluded to as fact (Maheshwari 2-4). A few reporters contacted the owner of the bus company that was supposedly transporting the professional protesters and he quickly denied the allegations, noting that “it could easily be debunked based on a quick phone call or two, or a couple emails” (Maheshwari 2). Instead, many people responded to the original post on Twitter with questions for validation, and despite an “admitted lack of evidence” the story continued to thrive (Mahreshwari 2).

While this is a single specific instance of a false rumor being spread as fact, it is only a small example of the prevalence of misleading information on the internet. Private citizens posting on personal social media accounts are a minor issue when compared to the potential bias of writers for major news sources being ignored. One only has to look at multiple headlines from various sources about the same issue to see that personal affiliation is a major component in the ways that events are represented. But if one is not going to double-check the information in a single private citizen’s message on Twitter, why would they question the information presented in a news article from a supposedly reputable source? Young people must be encouraged to question the information that is presented to them, especially on the internet; young adult authors should

encourage this questioning when appropriate in their novels or in their own social media interactions.

Social media in and for education

Hughes and Morrison also acknowledge that including technological elements incorporated with text can be a useful way to engage adolescents because it is a way to blend their extracurricular interests with their educations. We are immersed in a world of “media culture” that is impossible to ignore and should thus be incorporated with current education (Boyd 251). Children are exposed to digital media from very young ages and, by the age of adolescence, may “have conceivably accrued thousands of hours of exposure” to various media; detaching the media they are so familiar with completely from their educational lives classifies media as extracurricular entertainment when it should be embraced and integrated into education (Boyd 252). Hughes and Morrison used a social networking site, Ning, which was developed specifically for classrooms with a template similar to Facebook, to encourage multimodal discussion among their students in a familiar medium (Hughes 35).

The prevalence of social media in society is reflected in the observations of Thomas Phillion, who observed a high school class discussion of the social

atmosphere of contemporary society. In discussing the current world, many of the students cited the overwhelming presence of such ideas as sex or fear on social media to defend their arguments (Philion 46). Philion was inspired by this discussion to conduct a research project of his own to answer for himself the question of what kind of Age we are currently living in, using contemporary young adult novels for the basis of his research. He asserts that readers are able to make observations about the world when they are able to make “linkages between literary language... and prevailing social issues and contexts” (Philion 47). Social media can be an immense tool in bridging the gap between literature and social issues when it is used as an extension of texts and novels as an avenue for commentary and discussion.

Philion also used social media as part of his project by creating his own blog on which to host his book reviews and his thoughts about the books he was reading. He used links to other websites and videos to support his observations about the books, turning the blog into a multimedia platform on which to discuss different texts and the ways the texts interpret and relate to contemporary society. In one of his blog posts, Philion comments on how “traditional boundaries” between cultures and ethnicities “are being blurred so that cultural differences” are not as significant as they had been (Philion 48). The internet and social media are largely responsible for these blurred boundaries; anyone with an internet

connection can meet and communicate with people from various backgrounds. Philion specifically comments on how the prevalence of celebrities from various ethnicities is helping eliminate these boundaries because young people do not necessarily take race or cultural background into consideration when idolizing celebrities and athletes.

Philion also created another blog to allow middle school students in a book club to discuss books in a similar fashion to his research blog, encouraging them to link outside sources and various types of media to enrich their understandings. He comments that the students had some difficulty at first confusing the mode of writing in a blog with an instant messenger (Philion 49). This is another important reason to include social media in educational discussions: different types of social media have different templates and formats that are accepted in that media. Much as students are taught to recognize various genres of texts in book or paper form, it is important that they are also taught to recognize and move fluently between the various genres of internet text and media to be successful in an increasingly technologized society.

The young people who are growing up and developing in this fluid-culture, technology-centered society need literature that reflects the current environment. Tonya Perry and B. Joyce Stallworth argue that, as the current practice in literature stands, “the canon is always at least one generation behind”

because those who choose what is “canon” are not part of the current generation, but are the “influential writers” of the previous generation (Perry 15). The current global society is one in which marginalized voices are being heard more and in which the concerns of many groups are being brought to the forefront; it is important that these voices also be heard in literature. Young adults now have the ability to think from “multiple perspectives” because of the cultural diversity they are constantly immersed in. The literature they read should also reflect this diversity and should “critically engage” young people in discussions of history and current events (Perry 16). When students are exposed to more texts from authors of diverse backgrounds, they are more likely to be aware and critical of “authors’ motives and the social... contexts that frame texts.” Young people who read multicultural literature are also more likely to be inspired by this literature to realize that “they have the abilities to effect positive social change” (Perry 17). Especially when used in conjunction with social media, as Hughes and Morrison found, literature that reflects the multicultural world made possible by the popularity of social media is invaluable in encouraging young adults to become socially conscious and socially responsible adults.

John Green’s literature is, admittedly, not a reflection of the multicultural atmosphere of today’s world; his characters are generally white, middle class, and heterosexual. Green does, however, act as teacher in his portrayals of and

interactions with the technological world. He develops young adult characters who have positive, if somewhat minimal at times, relationships with social media and the internet. They use the internet for educational and informative purposes. They question the information that they find on the internet and they speculate about the reality of relationships that exist through social media. Green then steps outside his novels and into the social media world himself, extending himself through multiple media avenues to interact with his readers and show through personal example and engagement how to interact constructively with social media.

Presence of technology in John Green's books

Many people in today's society are consumed by the internet and social media. We spend much time perusing various social media platforms, reading articles on the internet, and watching online videos and television shows. In his novels, Green presents worlds that are not revolving around social media, but where the internet exists for educational and informative purposes when necessary. Rather than focusing on the internet as a means of entertainment, as our society tends to do, Green reverses it and focuses on it as a means of knowledge.

For an author with such a prevalent presence on the internet, John Green's books are relatively free of allusions to technology. The students in *Paper Towns* arrive to school half an hour early to congregate and socialize outside the band room doors; while this is a familiar ritual to students in generations up to the early 2000's, the current students' socialization occurs so much on social media that this type of gathering is unnecessary (*Paper* 11). Quentin reflects that his favorite moments with his friends are the simple moments when they are "just sitting around and telling stories" (*Paper* 215). The students of *Paper Towns* also practice the archaic ritual of passing notes rather than texting (*Paper* 19). While nothing will disconnect today's young people from social media, Green's characters offer an image of life without an overwhelming internet presence to those who have never experienced such a life. Green's characters do not need social media or texting to communicate; they meet and interact entirely in person, not online.

Where technology does exist in Green's novels it is for specific, usually informative, purposes. *Paper Towns*' Radar, for example, uses an ambiguously identified "handheld device" to obsess over the informative website "Omnictionary." "Omnictionary" is a rather obvious mimicry of Wikipedia. Green illustrates both the informative uses of the internet through his depictions of the characters' uses of "Omnictionary" and the dangers present on freely edited

‘informational’ websites such as Wikipedia. Radar’s particular obsession over “Omnicictionary” presents itself in a need to frequently check articles on the site to ensure that people have not added false information. “Omnicictionary” is first referred to when Radar is telling the others that he is currently rewriting an entry because someone deleted it and replaced it with a crude statement (*Paper* 15). “Omnicictionary” and Radar’s “handheld device” are infinitely useful when the boys are searching for clues to Margo’s location; as soon as Quentin mentions that Margo has been known to leave clues to her whereabouts when she has run away, Radar pulls out his device and begins searching for the information on a poster she left on “Omnicictionary,” and the information he finds leads them to another clue (*Paper* 108). Radar uses his ‘trusty’ “Omnicictionary” again to figure out what type of hinge is on Quentin’s door and how to detach it; yet, on the information page for the hinge, Radar also finds a crude comment about the name of the hinge and he laments, “Oh, Omnicictionary. Wilt thou ever be accurate?” (*Paper* 127). While Green is pointing out how useful the information available on the internet can be, he also frequently reminds the reader that any information, especially when contributed by private users, is not to be wholly trusted. Quentin goes so far as to refer to much of the information on “Omnicictionary” as “the unedited work of skunkbutt” because he must search through countless pages of useless misinformation before he finds something useful in the search for Margo

(*Paper* 152). Green also cheekily winks to his audience with a reference to the obsession with Chuck Norris that overtook the internet a few years before the publishing of *Paper Towns* when Radar finds himself “deleting vandalism on the Chuck Norris [Omnictionary] page” (*Paper* 201).

The teenagers in *Paper Towns* do not use much social media; they use email and an ambiguous instant messenger, but there is no reference to any social media platform. The instant messenger, however, is an important form of communication that allows Quentin to talk to his friends easily (*Paper* 23). It is also easy for Quentin to share information with his friends via instant messenger, because he can copy the link to something he is reading on “Omnictionary” and send it to them so they can read it as well rather than having to explain what he is reading (*Paper* 153). The fluidity of the internet and social media and the ability to transfer information from one platform to another easily is crucial to the communication possibilities of the internet. Email is also an important tool to Quentin because he uses it to blackmail the bullies at his school; while it is not expressly stated, the email address he uses is “mavenger@gmail.com.” Gmail is an email platform that allows the user to create any email address they like, as long as the address has not already been taken, to freely send and receive messages. From the username of Quentin’s email address, it seems as though he created it specifically for the purposes of sending the blackmail messages; Green

is illustrating how innovative and useful email can be, especially from sites such as Google that provide free email services (*Paper 97*).

The tools available on the internet are always constantly updating and changing; the internet is unique in the way it provides opportunities for people to create and experiment with programming capabilities. Margo has not been gone for very long but Radar finds a mapping program that she most likely would not have known existed (*Paper 193*). Radar also develops his own program to facilitate searching for locations to look for Margo (*Paper 224*). Quentin then uses this program to finally find Margo's hiding location (*Paper 234*). Many young adults enjoy experimenting with computer programming; while there are many positive and negative uses for programming abilities, Green is encouraging using technology for educational purposes through his characterization of Radar. Radar is also a bit of a hacker; he uses phrases he thinks Margo would search for to track possible IP addresses to try to find her (*Paper 194*).

While the internet allows for connections to develop between people across wide distances, it is important to remember that one cannot fully trust what anyone says about themselves on the internet, thus causing some distance to always exist between people who only interact online. Green addresses this in *Paper Towns* when Margo is standing outside Quentin's window and the screen separates them, "pixelating her" in his vision (*Paper 7*). Green evokes this

message again when Quentin and Radar are driving on a monotonous highway surrounded by cars, speculating about the lives of the other drivers around them for entertainment. Quentin reflects that there are so many people separated by nothing but “tinted windows” and yet it is impossible to truly get to know anyone because everyone imposes their own interpretation onto others’ existences (*Paper* 258). This is particularly true on the internet, where people separated by digital screens are completely anonymous to each other and can present any misinformation they like about themselves. Quentin also expresses a desire for tactile tools rather than virtual when he asks Radar to print out a map because he “wants to be able to look at it” (*Paper* 193). There are some connections and feelings that cannot be replicated via the internet.

Green offers additional insight into the social distance created by the internet in *Looking for Alaska*. Miles has an obsession with authors’ biographies, but he rarely reads the works of the authors themselves. He also collects the last words of famous individuals, freely calling to mind the last utterances of anyone his friends name for him. He does not always read the biographies entirely, however; he sometimes skips to the end only to read the final words before death. He ascribes much meaning to the final phrases he finds inspiring or motivational without knowing anything about the speakers’ lives because he has skipped through them (*Looking* 128). This obsession manifests itself into an obsession

with the final moments he spent with Alaska; despite the fact that they had never had any romantic involvement prior to that night, he focuses on that and on the possibility of the future implications of that night rather than on her actual actions. She was not known to be a monogamous or emotionally attached person, so the relationship he imagines with her likely would not have come to fruition. His friend Chip reprimands him, berating him for not remembering “the person she actually was” (*Looking* 165). This can be seen as a reflection of the ways people represent themselves and are perceived on social media. Some are quick to judge others based on the short phrases they say on the internet without knowing anything about the others’ lives that would lead to such statements.

He and his parents also like to watch the History Channel; this is one of the only specific references to types of media consumed in *Looking for Alaska* (*Looking* 5). Green is again emphasizing the informational purposes of various types of media. Miles is focused on learning the informational truth about everything, especially surrounding Alaska’s death. He has difficulty, though, finding all of the information he wants and trusting the information he does find. It is important to question the information that one is presented, even in such informational texts as biographies.

Looking for Alaska is conspicuously bare of most technology; it certainly does not play a major role in the main characters’ lives. The students at Miles’

boarding school do not have phones in their rooms; there is only a communal payphone in the hallway of the dorms (*Looking* 7). The “only cable TV on campus” is in a communal entertainment room (*Looking* 12). Cell phones are prohibited, but many of the more wealthy students whose tendency to go home on the weekends gives them the nickname “Weekday Warriors” have them anyway, making the ability to carry a cell phone an obvious social distinction (*Looking* 36). This contrasts sharply with the environment of many of Green’s readers, many of whom use smartphones and other technology daily. Green presents a picture of young adults’ lives without social media and technology, illustrating that social media is not necessary for a fulfilled, social life. Green also leads his readers to contemplate the circumstances under which one would not have easy access to technology because only those with higher social status at the school carry cell phones. With social media and technology being so prevalent today, it can be difficult at times to remember that there are many people who do not have access to them.

An Abundance of Katherines is also mostly devoid of technology. Colin uses the rather old-fashioned method of dialing information to find Katherine Mutsensburger’s telephone number; many of Green’s readers may not have understood what Colin was doing, as most people now would search on the internet (*Abundance* 163). This is not a time without the internet, though, as

Hassan uses the internet to register for school (*Abundance* 189). Shortly afterwards they also use MapQuest to find the warehouse in Memphis (*Abundance* 190).

Green's most recent novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, incorporates technology into the plot and into the format of the novel most prominently out of his novels. He uses a format similar to instant messenger conversations several times to present dialogue. This rapid-fire dialogue, devoid of emotional descriptors or additional narrative, allows the reader to easily comprehend the conversation and adds depth to the text by incorporating a form of digital literacy. It lends itself to being perceived as witty banter, particularly when Hazel is arguing with her mother about going to Support Group:

[Hazel]: "Please just let me watch *America's Next Top Model*. It's an activity."

Mom: "Television is a passivity."

[Hazel]: "Ugh, Mom, please."

Mom: "Hazel, you're a teenager. You're not a little kid anymore." (*Fault* 7)

Hazel and Gus are rare among Green's characters in that they own and frequently use cell phones to communicate with each other via text, though Gus demands that Hazel call when she finishes reading the book he recommended to her (*Fault* 51). Gus makes a distinction between the modes of communication of texting and calling; texting, devoid of vocal inflection and tone, can be perceived as devoid of

emotion, as the dialogue Green uses occasionally also illustrates. In this age that is so dominated by written online communication, telephone calls feel personal. This is why Hazel uses texting instead when she wants to broach a difficult subject with Gus, because she “wanted to avoid a whole conversation” (*Fault* 101). It is easy to detach emotion when using written text for communication because the words are sent out into the internet sphere without any instantaneous emotional reaction; the entire text must be written and sent before any response is possible.

Hazel’s favorite book is a novel titled “*An Imperial Affliction*” written by the author Peter Van Houten. It resonates with Hazel because it is about a young woman suffering through cancer, and it presents her afflictions in a realistic rather than a glorified light. It is so realistic, in fact, that the novel does not have a definitive ending; it stops in the middle of a sentence with no clear resolution, leaving the reader with numerous unanswerable questions (*Fault* 33). This infuriates Hazel, who has reread the book dozens of times and written to Van Houten in the effort to resolve her mysteries. Van Houten, however, never responds to any of her letters and has not “published so much as a blog post” since the publication of “*An Imperial Affliction*” (*Fault* 50). This is a dilemma that many currently prominent young adult authors such as Green and J. K. Rowling eliminate; many authors are quite active on social media such as Twitter

and Tumblr and frequently answer readers' questions about the lives of their characters beyond their pages. This encourages young adult readers to imagine and speculate beyond the limits of the text presented to them; "fan fiction" extensions of popular novels and movies are quite popular, in which readers become authors themselves in writing extensions of their favorite stories.

When Gus completes his reading of "*An Imperial Affliction*," he is struck with the same frustration with the ending as Hazel. He feels that Van Houten is breaching an "unwritten contract between author and reader" by not answering the many questions that the narrative poses (*Fault* 67). Green is raising a question about the existence of this "unwritten contract" - does it exist? Does an author owe his reader answers? Current authors who are active on social media frequently give their readers answers, but some still remain silent and allow their readers to speculate. While it is satisfying to give concrete answers to questions about specific characters or events beyond the pages, it is important to also encourage imaginative thinking and promote discussion between readers who can collaborate in developing their ideas beyond the text. It is infuriating to Gus and Hazel, but Van Houten allows for their continued discussions about the futures of his characters by remaining obstinately silent. If he had provided Hazel with answers in response to her first letter to him, she would not have the opportunity to brainstorm with Gus.

Van Houten has rather rigid ideas when it comes to the development of characters and the purpose of the author. He refuses to romanticize his characters as anything more than “scratches on a page” who have “no life outside of those scratches” (*Fault* 191). Obviously he does not mean to encourage speculation by remaining silent to their questions; he finds the questions absurd in-and-of themselves. Some readers become quite attached to the storylines and the characters of the novels they read, and Green questions why that happens and the rationality behind it. Hazel identifies with the characters of Van Houten’s novel, so it is “impossible not to imagine a future for them” to her (*Fault* 192). She sees in the main character’s mother a representation of her own parents, whose futures she is unlikely to see but that she is anxious to be reassured will exist and be happy. Readers often ascribe their personal feelings to the novels they read, lending importance to aspects of the novels that the authors may not have intended. Green illustrates that novels and imagination can be important tools for coping with personal difficulties, offering voice to worries that the reader may have.

Gus, however, proves to be a better detective than Hazel in this instance, as he finds a way to reach Van Houten’s assistant via email and receives a response rather quickly (*Fault* 67). Technology prevails where physical correspondence fails. In the response, Van Houten does not provide any answers

but encourages further questions on the meaning of life and the universe, questioning how important a novel could be to someone's life when life is such an overwhelming concept. He states that he does "not feel that continuing to share [his] thoughts with readers would benefit" anyone, which is why he has not written anything other than the one novel (*Fault* 68). This raises the question of why authors write in the first place; do they write because they feel they can benefit someone? Or do they write because they have an idea they feel they must put down, regardless of who may or may not read? Green encourages these questions in his characterization of Van Houten. Of course, Gus and Hazel later come to find that they have not been corresponding with Van Houten entirely, but that the anonymity of the internet has allowed his assistant to put his name on the correspondence to give a sense of closure to a couple of young adults with cancer who she feels sympathy for. Green is again pointing out that, while the internet can be a wonderful means of communication, it also allows for a distortion of identity and necessitates a questioning of validity. Hazel even questions whether Gus made up the response himself to amuse her (*Fault* 69).

Van Houten is characterized as being fiercely against the internet and technology. "He," via his assistant, refers to the internet as "the network that has replaced the brains of your generation" in substantiating his reasoning for not answering Hazel's questions via email, as he fears that she could possibly publish

his responses on the internet as a type of sequel to the novel (*Fault* 77). He does not even trust telephones for fear of her being able to record the conversation. Technology raises many security issues that it is important to keep in mind when posting or sending anything via the internet, and Green raises this awareness in his readers through the paranoid ravings of his fictional author.

Social media makes an appearance in *The Fault in Our Stars* in the form of a website similar to Facebook, on which young adults have profiles and friends who can comment and participate in discussions on them. Hazel finds the page of Gus's deceased girlfriend and ruminates over the comments left there after her death, questioning the sincerity of those who glorify "how heroic her fight was" and "how she would live *forever* in their memories" (*Fault* 100). While social media makes communication easy, maintaining connections between friends who may not have the opportunities to see each other often in person, it also raises questions as to how sincere those connections are. Hazel questions how many of the people who commented on Caroline's page really knew her. "Literally thousands" of people left condolence messages, but how many of those thousands likely knew her well in person (*Fault* 96). Hazel is sadly left to question the genuity of lamentations on social media again when reading the memorial posts for her own boyfriend and realizing that "almost all the wall posts... were written by people [she'd] never met and whom he'd never spoken about" (*Fault* 264).

Social media can be dangerous in that it mimics proximal socialization, but one must always keep in mind that a screen divides them from anyone they are talking to; it is easy to conceal things about oneself on the internet and to present edited versions of our lives. The internet allows for freedom of expression, and as the Amsterdam cab driver reminds us, “in freedom, most people find sin” (*Fault* 157). John Green reminds his audience of the dangerous implications of the anonymity of the internet and the freedom internet users have to express themselves.

Green’s novels are praised for the ways in which they explore many different issues that young adults today are experiencing. Miles and Chip of *Looking for Alaska* explore the possibility and factors that would lead one to commit suicide and ruminate over the results of alcoholism. *The Fault in Our Stars* is a candid exploration of two young people trying to live meaningful and fulfilling lives while struggling with cancer. However, Green’s novels are somewhat limited in scope. The protagonists of all of Green’s novels, save *The Fault in Our Stars*, are teenaged, white, heterosexual males; Hazel of *The Fault in Our Stars* differs only because she is a heterosexual female. The plots of several of Green’s novels are very similar; both *Paper Towns* and *Finding Alaska* are bildungsroman plots revolving around a white teenaged boy ‘finding himself’ through the relentless pursuit of elusive, gorgeous, teenaged girls. His writing is

also “highly stylized. No matter which character speaks, there’s a tone, a surface cynicism pricked by bone-deep ruminations.” The “quick, syncopated banter” of his dialogue is “exhausting” (Malone 78).

The origin of the witty, sarcastic tone of his novels is evident in Green’s presence in the Youtube videos he and his brother create. The videos are “slick and zingy,” heavily produced and full of “John and Hank’s bouncing boyish pratfalls.” “Many of the videos feel like they’re trying to deliver a bite-size moral,” with John and Hank acting as teacher and counselor. Green’s demeanor in writing and online can be overpowering and monotonous, and his writing is not to everyone’s taste and certainly does not cater to everyone’s personal experiences. However, it does resound with millions of young readers, movie-goers, and social media users, and encourages those who follow him to be more thoughtful in their everyday interactions and to be more socially active and aware on a consistent basis.

John Green’s social media presence

Green’s monochromatic casts and repetitive plot lines are a result of his goal to be authentic to himself in his endeavors; he says, ““if your goal is real connection, never pretend to be something you aren’t.”” His readers do not look

to him to be a voice for diversity because he does not come from a diverse background, ““and they forgive [him] because [he doesn’t] pretend like [he does]”” (Brunner 32). Green draws from his own background and experiences as a basis of his stories because he feels that it makes his writing more believable and relatable than if he tried to write about something with which he had no familiarity; he pulls stories from his own adolescence growing up in a boarding school and from his time as a hospital chaplain for sick children. His focus is not on being a face of multiculturalism or racial progression, but he inspires empathetic thinking through his charitable messages. He has said, ““I like writing for teenagers because I care about the audience. It allows you to participate in the process of values-formation,”” and this is his focus when writing (Barkdoll 68).

More so even than in his writing, Green’s authenticity in his interactions with his audience on the internet is crucial. ““Sharing your life - adversity and all - makes an audience genuinely care,”” and Green shares many of the ups-and-downs of his life through his social media accounts. He shared his struggles when writing *The Fault in Our Stars* with his online audience, welcoming them into the process by sharing ““parts of books that had to be abandoned. It made them feel invested in it from the beginning”” (Brunner 32). Green has created an online community of people who genuinely care about him and his writing and who share similar charitable and social values because he has always been authentic

about his values, and ““if you make stuff that’s in accordance with your values, you will end up with an audience that shares them”” (Brunner 32). His “multifaceted accessibility” comes from his understanding of the ways that literacy and the ways people read are changing (Barkdoll 67). He realizes that, while it may not be evident because the media that people are reading has changed drastically, teenagers today read ““more than we did ten years ago”” because ““they read instant messages, emails, and information on Web sites”” (Barkdoll 69). He understands and respects the new “critical digital literacies” of today and thus embraces them as part of his writing and audience interaction.

Green’s social media stardom and his prevalence as an author are indistinguishable; he was already “an Internet celebrity” when *The Fault in Our Stars* was being filmed, and “in an inversion of the natural order of things, Green [was] more famous than a lot of the actors in the movie” (Grossman 49). He and his brother Hank have a Youtube channel with “2 million subscribers” from which they created an organization called “Nerdfighters that advances social causes and generally celebrates nerdiness.” He also has “2.4 million followers on Twitter,” as well as his own personal website, Facebook, and Tumblr (Grossman 49).

Green was rather ahead of the times with his social media presence; he and his brother were famous on Youtube before Internet celebrity was

widespread. Now, publishers and authors are following his example in extending themselves on various social media outlets. Penguin Teen, one of Green's publishers, is now promoting "events on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr... which account for millions of impressions." There are "many new great opportunities" for connections between authors and their audiences, and more and more creators and publishers are becoming familiar with these opportunities (Maughan 19).

While Green did not become a notable name as a young-adult author until "2012, following the publication of his breakout hit *The Fault in Our Stars*," he was first famous acting as half of the "Vlogbrothers" duo with his brother (Malone 78). Through the "total of 1.5 billion views" on Youtube, the Green brothers created a community of "Nerdfighters" who share their "nerdy" personalities and social values (Brunner 30). They did not become popular on Youtube until "July 2007" when Hank made a video about Harry Potter immediately prior to the publication of the last Harry Potter book; this video went "viral" and their following skyrocketed from a few hundred subscribers to "more than 7,000" overnight (Brunner 32). Since then their following has been growing steadily; as of December 11, 2016 they have close to three million subscribers (Youtube).

The Green brothers carefully cultivate their videos to entertain and entice their growing audience. John Green uses it as a platform to discuss his writing

and issues stemming from his authorship; he addressed the banning of his book *Looking for Alaska*, which was banned for sexual promiscuity in several schools (an ironic issue for someone who was almost a minister), in a popular video entitled “I Am Not a Pornographer.” His ministerial background is evident in the tone of many of his videos, and he “doesn’t care about being heavy-handed,” but he understands the necessity of some variety for entertainment, “alternating a video about... mass incarceration in the United States with the occasional cute video about velociraptors” (Malone 79). It is through videos about social issues such as mass incarceration that the Nerdfighters have come to be; the Green brothers “are about encouraging people to channel outsidership into something productive, like living well through small acts of kindness” (Malone 79). They created their community of Nerdfighters by appealing through videos and then extended themselves through different social media avenues for different forms of communication.

Twitter allows for more fast-paced communication that most closely resembles having a physical conversation, but also allows for inclusion of multiple forms of media through videos, images, and links. John Green’s Twitter account has “nearly 2.5 million followers,” which is a large number when compared to other authors (Malone 78). He also communicates on his blog, which allows for more in-depth exploration of topics in a text format embedded

with visuals rather than in video format like on Youtube; Green uses his blog to make more serious posts, such as discussing why he voted for certain political candidates or the importance of health care (Malone 78). Green uses different forms of social media to address different topics because each media has a different format and audience.

John Green has said that his personal favorite social media platform is Tumblr. Tumblr is similar to a blog format but with shorter posts, with heavy use of visuals such as pictures, videos, and .gifs. It is currently “a booming social media platform, particularly among teens”; Green’s own Tumblr has 200,000 fans (Maughan 19). One of the biggest interest communities on Tumblr is “reading and writing YA books”; Green’s and similar authors’ popularity on Tumblr is akin to that of a music pop star on other platforms (Maughan 19). Tumblr has become more of a creative outlet than a social entertainment outlet. Reportedly “more than 50 book deals have come from ideas created and expressed via Tumblr” (Maughan 19). It has become a gathering place for virtual creative workshops where young people share their stories and ideas and help each other develop new creations. The avid interest in young adult authors present on Tumblr and other social media gives young adult authors a new degree of responsibility; the audiences on Tumblr have made authors celebrity figures who, unlike Peter Van Houten, can no longer hide in their reclusive homes and ignore

piles of fan-mail. Authors such as John Green who command large social media followings must remember that their actions on the internet and the words in their novels are constantly being watched and examined by countless young readers who are looking to them for guidance and support. These authors should present a positive example of how to conduct oneself on social media and how to use the internet wisely when interacting with their virtual young adult audiences.

Tumblr also encourages physical social gatherings with organized meetups. “Bookstores and libraries will... livestream” events and coordinate parties or special gatherings around them, or “fans can organize meetup events of their own” (Maughan 19). Not only does Tumblr encourage creative collaboration among its online users, but it also encourages its users to leave their screens and interact in the physical world. John Green also encourages his social media community of Nerdfighters to leave the comfort of their computers to make change in their environments. Nerdfighters organize charitable events in their cities to raise awareness of various social issues. Some Nerdfighters were organizing a group to “hand out books to kids on the National Mall” (Malone 80). They reach out to each other to sign petitions for such social causes as calling for the “White House to legally recognize ‘non-binary genders’” (Malone 80). The Nerdfighters, inspired and created by John and Hank Green, have become a community of people who go to each other for advice, support, inspiration, and

fun. There are Nerdfighter products such as clothing and decorations, and “people get Nerdfighter tattoos” (Malone 80). John Green, with the partnership of his brother, has understood and harnessed the power of social media to educate, inspire, and unite people through his Youtube channel and various other social media. He has translated his communicative abilities and appeal from the internet into literature, inserting his beliefs about the value of social media and the changing nature of literacy into his writing while also demonstrating it through example.

Conclusion

Literacy is changing, and new “critical digital literacies” are emerging that are crucial for young people to master to be successful in the professional and social world. Social media is a source not only of social entertainment but also of social communication and exchange of information and ideas. It is important that young adult authors such as John Green who are prominent figures on social media and who write about social media in their works demonstrate the various educational and revolutionary implications of the internet. In his novels, John Green’s characters use social media for information and easy communication; their technological devices are not constant features in the novels, but they are

readily available when needed. In his own conduct on social media, Green raises awareness of social issues and encourages communication among his followers, freely communicating with them himself as well and sharing insight into his life and his works. Green is an example of the newly revolutionized author who collaborates with his audience and shares insight into his background and his ideas, refusing to be shut in like an elusive Peter Van Houten but instead using accessibility as a selling point and a genuine avenue of communication. Social media and the internet are going to continue changing the nature of literacy, and it is important that literature merge with it to form a cohesive, fluid movement of information and ideas.

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