

Up close and personal

Paulo Coelho

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Despite my being in this remote region, I wasn't alone: people were travelling with me through the words of my blog



The American journalist Jeff Jarvis has come by my house to interview me. Here I am, face to face with one of the most incisive technology journalists of today - via his blog BuzzMachine - and he is asking *me* what I think of the internet. I find the idea mind-boggling, to say the least; it would have been unthinkable a decade ago, when Google was a fledgling search engine and the internet a mystery to most of us.

Still, I had a suspicion at the time about the potential of this new medium, and I decided to launch my own website and newsletter, and opened an email account for readers who wanted to contact me. One of the myths about writers is that we write our books in lonely ivory towers; in my case, I was never very keen on the notion of the reclusive author working in solitude, and have always tried to interact with my readers.

So I've spent a lot of time on my website, knowing that it is one of the rare public platforms, besides the traditional book signing, open to me. Yet, despite the success

of the site and newsletter, I felt that more could be done - but what? The answer is the result of ten years' fascination with the medium.

My virtual journey

In 2006, I decided that, rather than separate myself from the world, I would take a different path. The road is made by walking - this is the first tenet of every adventure. You place your foot on uncharted terrain and from there the road somehow imposes itself on the walker. I left my house in France for three months, visiting Tunisia, Italy, Bulgaria and Ukraine, before I embarked on my Trans-Siberian journey, a 5,772-mile trip from Moscow to Vladivostok.

I shared my experiences every two to three days with readers from all over the globe via my blog. The feedback was incredible - despite my being in this remote region, I wasn't alone: people were travelling with me through my words. The blog lasted a couple of months; I knew, though, that this first contact had to evolve somehow. But how?

Just like magic

When I returned home, I had a couple of months before the publication of my novel, *The Witch of Portobello*. I knew from previous experience that the free-sharing of my book over the internet would increase its visibility, so I didn't hesitate to post it on peer-to-peer websites and on my blog.

The more I've ventured into the virtual world, the more I have realised that the internet has a logic of its own and its credo is: share everything freely. This was my message when I spoke at the "Digital, Life, Design" conference in Munich earlier this year.

The feedback from readers and media alike to the internet incarnation of *The Witch of Portobello* was such that I started a blog called *the Pirate Coelho*, where I posted links to free electronic copies of my books. Of course, this "underground" activity was undertaken without the knowledge of my publishers. But on the official side of things, I was also exploring as many ways as possible of communicating with my public via websites such as MySpace, Facebook and YouTube.

Share and share alike

Then, one day last year in Geneva, after visiting the blogs of some of my readers, I had an idea: why not work together? From this simple thought emerged *the Experimental Witch* project. I extended an online invitation to participate in a film adaptation of *The Witch of Portobello*. Aspiring film-makers were asked to film one of the 13 tales that the book interweaves and post the results on YouTube. Musicians could use MySpace to send ideas for the soundtrack.

Now, the submissions are all in, and the winning entries will be announced on my birthday, 24 August. Though some excellent work may be left aside in arriving at a manageable length for the film, this distant collaboration means I have been able to see the film my readers picture as they read my work.

So I looked at Jeff after he'd finished his questions, and asked him: "What else should I do?"

Apparently, Jeff thinks I'm doing just fine.

Paulo Coelho's *"Brida"* is published by HarperCollins (£14.99); visit <http://paulocoelhoblog.com>