Web Publishing and how we Assess Authorship in the Digital Age

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Abstract

This paper looks at some of the ways in which authorship of texts has changed or been decentralised by the advent of digital publishing, with a specific emphasis on how the Internet has been a unifying, central component in enabling this shift by its presence throughout the development of different digital formats.

We look at how both the differences and similarities of publishing technologies come to play a role in the concept of ascribing singular authorship to a written work and how any shift or decentralisation of this eventually influences perceived levels of reliability, veracity and 'authority' in a work. We ask whether the use of digital technologies – relative to print - have compromised notions of authorship, or whether the concept of authorship is in fact fluid, requiring an adjustment in definition as new formats and media begin to replace the old.

Keywords: Authorship; Web-Publishing; Digital Publishing; Hypertext; Wikipedia; Roland Barthes.

Introduction

One of the main questions surrounding digital texts today is how authorship is affected by the move from distinct printed texts, to a much more hyper-textual nature of digital text, and how the closing gap between author and reader blurs the boundaries of readily-definable authorship. Ever since Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author, and media audiences became more aware of decoding the ideas delivered to them through

postmodernism, "true" authorship of a written text – and the authority of its ideas - has been forever in doubt (Creeber 2009, 16).

This article seeks to evaluate exactly how digital and web technologies decentralise notions of authorship and authority put in place by print, how early printing technologies played a role in the evolution of authorship, and whether authorship is a fixed concept or whether it may, in fact, require continuous re-evaluation in the context of technological developments as they influence how works are created and distributed.

Internet Technology and Hyper-textual Capability

In the context of publishing moving toward the online platform, Mark Poster asks the difficult question of whether cyberspace is "an occasion of strengthening or restructuring or of abandoning authorship?" (2006, 487). This debate around the fixity and qualification of what constitutes authorship will sound a familiar echo of the same debates raised in the pre-digital era by postmodernist and structuralist thinkers. Roland Barthes, who famously pronounced the "death of the author" saw readers becoming more aware that supposedly original ideas in a text were in fact a composite of external ideas reconfigured and retransmitted, and the reader had greater power to alter the meaning as its receiver (Barthes 1977). As a result, Barthes felt we should start to question the authority of the author and the permanence of their ideas in light of how an isolated text is connected to others, primarily through the reader:

> Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is a place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author (Barthes 1977, 148).

One of the main shifts seen by the introduction of digital text has been the greater capacity for copying and modification in tandem with the vastly increased capabilities for

hyperlinking: allowing a reader to link a fixed text to any number of similar works, related articles, or even further out to blogs and community message boards maintained by readers (Thompson 2011, 336). An aspect highlighted by Kathleen Fitzpatrick is that the advent of computer and web technologies in writing have seen a migration from bodies of work authored by individuals to these becoming part of a larger web of information authored by a community where increased collaboration will be necessary (Fitzpatrick 2011, 14).

Even closed formats closely echoing existing print container of the printed book – such as the e-book - allow for much greater instantaneous access to linked resources as these intertextual capabilities close the gap between an author's work and the reading audience, where a work only now exists *because* of its proximity to other works. Digital transferability by a reader from its original context is one side-effect of digital technology where the ideas are no longer ring-fenced in a fixed codex (The Book), dissolving the link between the original work, its author and anyone who may read it and re-contextualise it anew (Doueihi 2011, 15). Indeed, Michael Joyce expands to illustrate the potential impact of this upon a text's intended meaning:

> While formal, commercial, and legal authorship may still adhere to a work, it's instrumental authorship more frequently accrues to whomsoever can wield it to a new purpose and in different settings – often ones unintended or even unsupported by the originating author's initial intentions, logic, evidence, or argument. (Joyce 2008, 260)

Even before web technologies were a proposed idea for delivering printed information, we can see our own culture habits and needs laying the groundwork for the internet and its intertextual capabilities through Marshall McLuhan's work in the 1970's, and his observations of a culture cherry-picking and "surfing" through increasingly instantaneous and varied media (Creeber 2009, 15). Our access to information has increased vastly in the information age, where people are free to select from "a wide array of databases, catalogues, and menus", and this greater access to information reflects – or enables - the closed gap between author and audience (Manovich 2002, 128).

Early Print and the Evolution of Authorship

John Inge discusses the idea of authorship being a fairly recently adoption within published works, citing 17th century English plays as an example of works where authorship was a very secondary concern, and it was expected for plays to be revised, reworked, adapted, and somewhat altered to the times and audiences within which they were being performed (Inge 2001, 624). Of course, such traditions and acceptances of decentralised authorship stretch back to 700 BC when *The Iliad* was first written down and attributed to Homer, though some historians ascribe this text – and many of the time - to the more impermanent oral tradition of a whole culture (Worral 2015). Indeed some critics have mentioned writing and publishing practices have historically involved numerous parties beyond the author, with manuscripts often readily altered by printers to meet formatting requirements, often without requiring author consent, and this was accepted practice for the time (Dobranski 2008, 24-25).

One way of tracing the genesis of the concept of authorship, its economic leverage, and as a cultural mainstay of publishing is found by looking at the history of printed publishing and thus how the singular author came into being. In the Fifteenth Century - soon after the advent of the printing press - ownership of a published work was awarded to printers ahead of the author, in the form of "privileges" granted by local authorities or courts (Mellot 2007, 45). In an essay on web publishing and the work of noted publishing historian Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, James A. Dewar and Peng Hwa Ang point out that these legal frameworks helped usher in a "pride of authorship" through the Renaissance. That for a printed work to bear an author's name on the title page benefited the author and printer mutually by designating ownership as well as a form of copyright protection (Dewar and Ang 2007, 370).

As a side-consequence of asset-protectionism, authorship has also increased cultural capital as a separate component of this process, to a point where a bestselling author's 'brand' can actually begin to eclipse the publisher they are writing for (Thompson 2011, 9). Applying Bourdieu's *field of cultural production*, we can identify that a cultural concept such as authorship of a work has arisen as a result of the commercial pressure of unauthorised

reproduction coming to bear upon how cultural agents respond in their creation and distribution of ideas (Johnson 1993, 15).

Based on this, we might start to view the idea of a singular author - what Barthes refers to as the "Author-God" - as a somewhat artificial construct (1977, 146). The primary motivator of naming a text was protection of property and investment by anyone other than the author who staked investment in the printed work. Authorship, it seems, was both a by-product and direct agent of early copyright, and the singular object of the book was easy to protect as a tangible item of property, now thrown into disarray by readily shareable, reconfigurable digital text.

Through early print (and the age of pre-print) we can begin to identify a lack of singular authorship around a fixed work, contrasting against the notion of authorship developed in the years since. In fact, Post-Modernist and Post-Structuralist thought attempted to dissolve this very edifice of "singular authorship" as a rhetorical device surrounding a body of work that had been doctored and edited by many hands, but early publishing allows us to see this as more than just a pitched battle against a cultural construct. Its ultimate meaning would be further reinterpreted ("decoded") in the very minds of the reader, re-contextualising it beyond reach of the author (Creeber 2009, 16). The history of printing also allows us to understand how technological developments alone can come to bear on authorship, and that these issues have presaged conversations surrounding digital publishing by quite some time.

Wikipedia, Open-Authorship, and Authority

One often-cited project where the distinctions between author and reader blurs considerably is Wikipedia due to it being one of the first and continuously successful websites that uses open authorship as its founding principle, maintained by a large community of volunteer contributors (Creeber 2009, 40-41). We may feel concerned about the level of authority, fact-checking and reliability in articles from this anonymous

authorship, with articles constantly subject to potential revision from an anonymous contributor whose experience we are not able to measure or gauge (even though recent studies demonstrate reliability on par with works such as Encyclopaedia Britannica (*Britannica attacks... and we respond,* 2006)).

Some instances prove that accredited and "official" status as qualified authors comes with its own ethical problems of possible bias. Observing the example of German Wikipedia entries for the German government's Agency of Renewable Resources, this involved funding being allocated to an expert team appointed to check consistency and quality of all entries made under that page (Anderson, 2007). This may alter the view that official expert opinion from a recognised body and the provision of funding to this end is an automatic guarantee of informative, fact-checked articles. It highlights the potential for bias when organisations that have a vested interest to display – or omit - particular information are allowed to dictate content made available to the public as fact, and additionally, may be awarded exclusive status to author articles due to perceived levels of expertise (Hafner 2007).

Milad Doueihi (2011, 32) points out that the Wikipedia model of community authorship merely exposes the wiring of how knowledge truly operates: "as open ended, as a work in progress, as an infinite exercise". We might propose that whether a Wikipedia article is incorrect is a moot point, if the central code of Wikipedia readily invites further corrections from an array of contributors and information can be contested from many different directions.

The power of group consensus-plus-access would suggest an incorrect detail will not stay incorrect for long, ensuring organic stabilisation - one which normally requires the expense and resources of a revised edition in the case of any printed volume. Providing iterative correction on a specific area of expertise rather than through an editorial team responsible for the entire body of knowledge poses the possibility of efficiently refining content only where it is needed in a way that does not succumb to pressures affecting the entire structure. A printed book, by its nature, has a predefined, carefully paginated structure – requiring intensive editing - so that it may perform its intended function. Due to the lengthy

processes involved in carrying this from brief to print, we may see this limitation ultimately impacting how a fact is presented, and ultimately suggest that a book's authority is already compromised purely due to the processes required to see it realised.

Authorship in the E-book

Despite the evident changes to authorship wrought by digital publishing, one aspect withstanding the supposed disruption of authorship by digital formats is the singular author in e-books, where we see a familiar hallmark of modern print publishing being retained. Self-published titles offer a good example of this, observing a growing industry built around authors keen to release a work bearing their single name on the (virtual) cover (Campbell, 2016). However, it would be counterproductive to view the carry-over of an old format simply as stubborn adherence to established ways, when in fact the truth can often be more akin to an organic process of evolution, where existing traits are retained precisely because of the specific advantages they offer.

In a study surrounding authorship practices of self-published writers specialising in the area of poker e-books, Tim Laquintano identifies that authors later into the market faced raised expectations from their readership, who had now come to expect greater quality of content as the area of self-publishing increased in popularity, with readers possessing greater access to information through various poker websites, blogs and forums (Laquintano 2010, 472).

The authorship of self-published writers is valued by readers seeking up-to-date advice from experienced contributors who are vetted by community review, but who exist outside of mainstream publishing, whilst their work becomes linked into the corpus of a larger community work. In the case of self-published e-books, we see a close reciprocal relationship closing the gap between reader and author (who are also readers) "in ways that are different from those possible in print culture" as Doueihi reminds us (2011, 15). However, it is also one which also seemingly relies upon the tradition of designated

authorship awarded to a named creator, which serves to validate the authority and integrity of information contained within.

Part of our difficulty in ascribing authorship to digital texts lies in framing its discussion around a fixed codex with a clear beginning and end point, whereas the linked nature of current technologies allows a reader to navigate from website, to book, to blog, and back to website (and all points in between).

When compared with the physical book, these new interlinked technologies allow for the reader to become author as is often suggested in conversations surrounding digital media as a broader whole (Levinson 1999, 65-79). But it also demonstrates that the very nature of hyperlinks prevent the unity of a single work becoming ghettoised in a fixed container, which is a physical aspect of the book that may unintentionally reinforce ideas of singular authorship through printed work (Bolter 2001, 10).

As we look back to ideas of digital technologies enabling the recontexualisation of an author's work, coupled with a culture's co-dependent need for more information and the access to technology that can provide it, we can see authorship – as we see publishing itself - as part of a larger complex ecosystem of culture and technology which requires us to think differently about how we may ascribe authorship to published work going forward.

Conclusion

More and more we begin to see how technology – whether manuscript, printing press, or digital text – plays a large role wherever discussions of authorship take place. We might argue that Barthes may have overstated the "death of the author" whereas a view of "de-emphasis" may have been more appropriate depending on the circumstances and capabilities of the technology employed. Rather than mourn a disintegration of authorship, we can perhaps invoke Michel Foucault:

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared [...] Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers (2006, 282).

We can see the power transfer to reader from author being enabled by web technologies and the seemingly infinite capacity to redistribute, reframe, and re-contextualise works through increasingly linked digital platforms. By taking a historical view of publishing production in the advent of the printing press we begin to see cultural, commercial, and technological contexts emerge that allow us to see how authorship is in fact a fluid and impermanent concept, constantly open to evolution through a combination of forces. Reflecting on these patterns in the digital age allows us to make more sense of the apparent crisis and discussions around authorship and its disruption in light of new digital formats, and may even provide clues to how authority and authorship can be assessed to realise its commercial and cultural potential in the future through a shared, even relationship between author and reader.

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