

Academic Authorship and the Digital Revolution of Journals

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Abstract

This article deconstructs the factors affecting academic authorship in the digital age, noting that the dynamic nature of digital text empowers the reader while destabilizing the author even more than poststructuralists argued, and that digital networks wrest more control from the author still, problematising authenticity through fragmentation, and constraining the author through centralisation. There is little to redeem the author's control over their work, as even Foucault's notion of 'who speaks?' is met with indifference. There exist systems such as DRM which aim to preserve the author's ownership and credit for the work, and prevent fraudulent use, yet these too are not perfect.

Keywords

Authorship, scholarly communication, digital publishing, centralisation, poststructuralism.

Introduction

This article will explore the ways in which authorship has been affected by the swift revolution of digital journals, as over 90% of English language journals are online (Cope, Phillips, 2014), publishers' income in this area has recently reached up to 75% from electronic formats (Publishers Association, 2018), and most modern research makes use of readily available online material which most libraries and institutions subscribe to for access.

Since scholars such as Barthes, authorship has been viewed with a critical eye, closely examined and reassessed as its significance is overturned by influential essays. Barthes proclaimed the author's 'death', stating that to give a text an author is to impose a limit on it, such is the power it is given over the meaning of that text, and separating text and author is a form of 'liberation', opening it to infinitely more interpretations. Instead, the fact that every reader's experience is unique and individual gives that reader ultimate interpretative power, as the author's 'intentions' fade into irrelevance (Barthes, 2006). Foucault (2006) agreed on the limitations of an author-interpretation, but noted the undeniable presence of the question 'who speaks?' in the mind of the reader, that fails to remove the author entirely unless there is some unheard-of indifference.

This article will examine the extent to which this is true of scholarly communication, and academic authorship specifically, as the transition to digital online journals has highlighted the factors that most affect the authority of the academic researcher. I will focus on scientific authorship, where data-based online research with key high-ranking journals are of the utmost importance. Throughout this exploration of the different features and consequences of the digital revolution of scholarship, the common thread of a loss of control versus a gaining of authority and ownership, of fragmentation versus centralisation, will be seen. In short, the digital world and its networks create multi-faceted power struggles between content authors and users, and between standardisation and freedom. We will thus see that it is impossible to claim that an overall greater or lesser authority can be gained by the academic whose work is published online, so many and varied are the factors that influence this concept.

Decentring the Digital Author

In 'Reconfiguring the Author', George Landow notes that the nature of digital text, being immaterial, malleable, and alterable, with hypertext allowing for greater navigation and metatext allowing the reader to become a commentator and editor, has led to a radical transference of power from author to reader in the digital age, and their roles have

converged and blurred somewhat. For example, it is not just the article as a whole, as ‘intended’ by the author, that is consumed: like Barthes says, but even more so, every experience of reading is individualised; the existence of ‘hypertext’ epitomises the postmodern notion that the author is decentred and unstable, even though that school of thought predated digital text (Landow, 2019). Not only does the reader have complete control of how they consume a text, but they may ‘annotate text written by others, and to create links between documents written by others’ (Landow, 2019). The reader becomes the author – even through re-use and rewriting of academic material, which is so much more prevalent online (though I will expand more on this later).

As Balzac wrote, ‘the true place of writing... is reading’, and this has been amplified by the dominance of the online journal, and the platforms it is viewed on (Barthes 2006). Digital text is inevitably *dynamic*, meaning that the reader experience is not just unique on a subconscious level, but on a truly literal level too. Owen writes comprehensively on the consequences of journal articles being digitized, and summarises the problem of dynamic information neatly: ‘the contextualization and personalization of dynamic information resources ... problematizes authenticity’ such that the notion of authorship itself ‘cease[s] to exist’ (Owen, 2007). He refers to the same transference of power from author to reader, noting, as Landow did, that the reader can create their own document, from fragments of others, resulting in a very real text, but one where the question of authorship cannot even be conceived. The difference between print and digital is stark: the printed medium empowers the author to control physically the process by which the reader consumes the text; this is overturned in the digital world, where the reader becomes a sort of creator, choosing how to navigate through a text, how to comment on, edit, and reuse that text – ‘he or she is in control of form and content, and ultimately of message and meaning’ (Owen, 2007).

What truly constitutes authenticity in the world of digital scientific research is far more complicated than the empowerment of the reader by the digital format, however. Owen highlights the example of digital preservation, as various efforts in the digital archiving world have sought to find a way to store large quantities of documents and data

without compromising their authenticity through transformation, but none have resulted in a complete or definitive solution (Owen, 2007). Thus we see that the author loses control digitally as the needs of the platform transform his or her text from what was originally ‘intended’ into something new. Gardiner (2019) brings up an interesting question of the author’s name: in trade publishing, the digital world caused a shift from ‘author production’ (the author is of key importance to the production of quality book), to ‘author promotion’ – they are key for marketing, more their name or image). Therefore, if the author is only key as part of promotion or marketing, to what extent are they a part of meaning, or are they ‘just’ a brand? In academic publishing, then, is the fact that the author’s name is attached to an online article really empowering the author? To answer this fully, and to look more closely at the complicated ways in which the control of the author is affected online, we must talk in terms of Bhaskar’s ‘fragmentation’ and ‘centralisation’ (Bhaskar, 2019).

Fragmentation and Centralisation

While the alterable and dynamic nature of digital text can take power away from the author, the platform, the digital world itself, can overturn the role of the author with even greater effect. There are two sides to every story, and one is the idea of fragmentation – the internet should, in theory, offer a medium for individualism and democracy (Bhaskar, 2019). But in the world of academic publishing, where so much revolves around the big journal publishers, and the reputation of those journals and the authors themselves – does this have any sway? A benefit, in theory, of the widespread ‘fragmentation’ of research across the internet is just that – greater spread and use of information, to allow science to be developed faster. However, when work goes online, especially if Open Access, the notion of ‘fragmentation’ can backfire, with potentially negative effects: wide-spreading and far greater dissemination is the result, which, though desirable for the furthering of science, cannot but take away control from the author, decentring them in much the same way as the poststructuralists argued, while the reader gains more power and importance. How can the author feel empowered when their work is spread uncontrollably around in pieces and

reused, reworked, and dissected in this way? This may seem to picture digital networks as lawless and unmoderated, so a discussion of digital rights management (DRM, with Creative Commons as an example), DOIs (Digital Object Identifiers), and CrossRef will help to illustrate the power struggle between authors and networks.

Part of a huge movement and the biggest current issue in scholarly communication is Open Access (OA) research. Fundamental to licensing OA research is ‘proper attribution of authorship’ (Creative Commons, 2020). The level of CC license an author can acquire is of high importance to them, in order to retain their ownership and rights as an author. For example, the most restrictive (and therefore protective) license is ‘Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs’ (CC BY-NC-ND) – ‘only allowing others to download your works and share them with others as long as they credit [the author], but they can’t change them in any way or use them commercially’ (Creative Commons, 2020). Thus, in direct conflict with the negative effects of fragmentation is a licensing system which above all maintains that the name of the author is inseparable from the research, ensuring attribution, where proper credit is given, and even limiting how others can use the work, preventing some of the transformation that could wrest control from authors.

There is underlying data behind every written article, that has its own DOI – a ‘digital object identifier’ – which contains key information such as the author’s name. Online research is also under the influence of CrossRef, which links articles to one another, and can even separate individual digital elements of an article, such as raw data, from the whole. These examples of factors in the digital network, much like fragmentation, can work in both positive and negative ways for the author. On the one hand, an article becomes merely a number, a string of 1s and 0s, and can even be stripped down to data that is more relevant and useful to the reader than the text, and certainly author, of the article. This is in direct opposition to the power given to the author by CC licenses. On the other hand, a DOI, and CrossRef data, contains information about authorship that is transmitted when the identifier is used, meaning that even when because of hypertext, as research is spread seemingly out of the control of the author, the author or authors’ names are crucially attached to that data, ensuring ownership and rights are maintained.

Perhaps more powerful than fragmentation, digital networks create a ‘centralisation’ of standards and practices, more so than in the world of academic printed text, which I argue further disempowers the author. A significant power and freedom of the author is lost in the transition to digital because we are ‘locked in’, as Bhaskar argues, to far more standards, structures, formats, and codes with online publishing than we are with print. He uses the examples of QWERTY keyboards, the norms of browser-based searching and internet use, and the dominance of certain platforms over others; Google and Amazon for example. Because we are ‘locked in’ to so many of these standards online, far more restrictions of freedom are imposed on the author of a piece of digital scholarship (Bhaskar, 2019). This argument, too, benefits from illustration by pertinent examples: certification and prestige, and interaction with the online ‘space’.

In the scientific world, there is a particular unique importance of authorship to an academic. The benefits it can reap include the potential swift advancement of their career, appointment to fellowships, invitation to conferences, networking, and the opportunity for authoring more research (including funding). This all depends so much on the environment the work is published in, the level of authorship (collaboration etc., or first author, contributor) and, crucially, the journal itself. This is perhaps the crux of what really constitutes *authenticity* in scholarly communication. Owen (2007) writes: ‘[i]n scientific communication, however, certification is derived from the context, i.e. publication in a recognized scientific journal ... Here, the concept of authenticity is not related to ‘originality’, but to the fact that the document (e.g. the research article) is ‘contained’ within the journal.’ Thus an article, a piece of research, is deemed ‘authentic’ because of the prestige of the journal it is in, the stamp of peer review, quality, and respect that is a result of the gatekeeping process in academic publishing. These are the constraints, the chains of centralisation: to what extent then is the internet really a platform for greater freedom?

Dietz (2019) claims that ‘space’ is crucial to an author in the digital age. The ‘authority’ of a creator of text rests on their ability to publish – that is, make public – their text, on a platform, and interact with that platform to their benefit. It is undeniable that in the 21st century that space is the internet, be it social media, online bookselling space, or

online archive. Those in scientific research are therefore constrained further by a need to interact with that online space in all the ways that are deemed ‘standard’, or they will not be able to flourish on that platform.

Digital Products or Digital Networks?

In discussing these power struggles, what comes to light is not one answer to the question ‘who comes out on top?’ but a clearer view of what the crux of the problem is. Made clearer by the issues of fragmentation and centralisation, Landow’s (2019) point that it is not digital products or texts as much as the digital networks that form the whole environment in which they are published that wrest control from the author. For example, DRM is a good overall solution to fraudulent use, maintaining rights of the author (and therefore some control, and power) – but is it perfect? Unfortunately, digital networks have resulted in Sci-Hub, an illegal source of millions of articles for free, and a major example of flagrant bypassing of DRM, only possible in the online world, as nothing of this scale was possible before the move from print to digital. This is a key example of digital *products* themselves not being the problem, but rather digital *networks*.

Faced with the problems of hypertext and digital networks, the only way for an author to regain any control is to ‘decline to use those key properties of the digital format such as hyperlinks and other navigational devices. But by doing so, the digital format would lose its significance and the author would become less attractive for the user who has come to expect these properties in the digital environment’ (Owen, 2007). To try and take control back from digital networks, or the reader, is therefore to fight a losing battle, as the power of those networks rests in the centralisation which Bhaskar laid out clearly: in the chaotic expanse of the digital world and the internet, order is upheld by adherence to those practices which have become standard.

Conclusion

To conclude, I return to Foucault's 'author function' – that is, what little significance we can retain of the author after Barthes' undeniable structuralist removal of them, and now after a further 'digital death'. Poster asks a key question in the transition to digital: 'What conceivable transformation would undo the cultural operations through which the reader, listener, or viewer thinks of little else than 'who is speaking'? (Poster 2006) Digital writing, Poster argues, may just be that difference. It inevitably separates the author from the text, especially so as it mobilizes the text, 'so that the reader transforms it' – not just in the mind but literally, as it is reused and redistributed, more so than could ever occur in print. In short, through all these ways in which the author is decentred digitally, the reader experience is changed such that digital text itself 'may produce the *indifference* to the question "who speaks?" ' that Foucault predicted (Poster 2006).

Do there remain any ways in which scientific authorship redeems the relevance of the author in regard to the 'who speaks?' (or better 'who said that') question? With DRM, the common feature of all licenses is attribution, so the name of the author, the credit for the work, and ownership of the text is still regarded as inseparable from the article. Furthermore, the issue of prestige and certification from publishing an article remains thorny and two-sided (while good for the author's career, it is nonetheless centralised and disempowering). Finally, Poster's perhaps tenuous notion of 'performative self-constitution' (Poster, 2006): the presence of an online persona is what he is getting at, and of key importance to his argument that the text is now less important than that persona itself.

These are all ways in which we can to some extent redeem the significance of the academic author in the digital age, but it is clear to see the level of control that is wrested from that author by dynamic digital texts, and digital networks.

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