Originality, Imitation, and Plagiarism

Teaching Writing in the Digital Age

Caroline Eisner and Martha Vicinus

EDITORS

Reviewing the Author-Function in the Age of Wikipedia

Amit Ray and Erhardt Graeff

Introduction: Wikis, Authorship, and Authority

As social computing practices transform how cultural texts can be generated and circulated, written communities fostered by wikis offer some insight into the possibilities and pitfalls of dynamic, group-"authored" content production. Wikis are server-side software programs that allow anyone to create and edit web pages with only an Internet connection and a web browser. Quite simply and literally, wikis are a collaborative software tool. The inventor of wikis, Ward Cunningham, describes his software as "the simplest online database that could possibly work." Cunningham borrowed the Hawaiian word *wiki,* or *wikiwiki,* meaning fast or quick, alluding to the ability of a wiki user to quickly change the content of a page.[1]

The ability for users to edit web pages has profound implications for the development and distribution of knowledge. By de-emphasizing the central role of individual authorship in the production of texts, wikis offer a dynamic, multiauthored approach to their composition. In the last decade, wikis have emerged as a prominent and intriguing component in the production, modification, and dissemination of information and knowledge via the Internet.

Wiki users can be registered on a wiki system, and in some cases they can participate without naming themselves—they are known only by an IP address. The ability of a user to edit the content is the most striking feature of wikis. Open access has profound implications for the creation and editing of content insofar as it exposes texts' inherent instability. Unlike fixed media, wikis display the dynamic and inherently social nature of language and meaning as described in theoretical models of language and epistemology. In an unprecedented way, wikis allow discourse to emerge that is

continually negotiated and articulated through a community of users—sometimes thousands of interlocutors. The properties of texts generated through active collaboration test the boundaries of established avenues of knowledge production and modern institutions of knowledge and authority. And while changes to a wiki page can be made by anyone, such changes are ultimately archived as part of the wiki. Therefore, the wiki also functions as a digital palimpsest.

Wikis invoke a multitude of the theoretical issues regarding authorship raised in late structuralist and poststructuralist thought. For many in the humanities and social sciences, the decentering of authorship in favor of discursive and systemic methodologies more attuned to power, historicity, and a dynamic "field" of representation has led to novel methods for critical interpretation and evaluation. However, such models have not become a significant component in how communication is understood within the public sphere. The singular author is very much the model that governs the expectations of most readers. By complicating traditional notions of authorship, wikis affect associated issues of authority, originality, and value.

Authorship, the Author-Function, and Literary Studies

The romantic "author," whose genius and originality bring "newness" into the world, has been increasingly problematized by literary theorists and cultural historians over the course of the last forty years. Martha Woodmansee's historical work on the development of authorship vis-à-vis Romanticism and property has played an influential role in relating market logic with aesthetic rationale. While not reducing individualized authorship and the uniqueness of the literary work to a function of market economics and legal theory, Woodmansee's 1994 study, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics,* provides a detailed analysis of how changing market conditions in the eighteenth century facilitated the development of a romantic view of authorship.[2] Such detailed historical and cultural analysis has demonstrated that views of authorship are contingent upon a number of factors: historical moment, geographical location, and prior cultural practice. Not only is the individual author a relatively recent historical phenomenon, but the birth of the author as a solitary entity has marginalized writing practices in which the individual does not solely develop a work. Only in the last forty years have literary and cultural studies mounted a sustained examination of the "author" as a contingent figure.

The debate over authorship came to the fore during the mid-1960s when structuralism was being critiqued based on deconstructive insights into the relativity of language acts. In his seminal 1968 essay, "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes implores his readers to acknowledge the death of the author in order to liberate the reader.[3] Using structuralist insights on language as a system, Barthes posits that the act of writing "is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). He argues that by falling back upon the concept of an idealized, corporeal, and totalizable author, we lose the ability to appreciate how texts function. Barthes is laying the foundation of an argument that he would develop over the course of his career: the movement away from autonomous literary work to contingent cultural text. Replacing the author, he posits a modern scriptor that would emerge "simultaneously with the text," never "preceding or exceeding the writing" (146).

Barthes makes the case that any analysis of iteration and representation must consider the social, interactive, and communicative function of language, and not just the biography, psychology, and intentionality of the author (or, parallel with the "author," an idealized "work" of the sort posited by some formalists, such as the New Critics). He writes, "A text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148). In order to recognize Barthes's insight, it is important to note the intellectual relevance of authorship to virtually every facet of humanistic scholarly inquiry. During the modern era, the humanistic traditions of literature, philosophy, and history all developed in conjunction with, and were reinforced by, the concept of individualized authorship. Thus, Barthes was responding to both academic and popular representations of authorship with his polemical essay, concluding with his now famous dictum, "The birth of the Reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (148).

The following year, Foucault responded to Barthes with "What Is an Author?" which develops the concept of the author-function.[4] The notion of the corporeal author is reviewed as part of the discursive regimens that link the author to the work. Foucault heuristically deploys the question, adapted from Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing,* "What does it matter who is speaking?" to develop a new set of parameters to interrogate authorship, textuality, and the types of authority that relate to conceptions of author-

ship.[5] Much of the essay involves a careful explication of how we might conceive of the author-function. Importantly, Foucault is careful to note its variability. Authorship exists within different discourses, defining characteristics such as originality, authority, and property that vary according to the particular discourse. But Foucault does not want simply to replace the concept of the author with the author-function. In trying to read authorship as a contingent affair, he shows that the author-function does not affect discourse in a "universal and constant way" (149). Here Foucault the historian analyzes different types of authorship at different historical moments, noting the variable and at times contradictory function of the author under different conditions of discourse.

For example, Foucault looks at the inversion of the author-function as it relates to discourses we now call "scientific" and "literary." During the Middle Ages, only those scientific texts marked by authorship could be accepted as having authority. Yet literary works were circulated and valorized without any consideration of authorship. He notes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this situation reversed and the author-function became more prominent in literature and less influential in science. This observation, on the variability of the author-function, serves two purposes. It shows how authorship can vary both among different discourses and within them as well. Thus, the question of authorship becomes a contingent affair, no longer to be projected upon a corporeal figure, but subject to specific, if variable, forces. Reorienting the reception and analysis of texts toward an author-function would enable us to ask different kinds of questions than those we had grown accustomed to asking: that is, "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest sense did he express in his discourse?" (157).

Foucault's aim in undertaking this critique of the author, not unlike Barthes's, is to query naturalized conceptions relating author with work. But Foucault goes beyond Barthes's own romanticization of the reader to a model in which the author-function is variable and reconfigurable according to the tenets of the juridical, political, and social institutions that shape all discourses and thereby frame how knowledge and authority come to be understood. While he suggests that the author-function may one day disappear, discourse requires that other forms of restriction and delimitation emerge in its absence. In wikis, such order arises from what Foucault forecasts as a new mode of "experience" (160), embodied by the engagement with a specific burgeoning and palimpsestic medium.

Wiki Technology and the Wiki Writing Process: The Case of Wikipedia

The "About" page on Wikipedia.org (as of January 30, 2006 at 4:33 p.m.) begins, "Welcome to Wikipedia, the communal encyclopedia that anyone can edit. The content of Wikipedia is free, written collaboratively by people from all around the world. This website is a wiki, which means that anyone with access to an Internet-connected computer can edit entries simply by clicking on the "edit this page" link.

If you wanted, you could change the introduction on the "About" page without creating an account or typing a password. Similarly, you could view the "Discussion" or "Talk" page—another editable record used to track dialogue between users editing the main content page. Here you can see content in the process of refinement toward a publishable state—with discrepancies being hashed out among users, or the ever scrutinized neutral point of view (NPOV) of the article being debated (wikipedia.org/wiki/WP:NPOV). There is significant authorial power available by entering into the online discourse at any point on any page—this is the ability to leave one's mark via content or style on the wiki's dynamic history. In fact, your last option, to view the "History" of the page, is a time-stamped record of all edits made to a page. The trifold set of article, discussion, and history—each possessing separate but interrelated purposes—together completes a single wiki article.

The structure of the wiki's interface—specifically the MediaWiki software used by Wikipedia—in both presentation and editing views enables a transparent connection/interrelation between author, reader, and editor. These seemingly separate roles are represented by the interconnected Wikipedia community as a whole and, as we shall later suggest, can be consolidated into a single online entity. This facilitation of a synthesis of writing roles within the grander scope of a comprising community allows wikis to transcend even the superficial definition as a transparent tool or simple piece of software.

A wiki is—beyond the digital bits of software application code—the technological support structure for what we will call the *wiki writing process*. This process incorporates the aforementioned standard roles in writing and facilitates a new paradigm of collaboration on a massively distributed scale. Where there may once have been a one-to-one or one-to-many relationship between the separated roles, there now exist many-to-many relationships among wiki *users* as they interact with and within the community.

These relationships persist beyond any singular or even traditionally serialized publication. In fact, the only way to define the publication of wiki content is in the sense of "Serial Collaborations," a term used by Peter Jaszi (40). These collaborations are pieces of writing that are, or can be, infinitely edited over time by the users. There is a persisting dialogue between the users as they assume the various roles of reader, writer, and editor, which forces the actual wiki writing process into the loose category of "discursive practice," as put forth by Foucault. The collaborative and iterative aspect of wikis serves, then, to magnify this idea and gives the process its inherent strength, as well as its inherent weakness in regard to traditional definitions of authority.

Essentially, Wikipedia provides an example of poststructuralist principles operating online—an idea impressively illustrated by the "history flow visualizations" of Wikipedia article revisions generated by Fernanda B. Viégas, Martin Wattenberg, and Kushal Dave. The original analysis of Wikipedia article evolution by the team "revealed complex patterns of cooperation and conflict" (575). These stem from the community-enabling editing capabilities built in to the "Talk" and "History" article pages, as well as the "Watch List" option available to registered users, providing an alert system for vigilant writer-editors to defend the integrity of specific articles. The goal of these discursive provisions is informal oversight of content, which can be subject to "malicious editing"[6]—one of the strongest criticisms against Wikipedia. The history flow visualizations mapped three categories of wiki article revisions: (1) editing of content on average, (2) a malicious mass deletion of content, and (3) a mass deletion replaced by obscene content. The median survival time of the first category was 90.4 minutes, which broke down to 21 percent of edits reducing page size, 6 percent reducing it by no more than fifty characters.[7] Such numbers primarily indicate tightened prose and the elimination of irrelevant information (579, 581). Of course this dynamism is what makes citing Wikipedia problematic. This downside—most apparent when trying to perceive Wikipedia in the vein of a traditional encyclopedia—is balanced by the fact that new content is quickly and easily added to articles as events unfold. For instance, the study refers to how within a week of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 an entry devoted to the topic was written, and had tripled in size in a few weeks (581). The fast-responding character of the Wikipedia *user community* also catches and repairs mass deletions at a median delay of 2.8 minutes— 1.7 minutes for those involving obscenities (579). The data produced indicates, to at least those versed in poststructuralist insights on language, that

Wikipedia's neoteric authorial/editorial community is attempting to maximize the radical functionality/medium of wiki technology—publishing, editing, and republishing content (with self-governing oversight) at a frequency unimaginable in other media.

The aforementioned famous last line of Barthes's "The Death of the Author" is meant to undermine the authorial identity ascribed to a given text, devaluing what was once the author-genius into a mean "scriptor." This serves as preparation for new media, rather than a total destruction of previous cultural regimes. When we examine the wiki writing process, we find that the distinctions between author and reader have been blurred. Though individual "readers" will come across wiki pages, they are empowered to edit the very content they are consuming—to superannuate the traditionally bilateral division of reader/author, or the earlier mentioned trilateral division of reader/writer/editor. The reader and author are birthed in unison as the wiki "users." In this moment the author-genius subordinates itself to the community that comprises these superempowered users.[8]

In Foucault's inquisitive response to Barthes, the analysis of the semantic tangles of a dying author suggest the potential capacity for wikis to act as an evolved species of literature, employing the communitarian army of users on hand. Digital phenomena are seemingly fragile and fraught with change, but wikis provide a dynamically collaborative (edit), continuous (discussion), and constant (history) space. And we see this digital palimpsest harnessing an Internet of multifunctional users. As such, our wiki—the new media institution for the wiki writing process—forms the instance of an authorial framework that Foucault's critique of Barthes anticipates.

Notes

1. Cunningham developed wiki software in the mid-1990s. His WikiWikiWeb, the first wiki, has been running since 1995 and facilitates specialized programming.

2. Woodmansee, along with legal scholar Peter Jaszi, under the auspices of the Society for Critical Exchange (SCE), convened a large interdisciplinary group of scholars to address the state of "author" studies in the early nineties. This meeting resulted in a diverse array of essays published in 1994 as *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature.* In 2006, SCE held a follow-up conference, Con/texts of Invention, which reexamined these issues in light of the previous decade's work and the emergence of pervasive digitality.

3. Barthes's essay originally appears as "La mort de l'auteur" in *Manteia* 5 (1968): 12–17.

4. Foucault's response originally appears as "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" in *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie: Séance du Samedi* February 22, 1969, 73–104.

5. Foucault invokes a passage from Beckett's *Texts for Nothing,* which he slightly modifies from the original, "What matter who's speaking, someone said what matter who's speaking" (16).

6. *Malicious* edits are analogous to "vandalism" of wiki article content (Viégas, Wattenberg, and Dave 578). This vandalism can take the form of mass deletions or additions of obscene or injurious content.

7. Viégas, Wattenberg, and Dave define *median survival time* as "the total time that these edits remained on the site" (579).

8. Not all wikis function exactly like Wikipedia. Many wiki programs, including the open-source Media-Wiki platform upon which Wikipedia is based, can be configured to provide different levels of access. For example, in a classroom environment, the wiki's administrator might restrict writing/editing access only to class participants. Despite such variability, the basic principle of providing access to shared documents remains intact irrespective of the specific wiki platform. The ability to read, compose, and edit content, whatever the constitution of the group, allows for a very different form of written expression to take shape. In the classroom, this results in a composition process that is more explicitly social. Communication need no longer take place solely between student and instructor, writer and reader, but among a community of interlocutors. Thus, acts of composition are not conducted solely in isolation and require continual linguistic and communicative negotiations with active participants.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Image Music Text,* trans. Stephen Heath, 142–48. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

Beckett, Samuel. *Texts for Nothing.* Trans. Samuel Beckett. London: Calder and Boyers, 1974.

Cunningham, Ward. "What Is Wiki?" Edited June 27, 2002. http://wiki.org/wiki.cgi?WhatIsWiki, consulted May 30, 2005.

Foucault, Michel. "What Is an Author?" In *Textual Strategies,* trans. and ed. Josué Harari, 141–60. London: Methuen, 1978.

Jaszi, Peter. "On the Author Effect: Contemporary Copyright and Collective Creativity." In *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature,* ed. Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi, 29–56. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

Viégas, Fernanda B., Martin Wattenberg, and Kushal Dave. "Studying Cooperation and Conflict between Authors with *History Flow* Visualizations." Conference on Human Factors in Computing, Vienna, April 24–29, 2004. http://opensource.mit.edu/ papers/viegaswattenbergdave.pdf, consulted June 24, 2005.

"Wikipedia: About." *Wikipedia.* January 30, 2006, 2:16 UTC. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:About&oldid=37298037, consulted January 30, 2006.

Contents