Authorship is considered a collaborative endeavour in the infosphere. What impact is this having on the ways information is valued?

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This essay will examine the ways in which authorship is considered a collaborative endeavour in the infosphere and the impact this is having on the ways that information is valued. It will do this by looking at: the history of collaborative authorship; the modern figure of the author; contemporary collaborative authorship, and; by theorising on issues of trust and provenance; the difference between, and types of, online and print authorship; what role the Knowledge Economy plays in these discourses; and societal power dynamics in relation to who gets to decide the value of any given information.

Background: The History of Collaborative Authorship to the Modern Figure of the Author

In the Middle Ages, authorship was collaborative, and the idea of the singular author had not yet taken root. Scriptoriums, or writing rooms, were areas of a monastery set aside for the writing, copying, storage and maintenance of manuscripts, and all aspects of production were undertaken by a large workforce of monks, lay scribes, and illuminators. Therefore, the ‘authority’ in the writing was ascribed to the texts, not to the authors (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020a). The historicity of perhaps one of the most well-known Greek authors, ‘Homer’, has also been the subject of debate for many years – this debate is now so long-running that it has its own name, the ‘Homeric Question’, with many claiming that Homer was, in fact, not a single author, but a collection of orally relayed poems and tales told by many storytellers from the Hellenistic period, all bound together as two main epics, Iliad and Odyssey (West, 2011). The modern figure of the author comes later, in the Reformation period of the 16th Century, when ideas around individuation and the agency of the person began to emerge, and the prestige of the individual was in the process of discovery, being touted as the new, enlightened way forward. Later still, in the 20th Century, the Obscene Publications Act 1959 was passed into law, which governed the publishing of obscene materials and laid out who had the power to decide what counted as obscene, and who did not (Obscene Publications Act, 1959). In passing this law, Parliament effectively legitimised the idea of the individual author as the authority of a creation, instead of ascribing authority and merit to the texts themselves and allowing texts to be read for their weight, depth and
content – their message – rather than for what the background of the author was and attempting to glean meaning from that. As Barthes states, these changes in the way that authorship is valued are “the epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology which has attached the greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author” (Barthes, 1967). But, what does capitalism have to do with authorship, whether collaborative or singular?

**Power Structures, Trust, and Provenance**

Buckland asserts that “what a group knows or believes can have important political, economic and practical consequences. Understanding what is known in a community allows prediction of how the community is likely to react to new developments ... any ability to influence what a community knows is a significant source of power” (Buckland, 2017). Capitalism is an economic system built on unequal power dynamics. It is top down, hierarchical, paternalistic, economically coercive, and dependent on the acquiescence of the populace. It needs to be all these things, as it does not survive otherwise. Capitalism and authorship are interrelated because, due to the ‘person’ of the ‘author’, authorship infers (but does not necessarily mean) power and authority over a given subject; presupposes the individuals knowledge and expertise of that subject, and influences what belief system changes the reader might come away from the text with. The modern figure of the author ascribes authority to the person writing the text, more than the message within the text. This is used to create systems of belief that uphold capitalism.

Tied up in this are also ideas of trust, belief, and the submission of the individual to the state in exchange for protection – or at least, the perception of protection. This protection is usually seen as coming from groups or structures that, as a society, we assign as strong enough (or, coercive enough) and expert enough to deal with the structuring of society and all the associated issues and challenges – potential or already existing – that come about as the result of the homogenisation of society and the individuals within it. These groups and structures usually include, but are not limited to, lawmakers, police and government. In the 21st Century, with regards to ‘the author’ and who is valued as one, this translates as a need to know the identity of the author: their background, their belief system, and their intent. With the changes in society described in the first section of this essay, society has subconsciously learned that we need to ‘see' the author in order to trust the author; to know who it is so that in turn we can know how much to value their work, which then helps us to
decide whether we want to listen to what they are saying. If we don’t know the author, we don’t know if we can trust what they say.

However, trust does not automatically translate as truth, as we see exemplified every day on social media when misinformation and disinformation are shared without question, with the unquestioning assumption that the original author must know what they are talking about merely because they use compelling or convincing language in their arguments or positions. Why else would we share inaccurate information? Another good example of this is Buckland’s passport analogy. He shows us how “passports work on trust, not on truth” (Buckland, 2017), exposing how we choose not to question the provenance of a passport, instead seeing it as truth simply because it is issued by the body with a crest and the official-sounding name that we have handed over power to. However, the validity of the passport is still subject to human interpretation: border guards. Yet simultaneously, in an act of cognitive dissonance, we do choose to question the legitimacy of an anonymously authored piece of work (arguably not originating from an author, or body, that has committed many varied crimes en masse against its own people, as can often be the case with capitalistic governments (Marxists Internet Archive, 2020) – yet we still trust the state). This can be especially true when an anonymously or collaboratively authored piece cogently challenges the status quo in any given area of life, or makes us aware of our cognitive dissonances when assigning value to the work.

However, there is still an element of personal agency in who assigns value to authored works, and to suggest otherwise – that individuals are somehow completely at the whim of power structures such as governments, media outlets or economic systems, when deciding what we can and cannot believe, would be to remove the autonomy of the individual and our ability (as well as our responsibility) to choose, curate and interrogate our sources of information. That said, much of what we read and place value on has already been decided by the system under which we live, and the quality of the education that we receive, so this essay argues that the decisions we make on what we see, therefore what we have the opportunity to give weight to, is influenced to a degree by mass media, societal structures, and a postcode lottery of what quality of education any given individual has access to.
From Print to Online Authorship

When circulation of authored works was print only, before the advent of the world wide web, comment boards, email programs and social media, work could not be altered once printed, or new authors added, unless a new edition was published or a reprint facilitated. However, born digital documents are adaptable, therefore easier to collaborate on, and the limited publication life we see with a print run does not exist. A born-digital document can be shared and read a limitless number of times thus facilitating a greater reach (providing there is no paywall) and possesses an immediacy of circulation. It can also attract an equally limitless number of collaborators.

However, there is always a risk of information overload, as in today's infosphere we are assailed at every turn and in every breath by relentless advertising, social media updates, emails, marketing ploys, a seemingly limitless number of television channels, and our mobile phones pinging constantly. So, for a born-digital document to be absorbed by its intended audience, it needs to be relevant, captivating, and persuasive.

The switch to online and born-digital work has affected collaborative authorship by making collaboration faster, easier, more horizontal, and less elitist. That said, the demise of the printed book was predicted decades ago, by many who saw "the networked electronic text, with its relative ease of publishing and modification postpublication, as liberating authors and readers from the shackles of the printed book. They believed printed books would, in the near future, only be read by those addicted to the look and feel of tree flakes encased in dead cow. The book could not hope to compete against the computer, and its death was surely at hand. Except, as we now know, it was not." (Bath et al, 2018).

Knowledge Economies & Contemporary Collaborative / Anonymous Authorship

A Knowledge Economy (KE) is the creation of value using human intelligence to determine that value; an economy built around a system of consumption and production that is based on intellectual capital (Hayes, 2020). It is an economic shift from the industrial revolution to knowledge-based economies; from manual work to intellectual work – and therefore the value is in what we know and who knows it, rather than in what labour we can physically manifest and how much economic bargaining power we have in relation to the sale
of that labour. Manual labour is physical, thus arguably more easily measurable; value based on intelligence can be much more difficult to pin down. KE’s cannot exist without technology, as collaboration happens largely through wires now, and with the circulation of the finished products happening online also, a great deal of new published works are born-digital.

In a KE, it should arguably be simpler to facilitate the creation of knowledge which is horizontal and collaborative, anti-homogenous in its design and dissemination, and egalitarian in its reach and accessibility. In the infosphere, knowledge has many of these values more now than ever before, and thus public discourse, led traditionally by governmental and mass media communications, is changing shape, being challenged more often. The way in which we assign value is shifting to keep up with the ways in which individuals in society communicate. A good example of horizontal, collaborative knowledge in the commons is Wikipedia. In their words, Wikipedia is "a multilingual online encyclopedia created and maintained as an open collaboration project by a community of volunteer editors, using a wiki-based editing system" (Wikipedia, 2020). The volunteer editors, in one sense, are not anonymous, in that their username can be tracked across all their other changes across the whole encyclopedia, but in another sense, are anonymous, in that their username is an avatar and thus their meatspace identity can be anonymised. The value of the entries (or knowledge) on Wikipedia is determined by the editors, the editing and addition of articles is dependent on not just one author, the process going through several stages of provenance before approval. Readers who use, share, quote, or edit (by becoming an editor themselves) also give entries weight, value and an audience. It is much more difficult for this kind of knowledge, providing it continues to be maintained as a volunteer-run open collaboration project, to be hijacked by bodies or individuals seeking to impose top-down power over knowledge. Given that at the time of writing, there are approximately 200 million active websites on the world wide web (Internet Live Stats, 2020), and Wikipedia is ranked in the top 20 most popular (Wikipedia, 2020), it is not inconceivable that as an encyclopedic resource, acting as a jumping off point for further research, they have a sizeable influence on KE’s.

Two print resources (also available as e-resources) published by activist collective Dog Section Press, *Options for Dealing with Squatting* and *Advertising Shits in Your Head*, are authored by ‘Persons Unknown’ and
The focus for the reader becomes the content, rather than the histories of the authors, even though the political intent of the publications is obvious. Both of these books are anti-capitalist, a call to arms for activists wishing to subvert current forms of information overload and advertising by categorising it as propaganda and imploring the reader to become aware of the subconscious effect of constant information in their built, personal, and technological environments. They are both published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Public License, and have ISBN numbers. Several archival collections around the United Kingdom hold records of radical publishing such as leaflets, pamphlets and speeches focusing on working class struggles, emancipation of BAME and LGBTQ+ people, anti-war efforts, anti-fascist efforts, anti-government efforts, and evidence of huge organising going on across the country and across the centuries (Bishopsgate Archive, 2020; Working Class Movement Library, 2020; National Archives, 2020; The Feminist Library, 2020; British Library, 2020).

As we have seen already, horizontal knowledge is easier to discredit, but it also holds the potential to be dangerous to current power structures by subverting, challenging and exposing them in ways that mass or mainstream media dare not, like the above publications, initiatives and written works do. When the printing press first came about, it was seen as a threat, due to rates literacy increasing through the middle and lower classes, and "every kind of attempt was made to control and regulate such a "dangerous" new mode of communication. Freedom of the press was pursued and attacked for the next three centuries; but by the end of the 18th century a large measure of freedom had been won in western Europe and North America, and a wide range of printed matter was in circulation. The mechanization of printing in the 19th century and its further development in the 20th, which went hand in hand with ever-increasing literacy and rising standards of education, finally brought the printed word to its powerful position as a means of influencing minds and, hence, societies" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020b).

Assigning Value to Information in the 21st Century

Returning to the ‘value’ of information that is collaboratively authored. This really depends on who is carrying out the valuation. If it is someone in power, who stands to lose some of their power as a result of collaboratively or anonymously authored work, then the inherent value within the piece is perceived by the
one assigning value to it as dangerous, therefore it is dismissed, undermined or silenced altogether. It is much easier to discredit an anonymous face or collaborative endeavour, as their credentials cannot be reliably checked (though as a society we could choose to give the same level of trust to these works as we do to governmental bodies by judging them on their merit and content – yet we do not), and thus the provenance of their work is unprovable. Activist collectives, activist individuals, anonymous individuals and unregistered bodies can all be discredited by the assigner of the value by making the claim that the ‘author’ has no authority or expertise. This claim cannot be disproven if anonymity or the horizontal nature of a collective is to be preserved and upheld.

We also see this at play enshrined in law, with respect to copyright and the restrictiveness of copyright laws when we attempt to apply them to collectives, groups or anonymous individuals. In her 2019 book on this subject, Simone states that “in today’s information economy, intellectual property law is of fundamental importance. It provides the main set of rules governing the allocation of property-style rights in a broad array of intellectual products. In this context, the question of how to determine the authorship, and hence the first ownership of copyright, in works created by groups of people requires urgent attention. Yet, copyright law does not provide a coherent or consistent answer to this question. In the UK there have been no cases explicitly considering the authorship of works created by large numbers of potential authors” (Simone, 2019). This presents unique challenges to the future of collaborative authorship in the infosphere, challenges that must be overcome if we are to foster a society in which collaborative or anonymous publications are given the same weight and consideration in law as the traditional “author = owner” models that we are used to.

**Conclusion**

Collaborative creativity is the new norm in today’s Knowledge Economy infosphere, and will only continue to expand, with technology affording constant modification of published works, and easy, fast access to collaborators and models of publishing. It seems that this way of publishing has a historical precedent, both in print and online, and fosters egalitarian, horizontal access to, and creation of, information. Information in all its forms influences what a community knows, and therefore how it thinks of itself and its surroundings. For humans, being informational entities ourselves (Bawden and Robinson, 2017), this is intrinsic to how we
understand ourselves both as individuals and in relation to the communities we live in. If we are to pursue a more inclusive, information rich environment, or infosphere, in which to flourish as individuals and society at large, we must reconsider how we value information, and who gets to assign that value, by facilitating proper protection in law for collaborative works.

Reference List


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