

Chapter 6

Digital Paratext, Editorialization, and the Very Death of the Author

Marcello Vitali-Rosati
Université de Montréal, Canada

ABSTRACT

As shown by different scholars, the idea of “author” is not absolute or necessary. On the contrary, it came to life as an answer to the very practical needs of an emerging print technology in search of an economic model of its own. In this context, and according to the criticism of the notion of “author” made during the 1960–70s (in particular by Barthes and Foucault), it would only be natural to consider the idea of the author being dead as a global claim accepted by all scholars. Yet this is not the case, because, as Rose suggests, the idea of “author” and the derived notion of copyright are still too important in our culture to be abandoned. But why such an attachment to the idea of “author”? The hypothesis on which this chapter is based is that the theory of the death of the author—developed in texts such as What is an Author? by Michel Foucault and The Death of the Author by Roland Barthes—did not provide the conditions for a shift towards a world without authors because of its inherent lack of concrete editorial practices different from the existing ones. In recent years, the birth and diffusion of the Web have allowed the concrete development of a different way of interpreting the authorial function, thanks to new editorial practices—which will be named “editorialization devices” in this chapter. Thus, what was inconceivable for Rose in 1993 is possible today because of the emergence of digital technology—and in particular, the Web.

INTRODUCTION

Editorialization¹ is the set of elements that contextualize and give meaning to a particular content in the digital space. In this chapter, “editorialization” will refer to a set of heterogeneous practices con-

sisting in giving a structure to a text, organizing it, legitimating it and making it accessible. These practices do not form an alternative editorial model. The editorial model characterizing paper publications is defined by a clear process, a sort of procedure, starting with the selection of the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6002-1.ch006

content, going through its validation and arriving at its formatting and printing. Editorialization practices are not analyzable as a model because their structure is not fixed as one of a model. The forms of editorialization and their functions in the production of a document's meaning—in particular a text—can be studied and analyzed starting from what Genette called “paratext”: “a certain number of verbal or other productions [which] surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to present it” (Genette, 1997, p. 1).² In this context, this chapter's objective is to show that today, in the case of digital texts, the authorial function is no longer necessary to produce a text's meaning or legitimation, since this function is taken on by the set of editorialization elements.

Many scholars (e.g., Kaplan, 1967; Woodmansee & Jaszi, 1993; Rose, 1993) have pointed out that the idea of “author” (henceforth referred to without quotation marks to alleviate the text) is not absolute or necessary. On the contrary, it came to life because of the very practical needs of an emerging print technology which, at the time, was searching for an economic model of its own. In this context, and according to the criticism of the notion of author made during the 1960–70s (in particular by Barthes and Foucault), it would be only natural to consider the idea of author being dead as a global claim accepted by all scholars and readers. Yet this is not the case. While it is hard to prove that the idea of author remains important to the common reader—and this would be beyond the scope of this chapter—Rose's position is quite accurate for scholars. His book, a synthesis of previous works on the subject and a reference in this field, comes to the conclusion that the idea of author and the derived notion of copyright are still too important in our culture to be abandoned: “We are not ready, I think, to give up the sense of who we are” is the final sentence of his book (Rose, 1993, p. 142).

But why such an attachment to the idea of author? Let us start with the hypothesis that the theory of the death of the author—developed in

texts such as *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur ?* (*What is an Author?*) by Michel Foucault (1969) and *La mort de l'auteur* (*The Death of the Author*) by Roland Barthes (1968)—did not provide the conditions for a shift towards a world without authors because of its inherent lack of concrete editorial practices different from the existing ones. Barthes and Foucault were writing at a time when the only editorial practice that existed was that of the paper edition. Their texts were published using 18th century practices, and there were no other production and circulation practices available for texts. In more recent times, the birth and the diffusion of the Web—which came immediately after the publication of Rose's book—have allowed the concrete development of a different way of interpreting the authorial function, thanks to new editorial practices. Thus, what was inconceivable to Rose in 1993 is possible today, due to the emergence of digital technology, in particular the Web.

What needs to be stressed here is the fact that the Internet and the Web are in no way seen as incarnations of 1960–70s theories as stated by Landow (1992), Bolter (2001) or Sassón-Henry (2007). For these authors, there is a convergence between the ideas of writers such as Barthes, Foucault or Borges and the development of technology, as if these writers, and in general the set of theories which can be reassembled under the name of post-structuralism, had anticipated the Internet and the Web. This approach has been questioned (Cusset, 2008), since the relationship between theory and technology has never actually been proven. While it is true that analogies between some post-structuralist ideas and the Web can be found, for instance, in the need for a reader's active involvement in order to produce a text's meaning, speaking of them in a cause and effect relationship is an abstraction and an idealization of the post-structuralist discourse. Instead, what is of interest here is how the birth of a new economic model and the emergence of new editorial practices imply a change in the central concepts of the theory of literature.³ The

16 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/digital-paratext-editorialization-and-the-very-death-of-the-author/122537

Related Content

Blockchain and Scholarly Publishing Industry: Current Use Cases – New Efficiencies in Scholarly Publishing

Darrell W. Gunter (2021). *Transforming Scholarly Publishing With Blockchain Technologies and AI* (pp. 284-293).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/blockchain-and-scholarly-publishing-industry/280826

Amazon Blockchain Enabling Commercial and Governmental Applications: Amazon Leveraging Blockchain for the Advancement of New Technologies

Stephen E. Arnold (2021). *Transforming Scholarly Publishing With Blockchain Technologies and AI* (pp. 143-197).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/amazon-blockchain-enabling-commercial-and-governmental-applications/280820

Research Findings: Authors and Publishing—A Changing Industry

(2014). *Authors, Copyright, and Publishing in the Digital Era* (pp. 190-218).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/research-findings/102792

Mashup as Paratextual Practice: Beyond Digital Objects (in the Age of Networked Media)

Anna Nacher (2014). *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Culture* (pp. 63-82).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/mashup-as-paratextual-practice/122534

Standards Developments in Scholarly Publishing

Virginie Simon (2021). *Transforming Scholarly Publishing With Blockchain Technologies and AI* (pp. 72-84).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/standards-developments-in-scholarly-publishing/280815