

Authorship and Participatory Culture

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Media literacy and authorship

Since media education's beginnings, scholars and educators have included in their conceptualization of media literacy an engagement with authorship. The Center for Media Literacy's (CML) core concepts include examinations of the origins ("Who created this message?") and intentions ("Why is this message being sent?") of media texts (Thoman & Jolls, 2008). These questions encourage the public to understand (i) that media messages are constructed, and (ii) that the individuals, institutions, and intentions behind this construction contribute to the meaning of these messages.

Given that media literacy is a diverse field, drawing from different interpretive traditions and utilizing different analytical and practical approaches, particular engagements with the idea of authorship and its relationship to media literacy vary widely.

For example, media arts approaches and youth media programs discuss authorship in terms of authorial intention; media creators making deliberate aesthetic decisions to tell a story, express an emotion, or communicate a theme. Deliberately or not, these programs draw upon the understandings of authorship that developed out of traditions including film studies, art history, and literary criticism. In these perspectives, an understanding of the intentions of the author/artist/creator is paramount; not simply as a means of effectively engaging with a text, but also to allow one to effectively produce one's own art and express one's self.

Messaris (1998) describes the importance of *visual literacy*, and the value of not only understanding authorship but also becoming authors of media, as follows: "In a world as permeated by attempts at visual manipulation as ours is, these findings point to one possible avenue for increasing viewers' awareness of intent: training in production" (p. 183). As noted by Messaris, these approaches to media education address issues of authorship both through encouraging analyses of the intentions of media creators and through affording individuals the opportunity to produce their own media.

Next, scholars and educators coming from the perspective of critical media literacy often draw from studies of propaganda, the culture industries, and the political economy of media, and, in so doing, approach authorship through a different lens (see Hammer, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; McChesney, 1998). This approach addresses authorship, not in terms of authorial intention or

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self-expression, but rather in relation to institutional interests and media's role in maintaining political, economic, and social relations. Kellner and Share (2007a) write:

Critical media literacy also encourages students to consider the question of why the message was sent and where it came from. ... [K]nowing what sort of corporation produces a media artifact, or what sort of system of production dominates given media, will help to critically interpret biases and distortions in media texts. (pp. 15–16)

And last, a large segment of the field has drawn upon the tradition of cultural studies to determine how media literacy education can helpfully inform how the public makes meanings of media messages. This tradition—effectively articulated in Johnson's (1986) model of cultural analysis—discusses the *production* of a media text in relation to other “moments” of the meaning-making process, including *readings*, *lived cultures*, and *texts*. Each of these “moments” is understood as dependent “upon the others and is indispensable to the whole” (p. 46).

Consequently, media literacy education that draws from this tradition encourages an understanding of the production of media messages as including individual intentions and imperatives of industry, and seeks to situate authorship in relation to audiences, and creative production within the context of broader cultural and social practices.

Ultimately, while each of these segments of the field approach authorship from different directions, the combination of these frameworks helps the public understand:

- the *constructedness* of media texts,
- the intentions and interests behind the creation of media texts, and
- the relationship between production, text, and reception in the meaning-making process.

Contextualizing authorship

While media literacy scholars and educators acknowledge the importance of examining media *production*, they are also careful to contextualize these discussions of authorship within larger conversations about media culture.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of examining media through the lens of authorship is the potential for this approach to eclipse other valid, and even arguably more productive, understandings of media. Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1954) discussion of the *intentional fallacy* argues that cultural texts should not be understood or evaluated according to the author's intentions. So, while CML's first “key question” of media literacy might address the source of a particular media message, this question is accompanied by others which address other “moments” within the meaning-making process.

Questioning the place of privilege that the author has traditionally held in culture, Barthes (2001) emphasizes the active role that the audience plays, famously arguing that “the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author” (p. 6). This conception of the *active audience* has since been explored by scholars in the cultural studies tradition (perhaps most famously by Hall, 1980) and integrated into the key

frameworks of media literacy. For example, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) includes among its central concepts that “People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages” (NAMLE, 2007, p. 3). Thus, while scholars and educators recognize how media literacy necessarily includes an engagement with the concept of authorship, these issues are carefully situated in relation to a myriad of other aspects of media culture.

Participatory culture and authorship

In his essay “What is an Author?” (1977) Foucault emphasizes that while, since the Enlightenment, authorship has played an important role in how we have understood culture, “the ‘author-function’ is not universal or constant in all discourse” (p. 125). The historical and cultural contingency of the conception of the author that Foucault emphasizes is important to remember in an age with such dramatic changes in media technologies and cultural practices. Not only are our definitions of authorship changing, but so must our critical frameworks for analyzing media production.

The concept of *participatory culture*—introduced by Jenkins (2006, 2012) in his examinations of fan communities—is used to characterize the changing landscape of today’s media culture. It emphasizes: (i) the shift in relations between producers and consumers, authors and audiences that has occurred in the past few decades; and (ii) that these changes correlate with the increased availability of digital, networked, and mobile media technologies to the public, allowing audiences to author their own media and share them with others.

Scholars Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016) have further explored the concept of *participatory culture*, writing:

For us, participation is not an absolute: it’s defined in opposition to the dominant structures of institutionalized power. In the 1980s, it was about fans resisting and appropriating forms of commercial media. Today, it is about people finding voice, agency, and collective intelligence within the corporate-maintained structures of Web 2.0 platforms. (p. 184)

The type of participation that these scholars describe not only includes the idea of active audiences constructing their own meanings from the media they consume, but also using newly accessible media technologies to create and communicate themselves. Due to these changes in contemporary culture, media literacy education must, now more than ever, address authorship both as a framework for media analysis as well as preparation for the public to become aware of how their posting and sharing, modding, and remixing makes them authors.

Emerging media and authorship

While a discussion of this shift in understandings and practices of cultural production could examine fan-communities, citizen journalism, or “memes,” this entry focuses on video games to explore issues of authorship in participatory culture. Video games

provide a particularly productive object of study when considering authorship and participatory culture because they demonstrate:

1. The role that digital, interactive, and networked media technologies play in the production of media and the benefit of using materialist approaches to studying media in considerations of authorship.
2. The increasingly blurred distinction between producers and consumers, as evidenced in technically savvy game audiences who augment their gameplay and author their own experiences.
3. The opportunity that the increased accessibility of media authoring technologies has provided individuals who have been historically marginalized to create their own media and share their experiences and perspectives.
4. The rise of “indie” and “alternative” media encourages an understanding of authorship that challenges the Enlightenment-era understanding of the author as an individual and emphasizes the role of communities in creative production.

While each of these concepts will be illustrated using examples from video games, they are equally applicable in understanding how authorship is changing in other areas of contemporary media culture.

Manovich (2002) notes that “new media culture [including video games] brings with it a number of new models of authorship which all involve different forms of collaboration.” He notes that new media—like cathedrals, symphonies, and films before them—are created by teams of collaborators, which challenges traditional conceptions of the single author. But perhaps even more significant is that these media require a new perspective on authorship, one that involves both humans and computers. Manovich writes:

[W]e can say that all authorship that uses electronic and computer tools is a collaboration between the author and these tools that make possible certain creative operations and certain ways of thinking while discouraging others. (2002)

Video games, like all media texts, are constructed, but not just by their creators; in this case, game developers work with software programs that operate with specific protocols and algorithms, exercising their own type of agency on the creation of the game.

As a result, digital media literacy in the age of participatory culture must include what Bogost and Montfort call *platform studies*, defined as “new focus for the study of digital media, a set of approaches which investigate the underlying computer systems that support creative work” (2009). In order for audiences to understand the role of authors in the development of a video game, they must be able to examine the affordances and limitations that a particular software or system presents to the creative process.

Shaw (2014) provides a particularly interesting example of how this analysis of platforms can enrich media analysis. Discussing the process by which Nintendo designed its famous hero Mario, Shaw emphasizes the role of the system as coauthor:

[Mario’s] pudgy features, colorful costume, large nose, and bushy mustache—characteristics subsequently read as signifying his Italianness—were all designed to make the most of the limited

graphics of early arcade machines and Nintendo consoles. The hat saved programmers from having to make animated hair. The bushy mustache and large nose gave him character despite the low resolution, limited animations, and small size of the sprite. His bright-red costume helped distinguish him from the dark background of the Donkey Kong game in which he made his original appearance ... *The logics by which the world got to know the now decades-old, goomba stomping hero are unique to the particularities of 1980s game design processes.* (p. 23, italics added)

This emphasis on materialist media analysis does not, however, indicate an abandonment of the cultural studies approaches that have so informed media studies in general and media literacy in particular. In fact, this new conception of the system/software as author provides helpful insights into emerging media practices in participatory culture.

For example, studies like Ito et al.'s (2009) examination of *augmented game play*—which looks at the creation of peripheral media texts including mods, hacks, machinima, and game remixes—explores how communities of “amateurs” use their knowledge of the systems and software used by developers to create their own versions of video games. As Ito et al. observe:

This orientation toward remaking and customizing media is in many ways a hallmark of the digital era and a key training ground for learning critical engagement with media; it is also a pathway into various forms of creative production ... (p. 241)

Practices such as *augmented game play* are examples of how ideas of authorship—as well as the critical frameworks used to understand media's *constructedness*—are developing in the age of digital media and participatory culture.

Shifting our focus to the ways in which participatory culture influences the role of authors in the meaning-making process, this entry uses video games to demonstrate some of these changes and suggests some directions for media literacy education. Bogost (2015) notes that in the case of video games, it is often difficult to identify the role that particular individuals' intentions or institutional interests play in the creation of video games. The role of the author (or authors) is hard to pin down:

In part, it's because games are more highly industrialized even than film, and aesthetic headway is often curtailed by commercial necessity. And in part, it's because games are so tightly coupled to consumer electronics that technical progress outstrips aesthetic progress in the public imagination. (p. 11)

While an examination of the commercial and technological pressures experienced within the video game industry provide a particular understanding of how authorship functions within contemporary media culture, this perspective is limited in that it does not adequately account for the individual creators' interests, ideologies, and esthetics nor the social, political, and cultural contexts in which media texts—in this case, video games—are being made. However, certain developments within the game industry provide potentially productive sites to examine these often overlooked aspects of authorship.

For example, the increased accessibility of game-making software and the proliferation of “indie games” is evidence of a (gradual but not insignificant) decentralization of

the video game industry. And the increased accessibility of these means of production has allowed a new and diverse range of voices to join the conversation. These new game developers—often representing populations traditionally marginalized within the video game industry and game culture—are not only sharing new perspectives, but also developing new ways of making and understanding games.

One interesting example is the increased representation of LGBTQ+ developers (and characters) in games, and in particular within text-based interactive narratives called Twine games. The game industry, which has historically operated under the (false) assumption that most gamers are straight, adolescent males, has very rarely attempted to represent diverse perspectives or reach wider audiences. In response to this lack of diversity, indie developers like Anna Anthropy, Porpentine, and Lydia Neon (among many others) have authored Twine games that address various struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community (Hudson, 2014).

This development within video games is interesting to media literacy scholars and educators because it provides an excellent example of the powers at play in both the media industry and the meaning-making process: audiences-turned-authors are challenging the industry imperatives by developing games in alternative platforms with alternative perspectives. This is precisely the type of alternative media production that critical media literacy scholars have championed; taking on the role of author and creating media that “challenges media texts and narratives that appear natural and transparent” (Kellner & Share, 2007a, p. 4).

Last, these subtle shifts in power relations within video game industry and culture also point to an idea of authorship that is less concerned with individuals, or even industries, and more about communities. Celebrating the increased accessibility of game-design tools and the subsequent flood of new voices in games, Anthropy (2012) discusses her hopes for the future of game creation:

... what I want from video games is a plurality of voices. I want games to come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives. I can imagine—you are invited to imagine with me—a world in which digital games are not manufactured by publishers for the same small audience, but one in which games are authored by you and me for the benefit of our peers.
(p. 8)

Today’s media consumers are sharing, spreading, collaborating, and curating on social media and the web, and they are engaging in these acts of creation and communication as communities. boyd highlights the significance of this shift, writing “participatory culture requires us to move beyond a focus on individualized personal expression; it is about an ethos of ‘doing it together’ in addition to ‘doing it yourself’” (Jenkins et al. 2015, p. 181).

This entry has offered new ideas about how we might understand and practice authorship as media consumers, creators, scholars, and educators. It has explored how advances in media technologies and cultural practices require new ways of seeing the construction of media texts, the interests and intentions that influence media production, and the meaning-making process. And it anticipates that this conversation will continue and new perspectives on the relationship between media literacy, authorship, and participatory culture will emerge.

SEE ALSO: Active Audiences; Amateur—Professional; Coding as Literacy; Creative Works; Curation; Digital Storytelling; Documentary Analysis and Production in Media Literacy; Esthetics in Media Literacy; Game Design in Media Literacy Education; Game Media Literacy; Media Arts; Media Education Research and Creativity; Production in the Pedagogic Project of Media Literacy; Remix Culture; Understanding Media Literacy and DIY Creativity in Youth Digital Productions; Video Games as Education

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