

*Digital Authorship*

## Introduction

I wrote my first story when I was nine years old. It may, of course, have been my hundredth or thousandth story, for all that I am capable of remembering those long-ago scribbles. I think of this one — a few hundred words, written in the style of my then-favorite author, Judy Blume — as my first simply because I still have it: my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Eileen, typed it up, pressed it into photo album pages, and bound it with ribbon into my very first “book.” To me, an avid reader and aspiring writer, this packaging of the words I had written made me something more. It made me an author.

For most of recent memory, to be an author was something subtly but assuredly different from being a writer. A writer could be described as aspiring, freelance, hobbyist, short-form, technical, struggling, copy-, or by any number of other terms that refer to amateur or apprenticed practitioners of the craft. An author, however, was a writer who had “made it”: they had their name on the cover of a book, stamped into reverence, respect, and immortality. An author was not only being paid to write (as many writers are) — they held a position of authority. Nonfiction authors gained publishing contracts for being experts or for having singular experiences, making them literal authorities on their topics. Fiction authors achieved authorship by demonstrating superiority in narrative craft: characterization, poetics, emotional effectiveness, and plotting. An entire publishing industry existed to exalt these chosen few; in the aspiring author’s mind, receipt of a publishing contract granted them a parade of proofreaders and designers and promoters and book tours and window displays (a fantasy Hollywood thoroughly reinforces).

If such a paradigm ever existed for more than a fractional percentage of authors, it was certainly fleeting, and is now gone. The twentieth-century

model of authorship was deeply embedded in a publishing industry that invested highly in an author-centric ideology (Ramdarshan Bold 2016): authors worth publishing are special in some way, enough so that their words mean more than anyone else's, justifying their production, amplification, and sales to millions of readers. This model relies upon a reading-literate society in which the largest proportion by far are *readers* (Laquintano 2016, p. 20), recipients of knowledge and art, rather than generators of such. In this cultural frame, authorial voices are select and selected, the few communicating to the many, in a dominant power structure that reasserts itself with every book printed.

The twenty-first century, however, has ushered in a new era of authorship, thanks to the affordances of digital media and the Internet. Online digital and social media have broken down the barriers between mass communicator and audience, sponsoring a many-to-many communication paradigm through the interactive capabilities of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2007). On websites, blogs, newsfeeds, and media streams, a reading-literate culture has transitioned into a writing-dominant culture – and while most bloggers and posters achieve very little in the way of audience numbers, the costs of reaching them are so greatly diminished by digital tools that many have no need of a publisher to package their message. From this cacophony of voices, a new author has emerged, side-stepping the twentieth-century publishing hierarchy to communicate directly to their audience – often via two-way communication. This direct route develops relationships and communities, enabling attention to flow to the author. Some authors and platforms afford conversion of that attention into currency; others actively reject such a transition, instead bartering in a gift economy of writing and cultural exchange.

I have termed this breed of author the *demotic author*: one who is “of the people,” participating in a community of writers and readers, often in genres considered “popular,” common, or even denounced as derivative and of lesser worth. The demotic author eschews the top-down communication flow of author → text → reader in favor of publishing platforms that permit and encourage

*Digital Authorship*

feedback and conversation, such as blogs, fanfiction communities, and social media. In fact, the demotic author relies upon these platforms to generate attention for themselves and their work, often in lieu of the attention generated by a publishing house's marketing machine. They proliferate and thrive in a writing-literate culture; often, their method of writing and publishing is an alternative avenue toward expressing their voice, as the twentieth-century royalty model silences so many. The demotic author is both a re-emergence of oral storytellers of old, walking amongst their audiences and responding to them, and a figure of the future, when publishing spheres may not be controlled by the few, but shared spaces for the many.

*The Rise of the Demotic Author*

Timothy Laquintano aptly describes the current and rising trend of self-publishing as *mass authorship*: “multiple viable models of publishing have emerged to compete and complement one another; these multiple models force us to consider publishing both as a professional practice and as a literacy practice accessible to everyday people” (2016, pp. 6–7). Mass authorship arises in a writing-literate culture, where writing becomes an everyday practice and a dominant form of labor, and in which the social role of the writer is emphasized and embraced over the social role of the reader (Brandt 2015). It is afforded by technologies that evolve the book from a *read-only* medium to a *read-write* medium, converting a static object into a conceptual foundation for a community to converse, share, and respond creatively to its ideas, characters, and environs (cf. Lessig 2008). When writing – including communicating through text messages and publishing through social media – is a more dominant and desirable<sup>1</sup> form of activity than

<sup>1</sup> A 2015 YouGov survey identified *authors* and *librarians* as the most desirable professions, at 60 percent and 54 percent of the respondents, respectively. No other category except *academic* scored over the 50 percent mark (51%).

reading, when platforms and tools exist not to merely deliver content but to easily create and share it, when one can be assured of quick and easy feedback in the form of shares and likes and comments, then almost everyone can perceive themselves as having a voice worthy of publication and amplification. The romanticised notion of the author, a writer of divine inspiration and original genius, crumbles when readers realize that they, too, have something to say, no matter how mundane, and that they have the ability to say it to someone who might listen.

That is not to say, of course, that an author-centric ideology does not persist. Brandt's writing-oriented literacy co-exists in a culture that continues to formally promote reading-oriented literacy; likewise, new models of writing and publishing are emerging even as the royalty<sup>2</sup> publishing system continues to dominate, though diminished from its twentieth-century prominence (Laquintano 2016). Ironically, while the self-published and hybrid authors I discuss in sections 1 and 2 have at least partially discarded notions of Romantic authorship, fanfiction writers (section 3) practice their craft in a tenuous space of legitimacy that leads them to firmly uphold nineteenth- and twentieth-century notions of authorship, ownership, and copyright just so they won't be noticed enough for their work to be shut down, whether legally or culturally. Nonetheless, fans have emerged from the shadows into the sunny, exposed locales of the Internet, connecting with one another to the point of legitimizing their communities, if not always their writing. They are a key example of how power has transitioned from authors and publishers to

<sup>2</sup> I use the term *royalty publishing* throughout this Element to refer to what we commonly think of as "traditional publishing": the royalty-based publishing model that dominated the twentieth century, particularly in terms of fiction, as opposed to government, religious, or author-subsidized publishing. This definition is drawn from Laquintano 2016.

*Digital Authorship*

audiences and readers through their reviews, commentary, and sharing, making them influential players in the literary field of cultural production (Pecoskie and Hill 2015, p. 621; Ramdarshan Bold 2016).

Fanfiction writers are also a key example of Internet culture, where value is generated not necessarily from the exchange of currency, but through the exchange of information and content (Carolan and Evain 2013). While fanfic writers trade exclusively in a gift economy (Currah 2007) – content for content, feedback for feedback – other demotic authors dip into this prosumer space in novel ways that enable them to trade content for attention, and convert attention into currency. Authors can reach readers through social media, generating connections that, while they may not be *actual* relationships, nonetheless carry the *illusion* of such for their followers. They engage in forums, post YouTube videos, and have active Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr feeds, sharing some of their work (and often, their hobbies, beliefs, and personal lives) for free in order to generate attention for their published work. Content alone is increasingly less significant to consumers, particularly as so much is available on the web for free; demotic authors have found bartering attention provides something of what users are looking for, helping them convert casual followers into dedicated fans and patrons (cf. Carolan and Evain 2013, p. 295).

The rise of the demotic author has been driven in part by the difficulties the royalty publishing industry has faced in the past few decades. The lumbering behemoths (often noted as the “Big 5”: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster) that grew out of the twentieth century saw their audience fracture with the popularity of film, games, and the Internet in particular as a conveyor of free content. Royalty publishers found their established practices and methods of production and dissemination weakened (Tian and Martin 2011, p. 234). Rather than innovating their content or their delivery system (as, for example, Allen

Lane's Penguin did with paperbacks in the 1930s), royalty publishers shifted their focus to bestsellers and known authors – sure, marketable bets (Ramdarshan Bold 2016, p. 3). There has been a significant decline in the number and size of royalty advances since 2008 (Gibson, Johnson, and Dimita 2015, p. 5); it is no coincidence that this trend began shortly after the implementation of the Kindle and the Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) platform in 2007. This practice strengthened the barriers to entry to new authors and made it increasingly difficult for midlist authors to persist, resulting in a large community of unpublished writers disillusioned with royalty publishers just as technologies and marketplaces were emerging to offer them alternative routes.

The technologies and cultures of the Internet, from social media to ecommerce, have enabled a resurgence in the practice and the reputation of self-publishing (which I will primarily refer to as “indie publishing”). New technologies of the ebook, epublising, and online booksellers’ search algorithms provide value to content (Thompson 2012, p. 339) – including low barriers to entry, ease of access, updatability, searchability, portability, flexibility, affordability, and even intertextuality and multimedia – that enable these indie publishers to effectively replace the value-added services (editing, typesetting, printing, distribution) that once made royalty publishing the sole marker of quality. As Thompson notes, commercial fiction has been a significant driver for the rise of ebooks (ibid., p. 322); so-called “popular” fiction writers have eagerly embraced the affordances of new technologies to develop their texts and reach their audiences without the limitations of the slow and increasingly selective royalty system. Effectively, they are disintermediating royalty publishers and their linear model of publication (Murray 2010, p. 26) in favor of a more participatory and attention-based model that emphasizes many-to-many communication and long-tail economics (Hillesund 2007). Likewise, their readers have responded, disregarding the publishing method of

*Digital Authorship*

texts (if they even are aware of them; Amazon and others make little distinction between royalty- and indie-published texts) in favor of more and diverse content (Carolan and Evain 2013, p. 298). Further, indie publishing has permitted small publishers and authors to experiment with their work, crossing genres, returning to the short forms to suit commuters, and reaching niche audiences (Dietz 2015, p. 206).

The book- and author-based communities that arise in this demotic publishing model are part of the emergence of a new era of communicative culture, as the secondary oral culture (Ong 1982 [2005]) of the Internet's social media and Web 2.0 interfaces propagates a writing-literate culture (Brandt 2015) in which everyone is a published author with a potential audience. This culture affords both "legitimate" writing (defined by Laura Dietz as paid, usually with a royalty advance) and "illegitimate" writing, including blogging, online discourse on social media and forums, new experimental forms such as collaborative wiki novels, and indie publishing (Dietz 2015, p. 202). Thus Laquintano offers a comprehensive definition of publishing as a literary practice: that which "develops under conditions in which ordinary people have the ability to publish their writing using digital infrastructures" (2016, p. 12). Under such a definition, we are all authors, publishing every time we update a status on Facebook or comment on a news article. Under such a definition, indie publishers and even fanfiction writers are no less legitimized than royalty publishers.

*The Attention Economy*

The demotic author's publication practices have been afforded and legitimized by digital media and culture, yet they still face the same hurdles of any content producer: marketing to and reaching their audience. As multiple media have proliferated, and the information superhighway has become more of a content galaxy, consumer attention is fractured and fleeting.

Thanks to the easy replicability of digital content, the power of search engines, and the continual development of personalized product recommendation algorithms (a harbinger of the semantic web's intelligent applications), the difficulties of publishing are no longer in creating and distributing content but in discoverability in an age of hyperabundance (Bhaskar 2013; Goldhaber 1997; Laquintano 2016; Thompson 2012). When everyone is a publisher – not just of books, but of content across the whole of the Internet – *attention* becomes the scarcest resource (Goldhaber 1997), and “those who can gather and create attention are the new bankers of an *attention economy*” (Bhaskar 2013, p. 177, emphasis mine).

In the royalty publishing model, attention is garnered through the publisher's marketing machine: distribution to and display in bookshops, advertisements, critics' reviews, book club adoption, and placement on best-seller lists (which can be manipulated [Miller 2000]). Indie publishers, such as those discussed in section 1, have no such marketing might, and thus must utilize other means, including the “embeddedness” of economic behavior and institutions within networks of social relations (Miller 2006, p. 9); writers who seek an audience no longer have the luxury of fulfilling the romanticised role of author, remote and above commercial and financial concerns (Phillips 2014, p. 7). Hybrid authors, as discussed in section 2, have significantly more attention, as they build on that gained through their royalty publishing streams, adding to it with their independent publishing activities and social/online interactions. Fanfiction writers (section 3), notably, have somewhat different goals when it comes to audiences; many perceive reader attention as secondary to their primary motivation: to respond to, participate in, and reshape an existing story for their own satisfaction. For these authors, attention is a bonus, and as they have little to no expectation of monetizing any attention they gain, they trade almost exclusively in attention rather than attempting to convert it to currency.



*Digital Authorship*

Indie and hybrid authors, like any public figure, do not barter attention like-for-like; they are not as deeply invested in each of their followers/readers as their followers are in them. What they offer their followers is *illusory attention*: an unequal offering that nonetheless leads the receiver to feel they are being granted more attention than they actually are (Goldhaber 1997, n.p.). Likes, shares, and occasional direct replies to followers contribute to this form of attention, as do activities such as rewarding crowdfunding backers with special content (a key contributor to the success of patronage platforms). Particularly in the secondary oral culture of the Internet, followers can see the author's attention to *other* followers, and thus this increases the illusion that each one individually is receiving attention. The followers subsequently become amplifiers of attention, word-of-mouth marketers for the author as they follow, like, and share their experiences with the content and its creator (note the excitement expressed when a "celebrity" deigns to respond to or share a follower's post).

These niche audiences — dedicated fans and consumers — have become a key marketing demographic for indie publishers and royalty publishers alike. Indie and hybrid publishers are able to develop these sources of attention because they, in effect, *are* the product. Marketing managers in royalty publishing houses have a more difficult task, as they must seek to replicate the individualized marketing with an entire stable of authors. As section 2 discusses, this has led to the standardization of social media presences for royalty authors — a standardization that produces content so bland and obviously created by marketing departments that it quite often fails, given that "online marketing strategies don't work for every author and every book. There is no easy formula that can be applied" (Thompson 2012, p. 257). In contrast, where indie and hybrid authors succeed is in the long-term development of genuine literary communities based on their work, investment in marketing beyond the six-week intense marketing blitz of

royalty publishing, and development of a long-tail economic model that gives each book a much longer life to make a return on said investment (cf. *ibid.*, p. 266; Gibson, Johnson, and Dimita 2015, p. 5).

### *Introduction to the Sections*

When examining the effects of new technology and practices in any medium, Marshall McLuhan urges us to consider the answers to four questions: What does the new technology or practice *enhance, obsolesce, retrieve that had earlier become obsolete*, and *reverse into when pushed to extremes*? (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988; cf. Carolan and Evain 2013, p. 299). The sections that follow showcase specific examples permitting insights into these questions with regard to the evolving technology of the book, its production and distribution streams, and the environments in which author and reader connect over the foundation of common content. In particular, what happens to the role of the author in digital environments with digital tools, including epubublishing, ebooks, online publishing, and social media?

This Element looks at contemporary authorship via three key authorial roles: that of the indie (or self-) publisher, the hybrid author, and the fanfiction writer. Each role is presented separately in the three sections, though it is important to note that there are significant overlaps between the three. Indie authors who achieve significant enough success to attract royalty publishers, such as Hugh Howey, often become hybrid authors. Likewise, some fanfiction writers, such as E. L. James, choose to take their writing into the commercial publishing realm, publishing either independently or through royalty publishers; some royalty-published authors keep writing fanfiction (under usernames and/or pseudonyms) simply for the pleasure of it. Nonetheless, I have pulled the roles apart here for the purposes of examination. The final “Discussion and Conclusions” section places them in analytical context with regard to McLuhan’s questions, coalescing these roles into a snapshot of the digital