

# Social Software in Collaborative Writing

## Can the Humanities *Get it Together?*

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The oft announced death of the author is perhaps the longest running obituary yet. This death supposedly opens up the meaning of a text to the unifying conditions of a reader by pointing out that: “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination;”([1.5], 148) and yet it is clear today that the author-genius still imposes a limit to orthodox interpretation. The question of the author as a source of meaning has not really diminished; indeed, socially the individual is still privileged beyond the group, and yet as Critical Art Ensemble and others have noted, it is partly a result of older social models that are not designed to recognize collaborative work.[5] That is, in spite of various well-lauded technological innovations that supposedly aid in social collaborations, few of these models have been successfully integrated into the heart of intellectual production within the academy. Despite proselytizing a rhetoric of decentralization, humanities departments are generally retarded in the adoption of their own ideologies. Intellectuals still adhere to the rhetorical models they are familiar with, writing single author texts on single user software, secretly discussing the contents of their latest work to impede piracy, and passing the brunt of the work to their graduate students who are billed with one line in the acknowledgements, but never as collaborators. (Collaboration with graduate students in the sciences tends to be more common.)

The reasons for this are many, and it is not without some practical measure that this was and continues to be the case; after all, at the end of the day each singular person decides where to invest her or his existence, based on a host of unique variables, some more open, others more limited. All the same, in the new informational age the structures of our culture are changing [4, 100], and with this change it is important to understand how social activity may be affecting intellectual production, such that new media is still trying to catch up to our endless desire for social interaction. Contrary to the fear that technology would isolate us, and obviate b2b (face to face) interactions (cf. [5.1]), what has

taken place over the history of the internet is an explosion of social interaction; in short, we are communicating more than ever, and within these new communicational tools there is a growing desire by many users to make these communications content-rich, i.e., to develop products of these communicative interactions that retain some part of their collaborative framework.

Recently, in his radar sweep of the current state of computing, Tim O’Reilly spoke about the importance of social software as an emerging internet paradigm.[10.5] O’Reilly, primarily addressing software developers, noted several indicators of success across competing websites, indicating that those network spaces that provide spaces for user contributions (from Linux to Amazon) are ultimately more successful because they take advantage of existing collaborative models and social interaction. This is largely because the mental resources of a socially interested self-directed user group (i.e., any group with a goal in mind) can dynamically affect their environment quickly and collaboratively. In short, directed groups are often more effective than single users. (Groups such as Amazon’s and EBay’s user reputation systems, along with Amazon’s user recommendation system; in Amazon’s case single users offer feedback in a group setting, i.e., the group of specific users considering a specific product, or even a range of product types.)

Numerous scholars have explored “net culture” as it relates to collaborative writing. Much research has focused on the social-collaborative around groups that seek to engage broader social issues through the framework of the internet (and its concomitant resources). Bashaw and Gifford [1] focus on how net resources may be utilized to improve efficacy of groups interested in social change. Lovink and Schneider [6] address the idealism that is often uncritical in using so-called collaborative models calling for a radical critique of sovereignty in an age of globalization. J.J. King [9] takes a similar approach, debunking certain pervasive myths of the architecture of openness as it relates to social agency.

To this effect, within academics, the sciences have used a multi-authored approach in research

for many years. Large projects are broken down into smaller components that one person can work on, and then recombined at the conclusion. As a result, the documentation of this type of research is often presented under the aegis of all of the project's participants, in effect producing multi-authored texts. Yet most multi-authored texts are only one step toward an open-source collaborative model of writing. Multiple authorship still generally relies on older models of either designated authors or a circulated asynchronous document, such as Word documents sent from one person to another over email, or the standard author-editor relationship (e.g., peer review). Though each author of the project may claim complete representative authorship (in the case where one author demonstrating a project *he/she* worked on with *others*; where individuality is built into the linguistic grammar), collaborating in this fashion is still limited to its feeblest most rudimentary form, existing primarily because by default it cannot be called single-author.

This scientific model of multiple authorship is best described in the second of three general forms of collaboration (co-authorship) articulated by Ede and Andrea.[5.06] From an ideal scenario of close interpersonal collaborations focused on a single project, Ede and Andrea proceed to describe two other more common models: scientific collaboration (semi-independent) and "business" writing (sequential, accretionary, independent writing joined at a project's conclusion). Though Ede and Andrea prefer to keep these models separate, it seems more likely that a collaborative project, while normally focused closely on one of the three models, tends to include all of the these three general forms throughout a project's life. This is important to note because the concept of collaboration is often categorized as a way to better understand it. However, these categories also serve to distinguish collaboration from so-called single author works. In truth it would be more appropriate to detail different categories of single authorship, and assume that the collaborative model is the ultimate radical for all (inter)action.

Barring an unlikely reversal of these conventional categories, there is much to learn about collaborative authorship as a practice, especially in the humanities. While the sciences appear benefit from collaborative practice, there are no sufficient reasons for why those same benefits cannot be reaped by the humanities. The issue at hand is that there are a lot of good ideas,

and a lot of even better ideas that those good ideas could lead to if ideas were amalgamated, mixed, fused together. Likewise, instead of fighting over resources (books, journals, etc.), and limiting the acknowledgement of an influence to footnotes or endnotes, why not openly collaborate? Instead of competing against one another in a set of similar essays, why not pool talents collectively, and contribute to a larger, more finely tuned essay? It is common knowledge in editing that another pair of eyes will make the text better; why not simply incorporate that model into writing and idea-formation itself?

Collaborative writing is not a new concept; it is simply one that the conventional emphasis on authorship belies. In fact, as others have often noted, all works are essentially collaborative. (cf. [4.1] and [5.0]). Works that are not explicitly created between multiple authors in the same time span are nonetheless built upon earlier arguments, documented through citations in footnotes or endnotes, and revised by editors. In this sense, then, collaborative writing in the humanities does not encounter a lack of opportunity inasmuch as the humanities resist open-authorship models. This resistance is further compounded up to now by a lack of tools facilitating collaboration. If researchers wanted to work collaboratively in the past, they either had to have b2b. (i.e., face to face) meetings, or mail documents to each other. There was no quick or easy way to collaborate, and certainly there was no simple way to simultaneously co-author any kind of text. Two central problems impeding collaboration in the humanities are the apotheosis of the author-genius system of single-authorship, and a lack of tools to facilitate an alternative to single-authorship. These two problems merge, affecting the desire to collaborate, effectively placing it below most people's radar or devaluing joint works. (Thus, a possible third problem is the actual desire or wont to make better contributions and work together.)

Without returning to an internet-utopian platform, it is important to note that the internet has begun to address this last issue of tools for collaboration. In a continuum running from synchronicity to asynchronicity common tools such as email are meeting synchronous realtime social tools such as IM, and asynchronous tools such as wikis, cvs (code versioning, version control system - vcs), and others within the continuum such as SMS-text messaging, bbs, irc, usenet, and others. In addition, powerful

synchronous-asynchronous hybrids like The Coding Monkey's SubEthaEdit (formerly called Hydra) have become popular in extreme programming and blogging communities.

These new tools take advantage of a range of other technological developments. The realtime transmission of text, sound, and video supported by faster network architectures facilitated by wireless connectivity all contribute to the number of simultaneous synchronous modes of communication, in short, increasing available options for instantaneous expression. Ideas are communicated differently through a range of mediums: a physical gesture might be more effectively communicated through video, telephony (now standard for IM) allows yet another, and duplexing conversations occurs frequently through text (in several text boxes, or text during talk). Clay Shirky noted in a duplex voice-text scenario he participated in, that neither mode (text nor voice) was redundant, inasmuch as each mode edified the other.([12a]) For Shirky, speeches during the meeting acted as the central focus, while the simultaneous text dialogues acted as physical subtexts, branches, and as a space for epiphanies, all related to the central presentation. High-speed and wireless are two of the technological developments, others such as the move from desktop to laptop, and PDAs are also extremely important for tools of collaboration.(cf. [12b])

It would seem then, that if so many different social-software tools for collaboration exist, that there ought to be some kind of comprehensive meta-software, or über-ware that clusters all of the various social functions together, into a monolithic package. In fact, in a limited sense, recent versions of IM combining text, telephony, and video do just this. However, the eclectic range of social-software demonstrates a very important aspect of the social and collaborative process, namely, the importance of difference, especially as it relates to temporal architectures.(cf. [5.06], 153) IM's sometimes frenetic pace is perfect for live discussions, free-associations, and the kind of rapid-fire intellection that b2b dialogues excel in. In the same way, though, IM suffers from spontaneous bursts of emotion, unedited thoughts (all still potentially recordable), babble, noise, and even the waste of time present in so many meetings. Email also suffers from the occasional poorly edited thought or rant, but its slower pace usually means a more careful deliberation, or at least the possibility of not answering in the moment; delays in response are par for the course in

email. Like a message on an answering machine, email has a longer shelf-life, suspended in a socially accepted ether for hours, days, and even weeks (beyond that, it's tricky; even emails go stale). That shelf life translates into an advantage, because email content engenders static information. What you open in a message remains there, instantly archived for revisitation at any moment: one single user's thoughts – a kind of uninterrupted soliloquy. Yet emails are, of the various software types, perhaps the least social and interactive. It is community at a distance, dialogue via telegram: no one is interrupted, nor is there the presence of a group voice, merely a nexus of single voices. To this effect, wikis and cvs provide a collaborative workspace that is both static in appearance, user mutable, and still in many ways dialogic. A text can be created, added to at will (without the pressure of realtime interaction), accommodate branching and merging, versionable so all contributions and edits are traceable, and is ultimately object-oriented while user-friendly and group-savvy. Thus, minimally, these three tools allow three different collaborative models within differing time frames: "instant" messaging, "progressively mutating" wiki, and "static but steady" email. To this effect users have co-opted different software models for their own ends, each serving a specific social function whose gestalt carries the group's scaling collective voice.

In the realm of Modernist social design, a central lesson learned is that people like variety. People, in fact, as a general rule and in spite of Sartre's Hell, like to be with other people. But if this is the case, why don't more scholars in the humanities collaborate? Besides the lack of familiarity with social-softwares, do other factors hinder collaboration? One suggestion is the limit of resources: by maintaining silence and single-authority scholars often feel they can monopolize both textual resources and material rewards (if there are any). This is, of course, clearly faulty logic. Collaboration opens up the resource pool not merely on a local level (by sharing resources) but on a global scale. Additionally, the nature of most scholarly work is such that the specialty of a topic usually means the number of possible collaborators in a local space is limited; collaboration extends the borders of a community, such that it is possible to 1) discover parallel scholarly work that has potential for merging both locally and globally, and 2) facilitate effective alternatives to the b2b collaboration limit such that specialization is not restricted by locality. Finally, some other

possible explanations for a lack of collaboration may include the fact that collaboration already occurs “below the radar” or at different scales; or perhaps people may not want to collaborate (the psycho-social reasons for this are beyond the present scope); a perpetuation of copyright myths and their accompanying fears (often a misunderstanding of collective commons’ licenses); or practically speaking, the goals necessary for any successful collaboration may not be clear, in other words, collaboration needs a focused project and cannot usefully exist without this “glue that joins together.”

Tools and desire notwithstanding, why should scholars in the humanities want to collaborate? The answer is really quite simply one of reaping the same benefits that have become so evident in the OSS community, the sciences, and elsewhere, and include: openness of ideas, rhetorical model integrity (primarily for literary theorists), reducing redundancy, as well as participating in a possible model for subverting capitalist production without sacrificing singularity (differences in openness, copyright) by denying the weak heterogeneity that capitalism thrives on - thus the “melting pot” means that the pot has to melt, too. These benefits ultimately return us to the question: why “officially” collaborate instead of maintain the

current policy of casual conversation over beers? The reason is that ideas are not generated instantly in only one space; good ideas happen over many different kinds of channels, but unlike conversation, collaborative writing makes static its presentation: writing, despite the Barthean *scriptable*, is fixed and has limitations; how might we realistically affect the openness of interpretation without also effacing the myth of the author (not merely the author’s “death”)? Ultimately, practical (real) change can only occur as a change within the structure of participation of both reader and writer, and not change in name alone.

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