

What is an author in social media?

Sérgio Tavares

slt.filho@gmail.com @neocronica

Abstract

This article discusses what is an author in social media. It questions the distinction between “average user” and “famous author”, and analyzes the content of Twitter accounts of such authors, classifying them between personal, public and authorial. Furthermore, this division generates a possible way of classifying authorial text, considering space, publicity and content itself. The debate also considers if we, the social media users, are all authors and, if so, what are we authoring.

Keywords

Social media – Authorship – Paratext – Author – Social networks – Public – Private

1. Authorship in Twitter

In order to evaluate authorship elements in Twitter, a few accounts were taken in consideration, from known authors, media personalities and average users. Aspects and patterns found in those accounts were considered in relation to the traditional idea of what is an author and what is authorship, in light of theories of Gerard Genette, Ervin Goffman, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Twitter usernames of average users were suppressed for privacy purposes.

2. What is an author on the Internet?

Michel Foucault points out that the presence of the author entitles a different type of discourse rather than the trivial speech: “it is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes (...) On the contrary; it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.” (Foucault 102-120). What is an author in a culture where no speech (in the sense that Foucault addresses to: a speech that is by nature remarkable, or worth listening, or keeping) “comes and goes” since everything

is written, stored and archived? Or even better saying, what is an author in a culture where *everything* comes and goes in an everyday feed of the various social network sites of everyday life?

By a conservative definition of what is the author's work and what is not, social media activity would not result, necessarily, in the expansion of an author's work. Practice tells differently, as every production attributed to an author gains the status of cult, the magic that happens when a fan meets, talks to or interacts with an idol. The young novelist Amanda Hocking, considered to be the "star of self-publishing" (Saroyan), feeds a blog described by her as "Where Amanda Hocking says things about Amanda Hocking" (Hocking). Amanda Hocking (the author) is authoring about a specific topic, which is herself.

2.1. Nietzsche's laundry list

More than relying in content, discourses may be firstly defined by its paratexts, then from practices, and finally by content. Foucault questions the beginning and end of an author's work in *What is an author?*. Can Nietzsche's laundry list be considered as part of his work? (Foucault) After all, he did write it. A laundry list, however, has no authorial function – it is not even signed, unless if it should differentiate from someone else's list or by any other trivial reason. To define if a text in new media should or not be part of an author's work may be trickier than in traditional media. Initially, three aspects arise: **space, publicity and content.**

The problem with space is that in the same space that a user (a potential author) posts a poem, he/se may talk about the weather, recommend a new album of a friend, invite friends for a party or complain about the plumbing system or start a dialogue of any sort

(as contacting a company about a recently purchased product or invite someone to the movie theater, as it happens in common Twitter use).

One could say that Nietzsche could use a sheet of paper to write an aphorism, in the very same way as he used one to write a laundry note. Here is the matter of content, as two texts are entirely different, one of them displaying an essential part of an author's work, and another being text with practical or trivial everyday life purpose.

One could even complicate the situation, saying that Nietzsche could have written an aphorism and his laundry note in the same notebook, one page after another. That is certainly possible, but those were stages before the text was made public, and even they had a similar (or same) material interface, the texts were not *meant to* share the same space, and then the matter steps into the problem with publicity. They could appear together as some kind of curiosity in a biographical publication, but they do not belong *together* to the public sphere, and would be very unlikely that the author would make such text public.

In new media the trivial and the personal blends with authorial content, and it is *meant to* be that way: a blog may or may not display personal information among its other contents; a Facebook or Twitter account may be permeated with dialogs, trivial observations, general questions, casual remarks. They may as well include poems, aphorisms and other types of, essentially, authorial content (that is, content that will continue the author's work). Content in such sites are always framed by the paratexts that, technically, endow content with the authorial function. Moreover, even phatic/trivial remarks of everyday life may be managed by its author (that is, by virtually any user) in a way of building a persona

– the persona that authored, ultimately, the feed of the Twitter account, of the Facebook profile or the blog.

Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd observe that the “micro-celebrity” behavior is seen not only in Twitter users with a large number of followers, but that “many users consciously use Twitter as a platform to obtain and maintain attention” (Marwick and boyd).

It may be relevant to bring the example of Amanda Hocking: language and text, tools of the author, are operating in the creation of personal, yet authorial content. Amanda Hocking’s laundry list could be published in her blog, and that would still be (the author) Amanda Hocking blogging about herself. Social media for traditional authors, in this sense, are in great extent a site for an author’s *metatext*, or to use Gerard Genette’s framework of paratexts, it is the place where the author writes his own public epitext, a radically diverse phenomena if compared to traditional publishing¹.

Asides from self-referring texts, Twitter shows several authors whose work is produced, extended or continued inside the social network. Deepak Chopra, the Dalai Lama or Yoko Ono post many of such texts on Twitter, some of them undoubtedly regarded as a continuity of their works:

@Deepak Chopra

Pursue excellence, ignore success.

¹ In Gerard Genette’s book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, the concept of paratext is defined: a paratext is text placed *around*, and not *within* the text. Paratext can be *epitext* (texts that are placed far from the text, such as a critic’s review or an interview with the author) and *peritext* (texts placed near the text, like the title of the work or the name of the author inscribed in the book cover). Paratexts are a sum of epitexts and peritexts. What is relevant here is the idea that the authorship of the epitext is no longer by third parties, but by the authors themselves.

@Dalai Lama

In today's deeply interdependent world, war is outdated and illogical.

@Yoko Ono

Total communication equals peace.

2.2. Ambassador mode

Other uses of Twitter also add up to the author's persona, like sharing or promoting links. These give a glimpse of personal taste, interests or causes engaged in by the author. These updates work somewhat differently from original content created by the author (texts, status updates, pictures, videos etc) and more on the direction of an "ambassador" or "curator" mode of sharing content from the web. With the overwhelming production of information that circles on the Internet, some users are referred to when users are looking for content of interest. The ambassador searches, embeds, republishes content; he/she points content to somewhere else, and his/her audience looks for his/her selections/collections. Good examples are Pinterest, where users "pin" pictures or videos to a personal board and other users "repin" the previously published content. In 2012, up to 80% of Pinterest activity was constituted of republishing content from inside the social network (Moore). Tumblr is another social network whose curatorship aspect has bloomed, with a solid track of art curation and its own art symposium held in March 2013, in New York (Hyperallergic.com).

A few examples from popular Twitter accounts:

@Yoko Ono

I love this new album by my friend Roberta - Let It Be Roberta Flack Sings The Beatles

<http://t.co/Ast77KQR>

@Neil Gaiman

Sitting in a Florida kitchen, listening to Art Spiegelman talking about Bernie Krigstein's MASTER RACE on BBC Radio 4. I love the future.

@Stephen Fry

Samsung thinking out of the box. Some seriously cool new ideas for packaging and manuals: <http://t.co/N1PSRgB2> (via @pettore)

Another subset of Twitter messages would be the ones that show the user simply opening up to his personal ideas, remarks and views of the world. Even though this content does not relate, ultimately, to the author's "work", it is as well part of the growing *epitext*, and will influence to his/her image as an author. The key difference from these remarks to the "continuation of the author's work" may be the personal aspect of the content – it is accountable as a work from the author, but as a specific subtype of it, and the borders between what is part of the author's work and part of the author's personal remarks are difficult to draw.

@Stephen Fry

Another day's filming. The location should at least be more internet friendly this time. Getting so behind in my emails.

@Kevin Spacey

We lost a great man in Vaclav Havel. A playwright, a leader and a man who will be remembered

@Moby

I don't miss snow.

Finally, there are examples that operate as a “public relations feed” to a certain work and/or to the author him/herself. In traditional publishing, that would have been written by the publisher: the usual work of public relations, or advertising the author’s work, constituting the public epitext. In Twitter, it is the author who writes paratexts, and this distinction ends up blending texts and paratexts. The author becomes, him/herself, the public relation agent of him/herself and his/her own work. If the text is written the author or by agents, it does not matter: the *author* signs the text which previously was signed by an editor or by an institution.

@Kevin Spacey

So far we've performed Richard III in London, Hong Kong, Aviles (Spain), Istanbul, and Naples.

@Eminem

Australia, I'm on the way. Tickets still available for Sydney Dec. 4th show:

<http://t.co/JvS5frnn>

In some cases, the account is institutionalized: the author signs it, uses it from time to time, but texts signed by agents or crew members refer to the author in the 3rd person:

@Bjork

due to health issues, tonight's björk show at the new york hall of science is cancelled. refunds will be available at point of purchase.

It is a similar case in Mashable, for instance, where the profile @Mashable has the founder’s name and picture, Peter Cashmore, and automatically outputs the tweets from several journalists and collaborators.

Celebrities and media personalities doing PR work for themselves show a degree of transparency that was not usual in traditional media. These concerns with organization, box-office, commercial and sales expose the author to a level of frailty that used to be, traditionally, shielded by the previous systems.

2.3. Classifying content

Considering social media accounts by public persons, text in these media could be basically categorized in three different genres:

1) **Author's work.** The text has the function of being the "author's text". It is elaborated, formatted, created and edited so that it can be considered as part of the user's "work", or as the extension his/her work finds in new media. A clear example can be an aphorism published by the Dalai Lama.

2) **Personal/Phatic/Trivial.** These texts are similar to the previous category, but belong to a specific a genre of text that relates to his personal taste or life. Text refers mostly to the user's personal taste or everyday life (the author's metatext), or to serve a practical purpose (scheduling a meeting, confirming a date, asking the audience about a particular topic). Content may often be pointing to third parties, in the work of the "ambassador": interesting websites, a friend's work, a beautiful photograph etc. Quite often, a careful management of such observation takes place: as if the user was, himself, laboring the text so that it meets a certain standard of wit, humor, sophistication (and thus benefitting the epitext).

3) **Public relations.** Text is specifically propagating the user's work. This type of text may be displayed through automatic/ghost-written updates from PR employees or newsfeed from websites. It can be regarded a specific genre of metatext. Curiously, text and metatext may be written by the same person, using the same tools, making it hard to distinguish them entirely. The author simply shifts from mode A to mode B, resulting in an insertion of the "author's voice" in both modes, text and metatext.

All these texts mount up for the author's epitext, that is, the whole idea that the reader can make of the author according to text that is published and related to the author and the original text. The epitext is, therefore, the sum of the author's work, the personal and trivial text and the public relations performed by the author, and the types of metatexts, either a subset of personal text or of public relations. The author's epitext is part of the management process of the author's image, which mostly dwells with the author's work (text itself), the author's work adjacent text (public relations) and the author's personal life. What used to be text managed by editors and produced by news articles, now can be also managed and produced by the author himself. In this perspective, epitext merges partially with the author's text. So the end product is a meltdown of concepts, borders and authorial functions that may constitute of a new idea of what is an author.

Social media not only enables the author to publicize this material, but also rather creates the proper space to do so, and rewards him/her with popularity and media buzz. It is likely that the personal facts and remarks published along PR text and authorial text (all of those endowed with the authorial mark) are – intentionally or not – working as some kind of exchange currency: the author reveals himself to the audience in exchange or popularity and resonance of his works in social media. The buzz, who used to be measured by press exposure can now be measured by user interaction, reblogs, shares, retweets.

As the degrees of separation between personal and authorial content decreases, and authors are creating some kind of byproduct of their work; a parallel authorial work that consists in making their very selves more transparent, vulnerable, public. Transmediality, more than intertextuality, takes place. According to Jenkins, transmediality is the coordinated use of storytelling across media platforms (Jenkins). In Twitter (or in any social network), an actor may produce text, a writer may produce photography, a musician may produce aphorisms and so on.

Output in all these media is the trinomial of personal, work and public relations intertwining, creating mixed content that, as said before, mount up to the elaborate construction of the author's epitext – an epitext created and moderated by the author, available to the spectatorship (and scrutiny) of the audience.

3. The average user

When it comes to the average user, it becomes clear that social media users – with Twitter accounts, Facebook accounts or blogs – are used to the idea of a constant image management in those networks. Stating or not stating, liking or not liking one's friends' updates, or showing wit or humor in a status update is part of the social media game; it is, in many cases, the core of it.

Writing is conscious, but authoring is not an entirely conscious activity. This management may be the touchstone that turns the user into a *conscious author* of these feeds. By analogy, it is "immediate, but not reflected", as Foucault classifies how the proletariat carries a "universal" aspect in itself (Foucault). One may be consciously writing a certain kind of image, but when it comes to the effect of the entirety of this textual production,

most certainly the result product is unknown: one has written a status update everyday and ended up authoring an autobiography.

Considering the feeds themselves as works, the user is to be considered the active writer/author of this new textual genre: the blog entry, but also the Twitter feed, the Facebook timeline; the personal-social text feed. And the users connected to this writer are readers of this specific genre, authored by average users, celebrities and famous writers.

It is relevant to create a temporary, controversial distinction between “average users” and “famous authors” at this point. There is no such distinction, *strictu sensu*. The main distinction comes from the preexisting knowledge of what this person does, writes, produces and that will motivate the user to connect.

In the case of connecting to famous writers, the audience may expect to read *more from the author* (think of Dalai Lama’s aphorisms written in Twitter in the same manner that they were written in books) but also *more about the author* (think of a Neil Gaiman’s fan willing to know what he had for breakfast). It is hard to say that users connecting with each other are driven by radically different motivations. Relevant examples for the topic may include an user who wants to connect to another *to know more about the author*, to know more *from* the author (receiving the newsfeed of what this person produces, writes, creates or brings to the feed). It might be the case that everyone is famous in 15 seconds: one is famous whenever someone else gazes upon one’s online production – a production that usually results in a compilation of things that we like to see, read and know, in addition to our opinions and impressions, in addition to personal events of our lives.

The discussion becomes relevant when addressing to the difference between the famous author and the average user in Twitter: both are likely to be publishing phatic content,

both may be exploring public relations for their personal gains. But a famous author has an authorial work: the Dalai Lama has aphorisms published in print, Yoko Ono has her own artworks, Kevin Spacey has his acting career and so on. All the production of Twitter (the new epitext) is adding up to these artistic careers. The difference between the common man may be in perceiving *what is* the Twitter feed: it may be the authorial work, the *oeuvre*, the artistic and literary work in itself of every user.

Whenever posting in Twitter, blogs or Facebook, the user is producing a log file that, ultimately, is his own *oeuvre*, written by the user, its author. In one manner or another, often complimentary, these media are telling biographies, perceptions and worldviews: the author's epitext becomes the text, for famous or average Twitter users.

4. Conclusion

The social media writer is mostly a conscious *writer*, but often an unconscious *author*. These feeds will influence and/or construct the image of who is writing. That is true for most social networks that display a "personal profile" as an account (Facebook, Twitter), and not a self-contained "work" (as a blog). Every social media user is an author with a work, and to some extent social media is the site where users construct and narrate their experience of the world.

There is a lack of a conceptualization for such authors – novelists write novels, philosophical books are written by philosophers, blogs are written by bloggers. All these terms refer to a specific idea of authorship. Importantly, the significant changes in culture signal to the direction of a networked system that intertwines personal life with work activity. In social media, with text intertwined between personal, trivial and authorial,

authors and regular users make use of the tools as one's own *voice*: the same vocal cords to proliferate different kinds of discourse, without the traditional discretion or separation between informal and formal work. Furthermore, to a great extent, users are authoring their biographies online, complying to the social practice and corporate terms of each network.

The traditional image of an author in social media is peculiar: it is a personal experience of disclosure; and text has changed in, at least, three aspects: space, publicity and content – space is the same for a personal observation or an authorial “work”; every kind of text is public and generates publicity; content varies in scale from personal, authorial and public relations work, in a complex and organic epitext. An author can moderate comments in the epitext, but cannot avoid the scrutiny of the internet audience. He/she may open up, complain about the weather or ask the audience to buy his book – there is a degree of frailty in there that was not there before, as the author steps down from the *star system* to interact and disclose himself/herself in social media, even about commercial matters.

Importantly, the borders between authorial work and personal work are blending, and the transmediality of works is also increasing. Acting indiscriminately as artists or simply social media users, we are authors of our own oeuvre (the feed), of our own epitext (what adds up to our persona as an author), of our own biographies (to an extent), and curating and creating content exploring transmedia storytelling in a plurality of media.