

Collaborative Annotation on the Socio-Technical Platform: Meaningful Re-Contextualisation in Genius.com



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Abstract

In this paper, the materiality of annotation practices is analysed within digital online collaborative annotation platform Genius.com. The platform is regarded a socio-technical knowledge instrument, constituting directed participation between human and technical agents. By performing an affordance analysis of the platform and by focusing on formal properties of annotations attention is brought to people interacting with - and making meaning of produced text. Annotations are formally distinctive as participants add separate contextual layers instead of overwriting an author's text. The 'state of flux', digital texts being constantly updated to the audiences narrative present, now moved to the annotation layer. This can be done strategically as meaning is depending on context. The digital landscape is a convergent one in which users build a holistic patchwork from textual fragments. The Genius annotations are modules that lay out convergent routes and can contain all machine-readable textual formats and genres. Standardised whole-text annotations organise texts in an artist-centred intertextual network, allowing for Verified Artists to be linked to their own text and remain involved. Off-platform, Genius cannot control and recognise 'whole texts', affording only for sentence-based annotation which can be used to juxtaposition statements.

Knowledge works through a construct of several discursive positions, and annotations allow for co-existing discourses and additional signatures at one page. Signature are not equal, as [1] profile types creating a top-down elite and [2] IQ-points allow for bottom-up community acceptance. As the participatory threshold has lowered, acceptance shifts to after-publishing instead of up front. Each member can respond to annotations by commenting and up and downvoting. On-platform, users can edit annotations, differentiating between 'proposed input' and 'accepted Genius annotations', making for communities voice as preferred discourse. Off-platform all created positions formally co-exist equally. The paper raises questions of auctorial control as collaborative annotation spreads over the web, and questions of discursive context of the platform itself.

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1. The power of annotations: a change of writing history

In January 2016, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, reached the top 20 bestsellers in Germany. The Nazi political manifesto was first published in the mid-twenties, but being disputed and controversial, the Bavarian ministry had refrained from publishing it after the war. When the copyright ran out in January 2016, the Munich Institute for Contemporary History decided to republish a new version: a critical one, containing 3.700 annotations of historians revealing the "lies and false assumptions", placing the whole into context (Flood 2016). Adding annotations to *Mein Kampf*, which is infamous and surely not regarded trustworthy, turns it into an allowed bestseller that is no longer considered that 'dangerous'. The extra layer apparently changes the meaning, value and status of the manuscript. The book was annotated by historians, but what if just anyone could have added annotations? We find the answer in the shape of collaborative annotation platform Genius.com: a platform that affords users to publicly annotate texts, since this year even right on the web page. We find speeches of Barack Obama, news articles and songs being annotated by people varying from amateurs to the Washington Post, from Eminem to the White House. Although it is still in beta phase, Genius is growing fast and has been the subject of several discussions (Segran 2016). Is this a platform for a critical audience, or are these people who "colour in the dark with a yellow crayon and call it criticism"? (Dayle 2016). And what is exactly the possible power of an annotation, and can a writer defend her/himself from it?

1.1. The materiality of annotating practices

Annotations have a power-related history that runs back to medieval times. In Stephen Barney's (1991) *Annotation and its Texts*, several essays are attributed to the material practices of annotation and the social, cultural or political roles they played throughout history, like scribes making biblical glosses or copying manuscripts and adding rhetorical structures and comments to this 'nuclear work' (60-61). In the same book, Thomas Toon marks that annotations are "a convention from a time when the relationship between readers and the books was more interactive" (73). But the printing press made text reproduction less flexible and books became available to greater extends. The population's literacy rose and oral readings slowly made place for silent, private reading (Boundless 2015). Annotation became something you only did privately, to books that you owned, and the white page gained an integrity you did not cross (Toon 1991, 76). This all seems to be changing again now practices move from the materiality of paper to digital online texts. From education to leisure: digital reader is gaining ground. In 'The Future of Digital Reading' Clive Thompson (2009) mentions digital reading machines and how the technology is finally ready to unlock their hidden value: their readers. In explaining the implications of moving from analogue to digital text, Pierre Lévy (1997a) explains how the 'signature' disappears, as many people collaboratively (re)create, alter and circulate texts (366). Seemingly, we make a turn back to participatory times when text were changing when going from hand to hand. But of course, we might expect the new, digital writing tools to bring along new restrictions and possibilities. In medieval times, the work of scribes undermined the status of author as

original *auctor* (Barney 1991, 49; 184). But becoming a scribe was not for everyone: it took years to become an authorised, educated professional. According to Clay Shirky's (2008) *Here Comes Everybody*, online participation creates a space for the amateur. In public annotation processes, this is a major change. Before, the selection of a text to be annotated meant that it passed the critical audience the annotator was representing. The other way around, it was a privilege to be selected as annotator as it meant you belonged to a small, privileged community:

[The annotator] is always a member of that community, since no one becomes an annotator without the clerical training that constituted readerly communities in the West. (...) [The white page] should not be violated by any form of disrespectful comments, neither should [it] be violated by an unauthorised hand. (Barney 1991, 179; 189)

We can imagine that construct falling apart if annotation moves to platforms mediating the collaborative crowd. Still, these platforms strive for quality as well. They utilise 'the wisdom of the crowd', like Wikipedia and Del.icio.us. Niederer and van Dijck (2010) showed how these participatory knowledge instruments have different ways to maintain quality, afforded by an "intricate collaboration between human users and automated content agents", coining the "socio-technical platform" (Niederer en Dijck 2010, 1369). We could wonder: what happens to annotation practices when mediated by such platforms? And what do the formal properties of –apparently powerful – annotations mean to the practices in the platform?

1.2. Research question: Genius as socio-technical system

In order to understand the materiality of online annotation platforms, this thesis will focus on the question:

How does Genius.com operate as a socio-technical knowledge system?

Participatory platforms are often accompanied with a discourse of democratic, egalitarian places where everyone gets a voice, being no longer controlled by institutions (Shirky 2008, 77). Wikipedia was never the egalitarian, mythical space it was believed to be as its dynamic texts are created and governed by collaborating human and non-human agents in which control is constituted by hierarchy through technique, by access and permission (Niederer and Dijck 2010, 1369). This paper will focus on control, which has three elements: [1] control on produced content [2] on the voices behind this content and [3] auctorial control. The socio-technical platform will be regarded a 'knowledge instrument' (1369) in which the knowledge production has a way of organising and structuring that does not only lead to a non-equal space for users, but that also has consequences for the platform as producing 'meaning' (discourses). As such, the platform could be used as a rhetorical instrument, to create positions regarding truth.

The first sub question addresses the digital platform as knowledge instrument: how can

knowledge and meaning be ‘produced’ and what are the material elements of a socio-technical platform that play a part in this production? Then, to move to the specific case of digital annotations, we need to define what is formally specific about them, and how digital materiality relates to this. What elements make up a digital annotation, and how do annotations relate to the production of knowledge? Finally, we can bring attention to what makes Genius so different than medieval participatory annotation: the online participatory environment. How are the different voices on Genius distinguished from each other? And how is the practice of collaborative annotation structured on this platform?

1.3. Theoretical concepts

§2 will address digital knowledge production based on Foucault’s (1972) notion of knowledge as ‘systems of dispersion’. I will explain how this production is one of creating positions that are governed by an interplay social and technique, explained by Niederer and van Dijck’s (2010) notion of the ‘socio-technical knowledge instrument’ (1369). Secondly, §3, will explore the formal properties of digital annotations. Oren et al. (2006) define digital annotation as additional layers to a main text, layers that system developer Catherine Marshall (2000) further defines as ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ (98-99). The materiality of the digital will be based on Lev Manovich’s (2001) concept of modular elements described in his *Principles of New Media* which I will relate to Henry Jenkins (2002; 2006) convergent media landscapes in which people make meaning together. To relate making meaning to layers and context I expand on the language philosophy of Jacques Derrida (1982) and Judith Butler (2007), that build on Saussure’s postmodern view on language. In §4 the topic of social annotation is discussed. We may find participatory practices related to the ‘disappearance of signatures’ due to text being in a reader-writer continuum (Lévy 1997a, 366). But as annotations are layers with an own voice attached, they open up the possibility of several voices. It is the management of these individual voices in a collaborative process that I will explain with Lévy’s (2013) notion on creative conversation and Deleuze’s (1992) notion of user standardization through the ‘dividual’ (5).

1.4. Method: affordances of the technical and the social

As Lévy explains in *The Collective Intelligence* (1997b), there is a difference between information and knowledge, as the latter is information getting meaning and relevance in cognitive practices (17). These practices concern sharing, altering, viewing and interpreting texts, and it is in these practices that crowds become relevant. As such we should focus on the practice, on the instrument rather than its outcome. To analyse the properties of technique with the aim to highlight the social, we should use the method that focusses on the very way human agent act based on material properties: the affordance analysis.

1.4.1. Affordance analysis

I assume that the materiality of the mediating platforms will come with restriction and possibilities, that shape, but not determine the behaviour of people on the platform. Materiality here is understood as ‘being of relevance’, rather than being ‘matter’ (Leonardi 2010), so software and artefacts can be regarded material as well. Donald Norman (1998) describes how designed objects can stimulate certain behaviour. He later explains how the answer has two sides: one concerns cultural conventions and a conceptual model: this is what we could see as a social, or cultural layer (1999, 39). For example, if we see a space on the screen with a thumb up, we recognise it as a ‘like-button’ and know we can click it. These visual properties indicate the underlying affordances: the second element, being the possible behaviour of the technical product. Besides ‘perceived affordances’ a product also comes with ‘real’ affordances, including ones that a user cannot see (39-40). Written in 1999, this seems to have become more important as algorithmic control works underground through practices we are not aware of, actively shaping our social world (Beer 2009). Niederer and Van Dijck (2010) thoroughly analysed the active role of technique in constructing participatory text, but the cultural layer has not been given much attention as representation of text and users is not included. They focussed on the role of technique in back-end processes, like bots (1370-1373) but did not bring attention to how these un-egalitarian practices qualitatively reflect in front-end. If several voices co-exist, who is (shown as) more important? Does it matter if the person commenting on Obama’s speech is part of the White House, a journalist or ‘just’ a normal user? Technical affordances may provide control, visual representation can create an order and hierarchy that might support social control. Affordances are not that much the technical agents acting themselves, where Niederer and van Dijck focussed upon, but the way they shape and guide users’ possible behaviour. Therefore they can help up providing more insight in human agents participating through the platform. How can someone interact with an annotation? And how is making meaning together directed and governed? Although ‘meaning’ and ‘interpretation’ are difficult processes which are mostly approached from psychological and sociological perspective, I assume that the way a text and its source are presented lay the basis for how it can be perceived, something we can include as the materiality and properties of the design. As such I will combine the formal properties of annotations with the materiality of social-technical platforms.

1.4.2. Genius: a collaborative annotation community

Maintaining quality and community stand central in Genius Elizabeth Milch, Genius’s Deputy Director of Content described how it started out as a platform where rap-lyrics could be explained by glossing ‘street language’ and providing background information about the rappers. It started private and invitation-only, but later developers decided to open up the platform for participation of the ‘crowd’, which has grown to be a matured ‘language loving’ community (Milch in Jones 2016). Although it has grown bigger: member still mark the tight community as what distinguishes Genius from other platforms, like Hypothes.is or Annotea, which makes it a good case to focus on the social.

Within Genius, I will focus on the affordances that relate to annotating text and presenting the users in these practices only. Social connection and discussion like the forum are out of scope. Genius is divided in several parts: Lit, News, Screen, Lyrics and Sports. On-platform, I will focus on Lyrics, as this has the most community activity.

Former W3C local annotation standards like Annotea were no great success (Segran 2016). However, Genius states that now, 15 years later, people are ready for such a tool as mass adoption of social platform has become more common (Segran 2016). Genius' overarching mission is to "annotate the world (Jones 2016)", which became more concrete when they launched their flagship project: Genius News – the Web Annotator. Initially, texts needed to be placed on the platform itself. Now, one just needs the browser extension to annotate for example the Washington Post right on the original page. But what happens to control if you move it outside of the platforms boundaries, the place where the strong community lingers? I will compare the affordances of the Web Annotator to the on-platform version, to analyse the role of the platform. Of platform Genius makes no genre distinctions.

Sample textual analysis: annotation practices and American Elections 2016

I will use a sample textual analysis to validate the claims made based on the affordances, to provide qualitative examples of how they relate to knowledge production in practice. In order to understand how participatory platforms work, David Beer (2009) introduces three layers of analysis. The first is the cultural, political-economy layer, concerning the organizations that establish and cultivate Web 2.0 applications. The second level concerns the software infrastructures and their applications on the web. The third level explores how the previous two levels play out in the lives of those that use participatory web applications (998). Just as Niederer and van Dijck I will focus on the second layer, but 'knowledge' cannot be seen separate from socio-cultural context. To stay within a certain context and set the scope, I will focus on texts related to the American Elections of 2016, a trending topic on Genius. The politics provide a valuable context to analyse the creation of positions and meaning. Also, The White House has a Genius-account and many American journalistic platforms like The Washington Post are participating with Genius, providing insight in user types. I will focus on controversial texts and will include both songs and news articles, as the platform might not follow the traditional division between text styles strictly, as we for example find speeches being uploaded as 'songs'. Also, songs have long been related to politics, from the Dutch 'Boudewijn de Groot' to American Pink's 'Mr President'. And interestingly we find Donald Trump as a recurring theme in rap songs.

1.5. Academic relevance

Drawing from Foucault's (1972; 1982) view on power through knowledge as it structures and orders our social worlds, questions of control on knowledge production extend to questions of control in our society. The focus of recent research in knowledge production has often been on the role of

technology: how do algorithms work rhetorically (Inhagam 2013)? Or, in light of the semantic web: how can technology deal with meaning? (Oren et al. 2006). Niederer and van Dijck introduced the technique in participatory platforms, and an affordances analysis will add to the research of Niederer and Van Dijck a focus on ‘social’ in the socio-technical. The role of human agents in participatory platforms is often named the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ (Kittur and Kraut 2008; Surowiecki 2004) but not enough nuance has been brought to these ‘masses’. In *Creative Discussion of Collective Intelligence*, Lévy (2013) names the role of individual voices in the cognitive processes of the crowd (99-101). Jenkins (2002) applies this to virtual fan communities. But they do not focus on the special case of annotations, and what misses is a focus on the produced knowledge. By focussing on the front-end instead of back-end, we can move towards the perception of the created ‘knowledge’ and elements influencing this perception.

The other way around, annotations have often been analysed (Barney 1991; Marshall 1998, 2000; Oren et al. 2006), but not yet often in online, participatory environments. Barney’s essays address social practices and the industry but this was before the internet and digital texts. Digital annotations have been analysed from the perspective of technical structure (Oren et al. 2006) and from the more social perspective through ethnographic research (Marshall 1998, 2000) but in combination. To set forth the line of Barney (1991) place annotation practices in the materiality of digital culture, we would need to combine both technique and the social, and lay an explorative foundation for social annotation in participatory platforms.

2. Socio-technical knowledge instruments: systems of dispersion

Before turning to the specific case of digital annotation and knowledge production, we should expand upon socio-technical platform and knowledge production in general. In 1975, Foucault claimed that ‘sovereign power’ did not cover the way power works in our everyday lives, as is it always and everywhere that we are disciplined in our conception of what is allowed, what is wrong, what is normal and what is not. We are born in a social world which contains a ‘regime of truth’ (23;30). Through discursive communication practices we reproduce this system of dispersion that organises and structures the social world (Foucault 1972, 33-35). As such, the power is productive as it constitutes differences and positions in dividing practices, which do not only create a certain truth, but related social positions (Foucault 1982, 777-778). Deferring from Foucault I do not take there to be one ‘grand discourse’, but several ones that are conflict and remain shifting. We see this in Mein Kampf: critical annotations took position towards the text, creating the position of a critical audience. Imagine if we had a second group annotating, defending Mein Kampf: we then would have several positions surrounding a text, which gives the reader interpretational frames, or discourses, to choose from.

Participatory open platforms like Genius were associated with freedom, as we no longer

depend on institutions like newspapers and universities to get information. But the media that gave us ‘freedom’ are no neutral instruments and bring along new affordances, like tracking ones behaviour. What is argued to be a ‘self-organising crowd’ (Shirky 2008, 21-22), is a self-controlling one (Deleuze 1992, 4). This is supported by the technique not only organising its content, but also its users (see §4). Furthermore, platforms may increase access to information, they do not show information neutrally. David Beer (2009) builds on Lash’s (2007) notion of informational power when he writes about algorithm as ‘sinking’ into and ‘sorting’ aspects of our everyday lives (Beer 2009, 985). If I Google American Elections, which candidates will I see? And will positive or negative articles be shown first? Niederer and van Dijck explained how the social and technical work together in a practice governed by protocols:

Human and machine contributions are complementary parts of a society of control in which social interactions are increasingly facilitated by means of coded, automated processes. (1384)

Based on Galloways’ (2004) *Protocol*, they name the role of technical protocols to afford for productive participatory practices. But although technique does influence the sources and information we encounter and how we interact with them, it does not determine our perception of it, as Lévy (2013) explains in the role of individual cognition within collaborative crowds (102). Which sources we trust and agree with is as much a social practice of choosing a side, a person, rather than mere information. In ‘Interactive Audiences’ Jenkins (2002) writes about fans making meaning together in participatory knowledge communities, and how conflicting assumptions, different interpretations and competing ways of knowing can become the basis for social rifts (161), causing members to move to other communities or groups. A community thus may include different discourses. The way texts afford for choosing one side or creating another are interactions that depend upon technical affordances. How are competing ways of knowledge governed? As I will explain in the next chapter this does not only depend on affordance of the socio-technical platform, but also on the formal properties of a text. As such, I will first expand on the notion of digital annotations, before expanding on the specific affordances of annotations in Genius.

3. Digital annotations and practices of meaning-making

3.1. What makes a digital annotation

Annotations have been defined in many ways, as it is a field ranging from highlighting words to glossing a bible. Oren et al. (2006) name the lack of a unified model, especially with new types of digital annotations like semantic tags (2). They propose a formal and unified model of annotations:

An annotation attaches some data to some other data: it establishes, within some context, a (typed) relation between the annotated data and the annotating data. (2)

The term annotation can denote both the process of annotating and the result of that process, which is at one side the practice of creating them, and at the other side the presented result. We can break up an annotation in four elements: [1] the subject of annotation (the ‘nuclear work’), [2] the object, or the annotating data, [3] the predicate, being the relationship between these two, and [4] the context. The context concerns the author and the date the annotation was made (4-6). These elements make for several layers of machine-readability, ranging from annotations following the technical protocols completely (formal) to ones that only make sense to the ‘human eye’ (informal). A paper manuscript cannot do much with a yellow highlight: but the digital mediating platform is an active one that can participate and afford for more interactions, provided that they follow both technical and social protocol (Galloway 2004, 142). Protocols like universal resource identifiers (URIs), the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), and the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) for example make possible an associative network through all computers connected to the web. For people, the cultural convention of representing them as underlined makes them recognizable as such (139). Likewise a computer would not understand a PDF-note with just “<p>the name of the article</p>”. If that scribble would contain a hyperlink markup, the relation becomes machine-readable as the predicate is formally defined (Oren 2006, 5).

Digital texts and convergent modules

Although the descriptions above still leaves us with a broad field, they share one important element: the formal nature of attaching separate elements instead of overwriting or merging it. If they are machine-readable, the way we can interact with these annotation-elements goes beyond following hyperlinks. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich (2001) states that digital media objects existing as numeric data, as modular elements that become programmable and quantifiable, automated and reproducible (44). Importantly, the digital materiality thus does not only change how we interact with the annotation, but the content, structure and form of annotations themselves. We find an interesting overlap in Jenkin’s (2006) explanation of making meaning of digital texts by stitching together all separate fragments. When protocol align, new media technologies enabled “the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception (11)”. I asked around who saw Obama’s dinner speech of 2016. One saw the GIF-mess-up of the last-sentence: “Obama-Out”. Another saw a compilation-video. I read the annotated transcript on Genius, another saw a meme coming by on Facebook. We should note the variety of shape, but also of textual types and genres. Manovich describes our current social world as a composite of human and computer meaning in which traditional ways human culture modelled the world blend with the computer’s own ways to represent it (48). The semiotic notion of genre is “the conventionalised form of a text”, with “reflects a purpose of the sender which can be readily understood by the receiver” (Izquierdo and Resurrecció 2002, 136). In a way these conventions are social protocols, and the distinction does not reflect in the technical layer of meaning. Before digital media, knowledge was

isolated and disciplined, but now it can be constantly renewed and shared again, circulating in what Jenkins (2002) calls:

A 'patchwork' woven together from many sources as members pool what they know creating something much more powerful than the sum of its parts. (140)

This patchwork is multi-channel and cross-medial. He assumes that in current media texts it is necessary for users to work together to understand texts in full potential, referring to series and virtual communities in which fans collaboratively tie together and plots and details in the storyline (139). We find common practices in Genius. If we take a look at Obama's annotated dinner speech (Genius-Community 2016), we find images, the MP3 audio track, the video... There are many references one needs to understand to get jokes and statement, ranging from Game of Thrones' Red Wedding to other candidate's campaigns, to press pictures and to political history. As we will find in §4, all these formats are the same to Genius' annotations, and all can be included. Jenkins calls the patchwork the 'convergence of content', explaining that meaning is not derived from one text, but built up from fragments coming together in the mind of the users (H. Jenkins 2006, 4). Although these patchwork are different per individual and cross-medial, Genius is a particular example in which many convergent pieces come together in one place.

3.2. Annotations as meaningful context

I assume that just as convergence, an annotated text creates a holistic whole, a meaning that is not reducible to its separate parts. Stating that a text's meaning can change assumes that meaning is not fixed. Such a view on language can be traced back to the post-structuralist view of language led by Saussure (1916), distinguishing the 'sign' from the 'signifier'. The semiotic relation between the two is arbitrary, a cultural agreement rather than inherent to the signified. For example the word 'annotation' comes from the Latin 'notare', meaning 'to note'. But there is no reason intrinsic to writing words in a margin that makes for the word 'notare'. Saussure claims that language is self-referential, led by binary oppositions. Derrida (1982) addresses how this gap between sign and signifier results in meanings that can shift and can never be overseen or controlled fully:

[I]n a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a being - are always deferred. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which holds that an element functions and signifies, takes on or conveys meaning, only by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces. (28)

Language can exist only by its iterative nature, and as such language is always borrowed and placed in a spoken¹ chain of traces (Derrida 1989, 217). In *Opgefokte Taal*, Judith Butler (2007) builds on Derrida, stating that meaning is depending on context. The prostration to fix meaning is also by the

¹ Spoken and written, as Derrida did not regard the speech act as different from writing acts.

fact that you have no control over the context the words end up in (29). Context is for example the former use of the language, the culture, social milieu and intertextuality. Butler follows Foucault in regarding our daily life a chain of repetitions: but these repetitions are imperfect and not always the same, opening up the possibility for change (Butler 2007, 36). An exemplary text is that of a mesh-up video in which Trump is placed in HBO's *Game of Thrones*. He talks about building a wall across the southern border, a quote that can also be found on his own campaign site. However, in the series, *The Wall* happens to be a gigantic ice-wall, protecting the world from the army of zombies. As such, Trump's quotes get a whole different meaning only by placing it in between other (cross-genre) fragments. Altering the context of a text can thus be used strategically to create positions and steer towards certain interpretations. As such, annotations can do the same by creating a contextual frame that is likely to influence the meaning of the annotated object, without even altering itself.

We find annotations as strategic rhetorical context in medieval annotation already. Returning to times before the printing press, we arrive in an area where documents were copied by hand. Nichols (1991) explains that the process of completion did lay in the hands of scribes (48). Presented through different types of rubrication and decoration, all versions were likely to lead to different interpretations (60-63). Such processes were not mere visual styling: they were part of the visual rhetoric to segment and label textual elements (50). And albeit for the sake of play, inked mistakes being hard to correct, or to integrate prior annotations: often scribes did not copy them one to one: an imperfect repetition. The result is "a tension between the nuclear work, composed at some prior point in time by one individual possessing a specific point of view, and the extended work, the text with all its "extradiegetic, illustrated, and abbreviated manifestations produced by one or usually more individuals often decades or even centuries after the writer composed" (48). It challenged the role of the original author. Digital annotations themselves afford for different types of context as they often afford for less visual freedom and stimulate linear writing (Derrida 1991, 199); a rubric is difficult to add. What types can we distinguish in Genius?

3.3. Two types of context: extensive and intensive annotation

To understand the types of context an annotation can provide I move to someone that has long been analysing the field of digital annotations: computer scientist and system developer Catherine Marshall. Instead of departing from the technical features, like Oren et al, she start with observing user practices. In 'The Future of Annotation in a Digital World' (2000) she describes two types of annotations, which she relates to intensive and extensive reading and accompanying differences in annotating data. The first, is horizontal annotation, a link between nuclear texts. This can be a hyperlink, but also a descriptive label: a tag, which then leads to other texts with the same tag (99-100). Also paper books have footnotes that lay intertextual links, but the organising of digital texts through these tags works very different as a folio book cannot be on several places, but digital ones can (Shirky 2006). Links

can become actual infrastructure and text are stored based on association.² If formal, content can be organised bottom-up. In what we call ‘hyper extensive’ reading situations, links are made between pieces of content rather than whole texts (Marshall 2000, 114). As ‘stitching fragments’, we could argue horizontal annotations as bridges to a convergent path, influencing which ‘pieces’ are likely to be connected.

Secondly we have vertical annotations, which are meant to dive deeper into one text and require an intensive reading situation (Marshall 2000, 17). Instead of linking to another nuclear text they contain their own content like critical questions or private contemplations. In glossaries of ancient biblical texts, words were explained and defined by notes in the margin or links to other parts in the same book (Barney 1991, 189). In medieval times, the mentioned visual layer was a type of vertical annotation. Online, we find for example the remediated yellow highlight, and one could add visuals, like video. However, what types are supported depends on the specific features of a platform: what types of annotation do we find in Genius?

4. Genius’ annotation modules

As said in Genius there are two ways of annotating: adding an annotation subject to the platform, or annotating right on the original page with the Web Annotator. When you add a text to the platform, there are two types of annotation granularity. Oren et al. (2006) define granularity as the predicate being attached to for example a sentence, a word or whole text (2). Genius differentiates between two: whole text and sentence-based annotation (which can also be one word).

4.1. Whole text annotations and artist pages

Whole text annotation describe a text in general. When adding a text to the platform, you need to fill out metadata: a textual genre, an author (artist)³, a title and optional metadata like album, producer and date. Users get a dropdown list with suggestions based on former entries of other users. Such a structured way of input stimulates users to use the same language, which is important, because these are not only descriptive tags but ‘bridges’ between texts on the platform. Although aimed at lyrics, we find political speeches as well, like Obama’s Dinner Speech and the Inauguration Speech. The author tag leads to an ‘artist page’ that includes all his/her texts and background information, a descriptive vertical annotation made by users that is partly shown everywhere on the site where you hover over an artist’s name. As such, the page is a ‘reusable’ annotation that, due to the standardised user-names, can be added by the platform itself. When you add an artist tag you indirectly place a singular text within the Genius curriculum of the artists. A textual context, which may influence the perception of a single text, as we see if we compare the page of Obama to that of Trump. A first thing to note is that the page

² A conceptual way of organising introduced by Vannevar Bush’s Memex (Bush in Mayer 1999: 33-34).

³ As the platform started out as lyric site, we find music jargon which probably is yet to be updated. In current practice the ‘artist’ equals ‘author’ or ‘speaker’

is an example of convergence and that textual genres blur. The page includes all texts types: from transcripts of debates and the ‘televised addresses to the nation’ to songs, from a high school note to his girlfriend to photo’s. If we compare this to Trump’s page we find speeches as well, but mostly protest songs and mockery not written by Trump, like ‘Black Trump’ from the Daily Show or the ‘Nick Beasley’s GOP Primetime Rap Battle’. As such it supports users to take a convergent route through negative articles and irony.

Besides tags, which are single, standardised words and classifications, there are descriptive annotations. Users are asked to follow HTML tags and format according to protocol, but this concern mostly visual styling as the platform does not recognise tags within these type of annotation, only hyperlinks. The annotations provide space to place it in a cultural and social context and explain what it is about. For example, The ‘Donald Trump Song’ of rapper Mac Miller is made 5 years ago and is about having success like Donald Trump. The song has gotten quite a different connotation in 2016, now Trump runs for president (showing how meaning is depending on social context). An annotation explains:

Five years after the release of this 2011 single, Mac has made it clear that he in no way supports Donald Trump or his presidential ambitions. He took several shots at Trump on The Nightly Show. “I f*cking hate you!” (Genius-Community, Donald Trump (song) (annotated) 2016)

A link to the Nightly Show is included. A contributor explains that Donald Trump is one of the most enduring symbols of success in hip hop, going back at least to Raekwon’s 1995 *Incarcerated Scarface*: “But yo, guess who’s the black Trump?”. It includes links to other texts using Trump as a symbol of status. Vertical and horizontal annotation likewise support each other, a type of laying a convergent path to build your statement on several sources.

The whole text annotations are afforded only because Genius controls the annotated texts and can determine their inherent structure (a very artist-centred one). When we use the Web Annotator, Genius does not ‘own’ the annotated text anymore, and even does not recognise them as such. Hence they do not follow the protocols needed to distinguish for example a statement on Trumps site from the rest of the sites content.⁴ Different granularities are not possible as the technique can only recognise selected sentences, affording only for sentence-based annotation. If you would want to add a general thing about the text you would need to highlight the whole in yellow. In practice, users work their way around the restriction by attaching a general annotation to the title, but that may be understood by users, for the machine the annotation looks exactly the same as a sentence-based one. Not being machine-readable, it does not afford for creating an inherent navigation structure. In the platform users build further upon an author’s curriculum, but the Web Annotator builds up an

⁴ Genius does not own copyrights to all their annotated texts either, which led to legal issues in the past.

intertextual content from zero every time again. For Trump this might be a good thing, as the platform drags along a way less positive memory than Obama.

4.2. Sentence-based annotations and juxta positioning

By highlighting one or several words one can add sentence-based annotations. Other than on-platform, whole text annotation this can also be done directly on the web page, as long as its HTML-based text. A space in the right margin pops up; one can write an annotation that will unfold every time someone clicks the yellow highlighted sentence. An annotation can include written text, images and hyperlinks. For example, we could annotate the statement on Trump's site in which he describes the Mexican Wall with the video of Games of Thrones. To everyone with the Genius-extension installed, the site will now show an annotation with the link, including the video itself. Even without adding more text, the combination of these two implies a third statement of not taking him seriously. Such developing of statements by juxta positioning becomes even more clear when a text is annotated with information that directly counters a statement. The page where Trumps argues for the stop of immigration because the "impact in terms of crime has been tragic" (Trump sd) is annotated with a link to research rapports of the American Immigration Council that show how crime amongst immigrant is in fact lower. Intertextual relations are made to shows inconsistency, a type Genius itself presents as 'fact checking'. As critics of dialectic would say (Meyer 1980), we cannot say that the third statement is not better per se (one could just as easily have sought supporting research data), but it stimulates the audience to take position. Without this critical annotation a reader might just have taken the statement for granted, now there is a choice laid out. All Genius annotations are public, so following readers cannot go back to the point where there is only one position.

Utilising annotation to show inconsistencies is often applied within an author's curriculum. Having a consistent opinion seems important is relevant in politics. In the end people probably vote for a person that is likely to remain representing their opinion. In a philosophical approach to identity, Stine Jenkins and Rob Wijnberg (2010) described how identity can be built on your opinion, so strong identities are created with stable opinions (37). We find this happening in Genius both in a positive and negative way. The Trace posted a statement of Trump positioning himself against gun control, and in annotations we find quotes of his book in 2000, stating that he opposes gun control (The Trace 2015). Linking the separate statements leads to that of an 'unreliable identity'. On the contrary, in The State of The Union Obama addresses an argue for 'better politics', and annotations gloss the claim as "[O]ne of his constant themes. It's a thread that runs from his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, through his campaign for President, through his time in the White House and beyond" (Obama, Barack (Office of the Press Secretary) 2016). The artist-based tag structure of Genius itself support this by providing an overview. The Web Annotator leaves more options open: one could choose strategically, and pick out random text that support your claim.

4.3. Annotations as convergent modules

An important element of Genius is that users cannot only interact with a text through annotation, but also with annotations themselves. They contain own content, and when it includes links to other texts they show a piece of the referred text itself, an excerpt like a few sentences and an image. Also, they include the annotated sentence. It are separate modules that contain all four elements of annotation and could work as stand-alone piece of content. We see the results when an annotated sentences is edited or deleted, like the Wikipedia page for Trump. The margin shows an annotation about his life but the sentence it was attached to has disappeared. A 'lost' annotation however will still be shown on top of the page, including the message that Genius is not able to place it right, but the original anchored text is included anyway. As such: the annotation locks the four elements into a modular element that can be used in discursive practices as stand-alone piece. In terms of convergence, they are not only bridges between pieces of content, but patchworks in itself. They can be copied, shown somewhere else, be measured and calculated. As such, they can be interacted with separately. We will find this as important element when we move to Genius' most distinguishing feature: the social, collaborative annotation.

5. Social annotations: additional seals of authority

We can now move to the more social part: the collaborative interaction with the annotations themselves the sources behind them. Annotations do not only create context themselves, but also include context of their own. What is characteristic about annotations is that the separate elements – the double context- affords for separate times. A story always has a double narrative, the past of the event and the narrative present (Nichols 1991, 65). Wikipedia articles then are in flux as users continuously update the text to a 'narrative present' (65). This updating is exactly what Lévy (1997) describes as the main feature of intelligent communities, "constantly negotiating of the order of things, language, and definition of objects, and never fixed" (17). However, annotations afford for the past to remain, the updates present is in the additional layer. On textual base, this layer is in flux, leaving the annotated text relatively stable.⁵

In *Annotation and its Text*, Toon (1991) names annotations not only as additional layers but 'additional seals of authority' (74) as every layer includes an own author. Normally, texts in participatory platforms are single texts created out of several voices, which Lévy (1997a) named the disappearance of the signature (366), but in Genius we might have the opposite: additional signatures. Every signature is both an author and an interpreter, as he comments on the annotated text from his personal perspective (Nichols 1991, 65). We can explain interpretation as re-contextualisation, which is a collaborative practice as this perspective is not individual, but a an 'updated present' that extends to a community. For example, relating a five year old song about Trump to the elections is not relevant

⁵ In terms of meaning this means that both are hence they are intertwined.

for me only, but for many more in our current time. Every annotation creates a certain audience as it comes with an interpretational frame, a position regarding the text. Ralph (1991) and Derrida (1991) approach annotation as an aggressive act as they create a context that the original writer cannot escape from; “he becomes imprisoned within my explication” (Ralph 1991, 182).

Both Ralph and Derrida base this arguments on public paper annotating which was a task for professional communities. What happens when such a task moves from the professional to the crowd is explained by Shirky (2008); as the published text do not have to pass editors judgement, texts now are first published, then valued (97). If we apply this to above, we can say that a position is created, and then valued: does an audience agree, or not? The annotator likewise does not automatically represent a community. This aligns with Jenkins (2002) description of virtual knowledge communities as supporting ‘multiple ways of knowing’ (161) in which a user just can choose which one he supports, and move from one to another. But before turning to their interaction we should point out: how does Genius distinguishes voices in the first place?

5.1. The Genius voices: user profiles and hierarchy

Deleuze (1991) explains how users of a platforms are just as measurable, traceable and programmable as the produced content. Individuals have become standardised data; “*dividuals*” (5). Utilising a developing digital profile an enduring control is exercised based on users actions, which determine your access to and representation of information and actions (4). Possible interactions may vary per user type. However, becoming a certain ‘user type’ may be influenced by social action as well. In ‘The Creative Conversation of Collective Intelligence’ Lévy (2013) elaborates on individual cognition within knowledge communities, based on social relationships with for example discussion leaders and peers:

The type of effective participation by individuals [...] will shape their social roles as experts, discussion leaders, collaborating learners or more passive users. [...] In each community, individuals occupy specific semantic places according to their areas of expertise and learning paths. (107)

This semantic places involve technical affordances, like the way they afford for users to climb in rank and gain access and permission. This concerns both the back-end structures regarding order and hierarchy amongst users, but also front-end presentation. If more voices are found in one text, we may expect one to be chosen over another. For example, a conversation between Obama, a new member and a journalist arranges for different interpretations as three ‘anonymous’ or semiotic the same users, a hierarchy based on social and cultural conventions. Algorithms might show content as preferred, the technique does not determine who is ‘most important’, a user still has own role in choosing sources (Lévy 2013, 102).

5.1.1. Genius' user profiles and social surveillance

A participating crowd is no homogenous hive-mind as there is room for individual voices (Lévy 2013, 105). In Genius all voices may participate, but they are not equal. Every contributed content is presented with a profile name which links to an account page. Hierarchy between accounts is established in two ways: profile types and 'profile points' named IQ. Both influence access based on back-end restrictions, for example you need an amount of IQ to contribute to locked songs. You enter the platform as a Whitehat, only able to watch and add annotations or propose edits. Besides Whitehats, we have Editors, Moderators, Educators, and Staff: every type comes with extra possibilities, starting from accepting and deleting edits to being able to alter the platform itself. Interesting are the differences in how you climb in rank: a profile type is something Genius staff can give you and has a top-down hierarchy of elite users. But IQ relies on the affordance of other users up- and downvoting your actions and your edits being accepted by Moderators. In terms of computer and human language we could note that this is a very numerical way of gaining status, a measured social quantity. Whereas professionals used to get their status from belonging to an institution (Shirky 2008, 55-56) here you need to be appreciated by the community after joining. Status is not derived from being an annotator only, but from being an appreciated one. Shirky (2008) states that lowering the threshold to participate leads to the disappearance of the professional (and creates room for the amateur). He describes a professional as following;

A professional is someone who receives important occupational rewards from a reference group whose membership is limited to people who have undergone specialized formal education and have accepted a group-defined code of proper conduct. (James Q. Wilson in Shirky, 2008:57-58)

We find noteworthy similarities with Genius rank-system: rewards from the community and a group-defined code in shape of social protocols are found throughout the whole platform. When you add an annotation it gives you guidelines like 'how to annotate' and 'formatting help'. Not following the protocols gives other users the right to edit, downvote or, in case of elite users, delete you. As such it is not the technique restricting you but other users who keep you on track. The types of social control are similar to that Niederer and van Dijck found for Wikipedia, instead of the additional voting, making it more of a deliberate process (Lévy 2013, 100). Also profile pages, editing histories, conversation and user names are shown more prominent, making for an environment in which a user is very aware of the other voices. The accounts afford for the platform to collect all your actions at the account-page, which can be followed and surveilled. This type of social control (Deleuze 1992) is even more supported by the 'Firehose dashboard', a list where all actions on the platform are displayed in real-time. The platform's standardised structure reveals as we can use filters like user types, edit types and genres to filter the list. A 'suspect' label can be added to a profile by both technique and users, placing them into an easy-to-follow position. The notification system helps users

to follow topics, users, articles or fora. The technique and people serve as ‘watchdog’, the ‘elite-users’ make decisions.

5.1.2. The author’s voice: the Verified Artist Account

Different than Wikipedia, the annotated texts do have one original writer, which introduced the notion of auctorial control to the platform. Besides the users types mentioned there is a third one relating to ‘main authors’: the Verified Artist. Each artist-name (including artist page) in Genius can be claimed by a user who can prove himself as being that artist. As such, the authors of annotated text have a different relation to their own text, affording for a certain rhetorical control. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines ‘rhetoric’ as “the art or skill of speaking or writing formally and effectively especially as a way to persuade or influence people”. Targeting on a certain interpretation of a text could be a type of influence, but the shifting contextual layers in Genius make texts hard to capture. Ridolfo and DeVoss (2009) coined the term ‘rhetorical velocity’ to approach rhetoric of such dynamic texts by understanding how texts work as a component of a strategy instead of a fixed work. Focus is not on a final text, but on the text in process. We could approach this from the side of affordances: how can you remain involved in dynamic texts? The Verified Artist affords for a user to keep track of his/her own texts, supported by the earlier mentioned following/notification system. Still, authors cannot stop their text from being copied to Genius and cannot prevent the Web Annotator to run our their site, but an author can ‘surveil’ processes surrounding his/her texts.

With the account, authors can become actively involved in the annotation process. In fact, they do have auctorial control over their own annotations as these cannot be edited by others. Verified Artist annotations are green instead of the regular yellow, and a Verified-mark is shown behind the username, which makes self-glossing recognisable from both front- and back-end perspective. The White House has annotated its own speeches, to “get involved with readers” (Lapowski 2016) and provide background information. We find an example of annotation not only used as defence, but as a way to deliver pieces of information, a personal convergent web. What was a single speech now is one with possibilities to go in depth and explore, anticipating on the idea that your text will end up in an intertextual field, you might just as well start building it yourself. Self-glossing is a way of a reader to become his own audience (Nichols 1991, 65), and just as others can create rhetorical context, a user can try to explain himself from another position. Blogger Matthew Pulver (2016) wrote an article in which he writes to be worried about Trump’s strategy of rage and aggression, “torching a flame in white American parts of society”. A while after the article he has changed his mind and wants to tone down the somewhat aggressive voice. He could just remove the article, edit it or overwrite the old one. Instead, he annotated his own article:

I need to start by saying that I wrote this in a blast of anger animated by the racism and white supremacy that I grew up in and by which I’m still surrounded. (Pulver 2016)

Rather than trying to keep a text suiting to a current time, the context is used rhetorically by the author. ‘The state of flux’ is thus not a type of and author losing control, but of taking the control on the context back. Off-platform however, keeping track is harder: the annotated texts are not recognized as belonging to one author, so there are no notifications possible. You only get notification based on pages you annotated instead of all the ones attributed to you. The platform again shows to be an important element in controlling a web of pieces rather than one fragment.

5.2. The communities’ voices: annotating together

Now we set out the voices, we can turn to the final point: how do they annotate together? Genius annotations are all public and when someone browses a page (on- or off-platform) that is already annotated, you see the history of other participants. As such, an annotator will not start at a blank page but build further on the annotated whole. An article about Trump on online journal *New York* writes the following:

Donald Trump has provoked conservative intellectuals to express their dismay in existential tones. Conservative writers have used terms like unmitigated, unalloyed, potential [...] disaster to describe a Trump nomination. (Chait 2016)

A first thing that we note is that ‘*conservative intellectuals*’ is highlighted, a type of visual organising that makes them catch attention. The annotation attached to the highlight says:

Extremely dangerous to put these two words next to each other. (Chait 2016, annotation by Genius)

Then, ‘express their dismay’ is annotated with the words:

I’d never encountered the word “unalloyed” before, thanks, ‘conservative intellectuals’.” (Chait 2016, annotation by Genius.

What we see here is an example of Butler’s subversive use of language: in the article, conservative intellectuals have a negative connotation, but the annotation creates position against the article and allows other users to gather behind that position, in this case done by upvoting the comment. The created ‘opposition’ can suddenly talk back. Moreover, the second annotation responds to the focus on ‘conservative intellectuals’, a reaction to another annotated. If not for the first, the second would be likely not to exist. As Lévy explains, in crowds no one knows all, but all put together they may form a dialectic process (2007, 104) leading to claims they would not have been able to make alone.

The margin of the Web Annotator has a tab ‘Featured Annotations’ which provides an overview of individuals who contributed. The ones with a special profile, like Verified Artist are shown first – a clear example that voices are not equally represented- followed by a rank based on number of annotations. For example, ‘The CNN-Telemundo Republican Debate Transcript’ was

annotated, and we see directly that 65 annotations are added by 10 users, including two Washington Post Reporters (Washington Post 2016). The debate, that was between Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, Marco Rubio and moderator Wolf Blitzer, in a way now has 10 more participants. If the Republican politicians would have had an account, like Obama and the White House, they could have participated, but they do not and Trump and Cruz are likely not to be aware of the discussion they are in.

In §2 I addressed how a community can contain more discursive stances and that not every users has to agree with statements made by other participants. Off-platform, besides creating new annotations members can interact with existing annotations in three ways: up and downvote, respond to and share it. In the debate, Trump accused Cruz of using a rhetorical ‘soundbite’ and Cruz defends him with saying it was no soundbite but a fact. In an annotation we find someone saying: “a soundbite can be a fact” (Washington Post 2016). This annotation is downvoted by someone who replies that the annotation misses Trump’s point. The two annotations do not agree and create two positions: one at the side of Trump, and one at the side of Cruz. Semantically these annotations are not equal as they have different voices attached: one is an Washington Post Editor, one a normal user⁶, which could for example lead to different interpretations based on the social convention of journalists as trustworthy sources.

5.3. The communities’ voice: Genius Annotations

In the debate above, we find several voices that co-exist but do not and cannot merge, as the Web Editor does not afford for users to edit annotations. Editing existing annotation is a fourth type of interacting with annotations, which is platform-only. Users can work on *Genius Annotations* collaboratively by proposing edits. Different than off-platform, users cannot annotate a sentence twice. When a sentence is highlighted already one needs to build further on the existing one. An annotation or edit will initially be shown as ‘un reviewed’ or ‘proposed’ and when accepted by an Editor it will turn into a ‘Genius Annotation’. The context of the presented annotation changes from a single user to one that passed the communities elite judgement, introducing the important mechanism of ‘decision’. This supports a homogenous voice instead of several co-existing ones. The difference between these mechanism can better be understood by Lévy’s (2013) creative discussion, which he used to defend the intelligence of crowds. Critics sometimes fear the beehive mind in which all individual voices are overwhelmed by the crowd (101). General knowledge then is the blur of voices in which all black and white turns out grey. But this would mean that also change is suppressed and that we would still have the same ideals and opinions as ages ago, which can easily be proved wrong as not the same political candidates are chosen every four year. Lévy explains that besides general knowledge, there is room for creative input which might contain both brilliant and very bad ideas. Importantly, not all input will be adopted and become part of general knowledge, only a few become adopted (100). The hierarchy of user profiles in Genius plays an important part in the ‘creative discussions’ on the platform, as input is

⁶ On the platform, we would also have a difference in IQ, but outside the platform IQ does not count.

free for all that have an account but decision is in hands of the elite users. All member may vote (up and down), a practice that reminds again of deliberation, similar to the role of the community in attributing IQ points to user profiles. Paper annotations represented the community the annotator belonged to, but in Genius the community supports individual voices they find deserving of it. When not agreed upon as ‘Genius edit’ a comment can be placed under an annotation, rendering it formally less important, but still present. Ralph (1991) describes how an annotation is transient as the annotator can only take the position of one reader, a text is open for several readings and communities position might change (180-182). However, in Genius a community itself can take several positions, and also the ‘communities voice’ can be updated to a narrative present continuously.

A ‘Genius Annotation’ is represented as voice of the community, but is transparent by showing the several individual voices and an edit history. Clicking on an annotation, the percentage of all users that contributed (note the rank-system again) is displayed. Besides the user profiles, the community is presented through numbers, like browsing rates, ups and downvotes, and through profiles. When we open a text and see the White House annotation next to ours, it might do more than just creating positions. It leaves a mark, saying “I was here”. In the time of the Roman Empire the emperor could exercise legislative power by just placing his red annotation under a proposal law, in which “the signature is an extension of the body (Nichols, *On the Sociology of Medieval Manuscript Annotation* 1991, 45-46)”. Besides textual influences, the community likewise leaves its presence on the pages it annotates, both in numbers and in user names. Communities ‘presence’ makes the annotation practices itself not only social, it makes the reading of annotated text a social reading practice.

6. Conclusion: meaningful re-contextualisation

In this research paper, an analysis was done on how collaborative annotation platform Genius operates as a socio-technical knowledge platform. The way the materiality of the platform enables social annotation is analysed through conducting affordance analysis and examining illustrative cases from the American General Elections.

Digital annotation modules as strategic contextual layers

According to Foucault, knowledge works through a construct of several discursive positions that are in conflict, creating ‘systems of dispersion’. A knowledge instrument’s materiality regards the way it affords for users to (re)produce these positions by responding to them or creating new ones. Genius formally differs from Wikipedia as people add separate contextual layers instead of iteratively overwriting an author’s text, creating the opportunity for co-existing discourses and additional signatures. Although additional, annotations create a holistic meaning which is different than its separate parts. As meaning is dependent of context, annotations can be used as a rhetorical instrument. For example, statements can be fact checked or inconsistencies can be brought to light by juxta

positioning different fragments.

Marshall distinguishes two types of context: horizontal annotations (intertextual) and vertical ones (descriptive and visual), but in Genius the line between the two blurs, other texts are often used to support new statements. Digital texts can be copied and shown everywhere, enabling users to navigate through a convergent landscape where all media types and formats merge: songs, quotes, memes and political speeches are all equal, as long as they follow HTML formats. The contextual layer of annotations have the same properties as digital text, and interestingly the ‘state of flux’ has moved from author’s text to the annotation. Annotations are in a ‘narrative present’ and create a position (or several), being an aggressive act a writer cannot escape from. In Genius, authors cannot keep control over their work by fixing a text but by keeping track of and being involved in ongoing changes. This rhetorical velocity is supported by Genius’ ‘Verified Artist’-accounts⁷, which constitutes a different relation between author and his/her own texts in representation (green, verified) and access (annotations cannot be altered). However, this auctorial privilege is only afforded by platform-based annotations, when Genius can set uploading protocols of the annotated texts.

A standardised structure of tags constitutes a network of intertextual relations on the platform, and artist tags have an overview page which builds a memory of his/her curriculum, a reusable intertextual context. The artist gets an update when changes are made. The platform has two types of annotation granularity: whole-text and sentence-based. But off-platform (using Web Annotator), ‘whole texts’ are not recognised as such, affording only for sentence-based annotations and disabling the reusable artist’s intertextual context. Sentence-based annotations are linked to a highlighted (group of) word(s). They contain the annotation object, the subject, the link and the source. As such, they are measurable, shareable and storable stand-alone modules that can be interacted with more freely than paper. Users can up vote, downvote or respond to an annotation.

Social annotation: communities voice

Normally, texts in participatory platforms are dynamic main texts created out of several voices, leading to the disappearance of the signature. What is interesting about annotation is that all layers have a signature attached, which in Genius comes with a user profile that influences both representation and access. There are two hierarchical systems: [1] profile types distinguishes normal ‘Whiteheads’ from a privileged elite (Editors, Moderators, etc.) and [2] a point system in which ‘IQ’ can be gained as the community up and downvotes your actions. Although the professional is said to disappear when the crowd is brought in, the mechanism of social approval and community norms are found in Genius as well, only it happens after joining a community instead of up front.

We find the same acceptance mechanism in collaborative annotation on the platform. Lévy explains the role of individual voices in crowds’ as input to creative conversation, differentiating between delivering and accepting input. All Genius members can add annotations, but they will

⁷ Being music-based and in beta, ‘artist’ and ‘author’ are used interchangeable in Genius at time of writing

initially be shown as ‘proposed’. The whole community can up- and downvote the proposal, but only the elite users decide if the input is accepted. When accepted it is represented as communities voice: a ‘Genius Annotation’. Other users may propose edits, and build further to create annotations which literally contain several voices but form a coherent (and holistic) whole, the communities preferred discursive position. Off-platform there are no collaborative ‘Genius Annotation’, but only individual ones. People may up-, and downvote and respond, but cannot edit. As such, individual voices do not merge into a whole and voices (and accompanying discursive stances) co-exist separately, instead of a preferred communities voice.

Beyond Genius and beyond control

Altogether we can say that digital, compared to paper annotation is one of measurable and programmable modules, which reflects both in interaction with annotations themselves and on the voices behind them. Combined, these two constitute the ‘social annotation’ platform of Genius. However, the materiality only shows the social practices as afforded by the platform, which overlooks individual motivations and social relations between members. As Jenkins states, the social relation between members are an important element of virtual communities. Besides a knowledge instrument, Genius is a community of fans and language-lovers, which needs to be explored further to fully understand the ‘social’ in socio-technical platforms.

As I used exemplary texts to validating affordances, they do not give an insight in the general discourses on the platform. This is important, as they platform profiles itself as annotating the world – but it is likely not to represent this world equally. We should include the political economy and social context, which would include for example a quantitative examination of the text and its participating parties. Parties like Washington Post, The White House, New York Times for example are all American-based, and even within America Democrats and Republicans normally gather around different media channels (Gilbert 2011). A general negative attitude towards Trump might come as no surprise, as the platform was originally a community of hip-hop fans – probably not his biggest fan base.

As the Genius Community grows, the question of control gets more important. In politics, the public critical examination of candidates might be justifiable, but the Web Annotator actually ignores the robot.txt web protocol in not providing a possibility to opt out. Recently, Genius was used to annotate a private blog in a quite negative manner, which was not appreciated by the author (Dayle 2016). The events caused dissension outside and within the community, raising question of boundaries and protocols. A crowd might bring in a party, but we should wonder if some gatherings are not meant to be invitation-only.

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