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Authenticity in the Digital Age of Social Media

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Authenticity in the Digital Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Ghost writing is not a new phenomenon, as it has occurred in various media, including classical music and contemporary novels, for centuries. The last decade, however, has seen ghost writing enter into a new arena with its increased occurrence in social media. This raises questions concerning authenticity, for if authenticity is linguistically built, one has to wonder about the degree to which a ghost writer may obtain the authority to genuinely express the ideas of their employee. Regardless, the experience of the social media content consumer as an authentic or inauthentic act is central to the consideration of this paper.

When talking of brands and consumers, we have to consider the degree to which the responsibility is on the consumer or the producer of the product. This paper will look at this issue from both points of view. In doing so, we will apply numerous ethical principles, including deontological ethics, to try and ascertain the degree to which ghost writing in social media is morally problematic.

Keywords

Ethics, Social Media, Ghost Writing, Branding, Authenticity

In September of 2017, U.S. Senator Ted Cruz publicly liked pornography. Unlike in decades past, this was not a press release or even a comment to the press. Instead, Mr. Cruz's Twitter account liked a post of another Twitter account that posts sexually explicit material. Later, Mr. Cruz indicated that one of his aides responsible for managing his digital presence was to blame and the story has mostly ended here.

Yet, incidents like this raise important ethical questions regarding how we consume media in the 21st Century. Ghost writing of content has occurred in various media for centuries, including classical music and contemporary novels. The last decade, however, has seen ghost writing enter a new arena with its increased occurrence in social media. Companies and celebrities have turned to social media as platforms of influence for their target markets/audiences. One is able to engage in a threaded Facebook "conversation" with McDonalds as easily as they are with their own parents. In order to manage these increased interactions as well as the expectations of availability, prominent companies and people have started hiring employees solely to manage and engage in social media spaces on their behalf. The verified account of Senator Ted Cruz is just one example of this contemporary practice. We argue that this form of ghost writing represents a departure from prior ghost writing practices as

the intent is audience engagement built to feel authentic while relying on teams of uncredited people to do so.

In such a mediascape, the question of where authenticity comes from must be addressed. If authenticity is linguistically built (Taylor and Van Every 2000), one has to wonder about the degree to which a ghost writer, who has intimate conversations with the person they are representing in social media, may obtain the authority to genuinely express the ideas of their employer. Regardless, the expectation that a consumer of that account may have when viewing produced messages may lead that consumer to view manufactured, branded, framed, and manicured messages as being authentic expressions of a genuine person.

Ostensibly, these concerns are addressed through experience with the medium itself. As one becomes more proficient with various social media platforms, they become enlightened to the fact that people are brands, just as we have come to see advertising as biased messages produced by brands. This paper, however, will plunge into that assumption and analyze where the responsibility of authenticity resides. These questions will be analyzed from a variety of philosophical frameworks (including deontological) as tools to ascertain the degree to which ghost writing in social media is morally problematic. This is particularly ripe for analysis when comparing the role of authenticity and expectation of authenticity from the view of producers and consumers as in a social media ecology, for each person is simultaneously both.

What is this mediascape that we are currently presented with? A recent report from the Pew Research Center (2017) reports that approximately 69% of all Americans use at least some form of social media. This percentage increases when we look at different age demographics. Marketers in particular are interested in young purchasers, so that 86% of 18-29 year olds and 80% of all 30-49 year olds make use of social media makes social media engagement of prime importance to those seeking this market. Sheer use of social media is not the only indication of social media growing as a professionalized endeavor. A quick search on Indeed (a popular job search engine) found approximately 64,000 jobs related to social media. The sought out skills included management of accounts, posting, content creation, etc. Professionalism in social media is certainly here. The Content Factory (2017), a social media firm, estimates that most professional companies will be spending 4,000 – 7,000 dollars per month on these types of social media engagements.

That said, many early scholars of social media predicted a different vision for social media content and activity. For example, Clay Shirkey, a prominent media scholar, argued in *Here Comes Everybody* that social media represents the ability to organize

without organizations so that humans could overcome barriers, innovate, collaborate, and generally make the world a better place (Shirkey 2008). Shirkey is not the only one to have such a vision for social media. Numerous articles from the early 2000s argued that social media, and the internet in general, was a democratizing medium that would amateurize our media diets, break down barriers for collaboration, and unsettle organizational structures. In essence, through the genuine and authentic interaction of genuine, real, non-professional people, the world would have a richer, more diverse, more collaborative dialogue space. Using the terminology of Habermasians, the internet represented the digital public sphere. New services like Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, gave voice to those without printing presses to participate in the dialogues of the mass media. It intersected and influenced traditional media. These were people, real people, changing the world.

Scholars continue to debate the merits of the rhetoric that occurs in these spaces. Donald Trump's Twitter presence aside, political social media campaigns, corporate accounts like Chase and McDonalds, and news media outlet social media indicates that social media is not always about democratizing voice. It is a professional environment where marketing, industrial interests, political interests, and careful, professional level interactions are expected.

Controversies erupt when popular accounts make mistakes. Newt Gingrich, or at least his account, was publically shamed for purchasing Twitter followers. Senator Chuck Grassley tweeted incoherent sentence fragments, making him the stuff of internet legend. McDonald's officially tweeted that the country would be better off if Obama was still president instead of Donald Trump, resulting in concern over alienating consumers. As a result, it is not surprising that those with branding, imaged related goals; such as companies, celebrities, and politicians, would instead turn to a professional class of ghost writers to manage and produce refined, purposeful, persuasive content. This is not inherently problematic as we often turn to professionalism to produce the results we would like. However, a deontological ethical framework such as Immanuel Kant's offers us a basis to question the ethical nature of the phenomenon of ghost writing within social media accounts.

The Kantian ideal of universality within the categorical imperative seems to undermine the very practice of ghost writing, for Kant famously asks us to "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Weston 2001, 90). Imagining for a moment what social media would look like if everyone knew that every other post was not authored by the person listed indicates the questionable nature of the practice from a Kantian perspective. In a world

in which everything is ghost written, nothing feels authentic, for nothing can be truly believed.

Of course, the issue is muddled when one considers the practice on an individual perspective (Ted Cruz or 50 Cent) versus a corporate perspective. Regardless of what the Supreme Court may have said, most people do not consider corporations such as Coca Cola and Apple, or organizations like the NRA, as people. In terms of corporations, we are much more likely to recognize as consumers that the item being viewed in Twitter or Instagram is being presented by an employee whose job it is to manufacture that content. One could even go so far as to alter the maxim behind the categorical imperative to allow for corporations to always be represented by a social media expert, placing the question of ethical authenticity on the backburner in those cases.

Authenticity is still an important component in accounts that are presented as representing a single entity. The accounts of a model such as Chrissy Teigen or her husband the musician John Legend appear to be legitimate (especially as some of their tweets are as benign as their enjoyment of a Stove Top Stuffing for Thanksgiving dinner). When we read about Chrissy at the veterinarian worrying about her sick bulldog Puddy, we truly feel connected and empathize with their struggle (after all, we've seen several pictures of the little guy alongside pictures of food and cover shoots posted by Chrissy). The idea that the posts by Chrissy may not be by Ms. Teigen herself strike us as a betrayal of a trust. We trust her – we trust her voice – we trust her account.

Still, it would be foolish to forget that Chrissy Teigen is a celebrity, and as a celebrity must maintain her brand. This confuses the personal versus professional distinction for the average consumer, and examples like Ted Cruz and 50 Cent throw doubt on the legitimacy of all areas of the social media universe.

Social Media expert Jason Falls writes in Social Media Explorer about concerns regarding ghost writing in blogging. That article, titled "The Ethics, or Lack Thereof, Of Ghost Blogging" did make some important distinctions that may help clarify the corporate versus singular distinction wrestled with above. Falls writes that:

- If the writing piece in question is written under no byline for the company, you're a copywriter, not a ghost writer.
- If the writing piece in question is written under the byline of a person who takes a proactive role in outlining, dictating and/or editing the piece, you're a copywriter, not a ghost writer.

- If the writing piece in question is written under the byline of a person who simply reads the copy the writer provides offers cursory suggestions and edits, you should be listed a co-author on the piece... If you're not, you are a ghost writer and this is, by definition, not being honest or transparent with the audience.
- If the writing piece in question is written under the byline of a person who never even touches the project other than to pay the author, it's just a flat lie and unethical in my book (Falls 2009).

This line of thinking can help distinguish what may be a simple philosophical curiosity (when someone serving in a position of media relations publishes tweets for the company that employs them) from other more ethically serious matters. Of course, as history has taught us, corporate tweeting and other social media can have ramifications that are ethical in nature. To take just one example consider when a corporation tweets an advertisement or attempts a joke that is seen as being insensitive for sexist, racist, homophobic, or other reasons. Looking at the September 2014 DiGiorno Pizza's tweet that used a trending hashtag at the time – “#WhyIStayed You Had Pizza.” Of course, this small tweet caused a bit of an uproar, as the WhyIStayed trend was about women staying in violent relationships – a clear example of a post being tone-deaf to the ongoing conversation (<https://www.cio.com/article/2839794/social-media/12-shocking-social-media-horror-stories.html#slide4>, accessed 1/9/2018). In cases like this, who is to blame – the person who posted the tweet, the persons consulted for the tweet, or the person who hired the tweeter and the other consultants to the company in the first place?

Saying that we should focus most of our attention on individual accounts still leaves some serious questions. Of course, the degree to which entities like Beyoncé or Donald Trump are individuals or are instead fronts for larger more expansive brands and empires is an open one worth considering, and serves to highlight the concerns raised above. One does not know who is talking when someone is expressing their viewpoints in social media – and that is not a good thing.

It is at this point that we introduce the ethics of care model, formulated most famously by Carol Gilligan, into this conversation. Her perspective highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships, a point particularly relevant to ghost writing and social media. When we like a tweet posted by Philip Pritchard, the keeper of the Stanley Cup (perhaps the most important job in the world, we dare say), we believe that we are communicating directly with the man himself. When he likes a comment posted

on one of his posts, it feels like the man himself is showing respect for an offering of wisdom, insight, or praise. While the disappointment that would arise by learning that Phil, or any other celebrity, actually did not spend time liking one's comment might not cause significant harm, it does not change the fact that this perceived breach of trust might affect people severely.

This disappointment matters, says Gilligan, because our world is "a world of relationships and psychological truths where an awareness of the connection between people gives rise to a recognition of responsibility for one another, a perception of the need for response" (Gilligan 1993, 98). When an individual assumes a social position within social media, an understandable assumption is that they are who they say they are. When a 48 year old male enters a chatroom pretending to be a 15 year old female, few would argue that what is taking place is an inauthentic representation of reality, undermining the potential relationship between that person and those they interact with. The same is true for ghost writing of social media accounts. According to commentator Anthony Weston, the ethics of care is rooted in a larger conception of virtue ethics that stretch back to the philosophy of Aristotle, and that this perspective presents "Many of the key 'practices' of human life [that] arise from our life together" (Weston 2001, 98). When a social media giant like George Takei admits that some of his posts are outsourced to an individual paid \$10 per post, or when Hugh Jackman has to step in to explain that his tweet about the Opera Center in his homeland of Australia (more famously known as the Sydney Opera House) was written by a staffer, our sense of connection is undermined.

There is an inherent responsibility in placing your name on a document, be it a last will or a quick note to a friend. From the perspective of fans and followers of a celebrity, social media posts are notes that represent a relationship, regardless of how naïve or tenuous that connection may be. As more examples of social media ghost writing gone awry become public, more work must be done to evaluate what these examples mean for the larger ethos of our internet lives.

The ethics of care go beyond the inauthenticity of being ghost written for. There are strategic reasons beyond managing a strong social media presence to make use of ghost writers.

Potential social media scandals, such as the initial Ted Cruz example, allows for a shirking of responsibility. Although it is likely that this particular incident was the accidental act of an individual working for Senator Cruz, there is also the possibility that this was a genuine act of Mr. Cruz. In order to avoid a meaningful discussion of what Senator Cruz's enjoyment of pornography means for his public persona, a

staffing change conveniently makes such conversations unnecessary. In this way, the use of ghost writing can be seen as more than just a practice of professionalism, it is also a practice to insulate those in power. Instead of having to authentically address controversial, inadvertent, or upsetting messages, those in power can simply “make a staffing change” in order to solve the problem. This then becomes no different than “I was hacked” as an excuse for embarrassing content. We can think of this as the digital equivalent of “I was drunk” as an excuse for foolishly expressed sentiments. This then allows those in power to be able to trial run ideas and positions. When there is pushback, the intern or someone without power can be blamed and eliminated. Not only does this violate the ethics of care for the audience by way of potential manipulation, it is also a violation of the ethics of care regarding those being sacrificed for the account. Instead of being valued members of a team, ghost writers, previously unknown to the audience, are replaceable parts in a machine of content.

Yet, we should not be so quick to assume that we too are not guilty of these ethical violations. One of the promises of social media is that we, the once consumer, are now also producers of media content. Each Facebook post, tweet, and YouTube video is media content created by us. We consume and produce media, known in the media studies parlance as prosumerism. We likely do not have ghost writers, per se, but we are likely less than ideally authentic in our posts. We present ourselves ideally or partially. The normative standard being modeled by professional social media users, both known and unknown, is likely modeling the type of normatively correct social media behavior. Through observation, even the amateurs among us have learned the “dos and don’ts” of social media behavior. The professional class of social media are likely shaping the ethics of self-portrayal toward perfection and idealism and away from more authentic and genuine portrayals of self.

This paper serves as just the tip of the iceberg regarding the ethical questions we should be asking about the consumption and production of social media. In many ways, we assume that this medium will self-develop social norms and “correct” behavior. This was the hope and vision for many of the initial researchers. Professionals with considerations toward idealization instead of authenticity, however, are seemingly shaping these norms. This paper seeks to help us critically engage in discourse around the application of ethics as a potential solution to the pitfalls of a disingenuous mediated world.

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