Crowd-Authoring in the Social Sciences

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Each Chapter Is Written to Be Read Independently
Opening

In the social sciences, although individual and small group forms of authorship are the norm during the authoring process, authoring is merely one phase of the overall ‘cycle’ of academic knowledge production. This authoring phase is normally not collective, whereas many other phases of this cycle are collective; from conferences and seminars, to citation conventions and evaluation processes of all kinds (including peer reviewing). In other words, in the social sciences, most components of academic knowledge production are collective; however, when it comes to authoring, collectivism disappears.

This book proposes what could be called ‘crowd-authoring’—an approach in which a global large group of academics work together to co-author a manuscript. It examines if it is technically and politically feasible to compose a crowd-authored article. It reports on an experiment wherein 99 scholars with shared interest collaborated in three rounds via email to write a short piece. Despite the practical and political challenges, it was found that crowd-authoring could be put into practice. That is,
after two years of mediation, this manuscript was completed and submitted for publication.

That said, the editors of almost 50 journals rejected the manuscript, without even the consultation of peer reviewers. So, although the process of crowd-authoring was, in itself, successful in the sense that a crowd of authors managed to get together and produce a crowd-authored manuscript, the act of getting editors to tolerate the idea of crowd-authoring was unsuccessful. So, the problem was not with getting academics to manufacture a crowd-authored manuscript but rather with getting editors to respond positively to such a change in the intellectual and procedural convention of authoring.

Despite this constant rejection, the manuscript was eventually accepted for publication in a credited, impact-factor journal. This volume recounts and critically reflects on every feature of such an occurrence. A contribution of this volume is that it provides a debate about the technical and political ramifications of crowd-authoring; a phenomenon that is expected to soon enter the academic discourse in the social sciences.
Chapter 1: The Art of Crowd Authoring

Outline

Academic cognition is ‘socially distributed’, being stretched across the various minds of all academics, instead of residing within the mind of a single academic or a few academics. For this reason, methodologies should be innovated to systematically bring together these fragmented pieces of cognition. This chapter serves this purpose by pioneering a ‘crowd-authoring’ approach (Al Lily, 2016). This approach helps enable an international crowd of academics to co-author a manuscript, addressing a particular issue of shared concern based on reflections upon their daily academic practices. The chapter addresses the following question: What are the main mechanisms needed for crowd-authoring? This question is answered through a developmental endeavour in which 99 academics of educational technology from around the world worked together in three rounds by email to compose a short article. Based on this endeavour, three main mechanisms have been developed: a) a mechanism for finding a crowd of scholars; b) a mechanism for managing this crowd;
and c) a mechanism for analysing the input of this crowd. The recommendation is that crowd-authoring ought to win the attention of academic communities and funding agencies, for three reasons. One is the well-connected nature of the contemporary age. Second is the widely and commonly distributed status of academic intelligence. Third is the increasing value of collective and democratic participation. The recommendation is that large-scale multi-authored publications are a way forward for academic fields and wider academia in the 21st century.

**Introduction and Rationales**

There is considerable variation between academic disciplines when it comes to authorship conventions (Castelvecchi, *Nature*, 15 May 2015; Bird, 1997; Endersby, 1996; Patel, 1973). While solo authorship and small multi-authorship are popular in many subjects (notably in the humanities and social sciences), collective authorship has been applied in the natural sciences. Yet, despite the application of collective authorship in the natural sciences, such authorship has not existed as a methodology and has not had an established methodological framework.
This chapter has therefore come to contribute to the establishment of such a framework. It is the first publication to talk about large authorship as a methodology.

Academic fields are intelligence-intensive arenas. Hence, academic ‘developers’ should put considerable effort into continuously suggesting and developing intelligence-management strategies that help these fields to more effectively manage their academic intelligence. This chapter is concerned with the development of a strategy that helps with the organisation of academic intelligence. The strategy focuses on the authorship of academic articles. Academic cognition and intelligence are ‘socially distributed’, instead of dwelling inside the single mind of an individual academic or a few academics they are spread throughout the different minds of all academics (Ellis, 1994). In this chapter, some mechanisms are developed that systematically bring together these fragmented pieces of cognition and intelligence. These mechanisms jointly form a new authoring method called ‘crowd-authoring’, enabling an international crowd of academics to co-author a manuscript in an
organised way. This method is, partially, like composing petitions, manifestos or constitution referenda. It is, to some degree, a ‘networked flow process’ (Gaggioli et al., 2011; 2013), in which a paper acts as a ‘cultural artefact’ upon which a network shares, negotiates and refines thoughts and knowledge. It produces ‘snapshots’ of cooperative reflections shared by academics of the same field. It produces a ‘trend document’ with the reflexive thoughts of scholars, although without necessarily references or major reviews of the literature in a particular domain. It presents the academic enquiry as a negotiable and therefore political process wherein scholars negotiate their comprehension and conceptualisation of a common issue related to a shared profession. It suggests modifications in the patterns of existing scholarly behaviour and authoring dynamics. It takes a ‘top-down’ approach, following the notion of ‘expert judgement’, an approach used for soliciting from those individuals with particular expertise informed views on specific matters (Otway and Winterfeldt, 1992). Moreover, it constitutes an ‘innovation platform’ (Homann-Kee Tui et al., 2013: 1), bringing together a large number of worldwide
academic ‘stakeholders’ to understand common issues, address them and achieve common goals.

Academia has long experienced a ‘core–periphery’ dichotomy (to borrow terminology from Wallerstein, 1974), with a one-way influence from the core to the periphery. The core refers to the well-respected native English-speaking departments, faculties and/or journals, whereas the periphery refers to researchers outside of the native English-speaking domain. McMillin (2007) believes that such a ‘core–periphery’ dichotomy has been ‘a growing source of embarrassment’ (p. 9) for academics in the core. This is embarrassing considering that academia is the realm where a considerable amount of emphasis has been placed on the theoretical concepts of ethics, fairness, justice and morality. Have academics failed to apply such theoretical knowledge on/to themselves? If so, then history repeats itself, as such a political drama is similar to what Fanon (1952) told us about colonisation in the last century. Sociological cycle theory agrees that occasions and phases of society and history generally repeat themselves in cycles (Korotayev et al., 2006). Although the core may
practically dominate the periphery, academic fields cannot function healthily without feedback from both groups. The most substantial potential inherent in the academic space today is through academic globalism and thus collectivism. Any project based on the proposed crowd-authoring methodology could be seen as an example of the potential for worldwide collective knowledge to eliminate the periphery. Some non-English-speaking countries have their own traditions, theories and frameworks, which have not been translated into English and therefore have not had the chance to influence the core. Yet, again, the proposed crowd-authoring approach is an effort to enable non-English native speaking academics to reply on the practices, conventions and ideologies in their home countries to inform and shape the worldview. Crowd-authoring is inspired by the belief that the power relations among scholars of different contexts (from the core and periphery) will hopefully begin to become more balanced due to digital technologies and global participation. Put simply, since scholars can now collaborate online as equals, why can non-English-speaking scholars not, as the proposed crowd-authoring approach suggests,
embrace the political idea of taking back the lead on their thoughts and planning by the participation in internationally crowd-authored articles?