

# The End of the Author

**Copyright on the Internet – an anachronistic interim solution. Will interactive creative teams replace individual authors? Does the Internet require us to rethink our concepts of intellectual property? A contribution by Prof. Dr. Michael Giesecke, cultural and media historian at the [University of Erfurt](http://www.uni-erfurt.de).**

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The central concepts used over the last five hundred years to describe the processes by which knowledge is acquired and information presented and transmitted have been defined by the exigencies of the printing press and by the way books are distributed in a market economy. Even the order of precedence we assign to such concepts as hearing and seeing, rational and emotional intelligence, the descriptive sciences and the narrative arts, and speech and other forms of communication is based on the priorities of our modern industrial society. If we believe that the new millennium will bring with it simply a quantitative growth in our book-based industrial culture, then we can continue to create and communicate knowledge using these traditional concepts. But if we believe that the new millennium will bring with it radical innovations, then such traditional concepts will only hinder the shaping the future.

This also holds true for the concept of individual authorship – which emerged in the early part of the modern era and, though attributable to a number of causes, has always been linked with the socialization of what were then new forms of information stored in typographic media. As is the case with societies in which information is copied by hand, cultures based on the spoken word have no need of the concept of individual authorship. Even today we do not need to identify the authors of ideas in face-to-face discussions all the time. On the contrary, if at the end of a discussion we feel the need to identify the contribution of an individual participant, then the discussion was but moderately productive: the cooperative act as such produced nothing new, and the contribution in question was not a social but an individual achievement. Earlier advanced cultures based on the written word had no need of authors”, in part because their scribes saw themselves as links in a long chain down which ideas were passed. Writing something new was considered less of an achievement than copying old ideas. Only in the early part of the modern era, when people began to compete with the gods, did they not think twice about being creators themselves. “Novelty” became a positively charged concept. People began to welcome technical innovation instead of damning it as the work of the devil. Attitudes towards intellectual innovation also changed, and the authors of typographically stored information were granted rights of ownership. Thus order was brought into the flood of printed books – and temporal powers had somebody whom they could call to account for new ideas. Indeed, the obligation to declare the authorship of books cost some authors their lives.

## **New concepts for new media**

Thus the concepts of copyright and of protecting intellectual property came into being in the European heartland scarcely half a millennium ago, and much later in the fringe areas of the continent. In many parts of the world they have no basis in tradition whatsoever. These concepts are also indissolubly linked with the typographical production of information and with the kind of communicative networks that exist in market economies. Other media require other concepts. Developing such concepts is all the more difficult because as conditions change it is precisely the outstanding achievements of a particular technology that may become its greatest weakness. The historical achievement of the printing press is that it facilitated the processing of information on a social scale – but in ways that involve very little interaction. Typographical communication is characterized by an individual’s making information available to the public at large through channels

that allow many other individuals to receive this information simultaneously. The socialization of knowledge does not take place on the level of production or reception but through the mechanisms of technical reproduction and distribution prevailing in a market economy.

There is much evidence that in future this method of creating knowledge will simply be one of many alternatives. Even today the balance between forms of producing information that involve little interaction and those that involve intensive feedback is shifting in favour of the latter. The new electronic media are capable of becoming communication media only to the extent that they are networked with each other. But as soon as they are networked, these same channels of communication can be used for feedback, creating a form of interactive information processing similar to that which takes place within a group discussion. There is thus little justification in seeing the World Wide Web as simply another typographical mass medium. This being so, there is also little point in using antiquated terminology to describe the Web and in using antiquated mechanisms to control it. We will have to search for alternative ways of attributing information and of rewarding its creation – for it is obvious that people must be rewarded for making information available. Yet in the history of culture such rewards have taken so many forms – reciprocity, honour, power, love, trust – that to focus on monetary reward alone is neither logical nor particularly imaginative. It is time to develop new visions for the new media and for globally networked humanity, comparable to those that used to be applied to “intellectual property”. It is foreseeable that creating information will become a team process. Just as group project work has long been standard practice in industry, so it will become the norm in science and the arts. Products will be attributable not to individuals but to groups – and the latter will decide themselves how to divide up the honour, power, money, or other forms of reward that accrue.

But as long as we possess no adequate value system to apply to the new media, we must continue to solve copyright problems using makeshift solutions. What we need, however, is long-term solutions.