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Essjay's *Ethos*: Rethinking Textual Origins and Intellectual Property¹

Discussions of intellectual property are often the focus of rhetoric and composition research, and the question of textual origins grounds these discussions. Through an examination of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia anyone can edit, this essay addresses disciplinary concerns about textual origins and intellectual property through a discussion of situated and constructed *ethos*.

The July 31, 2006, issue of *The New Yorker* featured an article about Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. The author of the piece, Stacy Schiff, interviewed a Wikipedia bureaucrat named Essjay.² Essjay was this Wikipedian's username—like many others he chose a pseudonym in an attempt to maintain anonymity. In Essjay's case, he claimed he did this because "he routinely received death threats." Schiff's story details Essjay's online and offline credentials:

One regular on the site is a user known as Essjay, who holds a Ph.D. in theology and a degree in canon law and has written or contributed to sixteen thousand entries. A tenured professor of religion at a private university, Essjay made his first edit in February, 2005. Initially, he contributed to articles in his field—on the penitential rite, transubstantiation, the papal tiara. Soon he was spending

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fourteen hours a day on the site, though he was careful to keep his online life a secret from his colleagues and friends. (Schiff)

Schiff also noted that Essjay was a member of the Wikipedia mediation committee and had administrative privileges that were reserved for a select few Wikipedians. By all accounts, Essjay was a model contributor, and other Wikipedians praised him for his hard work. His Wikipedia user page showed several barnstars—awards that Wikipedians give to one another for diligent work.

But regardless of Essjay's hard work on Wikipedia articles, his credentials turned out to be fraudulent. Nearly five months after Schiff's piece was published, an outspoken critic of Wikipedia named Daniel Brandt (Brandt is the founder of the watchdog site Wikipedia-watch.org) told *The New Yorker* that Essjay was actually Ryan Jordan. Jordan was not, in fact, a professor.³ Brandt knew this because Jordan had recently been hired by Wikia (a for-profit company started by Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales) and had posted an online profile stating that he was 24 years old. The profile made no mention of graduate degrees. Jordan's ability to maintain a constructed identity while rising to an influential position within this collaborative project stems from one of Wikipedia's central policies—the ability of authors to remain “anonymous.” I use scare quotes here because Jordan was not really anonymous. Rather, he created the identity of Essjay to help him navigate Wikipedia. Thus, these edits were not written anonymously—they were written by Essjay. Further, even those Wikipedians who do not register for a username can still be traced to an IP address using a tool called Wikiscanner. In many ways, anonymity on Wikipedia (and, more generally, on the Web) is a fiction.

The Essjay episode provides scholars in rhetoric and composition a useful way of rethinking *ethos*, textual origins, and, ultimately, intellectual property. But before proceeding with this discussion, I would like to make it clear why I see an important link between *ethos* and intellectual property. Writing technologies continue to proliferate, and this reminds us that tracking down the origin of a text is always a problem. Rhetoric and composition has spent a great deal of time grappling with this issue. The Web exposes the difficulties of intellectual property by making it difficult to determine where “my” text ends and where “your” text begins. Wikipedia is just one example of how the pseudo(ano)nymity of the Web has served as a reminder of the sticky issue of textual origins.

The discipline has made numerous attempts to reframe discussions of intellectual property, and these attempts are all linked to the question of textual origins. Mickey Hess argues that composition classrooms can benefit from a

discussion of citation in terms of music, DJs, and sampling. For Hess, sampling “may have values that oppose the academic value of plagiarism” but students (and teachers) can learn a great deal from hip-hop sampling: “Studying hip-hop sampling as an alternate citation system can help students understand that invention and creativity go into sourcework” (293). In addition, Bill Marsh and Kelly Ritter have analyzed online paper mills and automated plagiarism detection services in an attempt to rethink and redefine intellectual property for the discipline. But discussions of intellectual property have not been confined to those studying the Web or new media. Kathryn Valentine argues that definitions of plagiarism often depend on context, and for this reason she urges rhetoric and composition to avoid the moral absolutes that often frame discussions of plagiarism. Further, the discipline has also seen extensive work on citation, such as Diane Dowdey’s work on citation across the disciplines and Chris M. Anson’s discussion of citation as a speech act. This article responds to these conversations about intellectual property and authorship by discussing the question of textual origins. All of these scholars (and many, many others) are taking on some of the fundamental questions of our discipline: Who owns writing? Where does writing come from? How do we account for our various (re)appropriations of texts? What is the origin of a text?

Rebecca Moore Howard’s work on intellectual property and her concept of “patch-writing” can be seen as the guiding thread of rhetoric and composition’s discussion of intellectual property. For Howard, all writing involves “patchwriting,” a process of imitation and mimesis. Much of what we do as writers is “erasing the trail” of patchwriting: “Erasing the trail is not a matter of hiding guilty evidence; it’s a matter of good prose style. When the trail is obvious, we call it plagiarism; when it is erased, we call it synthesis or even original writing” (7). Writing instructors, Howard argues, often fail to see that their own writing participates in trail erasure, and the concept of patchwriting points directly to the difficulty of ever determining the origin of a text. Howard’s approach provides a starting point for my analysis as I attempt to drill down from a discussion of intellectual property to the issue of textual origins. I do this to address the question that grounds composition’s discussions about intellectual property. While a new media environment that allows texts to be easily combined and/or redistributed has not created this question of determining textual origins, it has provided a continual reminder of the impossibility of cleanly linking a text with its origin.

In a sense, discussions about intellectual property stem from this question: What is the origin of a text? Often, this question of origin ultimately

leads us to questions of identity as we attempt to link a text with an author. Wikipedia's approach to textual origins is revealed in one of its core tenets: "No original research." Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, and it aims to compile a massive database of citations. But what happens to textual origins in a space like Wikipedia where identity is fluid and shifting and where cleanly linking a text with its utterance-origin is discouraged? Further, what if we consider that Wikipedia has not *created* this problem of linking texts with origins but has instead *exposed* a problem that is internal to the process of writing? If we are willing to recognize that identities are ever-shifting and thus that texts are never easily linked to "the author," then any direct link between text and origin becomes impossible. And this is why we can turn to *ethos* to rethink textual origins and intellectual property. As Alan Liu reminds us, *ethos* is "the inchoate coming-to-be or basis of identity" (71). A discussion of *ethos* is not a discussion of stable origins but is rather a discussion of a continuous process of becoming author, becoming speaker, becoming writer. For this reason, a rethinking of *ethos* and textual origins can be a useful addition to rhetoric and composition's conversations regarding authorship and intellectual property. The Web serves as a particularly fertile environment for the exploration of these questions. Spaces such as Wikipedia allow for a certain kind of anonymity, and this makes it particularly difficult to trace the origins of text.

While usernames and/or IP addresses are attached to each Wikipedia edit, critics of Wikipedia complain that anyone can anonymously edit Wikipedia. What these critics mean is that Wikipedians cannot always be linked to "real life" (RL) identities. Cade Metz is one of these critics, and he offers a solution to the problems introduced by Wikipedia's anonymity policy: "If Wikipedia would simply require editors to identify themselves, so much of [the problems with Wikipedia] would go away. Yes, there would still be issues. An IP address still provides a certain pseudonymity. But this is certainly a better situation than [*sic*] the one we have now" (Metz, "Truth"). Wikipedians are not anonymous. They build virtual identities for a virtual reality (VR), and critics like Metz worry that VR identities offer credibility problems that could be avoided through the use of RL identities. Regardless of the term's problems, I retain the word *anonymity* at points in this article because it grounds so much discussion of Wikipedia.⁴

Concerns about which RL identity has created a text are rooted in attempts to assign ownership by linking texts with origins. But the claiming of any text as "property" is troubled by what Jacques Derrida calls the "citationality" of any utterance: "Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written . . . in a small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it

can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable” (12). For Derrida, there is no “original” utterance—there are only citations of previous utterances. This is not a problem to be solved. Rather, this problem (or, better, this *question*) is internal to sign. While new media have not created the problem of fuzzy textual origins, they have indeed brought such issues into relief. Derrida’s questions about citationality serve as a reminder of these fuzzy origins: “What would a mark be that could not be cited? Or one whose origins would not get lost along the way?” (12).

The connection between Derrida’s notion of citationality and rhetoric and composition’s discussions of intellectual property becomes clearer when Derrida himself inspects the notion of copyright. In a now famous exchange with John Searle, Derrida notes that a manuscript of Searle’s includes a handwritten copyright mark. Derrida’s remarks come as part of a long and complicated debate with Searle regarding speech-act theory, and an extensive review of this debate is outside the scope of this article. Still, it is worth noting how Derrida views Searle’s handwritten copyright mark with sarcastic curiosity: “But what makes [Searle] think that these rights might be questioned, that someone might try to steal them from him, or that there could be any mistake concerning the attribution of his original production?” (30). While Searle seeks a speech-act theory that rigorously delineates context and tends to focus on the intentions of the speaker/writer, Derrida questions the stability of author, audience, text, and context. And this is what leads him to question Searle’s assertion of copyright. For Derrida, Searle’s handwritten copyright mark implicitly grants that the origin of a sign is always up for grabs. Searle’s copyright mark (or, we might argue, any claim to copyright) is a rearguard reaction to such citationality.

Derrida’s theory of citationality allows us to rethink how we link a text with an origin. Attaching a name or identity to any utterance (written or spoken) is only a provisional, after-the-fact gesture that attempts to manage the complexities of linguistic origins. In light of this discussion of citationality, we can view the concept of intellectual property as an attempt to link an utterance with an origin or owner (and, often, to compensate that origin accordingly). In terms of copyright law, the owner is either the origin of the text (author, artist, musician) or an entity that has purchased the rights to that text. However, citationality complicates any discussion of plagiarism, intellectual property, or textual origins, and the Web brings such complications to light. In a digital space of citational and textual overdrive where texts are sampled, mashed up, cobbled together, and circulated at staggering speeds, we are reminded that linking texts with origins is extremely difficult.

This tendency of the Web to expose longstanding problems makes it a useful space for reexamining some of rhetoric and composition's key terms. But analysis of the Web can and should move beyond rhetorical analysis of the texts housed there. As John Logie argued in 2002, many analyses of Web texts fail to address the virtual communities that produce them: "Most rhetorical analyses of World Wide Web-based rhetorical performances focus narrowly on the stylistic features of particular Internet-based 'texts' without satisfactorily addressing the communities producing those texts. But this is, perhaps, not surprising given the more general uncertainty over whether communities worthy of the name can develop within electronically enabled virtual spaces" (41–42). Since the publication of Logie's essay, rhetorical analysis of the Web and its texts has begun to address his concerns, and this article is an attempt to continue this line of questioning. However, if Logie is right that it is difficult to determine whether online communities are "worthy of the name," then it might be useful to study the constitutions that found such online communities. A rhetorical analysis of such constitutions can focus on the founding principles of spaces such as Wikipedia rather than attempting to determine whether or not online gatherings count as "communities."⁵ Studying Wikipedia's ethical and rhetorical constitution of anonymity—one that grounds this complex and messy text—can shed light on an emerging digital rhetoric that addresses the intersecting issues of identity, *ethos*, and intellectual property differently. All of these issues intersect at the question of textual origins. Rather than linking a text with a stable identity or with an expert Wikipedian, Wikipedia resists the temptation to easily resolve the question of textual origins by grounding discussion in *ethos* and thus encouraging a never-ending conversation.

If questions of intellectual property are questions about the origin of a text and if that origin is often equated with a particular identity, then Wikipedia's constitution of anonymity exposes the difficulties of such a search. What are the ethical and rhetorical implications of this policy? What would be the implications of ending the anonymity policy in the name of attaching a text to its apparent origin? This essay explores such questions by examining Wikipedia's willingness to welcome writers without demanding an RL identity and thus not positing any single Wikipedian as the origin of a text. Rather than grounding rhetorical exchange in the RL identities or credentials of contributors, the constitution of Wikipedia grounds its textual discussion in a chain of citations. Instead of allowing conversation to stop when a Wikipedian invokes expertise and posits herself as utterance origin, Wikipedia requires a citation. This is not to say that Wikipedia's constitution always dictates practice. Wiki-

pedians often do rely on an *ethos* of RL expertise, and this tendency indicates how difficult it is to abide by Wikipedia's citational ethic. But such cases do not change the fact that Wikipedia's constitution takes an interesting approach to the question of textual origins. This policy is grounded in a shifting notion of intellectual property—one that does not situate textual ownership within the Wikipedian. By exploring the pitfalls and advantages of such a policy, we can ask: How does a space that continually exposes the difficulties of linking texts with origins allow us to shift how we think about *ethos*, textual origins, and intellectual property?

"Ethos of the Unknown"

When VR identity is only loosely connected to RL identity, *ethos* becomes increasingly important. This is Alan Liu's argument in *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* when he discusses our current cultural moment in terms of an "ethos of the unknown" (72). For Liu, at the precise moment that Web denizens might feel the need to claim a stable identity, the carpet has been pulled from beneath them. Liu asks how new media theory might deal with this situation "without being nostalgic for foreclosed group and class identities in a manner that would inauthentically mime the great fundamentalist, nationalist, and ethnic reactionisms" (70). As a provisional solution, Liu argues for an "ethos of the unknown" that embraces finitude rather than essence. He points to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to explain: "'We' are no more than this transient moment when we have nothing more in common—as Jean-Luc Nancy might say in his *Inoperative Community*—than our finitude, our extinction, our 'death'" (69). Following Liu, we might say that the rhetor's RL identity no longer serves as the proper groundwork for online or offline communities. But such a predicament does not necessarily leave rhetors (digital or otherwise) in the lurch by severing all ties between "author" and "text." Instead, this predicament exposes questions of language with which we have always grappled but which can often too easily be forgotten. It is not surprising, as Liu notes, that we often fall "inauthentically" into "reactionisms." However, we would be better served by understanding how a discussion of *ethos* allows us to rethink composition, textual origins, and intellectual property. Intellectual property policies that unproblematically link texts with origins are ill-equipped for the life of Liu's "knowledge workers"—an *ethos* of the unknown is a better fit.

Liu's description of *ethos* as the "inchoate coming-to-be or basis of identity" is helpful as we think through the problem of textual origins (71). If Liu is right that information work requires a rethinking of identity via *ethos*, then

Wikipedia offers an ideal space to explore such a rethinking. Wikipedia's policies address the identity of a rhetor in a complicated way, and an analysis of how these policies deal with different types of *ethos* provides us with a useful way of understanding how some Web communities are dealing with textual origins. In this discussion of Wikipedia's constitution, we can make use of the division between the situated and invented dimensions of *ethos*. One's situated *ethos* precedes his or her text. It is tied to a reputation that has been built up over time, and it has to do with the various ethical or moral attributes assigned to particular human bodies. So, along with the reputation that a rhetor builds within a community, one's race, gender, and class can be part of a situated *ethos*. In addition to situated *ethos*, a rhetor is able to construct *ethos* within a speech or text. Through the use of certain tropes and figures along with various other textual strategies, a rhetor can *build* an *ethos*. This latter form is called invented (or constructed) *ethos*, and Wikipedia's constitution asks that it be built with a trail of citations. Rather than relying on a situated *ethos* of their RL expertise, Wikipedians are asked to rely on an invented *ethos* by citing other texts.

I want to be clear—I am not arguing that situated *ethos* has no place in Wikipedia or on the Web. Wikipedians build up reputations within the community, and this means that they enter any dispute or discussion with a certain amount of situated *ethos*. Further, expertise plays an important role in Wikipedia. The trail of citations demanded by Wikipedia's constitution points directly to books, articles, and other products of RL expertise. Being able to point to such texts is an important part of a Wikipedian's attempt to construct *ethos* via citation. However, Wikipedia's constitution asks that the RL expertise of the *Wikipedian* be left to the side. That is, as a Wikipedian, I am asked to avoid any attempt to steer or halt discussion by pointing to my credentials.

All of these questions of *ethos* become even further complicated when we realize how difficult it is to hold situated and invented *ethos* apart. In fact, in many situations, digital rhetors *invent* their *situated ethos*, and we will see how Essjay is a perfect example of this. By presenting himself as a credentialed theologian, Essjay was able to invent a situated *ethos*. We should also recognize that Essjay's use of *ethos* is not quite the same as the identity play or gender-bending of virtual communities documented by Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* and by Julian Dibbell in *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World*. It is important to remember that Wikipedia is not *only* an encyclopedia; it is also a space where human relationships are cultivated. This has been a cause for concern for people like Kelly Martin, a former member of Wikipedia's Arbitration Committee, who notes that certain

concerns of the Wikipedia community can get in the way of the main goal—building an encyclopedia: “The problem with Wikipedia is that, for so many in the project, it’s no longer about the encyclopedia The problem is that Wikipedia’s community has defined itself not in terms of the encyclopedia it is supposedly producing, but instead of the people it venerates and the people it abhors” (qtd. in Metz, “Secret”). Still, while some Wikipedians are focused on participating in some soap-opera-like dramas, the story of Essjay is not about identity play as much as it is about how *ethos* operates in a space where the fuzziness of textual origins has been brought to the forefront.

Finally, we should note that some traditional portions of situated *ethos* (such as race, class, and gender) do not disappear online. Such utopian arguments were prevalent in the early days of the Web, and in recent years they have been modified and corrected. Yet these revisions do not change the fact that *ethos* is at least a bit more malleable on the Web. In the following discussion of the Essjay controversy and textual origins, we will see how *ethos*, identity, and intellectual property are intertwined in the digital commons. Whereas a reliance on RL credentials allows one to rely on reputation via a situated *ethos* of expertise, Wikipedia’s focus on an invented *ethos* of citation changes the rules of the rhetorical game. These rule changes stem from a constitution that no longer considers the RL identity of the Wikipedian to be sufficient when tracing textual origins. The constitution of Wikipedia—and we should remember that this may or may not reflect the thoughts of Wikipedians themselves—does not care about a situated *ethos* based on RL expertise. Instead, the focus is on an invented *ethos* that gains its strength from a trail of citations. What are we to make of the reticence of Wikipedia’s constitution with regard to RL expertise and situated *ethos*? We might find some possible answers to this question by taking a closer look at the Essjay controversy, a situation in which Wikipedia’s stance on anonymity became scandalous.

Anonymity Trouble: Essjay’s *Ethos*

We can now return to the story of Essjay—a story that tells us a great deal about Wikipedia’s constitution with regard to *ethos* and textual origins. While Daniel Brandt was largely responsible for the “outing” of Essjay as a fraud, others had also noticed his double identity. A fellow Wikipedian posed this question to Essjay on his Wikipedia “User Talk” page (a page on which Wikipedians provide personal information): “Essjay, I’m kinda puzzled. Your Wikia profile says that you’re 24 years old, work as a Community Manager for Wikia, and used to be employed by a Fortune 200 company. But your Wikibooks profile says you’re

over 30 and currently work as a Theology professor. Is the Wikia profile someone else? I hope you can shed some light on this matter” (“User Talk: Essjay”). Jordan responded that he had, in fact, created a persona for Wikipedia to avoid “the attention of an unsavory element.”⁶ He claimed that stalkers often made death threats to high-profile Wikipedians, and that rather than having to worry about such threats he had created the “Essjay” identity. Yet, for Jordan, this identity was not necessarily a way of hiding something. In fact, it was just the opposite. Jordan claims that those Wikipedians who attempt to hide their RL identity inevitably let a detail slip, leaving clues for those who hope to uncover that identity. Rather than having to carefully guard personal information, he created an entirely new persona. In his mind, this allowed him to avoid the paranoia of guarding his RL identity:

I decided to be myself, to never hide my personality, to always be who I am, but to utilize disinformation with regard to what I consider unimportant details: age, location, occupation, etc. As a result, I’ve made many strong friendships here, because I’ve always been the person I am, but the stalkers have spent the last two years searching for middle-aged college professors with the initials “SJ” (which are, by the way, my initials) who live in the Northeast; I never had to worry that anything I said would lead back to me, because the areas they focused on, the unimportant statistical information, was a cover. (“User Talk: Essjay”)

He goes on to say that he thought stalkers “were the only people who actually believed the story” and that a glance at his edits should have made it clear that he was not a theologian: “most everybody [within the Wikipedia community] who is particularly close to me knew it was a cover” (“User Talk: Essjay”). Jordan believed that those Wikipedians who dealt with Essjay on a regular basis did not believe that he held such credentials.

After he was hired by Wikia, Jordan revealed his RL identity to Jimmy Wales and others within the company, and this caused no initial problems. In fact, for many Wikipedians, the constructed identity was a non-issue. Jordan describes the reactions of those he talked to after he “came out”:

Nothing really has changed any; I’m still the person everybody has known for the past two years, I just have a different job. I’ve never been disingenuous in my interactions with others: I’ve always been myself, and have every intention to continue being myself, people just know a bit more about what I look like and where I live now. Of the dozens of people I’ve talked to since I “came out,” all have been happy to have a face to associate with the person they know, have understood the need to be protected, and have no doubts that nothing has changed about the person they have come to know. (“User Talk: Essjay”)

This reaction held true for some in the Wikipedia community, and this is revealed in the nonchalant reaction of Dev920, the Wikipedian who initially raised the question to Essjay: “That makes a lot of sense. I didn’t think you had the time to be everything you said you were. :) Thanks for taking the time to write such a lengthy reply, and congratulations on getting the job at Wikia!” (“User Talk: Essjay”).

But this kind of understanding response seems to have been confined only to certain Wikipedia insiders. Upon receiving information from Brandt about Jordan’s true identity, *The New Yorker* published an editorial note: “Essjay was recommended to Ms. Schiff as a source by a member of Wikipedia’s management team because of his respected position within the Wikipedia community. He was willing to describe his work as a Wikipedia administrator but would not identify himself other than by confirming the biographical details that appeared on his user page. At the time of publication, neither we nor Wikipedia knew Essjay’s real name” (Schiff). The Editorial Note closes with a quote from Wales: “I regard it as a pseudonym and I don’t really have a problem with it.” Such reactions were baffling to bloggers and other commentators: “The reaction from Wiki devotees to this scandal is bizarre to outsiders. Jordan pointed the finger at the *New Yorker* for not being wise to his game. Others attacked Brandt—a popular Wiki pastime” (King). However, as time wore on, a number of Wikipedians expressed their displeasure with Essjay’s charade.

A “Request For Comments” page—“an informal, lightweight process for requesting outside input, consensus building, and dispute resolution, with respect to article content, user conduct, and Wikipedia policy and guidelines”—showed hundreds of responses by Wikipedians, many of whom were upset with Jordan’s pseudonym (“Wikipedia: Requests”). A straw poll initiated around the same time revealed a range of opinions on the matter (“Wikipedia: Straw Poll”). Within days of the publication of *The New Yorker’s* editorial note, even Wales was having second thoughts: “When I last spoke to *The New Yorker* about the fact that a prominent Wikipedia community member had lied about his credentials, I misjudged the issue. It was not O.K. for Mr. Jordan, or Essjay, to lie to a reporter, even to protect his identity” (Schiff).⁷ Wales asked Jordan to step down from Wikipedia. Jordan did, and he also resigned from his position at Wikia. The pressure of media attention (the story was covered by many major media outlets) had forced Wales to change his tune.

In the wake of this controversy, both Wikipedians and the community’s critics began to dig through some of Essjay’s contributions to Wikipedia. In doing so, many found that Essjay spent most of his time “ensuring that the

encyclopedia was as free as possible of vandalism and drawn-out editing fights” (Cohen). Wales made similar claims and pointed out that Essjay was “a very kind and loving and thoughtful person” and that he was “quite good at getting all parties on the same track” (qtd. in Williams). But Jordan’s claim that he had “never been disingenuous” turned out to be somewhat disingenuous. In certain situations, Jordan used his constructed situated *ethos*—that is, the *ethos* of a credentialed professor—to claim expertise and guide discussion in certain directions. One such instance involved Essjay’s contribution to the article for “Imprimatur.” By following edits on the “Imprimatur” article’s talk page—a kind of discussion board in which Wikipedians can discuss various aspects of an article—we can see how Essjay violated Wikipedia’s constitution and how other digital rhetors responded. An Imprimatur is an approval issued by a bishop of the Catholic Church that “assures the reader that nothing therein is contrary to Catholic faith or morals” (“Imprimatur”). From March 28, 2005, through September 2, 2005, the talk page for Wikipedia’s “Imprimatur” article shows an exchange between Essjay and other Wikipedians (“Talk: Imprimatur”).

March 28, 2005

A user notes a problem with the article: “The explanations of Imprimatur and *Nihil obstat* presented here are confused. The following Web page apparently gets it right: <http://www.kensmen.com/catholic/imprimatur.html>.”

March 29

A day later, this same user adds a more specific discussion of the problems with this article and asks for help editing the article:

More specifically, the current article seems to reverse the roles of imprimatur and *nihil obstat*. It would probably be more accurate to write, “While the *nihil obstat* certifies there is no moral or doctrinal error, the imprimatur is an express permission from the bishop for the text to be printed.” (That is, the censor does the legwork, then the bishop confers his authority on the censor’s decision.) In addition, *nihil obstat* is better translated “nothing hinders” [publishing the reviewed work]. I would edit the actual Imprimatur article directly, if I trusted my ability to do so successfully. There are MANY rules and conventions I have not learned!

April 12

Essjay enters the discussion arguing that the article is correct as is and cites *Catholicism for Dummies*, a text that he claims he often assigns to his students:

I do not believe this to be correct. An individual bishop has no power outside his diocese to forbid anything to be printed, thus he cannot offer a *nihil obstat*, only an imprimatur, which certifies that the text is free from moral error. . . . Unless of course he is the Bishop of Rome. However, the censor, who is an agent

of the Roman Curia/Holy See may certainly place a text on the “blacklist” of heretical publications. I believe the entry to be correct as it reads, and I offer as my reference the text “Catholicism for Dummies” by Trigilio (Ph.D./Th.D.) and Brighenti (Ph.D.). The text offers a *Nihil obstat* from the Rev. Daniel J. Mahan, STB, STL, Censor Librorum, and an Imprimatur from the Rev. Msgr. Joseph F. Schaedel, Vicar General. This is a text I often require for my students, and I would hang my own Ph.D. on it’s [sic] credibility.

April 21

Another Wikipedian enters the discussion and also claims that the article is flawed: “Imprimatur translates as ‘let it be printed.’ I think this text is the wrong way round, too.”

April 23

A third Wikipedian agrees with the first two and makes changes to the article: “The text is totally the wrong way round. I’m changing it.”

April 25

Essjay backtracks, saying that he has consulted with “the Curia”—an official ruling body of the Roman Catholic Church—and admits that he was at least partially wrong: “After consulting with the Curia, I amend my above-comments. Imprimatur is a permission to print, about this I was incorrect. However, it can only be issued by a bishop. *Nihil obstat* is a certification that no error exists, and is issued by the censor.”

September 2

More than four months after Essjay’s partial retraction, another Wikipedian updates the article and adds this comment to the discussion page: “I’ve updated this document significantly; I work for a Catholic book publisher as well as for the bishop of the local diocese, and have worked to get the imprimatur on several books—no offense to ‘Catholicism for Dummies,’ but it was definitely unclear (a Ph.D. doesn’t necessarily mean someone understands Catholic practices very well . . .);”

This final jab—“a Ph.D. doesn’t necessarily mean someone understands Catholic practices very well”—might be taken by some as evidence of Wikipedians’ hostility to expertise. However, in this particular case, the expert is not really an expert, and healthy skepticism has made for a more accurate article. This exchange shows us that in a clash between Essjay’s invocation of expertise and Wikipedia’s policy of not allowing experts to rest on authority, the latter wins the day. Wikipedia’s constitution means that, in this particular situation, Essjay’s claim of expertise (regardless of its fraudulence) fails to stop the discussion. Wikipedians disregard his claim of situated *ethos* without even knowing that

it relies on false credentials, and they focus on the invented *ethos* of Essjay and others who provide citations and sources to better the article. All of this happens regardless of Essjay's attempts to steer discussion with a claim of expertise.

One more example of Essjay's use of an *ethos* of RL expertise is worth noting—a letter that he sent to a number of professors who discouraged students from consulting Wikipedia.⁸ Essjay explains the form letter that he sent to a number of professors: “I've contacted a few professors after other Wikipedians have pointed out that the instructor made the ‘Wikipedia is not a reliable source’ argument to students who were, in fact, Wikipedians [sic]” (“Wikipedia: Administrators”). He goes on to say that when he was head of his department he would have wanted to know about a professor making such remarks, and he suggests that a student confronted by such a professor “make an appointment with the department head/dean/provost post haste.” Essjay begins his form letter by explaining that he is “a tenured professor of theology.” He goes on to argue that Wikipedia, if used correctly, is an “invaluable source.” Essjay even extends an invitation to skeptical professors: “Individuals like yourself—respected educators with advanced credentials—are an invaluable resource to Wikipedia, and I would be honored to see you join our ranks. Should you decide to do so, please drop by my discussion page and say hello” (“User: Essjay/Letter”). Seth Finkelstein, a computer programmer, blogger, and an outspoken critic of Wikipedia, argues that this letter is “fascinating” in that it reveals how Wikipedia “fundamentally runs by an extremely deceptive sort of social promise . . . by selling the heavy contributors on the dream, the illusion, that it'll give them the prestige of an academic” (Finkelstein). Finkelstein believes that this delusion does little more than deceive Wikipedians while benefitting investors in companies like Wikia. He sees the letter as polite and “very nice” and “[t]he sort of thing written either by a slick con man who is cleverly utterly false, or a delusional personality who is playing a role so deeply as to believe it with every fiber of his being” (Finkelstein). For Finkelstein, this letter is one more reason to distrust Wikipedia and its model of collaboration.

I agree with Finkelstein that the letter reads as if Essjay has convinced himself that he is a credentialed academic. However, what seems more interesting about the letter is that much of it is well-reasoned and well-argued. Essjay's statements that encyclopedias are not “college-level academic sources,” that no source should be considered authoritative without some other source as verification, and that Wikipedia is not intended as a “stand-alone” reference are all valid. I find it difficult to refute his argument that “[w]hen used correctly

(i.e., the information taken from the site is verified with a secondary source) Wikipedia is an invaluable and irreplaceable source.” Yet, this entire defense of Wikipedia is framed by Essjay’s opening statement that he is a “tenured professor” and that the recipient of this letter should refer to Wikipedia for information about his “background and credentials.” These statements allow Essjay to gain purchase and firmly establish his situated *ethos* in a discussion from which he would otherwise be excluded. However, this situated *ethos* was based on RL credentials, and for this reason it violated the constitution of Wikipedia. That constitution deals with textual origins by encouraging a string of citations and footnotes rather than by empowering a Wikipedian to rely on claims of his or her RL expertise.

Delivery Platforms and Textual Origins

After the Essjay scandal broke, Wikipedia critic Nicholas Carr asked an apt question: “If credentials don’t matter, why bother faking them?” What was the purpose of Essjay’s faked credentials in a space that does not require writers to be experts? One way of understanding Essjay’s claim of RL expertise is that it provided him with a platform of identity. This platform is particularly comforting in spaces that continually pull the rug out from any rhetor who attempts to rely on a situated *ethos* based on credentials. Attempts to ground an utterance in the speaking or writing subject is completely understandable—we do it every day. And for rhetoricians, the platform that we often slide beneath a spoken or written utterance is linked with the canon of delivery. In the rhetorical tradition, delivery has often focused on bodily performance in oral presentation. But several contemporary rhetoricians are rethinking delivery, particularly as it pertains to online spaces. Shifting notions of intellectual property and textual origins are closely tied to this resurgent interest in delivery. Cynthia Haynes’ linking of delivery to the “platform of being” most elegantly traces out the connection between the fifth canon and textual origins:

the crux (cru/cifi/x) of this rhetorical canon is no longer, in my view, concerned with oral delivery, or even delivery of discourse. If delivery was classically concerned with the “how” of discourse rather than the “what,” it seems to me that “how” begins with a platform from which one speaks or writes. Most primordially, that platform is Being. Put time into play, and that platform is Becoming. . . . Put technology into play, and that platform is a quaquaversal (Being and Becoming going in all directions at once). The notion of platform also implicates code, economy, politics, and mobility, among other things. (Haynes)

Rather than standing on firm ground and emitting (spoken or written) texts, speakers and writers deal with a situation in which being and becoming are “going in all directions at once.” Digital spaces such as Wikipedia make this predicament much more obvious. If I can no longer stand on the platform of being (essence), I am forced to recognize that there is no platform beneath my feet. I am also forced to recognize the tenuous relationship between me and my text, and this forces any writer to admit that claiming the position of origin is problematic. The question then becomes: What now? Are we to do away with all of our notions of intellectual property and authorship? Such alarmist questions often arise in current discussions of intellectual property, but they can tend to ignore that many on the Web are finding ways to move forward and create texts in the face of a shifting intellectual property paradigm. Wikipedia is answering the “What now?” question on a daily basis.

And Wikipedia is not the only place offering possible solutions. Danielle Nicole DeVoss and James E. Porter have encouraged rhetoricians to consider the “Napster moment” as emblematic of a new ethic of digital delivery:

[A]s writing teachers we need to see the Napster moment—and the writing practice at the center of it, filesharing—in terms of the rhetorical and economic dynamics of digital publishing, and especially in the context of public battles about copyright and intellectual property and . . . that digital filesharing forms the basis for a new ethic of digital delivery, an ethic that should lead us to reconsider our policies regarding plagiarism. (180)

DeVoss and Porter call Napster a “crisis in delivery” and point to it as an example of a shift in how we think of delivery: “it represents a paradigm shift: from an older view of writing as alphabetic text on paper . . . to an emergent and ill-understood view of writing as weaving digital media for distribution across networked spaces” (179). As the Web continues to remind us of the dotted line that connects any utterance with origin, we are being forced to rethink what it means to create, deliver, or claim ownership of writing. Given that situations like Essjay’s will most likely continue to arise, we can now ask a number of new questions: How do electronic spaces allow us to rethink concepts such as *ethos*, delivery, and intellectual property? What form does this new ethic of delivery take? Essjay’s controversial use of a situated *ethos* based on expertise and credentials gives us some insight into Wikipedia’s anonymity policy in practice, one that is continually critiqued. Critics of Wikipedia call for a policy that requires Wikipedians to provide RL identities, and this is a way of placing an author behind or inside of the text. Credentials slide a platform under the

speaker and stop the debate—grounding resolution primarily in the speaking or writing subject. But the digital commons often expose the problems with such a conception of authorship. There is a cacophony of voices that sits behind any utterance, spoken or written.

This infinite number of voices means that we are left without a firm platform of delivery. The realization that we have always lacked such a platform often comes as a disturbing realization, but it also means that we require new ways of thinking through questions of textual origins and intellectual property. Left without a platform, we often assert an identity and subsequently link texts to that identity. This is one explanation of Jordan's decision to construct the identity of Essjay. As we have noted, Jordan was not really anonymous. Though Essjay was a fiction, it was indeed an identity. His ability to rely on this identity shows that Wikipedia's constitution does not do away with claims of expertise. However, Wikipedia's policy with regard to anonymity and textual origins means that an "expert" like Essjay can always be questioned. This ability to question stems from Wikipedia's constitution, a constitution that grounds textual conversation in citations rather than in the RL identities of Wikipedians. It should be noted that Wikipedia's constitution does not do away with appeals to expertise. By demanding citations, it still is interested in authoritative information and expertise. However, Wikipedia's shifting of expertise away from a situated *ethos* of authorial expertise and toward an invented *ethos* of citation means that the expertise of the Wikipedian cannot stop the conversation. Stubbornly refusing to attach utterance to origin, Wikipedia's constitution encourages an ethics of citation and discussion.

The Web's more extreme separation of utterance from origin means that we can shift our rhetorical lens away from a firm platform of delivery (grounded in the expert subject or "genius" author). Searches for origins will continually fail, and this is not a cause for concern. Abandoning the search for origins means we can shift our focus to the textual chain presented by any speaker or writer. We can then have fruitful arguments about the validity of any citational chain. Critics often argue that anonymity is Wikipedia's most serious problem, but we could also argue that the anonymity policy is an attempt by Wikipedia to avoid some of the pitfalls of claiming expertise. Wales asserts that "it's always inappropriate to try to win an argument by flashing your credentials . . . and even more so if those credentials are inaccurate" (qtd. in Bergstein). If we follow this line of thinking, the anonymity policy is not the problem Wikipedia should address. Instead, the larger problem stems from any rhetor's claim that he or she

is the origin of an utterance. Such a claim retains a firm platform of delivery—a platform that is mythical in that it unproblematically links texts with origins. Thus, the Essjay scandal did not stem from Wikipedia's faulty constitution but rather from Jordan's need for a firm platform of delivery. The Essjay episode also shows how assertions of expertise can breed a kind of citational laziness. The statement "I have a Ph.D." is an appeal to textual information (a diploma), and that text should be confirmed like any other text. However, rather than appeals to credentials, Wikipedia asks that writers point to a textual chain that is verifiable and out in the open.

Wikipedia opens the door for editors like Essjay who claim to be something they are not. Requiring experts to provide RL identities is one way of addressing this problem, but Wikipedia offers a different solution by grounding knowledge in the ever-shifting terrain of citation rather than in the expert Wikipedian. Far from being a mere "online" phenomenon, Wikipedia gestures toward an emerging rhetoric that offers us ways to rethink the intersections of *ethos*, identity, intellectual property, and textual origins. Discussions about Essjay often come back to ethics: Is it not wrong to claim something that you are not? Further, is the ability for Wikipedians to remain anonymous an ethical policy? However, we might turn these questions around: What are the ethics of claiming to be the origin of a text? And how ethical is it to point to credentials as a way of stopping discussion? It is crucial for rhetoricians to study online spaces and consider these ethical and rhetorical questions. The insights we gather from spaces like Wikipedia can offer some clues as to how the field of rhetoric and composition might refine its theories and practices.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Diane Davis, Jillian Sayre, Dale Smith, Katherine Hayles, Clay Spinuzzi, and the CCC readers of this article for their extensive help and insight.
2. Wikipedians fall into a hierarchy of four basic categories: stewards, bureaucrats, administrators (sometimes called "sysops"), and editors (anyone who edits Wikipedia is an editor). As a bureaucrat, Essjay wielded a good bit of power within the Wikipedia community.
3. On January 20, 2007, Brandt published the email he sent to Stacy Schiff to an online forum called The Wikipedia Review. After a number of follow-up posts claiming that Schiff and *The New Yorker* were dodging him, Brandt posted a response he received from the magazine's Deputy Editor on February 26. In that response, the magazine's Deputy Editor informed Brandt that an editor's note would be published in the March 5 issue.

4. Usernames on Wikipedia serve the counter-intuitive purpose of hiding a Wikipediaian's identity. While "anonymous" Wikipediaians are identified by an IP address that can be tracked to give geographical information, Wikipedia usernames mask a writer's IP address. Only Wikipediaians with special permissions can link usernames with IP addresses.
5. My approach here—we might call it a constitutional analysis—is indebted to legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, who urges scholars and citizens to pay close attention to the constitutions and *codes* that lie beneath online communities: "We can build, or architect, or *code* cyberspace to protect values that we believe are fundamental. Or we can build, or architect, or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear. There is no middle ground. There is no choice that does not include some kind of building" (6). Lessig's discussion of the constitution of cyberspace is not a call for a document that will dictate how we live our lives online. Instead, he urges citizens to pay closer attention to the values that various codes encourage or discourage.
6. We should note that things get muddled when we attempt to draw a line between "Essjay" and "Ryan Jordan." Going forward, I will use the name "Jordan" to refer to the Wikia employee and "Essjay" to refer to the Wikipediaian. Such a choice allows me to manage complexity, but it also serves to smooth over a productive question: Where does Jordan end? Where does Essjay begin?
7. Jordan's suspect behavior was not confined to this claiming of false credentials. He also claimed that Schiff had offered to compensate him for his time—an ethical no-no for journalists. Schiff denied this (Lih).
8. This page was deleted from Wikipedia due to its "Right to disappear" policy (a policy that Essjay took advantage of after leaving the community), but the letter is archived at various mirror sites. Of course, it can also be found at the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>), a site that reminds us that Web texts rarely (if ever) disappear completely.

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