Abstract

Since its creation in 2009, the RapGenius platform has brought together communities of amateur enthusiasts, known as ‘scholars,’ to annotate everything from rap lyrics to scientific papers on their online platform. Accordingly, RapGenius provides not just a place of engagement for its users, but is a wealth of information on differing interpretations and editions, impressions, issues, and states; authorial intent; and the surrounding social and historical contexts of the texts. By analyzing the case study of the Hamilton annotations project, this paper reveals the bibliographic capacity of RapGenius and the general potential of collaborative bibliography to foster broader participation and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Keywords

book history, bibliography, Alexander Hamilton, RapGenius, collaboration

Introduction

From its inception, RapGenius has held the lofty goal of “annotating the world” (Genius, 2015, ‘About’). User-contributed annotations, made up of close readings of texts, form the knowledge base of the website, now known as Genius (Bradley, 2014). Regina N. Bradley (2014) conceptualizes RapGenius as a “tool of hip hop pedagogy,” established though annotators’ “playfulness paired with line-by-line reading and ‘peer review’ of other users’ explanations—marked by ratings” (p. 91). If RapGenius is a tool, it is one that enables bibliographical study. Users referred to as “scholars” comment upon not only the content, but also the history, social context, and various iterations of the text. Ultimately, the site encourages a disciplined, academic practice through its playful crowdsourced structure.

Context and Framework

Traditional bibliography has long fixated on the printed book; however, with the rise of born-digital media, it is important to recognize that bibliography, despite its name, is not and should not be limited to the study of printed books. Whereas the predecessor of the printed book, the medieval manuscript, has codicology as its own field of textual analysis, the novelty of born-digital texts is such that no such traditional textual analysis exists. This raises an important question: why not apply traditional bibliography to born-digital texts? In order
to create what the eminent Anglo-American bibliographer Philip Gaskell (1972) calls “basically a tool for editors” (p. 1), the scholarly research process of bibliography requires that a researcher apply forethought, rigor, and standardization to any bibliographic analysis. Without these controlled processes, the bibliographic tool would not function. We propose that RapGenius and its system of annotation serve a similar function with its own inherent set of principles and aims. After all, as seen above, Bradley also sees RapGenius as a pedagogical tool. How do the two intersect? How do they differ? RapGenius’s crowdsourced annotations contrast with the traditional image of the solitary bibliographer poring over a tome and create a continuously updated variorum. In a convivial and collegial atmosphere, the annotation projects on RapGenius have created a shared bibliography that ushers textual criticism into the world of social media.

History and Nature of RapGenius

RapGenius began one Saturday night in 2009. In a Brooklyn living room, three twenty-something friends unwound from a long week at work, having drinks and talking, hip-hop albums playing in the background. At one point, conversation turned to debate about the meaning of one particularly cryptic lyrical metaphor and, in turn, to the nature of rap lyrics as a poetic form of writing, meriting the same study of meaning and interpretation as academic prose and poetry (Wideman, 2015). Such pseudo-intellectual conversations between friends, over a few drinks, likely occur nearly every Saturday night in apartments all over Brooklyn and beyond, but not every group of friends possesses the ambition and skill set of these three young men. Mahbod Moghadam, Tom Lehman, and Ilan Zechory were Yale graduates and self-taught programmers, and their conversation about the meaning of rap lyrics and the need for a forum supporting collaborative discussion became a working prototype within 24 hours of that Saturday night in 2009 (Sargent, 2012).

Originally called RapExegesis, the site debuted as something akin to a blog, with fewer than ten people working on annotations. By mid-2011, however, it surpassed 1 million hits per month. After reaching a wider audience and changing the name to RapGenius, the creators applied to Y Combinator, a start-up incubator responsible for the likes of Reddit and Airbnb, and became the fastest growing start-up in Y Combinator history, receiving an initial $1.8 million in funding (Wideman, 2015). By October 2012, venture capitalist firm Andreessen Horowitz had invested $15 million in RapGenius, taken in by the site’s proclamation that “its serious, academic take on rap lyrics will help elevate the genre to a new level of poetry” (Weber, 2014, October 3, 2013 section, para. 1) and by late 2013 RapGenius surpassed nearly 5 million visitors per month and boasted 25 employees.

Today, Genius functions just as its creators originally intended: by breaking down text with line-by-line annotations that can be added and edited by anyone around the world, bringing myriad perspectives, modes of thought, and knowledge into the discussion. Genius’ “scholars” continually add annotations and comment upon other submissions, while also voting for one another’s contributions based on accuracy and insight. The more scholars contribute and receive positive feedback, the more Genius IQ points they can earn, which in turn grants privileges to do more on the site, such as editing other’s annotations, moderating discussion, and regulating the site as well as its social media. In addition, some works also have verified annotations, which come from “people closely associated with a piece of text,” such as the author or subject (Genius, 2015, “About”). Pieces of text on the site feature verified annotations alongside those from ordinary contributors, recognizing both author and reader and allowing them to interact. Many critics of RapGenius refer to its process as the “hyperintellectualization of hip-hop,” and the founders themselves see the platform as “a means for enlightened discussion,” one that is careful to have editors screen annotations for “valuable commentary, grounded in specific parts of a given text” (Wideman, 2015). Indeed, discussion within and without the company frequently features the rhetoric of education and academia, in which users do not simply comment as in other internet forums, but genuinely seek the input of others to produce the best explanations and explorations, rather than only seeking to voice their own opinions.

Case Study: Hamilton Annotation Project

One particularly interesting example of bibliographic features in RapGenius is the annotation project for the Hamilton soundtrack. Hamilton, written and directed
by Lin-Manuel Miranda, is a Broadway musical that details the life of Founding Father and United States Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. *Hamilton* is mainly rapped, and covers Hamilton's life from his arrival in New York in 1776 to his death during a duel with political rival Aaron Burr in 1804. *Hamilton* has been a runaway success. The *New York Times* attributes this in no small part to the musical style, writing:

It’s a theatrical rarity: a critically acclaimed work, written by a young composer, that’s making a cultural impact far beyond Broadway’s 40 theaters. That it’s told through the language and rhythms of hip-hop and R&B—genres that remain mostly foreign to the musical theater tradition—has put it in contention to redefine what an American musical can look and sound like. (Piepenburg, 2015)

*Hamilton*’s success has been meteoric; at the time of writing, all but one show for the next six months has been completely sold out and tickets for the only available time were reselling for as much as $2,575.00 USD for a single seat (Ticketmaster, 2015). Fans of *Hamilton* have flocked to *RapGenius* in order to annotate Miranda’s lyrics. In particular, contributors ‘epaulettes’ and ‘marvellings,’ with additional contributions from colleagues at the University of Toronto, created a Google Docs document in order to simultaneously work on an accepted and accurate corpus of annotations (A. Sharon, personal communication, December 3, 2015). Their annotations, which are thorough and historically grounded, make up the majority of the *Hamilton* project on *RapGenius*. epaulettes has earned over 16,000 IQ points from this project, and marvellings has just over 2,500. These metrics provided by *RapGenius* indicate the intensity of the contributions to the *Hamilton* project (Genius, 2015, ‘Hamilton IQ Leaderboard’). Miranda himself has praised the project, tweeting, “Can I just say you wonderful nerds are absolutely KILLING IT on the lyric annotations on Genius.com. proceed” (Miranda, 2015c). This combination of high output from contributors and the inherent bibliographic suitability of the *Hamilton* project as discussed below makes it a perfect example of bibliography in a born-digital environment.

**Application of Bibliographic Method to *RapGenius***

*Hamilton* is an excellent example to illustrate how *RapGenius* can be treated bibliographically because it is an adaptation in and of itself. Hamilton originated at the Public Theater in New York and was altered when it opened at the Richard Rogers Theater in order to be considered more suitable for Broadway. Miranda had been working on the piece since at least 2009, when he performed what would become the opening number, “Alexander Hamilton,” at the White House Poetry Slam. Miranda (2009) explained, “it’s a concept album about someone I think embodies hip-hop: Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton” (0:14). On top of these varying performances, Miranda has explained that this musical is based off of the 2004 Ron Chernow biography, *Alexander Hamilton*. Arguably, Chernow’s work is also a version of Hamilton’s life. Thus, we have a corpus of differing adaptations. If Hamilton’s life is considered the ur-text, or the original, Chernow’s biography and Miranda’s musical are clearly two distinct versions of his life, which can be bibliographically analyzed. Similarly, Miranda’s earlier work at the White House Poetry Slam, known as the *Hamilton Mixtape*, offers another adaptation of the musical: it was performed at a different time, with different lyrics, in a different setting. So we have the three version of Hamilton: his life, his biography, and the musical, which is further divided into the Broadway play and the mixtape. As each line in Hamilton is annotated, readers are able to see a full history of how this line developed through the course of the writing of the play. Take, for example, a verse in the opening song “Alexander Hamilton”: “The ten-dollar founding father without a father / Got a lot farther by working a lot harder / By being a lot smarter / By being a self-starter / By fourteen they placed him in charge of a / trading charter” (Miranda, 2015b, para. 2). The annotations on Genius for this verse reference Chernow’s biography, a letter by fellow founding father John Adams, and an image of an American ten-dollar bill bearing Hamilton’s image, and point out an inaccuracy in the lyric regarding Hamilton’s age (epaulettes et al., 2015). Readers can understand the relevant history and also how it shaped the lyric in the musical adaptation.

The editors of this annotation project have stated their purpose clearly. Their stated aims are full annotations that explain historical context, musical context, and above all, interpretive analysis (Hamilton Editors, 2015). They advise commenters to “please annotate in your own words with supplemental quotations and media where appropriate. Annotations that are JUST links to or quotations from wikipedia [sic] will be de-
leted” (Hamilton Editors, 2015). This moves the project beyond the realms of simple references and into a more formal analysis of each lyric. The editors also identified liaising with Miranda to verify their annotations as one of their stretch goals, which they have achieved: Miranda is recognized as the second most active contributor on the project after epaulettes (“Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording) IQ Leaderboard,” 2015). Adding verified authorial intent to the bibliography of lyrics goes beyond traditional bibliography; many bibliographers use textual evidence in order to tease out hints of authorial intention. By adding a feature for verified authorial annotations, RapGenius allows the author to be part of the analysis. His annotations can be pithy or they can be involved. In an annotation for the song “Aaron Burr, Sir,” Miranda states that he had a whole notebook of rhymes for ‘Burr, sir’ including bursar, Mercer, sure sir, etc. (Miranda, 2015a). By contrast, Miranda’s annotation for “My Shot”, one of the showstopping numbers in the musical, reveals that this song was essential to him; he spent the better part of a year writing it, and he consciously imitated the style of 80s raps and the artists Big Pun and Rakim (Miranda, 2015d). The RapGenius format allows for this annotation to link to these artists, and we as bibliographers are able to recognize these other works in the creation of “My Shot.”

One interesting question that arises from this proj-
ect is that of what exactly demonstrates an accurate representation of the author’s intention. In examples like those above, it is easy to see that Miranda’s voice is represented in the bibliographic record because of the green verification check mark. He directly wrote the text that appears in the ‘critical apparatus.’ However, take the example of the lyric “You’re absolutely right, John should have shot him in the mouth” (sdelmont, 2015, “Meet Me Inside”). The annotation cites a tweet by @AbbySharon, writing “In “Meet Me Inside,” is Ham saying Laurens should’ve shot Lee in the mouth reference to this in Chernow @Lin_Manuel?,” including a photo of the physical page in the Chernow biography which discusses a later duel. Miranda tweeted back, “Yes. Nice catch. #keeplistening” (sdelmont, 2015). This entire conversation exists like a verification, except that it does not have a green check mark from RapGenius. The screenshots from Twitter show that Miranda’s tweet did come from his verified account, but in the official bibliographic record of RapGenius, it does not count as an official authorial annotation.

Why is a Bibliographical Perspective Useful for Studying RapGenius?

RapGenius is ostensibly an example of modern bibliography, adapting the method of study to alternate texts like videogames or online resources beyond the physical book while remaining quite traditional in its approach to studying a text. Indeed, its founders prefer that it conform to the view of textual scholarship as an intensely disciplined, academic practice as they “elevate rap to a new level of poetry” (Sargent, 2012). Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, they are also making bibliography more accessible and collaborative in the process—still favouring experts but making room for the voices and observations of other contributors. In his exploration of historical bibliography, Tanselle (1992) discusses the importance in supplementing the study of the physical details of books with “information from printers’ and publishers’ archives, authors’ letters, magazine and newspaper advertisements, and other external documents,” and in the process “illuminating literary history, shedding light on behaviour of authors, publishers, readers” (p. 25). In the case of RapGenius, the text of the lyrics is usefully augmented by information on the historical context of their writing from both within and without hip-hop. Consistent with Tanselle’s discussion, this information can come from research by the bibliographers – the Geniuses, Editors, and Moderators of RapGenius – or directly from authoritative sources involved with the production of the text. RapGenius focuses on reconstructing the past of texts, but does so in the hopes of constructing a different future for the rap genre, and arguably bibliography, with its plan for universal annotation.

It is not difficult to imagine the annotated lyrics on the site as a variorum edition, in which the notes of recognized specialists and commentators fill the page, often with input from others involved in the creation of the text at hand. Verified annotations come from those immediately involved in the original act of production, while other RapGenius users offer their own ideas and can be elevated to an expert level in the process, when verified users confirm their interpretations. In this identification of cross-references and historical context, a Darnton Circuit view of the production of rap songs is revealed. In other words, just as Robert Darnton (1982) revealed that books are made not only by their authors, but also by their publishers, editors, and distributors, RapGenius ensures that the understanding of music and authorship is shaped by more than just the artist. In the case of Hamilton, many times an individual other than the artists to whom the song is credited has aided in writing lyrics, finding and mixing samples, or guest rapping, and their commentary on the final product can be just as useful and crucial in building greater understanding. While authorial intent is privileged above all when it comes to deciphering lyrics, contributors are welcome and are encouraged to share their own personal insights as long as these are based in thoughtful analysis. Like Darnton’s Circuit then, readers, or rather listeners, hold an important place in the cycle of rap songs. While some critics are tempted to ask whether the explanations are “correct,” the founders and users of RapGenius recognize that rap vernacular is ever-evolving, and so meanings are not always readily apparent (Sargent, 2012). Scholars have similar reasons for undertaking the bibliographic study of more traditional texts, sometimes establishing “correct” interpretations while at the same time recording how texts change throughout time. While the founders of Genius originally hoped to “re-write rap history,” in the process they and their users are constructing the history of each text as well as recording its transmission through time, like any respectable bibliographer.
Insights into the Nature of Bibliographical Study

Bibliography is typically viewed as a scientific study of texts; it is rigorous and evidence-based. W.W. Greg (1998) famously called bibliography the “science of the transmission of literary documents” (p. 135). Although bibliography is slowly moving past looking solely at print documents, the evidence-based approach remains core to bibliographical study. A crowdsourced project, such as RapGenius, might initially seem the antithesis of this rigorous exercise due to its openness and apparent lack of peer-review. It is important to consider the question of rigor in online collaborative initiatives. In their article, “Beyond Rigor,” Sean Michael Morris, Pete Rorabaugh, and Jesse Stommel (2013) suggest that in order to examine multimodal and collaborative work, we need to “move past our traditional definition of rigorous academic work” (para. 4). Their model of new rigor in networked learning environments depends on the structure of the environment itself. Rigor is found when an environment is engaged, critical, curious, dynamic, and derivative (i.e., responsive to its sources but not replicative). In this model, what is rigorous is not the particular process, but the “curious examination of the ... results and their effectiveness” (Morris et al., para. 6). New rigor offers a way of looking at RapGenius as a platform that enables a rigorous form of bibliographical study outside of an academic institution.

The rigor in RapGenius, especially in well thought out projects such as the Hamilton annotations, is similarly found in the attitudes of the community and their reasons for undergoing these endeavours. As discussed previously, the openness and flexibility of RapGenius as a platform is balanced with verification and the IQ points system, encouraging thoughtful discussion. These two factors, openness and thoughtful discourse, allow for the “constructing and negotiating community knowledge through a series of interdependent notes” so that no matter the expertise or station of the contributors, knowledge grows (Morris et al., 2013). While bibliography has always relied on collaboration, the crowdsourcing side of RapGenius makes that collaboration much more immediate and varied. Conversations are happening on various platforms and are encouraged to come together in the annotations.

Although the strength of the annotations lies in their collaborative nature, this openness may also cause potential problems when using RapGenius as a source of bibliographical information. There are a growing number of articles using annotations to back up their arguments. An example of this is an article in the Iowa Law Review titled, “Deterring Racial Bias in Criminal Justice Through Sentencing.” In this article, Umsted (2014) refers to a particular annotation of Jay Z’s “99 Problems” in a footnote to further his argument about racial profiling (p. 438). Another example is Smiley’s “From Silence to Propagation: Understanding the Relationship Between ‘Stop Snitchin’ and ‘YOLO’” (2015). Although RapGenius seems to keep most annotations if they are thoughtful, the ability to alter annotations could cause potential issues when they are used to further other arguments.

While RapGenius, with its emphasis of rap’s ever-evolving vernacular, is a good example of Greg’s (1998) statement that “text is not a fixed and formal thing” (p. 150-151), the difficulty of preserving past versions of the annotations themselves becomes significant. While it is true that digital files are not as ephemeral as they appear in popular imagination (Kirschenbaum, 2002, p. 24), realistically preserving these files and iterations takes concerted effort. In this form of bibliography, tracking the changes in the analyses may become just as vital as tracking the changes in the texts that they are analyzing. Although the stability of particular annotations is a concern, what is even more vital is the stability of the platform. Crowdsourced projects depend on scalability and a robust and engaged user-base. Wikipedia, the most dominant internet platform for crowdsourced knowledge, has seen a considerable decline in its user base since its peak in 2007, as Zach Schalk notes (2013), and many worry about the “future sustainability and content quality of a user-driven site that fails to attract new users” (para. 7). RapGenius, however, functions differently than Wikipedia, encouraging original thought and interpretation, which could be its saving grace in the long term.

Conclusion

The Hamilton annotations project shows the bibliographical capacity of RapGenius through its focus on original analysis; differing editions, impressions, issues, and states; authorial intent; and the surrounding social and historical contexts of the texts. Besides verifying historical context and interpretative analysis, “scholars” are encouraged to comment on musical composition; the tradition, grammar, and
style of hip hop within the songs; and visuals from the stage production. Through the crowdsourcing of information, this form of collaborative bibliography has the potential to reach wider audiences than traditional bibliographies. Unlike more traditional lyric websites such as SongMeanings.com, the RapGenius platform allows for systematic engagement with various aspects of song, not just overall interpretations. Although there have been individual projects that sought to annotate lyrics, the flexibility of RapGenius has allowed for a proliferation of engaged analysis. Over the years, RapGenius has transformed into Genius, which features additional categories: Lit, News, Screen, and Sports. Here, very different topics come together on one platform. Users are exposed to, and encouraged to annotate, everything from rap lyrics to scientific papers, but are also exposed to annotations by the author and by their peers. While, of course, exposure does not equal engagement, the fact that these topics reside together on the Genius website increases the possibility of interdisciplinary bibliographical analyses.

References


