'BRINGING YOU THE MEANING AND THE KNOWLEDGE BEHIND THE MUSIC'

FAN PRODUCTION AND THE CONTROL OF MEANING ON GENIUS.COM

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Introduction

Speaking at an event for venture capital firm First Round Capital in late 2013, Genius co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Tom Lehman jokingly drew comparisons between his site and The Talmud: 'The Talmud explains the Torah, and that's what Rap Genius does for the whole of the internet.' While presented in the context of typical Silicon Valley irreverence, this comparison nonetheless demonstrates the lofty goals of a website that began as a way to explain the lyrics of Hip-Hop songs and would soon promise to 'annotate the world'.

After a turbulent first few years and a brand relaunch in 2014, Genius has enjoyed accelerated growth following a partnership with Apple as an official lyrics service on the tech giant's streaming platform Apple Music. Arriving at the front page of the site today, an uninitiated user could be forgiven for mistaking Genius for any other mid-scale music site publishing lyrics, articles, release information, charts and video content. But beneath the surface is an engine powered by fan labour – a massive user-generated database of metadata and lyrical analysis. Genius relies on users not only to transcribe the pop lyrics that generate much of its traffic, but to create extensive annotations on those lyrics, ranging from amusing behind-the-scenes facts to insightful conceptual and textual analysis. Some Genius users also include comments and metadata about musical elements and techniques such as sampling, instrumentation and form in annotations; but since the majority of user annotations focus on lyrical meaning and context, this is the type of annotation discussed here.

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Itself presented in the form of an annotated text, and supported by insight from several long-standing community members, this article outlines ongoing shifts in the meaning-making power structures that exist on Genius.com. Firstly the function and cultural context of the website will be explained, followed by a discussion of some key regulatory and motivational techniques increasingly employed by the company to guide its community of contributors. A brief profile of an influential, high-level Genius user is then provided, demonstrating the heightened levels of interpretive agency afforded at the top of the site's hierarchy. The final section shifts slightly in focus, outlining recent changes in the nature of video content published by Genius – developments that suggest a gradual disempowerment of Genius users lower in the site hierarchy as well as a larger shift away from crowd-sourced interpretation and toward a privileging of authorial intent. Overall, it is argued that these changing dynamics and developments of meaning-making authority on Genius signify declining support for the audience-orientated knowledge co-production that was previously central to the site, resulting in a recentralisation of epistemic authority.

Online Lyrics & Interpretation

Founded in 2009 at the tail end of the techno-cultural revolution commonly known as Web 2.0, Genius embodies several core principles associated with this moment in internet history: participatory practice, online community and digital democratisation. In support of these principles the site extensively utilises the iconic Web 2.0 technology of 'wiki' style webpages open to direct editing by users (O'Reilly 2005). In essence, Genius represents a combination of Web 2.0 ideals and tech innovation with the online fan culture logics of collective intelligence and expert knowledge in order to enhance another internet phenomenon – music lyric websites.

Dai Griffiths has referred to the advent of online lyric archives as a 'point of no return' after which 'words in songs left their relatively stable publishing contexts and entered the unpredictable context of internet access and visibility.' (Griffiths 2001: 237). Online lyric transcriptions are audience-derived, frequently differing subtly in content and presentation to officially published versions, reflecting the various different ways in which a song can be heard.

These annotations contain additional information, but in a mirror of Genius itself also include quotations from a number of Genius users interviewed for this project.

Music lyrics have been made available online since at least the 1990s but came to prominence in the mid-2000s during a number of high-profile court cases from copyright holders (Young, 2005).

On Genius this process is taken to another level through its community-based project of annotation, discussion and explanation. The site represents an audience orientated process of collective meaning-making which is not beholden to forces of authorial intent, in which annotators are influential on the way in which users understand the music they listen to. Just as an important function of online lyric transcriptions is to clarify a hard-to-hear line in a favourite song, Genius' user annotations play a role in guiding or clarifying audience interpretation.

Folksonomy is a Web 2.0 term describing 'vast archives that people classify by tagging them with descriptive metadata' (Santini 2011: 211). These bottom-up systems of collaborative classification have proven to be influential in online music communities, a famous example being the power of Last.fm tags in shaping the identity of music genres and even christening new ones (Trainer 2016: 411). Genius' archive certainly qualifies as a folksonomy, but its interpretive dimension in particular raises questions regarding the stability and true 'source' of song meanings. Genius' project of crowdsourced annotation might first appear to follow a postmodern perspective that questions the author's position as sole originator of textual meaning, by offering audiences the opportunity to suggest their own understandings of lyrics. In practice however, users' acts of interpretation are generally required to fit into a specific model of musical understanding that somewhat privileges authorial intent – a policy made possible by the access to vast amounts of secondary media and other evidence afforded to Genius users by the internet. Rather than asking the audience to suggest what they feel a song means to them, the site could more accurately be characterised as asking users to go and find out what the artist was trying to say, using Google and online music media as well as scouring social media for clues and evidence. Nonetheless, the audience-mediated nature of this process still provides scope for a certain amount of interpretive agency and creativity on the part of Genius users.

Artists themselves can also make appearances on the site as users, and since at least 2011 Genius has incorporated lyricists' own explanations of their music. Musicians approached by the company or those who provide proof of their identity are given accounts as 'Verified Artists' and are encouraged to proofread lyric transcriptions, provide information about the history of songs or explain the intended meaning behind their work.

Rather than a personal process between listener and music, on Genius interpretation is collaborative and hierarchical, resulting in popular readings that can become canonised and accepted by the community.

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The potential presence of authors in the midst of fans discussing their work is a major selling point of the site to many users, and having an annotation met with a 'Verified Artist's approval (referred to as a 'cosign') is one of the higher honours a regular Genius user can experience. This form of approval is one of a number of internal mechanisms at work on the site that incentivise users to put effort into their online labour.

Community & Hierarchy: IQ

As the power and utility of categorisation and recommendation algorithms grows, folksonomic methods are not as popular as they once were. A site like Genius is rather more resistant to algorithmic obsolescence than other folksonomies since human minds still appear to be the best at interpreting artistic meaning in a satisfying fashion (George & Shamir 2014). But online nothing is futureproof, and the company has had to continually evolve in order to keep up with newer digital platforms and forms of participatory media that have appeared in the decade since its birth. Genius has remained true to the mission of explaining song lyrics, but over time the company has developed strategies (outlined below) to maximise user productivity and consistency. However, when these strategies are designed to target broadly defined markers of bad practice (frequently associated with the contributions of less experienced users) they frequently limit the capacity of certain users to make their interpretations heard. This particular problem will be explored in more detail later in this section.

The Genius community's collective identity is defined in this co-construction of metatextual knowledge, offering users the chance to prove themselves as interpreters or bring knowledge of their own to the table. But this rosy image was repeatedly problematised in my research by users who expressed dissatisfaction with a gradual lessening of community support, strict editorial standards and the privileged position occupied by prominent users. These last two complaints closely relate to the company's methods of regulating site content. In order to maximise user traffic and revenue, Genius needs to keep the quality of the average Genius annotation as high as possible while simultaneously ensuring that users do not become disillusioned with their role as contributors. This balance between professionalism and fun is maintained through a combination of incentivised community initiatives and a strong user hierarchy that focuses on mentoring and strict oversight from experienced users.

'I won't lie. I've had a couple annotations cosigned by artists I like. That's fucking cool as shit!'
Tom

Editorial standards mandated by the company are enacted by high-level users who work to train new contributors up and foster a sense of friendly competition. For the most part this arrangement functions well, but such a system inherently runs the risk of reducing diversity in annotation practices and closing down potential meaning, in the ideological pursuit of song interpretations that meet specific editorial standards and remain strictly true to the intent of the author.

In the site's guidelines, Genius identifies its contributors as 'scholars' – able to express their relationship with (and understanding of) the music they enjoy for an audience of the like minded. Users can 'upvote' and 'downvote' annotations, and those in search of community recognition can enter their contributions in weekly annotation competitions. Quality control is the responsibility of a subset of users who are awarded roles with extra permissions, the most populous of whom are called Editors. These users are expected to set an example in their own contributions, while also reviewing regular users' annotations and keeping an eye out for promising new users to bring into their ranks. Mentor culture in the Genius community is exemplified by 'Top to Bottom', a weekly video seminar in which an experienced host leads a surgery focussed on a specific song, discussing each lyric and reviewing all existing user annotations to bring them in line with the site's standards.

A central feature of Genius' community economy is a pseudo-currency called 'IQ'. This plays a vital role as an incentive for all contributors, especially as a user's IQ is displayed prominently next to their username. While far from the be-all and end-all of status on Genius, IQ remains a key signifier of user experience, investment and credibility. Bonus IQ is offered for participation in a number of ongoing community projects, organised under the banner of the 'Glorious IQ Bonus.'

This program offers additional IQ rewards to Editors on the completion of specific tasks deemed to raise the overall quality of the site. These include simple jobs like annotating newly released music, ensuring that metadata is added to album pages and completing summaries of songs, artists and albums. One job that stands out amongst these is so-called 'Red Removal', involving the systematic rejection and removal of unreviewed user annotations.

Several users interviewed for this project believe that the editorial quality and consistency of user submissions has improved over time.

Many interpretations are rejected on the basis that they are not meet on-site standards of plausibility or evidence of author intent. Annotations rejected on this basis are marked with the words 'It's a Stretch'.

Any user with the Editor role is able to edit, delete or tag user contributions with the distinction of 'Official Genius Annotation'.

The Community Manager, (a now notably defunct Staff position on the site) played a key role in recruiting new Editors, as well as hosting this seminar.
⊠⊠According to one user, this has resulted in 'a massive decrease in the number of Editors being made.'

Mainly obtained through contributing content, IQ is also awarded when a user's work is upvoted by other users, and when the corresponding page attracts a high number of views.

Bonus IQ can also be attained by accepting and providing edits on unreviewed annotations, but the mass removal of annotations by regular contributors are still an attractive way for users in higher roles to quickly boost their account's standing, and potentially earn more substantive rewards. A large proportion of the site's annotations remain unreviewed, so while competitive Red Removal is framed as necessary maintenance, one could argue that such incentivised purging of user annotations (frequently on the basis of formatting errors or rule technicalities) constitutes a systematic destruction of knowledge created by users lower in the hierarchy.

In the site's early years Genius annotations were much less strictly moderated, meaning many older annotations (or those from users returning to the site after spending time away) often break the very rules that have become central to Genius' policy of striving for consistency and (ostensibly) objectivity. Such contributions use a large range of media-forms and engage in open subjectivity. Common examples include animated 'reaction' GIFs as well as profanity and pornography. While newer annotations have retained and even expanded upon elements of this multimedia approach in some respects, an annotation consisting simply of an embedded GIF without explanation certainly would not make the cut today.

Contemporary annotations vary a great deal in length and depth. Some consist of simple observations about specific references, obscure slang or wordplay while others can contain several paragraphs of information contextualising a line with support from embedded media or quotations from primary sources. Annotations frequently feature hyperlinks to other pages on Genius, and such self-referentiality is encouraged in order to generate an interconnected and self-stabilising web of knowledge that encourages users to remain on-site. Most in-depth annotations are worked on by multiple users and built up in iteration over time. This practice of collaborative, iterative interpretation commonly breaks out on high-profile new releases, as the community races to provide the most insightful contributions.

As Marwick has argued, for all the non-hierarchical and communitarian ideals associated with Web 2.0, the market-orientated strategies that accompanied the era's technological innovations resulted in the emergence of highly competitive, status orientated environments (Marwick, 2013).

'I'm a three-time winner of this contest where I decided to do nothing but delete or reject annotations for a week-long period. The winner gets a 30-dollar gift card. This is just an event, like any other initiative.'
Aaron

First-hand accounts from interviewed users frame the website's past as something of a Wild West; a time during which annotations could be significantly more broad, profane and subjective in their content without risking removal.

'I still get messages pretty regularly from people who ask, "why did you delete my annotation?" and they only summarised the lyric or it was just a picture of a naked lady, and they'll say, "this is the way it's always been done." Well, things have changed in the last couple of years.'
Tom

Systems of 'self-quantification' are a recurring feature in such environments, providing individuals with social power in the form of many simple but quickly aggregated numerical markers and codes. Several users contacted for this project were quick to point out that the IQ system does not define their activity on the site. Despite these assertions, the competitive nature of collective annotation and practices like the IQ bonus (coupled with the social capital that comes with a high-IQ account) seem to suggest that there is at least some correlation between IQ and user status and identity. Whether or not this is a deliberate strategy by the site's owners, Genius' systems of contribution and interaction encourage and reward a race to the top of the hierarchy and compliance with moderation practices, as well as the site's author-first ideology of musical interpretation.

Community & Hierarchy: High-Level Users

Many users who have attained a high level in the community strata take annotation very seriously, taking time and great care to research and compose their interpretations, and frequently specialising in particular genres, artists or music labels. As this section of the article demonstrates, one advantage afforded to these diligent users is a certain level of additional freedom in more subjective or esoteric analysis, which might be less tolerated were it present in the work of a less experienced user or if it were accompanied by markers of editorial bad practice that high level users have learned to avoid. This disproportionate balance of meaning-making power encourages new users to work their way up through community mentoring rather than striking out on their own.

Aaron, a user interviewed for this project, is a high-level contributor holding the Editor and Moderator roles with a particular interest in creating high-quality annotations. Aaron's user homepage on Genius acts partly as a showcase of his achievements on the site: the page's left side displays more than ten colourful badges – trophies awarded to his annotations in various community competitions. A caption above one badge reads 'This annotation was featured in the Best Annotations of 2018, the Top Five Annotations of February 2018 and won "Tate of the Week" during *Black Panther's* opening weekend.' Many of these annotations are on the work of Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar, of whom Aaron is a big fan.

Likes, shares, views, followers, subscribers etc.

'I think this was in February 2018, I'll never forget because it was *Black Panther*'s opening weekend, so when that movie came out obviously the soundtrack dropped a week before that, everyone was going nuts annotating the lyrics and analysing the songs.'
Aaron

Pinned at the top of the page is an annotation of which he is particularly proud – an analysis of two lines from Lamar's 2017 song 'GOD.' that first explains the nuances of slang and wordplay in the line, before suggesting that the famously religious Lamar is also making a veiled reference to the biblical 'Tearing of the Temple Curtain', citing both *The Book of Exodus* and the *Gospel of Matthew* to draw links between Lamar's words and Christian scripture. The annotation then analyses the lyric in its wider musical context, reminding the reader that *DAMN.* (the album on which the lyric appears) was released on Good Friday, the same day the curtain was supposedly torn

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Aaron is often creative in his use of primary sources, but admitted to me he has no 'hard evidence' to support his reading:

> I've kind of been looking at is like my doctoral thesis in a way. It's an intense annotation and if I'm being honest it's an interpretation of a line that is kind of vague, and it's entirely possible that my theory on what that lyric means is wrong. I'll be the first to admit that, but I would say I am about 98% certain that that is what Kendrick is talking about.

The subjectivity inherent in Aaron's interpretation is no more lost on him than the parallels between his relationship with Hip-Hop and the act of decoding scripture as a practicing Christian himself. Indeed, as it lacks a source this interpretation technically fails to stand up to Genius preference for evidencing author intent. Despite this, the annotation has been approved – spared in part due to Aaron's reputation on the site and particular renown as an expert on Kendrick Lamar. One can only assume that if a new user were to make such a contribution, it would be at considerably greater risk of removal or at least being flagged with Genius Editor's catch-all tag for unsubstantiated annotations: 'It's a Stretch'. Aaron's status in the community plays a role in his ability to get away with such bending of the rules, but he has only achieved this status by adhering to the site's standards and generally living up to Genius' values of competition and overall deference to authorial intent. This indicates that despite the site's strict community standards, some users are able to harness Genius' Web 2.0 affordances as 'technologies of the self' (Bakardijeva & Gaden 2012), expressing their identity through meticulous curation of personal musical observations and well-researched insight.

"Slide on you like fallen drapes
,⊠
God toss full of carnivals"

Another annotation contains an embedded image of Lamar sporting a T-shirt printed with a bible verse to support his claim that it was referred to in a song:
'I will obsess over every single word in an annotation and I will go back and re-read it, and work out how it can flow more, and then obsessing over this annotation I discovered the [T-shirt] picture and I realised the connection.'

Dedicated annotators like Aaron are a valuable source of content for Genius, as the site's reputation for insightful interpretations draws in new users. The aforementioned editorial side of the site frequently features articles breaking down a new song based on community research and insight, spotlighting and praising user interpretations. While having content featured in a Genius Staff article is framed as a privileged reward, it remains a direct and uncompensated monetisation of fan practices by the website. Content hosted on Genius song pages has even made its way into other journalistic platforms in the past, showing that the value and influence of user annotations extends beyond Genius itself. The site has accepted user pitches for more directly authored editorial content in the past, but this practice is dwindling. Despite this, most users welcome any form of additional exposure for their work, especially given that several users I spoke to have serious journalistic aspirations of their own.

Video Content and *Verified*

So far, this article has demonstrated the impact of inter-user hierarchy and regulatory practices on the freedom of interpretation and meaning making in the Genius community. In contrast, the final section outlines how recent changes in Genius' online content strategy suggest a significant shift away from community-based interpretation entirely and towards a top-down model that gleans insight straight from the artists themselves. Despite this shift, Genius brand continues to trade on language derived from that community, presenting itself as a site for fans even while tightly controlling and lessening their overall interpretative agency. These changes have also coincided with the aforementioned decline in support for the users, reflected by the dismissal of several community-facing staff members.

Rather than simply exposing Genius' changing priorities as a company, these shifts must be understood in the context of more general trends in online content production. The so-called 'pivot to video' made by many digital media platforms in the latter half of the 2010s saw a distinct move away from written content in order to retain audiences who were flocking to YouTube. This raises the question of how such a pivot is achieved when a website is powered by written content generated by users. Rather than attempt to somehow transplant their community culture into short-form video, Genius opted instead to invest in highly branded YouTube-ready content focussing on the voices of artists themselves, rather than those of their audience.

A good example of this is the Pitchfork review of Kanye West and Kid Cudi's 2018 album *Kids See Ghosts,* which actually cites a Genius annotation as a source (Greene 2018.)

In 2012 a short series ran on the Genius YouTube channel called *Behind the Lines,* featuring musicians discussing their lyrics on camera. Despite having the legendary New York rapper and Genius 'Verified Artist' Nas among those featured, the series saw little success. In 2017, comparatively late in the industry-wide pivot to video, (and with a significant rebrand) the concept was relaunched under the name *Verified* to great success. Though it cannot compete with community annotation in terms of quantity, the series is extremely prolific, and in this aspect, the author contends that *Verified* represents a major change in Genius' method of attaining its most valuable resource: information about lyrics.

Featured artists' lyric explanations are also incorporated into the existing Genius annotation system. As the name suggests, the *Verified* series is conceptually tied to the longstanding role of 'Verified Artist' on the site. Explanations given in the videos are transcribed by Genius staff and added to the relevant song page on the site, complete with the green highlighting that singles out annotations bearing the verification of the author. As one might imagine, since the resulting annotations are transcribed from each artist's verbal explanations, they often do not meet the strict standards required of regular users, and frequently break one of Genius' cardinal rules: to never simply 'restate the line' in an annotation. Behind the scenes the community continues to work to build and perfect its vast library of musical metadata, analysis and interpretation, but as *Verified* continues to see success with a high proportion of new hits getting their own video, the community's role as real-time interpreters is less important.

A key element to the new format is that artists are asked to perform a cappella vocals for the song in question, breaking to discuss the lyrics in between each stanza. While safe territory for rappers, this aspect has proven to be rather more divisive among singing guests, adding an element of rather obviously calculated potential virality when certain artists inevitably themselves (or less frequently, surprise the audience by courageously emerging from the ordeal with their reputation unscathed). To this end (and with an almost admirable level of transparency) the series has increasingly called upon what might charitably be called gimmicky booking choices, hosting a number of viral stars to boost the series' popularity among a younger audience presumably disinterested in Genius.com itself.

As of the writing of this article well over a thousand episodes of *Verified* have been produced.

Before the series began, users would race to research and interpret new songs by their favourite artists as a community and perhaps even earning a coveted 'cosign' from the artist themselves if they happened to visit the site. Now, a significant proportion of popular new tracks are featured on *Verified*, the lyrics supposedly demystified, and the artist's comments automatically transcribed as the official Genius annotation.

Despite the recent decentring of community voices, Genius' is still careful to maintain the image of a media company defined by musical expertise. In addition to featuring the authoritative tagline 'bringing you the meaning and the knowledge behind the music', Genius videos incorporate terminology from the site's community culture into their musical news segments. In a recent video featuring the teenage creator of a viral dance challenge on TikTok set to 'Savage' by rapper Megan Thee Stallion, the host makes specific use of the term 'cosign' to describe the artist's personal participation in the challenge set to her music (Hill & Abad 2020).

The video explicitly identifies the Megan Thee Stallion's personal participation in a fan-made dance challenge set to her song as being akin to the lyric 'cosign' of a Verified Artist: a form of author validation that can be earned through audience engagement. In this way Genius content still makes prominent use of language derived from its community culture while continuing to pivot away from its roots as a Web 2.0 platform. Furthermore, by covering contemporary audience-generated cultural practice on the enfant terrible video app TikTok in this way, Genius already appears to be scoping out new sources of fan labour removed from its now rather dated Web 2.0 contributor culture.

Conclusion

As the dominance of Web 2.0 practices fades in the face of a changing internet landscape, new forms of participatory culture have emerged. Apps like TikTok that thrive on visually orientated mobile internet culture have shown that audiences are as productive as ever, but the close-knit communities and co-construction of knowledge on platforms like Genius are no longer the cutting edge. As a brand Genius has enjoyed great success in its recent strategy; deftly evolving to reflect and harness new developments in online music culture as a whole without losing its identity as a major online source of knowledge and meaning 'behind the music'. But since that very identity was originally derived from the labour of the site's increasingly disenfranchised membership, can it be maintained in the era of Verified? Through its waning support for the Genius community, the company sends the message that it needs its users less and less as its business model divests ever further from the insight that results from that community's labour.

Here, the term 'cosign' is taken from its original context of an artist 'signing off on' a user's interpretation of their work and is instead used to as a more general expression of approval of her audience's creative engagement – engagement that was instrumental in driving the song's online popularity.

Without dedicated contributors generating a large proportion of its content, it is questionable whether the company will be able to retain its audience and its credibility.

In outlining the shifting forms of musical knowledge production surrounding Genius.com, this article demonstrates the site's responses to changes in the nature of online audience production, visible in both the role of hierarchies and regulatory practices on the site, and the company's increased foregrounding of artist intent in recent years. As evidenced by the emergence of new platforms hosting subversive forms of audience participation and innovation (Coscarelli 2020), the disempowerment of collective meaning making on Genius does not signal an end to creative, influential audiences, but it would seem to confirm Web 2.0 ideologies of free market inclusivity inexorably lead to the recentralisation of power over officially accepted artistic meaning.

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