

# Late Print Culture's Social Media Revolution: Authorship, Collaboration and Copy Machines

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**Abstract:** This article examines the impact of copy machines on late twentieth-century print cultures. Specifically, this article makes a case for “dry copying,” the method of print reproduction perfected by Xerox in the late 1950s, as a unique medium rather than a weak imitation of other printing methods. Following the claim that the widespread availability of copy machines in the late twentieth century represented the arrival of a new medium, this article further examines how understandings of authorship, established with print culture, came undone in the era of the copy machine. Finally, this paper makes a case for understanding copy machines as a form of “social media” that opened up opportunities for writers, readers and publishers to create, share, exchange and comment on texts and images in communities and networks of their own making in the decades preceding the development of the web.

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*With Xerography, author and publisher and reader tend to merge once more.*<sup>1</sup>  
- Marshall McLuhan, “The Emperor’s New Clothes”

*I cannot fear the medium that is not a medium. So it is that I am sure that the widespread use of xerography will not devalue literature, nor will it confuse the identity of reader and writer, nor will it turn to antiquarianism the profession of publishing. It will not do these things because the act of copying is indiscriminate, unselective, uncompetitive. It is not a medium of art.*<sup>2</sup>  
- William Jovanovich, “The Universal Xerox Life Compiler Machine”

In 1959, Xerox launched the world’s first copy machine capable of reproducing documents on regular paper. Within a decade, the Xerox 914 and its knockoffs had become commonplace in offices, schools, public libraries, corner stores and copy shops. Although the copy machine radically transformed how printed documents were produced and circulated in the late twentieth century, to date, the machine’s impact has received little attention from media studies scholars, literary critics or book and publishing historians.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in *The Essential McLuhan*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1995), 348.

<sup>2</sup> William Jovanovich, “The Universal Xerox Life Compiler Machine,” *The American Scholar* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1971): 255.

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This article seeks to advance two arguments about the impact of copy machines on print culture and more specifically, understandings and experiences of authorship in the late twentieth century. First, I argue that “dry copying”—the method of reproduction used in most copy machines since the late 1950s—is a unique medium rather than simply a poor imitation of traditional printing methods. Following the assertion that the widespread availability of copy machines in the late twentieth century represented the arrival of a *new* medium, the second half of this article examines how understandings of authorship, established with print culture, started to come undone in the era of the copy machine. Finally, I consider some of the ways in which copy machines functioned as a pre-web form of “social media” by opening up new opportunities for writers, readers and publishers to create, share, exchange and comment on texts and images in communities and networks of their own making.

## 1. The Copy Machine as Medium

In 1967, Marshall McLuhan initiated a co-authored book-length project entitled *The Future of the Book*. Initially a collaboration with his publisher William Jovanovich, the book proposed, among other subjects, to explore the far-reaching effects of “xerography”<sup>3</sup> on the book, authorship and reading. That McLuhan proposed to collaborate with his publisher was no coincidence. As he explains in “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” xerography “reverses the characteristics of the printing press,” and “author and publisher and reader tend to merge.”<sup>4</sup> It seems likely, then, that his proposed collaboration with Jovanovich was an attempt to demonstrate one of the consequences of xerography—the merging of author and publisher.

Despite McLuhan and Jovanovich’s apparent intention to break down the division between author and publisher, their agreed-upon format reflected a much earlier and antiquated form—the epistolary. Rather than a commentary on the future of the book, however, the form appears to have been chosen for convenience or simply as an attempt for Jovanovich to find a feasible way to write with his highly eccentric co-author. As Jovanovich proposed to McLuhan, if they opted for an exchange of letters, their collaborative book would simply “structure itself.”<sup>5</sup> In the end, even this spontaneous structuring method could not sustain the project. By 1969, Jovanovich was bowing out of the collaboration, explaining that he lacked time to work on the book due to his demanding publishing job (at the time, President of Harcourt, Brace & World Inc.). Yet, elsewhere in the letter there is evidence that the collaboration’s demise may have had

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this article, I use the term “xerography” as it was used by McLuhan to refer to the process of making copies on a copy machine.

<sup>4</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” 348.

<sup>5</sup> William Jovanovich to Marshall McLuhan, June 13, 1967, Marshall McLuhan Collection, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.

more to do with ideological clashes than with lack of time. After all, Jovanovich admits that he “may be able to muster a book of essays” and as a result suggests to McLuhan that they both keep their material and use it as they see fit for future publications.<sup>6</sup>

While it is unclear which writings or ideas originally earmarked for *The Future of the Book* migrated to McLuhan’s publications, his personal files reveal that even after his collaboration with Jovanovich broke down, he continued to explore the subject of xerography. Although he appeared interested in xerography’s influence on media leaks (especially in the wake of the Pentagon Papers crisis), his primary interest in xerography remained its impact on authors and readers and subsequent impact on the structure of textual relations broadly defined: “The highly centralized activity of publishing naturally breaks down into extreme decentralism when anybody can, by means of xerography, assemble printed, or written, or photography materials.”<sup>7</sup> The shift, in McLuhan’s opinion, was nothing short of revolutionary. “Xerography is electricity invading the world of typography,” he declared, and it will in turn bring about “a total revolution in this old sphere, or this old technology.”<sup>8</sup>

If McLuhan understood xerography as a technology that would radically alter the relationship between authors, readers and publishers by decreasing authors’ dependency on publishers, his publisher’s views on the subject were far less optimistic. Following the breakdown of their collaboration, Jovanovich went on to publish an essay about xerography in *The American Scholar*. Notably, the essay is also structured in relation to a dialogue but *not* with McLuhan but rather with the writer William Saroyan. Responding to a claim made by Saroyan that “anything anybody writes has got to be published,”<sup>9</sup> Jovanovich opens his essay by citing his personal reply to Saroyan:

Your idea that anybody who writes should be able to be published may, in fact, come true. Xerography is a process that can make this possible, but whether it will make people feel better I cannot surmise, unless they happen also to be Xerox shareholders. Certainly, if publishing becomes universal, and if it is regarded as a kind of civil right, or a kind of public requital, then our concept of literary property must change. Everything will be published and it will belong to everybody—power to the people. There is nothing illogical in your idea. If everyone finds a publisher, he will then find a reader, maybe just one reader—the publisher himself. Of course, writers want lots of readers, but this desire will be less and less

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<sup>6</sup> William Jovanovich to Marshall McLuhan, July 2, 1969, Marshall McLuhan Collection, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Essential McLuhan*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1995), 293.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> William Jovanovich, “The Universal Xerox Life Compiler Machine,” 241.

fulfilled as there are more and more writers. Quantity declines as specialization declines. Eventually, every man will become at once a writer, publisher, librarian, and critic—the literary professions will disappear as a single man undertakes all the literary roles.<sup>10</sup>

Although Jovanovich's grim predications for the future of authorship, reading and publishing have yet to be fully realized, he was by no means naïve to raise concerns about the impact of the copy machine on the cusp of its widespread invasion of everyday life.

As Jovanovich recognized, by the early 1970s the copy machine was already well positioned to pose a radical challenge to print culture's established notions of copyright. Likewise, he appreciated that the increasing accessibility of copy machines would invariably alter how literary works are assessed. Emphasizing that print culture gave rise to popular culture and its accompanying assumption that the *mass* circulation and importance of a work are necessarily connected, Jovanovich observed that as the twentieth century entered its final quarter, different notions were already being forwarded. Evidently writing with an eye to the growing youth cultures and counter cultures of his era, he concludes that as property is increasingly held with suspicion, especially by "the Young (as a caste), by separatist Blacks, and by the Intellectuals who are able to subsist outside universities, foundations and government [...] The radicals, the outsiders, in our society are less interested in the artifact, the object, than in the media."<sup>11</sup> While his list of subcultural and counter cultural groups may be limited in scope, his observation is astute—xerography has a special appeal to groups who are suspicious of property but also intent on circulating ideas outside established economies of print. Rather than develop this thought, however, Jovanovich moves on to his main point and, presumably, his reason for abandoning the collaboration with McLuhan in the first place. In keeping with McLuhan, he recognizes that media "create their own meanings" and that "Each medium creates new conditions for the artist and the public, which themselves are not separate entities."<sup>12</sup> In contrast to McLuhan, however, Jovanovich rejects the claim that the copy machine is in fact a new medium. As he cynically concludes, "I cannot fear the medium that is not a medium. So it is that I am sure that the widespread use of xerography will not devalue literature, nor will it confuse the identity of reader and writer, nor will it turn to antiquarianism the profession of publishing. It will not do these things because the act of copying is indiscriminate, unselective, uncompetitive. It is not a medium of art."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 255.

The fact that to date the copy machine has received virtually no attention from media studies scholars or book and publishing historians may indicate that even four decades later, many observers still share Jovanovich's position that xerography is *not* a distinctly separate medium but a mere duplication process—a vehicle of reproduction rather than creation. Whether or not one considers the products of copy machines reproductions or creations, however, to conclude that the copy machine had little or no impact on the book and, more broadly, cultural production is to ignore much of what redefined print culture over the past four decades. Copies of copies of copies offer none of the ease of reading associated with traditional printing methods. Over time, copy machines pixilate and warp type, forcing the eye out of its print culture induced trance.<sup>14</sup> In McLuhan's lexicon, even if photocopies begin as "hot media," the process of copying copies cools them down. In short, the pixilation and distortion of the text requires readers to become increasingly active in the reading process over time.<sup>15</sup> Of course, in this respect, photocopied materials are also unique insofar as they represent a form of media that pose a challenge to McLuhan's theory of hot versus cool media. After all, the photocopy, depending on how many times it has been recopied, fits clearly neither in McLuhan's hot nor cool media binary but rather somewhere in between. This, however, is not the only way to account for the differences between a printed text and a photocopy. A wall of books, even in our era of mobile devices, still signifies a certain degree of cultural capital. Photocopies, even when bound into book-like objects, not only lack the prestige associated with print but are generally considered disposable. In many respects, they are marked by a temporality that may share more in common with ephemeral forms of media (e.g., a message left voice mail) than other printed matter.

It is precisely because photocopied materials share so little in common with other forms of printed matter, however, that Jovanovich's claim that xerography represents "the medium that is *not* a medium" remains highly questionable. If a medium is understood as any *extension* of ourselves, there is little doubt that copy machines are a distinctly separate medium from print.<sup>16</sup> Copy machines extended who could participate in the reproduction of images and texts, as well as the types of materials that could be reproduced. They quite literally extended who and how people could participate in print cultures and in the process, these machines—engineered to duplicate administrative documents—also proved to be vital tools of invention and subversion.

## 2. Authorship in the Age of the Copy Machine

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<sup>14</sup> This was a recurring theme in McLuhan's work; see among other texts *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Media Hot and Cold," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Playboy Interview," in *The Essential McLuhan*, 237.

Throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, common readers have continued to exalt the works of “great authors.” Indeed, the cult of the author often continues to separate so-called writing from literature and literature destined for bargain basement book sales from literature destined for the canon. The radical critiques of the author offered by poststructuralist theorists since the 1960s may have made *some* readers more aware of the author’s status as a *function* of discourse, but they have not necessarily resulted in the author’s death. Like it or not, the author (or the *concept* of authorship established with the spread of print culture) continues to reign. Nevertheless, understandings of authorship have expanded as a myriad of new media, beginning with the copy machine, have altered who can imagine themselves assuming the position of author while simultaneously altering—and in some cases, even diminishing—the author’s established function.

Within a few years of the copy machine’s initial arrival in public libraries and corner stores, writers and artists were already exploiting copy machines to produce everything from chapbooks of poetry to collaborative anthologies. At the time, of course, many onlookers, like William Jovanovich, assumed that the “millions and millions of welterweight Norman Mailers” produced as a result of this new media would neither lead to a new generation of authors nor to the production of any works of notable literary merit.<sup>17</sup> As Jovanovich concluded, if xerography produces anything at all, it will only be “endless, maddening gibberish.”<sup>18</sup> While there is no doubt that copy machines are responsible for putting a great deal of “maddening gibberish” into circulation, their impact on late twentieth-century literature and conceptions of authorship cannot be ignored.

Not surprisingly, copy machines proved especially important to writers and artists engaged in work with little or no immediate commercial appeal—in other words, work that might be broadly categorized as avant-garde, innovative, experimental and/or counter-cultural. And, in this respect, the copy machine’s timing could not have been more appropriate. As copy machines were becoming common fixtures in public libraries and corner stores, a new generation of writers and artists were spearheading literary and artistic movements that favored experimentation, collaboration and perhaps most notably, immediacy. Fluxus poet and composer Dick Higgins, for example, relied on copy machines to reproduce the *Fluxus Performance Workbook*—an ever expanding collaboratively authored encyclopedia of Fluxus “scores” that would play an integral role in Fluxus’s impact in the 1960s and beyond.<sup>19</sup> As Ken Friedman and Owen Smith observe, Higgins’ chapbooks “were highly portable” but more importantly, “easily

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<sup>17</sup> William Jovanovich, “The Universal Xerox Life Compiler Machine,” 255.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>19</sup> Ken Friedman and Owen Smith, “Introduction to the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of the Fluxus Performance Workbook,” in *Fluxus Performance Workbook*, eds. Ken Friedman, Owen Smith and Lauren Sawchyn (Performance Research e-Publication, 2002), 1.

copied using what was then the new Xerox technology” and as a result, they were able to spread the idea of what art could be to an ever expanding coterie of emerging artists working in the Fluxus and intermedia traditions.<sup>20</sup> By the 1970s, however, copy machines were also serving writers engaged in more individualistic pursuits.

Experimental novelist Kathy Acker used copy machines to collect materials for her novel-length cut-ups and early on in her career, relied on them to self-publish some of her work. Indeed, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, the copy machine would remain an integral part of innovative, underground and punk literary scenes. Before Soft Skull Press started publishing off-set copies of perfect bound books in the mid 1990s, founding publisher Sander Hicks worked the graveyard shift at a Kinko’s copying center near the New York University campus. When he wasn’t reproducing documents for customers, he was turning out photocopied volumes of his own writing and writing produced by his friends.<sup>21</sup> In short, for many writers who came of age in the 1970s to 1990s, authoring texts produced and circulated on copy machines would be a rite of passage—one step in the process of becoming a recognized author with a more mainstream press. However, copy machines have not only enabled authors, especially those engaged in work that may not be easily legible (e.g., work that challenges aesthetic and political norms), to put their work into circulation before finding a home with an established press. For all the writers who have created zines and other self-published works as a step along the way, there are thousands more who have chosen the copy machine as their primary and permanent medium. Largely but not exclusively, it is this cohort of writers who have effectively used the copy machine to infiltrate authorship.

With the spread of copy machines, a myriad of new genres evolved that in some way entailed undermining established notions of authorship. This is best illustrated by the phenomenon of fan fiction, which prior to the web was produced and circulated nearly exclusively with the aid of copy machines. By definition, fan fiction is fiction that writes into existing popular fictional narratives. It is fiction that is not necessarily authored, then, but rather fiction that extends or reworks previously authored works. While some fan fiction writers gain considerable notoriety within the restricted networks where they are able to circulate their work (prior to the internet, these were primarily mail-based networks produced through the exchange of photocopied zines), the motivation to publish and circulate one’s writing typically has more to do with the writer’s passion for another writer’s text than a desire to become a recognized author. Similarly, while certain fan fiction writers’ titles carry more currency than others within the restrictive base of fan communities, fan fictions are rarely exclusively authorized by the name of an individual fan writer. In contrast to most print-based economies where the name of the author functions to legitimize a work, in fan communities, the author’s

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Zaitchik, “The Lonely Truth Quest of Sander Hicks,” *The New York Observer* (February 21, 2010), <http://observer.com/2010/07/the-lonely-truth-quest-of-sander-hicks>

function is often highly ambiguous. As Henry Jenkins argues in his now-classic study on fan communities, *Textual Poaches: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, in fan communities both reading and writing are part of a complex social process that “does not preserve a radical separation between readers and writers.”<sup>22</sup> Authorship, in the world of fan fiction, then, is not so much a goal, as it tends to be in most print-based economies, but rather a consequence of textual production.

While fan fiction may be the most widely recognized way in which authorship was infiltrated with the aid of copy machines, by the late 1980s, copy machines were also being used to produce and circulate an entire range of other self-published texts. Alongside fan fiction, in the decade or so preceding the widespread availability of social media platforms, zines of all kinds proliferated. While some zines had a fan focus (e.g., they were inspired by a favorite band, musician or author), others took the form of personal disclosure pamphlets or “perzines” and focused largely or solely on the life of the zine producer. Yet, even zines that fell into the perzine category tended to challenge established conceptions of authorship. First, with few exceptions, these zines were produced anonymously or pseudonymously and sometimes even produced by groups of friends or collectives. Second, even zines connected to a single author had a tendency to be highly polyvocal, often incorporating other writers’ words with or without their permission. In the world of zines, where copyright is rarely a concern, authorship is assumed to be a collaborative enterprise—an enterprise shared equally by writers and readers.

### 3. Social Media -2.0

In the introduction to *The Social Media Reader*, Michael Mandiberg emphasizes the new media’s capacity to promote “active audience participation, uprooting the established relationship between media producer and media consumer.”<sup>23</sup> As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, he maintains, “the line between media producers and consumers has blurred, and the unidirectional broadcast has partially fragmented into many different forms of multidirectional conversations.”<sup>24</sup> So-called social media are distinct from earlier forms of media, according to Mandiberg, because they extend, if not produce, an unprecedented level of interaction amongst consumers and producers. In short, with social media the line between the amateur and professional and consumer and producer are both blurred, making it difficult to separate mere writers from authors, as well as readers from authors. What emerges is not simply a realization of Barthes’ “modern sriptor” but a reader who is actively

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poaches: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 45

<sup>23</sup> Michael Mandiberg, “Introduction,” *The Social Media Reader* (New York: New York U Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



engaged in generating content that is in turn consumed by other readers. Here, authorship is not so much surpassed as it is displaced as an entirely new economy of textual production takes precedence.

Without minimizing everything that makes *new* social media platforms distinct from earlier forms of media, in many respects the basis upon which social media are defined (namely, as media that displace or render obsolete understandings and experiences of authorship and audience/producer relations that emerged with the spread of print media) fails to account for earlier media that pried open analogous possibilities. After all, if what makes social media platforms, such as Wikipedia and Youtube, unique is their user-generated content, validation of amateurs over and alongside professionals, and reliance on the feedback and even labor of readers/viewers, then one can also easily make a case for the copy machine as a form of social media. As demonstrated throughout this discussion, copy machines not only represented a new medium because they facilitated the reproduction of documents (and other objects) on ordinary paper for the first time. Copy machines represented a break with earlier forms of printing because they effectively disrupted the social relations established under print culture. In short, with the arrival of the copy machine in the 1960s to 1970s, the relationship between writers, readers and publishers blurred, resulting in new types of texts and textual relations.

Copy machines may have fallen short of McLuhan's prediction of "a total revolution" of the old sphere of typography. Looking back on the era of the copy machine, however, Jovanovich's cynical conclusion that copy machines are *not* a distinctive medium nor a threat to established notions of authorship and literature also appears shortsighted. Copy machines never did replace printed books—more books were published in the decades following the copy machine's introduction in the 1960s than in the preceding decades—but the copy machine did profoundly alter what we could do with texts. After the copy machine, the sanctity of print and all its related institutions, including copyright and authorship, were never be the same. Likewise, the economies that had long regulated who could fully participate in the making and circulation of texts, be they bureaucratic or literary, started to come undone. Copy machines did more than change how texts and images were produced and put into circulation, then, they changed how texts could be experienced and by whom. As a result, copy machines also prepared us in innumerable ways for our experience of authorship in the age of social media.