

STRANGLING SCHOLARS

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John Milton wrote a famous pamphlet, *Areopagitica*, on the liberty to know, to utter and to understand, thinking that on a level playing field, truth would win. His time of turmoil, fear and censorship was also the time when printing unleashed access to knowledge and expression previously undreamed of. Today, with turmoil, fear and attempts to repress, the Internet has unleashed access to knowledge and expression previously undreamed of. Never so feasible has been the ideal of the international community of scholars, to pursue truth, knowledge and the improvement of lives. However, there are threats.

We still allow unnecessary barriers to literacy, so that the pleasures of scholarship are not open to everyone, to be curious, explore, discover, think, debate and communicate. This article focuses on some ways in which scholarship itself can be strangled. In Dark Ages, scholars may survive only in isolated spots, and neglected libraries rot. Or scholarship may be persecuted, and libraries burn. Or scholars themselves may get lost in mazes as in late medieval scholasticism, or classicism desiccating into eighteenth century snobbery, or grammar replacing the joys of Greek literature in schools. The spirit can be strangled by the letter.

Other ropes that strangle include the ‘death of the book’, restrictions on information, and even globalisation and copyrights (Papers by Huntsman, Steele and Bozza, 2003.) Primary schools may no longer attempt to give a grounding of a general education or value book literacy, and writers may lack readers with sufficient knowledge to comprehend. Market pressures driving excessive competition also drive downmarket, and cultural pressures can value form but not content. ‘What is truth?’ We may not stay even for the question, when school children are taught to persuade like advertising copywriters, regardless of why or what.

Intellectual freedom and Intellectual Property

The scholar is worthy of acknowledgment, citation, reward and a living. What more is needed? The community of scholars is threatened by battalions of lawyers specialising in Intellectual Property and extensions of copyright seventy years beyond the death of the author. Publishing can require time-consuming tracking down for permissions to quote even a few lines. Much worth remembering sinks into obscurity because quoting it becomes too much fag.

Free Trade Agreements are not free if they do not leave knowledge free. Owning Intellectual Property must not be turned into a money matter where almost anything thought or written can be allocated ownership to someone not the author.

Strangling prescriptions for the practice of ‘Scholarship’

References. Cervantes faced problems: -

‘How could u expect me not to be wurryd at what that antiqàted lejislàter thay call the public will say when it sees me . . . come out . . with a tale . .

without quotations in the margins or notes at the finish ..? (From *Don Quixote*, written in spelling without traps)

. Pedantic ‘scholarship’ may require loads of references, piled up to be revered as authorities, not sources of evidence - ‘The world is round (Pondweed, 2003) and the Pacific is the largest ocean (Duckwater, 2004.)’

References may be required to be limited overwhelmingly to the last two years or so, to look up-to-date. This is necessary in rapidly progressing fields of science and technology but not in human affairs. Contempt and consequent loss of the past only helps the current generation of academics to publish by re-inventing wheels and re-writing the ideas of old authors passed their ‘publish-before-date’ - with outcomes usually inferior to the originals, like Russian gossip.

Officious style-guides.

Computers and word-processing, greeted as time-saving boons for authors to improve drafts, can enable another time-consuming curse because authors are now expected to do their own formatting. Past authors wrote their pieces, sent them off, and their correct spelling was an immediate screening test. Spell-checkers make this sorting mechanism obsolete so the new pedantry can require exact conformity to a house-style, varying among publications so each new submission requires re-drafting. One journal reportedly sets 73 pages of Style Guide.

A style guide saves time for editors, and improves coherence of headings neater layouts and useful references, but should no demand hours of peering over fine details of punctuation and abbreviations far beyond the needs of efficiency or communication, and particularly trying with bibliographies. This is not scholarship.

Review of papers by knowledgeable peers is to ensure high standards, but should not result in long delays nor rejection of innovation or uncongenial sides of a controversy by any ploy - for example, articles calling for research in a new field turned down on the grounds that they do not cite research or ‘are not in line with current thinking’.

Research bandwagons can be stuck in ruts of acceptable topics. Everyone has the right to enjoy researching the trivial and obscure; it is a safer diversion than drugs. But more grants for innovative research on topics of practical importance, such as improving popular access to literature, could be diverted from trampled fields like D H Lawrence, the Brontës or witchcraft, or scientific research topics justified only by easily available laboratory and student subjects.

Strangulation by misrepresentation. The media can attribute to authors what they never said or wrote, misrepresent what they did, and refuse the right to correct the record. ‘We thought we made it very readable,’ explained one famous publication that had printed an article so seriously altered by a copyeditor openly hostile to the subject, that the writers’ reputation is still affected. The Independent Scholars Association, as a union, might support scholars in serious instances. Copyeditors might be less reckless, if knowing that authors might exert redress.

Strangulation by copy-editing.

Copy-editors are powerful now so many authors may have something to say, but cannot write it. Local university newspaper editors once threatened to publish articles exactly as they were submitted, to shock the campus populace. Even the writings of professors may need restructuring to be comprehensible. But medical dictum is appropriate, 'When possible, do nothing.'

Editors Ruth Wajnryb and David Cerbi (1991) claimed that 'some of the most pleasing journals to read are those where... all (contributions) read as though they could have been written by the same person,' I was glad, glad, that they 'discovered how difficult this is to achieve'. It is like 'Come on, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Shaw, Austen, Wodehouse, Huxley, and Mr Pooter, we can make you all indistinguishable.' This uniformity should not be required except for scientific discourse. A *Granta* issue featured new young writers - most had been souped up into look-alikes by Creative Writing courses.

Whenever a newspaper article or letter is jerky or the argument is hard to follow, readers should speculate about copy-editors deletions and negatives deleted or inserted

Some journals are punctilious in letting authors see proofs, but some send them too late for the author, others not at all, although the Internet surely removes earlier impracticality.

The Author's Right to a Title

The title is just about the most important thing that an author writes, as it can determine whether anyone reads the work, and summarises its intention. Editors who change titles without permission should be re-named themselves. Editors will unanimously reject this claim for author's rights, but I think their grounds are specious – for example, claiming that ambiguous titles lure readers. Most people prefer clues, as shown by a little experiment you can try yourself. The first title listed is the author's original, the second was published.

A military history of Scotland → Warts and all
Education for real life → When teachers fail real life test
Improving English spelling → Many sounds for vowel letters
Script reform in India → A day of change may come for India
Research on spelling → Eazi spelings

. Copy-editors making unwanted cuts and changes should have their names included in the by-lines, with a separate by-line if they change the title.

Nor should letters be published containing demonstrable, known and blatant untruths or gross misrepresentations, unless a footnote corrects the errors. A common example is chiding an organization or person for a 'deafening silence' on some issue, when the media should admit that they impose this 'silence' by refusing to publish anything they do or write.

Unreadable publication

The final choke-offs are to publish an author's work with a cover that repels buyers, in a size that does not fit easily on a shelf, with binding that rapidly sheds

leaves, and formatted with font and layouts that make it difficult to read. Trendy graphic designers should always read their work printed on paper, regardless of its beauty on-screen, and attention to sales appeal must not be disregard difficulty to actually read.

Scholars should not submit meekly. There are times to work away quietly in our own corners, and times for learned scholars to speak unto learned scholars. There are also times when knowledge is to be shared with everyone, the rough arenas entered, and Milton's *Areopagitica* brought up to date.

References

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Note on THE COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS AND INTELLECTUAL LEGACIES
The URL <http://creativecommons.org/> puts up an innovative scheme devoted to 'expand the range of creative work available for others to build upon and share', using a Creative Commons License.

'OPEN SOURCE' is the term used by José Ramos of the Australian Foresight Institute' for the concept of Intellectual Legacies. Authors can bequeath their Intellectual Property for the benefit of mankind - not for publishers or impersonal estates. Open Source could be made legally valid, and indicated by, say, OS in the same way that copyright is now. OS would mean that writings or graphics could be copied and used, but not changed or commercial profit made. BOS, Bounded Open Source, could place restrictions on who could use it, or how.

* COLLECTIVE OWNERSHIP OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY. This trust idea of a legal entity, thought up by Adam Leggett and José Ramos, would operate like a guild. Authors who contribute material approved by the collective are free to use the material contributed by other members.

