
Enjoy It While it Lasts: A Brief Golden Age of Freedom of Scholarly Information?

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Dr. Susan Whitfield, The International Dunhuang Project

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New technologies have always divided communities: the Internet is no exception. In the 1990s as it finally entered most scholarly institutions and became genuinely accessible to all, some scholars immediately mounted home pages, published electronic articles and sought funds for online projects. Others, in contrast, refused to have anything to do with it, speaking in tones of doom and gloom of the instability of digital data and other insurmountable problems. This was always capped with a heart-rending story of some poor researcher who had attempted - unsuccessfully - to access the fruits of his youthful research.

Is this a simple parallel with the contrasting reactions to early industrial-revolution technology - the power loom - of capitalist manufacturers and working-class Luddites? Of course, it is not a straightforward economic matter, but scholars today are speaking in terms of the opportunities or threats that the Internet poses to their work in language reminiscent of our early 19th century forbears.

The Internet Luddites' primary argument is the instability of digital data. Yet no-one in the field claims that digitisation is a archival process and, dependent on rapidly changing technologies, it certainly requires intensive management. But Luddites who cite this as a fundamental flaw fail to understand that, first, it is not intrinsic to the technology and, secondly a solution will no doubt be found, driven, as Ciolek points out, by the needs of e-commerce and big business. In fact, it seems increasingly likely that institutions will take on the responsibility for managing and preserving digital data banks, just as copyright libraries currently manage and preserve printed material.

Whether the solution will be found in time or be inclusive enough for the vast banks of scholarly data already created is a matter of concern, as Ciolek notes, but new technology inevitably results in some casualties. The Luddites were not mistaken in believing that the invention of mechanised looms would marginalise their own skills. Similarly, those scholars who have memorised classical canons - millions of words - now find their once unique and hard-acquired skills - for example, to identify the source from a few words of fragmentary manuscript text - more or less redundant as the source texts are digitised. Anyone, using freely available and powerful search engines, can type in a few words and obtain a list of possible solutions. This is unfortunate for scholars who have spent years in the memorisation, but liberating for other scholars and scholarship in general.

Nor need it be the concern of individual scholars to address other, vital issues relating to digital research - such as how to evaluate digital research; how to adapt to the new working practices that digitisation projects entail; and how to cite digital data - these must be addressed by the scholarly community.

Solutions will be found because of demand for them. Technicians can provide tools, but they cannot, for example, to design a useful relational database for presenting scholarly information on ancient manuscripts. The design has to be a collaborative venture between those with technical expertise and those with expert knowledge of the material. At present, those in a university environment receive no credit for digital research, in contrast to dictionary, concordance or encyclopedia editing. Pascal's recognition of the nature of such work - 'Let no-one say that I have said nothing new; the arrangement of the subject is new' - also holds true for database design. As demand for such tools intensifies and occupies a greater number of scholars, an evaluation system will inevitably be constructed. The first signs of a dialogue are already appearing.

The collaborative nature of the work is less problematic: it is a model already commonplace in science.

Database designers, programmers and inputers will receive joint credit just as do senior scientists - who conceive an experiment - and the post-docs and laboratory assistants who implement it.

Citing digital texts, open to constant revision or disappearance, will become routine as researchers compile metadata - hidden headers which provide information on the date of creation, date of each revision and authors - and as libraries and other bodies recognize their role as preservers of digital data as well as print and paper media.

The Internet has provided a genuine revolutionary leap in terms of access to information. It has confounded the censor and has enabled lone, unfashionable and eccentric voices to be heard. These are qualities which should be welcomed by the scholarly community. Yet this community is no different from others in tending towards a comfortable and exclusive conservatism, concerned, above all, to protect its members rights and to exclude those who threaten the community, either from within or without.

The history of academic censorship has not only seen restrictions imposed from outside. The community is, dismayingly, all too often complicit, with self-censorship not uncommon. Members who threaten the status quo are marginalised: there have been several high-profile cases in science in recent years, such as the controversy over the source of AIDS and the efficacy of homeopathy. It may be that the scientists involved are mistaken in their beliefs and that their methodology is indeed seriously flawed. But all too often the attack on them seems to be motivated by more than the search for scientific truth and has the feel of a mediaeval witch-hunt rather than rational criticism.

It is probably not coincidental that just as the Internet was offering scholars a revolution in the free expression and dissemination of ideas a new mood of scholarly possessiveness - expressed through the concept of 'intellectual property rights'- also started to gain momentum (see W3C Intellectual Property Rights Overview). And this way danger lies. The past few years have already seen an increase in litigation by those claiming that others have stolen their ideas - whether these be songs, scientific theories or film treatments. This has been accompanied by an increasing drive to register exclusive ownership. And it is not only the ownership of ideas which has come under increasingly legal scrutiny in the last decade. Human genes, images of ordinary building and of major collections of artworks are all becoming subject to property laws. These developments are direct threats to the new scholarly freedoms offered by the Internet.

The jury is still out about which side will prevail. Will the Internet revolution continue to threaten those who wish, for whatever purpose, to control information? The scholarly community - for its own well-being if nothing else - ought to side with the revolutionaries, but its past history and inherent conservatism suggests that it may end up in a devil's alliance with business to ensure that ownership is restricted. If this alliance wins then Ciolek's aging info-slum may be the only remnant of a brief age of genuine freedom of information. We should therefore enjoy it while it lasts.
