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Journal Self-Citation XVIII: A Tale of Kings, Serfs, and Liberation

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Abstract:

The relationship between mainstream publishers and academics (authors, editors) in North America resembles the relationship between the king and serfs in the Middle Age. I discuss why this situation is no longer acceptable and outline a possibility of change.

Keywords: academic publishing, publishing relationships

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I. INTRODUCTION: ONCE UPON A TIME...

... which extends to date, the mighty King Pubfrid was sitting in the tower of his ivory castle, watching with glee the vast expanse of his turf. Wherever his gaze reached, the King could see humble serfs diligently working on his fields. The serfs belonged to two large clans – the Ediwulfs and Authelms. The King knew that both clans were compelled to seek protection on his property because they feared a formidable dragon raging in the outside world. Once on the King's turf, the freemen of Ediwulfs and Authelms would turn into serfs. The King made the Ediwulfs supervise the Authelms and ensured that both worked hard in his fields. Those who disobeyed were thrown out to the dragon.

King Pubfrid had many reasons for satisfaction. Since time immemorial, the serfs willingly complied with the natural order of things, making them work for nothing but for enlarging the King's wealth, power and glory. Owning nothing but treacherous robes, the greatest reward serfs could expect was to see their name posted in public, usually next to an announcement of deviants dumped back to the dragon. No serious challenge to this best of all possible worlds could the King foresee. Indeed, he kept expanding his turf, creating new fields to busy even more of his busy serfs.

However, the King was aware of some unheard of acts of serf disobedience, which recently took place. Also, the King's spies brought up the rumor that some other and different kingdoms might be out there. King Pubfrid wondered if the rumor bore any grain of truth. And, then, there was that increasingly annoying, glittering sphere that not long ago emerged from the skies. The King could see that the sphere reflected almost everything that existed in his kingdom and then some, as if it was promising new ways of being. The King was not certain if the sphere was only the play of rogue sorcerers or there was something more to it. To be on the safe side, the King decreed the sphere taboo.

King Pubfrid wondered if all these annoyances were just the random events that accompanied business as usual. Or should he, the almighty King, just in some rather improbable case, divine these events altogether as a bad omen of some unknown magic threatening his empire?

II. BEING ON THE RECEIVING END

To link to the allegory in the opening of this commentary, let me introduce myself as a serf with kinship stemming from both the clans of editors (Ediwulfs) and authors (Authelms). As the allegory indicates, I intend to argue that the publishers of academic literature in North America (the almighty King Pubfrid) relate to editors and authors as feudal masters to serfs. By the end of my argument, I will sketch a different relationship the possibility of which may become a nightmare for the still almighty King.

The publishers in North America, with rare exceptions, appropriate work of both authors and editors. Authors are not paid for publishing in academic journals that are sold in information commodity markets. On the contrary, sometimes they have to pay "page charges" for "offsetting" printing fees, the review process, or some other dues publishers arbitrarily impose. The publishers take the copyright away from the authors, effectively expropriating the authors from their intellectual property. The paradoxical climax of this expropriation is that the authors often have to buy their own work once it is published.

The exploitation extends to the academic editorial staff that is not professionally employed by the publisher (most of the staff). To ensure a quality review process, editors have to deploy their knowledge of research fields and research methodologies. Sometimes, they have to commit to rapid, intensive learning in order to respond to requirements of the review process. For all their effort, editors typically get no or little pay (less than minimum wage). Similarly to authors, editors are expropriated from their intellectual work and usually have to buy the journals they created.

Editors also perform another type of work for free – managing and leading. They guide, coach, mentor, and operationally manage the authors throughout the review process, which can take months and years. One implication of this aspect of editorial work is in the direct falsification of the principal-agent theory: there are no agent costs for the principal (publisher). Instead, editors serve as a voluntary transmission of editorial power onto authors. Incited by professional norms of quality research, editors can significantly increase the quantity of the intellectual work the editors appropriate from the authors. This outcome constitutes another paradox: editors and authors are confronted, although both are victims of a similar deprivation imposed by publishers.

It is not only the intellectual work of authors and editors that publishers appropriate. To the extent that the authors use grant money, the publishers expropriate the grants agencies. Specifically, universities and other research institutions transfer money given for equipment, faculties, and budgets to the publishers. Publishers commercialize research reports, but pay nothing to the many actors involved in the research.

Facing no serious obstacles in perpetuating these medieval type of relationships, publishers keep increasing their realm of domination. They impose new demands upon editors and authors, such as assisting in marketing/selling their publications. These demands enlarge the scope of work publishers already exploit for free.

Sharing the marketing burden indeed serves as a cover-up for a lack of marketing competence and budget allocations that research publishers are notoriously bad at. Marketing in general is the area of hardship for those at the receiving end. It extends beyond advertising to involve the domain of pricing. Prices of research journals and monographs are exaggerated. Printing costs and small circulation volumes are usually cited as causes. To securely recover the costs and make a planned profit, publishers maximize the price markup and target less challenging categories of buyers (such as academic and corporate libraries whom they charge more than individual subscribers). The prohibitive pricing and limited market diminish the only benefit that authors and, partly, editors may have—the magnitude of their readership and of visibility.

To sum up this discussion, here is a recent example of a publishing project in which I was engaged. I wrote a chapter, reviewed several chapters, and served at a publishing board of a multi volume publication by a prominent North American publisher. The publisher appropriated my work as well as the work of dozens of other authors and editors, giving us literally nothing in reward. The publication was put out in the market at a price close to US\$1,000. None of the creators of this product were granted even a single copy of our own chapter. Instead, we were pressed by the publisher to recommend the publication for purchase in our academic libraries and elsewhere. I refused to engage in marketing and informed the publisher accordingly (their response never arrived). But I inquired with my librarians about the budget allocations they have available for different scientific disciplines. I found that the price of this publication was well above the amount ever spent for a single publication of the information systems literature. In all probability, neither I, nor will many others, see my work.

III. WHILE DRAGON IS AT LARGE

Why do authors and editors—academics—comply with the asymmetric, condescending relationship discussed in Section II? For different reasons. Like our allegorical serfs, many see no option to the traditional order. Others may prefer to “mind their own business,” which prevents them from seeing the larger picture. But with almost no exception, every academic struggles to punctuate their research with publications that mean survival in the North American academy. This institution blends the teacher and research role, making the incumbents compete on two rather than one racetrack.

The publication racetrack is increasingly important because it is linked to ranking criteria of organizations of higher education. These rankings, in turn, affect the student enrollment, grants money, budgeting formulas, and more. Threatening the academics with the Hobbesian choice of “publish or perish,” this academy manifests itself as our allegorical dragon that slays the outcasts of the publisher’s turf. Like King Pubfrid, publishers are taking advantage of this institutional environment, while academics are compelled to succumb to the serf role or accept a professional descent and possibly career termination. Facing the dragon, academics might even delude themselves in assuming that the role of publishers is to provide a life vest. This illusion additionally strengthens the grip of publishers.

The academy and publishers are two powerful social self-referencing (autopoietic) systems [Luhmann 1990; Maturana and Varela 1980]. This type of system lies between the open and closed system and is primarily driven by the purpose of self maintenance. It takes inputs from the environment selectively and spends much of its transformational energy to produce outputs that ensure its self maintenance rather than a contribution to a larger whole. A cell in the living organism is all focused on self maintenance, preservation, and reproduction with no awareness of its larger purpose. In the social domain, an industry or a firm can evolve into an autopoietic system. Thus, the financial industry or a firm in it become all about the money with no inputs from other social systems, such as ethics, as we currently are witnessing.

The mainstream publisher system has evolved into a self-referencing system. As argued above, it is occupied with delivering publications as its means of self preservation, while directly expropriating academics and the social systems that support research (including the academy). For its part, the self maintenance purpose of the academy system propels this institution to press academics into creating publications. In its pursuit, the academy appears blind to the constraints its incumbents face, acting very much as another self-referencing system. While partaking in both systems, academics constitute a separate social entity that both systems take advantage of. Being amorphous

and disorganized, the entity of academics lacks social system properties. The sheer goal of survival the academics share is not a sufficient catalyst for creation of a particular, competitive social system. Rather, the academic entity serves as the input and processing matter for the publisher and the academy system.

Whether the allegorical or the autopoietic system analysis is applied, the outcome is the same: Publishers rule the academics. Could there be a way out of the vicious circle? Indeed, there could.

IV. ABANDONING THE FIEFDOM – YES, WE CAN

Recall King Pubfrid's puzzlement with unusual acts of disobedience, tokens of different kingdoms, and the magical sphere reflecting his kingdom and things beyond it. These may be indications of the way out of the vicious cycle.

One method would be to reject the serf role at the price of being halted in publishing with major publishers and perhaps even ostracized. Academics could become more selective in picking editorship engagements and may try to negotiate a fairer exchange and other conditions for their work. Authors may decide to reject publishing with journals that charge them for publication costs. But how many authors and editors can afford or would be willing to risk taking this path? Plausibly, not many. Therefore, the disobedience method may be appropriate for just a select few bold takers.

A more feasible promise of change may be associated with identifying and supporting turf-adverse publishers. Indeed, there are publishers outside the mainstream that operate on a different basis. For example, the Informing Science Institute based in California runs a nonprofit model that recovers the genuine meaning of the concept of equitable volunteer work. The publishing staff put more than their fair share of work into publishing books, several journals, and conference proceedings. While the transfer of copyright still takes place, the goal is not in making money by commercializing appropriated intellectual property. The Informing Science Institute supports the ACM-type copyright, according to which a journal paper may be freely republished for nonprofit and classroom uses. In the case of books, authors are completely free to republish their own materials as they deem fit. It is left to the authors to deal with the issue of self-citation in conjunction with academic integrity. [Informing Science Institute 2009].

Other aspects also contribute to creating a fairer relationship between the Informing Science Institute, authors, and editors. These are incorporated into two driving values: (1) colleagues mentoring colleagues, and (2) free sharing of knowledge. The former value implies that authors can receive coaching that resembles the academic mentorship leading to a quality publication. On their side, editors find satisfaction in the meaningful work of helping the colleagues who need such help, and in contributing to production of knowledge rather than to the purse of the publisher. When published, this knowledge becomes free for everybody in the world to use. This brings us to the second value.

The Informing Science Institute supports the value of free knowledge sharing by creatively deploying the “magical sphere” from my opening allegory—the Internet. The Institute publishes everything in electronic format in the open access mode. The Internet is the publishing channel of choice. At the end of the year, electronic articles are accumulated into print volumes with no change in formatting (consequently, the print and electronic versions are identical). The print volume is priced reasonably, since the goal is to cover printing costs and break even. For example, a print volume costs no more than the charge a major publisher requests for online access to a single article. Thus, the pricing model contributes to enlarging the potential readership base. Helping the same cause is the dissemination of the same piece of research via multiple media (for example, online, paper and CD-based). Books are also available free online or for a reasonable price in print. The author and the Informing Science Institute jointly determine the price. The income above printing costs is split 50-50 between the publisher and author. In summary, the combination of non-profit motives, equitable volunteer work, and Internet capabilities allows for a fairer relationship between this publisher, authors, and editors. Altogether, they form a social system whose purpose is higher than self-maintenance—free sharing of knowledge.

The Informing Science Institute, fortunately, is not unique. The Association for Information Systems (AIS) uses a similar publishing model by deploying the Internet as a publishing venue and putting the cost of the subscription into the membership dues. The top quality of AIS journals constitutes additional proof that non-commercial publishing of academic research is a viable option.

Still, one might argue that nonprofit publishing would precipitate the demise of established publishing brands. Indeed, such a possibility exists, particularly for those publishers that are incapable of reconciling profit motives with principles of equity and fair exchange. Brands make and brands break. Publishing brands have always been made through joint work of professional and nonprofessional staffs as well as authors. If traditional publishers cannot

overcome the free rider character and the role of feudal master bogged down in his self-maintenance system, then we can abandon them and move to new turf-adverse publishers. Yes, we can!

There are certainly other methods of liberation. Since the purpose of this commentary is not to provide an exhaustive discussion on paths of change but, rather, to outline its possibility, a brief concluding note suffices. Academics could start using a piece of their significant gray brain matter to organize for protecting their interests. Many of us teach organization and management. Therefore, it amounts to a paradox (yet another one) that we do not deploy some of our knowledge for our own benefit. Another venue to explore is self publishing by using the expanding opportunities the Internet offers. Fiction writers do it, musicians and other artists follow, and countless bloggers fortify this trend. While challenges of producing quality research publications through the peer-review process are significant, these challenges should not obstruct the possibility of academic self publishing. University-based publishers may also become part of the change process. Rather than succumbing to the pressure of commercial publishers, universities may start controlling their investment in research that is presently appropriated by the publishers. Academic publishers would need to differentiate themselves by offering fairer conditions to the authors and editors. In principle, by expanding e-publishing operations, universities may save some money allocated for purchasing expensive journals. These savings can fund some of the publishing costs and even yield a little money for honoraria. On this path, universities certainly face significant challenges, such as learning how to work in an entrepreneurial environment and coping with institutionalized fetishes of paper journal and commercial publishing brands.

In summary, currently overwhelmed by the work they do for the King, busy serfs just need to take a moment for themselves to realize that more equitable and dignified ways of publishing academic research are within reach. Unless the King is able to accept a new deal, his turf may become a lonely place.

REFERENCES

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Dr. Bob Travnica teaches business information systems at University of Manitoba, and investigates organizations from the perspective of information and information technology management. His current preoccupations are with advancing his information view of organization as a framework for research and teaching, and with running the *Journal of Information, Information Technology and Organizations*.

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