

The UKZN Griot

...of Purveyors and Permissions



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‘It’s amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.’ Harry Truman, 33rd US President.

I read this in The Mercury on the same day that I filled in my NRF rating report:

‘Own contribution could address the following:

- Conceptualised idea for research
- Lead author writing up of article
- Wrote first draft, editorial input
- Postgraduate supervisor of the lead author
- Owner/co-owner of intellectual property of research
- Co-developed and executed research
- Project leader/budget owner.’

Harry would turn in his grave were he to read this claptrap. Imagine: all those busy bees at the NRF trying to come up with categories like these which disaggregate which ideas, sentences and paragraphs different authors may have conceptualised, written and of which they claim individual ownership. This kind of commodification has even reached the outskirts of the known world. “My words have value”, a semi-literate informant in the deepest of the deep desert once told us. Two rand a word he wanted when talking to us. This fellow would approve the NRF’s

attempt to tie us grant recipients up in knots. For the indigenous, at best, researchers are a nuisance, but they are also a welcome source for payments. For researchers, bureaucrats are a nuisance. The NRF not only wants this information for 2012, but for every article that rated researchers have ever published!

One of my gaming students is devising a software programme to do this work for us. It will sense the fingerprint of sentences, link these to their utterers/writers, and then send the data fragments to a mainframe read through a permissions spreadsheet. From there it will be approved for NRF input, and keep all those busy bees busy, who spend their time trying to peg what academics actually do, how they collaborate, and audit who owns which fragments of the final published outcome.

One global publisher (let's call it P-Way Ltd.) requires of each author the following to be entered into a spreadsheet:

- Assess whether permission is required.
- Collect all the information required about the material to be used.
- Enter the instances where permission is required on the electronic spreadsheet by using one spreadsheet per chapter.
- Write the relevant permission number on the documentation.
- The electronic spreadsheet and the hard copies of the documentation mentioned above need to reach the publishers with the final manuscript.

This is proof positive that idiotic instrumentalism is not confined to research or educational institutions. Harry would, I am sure, be perplexed. He might drop another bomb (on P-Way Ltd.)

Here are some of the comments from P-Way authors:

‘In my chapter on postgrad students using search-engines like Google for their research papers I make partial use of users’ online comments. How do I get permission from users called “Anonymous”, “UsainBolt”, “The Olympics Suck”, “JoyStick” or “Batman-is-Vladimir-Putin?”’.

‘From whom I would ask for “permission” for Government Gazettes, Parliamentary Hansards and the SABC Annual Reports. All these documents are in the public domain, and are quoted from in newspapers, business reports etc. It is ludicrous to imagine that I need to get permission from the Government Printers for these items.

‘We are all experienced researchers and know the rules of the game and what is and is not acceptable, legally and ethically. This smacks of the catch-you-if-I-can mentality which seems to be in vogue these days in the extended corporate world.

‘If (P-Way) has devised this policy in an effort to put an end to academic publishing in their stable then this is an excellent way to go.’

My response to the publisher was that these conditions will destroy every academic convention by which we are required to conduct our research and writing practices.

Just filling in the forms will take an age even once the information is obtained.

Where some sources, authors and publishers (like some on the Internet) cannot be found, are dead, out of business or lost in the mists of antiquity, or unknown, permissions will not be forthcoming. Ethnography as we know it will cease; oral history will die and primary research will be done without reference to any research that has preceded it. Academics will drown in paper, permissions and pearinda (a medication for high blood pressure).

Most fundamentally: if such a permissions regime is imposed, then the very dialectic by which academics construct their arguments will fail as no-one in their right mind will want to cite, paraphrase or cross-reference as the very act of citation will require the above time-consuming and exhausting tasks. The convention of embedding current research in acknowledged prior published research will cease entirely. The very foundations of research as cross-referenced dialogue will be thus destroyed. And, the stock currency by which academic work is peer-acknowledged – citation rates and impact factors – will be thus also shattered. ISI and Thompson-Reuters will go out of business.

Even where single authors are involved, the logical next step is the P-Way. We will spend more time trying to track “ownership” (i.e. allocating who gets the credit to the nth decimal point) than actually being productive. Descartes would be horrified.

While I understand that the bean counters need to separate the passengers from the workers, this imposition is inappropriate. Copyright, permissions and royalties are key to the publishing industry, but to turn academics into purveyors of permissions is extreme. For very academic writing there will be 15 bureaucrats counting.

The copyright, trademark and patent lawyers and the bureaucrats who employ them are wrecking the academic enterprise globally. This is the new product, it's called the P-Way, and is not Harry's way. Like Monsanto's once-off genetically engineered non-germinating seeds, every aspect of academia, every sentence written, every new idea, will become copyrighted, trademarked and patented, with the P-Way police checking on who owns fragments of statements, kernels of ideas, new words, and how these can be charged for.

Remember our informant: ‘My words have value!’ But no one will cite them for fear of infringement.

Remember Lenin's comment that the capitalist will sell you the rope with which you will hang him. I fear that in the world of academentia that we are fast reaching this point. The rest will just be a video game.

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Agency mines it for terrorist monitoring, while Google and Facebook position browsers for advertisers. Either way, we are all victims.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.