

Relation Between Medieval Renaissance and Today's Open Knowledge Dissemination

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The advent of the printing press helped a lot in the democratization of knowledge and research in Medieval Europe. The arrival of the movable type printing press introduced the era of true mass communication in the western world and this, in turn, altered the fabric of the society forever. It transformed people's lives by changing their relationship to information and knowledge. It also transformed their relationship with existing authority. It created a new breed of free thinkers, who ultimately dislodged the Dark Ages and brought about the Modern Era. Involving the 'general public' and saving knowledge from the hands of a select few brought about a positive change in the human society. Print created the possibility of wide and rapid circulation of ideas. This opened up a new free world where ideas could be debated and discussed. Thus the foundation of the modern scientific fervour was laid.

Print brought the ideas of thinkers, philosophers and scientists closer to the common man and made new ideas more accessible. It is a matter of debate how thinkers, like Issac Newton, could influence the thinking of the society without access to print. It would be superfluous to mention how true scientific debate started only after the invention of the printing press. The writings of thinkers outside the central sphere of science (like Thomas Paine, Voltaire, Jean Jacques Rousseau, etc.) too went a long way in shaping the world as we know it today.

However, in their time, the first printing presses were mostly viewed with skepticism. Barring a handful, most influential people opposed it. The 'holier than thou' expressed their fears that the world would come to an end if they let the common people use print. Even those, who welcomed the print, were apprehensive of the 'ill' effects that wider circulation of ideas through print could have on the world. Rulers and religious heads feared that if they did not control the printed material, their authority would vastly diminish. They wanted to have total control over what was to be printed.

In the words of Erasmus, a Latin scholar and a Catholic reformer, 'To what corner of the world do they not fly, these swarms of new books? It may be that one here and one there contributes something worth knowing, but the very multitude of them is hurtful to scholarship, because it creates a glut, and even in good things, satiety is most harmful... (printers) fill the world with books, not just trifling things (such as I write, perhaps), but stupid, ignorant, slanderous, scandalous, raving, irreligious and seditious books, and the number of them is such that even the valuable publications lose their value.'

Erasmus's fear pretty much sums up the apprehensions of today's 'intellectual elites' and 'printing powerhouses'. In today's world too, the Internet has brought about a transformation of the society. This is a tool that can be used for free dissemination of knowledge and of research. However, a few people even today tend to believe that free dissemination of research (that results in free and fair debates and discussions of the works) would bring about a 'end of the world' situation for science. They are of the opinion that they ought to have as much control as possible over the dissemination of research works in order to keep the flag of science flying. These handful of people have the audacity to believe that they must be the 'chosen ones' to boss over the whole of the scientific community. These are the people who oppose Open Science and Open Knowledge movements.

Time has shown us how zero control by a handful of individuals over the society and complete control of the community, as a whole, over itself brings about positive changes. Less the control by individuals or groups and more the control of the complete set of individuals, more is the positive change. The history of the printing press is a case in point. While history made a mockery of the control-freaks, it proved right the few individuals, who believed in the intellectual capacity of the masses. Intellectual Nazism should be a thing of the past and we should move away from such self-defeating practices.

As more and more researchers embrace Open practices, irrespective of the influence of any kind of authority and affiliations, a new free world of debate and discussions will truly open up.

Positive movements like the Figshare Open Science Platform have shown us how researchers can jump over all traditional deterrents and contribute positively towards the development of the scientific community, as a whole. Dissemination of research in such a place should be enough in terms of publication of research. The whole community of researchers will deliberate over these published works and not just a select few. This will take scientific dialogue forward in the true sense. As printed books replaced handwritten manuscripts, so will such Open platforms of knowledge dissemination eventually replace other non-Open pathways of dispersing knowledge.