The Disemboweled University: Online Knowledge and Academic Freedom

By Philo Hutcheson

Over the past several decades a number of scholars have examined academic freedom. By and large, and understandably, many of those examinations have been situated in social or political frameworks. Notable examples include Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens, *The Academic Mind*, Ellen Schrecker's *No Ivory Tower*, and two early examples, Jane Sanders, *Cold War on the Campus*, and George Stewart's compelling first-person account, *The Year of the Oath*.[1] Many of these works examine events at a single institution (as did Sanders), such as Lionel Lewis's account of the Lattimore case at the Johns Hopkins University and Charles McCormick's *This Nest of Vipers*. Other examinations offer a more sweeping discussion, as is the case with Sheila

---

[1] Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens Jr., *The Academic Mind: Social Scientists in a Time of Crisis* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jane Sanders, *Cold War on the Campus: Academic Freedom at the University of Washington, 1946–1964* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979); George R. Stewart, *The Year of the Oath: The Fight for Academic Freedom at the University of California* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950).

Slaughter's essay, "Academic Freedom at the End of the Century: Professional Labor, Gender, and Professionalism." These works are invaluable for understanding the complexities of academic freedom in practice, as individuals—particularly, of course, professors—struggle to assert the importance of freedom of inquiry and freedom of teaching while institutions—particularly, of course, administrators and trustees—see themselves as guardians of institutional reputation and public trust. As Laurence Veysey adroitly pointed out about the late 1800s and early 1900s, deeply reflected in events over a century later, "Nothing angered a university president so deeply as the appearance of publicity unfavorable to the reputation of his institution."[2] Nor are these events so easily circumscribed; even in the cautious response to McCarthyism in the 1956 AAUP report, "Academic Freedom and Tenure in the Quest for National Security," the special committee noted what appeared to be a violation of academic freedom by faculty members at one institution.[3]

There are also a number of works providing overviews of academic freedom, often including discussion of conceptual or even philosophical issues, and curiously, these are typically edited collections of essays. Examples include Edmund Pincoffs's *The Concept of Academic Freedom*, Louis Menand's *The Future of Academic Freedom*, Richard De George's

---

[2] See, for example, Sigmund Diamond, *Compromised Campus: The Collaboration of Universities with the Intelligence Community, 1945–1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Dwight R. Holmes, *Stalking the Academic Communist: Intellectual Freedom and the Firing of Alex Novikoff* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989); Lionel S. Lewis, *Cold War on Campus: A Study of the Politics of Organizational Control* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1988); Lewis, *The Cold War and Academic Governance: The Lattimore Case at Johns Hopkins* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993); Robert M. MacIver, *Academic Freedom in Our Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); Charles H. McCormick, *This Nest of Vipers: McCarthyism and Higher Education in the Mundel Affair, 1951–52* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Sheila Slaughter, "Academic Freedom at the End of the Century: Professional Labor, Gender, and Professionalism," in *Higher Education in American Society*, 3rd ed., ed. Philip G. Altbach, Robert O. Berdahl, and Patricia J. Gumport (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1994), 73–100 (see also Slaughter's other chapters in this series); Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 328. The Ward Churchill case at the University of Colorado–Boulder is a chilling reminder of how Veysey's assessment endures.

[3] "Academic Freedom and Tenure in the Quest for National Security," *AAUP Bulletin* 42 (Spring 1956): 49–107. Some scholars have offered a highly critical view of this report; see, for example, Sheila Slaughter, "The Danger Zone: Academic Freedom and Civil Liberties," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 448 (1980): 46–61.

Academic Freedom and Tenure, and William Van Alstyne's *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy*.[4] These are rich discussions, providing readers with a range of topics and perspectives, digging deeper into meanings of academic freedom in ethical, constitutional, historical, philosophical, and religious terms.

I argue in this article that underpinning these social and political histories of academic freedom, as well as the broader discussions of the topic, is intellectual history; how we define academic freedom in social, political, and economic terms, how we argue about its worth to society, is a fundamental matter of the history of ideas. I ruefully concede Peter Novick's caution, offered by a political historian, that attempting intellectual history is "nailing jelly to the wall";[5] nevertheless, asserting the foundation of academic freedom establishes a framework for examining its current condition in the realm of knowledge. And, indeed, there is at least one notable exception to the focus on social and political characteristics, Richard Hofstadter's *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College*, a work I will discuss in some detail.[6] Specifically, how we have come to construct knowledge, and even more specifically for the purposes of this article, who constructs knowledge and how, are foundational characteristics of academic freedom. The remainder of this article offers a brief review of the importance of knowledge in higher education over several centuries and the sharp break in the meaning of knowledge starting in the latter part of the 1800s, a more extensive discussion of the development of the

---

[4] Edmund L. Pincoffs, ed., *The Concept of Academic Freedom* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972); Louis Menand, ed., *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Richard T. De George, ed., *Academic Freedom and Tenure: Ethical Issues* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); William W. Van Alstyne, ed., *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

[5] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7.

[6] Richard Hofstadter, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). Hofstadter's work, of course, was initially part of a volume coauthored with Walter P. Metzger, and Metzger's contribution became *Academic Freedom in the Age of the University* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961). In many ways, Metzger's work represents a transition to a social history, with an emphasis on the influence first of German thinkers and then of businessmen and the formation of the AAUP. Recognizing the contribution of both authors, I will refer to their coauthored volume, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

social sciences with a focus on history (I know its history better than the other social sciences), and a discussion of academic freedom relative to the nature of scholarly inquiry. Much of what I review is likely to be obvious enough to many readers, but I prefer to make the arguments clear in order to proceed to the final analyses of the problems of online knowledge. I then provide a discussion about the construction of online knowledge and conclude with some somber remarks.

Charles Homer Haskins's wry history of the medieval university offers a succinct assessment of the importance of knowledge to the development of the university. After arguing that the seven liberal arts were not a sufficient basis for a university because of the "bare elements" of the *trivium* and the "still barer notions" of the *quadrivium*, he notes that during the twelfth century "a great influx of knowledge" came from Arab scholars, affording the university Masters the opportunity to consider that knowledge and build on it. At both northern and southern European universities, Haskins argues, "a great teacher stands at the beginning of university development."[7] He also addressed the origins of the name "university," or *universitas*, a discussion repeated again and again and eventually embellished with a notation of the nonunified nature of the institution. As he notes, the word simply means "the totality of a group" and referred not only to teachers and students in guilds but also to groups of craft workers.

Arguably, then, since its beginning, the Western university has been dependent on knowledge, including knowledge from sources outside Europe, and equally reliant on a teacher to interpret knowledge and disseminate it. It has also been an organization distinct from other organizations, unified in the pursuit, interpretation, and dissemination of academic knowledge.

Academic knowledge in the college or university was fairly unified until the 1800s. Institutionally, it was the German universities, first those at Göttingen and Halle in the mid-

---

[7] Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957 [1923]), 4–5, 7, 8–9. His comments about the *trivium* and *quadrivium* are telling, if only for the innumerable times that a scholar has highlighted the seven liberal arts as foundational to the university.

1700s, that began the fracturing of knowledge, a steady development of what we know today as disciplines and fields of study.[8] From the early 1100s to the 1800s, the unity of the Western college and university rested on the Bible—most assuredly with different interpretations, but in sharp contrast to today, the idea that one book was the source of almost all disputation is very nearly startling. Furthermore, that book stood for educators' understanding of society; Veysey argues that in the United States, the nineteenth-century college "educator, when asked to name the textbooks he employed for the discussion of social problems, was apt to answer self-righteously, 'the Bible.'"[9] Such an answer held sway at many US colleges and universities throughout the 1800s, but an increasing number of institutions, particularly universities, were embracing the new forms of academic inquiry represented by the disciplines. Fueled by the somewhat disparate foci on utility (as represented by the declaration of Ezra Cornell, "Any person, any study") and the heavily empiricist forms of inquiry in research loosely based on the ideals of scientific inquiry at German universities, professors at US universities—in some instances, encouraged by the institutions' presidents—developed disciplines. Utility not only provided rationale for electives, it also provided additional rationale for the university in society.[10]

   Disciplines represented specific forms of academic inquiry, each with its specific uses of evidence and arguments; there was, clearly, overlap among disciplines, especially in related fields. The natural and physical sciences increasingly focused on experiments in the laboratory; the social sciences to some degree also attempted empiricism, albeit in different settings. This article focuses on the social sciences, in great part because these fields easily draw the public's attention. Certainly, as Thomas Kuhn showed, there is contested knowledge in the natural and physical sciences, but it appears, not surprisingly, that the public and the polity (here and

---

[8] Hofstadter and Metzger, *Development of Academic Freedom*, 371.
[9] Veysey, *Emergence of the American University*, 31.
[10] Ibid., "Utility" (57–120), and "Research" (121–79).

thereafter I take liberties with the term *polity*, incorporating neoliberals and thereby recognizing the power of corporations) are more confident about what they know about the social sciences.[11]

Professors in the nascent social sciences struggled with how to define their work throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. Awkwardly and slowly building on an empiricist approach, professors in disciplines formed associations that developed into scholarly associations with conferences to present their work, established academic journals, promoted graduate study, and, perhaps most important, developed means on which they broadly agreed for evaluating work in their fields. These efforts did not come without cost. As Mary Furner shows, the arguments in economics, political science, and sociology often ranged between those who advocated reform and those who preferred an appearance of empirical objectivity, and the latter group won the battles. Early economists such as Richard Ely at the University of Wisconsin argued that old economists were "English, hypothetical, and deductive," while new economists were "German, realistic, and inductive." Furner argues that a moderate view obtained; for example, in the case of economists, they would "channel their reform efforts through government agencies or private organizations." Indeed, the "quality of their scholarship was higher," but at the cost of direct and public engagement of economic problems.[12] Political science developed as a discipline in the early 1900s, when "objectivity was a part of the emerging professional identity." Sociology developed with a focus on the social group,

---

[11] As a fascinating example of public response to social science research and natural or physical scientists' extramural utterances, see Robert O'Neil, *Academic Freedom in the Wired World: Political Extremism, Corporate Power, and the University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). He offers many examples of issues of academic freedom in regard to research or teaching by social scientists (and humanities professors); there are also many examples in regard to extramural utterances, and often these are cases involving natural or physical scientists. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Kuhn's book has, of course, received a good deal of critique; the 1970 edition is particularly appropriate since he observes there that he is curious about the recent application of his arguments to the social sciences, an application about which he is not certain.
[12] Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975), 60, 259. Two scholars who examine the late 1800s and early 1900s in terms of the development of the social sciences are even more direct about the consequences of these events, arguing that social scientists chose to serve political and economic interests. See Edward T. Silva and Sheila A. Slaughter, *Serving Power: The Making of the Academic Social Science Expert* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984).

distinguishing its scholars from those in economics and sociology. In all three disciplines, "academics judged each other primarily on skill in original investigation."[13] As Dorothy Ross shows, professors in the social sciences saw their work "as the product of empirical investigation." In order to attain coveted professional status, they had to confirm their "expert knowledge."[14] Peter Novick offers an extensive history of the US historical profession, presenting in detail the developing focus on objectivity, a misinterpretation of German scholarship that Furner and Ross also discuss. Writing about the late 1800s and early 1900s, Novick argues that "no group was more prone to scientific imagery, and the assumption of the mantle of science, than the historians." That science was to be "rigidly factual and empirical."[15] Throughout the twentieth century, Novick argues, historians' arguments about objectivity and relativism ebbed and flowed; eventually objectivism lost its hold beginning in the 1960s.[16] Consistent through those arguments, however, was the increasing development of a professional identity, clearly separate not only from earlier amateur historians' work but also from the curriculum and teaching of history in schools . . . and from the public. All three scholars argue that social scientists tended toward moderate views, exercising caution about radical perspectives, and respecting what Ross calls "genteel respectability and its canons of intellectual and moral hierarchy."[17]

Thus, in a rather coarse metaphor, yet one that shall prove useful to this article, the very bowels of the university exemplify an understanding of who creates knowledge and how. Clark Kerr popularized the term *multiversity* as a way of highlighting the disparate parts of such institutions, quipping that perhaps the only problem that faculty members could agree on was that there was not enough parking (which, in my experience, also applies to small colleges in

---

[13] Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity*, 290, 305–06, 323.

[14] Dorothy Ross, "The Development of the Social Sciences," in *Discipline and History: Political Science in the United States*, ed. James Farr and Raymond Seidelman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 90, 93.

[15] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 33 and 37.

[16] Ibid., "The Center Does Not Hold" (522–72).

[17] Ross, "Development of the Social Sciences," 97.

the Midwest, so it is not necessarily a function of size).[18] Yet undergirding the multiversity is a rather substantial set of agreements about what constitutes the nature of inquiry in higher learning and who determines the nature of that inquiry. As I will argue later in this article, it may well be that these conditions are changing because of the rapidly changing Internet. Scholars, however, continue to note and defend the traditional conceptions of the creation of knowledge. De George argues that "authority based on knowledge or epistemic authority is vested in those with the appropriate knowledge," adding, "With respect to the pursuit of knowledge through research, the faculty are once again the most qualified to decide what to pursue and how."[19] AAUP statements regarding such matters as academic freedom, tenure, faculty dismissal, or institutional governance clearly reflect such expectations about the source of knowledge on the campus. Witness also the likely universal statements at colleges and universities about plagiarism; the failure to attribute one's work to another person is academic dishonesty. The devil lies in the details, as it can be very difficult to determine if someone plagiarized, or deliberately falsified sources, or committed an honest error of omission (see Novick's discussion of the David Abraham case for a detailed examination of the complexity of this topic).[20] Nevertheless, the principle holds: The scholar shall not steal another's work. The fundamental way of determining that principle lies in the citation; citations are "conventions signaling the fair and proper use of the discourses of other people."[21]

The citation is vitally important to the scholar, and not simply because it is a device to oppose plagiarism. As Anthony Grafton has argued about historians,

> They must examine all the sources relevant to the solution of a problem and construct a
> new narrative or argument from them. The footnote proves that both tasks have been

---

[18] Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 20.

[19] De George, *Academic Freedom and Tenure*, 57, 58. These statements occur in his chapter, "The Justification of Academic Freedom" (53–84), which includes justification for student academic freedom and a measure of autonomy in institutional governance, an expansive discussion.

[20] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 612–21.

[21] Robert J. Connors, "The Rhetoric of Citation Systems, Part I: The Development of Annotation Structures from the Renaissance to 1900," *Rhetoric Review* 17 (Fall 1998): 6.

carried out. It identifies both the primary evidence that guarantees the story's novelty in

substance and the secondary works that do not undermine its novelty in form and

thesis. By doing so, moreover, it identifies the work of history in question as the creation

of a professional.[22]

The citation is a matter of accuracy, allowing the historian—and scholars in other fields—to

provide empirical support and secondary arguments for the arguments that he or she develops.

In a far from bold declaration, scholars have specific means for creating knowledge, based

on primary sources and secondary sources. Their work as academic professionals is distinct in

some important ways from other forms of creating knowledge. These specific means also take

shape in how we have constructed the ambiguous construct of academic freedom.

Academic Freedom, Ill-Defined

Richard Hofstadter's sweeping discussion of the development of academic freedom, roughly

the first half of *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States*, later published as

Academic Freedom in the Age of the College, provides an extension of the importance of knowledge

in the university setting. The creation of knowledge is set in the context of the time. Hofstadter

argues, "In all ages the weight of tradition presses in varying degrees upon the capacity of the

individual to pose new hypotheses and find new truths." In the Middle Ages in Europe,

scholars "existed within the framework of an authoritative system of faith," a framework that

continued into the nineteenth century in the United States.[23] While there was "considerable

liberty" in the medieval European university, Hofstadter posits that there is objective and

subjective freedom (in the gendered language of the 1950s):

Intellectual freedom has, of course, both its objective and subjective aspects. A man is

objectively free insofar as his society will allow him to express novel or critical ideas

without the threat of formal or informal punishment of any serious kind. He is

subjectively free insofar as he *feels* free to say what he wishes. Subjective freedom may

---

[22] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[23] Hofstadter and Metzger, *Development of Academic Freedom*, 12.

exist without objective freedom wherever men are so completely confined by the

common assumptions of their place, time, or class that they are incapable of engendering

any novel or critical ideas that they care to express, and where in fact the expression of

such ideas would be dangerous. Such men would be conscious of no restraints, but they

would not be free. A high degree of intellectual freedom may be said to exist where both

subjective and objective freedom prevail in a considerable measure, and where the latter

is present in reasonable proportion to the former.[24]

Who creates knowledge and how is a matter of intellectual freedom, and scholars are obvious

likely actors in the protection of intellectual freedom—or more specifically, academic freedom.

Social scientists in the late 1800s and early 1900s in the United States wanted to ensure the

protection of their objectivity (not to be conflated with Hofstadter's concept of objective

freedom) through the device of expert knowledge as well as a moderate stance (thereby not

threatening the public or the polity, at least too often). As Metzger and Furner show, the

development of the idea of academic freedom in the United States originated with the

disciplines before becoming the purview of the AAUP; scholars recognized the importance of

protecting the pursuit of knowledge.[25]

The AAUP itself has had representations of these ideas of objective and subjective freedom.

For example, in the early 1960s the Association commissioned a study to examine the conditions

of academic freedom in the South, authored by the well-known historian of the South C. Vann

Woodward. Woodward's study was eventually published in *Harper's Magazine*; he concluded in

part that southern faculty members were not examining segregation and racism, even though

they considered themselves free to examine different issues, because of pressures to remain

silent. Woodward also argued that the AAUP as well as other institutions would be unlikely to

---

[24] Ibid., 16.
[25] Ibid., "Academic Freedom and Big Business" (413–67) and "Organization, Loyalty, and War" (468–506);
Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity*, "Collective Security" (229–59).

change these conditions given the social, political, and economic power behind these pressures.[26]

Now, however, in the early 2000s, questions of objective and subjective freedom are far more complex than they were in the mid-1950s; some postmodernist and poststructuralist colleagues (among others) were likely shuddering as they read these words. Expert knowledge in colleges and universities is a far more contested arena, suggesting the continuing complexity of academic freedom.[27] In regard to academic freedom, as one scholar has noted, "Suffice it to say at this point that even those who have carefully studied and defended academic freedom may agree on the rationale but may also differ substantially when it comes to the definition and scope of this concept."[28] Thus, in a curious way, it makes sense that the 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* endures, if only for the large number of institutions that have endorsed the *Statement*, the continuing media coverage of AAUP deliberations about possible violations of academic freedom, and the continued censure of colleges and universities that violate principles of academic freedom. The breadth of the 1940 *Statement* in defining academic freedom perhaps allows for more agreement than some intransigent institutions of higher education are willing to admit.[29]

Equally important and despite differing notions about the meanings of academic freedom, the challenges of protecting academic freedom have not diminished. Calls to the AAUP offices about possible violations of academic freedom arrive every day, and the Association continues

---

[26] C. Vann Woodward, "The Unreported Crisis in the Southern Colleges," *Harper's Magazine*, October 1962, 82–84, 86–89.

[27] Joan W. Scott, "Academic Freedom as an Ethical Practice," in Menand, *Future of Academic Freedom*, 163–80.

[28] O'Neil, *Academic Freedom in the Wired World*, 9.

[29] Walter P. Metzger, "The 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*," in *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy*, ed. William W. Van Alystyne (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3–78. I would be remiss if I did not note that often the AAUP deliberations and censures focus less on academic freedom and more on such issues as process and tenure. Nevertheless, academic freedom remains central to AAUP activity—as more than one commentator has noted, it is Committee A, the first letter of the alphabet.

to censure administrations.[30] It may well be, however, that a new challenge to the very foundation of academic freedom is on the horizon.

Cyberspace

The relative youth of cyberspace makes examinations of academic inquiry in it problematic. An intriguing contribution by Robert O'Neil provides some important context. In one chapter in *Academic Freedom in the Wired World*, "New Technologies: Academic Freedom in Cyberspace," he outlines myriad ways in which professors face a brave new world. As he notes, "It was unexpected that courts would confer a substantially lesser level of protection for academic freedom when the medium changed. Yet that is precisely what happened in the digital age—to material posted on webpages, to individual electronic messages, and to the process of garnering vital research data from the Internet."[31] O'Neil describes the greater impact Internet messages have compared to older media; they may create a greater sense of "anxiety (even fear)," partly because it is much easier to incorporate visual images (including vivid or gruesome ones) into them, and they enter the home with far greater ease than printed messages did. (As I read that last statement, I thought of how much I despise pop-ups; throwing away junk mail is much easier than finding the Close button.) Furthermore, the Internet offers a new publication outlet, so professors with no print media options may go to online publication. Curiously, O'Neil misses a key point in his repeated discussion of the case of Ward Churchill, a University of Colorado professor investigated for research misconduct following widespread publicity of his statement that some of the people who died in the World Trade Center attack were "little Eichmanns."[32] As O'Neil observes, that publicity, which occurred years after Churchill published his essay online, only happened because the article was spread across the Internet.

One of O'Neil's arguments seems to require some more nuance. He states:

---

[30] **O'Neil,** *Academic Freedom in the Wired World*, 25.
[31] Ibid., 173.
[32] O'Neil, *Academic Freedom in the Wired World*, 28–29, 43, 83.

Certain obvious differences between old and new media have no direct bearing on academic freedom, though they are worth noting. An electronic message may instantly reach readers across the county and indeed around the globe, in sharp contrast to any form of print communication. Although a digital message, once posted, can be infinitely altered over time—another significant difference—the initial message may never be retracted once it has been sent or posted. Indeed, the first posting may remain accessible on "mirror" sites despite all efforts to suppress, remove, and expunge it.[33]

True enough, e-mail is nearly instantaneous. And, book burning across the centuries has not particularly succeeded in fully suppressing any text (it is incredibly difficult to suppress any text, written or oral, so in like manner, that initial e-mail has a capacity to endure). Yet, the combination of instantaneous communication and the capacity to alter the initial message has very real consequences for academic freedom, for in reauthoring the e-mail in part or in whole a person is able to refract the necessity of citation, the fundamental way of establishing academic inquiry. (Ironically, this also means that an expanded possibility of freedom is possible, since anyone can create or re-create a statement and post it anonymously; the author therefore need not fear reprisal.) Furthermore, as a revised e-mail or online post sweeps through home and office computers, any correction is no more powerful than an erratum published in a newspaper or a scholarly journal; it is read, if at all, a day or month or quarter later. Just as complex is the barrage of responses to an e-mail or post, a far cry from one or two scholars raising issue with a publication in journal responses or book reviews.

But in this article I seek to raise the more troubling question of who is constructing knowledge today. The speed of e-mails and posts, of revising them and resending them, and of responding to them, raises important issues of process. The content of knowledge, its validity, is of more fundamental concern.

Search engines are certainly constructing secondary sources. In 1998 Larry Page and Sergey Brin created Google, "a play on the word 'googol,' a mathematical term for the number

---

[33] Ibid., 179–80.

represented by the numeral 1 followed by 100 zeros. The use of the term reflects their mission to organize a seemingly infinite amount of information on the web." In its first year the company won an award for its "'uncanny knack for returning extremely relevant results."[34]

In preparation for this article, I typed "academic freedom" into Google, and it delivered, returning approximately 11,500,000 results in 0.8 seconds. Wikipedia's link was first, the AAUP's second. It was not a 1 followed by 100 zeros, but the number of results is beyond overwhelming, to the degree that I argue it creates a tendency toward a quick, nonreflective choice.

Google is hardly the only search engine; there are many specialized ones, often appearing in the search results for the larger search engines. Microsoft recently developed Bing, which is supposed to deliver more relevant results, so a user is not led from *academic freedom* to *freedom fighters* to *fighter airplanes* to *airing grievances*, at least according to the commercials. Nevertheless, entering "academic freedom" into Bing delivered 38,800,000 results (the time was not included, but it was at least as fast as Google). In this case, however, the AAUP link was third, following Wikipedia and *West's Encyclopedia of Law*.

Thus, when a professor wants to confirm the years when Immanuel Kant lived, so that he or she can point out to a student that citing a 1997 publication of one of Kant's works does not sufficiently reflect that he wrote in the eighteenth century, Wikipedia becomes the instant first reference. (Admittedly, a Google search for "Immanuel Kant" resulted in the Wikipedia link first followed by the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.) Here, then lie the critical differences between paper knowledge in the scholarly world and online knowledge. Not only am I confident that the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* is accurate because of careful peer review of an insufficiently supported claim in a submission for an entry (*mea culpa*), but also I am confident that in the high-speed, high-numbers world of online knowledge, no such review is likely. Infamous examples occur, as in the case of Tony Blair's death reported on Wikipedia. Most certainly, search engines and online

---

[34] http://www.google.com/corporate/history.html (accessed February 22, 2011).

pages of knowledge are endeavoring to improve their accuracy, but, faced with 11,500,000 or 38,800,800 results in less than a second, it seems eminently arguable that speed has the capacity to overwhelm any attempts at accuracy. . . if there are attempts at accuracy.

More disconcerting, primary sources disappear under the volume of secondary sources, and secondary sources disappear under the volume of tertiary sources. It could well be a scholarly axiom that the capacity of the individual reader to weigh the accuracy of a bit of knowledge diminishes the greater the distance from the bit's source.

In like manner, professors' online publications can be problematic. Obviously, peer review in its traditional paper forms can also be problematic. For example, Novick makes clear that peer review in the late 1800s and early 1900s, although not so structured as in the post–World War II period, allowed for an acceptance of the values and ways of the antebellum South that cruelly excluded African American experiences of enslavement. And, in the 1960s, African American and women historians resisted the standing assumptions of norms of peer review and created vibrant fields of inquiry.[35] Nevertheless, the possibilities of accuracy in peer review are powerful, and nonrefereed online publication may sidestep such possibilities. In this regard, it is fascinating to search "academic freedom" and quickly find professors' essays on the topic.

These issues are also complex when considering teaching. It is one matter to have a student utter a patently inaccurate or offensive statement in class. If a student posts a comment that needs correction or challenge, it can be a day or more before the professor responds, far too late (not unlike with fact corrections). And student comments derive today, and will derive in the future, from reading not the bowels of the university but the carcasses of the Internet.

It would be foolhardy to deny that academic freedom will continue to face the dangers of an enraged public. Challenges to the public's and the polity's notion of what is and what ought to

---

[35] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 76–81, 472–41, 491–510. Novick discusses African American and women historians as a "particularistic threat," and I argue briefly here that a robust analytical perspective would claim that race and gender are fundamental matters—easily drawing on, for example, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915–1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); and Gerder Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

be—as well as what has been—are more than likely to create ire if not repression or investigation. Novick tells us that one newspaper's response to Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* was, well, rather explicit: "SCAVENGERS, HYENA-LIKE, DESECREATE THE GRAVES OF THE DEAD PATRIOTS WE REVERE."[36] In a more recent series of events, the e-mails sent to Ward Churchill's department and colleagues are chilling for their racism and threats of violence.

Nevertheless, as the breadth and volume of search engines' results increase, providing a source of certainty for those building an argument—in scholarly terms, as citations and primary sources become attenuated—the validity of academics' knowledge, the fundamental assumption of academic freedom, becomes problematic. And while the university has on occasion welcomed knowledge from other sources, as in the case of the contributions of Arab scholars in the 1100s and 1200s, there is a consistent rigor to that knowledge. Online knowledge, in contrast, is overwhelmingly nonacademic, but to its users (in contemporary terms, ask the "birthers") it is accurate. Academic professionals—I use this term in the sense of their role as producers of knowledge[37]—face the possibility of a vortex of knowledge. Disciplines have long-standing traditions about the ways of creating knowledge, but the waves of knowledge from the Internet are overwhelming and suggest that academic professionals may not be able to control their disciplines as they have done in the past. The barrage of responses to statements on the Internet is complex; reading these responses, much less considering them, much less analyzing them, cannot be done quickly or easily. The coherence of disciplines faces a substantial challenge, as does the construct of academic freedom.

Scholars such as William Van Alstyne have long wrestled with the problems of legal definitions of academic freedom, carefully considering its relation to freedom of speech, civil

---

[36] Quoted in Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 96.

[37] Donald Light Jr., "Introduction: The Structure of the Academic Professions," *Sociology of Education* 47 (Winter 1974): 10–11.

liberty, and the First Amendment of the US Constitution.[38] The challenge of the Internet, however, is the potential loss to "academic freedom" of the significance of the modifier *academic*. The Internet blurs or erases the distinction between its instantaneously produced knowledge and the created, peer-reviewed knowledge of higher education. Indeed, it is worth noting that more than one Internet mogul dropped out of college, signaling less than full patience with the careful, considered behaviors about knowledge in the academy. As Cary Nelson noted in response to a draft of this article, "Academic freedom becomes meaningless as a guild principle—in its place we have 'freedom' without academic regulation and review."

Conclusion

Hence the rather dramatic title for this article. It would be foolhardy to claim that, in an ironic return to the ancients, reading the entrails of the disemboweled university allows us to predict the future. I know that these arguments are rather speculative. After all, three decades ago I confidently declared in a graduate seminar that sooner or later a major university faculty would unionize, and a year later the US Supreme Court issued the *Yeshiva* decision. Prediction is not the purview of social scientists, especially historians. Nevertheless, and with all due caution about the dangers of deterministic views of human events, it would also be wise to be wary of what the cyber future portends for academic freedom. The former provides unbelievably huge amounts of knowledge in a matter of less than a second to the person using the computer (or other device), in response to the simple typing (or speaking) of a word or phrase, seemingly forming expertise. Traditionally, academic freedom has been founded in the disciplined, peer-reviewed activities of the professoriate, forming academic expertise. The contrast is more than subtle; it is highly important within a public and a polity that looks on the academy as a key institutional actor in the affairs of society.

---

[38] See, for example, William Van Alstyne, "The Specific Theory of Academic Freedom and the General Issue of Civil Liberty," in *Concept of Academic Freedom*, 59–85; and Van Alstyne, "Academic Freedom and the First Amendment in the Supreme Court of the United States: An Unhurried Historical Review," in *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy*, 79–154.

Philo A. Hutcheson is associate professor of educational policy studies at Georgia State University. His publications include: "Goals for United States Higher Education: From Democracy To Globalization" in History of Education*(January 2011); "Professors of Education and Academic Freedom: Uncharted Waters," in* Faculty Work in Schools of Education, *(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001);* A Professional Professoriate: Unionization, Bureaucratization, and the AAUP *(2000); and "McCarthyism and the Professoriate: A Historiographic Nightmare?" in* Higher Education: The Handbook of Theory and Research *(New York: Agathon Press, 1997). He has completed a manuscript on the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education.*