June 1995

Book Reviews

Paul Gleason

International Monetary Fund

Barry Fast

Academic Book Center

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Recommended Citation

Gleason, Paul and Fast, Barry (1995) "Book Reviews," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 20.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1761>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Book Reviews

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

This issue's reviews were arranged for and edited by **Paul Gleason** of the *International Monetary Fund*. If you would like to suggest a title for review or wish to send *ATG* a review copy, please

use the following address: Book Review Editor, *Against the Grain*, 11 Orlando Avenue, Ardsley, NY 10502. Thanks. — BF.

The Story of Webster's Third: Philip Gove's Controversial Dictionary and Its Critics

by Herbert C. Morton. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Hardcover, xv+332 pages, indexed. ISBN 0-521-46146-4 (\$29.95).

Reviewed by **Bernice Randall**

For anyone old enough to recall the donnybrook over the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*, in 1961, Morton's book is certain to re-create the battle scene as vividly as a CNN newscast from Sarajevo. For anyone too young, the story is likely to seem as far-fetched as a Stephen King tale about a vampire terrorizing a New England town.

Why would usually well-mannered publications like the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and the *Atlantic Monthly* savage the eighth in a line of dictionaries descended from Noah Webster's pio-

neering work of 1828? If it weren't for comparison with its immediate, revered predecessor, *Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition*, they probably wouldn't have. When the Second was published in 1934 (incidentally, the year that Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* opened on Broadway), it was spared the accusations of permissiveness later leveled against the Third.

Yet, as Morton notes, the Third was not as different from the Second as most critics believed. Many of those who charged the Third with abandoning the Second's stand against the deterioration of the language, and the decline of cultural values in general, knew little about dictionary making and even less about the approach and contents of either edition. For example:

- The Third shared the Second's conception of its role not as a judge of good English but as a recorder of actual usage. This approach to lexicography is in line with Noah Webster's view that "the man who undertakes to censure others for the use of certain words and to decide what is or is not correct in language seems to arrogate to himself a dictatorial authority, the legitimacy of which will always be denied." Even earlier, Samuel Johnson (*A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755) had concluded that it is foolish for a lexicographer to try to protect the language from change.

- However irritating to readers who hadn't noticed them earlier, variant spellings were not new to the Third. The Second even gave *mispell*, along with *misspell*, a variant that the Third no longer recognized.

- As for the treatment of specific words, the Third's entry on *a* or *an* before words beginning with a consonant sound is virtually the same as the Second's. Other controversial words or meanings in both editions include *biweekly* in the sense of "twice a week" as

well as "every two weeks," *normalcy*, *finalize*, and *irregardless* (labeled "erroneous or humorous" in the Second and "nonstandard" in the Third). The inclusion of *ain't* in the Third was vehemently, though incorrectly, condemned as outright approval; while the Second labeled the usage "dialectal or illiterate," the Third called it "substandard" as a contraction of *have not and has not*, and noted that as a contraction of *are not, is not, and am not* it is "disapproved by many and more common in less educated speech."

The Story of Webster's Third accomplishes the three tasks it sets for itself. It tells us about **Philip Babcock Gove**, the complex scholar and lexicographer who spent 10 of his nearly 26 years at the G. & C. Merriam Company (now Merriam-Webster, Inc.), in Springfield, Massachusetts, as editor in chief of the new unabridged dictionary. It gives us an inside look at dictionary making, explaining how, in light of the expansion of English and the changes both in usage and in attitudes toward language, Gove and his staff revised the definitions, etymologies, pronunciations, and format of the Second Edition. And it chronicles the controversy that followed the publication of the dictionary, presenting the views of the most prominent attackers and defenders. In the process, it sheds light on the cultural and social tensions of the United States in the early 1960s.

If the journalistic and scholarly critics of the Third seemed to outnumber the defenders, it was partly because they were better known and partly because they voiced their opinions in more widely circulated publications. The *New York Times's* scathing parody of the dictionary and its call for an entirely new work based on the Second were soon echoed by other newspapers. But the most devastating blow was struck by **Dwight Macdonald**, whose March 10, 1962, *New Yorker* article, "The String Unstrung," delighted foes of the Third and heartened opponents of language change (by and large the same people).

As Morton notes, some critics had good things to say about the work and some defenders pointed out what they saw as shortcomings. Almost everyone praised the currency of the vocabulary, which was based on Merriam's enormous citation file and which reflected the sound lexicographic practice of incorporating only new words that had been in use for many years, over wide areas, and by many groups. The few comments on the etymologies were consistently favorable as well.

Objections to *Webster's Third* centered mainly on six Govian innovations: (1) a tight, single-statement style of definitions; (2) a liberal use of quotations from contemporary sources to illustrate meanings; (3) a reduction in usage labels and comments, especially in the treatment of slang and colloquialisms; (4) detailed pronunciations and a new pronunciation key (which, bad as it was, critics said, should have appeared on the text pages); (5) deletion of encyclope-

continud on page 50

The Story of Webster's Third
from page 49

dic material; and (6) a new capitalization style, which lowercased virtually all entry words and labeled the customarily capitalized ones according to usage ("cap," "usu cap," "often cap," "sometimes cap," and the like) — an editorial practice that even those open to lexicographic novelty usu found un-Godly.

After 34 years, the furor over *Webster's Third* has all but subsided. With updates every five years or so, the work has generally come to be regarded as the most authoritative one-volume dictionary of the English language. Yet it still has detractors, mainly self-styled purists determined to protect the language from almost everyone else who uses it. Some turn up in my editorial workshops. To those who insist that *Webster's Second* is the only reliable American unabridged dictionary I say, "Give me a break!" How can anyone seriously interested in English as it is written and spoken today make do with a 62-year-old dictionary when its successor gives more than 100,000 new words or new meanings for old words?

The writing style in *The Story of Webster's Third* is clear, engaging, and, given the author's understandable sympathy with the beleaguered Gove, as objective as possible. The research is sound — so sound, in fact, that it is surprising to find *Webster's New World Dictionary* described as beginning its definitions with the most common senses. Like those of Merriam-Webster, *Webster's New World* dictionaries arrange the senses of entry words in historical order for the most part. It is the *American Heritage* and *Random House* dictionaries that follow the opposite pattern: most common present-day meanings first.

Because Morton addresses his book to dictionary users, not dictionary makers, I wish he had supplemented the useful information on the art and craft of lexicography with a few basic facts about dictionaries. Readers who come across unexplained terms like

unabridged, desk-sized, and college-level might wonder about abridged dictionaries and whether size, number of entries, or lexicographic approach distinguishes desk dictionaries from college dictionaries. Again, finding terms like *synchronic dictionary* and *historical dictionary* only mentioned in passing, readers might be interested to know that synchronic dictionaries, such as *Webster's Second* and *Third*, concentrate on word forms and meanings within a limited period of time, whereas diachronic, or historical, dictionaries, such as *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, cover a long period, usually centuries, in tracing the development of the lexicon.

The notes, combining bibliographic citations and brief comments, are where they belong — in the back matter — and, thanks to the header references to text pages, easy to find. The index, though, is a bit idiosyncratic. Why, for example, does the entry "Gallan, Jordan J." lead us to the incidental intelligence that "it was Gove, not President Gallan, who would answer the attacks that followed in the *New York Times*, *Life* magazine, and other newspapers and magazines" (page 160), but not to the more relevant fact that "many more of these [scatological and racially derogatory] terms would be entering the *Collegiate* for the first time — including the taboo word *fuck* that Gallan had deleted from the galleys of the Third Edition" (page 268)? Relevant especially because earlier Morton cites Mario Pei's and Roy Copperud's protests over the omission of only that four-letter word in the Third. Yet the one-page index entry "taboo words" is unrelated to this and other discussions of vulgar and offensive terms.

Bernice Randall is the author of Webster's New World Guide to Current American Usage (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1988) and When Is a Pig a Hog?: A Guide to Confoundingly Related English Words (New York: Prentice Hall, 1991 (hardcover) and 1993 (paperback)). She is on the faculty of the Stanford Professional Publishing Course.

Who Owns Information?: From Privacy to Public Access
by Anne Wells Branscomb. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
Hardcover, xii+241 pages, indexed. ISBN 0-465-09175-X (\$25.00).

Reviewed by Robert D. Bovenschulte

Wham! That is the sound of colliding property rights in the information age. Anne Wells Branscomb, a communications and computer lawyer and a legal scholar-in-residence at Harvard University's Program on Information Resources Policy, has taken on the daunting task of analyzing these collisions. In *Who Owns Information?: From Privacy to Public Access* she has produced a

useful guide to sorting out the confusion and has made a worthy attempt to imagine suitable legal regimes to govern information usage in the future.

The energy causing most of these clashes between interests and rights stems from rampant technological innovation. With computers, databases, and networks, information seekers can now find, assemble, and exploit vast quantities of data. They can put this information to use with rapidly increasing sophistication in ways that frequently generate conflicts among various parties: individuals, companies, institutions, and governments. Profits, privacy, and the public good are at stake, but the law and norms of behavior lag far behind the development of ever-expanding capacities to exploit the value of information.

The author cites three purposes for the book: (1) to examine situations in which the current legal structure proves unequal to the new challenges; (2) to develop basic principles for improvements in the law; and (3) to urge readers to take these problems seriously and become involved in efforts to produce legislative remedies. Her ultimate goal is a society that has reached agreement on the permissible and prohibited uses of information in an environment rich in content and technological capability.

Examples of the law's inadequacy in dealing with today's technology of information comprise most of the book. Each chapter centers on one instance of this deficiency. The author's method, in general, is to describe the issue succinctly, review its history with an emphasis on legislative and judicial actions, delineate the key elements of the controversy, and point toward possible solutions.

The range of topics is broad. The title of each chapter mirrors the title of the book: "Who Owns (a specific category of information)?" The issues are (seriatim): name and address, telephone number, medical history, image, electronic messages, video entertainment, religious information, computer software, and government information.

continud on page 51

Who Owns Information? from page 50

The analyses yield many interesting and, at times, worrisome facts, possibilities, and speculations. The following sampling provides a more detailed sense of the book's coverage.

Name and Address

The amount of unsolicited "junk" mail that the average consumer must extricate from a stuffed mailbox has grown enormously. The author argues that this volume constitutes not just a nuisance but also an invasion of privacy. She notes that the United States Postal Service provides addresses to commercial mail managers in spite of the Privacy Act of 1974, which seems to prohibit this disclosure. Because presorted mail is cheaper to distribute, the USPS has found a way to circumvent the law's intent for its own economic advantage. Moreover, the individual is powerless to remove his or her name from these lists.

Another abuse of one's name and address results from the expansion of target marketing. By gathering and sifting through information about purchasing patterns, marketers can learn a great deal about any individual's preferences and design promotional efforts to maximize effectiveness. The objection is that this information is collected without the knowledge or consent of consumers. The author proposes a more equitable relationship based on the principle that a collector should be required to disclose and gain permission for any uses subsequent to the transaction generating the data.

Telephone Number

Perhaps even more intrusive than "junk" mail are telephone solicitations. They invade privacy, consume time, and disturb lei-

sure hours. Although automated calls are now illegal because of the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, the volume of telemarketing has certainly not abated. Various legislative remedies have been proposed to alleviate the problem, but to date the matter remains unsettled.

Clearly property rights and economic value are associated with telephone numbers. But to whom do they belong? On the one hand, the courts have not been impressed by telephone companies' arguments that they own the numbers they assign. On the other hand, the courts have not supported claims to property rights by the public, even when privacy is the issue. Especially murky are questions about the ownership and transportability of WATS lines and 800 numbers. Another recent innovation, Caller ID, raises a controversy about the right to anonymity of the caller versus the right to freedom from harassment for the person called. The author also describes the rapid increase in collecting transaction-generated information that allows marketers to categorize individuals from their use of the telephone. For commercial purposes, you are whom you call. Regulation of such database marketing efforts will probably become a legal morass. The author worries that neither the marketplace nor judges and juries will be able to sort out these complexities.

Medical History

Accelerated by the scope and sophistication of databases and networks, the use and control of medical histories have become serious concerns. Although all states have laws governing access to medical records for public health purposes, there is no consistency. Moreover, these laws were passed long before the existence of

continued on page 52

COUTTS

WORKING AS PART OF YOUR TEAM

We can handle all your book acquisition needs.

W

hen you put Coutts on your team, you gain extensive knowledge of the book trade:

- bibliographic accuracy
- a single source to handle both the mainstream as well as esoteric publications
- personalized service
- book approval plans tailored to your specific and dynamic collection management requirements.

COUTTS

Library Services Inc.

We handle firm orders, book approval plans, new title programs (notification slip service), continuations/standing orders, book processing and provide electronic access to information and PC software for ordering. Let our professional selectors and knowledgeable customer service specialists provide you with our, innovative cost-effective service.

*Please call or write for
more information.*

1823 Maryland Avenue, Niagara Falls, New York, 14302-1000 (716) 282-8627 Fax: (905) 356-5064, 1-800-772-4304

Who Owns Information? from page 51

Moreover, these laws were passed long before the existence of computerized information gathering and dissemination, and so they are inadequate to govern practices in today's technological environment.

While the public rightly fears unauthorized access to, and misuse of, personal medical records, aggregated data have great value for health care professionals, insurance companies, and the government. This information can contribute to improved treatment and cost reduction, which are especially important as efforts gain momentum to streamline health care delivery and make it much more efficient. Again, privacy and the public good come into conflict. Technology may turn out to provide sensible solutions that appropriately balance the interests of patients and society, but that is far from the current state of affairs.

Electronic Messages

The author probes the timely and fascinating problems associated with electronic mail. Because this innovation has only recently exploded on the scene, the law is largely silent on questions of privacy and confidentiality for e-mail messages. Differences of opinion about what is appropriate in any situation are sharply drawn, because no generally accepted ethic has emerged.

Here are a few examples of the issues. Does a company have the right to monitor and control all of the messages its employees put into its system? If not, under what conditions is the right circumscribed? Are network providers like **Prodigy**, **America Online**, and **CompuServe** responsible, to some degree, for the content of messages sent by their subscribers? Should such providers be regarded as mere distributors or as publishers? How are First Amendment rights to be interpreted in the context of e-mail? How will future laws and judicial decisions in one country apply, if at all, to e-mail that crosses geopolitical borders? The complications are many, and resolution has taken on a greater urgency as message traffic grows exponentially around the world.

Computer Software

In this instance, the law and technology become intertwined. The history of efforts to guarantee property rights for software creators is both fascinating and instructive. As the computer age unfolded, lawyers sought to use patent law to forge and protect monopolies for innovative computer programs. The patent office, however, failed to cooperate, for the most part. Lawyers then turned to copyright law, and Congress legitimated this approach in 1980. The following year the Supreme Court decided a case from which the patent office derived authorization to issue patents under certain circumstances. At that point software developers could draw on three sources for legal protection: copyright, patent, and trade secrets.

More complications arose as legal attention shifted from source code to computer interfaces. In the famous case of **Lotus 1-2-3**, the "look and feel" criterion for infringement was established. While this decision may have been sound legally and fair insofar as it properly rewarded an originator, it failed to address the needs of users for industry standardization in interfaces. By requiring a high degree of differentiation among interfaces, the law increased the cost of developing other innovations and frustrated users' requests for compatibility. To resolve this conundrum, the author argues that perhaps copyright, patent, and trade secret laws should be aban-

doned as the bases for protecting software rights; instead, special legislation should be developed because software is so critical to the national and world economy.

The foregoing provides only a glimpse into the richness of cases and anecdotes contained in this book. These investigations of specific situations are carefully argued and clearly presented. The author has admirably achieved her first purpose of elucidating the myriad problems of property rights, particularly against the backdrop of developments in information technology.

The concluding chapter moves from the case approach to an overview of information as an asset. The author highlights the conflicts between private and public domains. Here two themes dominate. First, the author worries about the reward system. She asserts that in the long run those who develop and distribute information must receive sufficient compensation to provide incentives for undertaking those activities valued by society; in effect, information cannot be free because in most circumstances its availability entails costs that must be recovered somehow. Second, she demonstrates an equal concern about privacy. Commercial interests and governments are forces against which the individual must contend. New laws are necessary to insulate the individual against unwanted intrusions and against abuses of personal information. The weight of the author's second purpose — outlining some basic legal principles to govern the information age — rests on this chapter. It is a difficult conceptual task, and she struggles gamely with it. The results are certainly worthy of attention, even if they seem a bit thin as a guide to action.

Two reservations about this book must be noted. For all its breadth, it glaringly omits any investigation of copyrighted material available through information systems. The Internet and the National Information Infrastructure are barely mentioned, and there is nothing about such crucial matters as fair use, electrocopying, document supply, local area networks, downloading and printing, encryption and metering software, varieties of content licensing, digital libraries, and the whole *mélange* of issues surrounding access, copyright, and payment in an electronically linked world. This omission is a pity, not only because the subject is central but also because the author appears to have a background appropriate for delving into these problems. The second criticism is a quibble. The chapter on religious information should have been eliminated or, at most, relegated to an appendix. While the history of the Dead Sea Scrolls is understandably interesting to many, it contributes little to the book's intent; the issues raised are not pressing on scholars as a whole, nor are they obviously generalizable to any larger context.

In the main, *Who Owns Information?* succeeds in accomplishing what the author set out to do. It is recommended to librarians, publishers, technologists, journalists, and anyone interested in a fine introduction to this important and perplexing subject.

Robert D. Bovenschulte has worked in publishing for 28 years and is currently Vice President for Publishing at the Massachusetts Medical Society, where he is publisher of the New England Journal of Medicine, Journal Watch, AIDS Clinical Care, and Health News, a recently launched newsletter for consumers. His career spans scholarly, professional, trade, college, and school segments of the publishing industry. He currently is on the boards of directors of the Society for Scholarly Publishing and the Copyright Clearance Center.