February 2000

Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-Hitler and Lennon

Barry Fast

Blackwell's Book Services, barryf@acbc.com

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

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fast, Barry (2000) "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations-Hitler and Lennon," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 36.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3434>

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.

Vendor-Library Relations — Hitler and Lennon

by **Barry Fast** (Vice President Strategic Business Development, Blackwell's Book Services; 718-885-9563/ 800-326-3080 (voice) 917-862-8526 (cell) 718-885-9562 (fax) 186 Cross St, City Island, NY 10464) <barryf@acbc.com>

Imagine a world with no countries. **John Lennon** wrote the song, and now we are creating it with the Internet. A new world is dawning at the beginning of the 21st century where borders have no meaning. Because of this, for the first time in history we can dream of a world without tyrannical governments, without censors, without restrictions on trade and information. Those of us in the information industry have a large stake in this new world order.

I have no doubt that we will quickly solve the technical problems that restrict Internet expansion, as well as the economic constraints on wiring the whole world. Petty money issues, like collecting sales taxes on Internet purchases, are mere potholes along this road. Now that Y2K has come and gone, there is a huge demand for technology solutions that were on hold while business and government focused on getting through the 2000 problem. In a few years we'll look back at this time and wonder why all the fuss about technological obstacles to Internet expansion. Right now 100 million Americans have Internet access; in a few years everyone will, everyone in the world. The real obstacles to a world without borders are the institutions that are the most threatened by the Internet, because of the science, knowledge, information and learning freely available through the Internet.

Increasingly, the way in which traditional, non-Internet information is assembled and distributed is concentrating in fewer, larger organizations. This trend poses a greater threat to intellectual freedom and the right to learning than economic or technology gaps. When the Kansas state school board required the curriculum to include the so-called science of Creationism, they did not just establish a narrow religious doctrine. They are now forcing textbook publishers to adhere to this particular religious dogma, as opposed to lots of other religion-based stories of human origins, and to the exclusion of the real science of Evolution. If this political event in Kansas spreads, the few textbook publishers will have sound commercial reasons for including Creationism in their science books for all schools in America. All our children will learn science from the Bible. The more enlightened citizens in Kansas and other states will lose control over

what their children learn, despite the political will to maintain high standards for scientific teaching. With limited textbook choices, the average citizen has no choice.

In November, **Amazon.com** reported that it's number 2 bestseller in Germany was *Mein Kampf*, **Adolf Hitler's** autobiographical discussion of his struggle to make a world free of Jews and other problem people and ideas. We can reflect on what this may say about modern Germany, but all countries have their haters and neo-fascists. Of more importance is the fact that *Mein Kampf* is banned in Germany as hate literature, so a most convenient source for curious Germans who wanted to read this book was **Amazon.com** in America. (The German-based **Amazon.co.de** will not sell it in accordance with the local law.) Within a week of this report in the *New York Times*, **Amazon.com** announced that it would no longer sell *Mein Kampf* in Germany. **Barnesandnoble.com**, which is 40% owned by the German information giant **Bertelsmann AG**, said that it will continue to ship *Mein Kampf* to German buyers, but Bertelsmann itself urged B&N to halt the shipments (according to

the Times) and it removed *Mein Kampf* from **Bertelsmann's** own online bookstore. If **B&N** decides that discretion is the better part of valor, and stops selling *Mein Kampf* to Germany, the only widely accessible copies of the book will be e-books on the Internet.

I read *Mein Kampf* in high school when I was in a phase of reading everything I could on World War II and its origins. I was also a firm believer in "know thy enemy" and could think of no better way to understand **Hitler** than to read his book. I handed in a book report on this work, which my history teacher firmly rejected, including a note to my parents, chastising me for reading such garbage. My history teacher would have been very comfortable in Kansas in 1999. My par-

ents, fortunately, would not.

German kids with the same curiosity that I had as a teenager can't buy *Mein Kampf* anywhere in Germany now. Only the Internet connects them to a possible English language print copy and certainly many online electronic sources of the book. The German politicians, like the Kansans, who decide what is suitable to know, can't stop the Internet. But they will try, as would Hitler if he were running that country today.

Information providers will always have governments to contend with, as surely as we have taxes to pay. Political and theological institutions have always been, with rare exceptions, the enemy of free thought and ideas. There is no such thing as a government that, given the power, would not attempt to stifle ideas that it deems harmful to itself. Wherever in the world churches have had unfettered power, from 12th century Europe under the popes, to 17th century England under **Cromwell**, to 21st century Afghanistan under the **Taliban**, they have imposed their beliefs on others. Even in our own country, the freest in the world, an elected school governing body in Kansas is trying to eliminate scientific inquiry into the origin of species. Because its members believe a story sponsored by one of the world's

many diverse religions, they arrogantly deter-

mine that this specific tale is the only one the children of Kansas will learn. In Germany, one of the freest countries in Europe, the writings of the most significant political figure in its history are banned. The sourcebook of Germany's agony and shame is closed to its own people. In each of these cases, because the information providers are few, and concentrated among even fewer owners, the governments can enforce these restrictions on intellectual freedom.

But they can't stop the Internet, and this is their great fear. They know that ultimately all information will be available on the Net, and that's why we will see governments and other threatened institutions attempt to restrict the Internet. We all have a stake in keeping it free, because an English pop singer had a better idea than a German politician did.