Against the Grain

Manuscript 8440

Eradicating the Written Word- Power and Symbolism through the Lenses of Book Burnings and Takedowns – A Research Project

Frances Pinter

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

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

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.

Take a closer look at....

The CHARLESTON REPORT

Business Insights into the Library Market

You Need The Charleston Report...

if you are a publisher, vendor, product developer, merchandiser, consultant or wholesaler who is interested in improving and/or expanding your position in the U.S. library market.

Subscribe today at our discounted rate of only \$75.⁰⁰

The Charleston Company

6180 East Warren Avenue, Denver, CO 80222

Phone: 303-282-9706 • Fax: 303-282-9743

IRs R Cool Again *from page 1*

like any good collection of IRticles, we include essays that largely ignore the messy stuff and simply explore the ever expanding possibilities and capabilities of IRs from non traditional research objects (NTRs) to providing entries to the surrounding local community. Even those authors who originally planned to write essays critical of IRs found it very difficult to do so once they got a few paragraphs in. To state the obvious, IRs are not sexy. The name itself is quite fitting. IRs are not perfect. Many of them are clunky (especially compared to slickly produced, commercial social media subterfuges) and, largely because there are so many different platforms and so much variety from institution to institution, they do not offer easy ways to integrate and interoperate (a problem that some may say is essentially solved by Google, but that may require another special issue). However, despite all of that, IRs are undeniably functional and provide an obvious and ready-made duct tape of sorts that can shore up the many gaping holes that come with open access and any grand plans to transform/secretly maintain the scholarly publication industry.

We hope you find the following IR-themed essays thought provoking and enlightening. 🌱

Eradicating the Written Word

Power and Symbolism through the Lenses of Book Burnings and Takedowns — A Research Project

by **Dr Frances Pinter** (Senior Research Fellow, School of Advanced Study, University of London) <frances@pinter.org.uk>

You might well ask why I, a UK publisher who has devoted most of my professional life to broadening access to knowledge, would be interested in book burning. Well, it dates back to travels to communist countries in the seventies and eighties where books that I'd freely studied from were still banned. In the nineties, at the request of **George Soros**, I was given an unprecedented opportunity to help foster the development of the newly independent publishing sector in thirty post-communist countries, including supporting translations.

Over the decades, I felt a perverse, almost macabre interest growing in me about extreme acts against the spread of knowledge — that of book burning. Not just a simple act of destruction, there was more, much more to be understood — if one looked beyond the ashes.

Essentially, book burning is about power and symbolism. How is power exercised through book burning? And, how should we understand the symbolic power of book burning? Who does it, and why? To what effect has its use as a tool of control changed over time as technologies of book production improved? Changes such as the growth of literacy, education and increasing availability of multiple and, more recently, digital copies of books have

altered the way in which control of knowledge and its dissemination (and destruction) occurs. Book burning isn't merely a matter of flammable material, it can be a powerful political instrument or just a futile gesture.

An historical review of book burning makes clear that these gestures have been a feature of our history throughout the ages. The earliest known papyri burnings date as far back as 1300 BC by the **Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton**. The earliest known book burnings in China were carried out in 213 BC by the emperor **Qin Shi Huang**. Millions of books have been burned over the millennia all over the world. You can now see schoolchildren on YouTube burning copies of *Catcher in the Rye*. Only a few years ago history books were burned by local officials in Northern Siberia because their revisions, though by Russian authors, had been sponsored by the philanthropist **George Soros**

(a project with which I'd been involved and helped to deliver). And, of course, whole libraries have been burned down.

Today, knowledge stored by digital means still has considerable challenges of discoverability, accessibility and preservation. Even if we can solve the technical challenges, how do we protect content from malice and neglect? The phrase "Digital Flames" has emerged from the library community, conjuring up a really dystopian future that none of us want. So, I'm looking at what we know about the intentions and motivations behind book-burning to see if there are lessons to be drawn for protecting our cherished knowledge base. 🌱

If you'd like more information about this project or if you want to share your own thoughts and experiences please contact me at <frances@pinter.org.uk>.