

The Immutable Mobile:
A Vehicle for Domination

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The power of one individual or society to dominate another arguably constitutes one of humanity's most primal behaviors. Throughout much of the breadth of human history, tales of domination describe the wars and exploits of the physically powerful and the subjugation of those they conquer. The ideas of the conquerors often subsequently proliferated amongst the newly subjugated — science, mathematics and economics with corresponding knowledge methods, number systems and concepts of money all spread throughout the globe, engulfing and destroying the ideas of societies which resisted, and even those that submitted — and no socially constructed ideas ever spread quite as widely as European science and market capitalism. From roughly the fifteenth century onward, European science and market capitalism spread like a plague across the globe, colonizing and infecting virtually every society it touched. Much has been written regarding the rise and dominion of the capitalist mode of production (Harvey, 1990; Wolf, 1982), focusing on the ways in which the capitalist economic system dominated all others. Few would argue that the rise of capitalism and Western science links inextricably to the advent of the printing press, however, Bruno Latour (1986) argues that capitalist ideological domination not only links to, but stems from the printing press' creation of "immutable mobiles", which allow European science and capitalism to rise.

The immutable mobile, a consistent, endlessly reproducible transportable object, assists the creators of the object in dominating, colonizing and subjugating the users of the object in a way that no economic, religious or social knowledge system in and of itself could. The immutable mobile acts as the vehicle for producing and reproducing the domination of the ideological system. Latour (1986) explains, "No new theory, world view, or spirit is necessary to explain capitalism, the reformation and science: they are the result of a new step in the long history of immutable mobiles." (p. 12). Latour (1986) believes capitalism to be "an empty word as long as precise material instruments are not proposed to explain any capitalization at all, be it of specimens, books, information or money" (p. 31). Accordingly, for Latour the power of European social structures to dominate the earth lie not in the capitalist mode of production, but rather in the material instruments that measure capitalization transformed into easily reproducible mobile objects. Latour (1986) continues, "capitalism is not to be used to explain the evolution of science and technology...Once science and technology are rephrased in terms of immutable mobiles it might be possible to explain economic capitalism as another process of mobilization" (p. 31). Thus for Latour, mass production acts not a feature of the capitalist mode of production, but rather the idea of capitalism itself gets mass-reproduced through the printing press' creation of the immutable mobile, and like a colonizing army, the ideas of science and capitalism spread.

Latour believes that ideas cannot dominate on their own, rather their mobilized form allows them to do so. He notes that "before the advent of print every possible intellectual feat had been achieved...But each achievement stayed local and temporary just because there was no way to move their results elsewhere". (Latour, 1986, p. 11). Numerous ideas now associated with the European Renaissance and Enlightenment already introduced, and in many cases recorded, lacked the capacity to dominate because their mobilization as immutable reproducible objects capable of combinability remained unrealized. Latour (1986) states that in order for one entity to dominate another, it has "to invent objects which have the properties of being *mobile* but also *immutable*, *presentable*, *readable* and *combinable* with one another" (p. 6, emphasis in original). Readable reproducible mobile objects allowed for the production of certain Enlightenment ideas due to their combinability since "the old texts...can be gathered more cheaply in one place...then the contradiction between them at last becomes visible in the most literal sense." (Latour, 1986, p. 11). The visible contradictions between the texts and their newfound mobility and reproducibility allowed users of the texts, like Tycho Brahe, to look at many of the ancient texts at once, compare them and find errors easily, which in turn generated new ideas and perspectives on many varied topics formerly considered orthodox.

Latour's readable and combinable "immutable mobiles" created by the printing press function as semi-stable, difficult to alter objects that travel around from user to user, conveying ideas and transforming minds. These objects, texts or inscriptions often take the form of a bound book or a document. Michael Buckland (1997) gathers several definitions of a document that behave somewhat differently from Latour's immutable mobiles, yet share certain characteristics nonetheless. While Latour (1986) cites authors from disciplines as varied as philosophy, art history and sociology, Buckland (1997) focuses almost exclusively on information scientists¹ and their definition of a document. S.R. Ranganathan (as cited in Buckland, 1997) describes a document as a two-dimensional text records suitable for transport, thus resembling Latour's (1986) immutable mobiles. Buckland (1997) notes that Ranganathan views a "'document' as a synonym for 'embodied micro thought' on paper 'or other material, fit for physical handling, transport across space, and preservation through time'" (p. 807). Ranganathan's definition of a document as transportable (mobile), fit for physical handling (presentable), and preservable (immutable), mirrors Latour's immutable mobile. Conversely, Paul Otlet's (as cited in Buckland, 1997) definition of documents as "natural objects, artifacts, objects bearing traces of human activity (such as archaeological finds), explanatory models, educational games, and works of art" (p. 805), however, would often fail the definition an immutable mobile. Although Otlet's

¹ Buckland provides citations in his bibliography from archaeologists such as Kenneth Ames, but they do not figure prominently in this paper.

definition of a document would constitute one feature of immutability — art and artifacts are no more easily altered than text — these documents are not easily reproduced, except in an alternate digital form. Likewise, art and artifact 'documents' might not possess mobility — a statue for example. Similarly, Suzanne Briet's (as cited in Buckland, 1997) definition of a document, which extends to an antelope in a zoo, most certainly does not share all the characteristics of the immutable mobile. Buckland (1997) paraphrases Briet's argument of including an antelope as a document noting that if the antelope "were to be captured, taken to a zoo and made an object of study, it has been made into a document" (p. 806). Humans cannot currently reproduce the antelope as a zoological document, although genetic cloning may someday achieve a near exact copy, and though mobile on its own, humans cannot easily move the antelope in its documented form — thus negating Briet's documents as immutable mobiles. However, Briet's antelope in a zoo as document demonstrates once again how documents dominate, representing human dominion over not only one another, but also over the rest of the natural world. The capture of the antelope by humans for study in the zoo renders the animal dominated in the most pure physical sense, and the visits by children to the zoo enculturates them to view the animal as an object to dominate.

The domination of the mind by documents and immutable mobiles on their users may represent a productive transformation for the consumer of the information contained within the object. Latour (1986) writes:

"The printing press does not add anything to the mind, to the scientific method, to the brain. It simply conserves and spreads everything no matter how wrong, strange or wild. It makes everything mobile... No matter how inaccurate these traces might be at first, they will all become accurate just as a consequence of more mobilization and more immutability" (p.11).

Thus humanity would appear to benefit and progress ever closer to as yet unrealized truths as the refutations of inaccurate claims contained in documents become documents themselves. Unfortunately, Latour (1986) also reminds that "the dissenter either has to quit and accept" what is said "as a hard fact", or "produce counterproofs by persuading his prince to invest a comparable amount of money" (p.12). Accordingly, if one 'truth' even appears to refute another 'truth', the earlier truth must produce counterproofs that often require more funding. "In this, the 'proof race' is similar to the arms race because the feedback mechanism is the same. Once one competitor starts building up harder facts, the others have to do the same or else submit" (Latour, 1986, p.12). Latour however neglects to illustrate that winning the "proof race" relies as much on funding as on hard facts. Latour (1986) describes money as yet another immutable mobile, capable of mobilizing ideas just as books or maps do, yet neglects to explore how monetary power can generate the reproduction of falsified ideas, as well as the reproduction of the idea of money itself, and usurp more "accurate" ideas. 'Facts', if they exist, must be generated or discovered, which in a capitalist

economy requires monetary funding. Many 'scientists' currently engaging in the coercion and outright falsification of evidence in attempts to refute evolution and climate change receive significant funding from well financed individuals seeking to dominate the discourse for their own nefarious ends. Because the immutable mobile ultimately serves as a vehicle for domination by the powerful, the success of the immutable mobile as a vehicle for "accuracy" becomes dubious. The proving or disproving of ideas, such as evolution, therefore becomes less about accuracy or human knowledge, and more about which prince has the money and inclination to invest in the 'science'.

The domination of physical and mental space by both immutable mobiles and other types of documents has a profound effect on users of information and creates a dilemma for information professionals. Each time a user of information services seeks and consumes information in the form of a document, that user has forever altered his or her way of being — the users mind colonized by the immutable mobile's producer. An information user's mental metamorphosis may constitute a positive development, provided that the immutable mobile's producer legitimately seeks to promote human knowledge, with little regard for power and domination over the user. Conversely, if the immutable mobile's producer seeks to dominate the social discourse and restrict the user, such as those producers that promote the use of money in society to the point at which it becomes a requirement for individual human existence everywhere on the planet, this is a positive development only for the few who control the immutable mobile's production at the expense of the many who must submit to its dominion. The consumption of information, documents and immutable mobiles then becomes a form of colonization and exploitation, as the human power behind those objects influences and ultimately controls the user. It is therefore imperative for any user to understand the nature of media, and all other forms of documents and immutable mobiles — that they serve to enculturate them to think certain thoughts, believe certain things, and behave certain ways. Whether the media is scriptural, political, scientific, economic, cultural, 'factual' or not; the consumption of any media represents an attempt on the part of the producer or promoter of the media to influence or control the user of that media. Due to the dangers inherent in information retrieval from the information producers who seek to dominate and control the retriever, the ethical information professional must therefore remain vigilant in evaluating sources with a critical eye and educating users on the ways in which the users information, economic, physical and spiritual needs can be utilized against the user by those producers who currently control the discourse to further their own ends at the expense of the user. The ethical information professional, interested in truly serving users, may therefore represent the last hope in preventing the users from seeking information from producers who would seek to dominate and control them.

References

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