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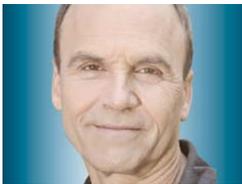
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CULTURE WILL PAY FOR LOSS OF RIGHTS

Authors' livelihoods are under threat from a diverse array of forces, mostly digital

SCOTT TUROW



Three years ago I was in Moscow seeking an answer to a question I had found utterly confounding. In the nation with perhaps the most distinguished list of novelists the world has known, why was I unfamiliar with the work of a single revered Russian novelist of today?

Tolstoy, Pushkin, Dostoevsky; even in the Stalinist era there were Solzhenitsyn and ostensibly non-political writers such as Pasternak. What was happening?

Writers in Russia were more discouraged about their positions than any I have met — even more than in China, where paper publication is a rarity and authors are compensated by hits.

The reasons to repress writers are well understood: writers are a significant threat to a government crushing organised opposition.

But aside from Pussy Riot, Russian President Vladimir Putin is not known to have jailed dissidents. How has he managed to so thoroughly exert control?

It turns out that Stalin was a brute; Putin is a dark genius. He

deprives writers of a livelihood by devaluing their copyrights. You don't throw them in prison, just make their copyrights worthless.

Piracy is rampant in Russia. Authors publish a new book and find it for free on the internet the next day. The only people who will fight for an author — publishers — are nearly nonexistent.

This literary dystopia one would think would find no comparison in the West, where copyright is deeply ingrained. Our model allows authors to support themselves by controlling the exploitation of their works.

But authors' rights and incomes are under threat from a diverse array of forces, most of them arising from the digital universe.

In fact, we're facing a small-scale version of what is happening in Russia, but, as so often happens in capitalist societies, large corporations are playing Putin's role.

In the digital era we face the devaluing of copyright, concentration in publishing and corporate oppositions that use all means available to help themselves to what should belong to authors.

And people who seemed years ago to have common cause are now turning into rival camps.

Both academics, whose publications seem to have lost any commercial value and who are

salaried, and librarians, who see their job as the dispersion of knowledge, are now often at war with commercial writers. And they sail under the flag of a slogan — "Information wants to be free".

Information is free for no one. There is always a writer who has struggled for years to research those ideas, and that is not without enormous cost. It is a tremendous lie to say "information wants to be free". We do not exist in the kind of society where any product or service is free.

I love libraries, but libraries are socialist enterprises — and you cannot ask authors to be the only socialists in a capitalist society, where they have to pay for the roofs over their heads, the food they eat, the cars they drive.

There are other intellectual property holders — like Amazon with its software or Google with its algorithm — that stand between authors and their readers, some of whom impose a chokehold on the literary marketplace.

My objection to Amazon is that it is not really a free-market operation. It extols the market while being utterly free of market forces. It hasn't made a profit in 20 years, its predatory pricing has laid waste to bookstores and its goal is to put competitors to death.

The Amazon model is simple. Put everybody else out of business and then keep all the profit that is to be made. At same time, it is raising prices where they it does not have competition.

Because of this change in bookselling, publishers have felt obliged to combine so that they

have more market power of their own. Concentration in publishing threatens authors in many ways, especially by limiting outlets and by creating a disturbingly united front on certain essential issues, especially a deliberate decline in authors' royalties on e-books, which are roughly half of what they were on paper books.

Then there's Google, a company built on other people's content. In 2004, it scanned the entire contents of seven university libraries without the permission of authors or publishers.

Book piracy is the force that will destroy the book. But the key is letting people know you have illegal goods for sale.

You need to use search engines to find pirated goods. To make matters worse, Google is now selling pirated books directly on its online marketplace Google play. In both instances it claims it is just a neutral intermediary.

In the US or Australia, if somebody stands on a street corner and tells you where you can buy illegal drugs, and makes a little money in the process, they might end up in jail. But Google is allowed to get away with this scot-free.

While there are promising technological developments on the horizon from The Copyright Hub, authors need, more than ever, to stand together. But also, frankly, their readers and fans can support their work by always paying for the products they love.

This is an edited version of a speech given at the Australian Society of Authors' congress.