

# Martin Luther, Science and the Internet

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## Introduction

Once upon a time, in the dark Middle Ages, the Church held the Keys to The Truth. The Church had forgotten its mission and vision. It sold Variations of Truth as letters of indulgence. Then a man stood up and challenged the credibility of this system. This man was Martin Luther, and his challenge was successful. The one weapon through which his word was heard was the recently invented printing press. Martin Luther printed the Holy Bible in the local language, thus reminding the Church of its original mission in a way that was verifiable to all who could read. He came at the right time because without the printing press, his voice would have been lost.

Today, in the twilight of the Age of Enlightenment, Science holds the Keys to The Truth. Science is in the process of forgetting its mission and vision. It sells Variations of Truth as research results and provides its commissioners with highly desirable absolution; be it in an environmental, financial, legalistic or even ethical sense. Once again The Truth has become a commodity; it can be sold rather than searched. In retaliation, scientists now circumvent the prevailing peer review system by publishing their research results directly over the Internet.

History has a tendency to repeat itself. However, fuzzy logic teaches us that history can only repeat itself in *similar*, and never in *identical* ways. Every Age and civilization appoint their guardians of the truth. Both the Church and Science have their unique systems of peer review that, once tainted, tended to develop in self-serving ways. To paraphrase the authors of '*The struggle of life*', 'Decisions about what is correct are taken in back rooms, equivalent of party cells. Intentions are screened in advance. What is rejected in these back rooms is never made public and forever hidden. Be aware of the Russian word for council. It is 'soviet'' (free after Rossignol *et al.* 1998). As in the days of Martin Luther, the question is raised '*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*' (Juvenal, 50-130 A.D.), or, who guards the guardians?

To draw the parallels between the advocacy by the Martin Luther of 1517 and the advocacy that happens on the Internet is the main thrust of this presentation.

## Advocacy

The Merriam Webster on-line dictionary defines the word as a 15th century noun that means '*the act or process of advocating or supporting a cause or proposal*'. Advocacy is about gaining trust and confidence from an audience and, in fact, it is a battle for credibility with the aim to induce

change. As a rule, advocacy aims to bring change to activities or policies. Parameters for its success include re-allocation or termination of budgets and initiation or termination of a line of activities. It is assumed that without the advocacy, these activities and policies -or the lack thereof- would have continued on their present course. Advocacy may be called for where organizations fail to live up to their mission and vision.

Before embarking upon the road of advocacy one has to ask why an organization succeeds or fails to live up to its mission and identify the incentives that lead to the continuation of the day to day practice. Elimination or restructuring of these incentives is key to successful advocacy. Typically, these incentives can be expressed in terms of status, power and money. Where these are challenged or called into doubt, resistance can be counted upon. This is where the balance of credibility between argument and counter-argument comes into play and the question is: Who has enough “ammunition to sustain battle” (Kiel, 1996-1999, pers. com.). In these days, advocacy likely requires assets for financial, juridical and scientific firepower and communication means. Green Gold (Romeijn, 1999) is a scientific study where the process of successful advocacy was meticulously recorded to the extent that it can be entirely be reconstructed. In this case, the Internet provided the main advocacy tool. OneWorld has recently released a web ‘guide’ that is dedicated to the research results of this study. In fact, it was uploaded this very week (OneWorld, 1999).

## **Science**

Invoking science is no guarantor for fair play in advocacy. The late and much respected Professor of Philosophy at Berkeley, Paul Feierabend wrote: “Financial arrangements can make or break a research programme and an entire profession. There are many ways to silence people apart from forbidding them to speak-and all of them are being used today. The process of knowledge production and knowledge distribution was never the free, ‘objective’, and purely intellectual exchange rationalists make it out to be” (Feierabend, 1993, pp 126-127). Nonetheless, science ranks highly in advocacy because of its presumed credibility and independence. A good example is found in the way that our wealthiest environmental organization portrays itself: “In just over three decades, WWF has become the world’s largest and most respected independent conservation organization. [...] WWF provides high quality conservation services by using the best scientific information available, seeking dialogue to build bridges, and taking a responsible, long-term view. WWF aims at all times to be trustworthy, transparent, and solution oriented” (WWF, 1998).

Ephesians|4:13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:

Ephesians|4:14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

**Bible: King James Version.**

In a paper for the Journal of Professional Issues in Engineering, Bella writes: “Organizations tend to systematically distort information in self-serving ways. [...] Unchecked by outside influences or the undeniable realities of catastrophic failures, organizations can sustain self-serving distortions. The potential for catastrophic consequences is significant” (Bella, 1987). The Green Gold case study on Internet advocacy confirmed this for WWF.

Science and the Internet blend well through their common traits and potential for recording, traceability and public accessibility. Even if this potential seems obvious, we have not yet arrived at the phase of building of a scientific theory on how to mobilize the Internet as a tool for advocacy or the extraction of accountability. The scientific methods employed so far were largely those of observational science. Very few researchers have ventured into the realm of experimental science by providing input to the Internet and then observing the results. With Green Gold the potential of the Internet as a medium for experimental research was established.

## **The Internet**

Advocacy over the Internet is in its infancy. In an act of bold oversimplification, the Internet can be divided into e-mail and websites. Advocacy over the Internet today largely happens via e-mail. The restriction ‘today’ is given because few things are as volatile as developments in ICT technologies. In terms of advocacy, websites largely preach to the converted. The potential of e-mail as an advocacy tool was quickly understood. Football hooligans use it to organize and confirm the next battle with their adversaries and NGOs use it to exchange the latest information about alleged wrongdoings of trans national corporations on the other side of the globe. Websites and ftp-servers are more useful to provide a wide or restricted access to background information and complementary materials.

The Internet does not yet reach far beyond mid-level management, though this may be subject to rapid change. Due to computer illiteracy, senior management worldwide has not yet grasped the full potential of the Internet as an advocacy tool. Senior managers can well remain unaware that the balance of argument and counter-argument has already shifted within the organization when they decide to challenge the adversary. Failing the support of their constituency of mid-level managers, senior managers can unknowingly enter into battle with disorderly troops and then be forced to resort to unproductive, draconian and ultimately self-defeating measures in order to close ranks. In this not entirely hypothetical scenario, effective advocacy over the Internet works in an unobtrusive, almost subliminal way.

The printing press of the late Middle Ages was nothing short of revolutionary. Yet, the Internet does away with many of its limitations. The Internet can be used to reach out to a targeted,

Ephesians|3:18 May [yea] be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;

**Bible: King James Version.**

worldwide audience. Anyone who has reasonable typing skills and Internet access has the full functionality of a printing press, distribution chain, bookshop and delivery system at his fingertips. Delivery is fast and at negligible cost, irrespective of the number of recipients. Moreover, through digital fingerprinting all messages are recorded and verifiable.

We have not yet come to grips with this awesome, even frightening potential for transparency. However, the (USA's) National Security Agency, proprietor of a large part of the backbone of the Internet, has already installed an elaborate topic spotting and sniffing network to tap e-mail messages worldwide (NRC Handelsblad, May 2, 1999). As in the Middle Ages, innovative means of clampdown and spying are installed simultaneously with the novel communication and distribution channels. The Internet as a tool for advocacy thus offers a mixed blessing of total freedom and total control which is inherent in its nature.

### **The Green Gold case study**

Treemail funded a PhD study about the effects of Internet advocacy in the case of the WWF endorsed 'Teakwood' investment program. This program offered the Dutch public the opportunity of investing in a teak plantation in Costa Rica. Teakwood was advertised to produce extremely large returns and to be beneficial to the environment. The experimental research included broadcasting consecutive pronouncements from organizations related to the Teakwood program to forestry and environmental professionals worldwide.

This process was found to generate pressure on the organizations when their pronouncements became self-contradictory and demonstrably false. One example of a false pronouncement was that the projections for tree growth were based on scientifically sound data. In fact, they were found to be several times higher than anything ever published in the vast literature on teak. Another example of a false pronouncement was when WWF published that no agrochemicals were used at the plantation. In fact, such products, including Paraquat, were found to be used widely whereas no proper training or protective clothing were offered to the plantation workers. Within months of the release of the first e-mail circular, the multimillion Dollar Teakwood program was terminated.

The e-mail circulars took the verification of the Variations of Truth out of the confinement of the obscure back rooms of a USA based NGO, the Rainforest Alliance and the Forest Stewardship Council, or FSC. The FSC is a Mexican-based Asociación Civil that supposedly oversees forest certification bodies. The WWF sponsored FSC moved quickly to accept mockery of universal principles of law and justice. It approved a complaints procedure that the Rainforest Alliance secretly conducted without notifying those whom it had appointed as 'plaintiffs'. All the 'tricks of the trade' were played in masterly fashion by the Teakwood contract partners. Costa Rican Ministers were paraded at press conferences in The Netherlands. Dutch Ministers firmly endorsed the exposed growth projections in response to questions from the Parliament and provided additional funding

for FSC and WWF. Adversaries were subjected to threats and defamation. KPMG reports were waved and collages of supposedly scientific research were presented to the press. All this, to no avail. Much in keeping with Martin Luther's use of the printing press, the jury was already out with well over a thousand angry foresters.

The matter of forest management certification became an important issue at the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly Session in New York on June 25, 1997. That day, the World Bank and WWF announced a Global Alliance which aims to bring an additional 200 million hectares of the world's forests under independent certification by the year 2005. In a press release the two organizations announced that: "Independent certification verifies that forest management practices are environmentally, socially and economically sound and allows consumers to purchase products from well-managed forests" (World Bank, June 25, 1997; World Bank; 1999).

Green Gold sounds a word of caution to the World Bank's Global Alliance in view of a proven "readiness to lie to Government officials, including Ministers and judges, on the part of key-individuals to the promotion of the FSC" (Romeijn, 1999). Organizations involved in the Teakwood case readily waived their mission and vision. Key-players of forest certification exercised such elasticity in their Variations of Truth that words became meaningless. It was scientifically established that, under these conditions, the FSC system does not safeguard the application of the very FSC principles and criteria.

The swift termination of the Teakwood program is a parameter of successful advocacy and indicates that the Internet can trigger a marked influence on international policy. In addition, Green Gold research established that the Internet can be used as a novel tool to aid scientific and perhaps, even forensic research.

## **Lessons for the future**

If history does repeat itself in *similar*, yet not *identical* ways, we may well live see not just one, but thousands of Martin Luthers nailing their proclamations on our present day's equivalents of Church doors (Luther, 1517) and this by means of the Internet. As in the days of Martin Luther, we can brace ourselves for a 'communication shock' that has potential to wreak havoc with the prevailing centers of power and their constituencies.

The mechanisms that allow for an unprecedented freedom of expression and for executing the contemporary equivalent of a Mediaeval Inquisition were both built into the Internet. In fact, both rely on much the same toolkit. In a similar vein to what happened in the case of the printing press, it is within reason to expect that there will be fierce battles ahead, until the Internet gets burnt by the Inquisition. In some places, as you surely know, the battle has already begun.

For the time being, however, and if properly employed, the Internet provides a novel instrument to enhance professional ethics worldwide, and to extract accountability, even from organizations or individuals that may not naturally be so inclined. The Green Gold research proves that, and how the Internet helps to extract accountability across the globe. These are encouraging, scientific conclusions for working toward a civil society.

For a last and final word on advocacy, quoted from a plaque with a daily prayer:  
"Oh Lord let me keep my big mouth shut until I know what I am talking about."



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End note: in November 1999 OHRA offered a refund to all Teakwood investors.