

The Forward Eagle

Compiled Weekly

“Let us endeavor mutually to enlighten one another.”

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Essay

1.

In 1710 the British Parliament enacted the *Statute of Anne*, the west's first statutory copyright law. The statute defined rights for authors rather than just for printers.

President George Washington signed the first US copyright law in 1790. The name on the legislation was *An Act for the Encouragement of Learning*. It protected the authors of books and creators of maps and charts.

The Copyright Act of 1976 formed the foundational framework for today's US copyright law. It extended copyright duration to the life of an author plus 50 years, which later was extended to 70 years by the 1998 Sonny Bono Act. The 1976 law has been continuously amended over the decades to address digital media and new technologies.

Copyright protection begins the moment an original work is written or saved in a physical or digital format. The law gives creators the exclusive right to copy, share, or display their text. The lack of enforcement or a delayed lawsuit does not make an unauthorized copy legal; the owner has chosen not to enforce their rights.

Breaking copyright law is commonly a civil offense. The owner of the creative work must file suit in federal court against the person or business that used his or her original work without permission. If guilty, the defendant may owe the owner compensation for financial losses and may also receive a court order to stop the misuse.

The First Sale Exception to copyright allows the resale of a physical book bought and owned as an item of personal property. Under U.S. copyright law, it is legal to sell, trade, rent, or give away a physical copy without permission from the copyright owner. This law is the foundation for used bookstores, garage sales, and online resale platforms. Reselling used books is legal under the First Sale Doctrine.

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The Laurentian Library Reading Room in Florence, Italy, designed by Michelangelo in 1571, once housed a collection of over 11,000 manuscripts, 2,500 papyri, 566 incunabula and hundreds of early print volumes.

2.

In 1519 Michaelangelo began a plan for a reading room at the library of the San Lorenzo Monastery in Florence. The plan only really took off in 1523 when Cardinal Giulio de' Medici became Pope Clement VII. The library was part of his plan to glorify the Medici in a neighborhood of Florence dominated by the presence of the family.

Between 1524 and 1527, Michelangelo worked steadily on this well-documented library commission. Letters between Michelangelo and the pope cover everything from lighting, site selection, cost, structural issues, design of doors, tabernacles, reading desks, ceiling decoration, etc. The project moved quickly with the assistance of a large Florentine workshop of builders and craftsmen.

The construction specified easy-to-source local building materials, in contrast with other projects of Michelangelo's that required excavating Carrara marble. Political changes in the period 1527-34 brought the work to a halt, and Michaelangelo permanently moved to Rome. The library was completed under reign of the Medici Duke Cosimo I and opened in 1571.

The manuscripts, papyri, incunabula and hundreds of early hand-printed and bound books in the library had no known single author or copyright. For the most part an original author during the Renaissance was unknown and of little consequence to the scribes and pressmen, who were seen as the creators of the texts. The acts of copying and publishing were synonymous.

So valuable were these manuscripts themselves that chains were used to secure them to the rows of walnut reading benches in the room. Perhaps those chains provided an early form of protection of physical and intellectual property.

Even without copyright protection, the Cinquecento was no free-for-all. Property, of any sort, already belonged to a king, a prince or a priest.

3.

The idea that media and the information it holds belong to an author because it originated within that author's mind, or that such author is

in the employ of an entity that by agreement owns the author's "intellectual property," is, in the history of ideas, a novelty only some three centuries old.

Copyright law has always required a human author. Congress has shown little interest in revisiting this requirement. As a result of this century's large language models, and 1960s poststructuralist literary theory, the assumption of authorial authority has come under scrutiny; individual authors and institutions only attempt to apply author-based intellectual accountability to texts in which the creative act of authorship has become optional.

If it has not changed already, the politics of knowledge soon will not be as it once was. New media will generate new authors, free to be read and shared with others.

Copying books without permission has always been against the law. However, for decades now photocopy and digital machines have come with templates that copy two opposite book pages at a time and white out the gutter between the pages. Photocopying effectively replaced copyright in offices and copy shops. Jurisprudence and copyright owners not only winked, they closed the window shades.

Word of the Week

literary criticism

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The practice of analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, and studying works of literature.

Unlike a basic plot summary, it uses evidence to explore a text's themes, style, setting, and deeper meanings. The word "criticism" does not mean finding fault; it means a thoughtful evaluation of a piece or a body of work.

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