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Are They Stifling the Work of Martin Luther King Jr.?

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On the final day of the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery voting rights march, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered an impassioned speech from the steps of the Alabama state capitol. King's tone in that speech was decidedly more tough-minded than in his far more famous "I Have a Dream" oration two years earlier.

On Jan. 8, Intellectual Properties Management (IPM), the Atlanta-based firm that represents the family-controlled King estate, announced a multimillion-dollar deal with Time-Warner to produce and market various new renditions of King's speeches and writings. That very same day a Lexington, Ky., newspaper editor who likes to put one of King's lesser-known compositions in front of his readers on King's birthday decided that 1965 speech would be a fitting one for this January's observance. Years ago the speech had been published in an academic compendium of some of King's writings, but only IPM could approve putting King's words in front of Kentucky readers.

The editor then began a long and frustrating effort to obtain IPM's permission. Despite an express-delivery letter and phone calls, he could not get a timely answer; only at the last minute did his newspaper receive approval to reprint the speech.

That experience stands in sharp and revealing contrast to the well-publicized press agency of IPM chairman Phillip M. Jones and Time-Warner executive Laurence J. Kirshbaum. Jones and Kirshbaum insist that their plans will bring King's words to increased numbers and new generations of Americans, but at least in the present day, the commercially aggressive manner in which IPM has taken control of King's verbal legacy is resulting in reduced rather than enhanced presentation of King's message.

IPM and the King estate have undeniable rights to earn licensing and royalty income from King's writings. Presumably it was ineptitude, and not lack of ardor, that caused IPM to delay so long in approving the Kentucky newspaper's request. But it's also imperative for IPM and the King estate to acknowledge that many prospective users of King's words will be able to pay only the most modest of permission fees, far less than what IPM and the estate may aim to earn. Unless Jones and the King family make their interest in maximizing income secondary to the widest possible dissemination of King's words, IPM's assertive management may well prove deleterious to the real substance of King's legacy.

Aggressive commercialism starkly contradicts King's own utter disinterest in using his service to the civil rights movement to benefit himself financially. King's unselfish character was coupled

with a deep disinterest in the accumulation of material possessions, and while King never lived as ascetic a life as he oftentimes aspired to, the profit motive was never a part of his life.

The long-term dangers of IPM's stance are multiple. How will new students of King's life, especially young people, react to the meaning of a man whose year-2000 image may be heavily colorized -- or perhaps bleached -- by Time Warner's corporate image specialists?

Of all the major public figures of 20th century America, Martin Luther King Jr., stands virtually alone as a true "leader." He spoke out courageously on issue after issue -- race, poverty and Vietnam -- not because opinion polling indicated that his positions would enhance his popularity -- they almost always didn't -- but because he was following the dictates of his conscience. That's the Martin Luther King whom we justly celebrate each January, and the most politically challenging aspects of King's sometimes radical legacy should not be watered down out of material self-interest to present as popular as possible a Martin Luther King for the dawn of the 21st century.

There are additional dangers of censorial control and punishment. Consider the possibility of a scholar whose analyses of King -- or anything else -- anger or offend the King estate, as, for example, might occur if scholars expand their study of King's graduate school writings. Could permission to quote from King's materials be withheld, or the price made high enough to alone block publication?

A recent story in the New York Times highlighted how one of my fellow King biographers, Taylor Branch, who recently met with King Center chairman Dexter King, now "declined to expand" on his previous public criticisms of the estate's behavior. Branch may or may not have changed his views, but the leverage that IPM's stance gives the King estate over writers who specialize in King could well inhibit them from speaking out fully and frankly about their concerns regarding the King family, the King Center and the King estate.

IPM and Time Warner's publishing project promises to include items, such as a collection of some exceptionally important unpublished sermons, that everyone interested will celebrate and welcome. But IPM's handling of King's legacy ought to receive the most careful and thoughtful continuing scrutiny.

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