

Disappearing Ink

by Todd Maupin

In the early days, few people even noticed. At first, some thought that they were imagining things or had merely become forgettable. Then, as the instances became more widespread and no longer isolated to any one place, the phenomenon was confirmed. Our ink was disappearing. All of it.

Perhaps, some clarification is in order. This was not a matter of ink disappearing from stationery stores, or from the pens, inkwells, or whatever people have in or on their desks to satisfy their writing needs. Also, the octopi were not losing their ink. Probably not. No one had been brave or foolhardy enough to check. Signed checks were becoming blank checks. It was not even a matter of giving someone *carte blanche*. These became blank rectangular sheets of that paper stock that was used for checks. Now worth even less than the paper upon which they had been printed. Even those walls of shame at certain establishments that post patrons' bad checks became just a shameful wall of nothing flapping in the breeze. A blank warning against an unidentified menace.

Printed ink was not immune either. It vanished just as easily and often. That is to say, always. If none of this was immediately concerning to some, it caught the world's attention when the timeline for the ink's disappearance started to accelerate. What had initially taken weeks, became hours, then minutes, and finally seconds. A person could watch the ink disappear as the words were written, or as soon as a sheet emerged from the printer. Our letters, numbers, and figures were obliterated as though they were being tailgated by a merciless eraser.

"I don't write checks. So what?" You might say. "I don't use ink." Or "I use a pencil, to make shopping lists or to draw my architectural sketches." Good luck if you still wanted printed receipts from stores.

Those also disappointed. Spools gold, to mine an old concept. Architects were likely also perturbed and even the pencil pushers were alarmed by the next chilling stage of our shared nightmare.

It was the night guard at the British Museum on his final rounds who first noticed a blank document where the Magna Carta should have been. Not long after, probably 4 or 5 hours later, to coincide with the time difference, the National Archives Museum in DC now found itself curating a display case in the Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom containing three old blank parchments. It was only thanks to the discoverer's hearty constitution that she did not faint or fall ill. Had history played out differently, without Revolutionary developments, she may have lost her English breakfast.

The dominos continued to topple. Attempts were made to safeguard the remaining documents by placing them in vaults, safes, vacuum sealed packages, or even Ziplock bags. None of these strategies slowed the cruel and unforgiving process. The ink eventually disappeared. The effect was staggered, and seemed to happen in shifts, but no documents escaped the inevitable fate. It was bound to happen to everything, and it did. We could see the writing on the wall. That is, until we could no longer see any writing at all.

Soon enough, all of the words had vanished. Worldwide, Roman alphabets and numerals, Cyrillic, Sanskrit, Hanzi, Kanji, Devanagari, and whatever they call those curly letters used in the Czech Republic. You name it, all of the ink upon which the world had been built and designed had vanished.

Even the optimists had sunk their heads. They could only point to the unmasking of fake cave paintings as the only positive development that had resulted from the catastrophe. The charlatan in Spain would have been asked to refund millions of euros to those he had swindled but the blank bills were of little use to anyone now. Thus, he was only imprisoned. And as they had with all other

suspects in recent weeks, the booking officers at the precinct had not even bothered to take his fingerprints.

Experts in all of the relevant fields of study were baffled. Even those in the irrelevant fields had no answer. The largest producer of novelty items offered his assistance, sharing the formula for his disappearing ink that had been sold for decades. While it was appreciated and admittedly had even offered a glimmer of hope, this gesture did not lead to any new revelations. Before risking a further dampening of their spirits, the leading scientists stopped the jovial fellow from activating the conspicuous flower on his lapel. They shook his hand and sent him on his way. Once they had recovered from the surprise of the joy buzzer he had been palming, they regrouped. However, they were no less shocked than before by what had befallen the world.

The experts returned to the well, which was out of ideas and ostensibly out of ink. The time to wallow and sulk was short-lived. Just when everyone thought it could not be worse, it became worse.

Blaming the lawyers for everything would have been a trite and tidy assignment of culpability. And yet, even if the next stage of our nightmare was not the fault of our lawyers, they did indeed cast the first stone. We didn't start the fire. It was always burning, since the world's been turning. Leave no stone tablet unturned.

It probably originated with some simple dispute, some innocuous and meaningless conflict. No one knew for sure. This information was probably protected by attorney-client privilege. In any case, in ever more cases, in a wave of litigiousness, the world's established legality began to unravel. Without ink, agreements, contracts, leases, settlements, all of our cherished fine print, the very rules and fabric of our bureaucratic existence no longer had a tangible and legible basis upon which to be honored.

Suddenly, all of the people who had ignored every user agreement included with every product or service they had ever acquired now wanted written documentation for every rule or law holding our societies and civilizations together. All the while, scientists were still unable to get to the bottom of the disappearing ink phenomenon. We were at a new low, and then the bottom dropped out again.

Remember all of those treaties, pacts and armistices that followed the ends to all of the great and not so great wars? Have you read them? Apparently, nor had anyone else in recent memory. The Geneva Convention may as well have been a dairy expo in Wisconsin. Schengen held as much weight as Schenck v. United States, or the bygone by laws of Schenectady, New York. Anarchy in the UK had not been trendy in decades, but now anarchy was trending again. In UK, Louisville, the rest of Kentucky, and all over the world.

There were reports and rumblings of troops being mobilized, armies fortified, and weapons stockpiled. Fixed national borders started to seem more fluid and circumstantial. Pacifists and power mongers alike admired with envy the green on the other side of the fence. Israel, Palestine, India, Pakistan, they had been living this scenario for years. The leaders of these states just shrugged, but their projected nonchalance clearly bordered on unease and apprehension.

Lines were drawn in the sand. This briefly led to the realization that more could be written with sand and water than mere messages of help and SOS. The utility of this writing style was quickly discovered to be impractical; castles in the sky were once again castles in the sand. And the sand in the hourglass continued to trickle and bring us closer to conflict all around the globe.

“War” would have been the word dominating the headlines on the all of newspapers, but we could not even have those publications

anymore. Governments, parliaments, even dictatorships and tyrants called urgent meetings but these dispersed and disbanded without a vote. Upon what would they have voted and how could there have even been a record of it? Naturally, there was always some naysayer among the nays or even the yeas who had suggested these decisions could have been recorded electronically.

Massive amounts of ink had been spilt in analyses as to why it was a horrible idea to believe everything or most things that appeared on the internet or social media without a valid source. Even though that ink was also gone, thankfully the memories of that dry truth had still been fresh in our minds. Thus, we plodded on, unable to ink new legislation, only able to sink into degradation.

We were at an impasse, at best, or a precipice, at worst. Even these were interchangeable, depending on whom you asked. The world awaited its fate. Indecision was the only deciding factor. This was when the ink started to return.

The initial instances were dismissed as hoaxes. The first ink sightings were discounted with the same disbelief as the Virgin Mary on toast or a Virgin Atlantic flight arriving on time. As the word of mouth became more prevalent and more powerful, it was impossible to reject the claims. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who had seen restored ink. And then, in just a matter of weeks, everyone had glimpsed first hand that the ink was indeed returning.

This was shaping up to be a happy ending and one that we could again document. Of course, it was not to be that simple. It never is. The ink was not reappearing to the exact pages, spots, or locations where it had gone missing. One of the early cruel ironies was that a "have you seen me?" plea from a milk carton that had instead resurfaced on a pamphlet advising of the dangers of glaucoma.

Globally, once again, the crisis was rampant. The ink was returning haphazardly. People in Montana, Montenegro, and Monclova, Ohio, gasped at the Mongolian text suddenly dominating libraries and the local newsstands. Meanwhile, monotonous monochrome materials at a Montessori school in Monterey became very Jamaican... Mon. Very rarely, some of the ink actually found its way back to where it had originated before it had disappeared. However, experts suspected that these were merely happy accidents and happenstance.

A short-sighted politician issued a statement to remind everyone that we were fortunate to at least have the ink returning our messages whole, in the left to right direction that all text flowed. Someone must have reminded hm that only a fraction of global languages followed that rule. The tweet which had been resplendent in all caps was deleted overnight. The politician, while incorrect, had his heart in the right place, but was destined to be left out of the history books, if these would ever be written again.

In much of the Western world, it seemed that only a precious few had noticed that the ink's return had been misplaced. Eyes glued to their devices, the masses only read blurbs about the latest developments while they scrolled through their newsfeeds.

You may be wondering about the fate of tattoos in all of this. Their ink was subject to the same phenomenon as all other documents and publications. The tattooed among us had our ink restored as well. Not exactly our ink, but some ink, to give you an idea or an inkling. This is another story, or at least another chapter in another book. In fact, some of the tattoos became just that.

Roughly a month after the ink had started to reappear, it was believed that all of it had returned. However, the disarray was devastating. It was as if the entire world had attended the same party and all of our coats were left haphazardly on the bed in the spare bedroom. Thanks to the fickle returning ink, even mixed

metaphors were halfway across the world from where they were originally intended to be. Sorting out this chaos was projected to take decades, if not hundreds of years.

Nations, factions, allies, enemies, rivals, comrades. The level of international commitment required was unprecedented. Any level of success would have required greater fervor, determination, and collaboration than even the Human Genome Project had enjoyed. Incidentally, no one knew where the ink on those original documents had ended up. This endeavor of course would have to take place on a much more massive scale, but was it even within our DNA to succeed?

A saving grace on the margins, and within the margins, was that new messages were again able to be printed or written. Ink was again cooperating and behaving. All according to the laws of physics that had been documented long ago but were still misplaced. However, the world was cautious about putting too much faith in ink going forward. Or backward, depending on one's writing style or perspective. Why invest the time in writing something that might only disappear? Even the publishers of sudoku books felt puzzled about the risk involved.

The global initiative to restore all of the ink brought about an international level of camaraderie and an era of genuine good feeling that endured for what felt like 6 or 7 minutes. The unfortunate aspect about messages or statements that are created with ink is that these are often intended for a very limited audience. Imagine if the world were a high school and the private diaries and journals of everyone were suddenly available for perusing. There was barely a grace period of conjecture and speculation before the mutually assured ire and fury took over, globally. Kumbaya.

As had happened in the past, a situation affecting and plaguing all of the world's population failed to create more solidarity or harmony.

Instead, the world experienced greater isolation, bickering and hostility. Even climate change discussions became more heated, and not only ironically. The cupboard was bare of its worst kept secrets and the level of mistrust had never been higher. The animosity and competition that had always been obscured and rendered opaque by diplomacy had no further hindrances. This would have meant a sort of jaded liberation if only we could have become united in this, another common affliction. Of course, we could not.

Where are we now? As I write this, the effort to sort out the returned ink and documents has continued feebly for years. Statisticians who have projected how far we have come have been admonished for the brutal honesty of their assessments. And no one nation trusts any other to turn over the documents that had fallen into their possession when the ink returned. Some experts believe that essentially there has been no progress at all. Globally, it is a mess. We are a mess. Barely holding us together are the Olympic competitions for gold medals but everyone has forgotten the golden rule.

Perhaps, by the time you read this, there will have been progress. Or maybe the ink will have disappeared and reappeared again, sending the world into another jumbled spiral. I can only hope that has not happened again. It is quite possible that you are reading this story in bewilderment, wondering why it is contained within the installation instructions of the ceiling fan you wanted to mount as a weekend project. In such a case, you would have my sincere apologies. Be sure to turn off the power at the circuit panel before you begin. Hopefully, someone used a pencil to identify the circuits on the panel.

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