Pelikan's Antidisambiguation-The Undying Tweet

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B
tack in the 1990s I had among my re-
sponsibilities that of administering the
tiny student computer lab at a small
post-secondary institution in the distant Pa-
cific Northwest. That facility hosted around a
dozen first, second, and third-generation Apple Macintosh computers (from the so-called “Fat
Mac,” sporting 512 kilobytes of RAM, up
and including the so-called Mac Classics
equipped with, what, two megabytes of RAM?
Something like that…). Together, they shared
access to a first-generation Apple laser printer,
with which they connected via Apple’s pro-
prietary AppleTalk local area network. The
lab did not connect to the institution’s early
administrative computing resources of that day
(an IBM AS400, if I recall correctly). It was
truly a closed, stand-alone system.

This was long before we had widespread
external network connectivity outside of an
institutional local area network. The Internet
was still a ways off. I possessed a BITNet ID
at the time (“Because It’s Time Net” you
can google it…), permitting me access to such
services as email. One had to apply for such an
ID, citing work or research-related justification.

The lab was like a remote island of comput-
ing capability, its own little world of networked
systems, requiring neither ID nor password.
Students were encouraged to bring along a
floppy disk to ensure access to their work,
but many simply left folders on the machines’
small hard-disk drives — twenty or thirty
megabyte drives, if memory serves…

In effect, the lab became a Petri Dish
of sorts, hosting in microcosm many of the
phenomena, social and anti-social, that have
come familiar in our post-innocent com-
puting age.

The sweeter, less world-worn of our stu-
dents saw the lab as the embodiment of an
ideal: a shared communal asset that good
people could use to do good and to be good.

The more cynical among the student body
saw the tiny network as a ripe target for op-
portunistic chicanery, mischief, and downright
dishonesty. The nasty ones would pifer the
work of others, innocently and trustingly left
behind. They would change date and time
stamps in attempt to falsify the creation date
of files (with the intent to engage in acts of
abridgement to the construction of sentences or
paragraphs? Anecdotally, a few said they had
the impression that students were beginning to
construct their ideas in shorter portions, as if
by 342 pixel screen. None of us could prove
it, or were inclined to dig deeper, but the idea
remained. As surely as a piccolo differed from
a flute, or a violin from a cello, perhaps the
limitations of scale possessed by a tool could
manifest themselves in the content created
with that tool.

So even now, or perhaps especially now,
these ideas return to me. The conscious adop-
tion of a limitation for purposes of self-disci-
pline or self-constraint can serve as a vehicle
for creative rigor. Surely, those who impose
upon themselves the constraints of sonnet con-
struction, or of haiku, for example, do so for
the benefits to accrue from such self-imposed
restraints. It is a kind of Lenten discipline.

On the other hand, those less reflective may
permit their forms of expression to devolve to
fit the limitations of a medium without giving
it much thought.

Witness the evolution of personal expres-
sion, from the handwritten let-
ter to the email to the Tweet.

In handwritten penman-
ship, one must compose one’s thoughts prior
to touching nib to vellum. There is no erasing here,
no destructive backspace. What is written
remains written, so one must choose one’s
words carefully.

Fast-forward, then, to the way of writing
many of us began with — the yellow legal pad
in pencil for creation and editing, with circles
and arrows, followed by the careful transcrip-
tion to typewritten text for final presentation.
One learned, through bitter experience, not to
attempt revision during the production of that
final presentation copy: just stick to the text!

Then onto the scene come word proc-
sessors — omigosh! Delete and backspace!
Copy and paste! Undo and Redo! Just start
writing and let it just happen! Composition
gives way to improvisation! I’m free! We
can fix it in post! Never mind that those
undo capabilities result in the accumulation of
discarded text, embedded, hidden, but legally
discoverable, in the word processing file. So,
if you begin the letter, “My dear distinguished
idiot,” think better of it, and change it to “My
dear distinguished colleague,” your original
text remains hidden in the file, waiting to be
subpoenaed. Gotcha!

My guess: in the not-too-distant future,
Scholars will comb through the Word files of
to those of us who write today, to recreate
the creative process our writing went through, by
examining, keystroke by keystroke, that which
we banged out, backspaced over, cut, paste,
and deleted in the throes of our compositional
efforts.

From there it’s just a short plummet to the
eemail, dashed off in far too much of a hurry,
telling that so-and-so what you really think of
him! Hah! That’ll show him!

Ah, but — once again, all those servers, all
those hand-offs, machine to machine, network
to network, the traces of our words become
more and more indelible, and further and fur-
ther from reach of our own direct control. All
discoverable. All subject to subpoena.

It is precisely because we are often unref-
lective about the nature of the impact of our
technology upon our expression that those who
are most unreflective are the most vulnerable.
Give an impulsive person a Twitter account
access to a cellular telephone, then sit
back and watch the fun! A gift that keeps on
giving! And all indelible, undying, everlasting,
retranslatable, as the ripples of one’s impulsive
definitely spread out like the rings from a fully
packed tackle box, hurled in furious anger from
the back of a fishing boat, disturbing the placid
surface of a quiet lake.

Oh yeah. Let’s put more such devices into
the hands of the incalculous. Let’s enable those
who spout off in anger to produce the petards
of their own hoisting, as it were, and release their
frothy venom into the lush, fertile medium of
the tweeting.

Those whom the gods would destroy they
first give Twitter accounts.