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# Pelikan's Antidisambiguation-The Undying Tweet

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# Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — The Undying Tweet

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**B**ack in the 1990s I had among my responsibilities that of administering the tiny student computer lab at a small post-secondary institution in the distant Pacific Northwest. That facility hosted around a dozen first, second, and third-generation Apple Macintosh computers (from the so-called “Fat Macs,” sporting 512 kilobytes of RAM, up to 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 proprietary 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 computing 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 become familiar in our post-innocent computing age.

The sweeter, less world-worn of our students 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 opportunistic chicanery, mischief, and downright dishonesty. The nasty ones would pilfer 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 academic non-integrity). They would install non-authorized software, notably games, on the systems. I remember a breakout of network-enabled peer-to-peer card games like poker and blackjack, as well as space battle games. These would tie up systems and overwhelm the tiny network as these jokers cavorted whilst sincere students tried to get real work done. The peer-to-peer aspect extended to chat and file sharing as well, almost invariably involving content of the sort now known as NSFW (Not Safe For Work).



Sigh. It was a royal pain to administer, but truly, it was a lab, and we all learned much from coping with the emergence and evolution of all this nonsense.

I mention all of this because I want you to recall your early exposure to such things. If you were not around for these things, I want you to be able to project yourself into such an environment. If you were around, I want you to recall the time when all of this was new.

I remember noticing at some point that the limited screen size of those early Macs might be having an effect on the way students were writing. The screens were small enough that in order to display a font at a useful size, you have to limit the number of lines of text available on the screen. These were graphics-based screens, of course, meaning that they possessed the futuristic capability of displaying fonts realistically. Truly revolutionary, this gave birth to the phrase WYSIWYG, and permitted students to change typefaces, for better or worse, as frequently within a document, or a line, or a word, as they desired.

Somewhere around this time, in response to a question from a student, “Why are they called word processors?” I replied, “For the same reason they are called food processors!”

More to the point, I began to wonder if the limited screen real estate was having an impact on the way ideas were encoded. I began to ask around of the professors: had they noticed an 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 loath to permit an idea to scroll off the tiny 512 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 adoption of a limitation for purposes of self-discipline or self-constraint can serve as a vehicle for creative rigor. Surely, those who impose upon themselves the constraints of sonnet construction, 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 expression, from the handwritten letter to the email to the Tweet.

In handwritten penmanship, 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 transcription 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 processors — 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 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 email, 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 further from reach of our own direct control. All discoverable. All subject to subpoena.

It is precisely because we are often unreflective 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 accessible from a cellular telephone, then sit back and watch the fun! A gift that keeps on giving! And all indelible, undying, everlasting, retweetable, as the ripples of one’s impulsive folly 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 incautious. 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 tweetsphere.

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