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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation-The Undying Tweet

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Back 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 in its infancy. 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 pifer the work of others, innocent 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 dishonesty. The nasty ones would pilfer the opportunistic chicanery, mischief, and downright dishonesty. The nasty ones would pilfer the opportunistic chicanery, mischief, and downright dishonesty. The nasty ones would pilfer...)

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 abridgment to the construction of sentences or paragraphs? Anecdotally, a few said they had the impression that students were beginning to struct their ideas in shorter portions, as if 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 construct their ideas in shorter portions, as if they 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. Give an impulsive person a Twitter account 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. 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.

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 tweetosphere.

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