Poe in Cyberspace: Taming the Wild Wild Web

Heyward Ehrlich, Rutgers University-Newark

WilliamGibson remembered first writing the word *cyberspace* “in red Sharpie on a yellow legal pad.” After using it in the story “Burning Chrome” (1982), as Gibson famously explained in *Neuromancer* (1984), *cyberspace* was “a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system” that was located in “the nonspace of the mind.” Eventually *cyberspace* became a common metonymy for the Internet, for the online world, and, later, for Cloud Computing. Two decades ago, J. Gerald Kennedy in *A* *Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe* (2001) described Poe’s anticipation of contemporary cyberspace in creating some characters as “alienated figures: ensconced in remote, indefinite settings, absorbed in private fantasies or obsessions --the nineteenth-century equivalent of cyberspace.” Similarly, a reviewer of Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (1999) described “The Power of Words,” Poe’s dialogue, as belonging to the period when “the information highway first blazed across cyberspace . . . [and] one of the earliest travelers on that road was Edgar Allan Poe” (*Chronicle of Higher Education,* 14May 1999)

For Whalen, Poe was influenced in his dialogue, “The Power of Words,” by computer forerunner Charles Babbage: “For both Poe and Babbage . . . the universe is a vast material archive that contains a permanent record of all that has been said and done since the beginning of time” (259). In the *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837), Babbage had described how such vibrations were retained in the atmosphere: “The air is one vast library, on whose pages are forever written all that man has ever said, or woman whispered” (66).

Poe‘s Agathos in “The Power of Words“ claimed that the vibrations left by thought, speech or motion could be decoded by the mathematically astute by “tracing every impulse given the air — and the ether through the air — to the remotest consequences at any even infinitely remote epoch of time.” Poe also claimed here that “the acquisition of knowledge” was the source of the highest happiness. Acknowledging that only the Deity could connect to ‘*all* epochs, *all* effects, to *all* causes,” Poe merged cosmology and aesthetics in his memorable pronouncement: “The universe is a plot of God.”

For us, an important step towards the integration of universal knowledge in our modern computer age was Tim Berners-Lee’s formulation in 1990 of HTML, the markup language that first enabled scientists to communicate online between hitherto incompatible platforms and to connect data and documentation through a system of hypertext links. However, as the lingua franca of the Internet, HTM required skilled programmers to create the sites that unified the World Wide Web. By 2004 the rapid development of interactive sites in what was called Web 2.0 empowered the majority of users without coding skills, thereby supporting on social networks the informal exchange online of comments, photos, and videos, or anything else, that was ordinarily shared among families, friends, and acquaintances. In its first decade several social networks sprang up: Six Degrees (1997), Friendster (2002), Linkedin (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Reddit (2005), and Twitter (2006), followed by Snapchat (2011), Instagram (2014), and TikTok (2018).

Among these social networks, Facebook was the most successful; by 2012 it had reached one billionusers globally, 600 million of them on mobile devices, having uploaded 219 billionphotos and forming 140 billionfriend connections. A Zephoria.com survey in June 2020 credited Facebook with 48,269 employees, 2.6 billion active users (exceeded in popularity only by Google and YouTube), and more than 10 million groups, its revenue in the first quarter of 2020 reaching $17.4 billion.

Unfortunately, the road to universal knowledge sometimes paved over older paths of traditional privacy. For example, Google, which early attained unrivalled trust and reach by making information universally available under the goal of “Don’t be evil,” eventually monetized its early procedures and abandoned its altruistic motto. The original page rank system, on which the success of Google was based, was replaced by a scheme that gave display precedence to paid ads. In addition, as Google began gathering and selling user information so that, as some cynics remarked, the first thing that Google searches is you. In response to renewed public interest in online discretion, *Wired* magazine in June 2020 published a list of privacy-respecting search engines, alphabetically Brave, DuckDuckGo, Edge, Firefox, Ghostery, Safari, and Tor, each with different PC/Mac and laptop/phone capabilities.

In another area, Amazon intruded on privacy by suggested to consumers the titles of books that they might purchase, based on the “also bought” lists of other buyers. The commercial practice was mildly annoying but also occasionally useful. However, a weightier and more distressing use of personal data was its use by social networks for political targeting and influencing voting.

In 2018 the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that Facebook had harvested an extensive quantity of personal data on users and friends that supposedly had been collected for academic purposes, selling it to American politicians for partisan purposes. Worse than this, the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) made systematic attempts to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. According to one Facebook spokesman, the Russian IRA spent $100,000 in the 2016 campaign to sow national conflict and to support favored candidates, placing 3,000 ads and creating 470 false accounts. Such figures vary. According to a University of Oxford Computational Propaganda Research study, the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) placed 57,000 posts on Twitter, 2,400 posts on Facebook, and 2,600 posts on Instagram in the 2016 U.S. elections. In 2017, the U.S. House Intelligence Committee Minority reported that in the 2016 U.S. presidential election the Russian IRA placed 3,393 advertisements and 470 pages on Facebook, containing 80,000 pieces and reaching 126 million users and created 36,000 linked bot accounts on Twitter, disseminating 288 million impressions.

All this was possible because online publishers enjoyed legal exemptions that were not shared by print publishers. Intended as an incentive to protect free speech, Section230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) of 1996 exempted internet sites from liability for presenting information that originated elsewhere –a protection without parallel for print publishers.

The extreme applications of the principle of protected first amendment free speech raised serious concerns. Critics complained that the classic defense, summarized by the statement usually attributed to Voltaire, “I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,” had been wantonly applied. Some social networks were accused of creating or disseminating fake accounts, hate speech, extreme racism, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and doctored photographs and videos -- images that seemed beyond the traditional boundares of verbal free speech.

What was worse, in the pursuit of higher ratings some social networks in reporting on violence might seem to be condoning it. The shooter of the March 2019 mosque attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, staged the event to be live-streamed on Facebook, which carried it for 29 minutes, eight minutes longer than it took the police to arrest the gunman.

Can the Wild Wild Web be tamed of such excesses? To complicate matters, several unexpected developments in the first half of 2020 moved the Internet into uncharted waters. The Covid-19 pandemic also affected employment, education, and entertainment as well as perhaps vitalizing the Black Lives Matter movement. In June 2020, complaining that Facebook had not done enough in response to charges that it was presenting fake news, conspiracy theories, and hate speech, a consortium of about a thousand advertisers boycotted the placement of advertisements there and supported the #Stop Hate for Profit campaign.

As the presidential political campaign warmed up in Summer 2020, Facebook defended itself by labelling voting-oriented postings, directing users to the votinginfoproject.org site that had been created by state and local officials in cooperation with The Pew Charitable Trust and Google. Under the headline “How Facebook is preparing for the US 2020 election,” on July 10, 2020, Facebook placed the first of several full page ads in the *New York Times.* It promised to triple its security force to 35,000 people (Joan Donovan of the Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center thought 100,000 content monitors would be needed). It also made this claim: “Removed billions of fake accounts.” This was mathematically odd since Facebook only had about 2.6 total billion accounts and had previously claimed to have removed three billion fake accounts. A wave of fakery also hit Twitter: in the summer of 2020, the accounts of dozens of well-known public figures were hacked in a blatant Bitcoin scheme.

To their credit, some social networks took tangible action on their own to tame Web excesses. At the deadline of this column Reddit had banned all forms of extreme or hate speech, removing both the right-wing r/The\_Donald and the left-wing r/Chapo Trap House offering and offering the nw group r/againsthatesubredits. For their part, Twitch suspended President Trump for “hateful conduct” and YouTube purged white supremacy content. When Twitter flagged two of President Trump’s tweets on mail-in ballots as “potentially misleading,” the president replied by threatening a request of legal clarification of the protections offered to social networks by Article 230 of Communications Decency Act. Although the F.T.C. had imposed a $5 billion settlement for a consent decree violation against Facebook in 2019, its anti-trust investigations were continuing against Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. At the deadline of this column, a variety of contentious issues were expected to continue and even intensify as the U.S. presidential election approached in the second half of 2020.

Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg was known for his defense of controversial content by the principles of free speech and newsworthiness, but he is not known to have been aware of the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Nevertheless, a Website devoted to the psychological analysis of public figures fof some reason decided to compare and contrasted Zuckerberg and Poe in matters of personality (search for “crystalknows Poe Zuckerberg”), perhaps the most curious connection yet of Poe and cyberspace. .

In any event, our current Covid-19 pandemic in some ways echoes famous historical plagues. Probably the cholera outbreaks in Philadelphia and New York in 1832 suggested to Poe he material for his tale, “The Mask of the Red Death: A Fantasy.” When first published in *Graham’s* in May1842 the title was word *mask,* a face covering, but it later became *masque,* a masked ball. Poe records tale records several traditional defenses against plague, masks, quarantine, and social distancing. The cause of such epidemics, Poe’s contemporaries believed, was miasma, which was foul air or night air. In the tale the costumed representation of the Red Death (perhaps named a variation on the Black Death of the 14th century), having somehow gained entry to the fortified abbey, appears, significantly, as the clock strikes midnight. Prince Prospero’s valiantly attacks it with a dagger, but as he does, he comes within the proscribed social distance of three feet and dies instantly.

Today we are again aware of miasma or foul air in the breath, cough, or sneeze of a Covid-19 infected person who comes too near us. In “The Power of Words” air, or the atmosphere, is the repository of the vibrations of all past utterances (the Akashic records of the theosophists). Air, of course, is not only the medium of radio and television but also the medium of WiFi, GPS, and Bluetooth in our broadband. Recently Cloud Computing seemed to be a promising repository of universal knowledge, making a tangible manifestation in cyberspace of Poe’s notion of universal knowledge. Unfortunately, the excesses of the Wild Wild Web may also threaten cyberspace with exposure to the opposite, a miasma of toxic air.

*“Poe in Cyberspace” columns are available online at eapoe.info.*

HEYWARD EHRLICH is Emeritus Professor of English, Rutgers University–Newark. His “Poe Webliography” was first published in *Poe Studies* in 1999 and is updated online. His edition of Poe’s notices and reviews in Philadelphia magazines is in preparation for the *Collected Writings*.