Poe in Cyberspace: When *pokerishness* went viral

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While reading a parody of “The Raven” on April 18, 1846, Abraham Lincoln enjoyed “several hearty laughs.” The excited reading public devoured fifteen parodies of the poem and “innumerable” reprints, as tallied by F. O. Mabbott. Exploiting this unprecedented attention, Poe claimed he had planned it all, writing to F.W. Thomas on May 4, 1845, “’The Raven’ has had a great run . . . but I wrote it for the express purpose of running . . . . “ Today, the digital equivalent of running occurs when an item goes viral on the social networks, explosively reaching thousands if not millions of users. The phenomenon is not entirely natural: the social networks themselves develop and refine proprietary algorithms to select and promote the candidates to achieve the maximum coverage.

Poe’s friend N. P. Willis promoted “The Raven” by printing it in the *Evening Mirror* of January 29, 1845, a few days before its official publication. In his introduction, Willis praised Poe for “imaginative lift and ‘pokerishness.’”The quotes around “pokerishness” made sure that readers not accustomed to reading literature carefully would get the pun. The word *pokerish,* denoting an uncanny or spooky quality, was already an adjective based on a noun, but by adding the suffix *ness*, Willis converted that adjective into an abstract noun, flavoring the poem with his verbal wit and wordplay.

Poe of course had an entirely different view, arguing in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “The Raven” achieved the sentimental final effect of “mournful and never-ending remembrance.” Although achieving great popularity in its contemporary reprints and parodies, the poem left a group of highly respected readers with deep reservations, their number including Henry James, W.B. Yeats, T. S, Eliot, and Harold Bloom. For such readers Poe had not achieved his stated dual goal, of creating a poem “that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.”

The priority for Poe, as he asserted in the case of “Berenice,” was to be “sought after with avidity,” which was more important than conforming to accepted standards of taste. In a letter of April 30, 1835, he enumerated the ways in which overemphasis was necessary: “In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical.” Although the relevance of this doctrine to “The Raven” could be debated, the problem remained of the skewed audience for the poem. Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman suggested the possibility that “The Raven” had great appeal precisely because it was “a poem for people who don’t like poetry” (239).

The remark is relevant for us in the increasingly quarrelsome Internet, as it diverges more and more from the restrained standards of the age of print. In recent months, for example. the Internet has been charged with containing large quantities of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and even lies. Perhaps the excesses of the Internet reflect its appeal to a portion of the public impatient with the slow pace and compromising restraints of traditional politics. In other words, perhaps the Internet offers a replacement for politics for people who don’t like ordinary politics.

In any event, the Word Wide Web was quite different when it first appeared: its content was relatively static, and its audiences were relatively small. After 2004, Internet 2.0, as it was called, introduced dynamic presentations, active user-responses, and social sharing of texts, images, and videos. Perceiving new opportunities, advertisers jumped in with screen-covering banners and other strong graphics, but after viewers were repelled by them as intrusive, a more subtle strategy was developed to deliver a new kind of advertising, targeted to each viewer through the unobtrusive but relentless collection, analysis, sale, and application of massive quantities of user behavior data.

For nearly a century the media had become more and more important in politics, examples being FDR’s Fireside Chats on radio, the elegance of JFK on television, the film star Reagan’s effective image, George Bush playing the war hero aboard an aircraft carrier, Obama’s experimental tone, and the relentless pursuit of ratings by the former realtor and reality-TV host, Donald Trump. From 2015, when he began campaigning, to 2011, when he left office, Trump transformed the media into primary element in the executive branch of government, issuing an estimated 34,000 tweets that had the status of official statements. The unexpected new power of the Internet was not lost on the Russians, who promoted surreptitious efforts in 2016 to suppress votes in selected states. As national attention turned to the possibility of similar interference in the 2020 campaign, the Russians surprised everyone by instead hacking American security software and its tools. By October 2019 they had breached SolarWinds, a security service for Fortune 500 companies and the U. S. Commerce, Treasury, State, and Energy departments, thus affecting an estimated 18,000 corporate and institutional users. Two other security software service tools, FireEye and Crowdstrike, were also hacked. What emerged was the beginning of a possible new cold war in cyberspace, dangerous as a place that was neither protected nor regulated. Thomas L. Friedman warned in a *New York Times* lead editorial of the new dangers in “a realm called ‘cyberspace’ -- where we’re all connected but no one is in charge . . . . and social media become[s] a threat to democracy.”

It is important to keep in mind that it was perfectly legal to circulate material on the Internet in the United States that could not appear in print. According to Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1995, the social networks had no legal or editorial responsibility for what they transmitted, exempting them from legal recourse even if they disseminated misinformation, conspiracy theories, and lies. During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic Trump’s medical assurances were intensely controversial, exceeded in late 2020 by his denial of the presidential election results, his supporters taking up the slogan “Stop the Steal.” Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets found themselves torn between supporting the principle of absolute free speech, which led to maximum audience size and the most income (as long as there was no further government regulation) and a sense of responsibility for the public culture they were dispensing.

After the Internet played a key role in the planning and execution of the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021, the social media finally asserted themselves. Facebook suspended and then banned Trump and certain supporters. Twitter suspended Trump adviser Michael Flynn, 70,000 QAnon-related accounts, and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R, Ga). Moreover, Google, Reddit, YouTube, and Snapshot enforced similar sanctions. The overall result, according to Zignal Labs, was a 73% decline in election misinformation.

As Trump’s term of office ended, his supporters, deprived of access to their former Internet outlets, turned to other sites, especially those promising a degree of privacy. Many moved to Telegram, which provided encryption; Signal, a competitor of What’s App; Parler, a favorite of the Proud Boys (Amazon Web Service removed support of them); Oath Keepers, a far-right paramilitary outfit; QAnon, a focus for conspiracy theories (some of whose users switched to Twitch); Three Percenters, named for the supposed small percentage of participants in the American Revolutionary War; Rumble, a video sharing app; Gab, a far right social network; and DLive, a live stream service with blockchain security. Apparently hastily deleted, many controversial posts were recovered by researchers who recovered them on the Internet Archive.

Incidentally, during the invasion of the Capitol, some protestors used chat and live-streamed video media, motives for staging the event. Tim Gionet reportedly chatted live with 16,000 fans on Dlive, where streaming could attract donations as large as $10,000 and even $20,000 a month, the press reporting some streamers earned six figures a year. Additional streaming reportedly took place on Woozuh, Gloomtube, Louiz, and Murder the Media.

In the aftermath of January 6, some private lawsuits were initiated by victims of the riot against its organizers and adherents. Government anti-trust actions loomed as more likely to be taken against the main social networks. To burnish its image, Facebook had created an Oversight Committee and now ran full page advertisements in influential newspapers. In the course of their investigation of s smartphone usage in the January 6 incident, prosecutors discovered that location data could be used to trace the movements of some individuals from home to rallies and then to the invasion of the Capitol. Few people are probably aware when they sign location agreements with cellphone app providers of the uses to which this data could be applied. Investigation began to reveal the extent of trafficking in cellphone usage data through mobile advertising identifiers, as they are called: Cuebig provided location data on consumers; Hivestack checked ad revenue expenditures; Mogean tracked consumer GPS ids; Ubimo provided location information for marketers; LBRY was a protocol to build apps; and Arweave, developed a storage service for permanent data.

Although voting irregularities were widely charged in the 2020 presidential campaign, few were documented. Of course, voting irregularity is hardly a new issue. In fact, it is possible it played some part in Poe’s life – or rather, his death. With limited information available, explanations of his death have never been satisfactory. Joining theories of suicide, murder, cholera, hypoglycemia, rabies, syphilis, and influenza, one additional theory builds on the contemporary report that Poe was found unconscious in the street and in very bad condition, wearing someone else’s clothes. The location was before Gunner’s Hall, a polling place for Ryan’s Fourth Ward, and it was the day of a local election in Baltimore. The theory that emerges is that Poe was the victim of cooping, a gang practice of kidnapping strangers, plying them with alcohol, and, after changing their clothing, forcing them to vote several times as directed. Possible but unproven, this theory of Poe’s death, uncanny and spooky as anything that appears in his tales, may be another instance of what Willis called *pokerishness*.

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

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