

The “cancelled” Historian’s column:

WITHOUT MASKS! (A parable)

By A. Ephremides

History continues relentlessly. More than a year ago, the era of physical mask-wearing set in, to accompany the often-worn masks of hypocrisy and pretention. When talking about masks, the first thing that comes to my mind is Giuseppe Verdi’s famous opera “Il Ballo in Maschera”, or “Bal masque”, or “Masked Ball”. Masks provide protection against all sorts of perils. Yes, they protect from viruses but they also protect the wearer from being recognized. In that opera, the wearing of masks concealed the identity of assassins.

In the IT Society, the past year-and-a-half with life under the threat of the pandemic has been a major landmark. First of all, it interrupted the regular “flow” of activity, as it did with almost everything we do. But, beyond that, there were other additional and more subtle effects. The “virtual” events that supplanted the in-person encounters created an almost unreal environment. The “zoom” sessions became a fixture that eventually led to mental fatigue and caused untold frustrations. Especially among the younger researchers and students it created a feeling of confusion and bewilderment. Many agree that the education process, but also research productivity, was seriously impaired during this time. But among the “operators” who run IEEE affairs it provided an almost perfect cover for their activities. The “disconnect” between, and among, close colleagues put everything into question and reduced the usual and necessary transparency that used to govern the Society’s affairs. An eerie feeling about forces operating beyond our control set in and added to the discomfort.

But now we have reached the point where the masks are being gradually set aside. Both physically and figuratively. The world has changed, and so has the scientific core of our field. And I am not talking only about the specific research directions that have become dominant. Such evolution is always occurring and it is natural and healthy. I am talking about the unique, defining feature of the Information Theory Society, which for over half a century has been the maintenance and promulgation of the highest standards of quality and behavior. Respect for excellence and intellectual brilliance was THE criterion that governed everything we did. It led to a “success story” the like of which only few scientific fields have experienced. Unwavering adherence to intellectual integrity was surpassed only by the openness with which new members were welcomed. It was indeed a pleasure to be part of this group of exquisite and talented individuals. Our workshops and symposia were unparalleled in quality and in intellectual rewards. Our Transactions were consistently the journal by which every other publication was measured. We were the envy of our peers.

Already, before the pandemic set in and before the masks were put up, there were some rumblings. Gone was the climate of collegiality and trust. Disturbing events had started destabilizing the unique structure of our governance and the unwavering adherence to quality. All of a sudden the prevailing “zeitgeist” in society at large enabled unheard of campaigns against imaginary threats. We were told that we should watch our behavior, “or else”. A strict “code of conduct” was imposed, not as a friendly reminder, but as a serious threat. As if there were tons of behavioral breaches at all over the past 70 or so years that necessitated the creation of “conduct police”! This meant that we could not even challenge a speaker who might be presenting preposterous or erroneous results because we might be

hurting their feelings. It meant many more things. Above all, it meant “watch out because we can destroy you”!

Before we had a chance to sort everything out, the masks were introduced and covered up everything. Untold developments and processes were set in motion. The “darkness” of virtual relations obscured reality. Symposium after symposium and workshop after workshop, our interactions started sinking into virtual “blurriness”. New publications started appearing with little possibility of detailed discourse. The administration of the Society’s affairs slid into non-transparent oblivion. Until we reached the point where it seems that the masks that were being worn in the process, both physical and figurative, have started dropping.

The latest, of course, is the preposterous idea to make the ISIT, our flagship Symposium, permanently virtual or hybrid. A questionnaire/survey is underway to enable the transition into a regime of permanent (figurative) mask-wearing. With the allure of reduced costs and elimination of the need to travel, members are invited to consider supporting a permanent “cut” in the lifeline of the Society where live, in-person interaction is the proven means of making progress.

As the picture starts clearing, a worrisome reality is emerging. In the technical domain: confusion and uncertainty. In the quality domain: a truly disturbing abandonment of the gold standard by which the Society thrived for over half a century. The signs of opportunism are proliferating. Cancellation of the pillars on which the Society rested all these years has led to a destabilization that places its future into serious peril. The decision makers and the decision making process have shifted in ways and directions that are alien to the traditions of the Society. Without masks, everybody can see everybody else and draw their conclusions. Some keep wearing their virtual masks and are still difficult to detect. But developments have “vaccinated” us. We have developed (hopefully) some immunity to evil.

This column is a figurative Call to Arms. Stop the slide! Especially now that the masks are falling, it is easier to see what is going on. It may not be too late to react. But the risks are enormous. History has always been the means by which the “old” remember and the “young” learn. Wearing masks can deceive. Without them the task of the impostors is more difficult. Fear of retribution is widespread. But this threat is a paper tiger. Be bold and resist. Measure everything that is happening today with the standards that made this Society great. And resist any effort that aims to transform it into a vehicle of self-promotion by the unworthy.