

STILL HERE AND.... KICKING

The Cancelled Historian's column

I used to look forward to writing my quarterly columns as the Historian of the IT Society. Despite the momentous events that have taken place in the last couple of years, I still have the (admittedly) diminished urge to convey my thoughts to the audience towards which I still feel affinity and affection.

Of course, by now, we have transitioned to a new reality. Perhaps, both figuratively and substantially, this reality is virtual. Gone are the in-person interactions, the lively exchanges, the mutual disagreements, and the expression of ideas that used to nourish our minds and test our acumen and resolve. Is the Society that was born about seventy years ago still alive and well? Has its aspiration to excellence given way to new and nebulous concepts of identity, representation, and..., yes, victimhood?

During the long hours of idleness that the pandemic imposed on us, I reflected a lot about the phase transition that we have experienced. I talked about the shedding of masks in my last column. It seems that the masks are back on and the Play continues to evolve. To be sure, we have not (to the best of my knowledge) experienced massive assaults like the ones that have occurred elsewhere in the name of nebulous pursuits of postmodern ideas. Not yet, anyway. But we have experienced "cancellations" and the imposition of a "new deal" that nobody seems to want to discuss. Perhaps it is for the best to just pretend that all is well (until the clothes of the proverbial Emperor completely disappear).

It used to be that the freedom of expression was a core value that served as the beacon that made great minds from around the world look towards the United States and its universities as the place they wanted to come to, live, work, and flourish. Is this core value still alive? Can we still freely discard preposterous ideas that claim that Mathematics is an instrument of oppression? Can we question the preposterous claims that the Classic civilization that we have inherited marginalizes and traumatizes some groups of people? Can we argue that Artificial Intelligence algorithms are not, as some claim, a tool for discrimination? Can we protest the imposition of the childish practice of adding "pronouns" under our signatures?

In our Society, so far, we have managed to stay clear (more or less) from these murky waters. But isn't it possible (if not likely) that one day Information Theory will be targeted as another manifestation of ideological oppression? The road can suddenly become very slippery.

One example that comes to mind is the famous "Code of Conduct" that now accompanies all IEEE activities and for the establishment of which the IT Society "leadership" played an ominous role. In that Code we are sternly warned that unless we behave in a civil fashion and treat everyone with respect (this includes, apparently, not staring at anybody in ways that can be construed to be offensive) we are in for serious trouble. As if IEEE gatherings (and IT Symposia as well) were hotbeds of offensive behavior that had to be reined in. For over 50 years I have been part of all sorts of IEEE activities and have yet to experience or observe any objectionable behavior. I guess the culprits have stayed away from my sight. But let us focus on the notion of "treating everyone with respect". What does this mean exactly? I thought respect is something that is earned and does not happen automatically. Yes, we need to be polite to each other, but how can you respect someone who, for the sake of an example, presents a talk that contains mistakes? They (dare I say "he" or "she"?) does not deserve respect. It seems that sensitivities to ordinary human behavior have been elevated to levels that render scientific discourse

impossible. And how can it be claimed that a person is treated with respect when they (here we go again) gets harassed because they (here we go again) expresses a view that does not conform to “established” norms and thinking?

And here is another example. Can we use the term Normal distribution to describe things Gaussian? That would imply that Poisson distributions are (God forbid) abnormal! Can we talk about Raptor or Tail-biting Codes? Can we refer to some data as irrelevant? Is mutual or self- information sufficiently “inclusive”? Isn't filtering out high frequencies discriminatory? Is being non-linear permitted? And what about the proverbial Alice and Bob? Are we being “sexist” if we refer to them? And, for God's sake, what about Lena? Entire generations grew up studying her face. I bet that if a paper uses her again as an example in the performance of a signal processing algorithm the chances of the paper being published would be nil. Indeed, how many of our younger colleagues know about her? Please, those who don't, look her up.

Nobody in (or from) our Society (to the best of my knowledge) seems to have gone all the way to such extremes yet, but one day they (here we go again, this time...correctly from the grammar point of view) might.

It used to be the case that participation in the IT Society's activities was not only professionally and intellectually enriching and stimulating. It was also fun. And in the few instances that somebody might go a bit beyond the limits of inoffensive behavior, there was no malice and the intent was benign. The sense of humor that characterized our activities was refreshing, entertaining, and inventive. Just remember the session on “Dress Codes” when we held a workshop in a southern resort that required tie-and-jacket attire for gentlemen (the latter still existed in those days). Or remember when our Japanese colleagues had proposed to hold a workshop on “Kinky” island!

All such “extremes” have gone the way of the horse and buggy. Now the behavioral police wants to make sure that we do not have any fun. Indeed, this seems to be the main motive for the preposterous codes of conduct that we are (threateningly) reminded of constantly. Having fun is offensive to the zealots of “correctness”. So we must “repent” (I am not sure about what) and self-flagellate.

However, human nature ultimately wins. It cannot be suppressed. Bright and intelligent people can see through this preposterous charade of attempted behavior control. Many believe that what we are experiencing today is simply an over-swing of the pendulum (even though it appears that the pendulum has performed a giant swing on the horizontal bar). Yes, it has to (and will) come back. But it will do so at the cost of ruining lives and careers and of undermining excellence and meritocracy. Let us hope that the damage will be reversible.