Virtual Pollutions

History of Information 103
Geoff Nunberg

April 29, 2010
The problems of "rotten information"
The pervasion of hate speech
The porn problem – what's to be done?
A crisis in civility?
That's a wrap…
Spatial Models of Electronic Discourse: "Cyberspace"

The New Jerusalem, ca. 1992

Cyberspace: A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic night. . . . From vast databases that constitute the culture's deposited wealth, every document is available, every recording is playable, and every picture is viewable. The realm of pure information, filling like a lake.

— Michael Benedikt, Introduction to Cyberspace, MIT Press, 1991
Cyberspace: The Morning After

The virtual Bowery

[The Internet is] a place where crime is rampant and every twisted urge can be satisfied. Thousands of virtual streets are lined with casinos, porn shops, and drug dealers. Scam artists and terrorists skulk behind seemingly lawful Web sites. And cops wander through once in a while, mostly looking lost. It's the Strip in Las Vegas, the Red Light district in Amsterdam, and New York's Times Square at its worst, all rolled into one -- and all easily accessible from your living room couch.

"The Underground Web," Business Week, 9/2/02
Varieties of "Rotten Information"

Problems of authenticity: fakes, hoaxes, forgeries, plagiarism, etc.

Problems of quality: reliability and “authoritativeness”

Problems of “pollution”: pornography, violence, racism & hate speech, predators, incivility, etc.

Mary Douglas: "Dirt is matter out of place… Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements."

How to tell pollution from the merely "unacceptable"?
THE FRANKLIN PROPHECY
Recorded by Charles Coteworth Pinckney
Delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787

"I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and impenetration. The menace, gentlemen, is the Jews.

"In whatever country Jews have settled in any great number, they have lowered its moral tone; depreciated its commercial integrity; have segregated themselves and have not been assimilated; have sneered at and tried to undermine the Christian religion upon which that nation is founded….

. If you do not exclude them from these United States, in their Constitution, in less than 200 years they will have swarmed here in such great numbers that they will dominate and devour the land and change our form of government...
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"I cannot find a single original source that gives the slightest justification for believing that the Prophecy is anything more than a barefaced forgery. Not a word have I discovered in Franklin’s letters and papers expressing any such sentiments against the Jews as are ascribed to him by the Nazis — American and German.”

Charles Beard, NY Times, March 10, 1937.
Pervasiveness of Hate Speech

Google

protect this young nation from an insidious influence*

Web Results 1 - 100 of about 1,800 for "protect this young nation from an insidious influence"

The JEWS who Run Clinton and the USA

"I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration. The menace, gentlemen, is the ..."

www.biblebelievers.org.au/libtxt.htm - Cached - Similar

JewishPost.com - The Franklin Prophecy: An Anti-Semitic Hoax Gets ...

I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration. That menace, gentlemen, is the ...


US Founding Fathers' Statements Concerning the Jews

... he declared: "I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration."


The Jews - 100 Facts

Fact #72 (11) — Benjamin Franklin: "I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration."


What were 3 factors that led to the Holocaust? - Yahoo! Answers

Dec 15, 2009 ... "I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration."

answers.yahoo.com › Arts & Humanities › History - Cached - Similar

Americans Wake Up: Zionists & Israel ruling America. | Facebook

I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration. That menace, gentlemen, is the ...

www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=107241956862 - Cached

The Goldman Probe Is a Smokescreen | Republic Broadcasting Network

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republicbroadcasting.org/jpf/199901article1.php - Cached

Judenhass Quotes

"I fully agree with General Washington, that we must protect this young nation from an insidious influence and penetration. The menace, gentlemen, is the ..."

www.judenhass.com/taxhuskies.html - Cached - Similar
Pervasiveness of Hate Speech
Pervasiveness of racialism

Links to other racist sites:

Fig. 1 (3 views). A Dinaricized German from Heidelberg; although his face shows in exaggerated degree all of the criteria of Dinarization, the great size of his cranial vault is unusual for Dinarics and implies the presence of an admixture of Upper Paleolithic factors. This individual might be called a Nesc; since the Mediterranean element contained is unquestionably Nesc, and probably Nordic of the Nordic variety.

Fig. 2 (3 views). A Nesc from Berlin: the shallow rasion depression, and the great height and salience of the nose are especially noticeable here. Nescs are extremely common in eastern Germany.

Fig. 3 (3 views). A Nesc Pole from Galicia and eastern Poland.
Why is racist speech a problem?

How concerned should we be about racist speech?
Is there more racist speech than before?...
Or is it just more visible – like bad spelling?
An Awkward Search Result
An Awkward Search Result

According to its site, Jew Watch is keeping a close watch on Jewish communities, organizations, monopoly, banking, and media control worldwide. The page contains a list of links and articles related to Jewish communities and organizations.
If you recently used Google to search for the word "Jew," you may have seen results that were very disturbing. We assure you that the views expressed by the sites in your results are not in any way endorsed by Google. We'd like to explain why you're seeing these results when you conduct this search. A site's ranking in Google's search results relies heavily on computer algorithms using thousands of factors to calculate a page's relevance to a given query. Sometimes subtleties of language cause anomalies to appear that cannot be predicted. …
The Menace of Pornography
The dangers of pornography

Whereas pornography was once furtively glimpsed at dimly lighted newsstands or seedy adult theaters, today it is everywhere. It pours in over the Internet, sometimes uninvited, sometimes via eagerly forwarded links…

…Whereas children used to supplement sex education by tearing through National Geographic in search of naked aboriginals and leafing through the occasional Penthouse they stumbled across in the garage, today many are confronted by pornographic images on a daily basis. In a 2001 poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 70% of 15-to 17-year-olds said they had accidentally come across pornography online.

Time, January 19, 2004
"More than 4 million Web sites worldwide show images of children being sexually exploited, said the U.N. investigator on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography…"

It is estimated that 100,000 sites contain child pornography."

"A total of 4.2 million websites econtain pornography."

< 1% of Websites contain porn. Philip B. Stark. UCB, 2006 (100-200m sites in all)

… But what do the numbers really mean?
How Porn Sites are Used: An Exception to "Winner Take All"

Distribution of User Volume Among Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Sites</th>
<th>% of traffic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Sites</td>
<td>32.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>.01</td>
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Adamic & Huberman, 2000
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Adamic & Huberman, 2000

An Exception to "Winner Take All"
Responses to Rotten Information

- Institutional & organizational adaptations
- Social change
- Appeals to market forces
- Legislative and legal remedies
- Technological solutions
Technology to the rescue?

What if the baseball could repair the window?

The Internet caused the problem. It's only fitting it should also provide the solution.

myCIO.com - Your Chief Internet Officer
Feeding the Filtering Frenzy

Ad for McAfee’s GuardDog software
Legal Solutions

Children's Internet Protection Act:
Passed in 2001 -- 3rd attempt to regulate online porn
Limits of Text Blocking

Text unavailable (imaged, etc.)

Confusion with innocent text (cf site on St. Augustine)

Need to block IP numbers – collateral damage due to virtual hosting

"Loophole" sites: translation sites, anonymizer sites, Google cache & images (classified as "pornography" by N2H2)

Inherent trade-offs of precision and recall
Limits of Image Classification

Images found "Probably Objectionable" by WIPE (Wavelet Image Pornography Elimination / Detection).
Libraries can regulate use by means of use policies, training and guidance, monitoring of logs, tap-on-the-shoulder policies, etc.

Rights of other patrons can be protected by privacy screens, etc.

Parents can assume responsibility for monitoring kids' surfing.

Providers can offer "greenspace" browsers for kids.
Social & Institutional Responses

Even porn can get old...

MMORPG: World of Warcraft Blamed for Porn's Decline

Porn industry blames $74m decline on the rise of online dating

Facebook and MySpace are Killing Porn?

Porn Flounders, But Adult Novelty Business Booms

Published: Tuesday, 27 Oct 2009 | 10:47 AM ET
The New Incivility
The Rise of Incivility

"The happiest and most peaceful parts of the World Wide Web are the places where people are buying things. The nasty parts of the Web are where people are doing what the Founding Surfers intended: expressing themselves and forming communities. Have you visited cyberspace lately? As a friendly place to hang out, give me meatspace any day."
Michael Kinsley, Cybercreeps Run Amok," 2005
Technological explanations

...because email is such a casual means of communication, it privileges those who prize informality. What happened to "Dear Sir", "Yours faithfully" and the bracing pleasures of a firm handshake? I ask. They died, you reply, but nobody bothered to tell you, granddad. Stuart Jeffries, The Guardian

...maybe banging out an e-mail is just so easy, compared with all the necessary elements of writing a letter, that the id can send out a half-dozen e-mails before the superego can stop it. Michael Kinsley

What "flamers" have in common with the digit-wagging driver, with the talk-show callers, is not just their aerobic exercise of the "freedom of speech." They belong, rather, to the growing uncommunity of people who now act with the protection of anonymity. Elllen Goodman 1999

Or is everybody just snarlier these days?
The Rise of Incivility

A New Phenomenon?

So where did all the civility go?... I keep coming back to my long-standing hunch that it all began to go bad around 1965. That was the year that America, suddenly, became postmodern. Many venerable American traditions -- some wonderful, some horrible -- all vanished at the same time.

Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*
We've been here before!

Where else has technology interacted with social, political, and economic forces to produce outcome?

Writing
Print
Telegraph & telephone
Newspapers
Advertising
Propaganda
Photography
Radio & TV
Computers
Search
Internet…
Good-bye and good luck