

WHAT IS THIS ALL REALLY WORTH?



Many years ago everyone scornfully dismissed traditional letters as “snail mail.” I too was dazzled by the speed of email: instant correspondence. It seemed that moving beyond the old system had no possible downside. However, after re-starting Caliban as a digital magazine in 2010, I began to notice the difference in my correspondence with contributors. Although there are significant exceptions, most of the email exchanges have been short, often perfunctory. Then I remembered all the wonderful letters I had boxed up when I sold the archives of the original print Caliban to the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley. People (including me) just don’t write those long letters anymore. I miss that. Why should such a great tradition disappear? Is there any way to bring it back? Will the digital trail of writers in these last two decades be so ephemeral that soon no record of our interactions will exist?

Musing on this, I am reminded of an image I have (not rare, but striking) of four friends sitting at a table in a coffee shop, scrolling through the messages on their smart phones and never once speaking to one another, or even making eye contact. I don’t argue that the conversations in the

coffee houses (and many other venues) in Berkeley and San Francisco during my student days in the sixties were all brilliant, but some of them were really interesting. Sometimes people at a neighboring table would pull up a chair and join the conversation. There was a flexible and widely shared sense of community and communal interest in politics, philosophy, art, and literature. I’m pretty sure that such things have existed in many places around the world for centuries. Are they gone forever now?

Such thoughts make me wonder, just what have we gained from this impressive digital technology? If Jon Stewart were still hosting The Daily Show, he might shoot down my concern with a sardonic “easy access to porn.” But then I think about the recent investigation by the New York Times into Facebook’s involvement in the attack on the 2016 elections (“Delay, Deny and Deflect: How Facebook’s Leaders Fought Through Crisis,” Nov. 14, 2018). When Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg became aware of the Russian involvement in the spring of 2016, they covered it up. Even worse, when critics began to notice and went after them, they hired a right-wing Republican attack machine (Definers Public Affairs) to smear those critics.

We have also known for some time that Facebook had “embeds” in the Trump campaign working with Cambridge Analytica, the Russia-connected operation that used Facebook-harvested data from several hundred million individual users to micro-target disinformation. Think about all the years we have cheered the brilliant techies as progressive and anti-establishment. Forces for liberation. It now appears that they have turned into monstrous corporate powers that prefer authoritarian methods so that they can more efficiently control and exploit their users. They told us they would democratize information and access, that all our lives would be amazingly improved. More and more it looks like Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube (and others) have been parties to a conspiracy by elements both foreign and domestic that aims to undermine our elections and the very foundations of our republic.

I remember how excited people once were that the wonders of social media were free of charge. It seemed to go against all common sense. But, as the old saying goes, if you wonder who’s the mark at the poker table—it’s you. The product these guys are selling (to anyone who is interested) is you, the user. The very people, both

left and right, who are obsessed with an intrusive Big Brother government don't seem to be particularly bothered that searching for a product or service on the web instantly leads to a bombardment of related ads. The speed and accuracy of this intelligence system has replaced what used to be a laborious and expensive process of consumer research. And now we know how quickly it can go from commercial purposes to political ones—how it has become weaponized.

So how did we get here? (Before I go on, full disclosure: Calibanonline has always had a Facebook page, for the purpose of announcing new issues or Caliban Chronicles essays, and for weekly posts featuring a single art piece or poem from past issues. I have a personal page that I use only for Calibanonline posts.) What was the great attraction that led people to post pictures and opinions, mutually friend people to

build that vital number, share other posts, often without determining their value or veracity? Writers and artists were originally ecstatic about the possibility of unlimited exposure of their work, without the interference of editors, curators, or judges. That was an aspect of the notion of democratization. I don't know whether any honest research has been done on how many people are actually "reached" this way, as opposed to Facebook's definition of "reach," which means people have scrolled by the post. As far as I know, Facebook has not revolutionized the lives of writers and artists, especially those who did not have any other means of exposure. So what is the lure? The Hollywood dream of being discovered sitting on a stool in Schwab's Drugs?

Doctor Faustus, in Marlowe's Elizabethan play, starts out with the lofty ambition of understanding the universe. He's sells his soul to

Mephistopheles because he thinks the knowledge and power he will gain make the sacrifice worthwhile. By the end of the play, he is reduced to playing ridiculous tricks to fool yokels and to amazing a snooty duchess by producing fresh grapes out of season. As he is carried off to hell at the end, neither Faustus nor the audience know anything more about the secrets of the universe. So what was the sacrifice of his immortal soul all really worth?

It has now become a cliché that the Republican Party has sold its soul to Donald Trump, the devil incarnate in every way except intelligence. But those of us not in the modern ultra-right movement have to ask ourselves this question: Can we play in the playground that helped bring him to power, and continues to stoke the rage of his large cult following, without getting the scent of brimstone on our own clothes?

