Eternal October and the End of Cyberspace

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According to its best-known history, drafted in the mid-1990s, USENET's governing structure was open, and it opened new doors to direct democracy.[1] I do not think it is controversial to claim that excitement is no more, just as the freedom to craft theories and expectations of new kinds of "community," ignoring centuries of trial and error in the matter,[2] is all but gone. By the end of the 1990s, USENET was overrun with spam, and by the mid-2000s, it was widely reported as "dead." But in USENET mythology, its fall occurs earlier, in September 1993, in an "Eternal September."

Prior to 1993, the month of September marked a wave of new university students, connected through their campus. *Eternal* September was caused by a flood of users who gained USENET access as part of a new America Online (AOL) offering and, unlike previous USENET freshman cohorts, they could not be resocialized.[3]

> These relatively small drafts of newbies could be assimilated within a few months. But in September 1993, AOL users became able to post to Usenet, nearly overwhelming the old-timers' capacity to acculturate them; to those who nostalgically recall the period before, this triggered an inexorable decline in the quality of discussions on newsgroups.[4]

This assimilation and acculturation was described as a matter of observing network etiquette. "Netiquette," as it was called, was much like the etiquette of court ceremony or professional ritual in that it was inextricably bound to *place*.

In other words, the newbies could not be forced to accept what we now understand as a central tenet of cyberlibertarianism: that cyberspace, too, was a place, separate from the world, and thus free. For it all to work, all the visionaries needed was for everyone to recognize a small set of self-evident truths. In Barlow's words, in his 1996 cyberlibertarian manifesto *The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,* it was "a global social space," a "civilization of the mind," a "*world.*"[5] Not only was cyberspace a real *place,* but it was more than the world. In cyberspace, liberty and culture could proceed past the natural limits set by physicality—governments, industries, and our very bodies. In cyberspace, our bodies might be beaten and subject to laws no better than pig iron, but that was the price of materiality, a cost that, finally, revolutionaries would pay no more.

But in cyberspace there was no revolutionary state at hand to enforce the new edicts. Just as the cyberlibertarians saw cyberspace as more than real, I read the Eternal September counterrevolutionaries treating it as *less*. They could flame and troll with a fearlessness that was harder to get away with under the material coercion of the state, or the physical consequences of talking when you were supposed to be listening. Without the oddly providential cyberlibertarian vision to give a reason for good behavior, cyberspace looked a lot more like the history of civilization than it did an unencumbered new chapter. But the basic claim of placeness–later translated into a metaphoric quality of the Internet as a place to go and be—survived in our language and metaphors.

William Gibson coined the term "cyberspace" in his 1984 book *Neuromancer,* a year after the early Internet began to assimilate local networks and online systems that might have formed their own, separate pockets of online.[6] Cyberspace meant a *single* global place, both in *Neuromancer* and in the visions of the pioneers behind the new Internet. Gibson's work was set in the future, when whole populations were online. Returning to the canonical work on USENET, it predicted that if ubiquitous network access was achieved, "'all Hell will break loose' in the most positive of ways imaginable."[7] But what does it mean for *cyberspace as place* when more of the world inhabits it?

Eternal September arrived three years after Godwin's Law, which in 1990 first stated that as an online discussion increases in size, "the probability of a [bad-faith] comparison involving Hitler approaches one." Godwin's Law hints at how Gibson's cyberspace could not come to be, and why I think the ideology of cyberspace (as place) is finally over. Consider how Godwin's Law works at its law of large numbers conclusion, with ubiquitous network access on a Gibson scale, in a discussion that encompasses, for example, the US population. At this scope, the discussion will contain far more than bad-faith talk of Hitler. It will also include real fascists, because there are fascists in the United States, and they use the internet to organize. If there is a law that better exemplifies the Internet of October 2016, as I write this, it is that as a discussion increases in size, the probability that it will contain fascists approaches one. This is Eternal October: the successor to Eternal September, when it is no longer possible to pretend (nomatter one's privilege) that cyberspace can circumvent the politics of civilization. Just as Eternal

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September ushered in a new reality, October 2016 is never going to end.

If elements of cyberlibertarianism inform our historiography, then we cannot be said to have ever inhabited the world it described, because that world did not exist. In other words, we have never been "online." After all, the ideology of cyberlibertarianism is fundamentally about concealing the sources of its own social regulation. Cyberspace was not special; it was merely built out of communities that, for a time, regulated themselves offline. This is not a radical claim, for there are many things that we have never been. We have never been modern, because we never could fully separate society, nature, and technology.[8] We have never been digital, because the digital has not escaped the politics of all tools hitherto.[9] We have indeed *called things* modern and *evoked* digitality to get our way in arguments, but neither of these has ever satisfied its own ideology, and neither could serve as a nonfiction basis for a system of explanation. For similar reasons, if we are not careful, then the Internet does not exist, and nobody has ever used it, because there is no hermetically sealed lineage disconnected from all other technologies, infrastructures, maintainers, and subjectivities.[10] In this sense, do we inhabit our histories of online systems? Have we ever been online? Myths are not true or false; they are only living or dead.[11]

I do not think we ever inhabited cyberspace. We *were promised* it, though.[12] But just as cyberspace grew in ubiquity, and its metaphor seemed to creep closer to being fully realized as an immaterial place, it vanished. The "civilization of the mind," its conveyances, the megastructure thoroughfares under signal skies—all of it faded and glitched out. Is all that remains any *more* than data centers, intellectual property regimes, Terms of Service agreements, news feed algorithms, cybersecurity nightmares, and a crumbling postwar order? If not cyberspace, then what *did,* and do we, inhabit? This question is fundamentally historical. The choice of a conception of the world—or another, immaterial world—is political and historical, as is its criticism, and as are its competing philosophies.[13] What is the history and present moment of online systems for historians of computing?

References and Notes

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