Stirring the Pot

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Sometimes, the most important contributions to our body of knowledge are those that question what we are doing and help reveal when our actions match our ideals.

Today's addition to the "Body of Knowledge" column has less to do with a single article and more to do with a career of contributions to *Computer*. That is not to say that the article under consideration, "Lies, Damn Lies, and Fake News,"[1] is not influential. It is ranked number five on the IEEE list of articles from *Computer*, with 12,890 downloads. Like many influential articles, it appeared at a key moment. The United States had just completed a tumultuous election that raised many questions for the technical community. Was there really a phenomenon called "fake news?" How pervasive might it be? Was it a problem that might have a technical solution?

This article offered a first approach to these topics, but it was really just one more contribution from the keyboard of Hal Berghel, who has served as the conscience for *Computer*, its warning voice, and its agent provocateur. For more than 20 years, he has written and edited articles that argue that the technological work of computer science and computer engineering is deeply dependent on the institutions that support it and the society that requests it. Furthermore, as he sees it, these institutions and this society are too easily manipulated by people who are only pursuing narrow self-interest.

It is simplistic to say that Hal's concerns should not be part of the technical literature, that we should present

ARTICLE FACTS

» Article: "Lies, Damn Lies, and Fake News"
» Author: Hal Berghel
» Citation: *Computer*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 80–85, February 2017
» *Computer* influence rank: #5 with 12,890 downloads and 10 citations

only technical information in the pages of IEEE periodicals and deal with controversial topics in some other forum. It would certainly create less work for the editors and publication administrators who have had to deal with the feedback from the readers of *Computer*. (And perhaps, here, I should admit that I have been a long-term colleague of Hal on the *Computer* Editorial Board, served as his editor-in-chief and vice president of Publications, and hence am familiar with the kinds of reactions that his writing provokes.) However, the columns raise issues that we cannot ignore and ask how we might address them.

If we move outside the immediate topic of "Lies, Damn Lies, and Fake News," we quickly see that the reputation of *Computer* (as well the IEEE Computer Society as a whole) rests on two important activities: validation and valuation. Our role in the technical community is to validate technical manuscripts, to check that they are correct and true. After we do that, we make an effort to assess whether these manuscripts have value, if they solve an interesting problem, and if they provide a theory or technical idea that can have wide application. We believe that if an article is invalid, not true, then it has no value. However, recent experience has shown that falsehoods, whether they are fake news or incorrect technical papers, can have value to someone.

While Berghel's article primarily dealt with national politics, it covered a topic that can deeply touch the technical community. When I was new in my career, I was on the steering committee of a conference that had a regular contributor who would end his technical presentation with a 4- or 5-min political diatribe on a subject that most attendees found divisive and provocative. He would make bold charges against leaders, both political and technical, but

would never produce evidence to substantiate his claims.

The steering committee wrestled with his case for several years. A couple of us approached him and asked that he remove the politics from his technical presentations. He would promise to do so, but he never lived up to his word.

Finally, at one steering committee meeting, we faced the question of banning him from the conference. Most everyone admitted that his presentations were false or at least wildly exaggerated. Most everyone was offended by his statements about specific people and particular groups. Yet, few felt that it was the purview of the steering committee to say anything.

We debated this question for two hours, maybe longer, and then one member, a senior engineer who rarely said much, quietly asked, "Do his presentations have an impact on our integrity?" When questioned about what he meant, he simply replied, "Does the fact that we allow him to say demonstrably false things suggest that we allow presenters to promote ideas that are not true, including technical ideas?" That simple question brought focus to the discussion and showed us where we needed to take a stand. The committee quickly drafted a statement that it was devoted to the free and unfettered exchange of ideas on technical subjects, and that it would not tolerate individuals who used that freedom to promote nontechnical ideas. It was a decision that might seem at odds with Berghel's demands for openness except that it was a leadership group standing up to a single

member who was attempting to use a technical conference to promote his own political beliefs.

Berghel's columns often stir up controversial questions. They often bring issues to the surface that are not easy to discuss. But they always push us, as technical professionals, to see how

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our work touches social, political, and economic issues. They also drive us to be involved in the debate and decide what we might be able to do. There are issues we must engage, no matter what opinion we may have on the outcome and no matter how much we may agree or disagree with the authors that bring these issues to our attention. Such reasons are why "Lies, Damn Lies, and Fake News" is number five on the IEEE list of influential *Computer* articles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCE

1. H. Berghel, "Lies, damn lies, and fake news," *Computer*, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 80–85, Feb. 2017. doi: 10.1109/MC.2017.56.

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