

Vanity and Guilt, Humility and Pride

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This anniversary essay relates thoughts about some of the e-mail messages stimulated by the seven essays I have contributed since this column first appeared a year ago. Of snail mail there has been none—a reflection of the times, no doubt.

The e-mail responses fall roughly into four categories, defined by the axes of brief-to-lengthy and positive-to-negative. Each month, *Computer's* editors choose some of the more substantial responses for the Letters to the Editor column, usually publishing readers' responses to an essay a couple of months after its publication. Some of these messages—and many of the longer unpublished ones—cause me to wonder about my success in provoking thought and discussion about truly professional issues.

MERELY SECONDARY DETAILS

Typically, the author of a disquieting e-mail starts by congratulating me on the essay, either enthusiastically or perfunctorily. That person then goes on to dispute my reminiscences and observations, although in most cases they are merely secondary details intended to give nostalgic conviviality to an otherwise dry and unrelenting narrative.

My first essay was meant to provoke discussion about what constitutes a profession and how a profession differs from a trade or craft. As secondary enlightenment, I used the well-known nine-dots problem to observe that, while a technician should be able to find a four-line solution by seeing outside the box formed by the dots, a professional should be able to see outside the piece of paper that the nine dots are drawn on to find a *one-line* solution.

Much of the e-mail this essay generated found fault with my one-line solution on various grounds, but none denied that it worked. The typical objection was that rolling the paper into a tube is, for various reasons, such as going into a third dimension, invalid. I suspect that many such objections arose from a perceived threat to the popular cliché, “outside the box.”

Although I enjoy such exchanges, the persistent focus on secondary topics causes me to worry that some readers are not getting past the details to the major issues.



Responses to this past year's columns emphasize the computing profession's need to become more concerned about professionalism.

VANITY

Even the secondary e-mails can incite thoughts about professional issues, however. At the moment, I am involved in an e-mail exchange with the American Dialect Society over my speculation about the origin of the term *floppy disk* (“The Great Term Robbery,” May 2001, pp. 96, 94-95). This exchange has involved no less a celebrity than Eric S. Raymond, the widely renowned author of *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, who described my recollections as “a thin, unsupported, and very implausible tissue of conjectures... .”

I found Raymond's condemnation especially stinging because I had received an e-mail a couple of weeks earlier, provoked by the February column, “US Electoral Reform: The Obvious Obligation,” that baldly told me I am “a complete idiot.” Such accusations raise an issue more general than the quality of my memory or intellect: They raise a professional issue. If our profession, however it might eventually evolve or be defined, is to gain the community's respect—a necessity for our profession's members to be fully effective—those members must first respect *one another*.

Apart from any question of politeness, professional disagreement must be handled in a professional manner, even through e-mail. If an author makes a factual error, the reader should simply point out the error and cite the appropriate authority. A reader who questions an author's recollections should describe any disparity with enough background to show that the contrary recollection has more weight than the original, or at least enough to require reconsidering the original assertion.

In matters of opinion, however, professional respect is paramount. The opinions and judgments developed by a profes-

sion's members distinguish that profession from a trade. To cite the Charles McCabe quote that once adorned *Computer's* Open Channel column, “Any clod can have the facts, but having opinions is an art.”

When debating opinions and recollections, we must acknowledge their subjective nature; bear in mind that other professionals can be as convinced of their judgments' value as we are of ours; and be prepared to change our opinions in the light of professionally delivered alternatives.

Professional respect should extend even to intemperate comment from other professionals, a principle whose validity became plain to me when I checked what

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I had actually written about the origin of the term “floppy disk.” I certainly recall that marketers of the time had rendered “flexible” meaningless, and thus made “flexy” descriptively useless. But to my dismay, I discovered that I had gone overboard and asserted that the marketers had coined “floppy.” I have no recollection of any particular group of people—other than the general body of users—being blamed or credited with this coinage. Therefore, Raymond was correct even if he wasn’t right. This mistake exposes another professional principle: Always double or triple check what you actually write when you record a recollection or opinion.

But honest mistakes, even careless ones, should not be bluntly scolded in public. In a very real sense, the fault behind vituperation is vanity, insofar as vanity lies in putting self-regard above respect for others.

GUILT AND HUMILITY

Self-regard of a slightly different kind manifests itself as guilt. A reader commenting on the first several installments of *The Profession* accused me of “building up [readers’] guilt,” presumably because he felt guilty (“Is Holmes Out to Get Us?” Letters, Jan. 2001, pp. 10-11). This accusation puzzled me quite a bit at the time.

Guilt is an extremely personal and unconstructive feeling. If we make spe-

cific *personal* mistakes, such as the recollection error I just confessed, we may well experience some feeling of personal discomfort and even guilt. But feeling guilty about professional issues—in this case, about “paradigm shifts”—seems to imply a very personal and complete identification with the profession, an attachment that runs very close to vanity.

Our pride in the computing profession should impel us to make our products, services, and general behavior more professional.

A larger problem with allowing self-regard to dominate our attitude toward the computing profession involves how this behavior appears to the public and other professions. The closing two paragraphs in Robert Whelchel’s “The Digerati,” written as his swan song when he retired as editor in chief of *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* (Spring 2001, pp. 43-47), bite particularly deep:

As a teacher of electrical engineering I use technical software daily. I am more in awe of its educational benefits than most of my students. ... I have nothing against computers and nothing against

properly functioning software. What I do oppose is the digerati attitude spawned by excessive pride and arrogance, which promotes disregard and disrespect for the rest of us. It is time for the digerati to learn humility.

There undoubtedly is a paradigm shift in learning due to ubiquitous computing power. ... Trying to figure out how to live with and control this and similar paradigm shifts requires serious effort. Those of us involved in such tasks could benefit greatly from digerati input if they would abandon their used-car salesman attitude that everything they do is the greatest thing in the world.

Although we must take remarks such as these seriously, we should not react by feeling guilty, as doing so will not promote our profession.

Whelchel urges that we “digerati”—his encompassing and somewhat disparaging term for computing professionals—learn humility. We should indeed do so. We should also realize that the computing industry’s blunder rate is far higher than it should be and that we must take professional responsibility for it. In acknowledging and working to reduce this blunder rate, we will show that we are indeed learning humility.

PRIDE

Whelchel accuses us of “excessive pride and arrogance.” Any arrogance is bad, but *excessive* pride deserves special condemnation—for it springs from vanity, from an excess of self-regard. We must base proper pride in our profession on respect for our fellow practitioners, and confidence in the value of the profession to clients, and, more importantly, to the community.

Our pride in the computing profession should impel us to make our products, services, and general behavior more professional. As professionals, we must work to improve the computing industry’s record, and we must humbly and respectfully strive to support people like Whelchel, who seek to apply digital technology for the benefit of the greater community.

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In some areas, such as the field of education, we are in grave danger of continuing to achieve far less than we should have. But we can take genuine pride in the computing profession's achievements so far, and the possibilities for the future are almost unimaginably rich.

The new millennium seems an appropriate time for the computing profession to become more concerned about professionalism. Significantly, *Communications of the ACM* started its The IT Professional column this year under the leadership of Peter Denning. Although its tone differs somewhat from this column, readers with an interest in the computing profession should find Denning's column interesting.

The e-mail The Profession column has provoked thus far strongly suggests that computing professionals have a real interest in professional issues. Anyone who contributes an essay to the column is, I believe, assured of a wide and interested readership.

IEEE Computer Society members might also consider joining the IEEE Society on Social Implications of Technology so that they can receive its quarterly publication, *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine*. Many of the articles in that publication relate directly to digital technology, and all of them would be of interest to computing professionals. *

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