Bad Language: Emerging Issues in Electronic Discourse

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This project considers the conditions necessary for the concept of "bad language" and several issues which are emerging as a result of their regulation in electronic discourse. Building on the theories of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, this project demonstrates how varying dominant communicative technologies have molded consciousness and created different types of people whose patterns of thought have been shaped by those technologies, including their regulation of bad language. In the early English-speaking world, the practice of writing was understood to have magical properties and their use was controlled by grammars or the need for a guru to read them aloud. The concept of "curse words" was possible only after the introduction of vernacular writing, particularly after printing required words to appear as discrete expressions separated by white spaces on a page. Print established the conditions necessary for English language dictionaries, written primarily for writers, and radically removed words from contexts in an attempt to establish fixed meanings. Printing also created the need to legislate for "correct" usage of language, especially in writing. This radical removal of words from contexts, individually cataloged and defined, allowed moralists to displace the contested meanings of language with the moral certainty that certain words were always blasphemous, profane or obscene. It considers how this form of dictionary-meaning has been incorporated into spell check and autocomplete programs to prevent profanity by directly intervening in its use on electronic devices. One example includes the autocomplete function of cellphone texting programs changing a user's input of the word "fuck" to "f****" or "duck." Contrary to some arguments, electronic devices are not eliminating printed books but are actually producing more of them. Electronic devices have made it easier to write, print and read than ever before and virtually all printing is now done with the aid of electronic devices. However, this project argues this is not simply a return to an earlier mode of thinking through textual medias. The modern explosion of writing is occurring within virtual environments which are regulated by electronic dictionaries, spellchecks, and filters.

To contest McLuhan and Ong's assertion that electronic communications technology will simply cause a "retribalization" of language communities and a return to premodern modes of thought, this project examines the emerging issues of electronic discourse; particularly keyword filters. In response to the dictionary projects of fixing meaning, the deconstruction movement in literature and philosophy (intimately tied to texts) begun in the 1980s attempted to demonstrate the infinite meanings of words and expressions. Deconstructionists declared any attempt to establish normative contexts as futile and any

question about the meaning of a word unanswerable. With the digital revolution and the Internet, search engines like Google respond to this declaration by demonstrating a limited number of word-meaning contexts. In effect, Google shows the sum of all meanings for a particular keyword search and defines the legitimate mode for asking questions. Recently, Google rolled out their semantic search engine, which is their first attempt to answer questions rather than just point at content. However, Google's semantic search still only displays information it considers as important or relevant about the user's keywords. The project also considers the various ways Google encourages its users to "report abuses" of its Terms of Service Agreements to effectively enforce its norms. Increasingly, what can be written, said or shared online is regulated by user agreements rather than legal codes.

The project concludes by considering how the equivalence of keyword search results with word-meanings enables interventions into the expression or repression of alternatives. These kinds of interventions prevent a return to the preliterate or premodern modes of thinking envisioned by McLuhan and Ong. Google presupposes, requires, and codifies a radical dissolution of language into series of words. Additionally, Google deploys by default a SafeSearch filter which blocks words it considers to be objectionable. There is no way to challenge Google, to ask why these and not other displayed contexts? Why this ordering? Or Why is this search term censored? This presents a challenge to traditional conceptions of free speech by replacing them with new methods of private censorship using terms of service agreements. This project argues that these methods of private and automatic censorship are no longer within the realm of traditional free speech arguments. As filters and algorithms intervene in the possibility for free speech, writing, or language is increasingly subject to the coding of virtual environments rather than law or rights which protect citizens from government abuse. The coding of virtual language filters, as opposed to law, are often not open for review by users, are not open to appeal, and are not democratically instituted. Electronic filters and systems of language regulation make a future return to premodern modes of thinking impossible. However, this project presents a few possible methods for resisting these trends by demonstrating how the use of profanity can interrupt the processes by which engines like Google's semantic search operate and organize results. The futures of language and communication cannot simply be a return to premodern modes, but must be something we have not seen before.

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