

President's Notes
April 2018

Computer Users of Erie will hold its election of officers and board members at the April General Meeting. Thanks to members of CUE who volunteered to serve, we have a full slate of candidates which is published elsewhere in this newsletter. Members who can't attend the meeting will have the opportunity to vote by absentee ballot. It has always bothered me that we have not used technology to automate the absentee voting process. It's not that we fear Russian hacking, but we hadn't found the proper tool for a good voting system.

I finally found a better absentee voting system while exploring why schools so eagerly adopt the Chromebook. Chromebooks are low cost but also Google's software fits the needs of the classroom. The Google Forms app stands out as a great way to collect information, administer tests, and conduct elections. My first use of Forms was to create a sample ballot for the CUE election and found it worked very well for voting and had a good way to include write-in candidates. Schools do have means to prevent abuse which we don't have. I couldn't limit the number of votes per person automatically so at least for this election cycle the form will ask for your email address. That means it's not a secret ballot but neither was the email format for absentee voting we used in the past.

Forms isn't perfect, but I can see that the app could be useful within CUE such as for member surveys. Using Forms in absentee voting will also serve as an evaluation. Let us know how you like it. Or maybe the next president will survey your opinions using Forms.

Changing topics, since this is my last President's Notes, I thought to use this platform to raise awareness of CUE members about some recent developments concerning social media. Many of you depend on Facebook to keep up to date with family and friends and that is a good thing. But Facebook has been under intense scrutiny by everyone from users to tech-company leaders to governments. Full disclosure – I am not and have never been a Facebook user but I have followed the Facebook controversy since I have an interest in the privacy issue and my wife is a Facebook user.

In 2016 Andrew Bosworth, a Facebook Vice President wrote an internal memo titled “The Ugly” highlighting both positive and negative results of focusing on growth at any cost in pursuit of Facebook's mission to connect people, apparently as many as possible all around the world. Whatever the motive “Boz” had for posting the memo, the text shows senior management of Facebook is well aware of physical and emotional damage that can result from use of the platform. Apparently many Facebook employees were outraged that this internal memo was leaked and published by the press. Isn't it ironic? I wonder if they were as outraged about the leak of data of 50 million users to Cambridge Analytica which sought to influence the political process. That scandal brought to light the amount of data Facebook collects on its users largely without their knowledge and sells to advertisers to fund growth at any cost.

Facebook does allow users some control over security and privacy of their data, but those controls have been dispersed to over 20 locations throughout the platform. In fairness, Facebook recently announced the creation of a centralized place for users to access these privacy and security controls. From that centralized place users will also be able to see and limit what information Facebook keeps on them. I am skeptical about how well that will work. If enough users greatly limit their data, Facebook may see falling income from reduced sales to advertisers. Could Facebook be counting on typical users never throttling data acquisition? Perhaps CUE could provide a useful service to its members by teaching how to use Facebook's centralized privacy and security controls.

As I mentioned, I am not a Facebook user, but that doesn't stop Facebook from trying to collect data on me. Facebook wants to plant a cookie on the browser of any visitor to one of their pages. Fortunately my browser settings don't allow this. They could collect information on my browsing history, time spent on a website, my computer operating system, and more using cookies. Facebook provides no way to examine visitor data acquired by cookies but it does sell that data to advertisers. Cookies and pixels are industry standard technologies, as Facebook says, and many websites do the same thing. Apparently the notion of privacy has become as antiquated as the quill pen used to write the Constitution. Our privacy continues to be under attack for the sake of corporate profit and it's the price we pay for internet connectivity. "If you're not paying for the product, you are the product." (source unknown)

John Fair