

## FINAL WORD ↔ BY TIM ROWLAND

# Siding with the Nerds

Like millions of other Americans this spring, I received a notification that a “friend” had logged into Facebook using an app that funneled data to Cambridge Analytica, a digital Rumpelstiltskin that managed to spin gold from the bottomless chum bucket of social media.

Facebook, bless its heart, recommended that I go into “settings” and perform a series of occult maneuvers that would ensure, I guess, that Russian hackers could never access my account and discover that I have two exceedingly handsome dogs named Addie and Pete.

I didn’t do it. Instead, I treated the notice the same way I treat the message that my computer is likely to go all nuclear-fission because I didn’t eject my flash drive properly.

Not so congressional Luddites who, feeding off American outrage as if it were ketchup on a well-done steak, hauled poor Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg into the Capitol’s hallowed halls to grill him over matters involving what they called “the Facebook.”

Predictably, grizzled lawmakers who wouldn’t know a hard drive from a hard-boiled egg embarrassed themselves by stumbling over the words “device” and “tablet” and by asking how Facebook makes money if it doesn’t charge its customers—which is like asking how CBS makes money on March Madness if it doesn’t charge the players.

For the first time in my life I sided with a computer nerd. Zuckerberg took the “mistakes were made” approach,

but I wish he hadn’t even done that. I wish he’d looked them right in the eye and said: “Newsflash: Facebook is social media. Not the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, social media. It’s a commercial entertainment site that people visit voluntarily, and of course it’s going to be used for manipulation, just like Febreze uses television to suggest you need its product even if you don’t smell anything, because you’ve obviously gone ‘nose blind.’”

Two issues, rivaling each other for silliness, are being tossed about in the Great Facebook Debacle of ’18. One is that the Russians used social media to drive our malleable, child-like public into electing Donald Trump. The second is that Facebook has compromised our God-given right to privacy.

As to the first, who knows the truth? Maybe Russian memes did push that last handful of people in that last handful of states into voting for Trump. Or, more likely, maybe the messages just further ginned up already virulently anti-Hillary

voters. But even if a few more people did pull the lever for Trump because of Facebook, so what? Sometimes an umpire’s bad call affects the game. But the outcome is a lot more complex than one bang-bang play at the plate. In the final analysis, anyone with an imagination vivid enough to believe that immigrants are harvesting the organs of school children for use in satanic rituals is probably not going to vote for someone as technocratically boring as Hillary Clinton in the first place.

Far more worrisome is the possibility that our voting machines could be physically hacked. Naturally, that is the part of the equation that virtually everyone dismisses.

Privacy, meanwhile, is the imaginary life preserver that people like to fall back on when they are doing things they ought not. The right to privacy is not explicitly guaranteed by the Constitution, though a lot of the important things we want covered by it are: speech, assembly, religion, and protection from willy-nilly government searches, wiretaps, and the like. But we hardly need to plumb the depths of the Ninth and Tenth Amendments to remember that the Constitution is about restraining government, not something a nerd whipped up in his dorm room.

And what, exactly, about Facebook can be considered intrusive? Social media is a guest we have invited into our homes. So what part of “social” do federal lawmakers have trouble understanding? It’s like we’re caught doing something embarrassing on the subway and we get angry that people noticed.

Anytime electrons are flying through the air, we should simply assume that they are subject to being netted by someone for whom they are not necessarily intended. And conversely, we must assume that what we see incoming on our screens is not always going to be as it appears.

We expect a bank to take ample precautions against playing fast and loose with our data. But Facebook? Please. On social media, we have no guaranteed right of privacy. But we do—or we should in this increasingly digital age—have the right not to be stupid. R

TIM ROWLAND is a columnist for the (Hagerstown, MD) *Herald-Mail* newspaper and author of the books *Strange and Obscure Stories of Washington, DC* and *Strange and Obscure Stories of New York City*.

