A summer of news with **rms**

Camille Akmut

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Abstract

From June to September 2019, I submitted short of a thousand political notes to Richard Stallman. I reflect on a time period when we were in daily contact : we discussed and debated world news, until he became subject of it and continuing my task seemed impossible.

1 A specific type of mind

Before I tell of these events, I should tell of others.

The last few days have brought back two memories in particular. By the end of this, the reader will hopefully get a sense of why they appear important to me now.

First, as a 16-year old I identified strongly with Kastner's novel of the same name : Fabian, an unemployed doctor of letters, goes through life as a poor young adult in the midst of the greater incertitude of Inter-war Berlin. One episode has him standing before a shop's windows and understanding that his role, in life, was as an observer.

Further back in time, my childhood best friend's father was a small-time engineer with a (perhaps excessive) love of chess. He represented a type of culture that was wholly absent in my own home. He asked mathematics riddles and taught openings.

But these stories are not re-told for self-gratification.

I don't remember the before or after of what follows, or the why. Just the event itself :

This smart and strong man, accustomed to manual labor, dragged one of his sons (my best friend) down the stairs and into the garden, where he proceeded to give him a brutal beating.

I was no stranger to beatings myself, the kind that were felt for multiple days afterwards and left colored marks (by a woman, in my case).

This was the mid-1990's, and attitudes were split about in the middle at the time : there was certainly no shortage of people to say that 'they deserved it', or 'a small tap on the bottom never hurt anyone'...

Of course, neither one nor the other was true.

I started laughing uncontrollably : I felt such deep sadness, and anger that I couldn't express myself correctly.

What was most unacceptable about it was perhaps that this was the same man that I admired, and liked; and, who had always been attentive, if not affectionate towards me. I learned much from him, but there was a specific type of mind at work here, for sure.

2 I met RMS

The first encrypted e-mail I sent was to Richard Stallman. My first act of technology-related activism was through him.

However our relationships only really started at the end of June, at a point when I was mostly done with my cycle of research and publishing.

Much of what I wrote about Paul Veyne I could say about him : he treated everyone equally.

He wasn't one of those adroit types, schmoozy and false...

I never felt alone during these months : I could talk to him about everything. It wasn't the sort of relationship ("you pat my back, I pat yours") that I've tried to escape all of my life.

With almost clockwork precision, I would submit political notes in the morning, such that by the next he answered back.

Some of them lead to long discussions, few to disagreements.

On average I sent 10 a day, and 2 or 3 would end up being published.

We covered the Hong Kong protests, Chelsea Manning and Ola Bini's imprisonments, we talked about Allende, and sensitive topics like abortion or feminist issues, and of course the various acts of buffoonery of technology companies and their demented executives.

I should add that I delete my e-mails frequently, so this is all from memory (and all I can say).

The only big disagreement we had concerned the Opioid crisis : his own experiences with pain medication ("pain so strong it made it impossible to think") made it so that I couldn't get some of my notes through... I believe he has revised his judgment since.

He read the Guardian and The Intercept (as did I, in addition to Reuters), so I decided to extend my sources to include about a dozen others in total. I stopped reading the former during this time period.

This included BBC World (the national version of BBC in my experience is close to tabloid news) and Motherboard for instance.

The Richard Stallman I knew was in his 60s : far from the "a sucker is born every minute" attitudes of his younger years.

I always felt protected with him : I knew I could express my doubts, and that we could otherwise disagree safely. He often told me "everyone makes mistakes", and where I was sometimes harsh he showed more understanding. There was something very humane about him, including the faults.

Then came the whole Epstein affair.

3 A big mess

Epstein, to me, represents the epitome of someone who never could say sorry; who went through life insensitive to the pains of others.

A modern Zanzinger, in other words.

When he got in trouble with the law – that he did too many times – crocodile tears flew, and pinky, forever promises were made with judges... But, it never went beyond that.

In any case, I followed the entire affair and wrote regular notes.

I think The Verge article that Richard Stallman quoted was one of my notes, but I can't be sure.

This all took a surrealist turn when on the 13th, bearing in mind time zone differences, my last note was on "Remove Richard Stallman."

I learned of it very quickly.

I begged and pleaded with him to apologize.

What's to come, I don't know.

I feel too close to the events to be able to analyze them now.

I had ceased to be a mere observer, and as in the case of my childhood friend's father, I had come to understand there were parts of his mind that were inaccessible to me.

People expect impossible amounts of those they have constructed as their "heroes", because looking at them realistically would mean taking a harsh look at themselves; a task truly impossible.

The greater their faults, the more fiery the flame.