Tariq's Take

meditations on technology, culture and the sublime

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What does it mean to be a netizen?

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Back in December in a post on the Open Government Directive, social media expert Steve Radick wrote, "The rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship are changing, and we [government practitioners] need to be educated—at every level—on how and why to engage through open government channels." This resonated with me: **What does citizenship look like in the age of the internet? What new citizen "duties" are emerging on the social web?**

When I think of citizenship on the web, it is not in the conventional "national citizen" sense. Rather, citizenship takes on a broader, and perhaps equally important, meaning: internet citizens ("netizens" as Michael Hauben dubbed us) are people who have a stake in the evolving content and character of the web.

In this sense, internet users are citizens in a world of ideas, participants in an ongoing knowledge and value (in the "societal values" sense) creation experiment. Although language, technology access and literacy, and censorship still represent barriers for some, the conversation is increasingly global.

The on-line world is a democratic space. People "vote" in this space by consuming, responding to (e.g. by commenting on blogs), sharing, promoting (e.g. within ranking systems like Digg) and creating content. Like more traditional democratic spaces, the web favors those who engage, those who say and do things, over those who do not; people who engage have a say in shaping the online world. It's worth noting that, like other democratic spaces, some have more influence, "more of a vote", than others because of structural and other factors (e.g. what sites a search engine ranking algorithm favors).

The Internet is saturated with information (too much for any one individual to sort through) and crowded with competing narratives; the information and narratives that bubble up to the top become public "knowledge". The content that surfaces (e.g. the first page of Google results on a given topic) might be taken to represent a sort of consensus on what is "valuable", maybe even what's "true".

With this in mind, I posit that engagement on the internet is perhaps, like civic engagement in the off-line world, a "duty" of citizenship. If we want our values to be reflected in the presiding

culture, if we want the best information to rise to the top, we have to assert ourselves through all of the mechanisms available to us.

While many consume content, fewer share it and fewer yet, actively curate or create it. This worries me. Why? Because many quarters of the internet are effectively "dictatorships of the loud" – people who create content often and are good at promoting it, disproportionately impact the conversation regardless of how sound their ideas are. The inane or fluffy often wins out over the useful or profound.

I started writing not because I'm the most expert person on many of the subjects I write on, but because I'm not the least – I'm trying to drown out the one guy dumber than me. And I'm not just blogging; I'm scouring the internet for ideas that represent our best values and promoting them; I'm seeking out bull and blasphemy and calling it out for what it is. I figure It's the least I can do to help shape the Internet, and the World.

What do you think, what does it mean to be a 'netizen'?

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