

A new civic responsibility: An exhortation

Contributed by peritonlogon
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Everyone knows that the media has changed and continues to change. Everyone also knows about the buzzwords, user-contributed, blogosphere, decentralized news, 24-hour news cycle and the cable news networks (well, relatively new). Most people also know that when cable news began a change happened. Since cable news networks weren't using the public's airwaves they were not held to any civic responsibility standards in their determination of what constituted news. The consequence of this change and all of the changes that followed, such as user contributed news and blogs, has created a new model for news, which is, news equals attention grabbing content (perhaps it would be more accurate to say "heightened an existing aspect already present in news"). But it's our attention. We have the right to pay it to whomever we wish, which means we ought to consciously cultivate our news sensibilities and be very careful whenever we pass on news and stories.

Furthermore, with the incredibly vast quantities of news content being produced, we have what you might call a buyers market. The news media available to us so greatly outnumber the hours we have to consume the news that at the very least we should be judicious in our selection. But even more, since we individuals hold a lot of power in determining what gets passed on and read by means of conversations, email, blogs, call-in shows and news aggregators, we therefore have the responsibility for defining what constitutes news and what comprises civic discourse and we are also accountable for the results. It's our attention and we get to determine to whom to pay it. So in other words, we have a civic duty to ignore irrelevant hype and to pass on only quality stories with demonstrable relevance and clear ideas. It is up to us to pay no attention to wealthy party girls and extremist anomalies. It is up to us to listen for pertinence and to cultivate our sense of relevance and put things in perspective and ignore the impertinent and the out of perspective. In addition we must demand high standards from our elected officials by withholding our attention vote from candidates who do not offer leadership and answers beyond a marketing campaign. Say what you want about Ron Paul and Dennis Kucinich (and maybe Mike Gravel too, but frankly, Dennis Kucinich's website is the only one that offers extensive discussion and includes many specific issues) but they are the only Rep/Dem candidates who deign to offer defined positions and arguments for those positions. They are the only candidates who give the citizens of this country the respect they deserve by speaking candidly to them. They are the only ones who have given us enough respect to deserve our attention as candidates to lead this country. However, this does not have to be the case. It could very easily be the case that Giuliani, McCain, Romney, Obama, Clinton and Edwards all provided clearly enunciated positions and arguments for those positions (the Internet has been here for nearly two decades, the least they could do is have a Wiki on their site) but not if we don't demand it, but not if we continue to pay attention to their advertisements and talk about their lives without regard for the their relevance to our lives. They won't pay attention to us until we start ignoring them. It must be noted that the basic idea here (dictating what and how things are spoken by not speaking about certain things) is nothing new, no one talked about (the bad things done by) Augustus Caesar, conquering armies have always removed statues of heroes and renamed streets, so have fascist governments, throughout the late 90s and early 00s news organizations stopped using the term "global warming" (climate change just didn't sound as bad, if you remember, it was barely discussed for nearly 10 years) and Bill O'Reilly doesn't speak the names of certain people he doesn't like. This is a tried and true method and you better believe that ideological organizations employ it and seek to get media companies to employ it for their benefit. But the bottom line is, it is our attention. If you want to keep being fed "dog food" eat like a dog (the words of a former Congressman and Clear Channel executive in reference to their radio content, dog food, because, of course, he considers those who listen to it dogs, don't believe me look here, so, yeah, that's what they think of you). If you want to read and think like a human exercise some discipline, take responsibility for what you read and pass on and don't eat dog food.