My fellow digital citizens ...  
Hmm, what comes next? I was very honored to be asked to contribute a column about (and for) “The Digital Citizen” in IEEE Internet Computing, but as I sat in front of the blank screen, index fingers poised, the meaning of the phrase seemed to melt into air. What might a digital citizen be? Is the phrase an oxymoron? Or a category error? Does it just mean someone who’s online? Are there analogue citizens?

I need to think about this. What should a column like this be about?

What Is a Citizen?
One way to approach this question is to work backward from a plain, ordinary citizen — plenty of great thinkers have tried to pin down precisely what citizenship is. Can the Dead White European Males have any relevance in today’s wired world? Yes, I think they can. They were responding to more or less the same problems and perils as we are. “’Tis the same wind in the same anger,” as the poet put it, “but then it threshed another wood.” Societies build up similar forces whose effects vary with context; each wood gets threshed in a different way. We need to understand not only our immediate environment but also the historic struggle to preserve the good life of the individual and the health of the community.

Citizenship is a measure of status within a community; a citizen can take part in certain processes and decisions. Sometimes that’s a right, sometimes a responsibility. As usual in philosophy, it’s the toga-clad ancients who set the terms of argument so convincingly that debates have scarcely changed since. Aristotle and the Athenians thought that the citizen should participate in decision-making — he (always a “he” for Aristotle) should rule as well as being ruled. The Romans, on the other hand, sought to unite their diverse empire with the more passive idea of equal legal status throughout. The Centurion rescued Saint Paul merely by telling his captain, “Take heed what thou doest: for this man is a Roman.”

A citizen’s responsibilities can include voting, being a good neighbor, tolerating others with whom you disagree, abiding by legitimate decisions, not free-riding on others’ efforts, defending the community against infiltration or attack, and doing your best to make sure that the conditions of a decent society are fulfilled. We must extrapolate from these to the digital world.

With these responsibilities should come rights, but what might they be for the digitally inclined? There are many suggestions, from John Perry Barlow’s 1996 claim that “from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge” (https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html) to Darrell Issa’s “Digital Bill of Rights” in 2012.1 But how do we decide between them? And — always the trouble with rights — who will enforce them?

The Value in Digital Citizenship
Which is another way of asking what the digital citizen is a citizen of. To begin with, any digital citizen is a citizen of a nation, inheriting the rights and responsibilities that go with that. On this unambiguous reading, the significance of the “digital” part of digital citizenship depends on whether it enhances basic citizenship. Wired individuals might (or might not) interact more effectively with their governments, hold them...
to account, or even launch political campaigns and careers.

This reading is neutral between the Greek and the Roman view: the Internet might facilitate activism (the Greek model), or merely let citizens engage more easily with governments (the Roman model) — for example, via e-government portals.

These issues have been explored for some time by researchers keen to understand whether being online improves or degrades citizenship — Karen Mossberger takes the positive view, for example (www.uic.edu/cuppa/pa/faculty/mossberger.html), and Matthew Hindman the negative (www.matthewhindman.com). Clickstreams and social attitude surveys generate plenty of data for researchers to crunch, and the Web Foundation’s Web Index (http://thewebindex.org) gives a new perspective. The value or otherwise of being a digital citizen as opposed to the vanilla-flavored variety requires understanding lots of related issues, such as digital divides. One thing is for sure: as more people become wired, the nature of national politics and citizenship will change (as it has in India, for example, where party, religious, and caste loyalties are increasingly being challenged by young, urban devotees of smartphones and social networks).

But there is a more challenging idea — that the digital citizen is a paid-up member of what Barlow called “Cyberspace, the new home of mind,” perhaps with Bitcoin as our currency and McAfee our army. The Web’s worldwide nature, the Internet’s interconnections, don’t eliminate the local, but they do provide new (and fast) routes to other places. Which means it’s harder to enforce rights universally, and when they are enforced, harder to restrict them to a selected set of people.

For example, the welcome move toward creating more public open data is driven partly by rights-based arguments — the “right to data.” Where I live in the UK, government can collect data because of the legitimacy I confer by voting as a citizen, and because of the resources I donate as a taxpayer. On those bases, I can argue that I have a right to non-personal, nonconfidential, nonsecret government data. All very well, but once the data is on data.gov.uk, anyone from any nation can download it. Is that a bad thing? Absolutely not, quite the opposite; but we can’t argue that a Frenchman or a South African has any kind of right to UK government data unless we make the further claim (as many do) that any digital citizen has the right to the same information as any other (“all digital citizens are created equal on the Internet,” is the third of Issa’s Digital Rights, and “digital citizens have a right to access the Internet equally, regardless of who they are or where they are” is the seventh).

Issa’s proposals are clear and naturally beguiling. Yet do they say so very much? Who will argue against privacy, or free speech, or motherhood and apple pie for that matter? The first two at least are essential, surely, for people to make the most of their digital citizenship. Yet what do they mean? How do we draw the lines? Which police forces, even in democracies, will give up powers of surveillance? Which social networks or search engines will give up their data on our relationships and quests for knowledge? Would we even want them to, given that if we disrupt their business models, we’ll have to pay hard cash for their services? Does privacy trump free speech, or the other way around? Wikileaks (http://wikileaks.org) is controversial, but does it perform no useful service whatsoever? How far should Google’s executives be held responsible for what’s on YouTube? Will Facebook ever look favorably on ladies’ nipples? The devil, one feels, will be in the details.

Citizens in Conflict

A landmark piece by sociologist T.H. Marshall argued in 1950 that the nature of citizenship was often determined by the conflicts citizens had undergone to achieve status within a community. Is this true in the digital age? What struggles mark our digital citizens? And how does going digital affect their progress?

The Twitter Revolution in Iran in 2009 was an interesting case in point. Tragically for those concerned, it was less of a fundamental change and more of a Twitter trend, with supportive tweets from the US and Europe confusing the picture in Tehran. Social media can certainly mobilize opinion, but the serious organization that can change the world requires hard, time-consuming, and sometimes dangerous work. New technology played a part in bringing down Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in 2011, but the ensuing election was won by the Muslim Brothers, who had been organizing since 1928. Internet-savvy anti-politicians across Asia, such as Imran Khan in Pakistan, Joko Widodo in Indonesia, and Ahn Chul-Soo in South Korea, can seriously challenge sclerotic governing dynasties, but as they approach power, they must still make accommodations with old-style party machines skilled at getting out the vote.

Changing the world needs stony realism — yet do we really understand the social significance of trending tweets or Facebook likes? Retweeting and liking are hardly costly, and translating the vague goodwill of armchair revolutionary- ies into committed action is non-trivial. Could the Iranian opposition have been misled in 2009 into risking their lives by fevered analysis and a Western-centric view of the possibilities of hi-tech? Mark Pfeifle, a national security advisor...
in President George W. Bush’s administration, even floated the idea of giving Twitter the Nobel Peace Prize.⁷

On the other hand, we shouldn’t neglect the possibilities of providing people with the tools to organize and get things done — to create, program, and drive what Tim Berners-Lee has called “social machines.”⁸ If we can move on from the usual model of crowdsourcing, in which a top-down system organizes the output of humans willing or incentivized to act as glorified computers or sensors, to something where communities can develop, maintain, and evolve such systems for themselves, then social machines could be an important resource for digital citizens. Ushahidi’s (www.ushahidi.com) map of the 2007 Kenyan violence remains an impressive demonstration of how technology can support a citizen’s ability to negotiate his or her environment.

A solution to a problem doesn’t keep its honorific status as a boon to humankind. Instead, it becomes part of a new environment in which we’ll find more problems and different opportunities. The forces and drivers molding the Internet depend on a diverse set of causes and sponsors. Businesses, governments, individuals, networks, policemen, thieves, slacktivists, pornographers, and inquisitors all conspire (tacitly, we assume, rather than literally) to create incentives and deterrents for different behaviors. As digital citizens, is it not our duty to try to ensure that the social good is rewarded and harm punished? But this is easier said than done.

Put another way, what’s good for the consumer can be bad for the citizen and vice versa. Pity most of us are both. “How hard is it,” asks Evgeny Morozov in his book The Net Delusion, “to imagine a site like Facebook inadvertently disclosing the private information of activists in Iran or China, tipping off governments to secret connections between the activists and their Western funders?”⁹ Or indeed between each other — Stéphane Bazan of Saint-Joseph University in Beirut has described how the Syrian government has been doing exactly that, using man-in-the-middle attacks to get access to dissidents’ social networks.¹⁰ So, the answer is, not hard at all, at least for President Bashar al-Assad’s cybergoons. As with many online phenomena, social networking cuts both ways.

We shouldn’t think that these battles are straightforwardly between democrats and authoritarians. First of all, a debate exists over what constitutes an authoritarian government — those of the US, Venezuela, Singapore, and Iran, to name but four, have strong claims to legitimacy, yet all have been known to play hardball with opponents. What appears authoritarian to one digital citizen might look very different to another on the inside. This isn’t to concede the notion of right and wrong to the relativists, but the Web is the World Wide Web, and it’s not the job of this digital citizen to judge every issue from his own perspective.

Secondly, authoritarianism has been privatized to a surprising degree. All but the harshest regimes have a stock of willing nationalistic activists who see a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack on an enemy government’s portal or an opposition blogger’s site as a patriotic act. Censorship, oppression, and cyberwarfare can be outsourced and rendered deniable easily enough — an approach, it’s worth noting, pioneered by my own government in England in the sixteenth century, with its arms-length support for privateers such as Sir Francis Drake (note the knighthood — this guy had friends in high places).

And although the Internet is a hard thing to police, it can be removed altogether, as the Chinese government did in its restive Xinjiang province for 10 months in 2009–2010,¹¹ thereby cleaving seven million users from the Net. Indeed, the ease with which the Internet can fragment is chastening given our penchant for assuming it’s a virtual or logical structure. It’s not so platonic that a de-peering spat between Sprint and Cogent (as occurred for three days in 2008)¹² can’t sever connections between vital institutions (in that example, between the US Department of Justice and the New York court system).

This shows us that we can’t simply take the Internet as a gift from God with no other external impact, as Andrew Blum pointed out in Tubes,¹³ his tour of the wires along which the Internet runs. It’s a physical thing as well as a logical construct — it runs along fibers, it can be chewed by squirrels. It has environmental effects (catalogued by Greenpeace in their 2011 report on dirty data¹⁴). “The cloud” is a floaty, ethereal name for something that consumes about 2 percent and rising of the global electricity supply. Do we digital citizens have responsibilities for that?

This is a lot of things to think about, and hardly an exhaustive list of questions. I don’t pretend all these issues will get a mention, or that I have the answers, but we clearly have a lot of debating and thinking to do before we get ourselves straight about how we should conduct ourselves online.

In the interests of transparency, it’s perfectly reasonable to want to know where this particular digital citizen is coming from. Well, I’m basically a skeptic — my intellectual hero is Montaigne, and my major philosophical influences are Wittgenstein and Hume. In politics,
Welcome to (and from) the Digital Citizen

I rank Adam Smith way above Karl Marx, which isn’t to say that Marx doesn’t provide very many insightful observations.

I don’t do wide-eyed admiration, and the word “awesome” will never appear in this column (except just there, so we’re past it now). Equally, I’m hardly a techno-pessimist; from my own research into open data and transparency, I’m firmly convinced that the Web has made the world a better place. But it’s vitally important to realize that you can’t just turn up in the field with a piece of tech and think that handing it over will automatically improve lives, however well-designed it is. Users are cussed folk, who intentionally or otherwise will do almost anything to subvert technology for innocent purposes or malign ones. It’s also cripplingly hard to determine what the effects will be when a new technology is deployed at scale. When the unintended consequences outweigh the intended ones by such a margin, it behooves us to be careful, respectful, humble, and imaginative.

We are all digital citizens, and we collectively and individually shape technology, just as it shapes us. It’s an endless dance in which we try to exploit new possibilities without ever quite knowing (or even caring) how they will affect the tribes and little platoons that give our lives meaning.

So, I don’t propose to lay down the law. Feel free to contact me any time with comments, criticisms, blueprints for revolution (bloody or otherwise), or suggestions for themes to explore and viewpoints to air. Had we but world enough and time, I’d cover the lot. Given that we haven’t, I’ll be selective.

However, one event I feel I must cover next time out — it won’t have escaped your notice that the leader of the free world for the next four years was chosen a short while ago.

At the time of writing, it looks to be a close-run thing between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, although you, my fellow digital citizen, will by now know the result. In the past, US elections have been extremely important in demonstrating the Internet’s possibilities (for example, the Howard Dean insurgency in 2004), as well as its limitations (for example, er, the Dean insurgency in 2004); certainly the Americans have been ahead of the curve in online campaigning. When the dust has settled, I’ll consider the evidence as to whether either barackobama.com or mittromney.com has made a difference — and if so, in what direction.

References

Kieron O’Hara is a senior research fellow in the Web and Internet Science Group in the Electronics and Computer Science Department at the University of Southampton. His research interests include trust, privacy, open data, and Web science. O’Hara has a DPhil in philosophy from the University of Oxford. Contact him at kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk.

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