

## /dev/random Discontent Creator

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Some enterprising individual on a business-oriented social media site recently tried to flatter me (at least, I'm presuming he meant it that way) into accepting him as a connection by labeling me "a fellow influencer and content creator." The naturally curious sort that I am, I decided I should probably try to understand what it was he was calling me by conducting a little online research. The Internet being a fractal rabbit hole that leads to an infinity of equally fractal rabbit holes, I got a little distracted. After six or seven hours I eventually ran across this definition for influencer: "a person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media."

Now, were I indeed any variety of influencer, my novels would doubtless occupy positions much higher on the bestseller list than they currently enjoy. My sales rankings are so abysmally low, in fact, that they very nearly wrap back around to the top like a pinball score. Regular readers of this column will also have a pretty clear idea what I think of social media. Associating me with a commercial product there would be a disastrous mistake on anyone's part, as I am at best a "dissuader" and at worst, "anathema."

I'm trying to remember the last time I influenced anyone to purchase something. My wife buys things at the store because I ask her to, but I don't think that really counts. This paucity of persuasive acumen is partly due to the fact that the majority of my friends are too old to be influenced by me or much of anyone else. By the time you get to my age, you like what you like and don't what you don't, regardless of what other people say. Besides, my idea of a ringing endorsement goes something like this: "I bought this three-horsepower slip-clutched double overhead cam citrus peeler yesterday and it hasn't fallen apart yet. Sweet." I don't habitually rate purchases, but if I did it would be with little crescent wrenches, not stars.

It's been my observation that facts and even basic grammatical awareness are largely regarded as irrelevant in the headlong rush to online influence. The medium is no longer merely the message; it now constitutes the whole enchilada. What is being said is far less crucial to modern audiences than *how* it is being said. Presentation has superseded rhetoric, form obliterated function. Communication itself has been wholly subsumed by advertising. Clarity and meaning are outmoded concepts.

Even the label "content creator" is spurious. We're *all* content creators, although most of us create content that doesn't need to exist in this or any other universe. There is nothing inherently salutary in creating content unless that content has value in and of itself. I, for example, allow every new kitten who comes to live in my house to flounce across my keyboard and thus construct a "short story." I suppose that makes my cats content creators, too. Content creators, I might add, who haven't the slightest interest in generating followers or accumulating likes, unless by "likes" one means petting and/or treats.

## Discontent Creator

Most of the content I see created in the IT realm is commendably utilitarian, which means someone, somewhere, probably has an actual use for it, even if it's only to give the folks in the C suite something to chew on while they're packing their golden parachutes. This stands in stark contrast to the bulk of what "influencers" produce, which resembles transcripts of conversations overheard in a high school hallway accompanied by *way* too many photos of the originator and is more closely related to secretion than creation. There has never before been a generation so fascinated with their own visages. I'm not really a fan of reflective surfaces around my house in general, much less selfies. Most pictures I've seen of myself are disturbing in good light, terrifying in bad.

Before the age of social media, writers often wrote stories. Some of these stories were factual, some flowed from a practiced imagination. While not every story rose to the level of high art, referring to them simply as "content" is akin to calling works of portraiture "pigment." Highways have no intrinsic worth until they enable vehicles containing people or goods to travel from place to place, just as content means nothing unless it conveys something significant to the reader other than self-referential metaphor. "Yo dawgs, check out my new cowboy boot b-ball kicks!!!!" is not what I'm talking about here.

The chief problem I see with content creation for its own sake is that it muddies an already densely opaque pool of verbiage. These people seem to be paid by the word, as well, which means they often take two paragraphs to say what could have been expressed in a single sentence. That really does no one any favors, especially in our era of breathtakingly short attention spans. The more fluff there is to wade through, the less likely the waders are to chance upon something they actually would benefit from reading. It's no wonder misinformation is rampant. The signal-to-noise ratio of the Internet has never been very high, but lately it seems to have plummeted off a precipice. Searching for reliable information online is like trying to find one specific pebble in a gravel parking lot, while a hundred "helpful" people crowd around, all pointing in different directions, shouting at you that they know exactly where it is.

My conclusions, then, are that "content creator" seems to be another name for "one who writes filler," and an "influencer" is what we of my generation called a "corporate shill." You may argue that this column demonstrates that I myself thereby meet the content creator definition, but I must respectfully dispute this assertion. What I create is quite clearly *discontent*, although with this being a pandemic-bedeveled election year, that market is already seemingly saturated. I have faith in the near-bottomless hunger of the public for toxic disillusionment, though. It certainly keeps Hollywood humming along.

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