

## **Introduction**

(Second Volume of "Netizens Netbook" (Draft))

This draft book is the second volume of what I hope will become a series of books about netizen development which started with the "Netizen Netbook". This second volume is intended in part to recognize the development of the netizen phenomenon that has taken place in the past 20 years.

In the early 1990s, Michael Hauben made a scientific discovery when he recognized that an important advance of our times is not only the Net (i.e. the Internet), but even more importantly the rarely recognized emergence of the Netizen. The netizen represents the empowered online global citizen striving to make the Net and the world it is part of a more desirable and grassroots controlled environment. The vision Michael had is the foundation of the first Netizens Netbook. He was able to articulate both the vision and the signs that the vision was becoming a reality in the actions and consciousness of netizens made possible by the Net.

The first Netizens Netbook grew out of both online suggestions to Michael that he put his inspiring articles into a book and my thoughts that there was a need for a book that could look ahead in a scientific way, as the 17th Century economic writings I was reading at the time did for their times.


Based on Michael and my desire to publish such a book, I spent several months gathering the different articles Michael and I had written and putting them into a volume posted online in January 1994, more than 20 years ago this year.

We announced that the book would be available online to download via the protocol known as ftp (file transfer protocol). We put an announcement in a local events-of-the-week newspaper. We were able to arrange to use a room at the local community college for the event.

Just a few people came. One of those attending was a teacher I had worked with at the Ford Dearborn Engine Plant. A postman we knew from the post office who was also a computer

enthusiast attended, as did a former neighbor who was a Commodore computer user. One person came from the notice in the events newspaper.

Michael read a selection from “The Net and the Netizen,” one of his chapters in the book.<sup>1</sup> I had planned to read something, but I do not think there was time so I didn’t present my selection. Mainly we managed to show that the book was put online and was available to be downloaded via ftp. This was January 12, 1994. It was only by 1993 that the Internet had substantially spread, though work on it had been in process for over 20 years by then, starting in 1973. The first Netizen Netbook was a pioneering publication. Its title was “Netizens and the Wonderful World of the Net,” Michael made sure the book was announced online. Later the title became "Netizens: On the history of Usenet and the Internet." It is now 20 years later. Much as Michael had envisioned the Internet has spread broadly and widely. Also what has spread is the excitement of netizens who recognize that they are empowered by the Net and they take on to explore what this empowerment makes possible. What has been quite fascinating is to meet and talk with netizens from different places around the world and to learn of their efforts and fortitude.

Also it has been quite fascinating to have had the experience of learning about and then becoming connected with the netizens of South Korea (where the Korean word for  Netizen is pronounced net-i-zen) and with netizens in China.

In both South Korea and China, the work has been welcomed and spread and has been developed further.

When looking for the concept of netizen on the Korean search engine Daum one colleague told me, “You are famous in Korea.” Actually it was the concept of ‘netizen’ and Michael’s work that was famous. But what a thrill it was to hear such a sweet compliment for the work.

It is in Korea that netizens played the crucial role in the election of the President of the country in 2002 and where netizens took seriously both the weaknesses and the strengths of the empowerment that the Net promised.

In China, there are hundreds of millions of netizens and their amazing activity, of which the creation of an anti-cnn web site to counter the media myths about China spread by the western media CNN and BBC etc. is only one example.

Many people in China have hope for the future. That hope, they say is based on netizens and what they do online to challenge the abuse of power.

There are other examples of important netizen achievements. For example, netizens in Egypt built a means to communicate across the divide of those with left or right political perspectives.<sup>2</sup> Based on such achievements the Egyptian people were able to bring down the Mubarak government in 2011. Indonesian netizens were able to spread their communication from online to off line so the Indonesian people could prevail against Suharto in 1998.

Over these years, Michael's work has been quoted or referred to in many scholarly articles. The concept of the netizen has spread and been developed in significant ways. See for example the work of Haiqing Yu about the new form of citizenship being explored by Chinese netizens,<sup>3</sup> or the work of Mark Poster about the potential of the netizen to provide a significant challenge to the corporate dominated globalization.<sup>4</sup>

For now, the tentative title for the new book is:

In the Era of the Netizen: Models for Participatory Democracy

I am proposing that the models for the future in politics, journalism, economics, and culture will emerge from those situations where there has been participation and communication to contribute to the generative development.

The dynamic form of the Netizen Netbook has been said to be “pathbreaking”, “seminal”, “a milestone” or the “renowned” book. Among the descriptions for Michael's work are, “the Original Netizen,” “scholar, and “the first participatory historian of the Internet”.

There have been other interesting observations that have grown out of the spread of both

the consciousness and the actions of netizens. For example, Mark Poster, a noted media scholar, recognized that “the netizen might be the formative figure of a new kind of political relations, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the Net and to the planetary political space it inaugurated.” In other words, creating a netizen global space along with contributing to a more netizen impacted nation state.

This new phenomenon, Poster maintains, “will likely change the relation of forces around the globe.” Poster continues, “In such an eventuality, the figure of the Netizen might serve as a critical concept in the politics of democratization.”

A different conception of the future that netizens may bring about has been proposed by Indian journalist Vinay Kamat who writes for the *Times of India*. He writes, quoting something written about South Korea:

“Not only is the Internet a laboratory for democracy, but the scale of participation and contribution is unprecedented. Online discussion makes it possible for netizens to speak out independently of institutions or officials.”

But then, referring to the growing number of netizens in China and India and the large proportion of the population in South Korea who are connected to the Internet, Kamat adds the implication that he sees. “Will it evolve into a 5th Estate?” he asks, contrasting the netizen and netizen journalism to the current mainstream media which is considered the 4th Estate. Kamat questions whether netizen online discussion will become a power replacing the mainstream media. “Will social and political discussion in social media grow into deliberation?” he asks. “Will opinions expressed be merely, ‘rabble rousing’ or will they be ‘reflective’ instead of impulsive?”<sup>5</sup> Articles such as these raise serious questions and hopes for the future, and they are just a few examples of the manifold articles being published around the world raising such questions about the possibility for the future of the netizen and netizen journalism and netizen democracy. These inspire me to hope that the new book will give some focus and encouragement to those raising such questions and exploring visions for the future. -----

Notes:

1. The chapter can be seen at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x01>. The whole book can be seen at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/>
2. See for example, "Netizens in Egypt and the Republic of Tahrir Square" <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/ronda2014/egypt.txt>
3. Haiqing Yu, "From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of Post-Mao China about netizens and new form of citizenship". A version is online at [http://www.crr.unsw.edu.au/media/File/media\\_citizenship.pdf](http://www.crr.unsw.edu.au/media/File/media_citizenship.pdf)
4. Mark Poster, *Information Please*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2006, page 70.
5. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/ampnbspWe-are-looking-at-the-fifth-estate/articleshow/11133662.cms>

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Ronda Hauben, February 20, 2014

## Preface

### What is a Netizen?

The story of Netizens is an important one. In conducting research four years ago online to determine people's uses for the global computer communications network, I became aware that there was a new social institution, an electronic commons, developing. It was exciting to explore this new social institution. Others online shared this excitement. I discovered from those who wrote me that the people I was writing about were citizens of the Net, or Netizens.

I started using local bbses in Michigan in 1985. After seven years of participation on both local hobbyist-run computer bulletin boards systems, and global Usenet, I began to research Usenet and the Internet. I found these on-line discussions to be mentally invigorating and welcoming of thoughtful comments, questions and discussion. People were also friendly and considerate of others and their questions. This was a new environment for me. Little thoughtful conversation was encouraged in my high school. Since my daily life did not provide places and people to talk with about real issues and real world topics, I wondered why the online experience encouraged such discussions and consideration of others. Where did such a culture spring from, and how did it arise? During my sophomore year of college in 1992, I was curious to explore and better understand this new on-line world.

As part of course work at Columbia University, I explored these questions. One professor's encouragement helped me to use Usenet and the Internet as places to conduct research. My research was real participation in the online community by exploring how and why these communications forums functioned. I posed questions on Usenet, mailing lists and freenets. Along with these questions, I would attach some worthwhile preliminary research. People respected my questions and found the preliminary research helpful. The entire process was one of mutual respect and sharing of research and ideas. A real notion of 'community' and 'participation' takes place. I found that on the Net people willingly help each other and work together to define and address issues important to them. These are often important issues which the conventional media would never cover.

My initial research concerned the origins and development of the global discussion forum Usenet. For my second paper, I wanted to explore the larger Net and what it was and its significance. This is when my research uncovered the remaining details that helped me to recognize the emergence of Netizens. There are people online who actively contribute towards the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications. These are the people who discuss and debate topics in a constructive manner, who e-mail answers to people and provide help to new-comers, who maintain FAQ files and other public information repositories, who maintain mailing lists, and so on. These are people who discuss the nature and role of this new communications medium. These are the people who as citizens of the Net, I realized were Netizens. However, these are not all people. Netizens are not just anyone who comes online, and they are especially not people who come online for individual gain or profit. They are not people who come to the Net thinking it is a service. Rather they are people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone's part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource. Netizens are people who decide to devote time and effort into making the Net, this new part of our world, a better place. Lurkers are not Netizens, and vanity home pages are not the work of Netizens. While lurking or trivial home pages do not harm the Net, they do not contribute either.

The term Netizen has spread widely since it was first coined. The genesis comes from net culture based on the original newsgroup naming conventions. Network wide Usenet newsgroups included net.general for general discussion, net.auto for discussion of autos, net.bugs for discussion of unix bug reports, and so on. People who used Usenet would prefix terms related to the online world with the word NET similar to the newsgroup terminology. So there would be references to net.gods, net.cops or net.citizens. My research demonstrated that there were people active as members of the network, which the term net citizen does not precisely represent. The word citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership. The word Netizen reflects the new non-geographically based social membership. So I contracted the phrase net.citizen to Netizen.

Two general uses of the term Netizen have developed. The first is a broad usage to refer to anyone who uses the Net, for whatever purpose. Thus, the term netizen has been prefixed in

some uses with the adjectives good or bad. The second usage is closer to my understanding. This definition is used to describe people who care about Usenet and the bigger Net and work towards building the cooperative and collective nature which benefits the larger world. These are people who work towards developing the Net. In this second case, Netizen represents positive activity, and no adjective need be used. Both uses have spread from the online community, appearing in newspapers, magazines, television, books and other off-line media. As more and more people join the online community and contribute towards the nurturing of the Net and towards the development of a great shared social wealth, the ideas and values of Netizenship spread. But with the increasing commercialization and privatization of the Net, Netizenship is being challenged. During such a period it is valuable to look back at the pioneering vision and actions that have helped make the Net possible and examine what lessons they provide. That is what we have tried to do in these chapters.

Michael Hauben, New York, November 1995

Last Updated: June 12, 1996.



## What the Net Means to Me:

The Net means personal power in a world of little or no personal power (of those other than on the top - who are called powerful because of money, but not because of thoughts or ideas.) The essence of the Net is Communication, of personal communication between individual people, and between individuals and those who in society who care (and do not care) to listen. The closest parallel I can think of are several fold:

1. Samizdat Literature in Eastern Europe.
1. People's Presses - The Searchlight, Appeal to Reason, Penny Press, etc.
1. Citizen's Band Radio
1. Amateur or Ham radio.

However the Net seems to have grown farther and be more accessible than the above. The audience is larger, and continues to grow. Plus communication via the Net allows easier control over the information - as it is digitized and can be stored, replied to, and easily adapted to another format.

The Net is the vehicle for distribution of people's ideas, thoughts and yearnings. What commercial service deals with the presentation of ideas? I do not need a computer to order flowers from FDT or clothes from the Gap. I need the Net to be able to voice my thoughts, artistic impressions, and opinions to the rest of the world. The world will then be a judge as to if they are worthy by either responding or ignoring my contribution.

Throughout history (at least in the USA), there has been a phenomenon of the Street Corner Soapbox. People would "stand up" and make a presentation of some beliefs or thoughts they have. There are very few soapboxes in our society today. The 70s and 80s wiped out public expression to the public via the financial crisis and growing sentiment of put your money where your mouth is. In the late 80's and early 90's, the Net has emerged as a forum for public expression and discussion. The Net is partially a development from those who were involved with the Civil Rights, Anti-war struggles and free speech movements in the 60s. The personal

computer is also a development by some of these same people.

Somehow the social advances rise from the fact that people are communicating with other people to help them undermine the upper hand other institutions have. An example is people in California keeping tabs on gas station prices around the state using Netnews. More examples of people reviewing musics - rather than telling others, you should really go buy the latest issue of Magazine X (rolling stones, etc) as it has a great review. This is what I mean by people power - people individually communicating to present their take on something rather than saying go get commercial entities' X view from place Y. This is people contributing to other people to make a difference in people's lives. In addition, people have debated commercial companies' opposition to the selling of used CDs. This conversation is done in a grassroots way - people are questioning the music industry's profit making grasp on the music out there.

The industry definitely puts profit ahead of artistic merit, and people are not interested in the industry's profit making motive, but rather great music.

Representation of two things:

1. Way of expressing one's voice - when that voice generally does not have a place in the normal political order.

1. Way of Organizing and questioning other peoples experiences so as to have a better grip on a question of problem.

Someone regaining control of one's life from society.

These are all reasons why I feel so passionately about 1) keeping the Net open to everyone, and having such connections being available publically, and 2) Keeping the Net uncommercialized and unprivatized. Commercialism will lead to growing emphasis on serving oriented rather than sharing oriented uses of the Net. Like I said before, it is NOT important for me to be able to custom order my next outfit from the Gap or any other clothing store. Companies should develop their own networks if they wish to provide another avenue to sell their products. In addition, commercial companies will not have it in their interest to allow people to use the Net to realize their political self. Again let me reemphasize, when I say politics, I mean power over one's lives, and surroundings. And this type of politics I would call democracy.