

INTRODUCTION

On the Development and Significance of the Participatory Global Computer Networks

A new millennium is approaching. To welcome this transition to a new era, computers and people around the world are interconnecting and interacting in a manner that is unprecedented. There are modest estimates that as many as 25 million people and a million computers are being connected via the Net. And the number is growing every day. Yet very few people know how the Net has evolved, and only a few have a perspective as to what its future direction should be.

This is a book about the creation and development of this participatory global computer network. It is about the history of the Net and the impact it is having on the lives of people today. The goal of this book is to provide needed perspective to make it possible to understand what impact the Net can have on the present and on the future of our society.

The following questions have been helpful to this research:

- 1) What is the vision that inspired or guided people at each step?
- 2) What was the social or technical problem or need that they were trying to solve?
- 3) What can be done to help to nourish the further extension and development of the Net and the social advance that the Net represents?
- 4) How can the Net be made available to a broader set of people?

One of the pioneers recently described how those who were involved in the early days of networking did not understand what particular changes their work would lead to, but they did understand that what they were doing would fundamentally change the world. He described how he realized that once two people across the continent could communicate via this new technology, then it would be possible for people around the world to communicate.

For those who are just becoming acquainted with Usenet and the Internet, beginning with Part I will provide an introduction to the on-line world and to some of the advantages of this new world. A glossary will be provided with brief definitions of technical terms and acronyms for those new to the Net. Readers already familiar with the Net may want to start with Part II, "The Past". All readers should find Part III, "The Future" and Part IV, "Contributions Towards a Theoretical Framework" useful. Also, though, readers can choose to begin with any particular section or article that is of interest, since these have been written to be read independently. These articles are intended as a contribution towards documenting the significance and nature of this eighth wonder of the world and the global communication it makes possible.

Today people around the world are communicating via these new technologies, and this communication is having a profound impact on people's lives. Knowing the details of how this participatory global computer network has been built will make it possible to build on the

achievement that it represents. Knowing where these developments have come from can help to judge what is the next step forward. The creation of time-sharing and of packet switching and of the Global Computer Network they have made possible are providing a powerful thrust forward for those who understand and are able to implement these new communication technologies.

Ronda Hauben
