FOREWORD

Netizens: On the Impact and History of Usenet and the Internet is an ambitious look at the social aspects of computer networking. It examines the present and the turbulent future, and especially it explores the technical and social roots of the "Net". A well told history can be entertaining, and an accurately told history can provide us valuable lessons. Here follow three lessons for inventors and a fourth for social engineers. Please test them out when reading the book.

The first lesson is to keep projects simple at the beginning. Projects tend to fail so the more one can squeeze into a year the better the chance of stumbling onto a success. Big projects do happen, but there is not enough time in life for very many of them, so choose carefully.

The second lesson is to innovate by taking something old and something new and putting them together in a new way. In this book the "something new" is invariably the use of a computer network. For example, ancient timesharing computer systems had local "mail" services so its users could communicate. But the real power of e-mail was when mail could be distributed to distant computers and all the networked users could communicate. Similarly, Usenet is a distributed version of preexisting bulletin-board-like systems. The spectacularly successful World Wide Web is just a distributed version of a hypertext document system. It was remarkably simple, and seemingly obvious, yet it caught the world by complete surprise. Here is another way to state this lesson: "If a feature is good, then a distributed version of the feature is good. And vice versa."

The third lesson is to keep on the lookout for "something new", or for something improved enough to make a qualitative difference. For example, in the future we will have home computers that are always on and connected to the Net. That is a qualitative difference that will trigger numerous innovations.

The fourth lesson is that we learn valuable lessons by trying out new innovations. Neither the original ARPAnet nor Usenet would have been commercially viable. Today there are great forces battling to structure and control the information superhighway, and it is invaluable that the Internet and Usenet exist as working models. Without them it would be quite easy to argue that the information superhighway should have a top-down hierarchical command and control structure. After all there are numerous working models for that.

It seems inevitable that new innovations will continue to make the future so bright that it hurts. And it also seems inevitable that as innovations permeate society the rules for them will change. I am confident that Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben will be there to chronicle the rapidly receding history and the new future, as "Netizens" increasingly becomes more than a title for a book.

Thomas Truscott
Durham
December 1995