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 nuturing 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.

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