

My Thinking on Netizens

by Xu Liang, May 1, 2012

In 1999, when I went to college, it was the first time for me to touch the internet. I still remember clearly the experience that day. I carefully got access into a website and browsed some news. Later I registered an email address and sent my first email. Afterwards I learned to chat online. The first time is always very fresh and exciting. But after the excitement diminished, I thought that the internet did not change our lives as much as what was described by others. I still remember I told my roommate disappointedly, he was an amateur for computer, that the internet could not do any more than email and browsing news. I admitted that the internet did make our lives much more convenient and more fast than before, but it just substituted for the role of newspapers, radios, and televisions. These inventions did not change the historical trail, neither did the internet. This was my opinion at that time.

In recent years, with the popularization of the internet, the internet was more and more necessary in our lives. I roughly spend a quarter of a day on internet. What is more important, we witness the power of the internet and social media in some big things, like the high speed railway crash in China, Arabic Spring, Occupy Wall Street movement and so on. I gradually realized that I underestimate the impact of the internet before. I am not sure if the internet will change the trail of human history, but I am sure that the internet does change the structure and management of human society. Why? First, the internet gives us another spacious space. In the cyber space, the demarcation of nations, classes, parties, groups and professions becomes vague. Identities and status of people are not set by the society. Second, the internet gives us another source of power. This power is not less than the invention of the atomic bomb. But the internet is different from the atomic bomb. The latter can be monopolized by a few people. The former should be shared by everyone. Actually, the bigger the power is, the fewer people have the atomic weapons, while the bigger the power is, the more people share the internet. Each internet user is both a source and a holder of the power. With great power comes great responsibility. In tradition, a few elites manage the society and make decisions. Now everyone can participate in the management and influence the decision-making process.

Let me go back to Michael and Ronda's book, *Netizens*. I have to admit the book is very visionary. It was not just because it foresaw the drastic social changes brought by the internet in the early 1990s before I touched the internet, but what is more important is that the book offers us a blueprint for our future society based on the internet, that is the netizen.

What is the netizen? According to the Haubens' introduction to me, the netizen does not equate to the internet user. Only those internet users who abide by a set of moral norms and do good things are netizens. The Haubens imagine that the netizens would be the mainstream in the cyber society and it would give birth to a good and equal society in reality which would break away from the traditional minority-ruling-majority model. Marx and many Communists once tried to construct

such a perfect society. They failed in practice. The internet and netizen probably provide a technological tool and a different way to realize the dream. This is our best wish.

However, we also should know it is a long way for the theory applying to the practice. The formation of the civil society in the real world tells us we can not expect a netizen society would form very soon. Like civil society is based on the rule of law, the netizen also should be based on a set of norms. But the formation of norms must be a free, open and voluntary process. Any government and organization should not make out such norms in the name of netizens, or the netizen society would repeat the tradition model.