

Review for Internet Research:

Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet

by Michael and Ronda Hauben

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345 pages

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Netizens delivers on its title. It provides a chronicle of the development of the Internet, and particularly the venerable part called Usenet. It is almost an ethnographic study, as the authors are also long term participants on Usenet. Not surprisingly, the book reflects some of the character and contains some of the benefits and drawbacks of Usenet itself, as many of the chapters were first posted on the Internet. There are repetitions, homely but sincere writing, overlapping themes and a good dose of acronymic jargon in some places which might deter the uninitiated. Some sections, replete with copies of postings or appended with detailed notes, almost look like what we have become so used to scanning through on our screens.

But beyond these idiosyncrasies, Netizens is a book which champions grass roots democracy. It speaks for and through the on-line citizens who helped shape the Net in its early days. The unfolding of ARPANET and unix is much more than a story of problem solving and the scientific method applied to new realms of computing. Like a fairy tale or myth we can enjoy hearing in many different versions, the birth of the Internet goes deep into our cultural psyche. It embodies what we want to believe about technological change: that it has loftier intent along with entrepreneurial energy. Of course, this is a very American story, so it is appropriate that it be told from the Haubens' American, yet gently challenging perspective.

This is where Netizens is most interesting and highlights a theme which is today much muted: the role of blue sky research and government funding. Their history assembles detailed quotes from many of the pioneers. Back in 1968 Licklider and Taylor, of the Advanced Research Projects Agency, envisaged a network of computers which would move communication capabilities far beyond the linear transportation model of sender to receiver which prevailed at the time. They understood the potential for users being "active participants in an ongoing process", and foresaw the development of communities based on affinity and common interests.

These were not visions with immediate commercial payback, and perhaps they never will be. The technical difficulties in establishing such a global network could only be handled through substantial amounts of non-profit funding, which is what ARPANET was given. One of the twists in the Internet story which lifts it to the level of near myth is the irony that the project had a military goal, but this required linking civilians so they could share information. The founding of unix had almost religious, and certainly philosophical undertones. The Haubens refer to

descriptions of its development as "a system around which a fellowship would form." Here they touch on another grand theme of the Internet, reflexive progression. They ask, with innocent and irrefutable logic: "How else should one go about designing communications programs but on an operating system designed with the basic principle of encouraging communication?"

Thus emerged a system which put power in citizens' fingertips and minds and eyes, provided a many to many capability, and raised the possibility of a read and write media as a counter to global leviathans. In their chapter on the effect of the net on professional news media, they again present real people's views and experiences to document their theoretical position. I must admit to a tiny thrill of recognition and pride, when I saw a quote from an Australian journalist of my acquaintance. And the pleasure of reading their book was enhanced by having met the Haubens at a conference or two. Probably nothing can replace face to face friendliness over a shared meal.

But they could not be further from an academic elite. Although Ronda in particular draws on seventeenth and eighteenth century economic works and philosophers, the book never loses sight of its democratic intent. A further theme of universal access penetrates each part of this history: past, present, future, and theoretical framework.

While the comparison between the Internet and the invention of the printing press is now commonplace, they flesh it out with succinct and pertinent quotes from Elizabeth Eisenstein's seminal book on the printing press in early modern Europe. And always highlighting the role of both technologies in opening new domains of learning, sharing, participating.

Unfortunately, one of their own examples shows the naivete in hoping for empowerment through technology alone. In late 1994, the National Telecommunications Information Administration held a virtual conference to consider future directions for the US infrastructure. There was an outpouring of support for the social benefits of the Internet from all corners of the country. Eloquent arguments were made for universal access. However, the public's input to NTIA was not acted on, and the US backbone of the Internet was privatized in May 1995. Another sad coda to that episode is that, according to the Haubens, only 80 public access sites to the on line conference were made available in libraries or other public places.

Correctly, they note that "One of the most difficult dilemmas of our times is how to deal with the discrepancy between the need for more public input into policy development and the actions of government officials who ignore that input."

These tensions, like the theme of universal access, remain critical, even as electronic commerce spreads, supposedly in response to "market forces." By offering us detailed insights into the early days of these still unresolved issues, Netizens reminds us that technology should serve the people.

They include part of a poem by Vint Cerf, another founding father of ARPANET. Written in the late 60s, it reveals his recognition of the intimate play between art and science, linked by a common thirst for knowledge. I could not help but remember his words as a keynote speaker at the Internet Conference in Montreal, nearly 30 years later, in response to a question from Scott Aiken, one of the founders of the Minnesota e-democracy project: "Democracy doesn't scale."

Netizens is an affirmation by the authors on behalf of all their fellow Usenet contributors, and all of us who have benefitted in some way from the altruism and free information which flows? across the Internet. There is an optimistic mantra: democracy can scale.

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