

MATT JONES

We Are All Netizens Now

<http://mattjon.es/blog/2013/11/we-are-all-netizens-now>

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The Net means personal power in a world of little or no personal power (other than those on the top – who are called powerful because of money, but not because of thoughts or ideas). The essence of the Net is Communication, of personal communication between individual people, and between individuals and those who in society who care (and do not care) to listen.

Michael Hauben What the Net Means to Me

The quote above is taken from an article written 1994, a few years after the invention of the Web and about 14 years before the mass-participation in social media networking sites.

Michael Hauben was an educationalist and researcher who enthused about the empowering nature of the Net as far back as the early eighties. Back then the Net was the collective name for Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), USENET and Email – all distributed electronic communication systems that were accessed through a dial-up connection to non-commercial computer networks.

These were the social networks of the day; not just bringing people together through the sharing of knowledge, but as ‘Netizens’ – a term coined by Hauben – people were using the network to unite for political change.

Of course, the people using the Net back then were a small minority and largely based in the US. You needed expensive hardware and the technical wherewithal to connect to the network, so if you were a Netizen, you were likely to be either associated with a University or work in the telecommunications industry.

Twenty-five years later and now a Netizen is just as likely to be someone under siege by their own government, communicating to the world via Twitter or Facebook about the injustices being inflicted on them by their unelected leaders.

But at the same time as the barriers to participation are being smashed down, we have the specter of control of the Net by both national governments and multinational content owning companies,

as well as deep concerns of privacy violations by the same social networks that have enabled the mass-participation in the first place.

These days, the Web is less like a web of connected information (as Tim Berners-Lee envisioned it), and more like nebulous cloud in which great things are being created but there's also potential for tumult and annihilation.

These issues come at a time when web technology has matured to the point where the open standards of the web can be used to deliver powerful content and tools for democracy to people connected to the network via their phones or other inexpensive hardware.

To look to the future we sometimes have to look to see how things were in the past. Michael Hauben's vision of the Net in the 80s concerned personal freedom, empowerment and democracy on distributed networks; making the technology work for us.

Every day, we play in the walled gardens of Twitter, Facebook, iOS, Google and Amazon; access is easy but we have neither freedom or privacy there. We are mostly oblivious to this, or at least happy to sacrifice our rights for the convenience of connecting with our friends or buying an eBook with one click.

The Net can offer so much more to society than this, but it's up to us as Netizens to make it.

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