

Candlelight 2008 and the 15th Anniversary of the 'Net and Netizens' Netizen Journalism as Watchdog Journalism

by Ronda Hauben

Abstract

In his pioneering research about the impact of the Internet, Michael Hauben recognized that the participatory nature of the Net made possible a new form of citizenship, a non geographic form. He called people who were developing this new form of citizenship, netizens. (1)

What would be the impact of this new phenomenon? Hauben investigated several areas where the impact of this phenomenon was particularly striking. One of these areas was journalism. What impact would this new form of non geographic citizenship, would netizens have on news media? Would netizens make possible a new form of journalism? The Net “gives the power of the reporter to the Netizen” Hauben wrote. (2)

This article explores the nature of what this power is. It considers the long desired goal for the press to act as a watchdog to challenge the abuse of power. During the more than 100 days of protest from May through August netizens in South Korea acted to make such a press? In this article, the events of Candlelight 2008, particularly the events of June 11 are examined to consider what can be learned from the experience of Candlelight 2008.

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The year 2008 marked the 15th anniversary of the publication of the article “the Net and Netizens” by Michael Hauben on the Internet in the summer of 1993.(3) Hauben posted this article in four parts because it was fairly long. It was based on pioneering research he had done about impact of the Internet by asking online users questions about how they were using the Net in that period of the early 1990s. Also at the time there was some use of the term net.citizen on the net. Hauben contracted the term net.citizen into the term netizen. Based on the responses, he received, Hauben put together a paper defining a new conceptual phenomenon he called the netizen.

The article summarizing his research was spread around the Net by the Usenet software network and by people forwarding it to each other via email. People embraced the concept of netizen to describe the social and political phenomenon that Michael had identified. (4) Netizen is not a passive identity. Rather a netizen is an active participant in the affairs of the Net and ultimately of

the world. Identifying as a netizen has become an identity people online have embraced. They consider themselves to be netizens.

In a recent book by Mark Poster, netizen was described as a political concept. (5) The impression is given that the concept showed up on the Net more or less spontaneously. This is not accurate. Before Hauben's work, the word netizen was rarely if ever used. After the wide online circulation of the article, the use of the concept netizen became increasingly common. It was a process of initial online research, of summarizing the research, of analyzing it, and then putting the research back online and people embracing it. This was the process by which the foundation for the concept of netizen was established.

The early 1990s was also a time when the privatization of the Internet was being actively promoted by commercial interests. Spreading the consciousness of oneself as a netizen became part of the fight defending the public essence of the Net from the growing power of commercial interests over the affairs of the Internet. An understanding of the origin and development of the concept of netizen has in various ways been obscured by those forces who wanted to promote the commercial domination of the Internet.

In the "Net and Netizens," Hauben wrote that the Net represents a significant new development. "We are seeing a revitalization of society," he explained. "The frameworks are being redesigned from the bottom up. A new, more democratic world is becoming possible." This new world had a number of characteristics that he outlined. He described a situation where "the old model of distribution of information from the central Network Broadcasting Company is being questioned and challenged. The top-down model of information being distributed by a few for mass consumption is no longer the only news."(6)

Hauben observed, "people now have the ability to broadcast their observations or questions around the world and have other people respond."

The computer networks, he wrote, "form a new grassroots connection that allows excluded sections of society to have a voice. This new medium is unprecedented. Previous grassroots media have existed for much smaller groups of people...."

The Net, Hauben argued, was providing netizens with the ability to create the content and to set the agenda for what is to be discussed. Thus netizens had the power to not only determine the content for discussion forums but also to design the forms that online discussions take.

Hauben wrote elsewhere that in its simplest form the power of netizens to determine the form and content of online discussion characterizes democracy, making the net and netizens a significant model for a democratic society. He challenged the claim that elections are the essence of democracy, since elections merely allow citizens to vote on candidates once every few years. Democracy, Hauben argued requires the active participation of the populace and it is a process where their discussion and debate can have some effect on the decisions made by government. That is what Hauben proposed to

be a more appropriate a model of democracy.

Another one of the earliest articles Hauben circulated online was about James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill. In 1825, James Mill wrote an Encyclopedia article about the Freedom of the Press. Mill wrote that government officials are likely to be corrupt. These officials are put in a situation where they have power. Therefore a means is needed to monitor and contain their use of this power. Mill suggested society needs a press that functions as a watchdog to oversee the use of power by government officials. The Net, Hauben wrote, makes such a watchdog possible.

The “Net and Netizens” was first posted online in 1993. The conceptual understanding it proposed at that time in the early 1990s was something new. The question to be raised is: How accurate was Hauben’s assessment of the potential of the Net and of the netizen to make a more democratic world possible?

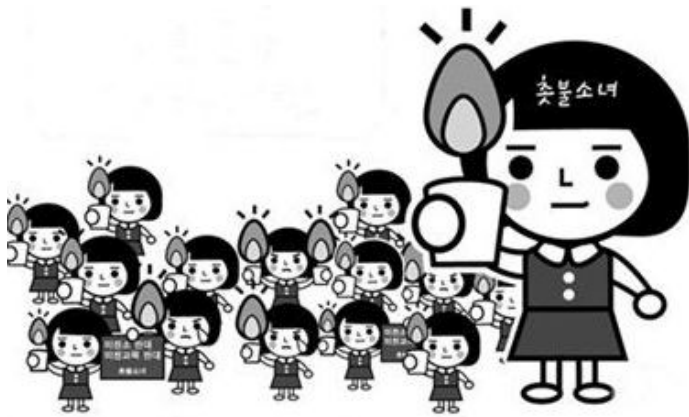
In order to answer this question, it is helpful to look at recent political developments in South Korea, because netizens in South Korea have been at the forefront of the struggle to explore the potential of the Internet and the netizen to create a more democratic society.

In 2003 an article in the Financial Times reported that the new South Korean President had been elected by netizens.

It described the election of 2002. The actions of netizens during this election made it possible for the president to be someone from outside the political establishment. Roh Moo-hyun was elected for a five year term as the President of South Korea. (7) Roh had run on a platform supporting participatory democracy.

In 2004 the National Assembly tried to impeach him and netizens took up the fight against the attempted impeachment. One of the means of fighting for democracy in South Korea are candlelight demonstrations. An activist in South Korea explained that one of the sources of inspiration for candlelight demonstrations in South Korea were the candlelight demonstrations in Leipzig, Germany that helped to reunite Germany in 1989.(8)

In 2008, there were over 100 days of candlelight demonstrations in South Korea. The first of these demonstrations was held on May 2, 2008.(9)



Candlegirl and Her Army
@Nanum Munhwa

The first candlelight demonstration on May 2 was the result of online discussion and efforts by netizens on discussion groups, which on the Korean Internet are called cafes. Realizing the concern expressed in online discussion about what was happening in South Korea, middle and high school students used cell phones and fan websites to announce what became the first major candlelight demonstration of May 2008.

The demonstration was part of an expression of popular frustration with the new South Korean President Lee Myung-bak. Lee Myung-bak, a conservative candidate, had won the presidential election in December 2007. During this election, Internet posts about the candidates by netizens were subjected to censorship, with many of the posts being removed on the order of the government, and over 1000 netizens receiving summons to report to police stations in South Korea to be penalized for their posts. (10) This was part of a harsh censorship of online activity by netizens trying to participate in the 2007 election campaign carried out by the South Korean government from June 2007-December 2007. Then in April 2008, Lee Myung-bak came to the U.S. and signed an agreement with George Bush. The agreement ended the former restrictions on the export of U.S. beef to South Korea. It eliminated the regulations that existed to provide precautions with regard to the danger of mad cow disease or other health concerns related to beef. Virtually all the restrictions were to be removed.(11)

Middle school and high school students felt the change in regulations on beef would add to their health concerns, along with their concern with other plans the Lee Myung-bak administration had announced to make unpopular changes in the laws in South Korea. Also there was an impeachment petition being circulated online. A number of people in South Korea felt that the new president and his proposed program would take South Korea back to its autocratic past. The candlelight demonstrations were a sign that many in South Korea saw the actions of the new president as a difficult problem for their country.

In August Oh Yeon-ho, the CEO and founder of the Internet newspaper *OhmyNews* gave a

talk in the U.S. about the candlelight 2008 demonstrations. *OhmyNews* which was started in 2000, as an internet newspaper pioneered a number of new forms in its commitment to be a 21st century newspaper.(12)

The Korean edition of *OhmyNews* combines articles submitted by its regular staff with those submitted by volunteer correspondents from the Korean-speaking population at home and abroad. The staff fact checks the articles and then decides which will be put on the *OhmyNews* front page. The Korean edition has a regular staff. The smaller English language edition of the newspaper known as *OhmyNews International* has only a very minimal staff and its edition is mainly based on contributions of articles by people. The Korean edition of *OhmyNews* is a major newspaper in South Korea.

There's been a very proud tradition in South Korea of protest and sacrifice. In 1987 through large protests the South Korean people ended the military dictatorship which had governed their country. But only in the last 10 years had people felt that they had some minimal level of democracy. In his talk, Oh Yeon-ho explained that people had committed themselves to using the Internet to try to guarantee and spread that democracy.

OhmyNews had played an important role in the 2008 demonstrations. One of *OhmyNews*'s important contributions was to start *OhmyTV*. Because of *OhmyTV*, people around the world were able to watch the demonstrations in South Korea. Even if one didn't speak Korean, one could have a good idea of what was going on in the demonstrations by watching *OhmyTV*. At times, *OhmyNews* had 24 hour coverage. Also there were articles and photos about the candlelight demonstration. There were articles covering the Candlelight in the English edition of *OhmyNews*, some of which were translated from the Korean edition of the newspaper.

Though netizen is not a Korean word, it has been adopted in Korea. Some online users refer to the word netizen to describe when they are active defending democracy using the Internet. Netizens in South Korea took on to broadcast whatever was going on. They would use text messages sent via their cell phones or their laptops. They would discuss what was happening online.

A report on the demonstrations by France24 demonstrated this consciousness of oneself as a netizen. The reporter interviews someone she calls a netizen with his laptop. Even when the police were using water cannons attacking the demonstrators, one could see some netizens with plastic over their laptops trying to film what was going on. People took their cameras, their cell phones and in any way they could, would broadcast on the Internet what was happening. They would get broadcasts back from other people at other areas of the demonstrations. Along with the *OhmyTV* broadcasts, there were many other sources of broadcasts, as for example via the Korean online video portal Afreeca or via YouTube. People who were not at the demonstration would discuss what they saw and interact with the demonstrators via their computers or cell phones. As one person explained, netizens could go with their laptops to the demonstration. They could be at the demonstration and be online at the same time. So these two experiences really came together in a lot of ways for a number of people during these demonstrations.

Some netizens emphasized that the Candlelight 2008 demonstrations were different from the prior tradition of demonstrations. In South Korea, there is a tradition of militant demonstrations in the struggle for democracy. The demonstrations in 2008, however, were festivals. There were people of all ages participating. There were men, women, and children at the demonstrations. People would bring their instruments. For example, in the middle of the police attacking protesters at one of the demonstrations, some people began to play their accordions. At other times, there would be singing. There would be dancing. There was debating. There was a free speech stage set up. People would line up for a chance to speak. Others would listen and react to the speakers. And the demonstrators posted their articles, photos and videos on the Internet, so that they became the press. Hence they were no longer dependent on how their demonstrations were reported in the traditional media.

In order to understand what happened during Candlelight 2008, it is crucial to recognize that South Korea is advanced in terms of the Internet.

South Korea is among the most advanced nations having the highest number of people connected with broadband access. What has happened in South Korea presents a glimpse into the future demonstrating what is possible when a large number of people in a country have access to high speed broadband connectivity.

If the Internet can spread widely and if there's inexpensive wireless available, people can have access to the internet and to write, to share their videos, and to carry on discussions about what is happening in the world. This form of broad access can function as a watchdog over government officials. This was demonstrated at times during the demonstrations when netizens filmed or took photographs of the actions of the police. These films or photos at times were a protection for people from the arbitrary actions of the police.

A significant set of events demonstrating the power of the Internet to make possible a more participatory democracy occurred during the demonstration that took place in Seoul on June 10 and continued into the early hours of June 11. A very big demonstration was planned for June 10th, to celebrate the victory twenty-one years earlier of South Koreans over the military government in South Korea in June 1987. Some estimate as many as 600,000 to 700,000 people participated in the demonstration in Seoul on June 10, with over one million people participating around the country. To prepare for the demonstration, the government created a blockade of the president's house, which is called the Blue House, to keep the demonstrators from marching to the Blue House. The police put up barriers. These were shipping containers, filled them with sand so they are said to have weighed 40 tons each. They put grease on them to prevent people climbing over the blockade

Netizens named this structure, "Myung-bak's castle". They made a wikipedia entry for this as a landmark of Seoul. They decorated the landmark with their posters.



This is a photo of what happened later, after the June 10 demonstration, from 12 midnight on June 11 until 5:30 am. On one side of the barrier is the crowd of people discussing what should they do about the barriers.

On the other side of the shipping containers, there are buses filled with police inside and outside guarding the President's house.

Someone brought blocks of styrofoam to the demonstration area, making it possible to create a structure to breach the shipping container barricade. After the main demonstration was over in the

early morning hours of June 11, a discussion was carried out by the demonstrators debating what to do about the barrier. Some argued that the demonstrators should go over the barricade. Others argued that this was too dangerous, especially given the candles and the inflammability of the Styrofoam and the grease on the barricades. The discussion continued for 5-1/2 hours, with people lining up on both sides of the debate. Through the discussion people decided not to go over the barricade. Instead several people with their banners went up on the barricade to show that they could have gone over it if they wanted to but that they had decided not to.

The photo presents the contrast between what's supposed to be democracy, which is the side of the barricade is the area filled with police protecting the President from communicating with the people. On the other side of the barricade were the people holding a serious discussion and deciding how to resolve a difficult difference of opinion.

On this side of the barricade, the people communicated with each other, demonstrating the power and generative nature of democracy. People online wrote about how important it was to them, to see that there could be a discussion where people had real differences which they could resolve. This was significant in two ways:

First, they figured out how to resolve the differences to come to a decision among all of them.

Second, they cooperatively determined how to construct a structure that would enable them to carry out their decision. In this example, the potential to generate a form and content was transferred from the online world to the demonstration area.

The discussion and decisions carried out on June 11 were by a combination of people acting as netizens and as citizens. What they did, I want to propose, represents an important achievement and



serves as a fitting celebration of the 15th anniversary of the publication online of the “Net and Netizens”.

Notes

(1) See for example, Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, “Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet”, IEEE Computer Society, Los Alamitos, CA, 1997. There is an online version of the book at:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook>

(2) Michael Hauben, “The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media”, in “Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet”,. There is an online version of the book at:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook>

(3) The “Net and Netizens” is the first chapter of the book “Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet”. There is an online version of the book at:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook/>

(4) “Socially” is used here because the concept of netizen refers to having a concern for the well being of others, not only for one’s own concerns and interests.

(5) Mark Poster, “Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines”, Durham, NC, 2006, p. 78.

(6) For example, there was difficulty getting the book “Netizens” published and distributed widely.

(7) Ronda Hauben, “Online Grassroots Journalism and Participatory Democracy in South Korea,” in Korea Yearbook 2007, edited by Rudiger Frank, James E. Hoare, Patrick Kollner, and Susan Parnes, Brill, Leiden, 2008, p.61-82.

(8) Interview with Lee Tae-ho of PSPD, 18 July 2006.

(9) See the description of how the May 2, 2008 demonstration was self-organized in the film:

(10) Ronda Hauben, “Netizens Censored in South Korean Presidential Election, OhmyNews International, December 25, 2007.

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=381313&rel_no=1

(11) Ronda Hauben, “Candlelight 2008 and Behind the Scenes in the Beef Deal: the Role of the OIE in Changing the Category of US Beef in South Korea”, OhmyNews International, May 6, 2009.

http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=385186&rel_no=1

(12) Online Grassroots Journalism and Participatory Democracy in South Korea, p. 64-67.