

[Editor's Note: Also in celebration of the 15th Anniversary of the print edition of *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, Ronda Hauben made the following presentation at the Hope Institute in Seoul South Korea on Aug 10, 2012.]

Korea and the Era of the Netizen

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Part I – Introduction

In my talk today I want to provide some background to how the concept of the netizen came to be recognized and how the understanding and practice of netizenship has spread around the world.

Then I want to focus on developments by netizens in South Korea and try to begin a discussion of the significance of this development and its implications for the future of democracy.

Fifteen years ago, on May 1, 1997, the print edition of the book *Netizens* was published in English. Later that year, in October, a Japanese translation of the book was published. *Netizens* was the first book to recognize that along with the development of the Internet, a new form of citizenship had emerged. This is a form of citizenship that has developed based on the broader forms of political participation made possible by the Net.

The book *Netizens* documents the emergence of this new political identity. It also explores the potential for how netizens will change the social structures and institutions of our society.

A recent article in the Reader's Opinion section of the *Times of India* newspaper referred to a paper I wrote about South Korean netizens in 2006. Quoting my paper, the *Times of India* article said, "Not only is the Internet a laboratory for democracy, but the scale of participation and contribution is unprecedented. Online discussion makes it possible for netizens to become active individuals and group actors in social and political affairs. The Internet makes it possible for netizens to speak out independently of institutions or officials."

The writer in the *Times of India* article pointed to the growing number of netizens in China and India and the large proportion of the population in South Korea who are connected to the Internet.

"Will it evolve into a 5th estate?" the article asks, contrasting netizens' discussion online with the power of the 4th estate, which is the mainstream media.

"Will social and political discussion in social media grow into deliberation?" asks Vinay Kamat, the author of this article, "Will opinions expressed be merely 'rabble rousing' or will they be 'reflective' instead of 'impulsive'?"

Both South Korea and China are places where the role of netizens is important in building more democratic structures for society. South Korea appears to be more advanced in grassroots efforts to create examples of netizen forms for a more participatory decision making process. But China is also a place where there are significant developments because of the Internet and netizens.

Later in my talk I will refer to Chinese netizen developments, but first I want to look at the work that the co-author of the netizens book Michael Hauben did to develop and spread an understanding of netizens. Then I want to look at some of the netizen achievements I have observed in South Korea.

Part II – About Netizens

First, some background.

In 1992-1993, Michael Hauben, then a college student who had gotten access to the Net, wondered what the impact of the Net would be.

He decided to do his research using the Net itself. He sent out several sets of questions and received many responses. Studying the responses, he realized something new was developing, something not expected. What was developing was a sense among many of the people who wrote him that the Internet was making a difference in their lives and that the communication it made possible with others around the world was important.

Michael discovered that there were users online who not only cared for how the Internet could help them with their purposes, but who wanted the Internet to continue to spread and to thrive so that more and more people around the world would have access to it.

He had seen the word 'net.citizen' referred to online. Thinking about the social concern he had found among those who wrote him, and about the non-geographical character of a net based form of citizenship, he contracted 'net.citizen' into the word 'netizen'. Netizen has come to reflect the online social identity he discovered doing his research.

Here is an excerpt from one of the questions he posted on line during this period in the early 1990s when the Internet was just spreading and becoming more widely available:

“Looking for Exciting Uses of the Net”

“...I would like to know about people’s uses of the network(s) that have been especially interesting, valuable and/or exciting. I want to hear about people’s delights and also disappointments.”

Gathering all the replies he had received, he wrote a paper describing his research. The paper was titled, “The Net and Netizens: The Impact the Net has on People’s Lives.” This research was done in 1992-1993. At that time, the Internet was spreading to countries and networks around the world.

He posted his paper on July 6, 1993 on several of the discussion forums known as Usenet and on several Internet mailing lists. It was posted in four parts under the title “Common Sense: The Net and Netizens: the Impact the Net is having on people’s lives.” People around the world found his article and helped to spread it to others. The term netizen quickly spread, not only in the online world, but soon it was appearing in newspapers and other publications offline.

This paper initiated the conscious awareness of netizenship as a new form of citizenship.

The concept and consciousness of oneself as a netizen has continued to spread around the world.

In a talk he gave in Japan in 1995, Michael explained that there were two uses of the word netizen that had developed:

Netizens are not just anyone who comes online. Netizens 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. (Hypernetwork ‘95 Beppu Bay Conference)

This usage of netizens is the usage I am referring to in my talk today as well.

“The Net and Netizens” was but one of a number of articles Michael wrote about the research he was doing about the Net.

During this period I collaborated with Michael, also doing research and writing. Our different articles were often based on what we had learned from people online and which we subsequently posted online.

In January 1994 we collected our papers into an online book we titled *Netizens and the Wonderful World of the Net*, or in its shortened title “The Netizens Netbook.”

In 1997 a second version of the book was published in a print edition titled *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* in English in May, and then in a Japanese edition in October.

Among the responses Michael had received to his work was one from a professor in Japan, Shumpei Kumon. The professor wrote: “I am a social scientist in Japan writing on the information revolution and information oriented civilization. Since I came across the term ‘netizen’ about a year ago, I have been fascinated with this idea.”

Professor Kumon wrote, “It seems that the age of not only the technological understanding but, also political-socio-revolution is coming, comparable to the citizen’s revolution in the past. I would very much like to do a book on that theme.”

When Professor Kumon’s book on netizens was published in Japanese, its title in English was *The Age of Netizens*. The book begins with a chapter by Michael on the birth of the netizen.

In the 1992-1994 period, a significant critique of the professional news media was developing among netizens. In the chapter of the *Netizens* book, “The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media,” there are a number of observations made by people online who recognize that this new media makes possible the participation of a broader set of people in reporting the news and that the range of news is also considerably expanded.

Part III – Some Examples of New Forms of Netizens Reporting the News

In order to consider in more concrete terms the new form of citizenship and the new form of media that the Internet makes possible, I want to describe some examples drawn mainly from South Korea (though there are other examples from China, and other countries that it would be valuable to discuss during the question period if we have time.)

A. South Korea and the Netizens Movement

My first experience with netizens in South Korea was in 2003 when I saw an article in the *Financial Times* that the new president of South Korea at the time, Roh Moo-hyun, had been elected by the Netizens.

This was, as you can imagine a very striking news article for me to find, not previously knowing anything about the struggles of the netizens in South Korea. But subsequently I learned that the Netizens book was known by several

in the academic community. For example, Professor Han Sang-jin of Seoul National University (SNU) told me he used the book in a class at SNU. Professor Kang Myung-koo also of SNU learned of the book from the Japanese edition and it had an influence on his thinking, and Professor Yun Yeon-min of Hanyang University learned of the book from its online edition, and it inspired him to write his early book about South Korean networking titled “A Theory of Electronic Space: A Sociological Exploration of Computer Networks” (Seoul: Jeonyewon).

When during a trip to Seoul in 2005, I asked a number of different people that I met if they are netizens. They all responded “yes” or “I hope so.”

There have been a number of important netizen developments in Korea. These include:

- 1) Helping to build what became large candlelight demonstrations against the agreement governing the relations between the U.S. government and South Korea. This agreement is known as the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA for short) in Nov., 2002.
- 2) Helping to build the campaign for the presidency of South Korea for a political outsider Roh Moo-hyun in Nov-Dec 2002.
- 3) Helping to create a climate favorable to the development of online publications.

In 2002 the *Sisa Journal*, a Korean weekly, named ‘Netizens’ as the person of the year. This represented a rare recognition at the time of a new and significant phenomenon that is represented by the emergence and development of the netizen.

A subsequent example demonstrating how netizens have been able to have an impact on science policy is the case involving the stem cell scientist Hwang woo-suk in South Korea. Hwang had been considered a top Korean scientist and his scientific achievements were celebrated by the Korean government. Netizens in South Korea were able to demonstrate that Hwang had doctored photographs of his research to present fraudulent results.

Lee Myung-bak won the South Korean presidency in 2007. In April 2008, he went to the U.S. and agreed to a beef agreement ending the former restrictions on the import of U.S. beef into South Korea.

Starting on May 2 there were 106 days of candlelight demonstrations in South Korea protesting the administration of Lee Myung-bak and calling for his impeachment. (I was in South Korea when the first candlelight demonstration occurred on May 2 but wasn’t able to go to it.)

One of the most remarkable events of the 2008 Candlelight demonstrations occurred on June 10-11. A big demonstration was planned for June 10 to celebrate the victory over the military government in South Korea in June 1987 that led to direct popular election of the ROK president.

To try to keep the demonstrators from marching on the Blue House, the presidential residence, the Lee Myung-bak administration set up shipping containers as barriers and filled them with sand. Then they were covered with grease so that people would not be able to climb over them.

Netizens named these structures the Lee Myung-bak castle. They made a Wikipedia entry for it as a landmark of Seoul. They decorated this new landmark of Seoul with graffiti.

On the other side of the shipping containers there were buses filled with police inside and outside the buses, guarding the president’s house.

Blocks of styrofoam were used at the demonstration to build a structure to be able to go over the police barricade.

There was a 5-1/2 hour discussion with people supporting the different positions in the debate. Through the discussion people decided not to go over the barricade for a number of reasons. Many people felt it was too dangerous to go over it. Instead several people with their banners went up on the barricade.

The people who went up on it did so to show that they could have gone over it if they wanted to, but that it had been decided not to.

The situation presented the contrast between what is supposed to be democracy, which is the side of the barricade protecting the President from communicating with the people. And what is democracy, which is the people communicating with each other on the other side of the barricade. People online wrote how important this all was to them, to see that there could be a discussion where people who had real differences came to a decision taking those differences into account.

This was significant, I feel, in two ways. First they figured out how to resolve their differences to come to a decision. Second they cooperatively determined how to construct a structure that would enable them to carry out their decision. They took what they could do online and they did it offline.

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.

There is one other netizen development that I want to mention in this talk.

This is the situation that happened with respect to the South Korean war ship Cheonan in 2010. The ship broke in two and sank on March 26, 2010. At the time, it had been involved in naval exercises with the U.S. military in an area of the West Sea/Yellow Sea between North Korea and China. This is a situation that soon became the subject of much discussion among netizens.

Initially the South Korean government and the U.S. government said there was no indication that North Korea was involved. Then at a press conference held on May 20, 2010 in Seoul, the South Korean government claimed that a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine had exploded in the water near the Cheonan, causing a pressure wave that was responsible for the sinking. Many criticisms were raised about this scenario.

First, there is no direct evidence of any North Korean submarine in the vicinity of the Cheonan. Nor is there any evidence that any torpedo was actually fired causing the pressure wave phenomenon. Hence there was no actual evidence that could be presented in court of law to support the South Korean government's claims.

In fact, if this claim of a pressure wave phenomenon were true even those involved in the investigation would have to acknowledge that this would be the first time such an action was used in actual fighting.

What I am interested in, however, is how netizens responded to this situation.

What is unusual and something I find especially interesting is that netizens who live in different countries and speak different languages took up to critique the claims of the South Korean government about the cause of the sinking of the Cheonan. It appears, also, that such netizen activity had an important effect on the international community. And it appears to have acted as a catalyst affecting the actions of the UN Security Council in its treatment of the Cheonan dispute.

Such activity is the basis for what I refer to as a new form of news.

There were substantial analyses by NGO's like Spark, PSPD, Peaceboat and others posted online in English as well as Korean. These were distributed widely online.

There were also discussions and critiques at American, Japanese and Chinese websites that I saw when searching online during the period that the Security Council was discussing the Cheonan incident.

One example of such a critique was by an American blogger, Scott Creighton, who uses the pen name Willy Loman. He wrote a post titled, "The Sinking of the Cheonan: We are being lied to."

In a post he titled "A Perfect Match?," he showed that there was a discrepancy between the diagram displayed at the press conference held by the South Korean government and the torpedo part that the South Korean government claimed it had found near where the ship sank.

The South Korean government claimed that the diagram was from a North Korean catalogue offering this as proof that the torpedo part was of North Korean origin.

On his blog, Loman showed how the diagram was of a torpedo different from the part of the torpedo the South Korean government had put on display. The diagram was of the PT97W torpedo, while the part of the torpedo on display was of the CHT-02D torpedo.

Much discussion followed this post on Loman's blog, both from Americans and also from Koreans. At first the South Korean government denied these claims. But three weeks later in response to a question from a journalist, the government acknowledged that Loman was right.

In a post titled "Thanks to Valuable Input" Loman wrote: "Over 100,000 viewers read the article and it was republished on dozens of sites all across the world (and even translated). A South Korean MSM outlet even posted our diagram depicting glaring discrepancies between the evidence and the drawing of the CHT-02D torpedo.... But what we had, was literally thousands of people across the world committed to the truth...." It was signed Willy Loman.

Such online discussion and posts appeared to have acted as a catalyst to encourage the UNSC to act in a neutral way toward the two Koreas, with the Security Council giving time to hear from both sides of the dispute and encouraging the two Koreas to settle the dispute peacefully. A Presidential statement issued by the Council on July 9, 2010 took a balanced view, stating the different views of both sides, but without assigning blame to anyone.

Part IV – Implications

Describing the ability of citizens to discuss issues online on the Chinese Internet, an Australian researcher, Haiqing Yu, a researcher at the University of Melbourne, realized that there was an important phenomenon developing among some of the people online in China who identified as netizens. They were exploring how the Internet could help them to contribute to their society.

She explains in her book *From Active Audience to Media Citizenship* that there is a new manifestation of what it means to be a citizen and to express one's citizenship developing on the Internet, that it is a more mobile and flexible

manifestation than previously. (p. 307)

She maintains that the virtual space of the net has become a public forum that makes it possible for ordinary people to take part in the traditional media's agenda setting and government decision making and law-making functions. Haiqing Yu writes, "Citizenship is not an abstract concept discussed in ivory towers among elite intellectuals. It is a mediated social reality where ordinary people can act as citizens of a nation when they use the Net to talk, discuss, petition and protest."

In a similar observation, Michael Hauben noted that, "The collective body of people assisted by Net software, has grown larger than any individual newspaper."

The implication from these two different observations is that a new form of global media and a new form of citizenship are developing. Instead of the traditional news reporting which is actually the news of a certain set of elite economic and political interests, there is the ability developing among netizens to have real debate on issues on the Net. This new media includes the participation of a broader set of people who hold a wider more encompassing set of diverse perspectives.

Actually the ability to have this broader set of perspectives that the Net makes possible is helping to create a new media and a new role for the citizen. These are gradually supplanting the traditional forms of journalism and of citizenship.

Part V – Conclusion

I want to point to an analysis of the netizen by media historian Mark Poster in his book *Information Please*. The book considers the effect of globalization on the citizen and argues that with globalization the citizen loses the power to be able to have any influence on government officials. The concept of the netizen, however, intrigues Poster, as he sees in this concept the potential to forge a new identity that is capable of opposing and challenging the harmful effects of globalization.

Poster explains, "This new phenomena will likely change the relation of forces around the globe. In such an eventuality, the figure of the netizen might serve as the critical concept in the politics of globalization."

I want to support Poster's argument but I propose our time can best be described as the Era of the Netizen. The ability of the netizen to focus on communication and participation to affect the institutions of the society, is a critical characteristic of this new Era.

In his article comparing the impact of the Net on our society, with the impact of the printing press to bring revolutionary changes to the society after it was introduced, Michael wrote, "The Net has opened a channel for talking to the whole world to an even wider set of people than did printed books."

In conclusion, considering the examples of the response of netizens to the problems raised by the investigation of the Cheonan incident, I want to propose that the importance of the collaborative response of netizens supporting each other from diverse countries and cultures is but a prelude to the potential of netizens around the world in different countries to work together across national borders to solve the problems of our times.

Thank you for your attention and we welcome your questions and comments.