

**Netizens and Communication: A new Paradigm**  
by [Ronda Hauben](#)

[Note: This is a slightly edited version of a talk presented on May 1, 2012 at a small celebration in honor of the 15th Anniversary of the publication of the print edition of the book *Netizens*]

I – Looking Back

Fifteen years ago on May 1, 1997, the print edition of *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* was published in English. Later that year, in October, a Japanese translation of the book was published. Today we are celebrating the occasion of the 15th Anniversary of this event.

In honor of this occasion I want to both look back and look forward toward trying to assess the significance of the book and of Michael Hauben's discovery of the emergence of the netizen. I want to briefly look at what has happened in the interim of these 15 years toward trying to understand what new advance this development makes possible.

By the early 1990s, Michael recognized that the Internet was a significant new development and that it would have an impact on our world. He was curious about what that impact would be and what could help it to have a beneficial impact.

The book was compiled from a series of articles written by Michael and by me which were posted on the Net as they were written and which sometimes led to substantial comments and discussion.

The most important article in the book was clearly Michael's article, "The Net and Netizens: the Impact the Net Has on People's Lives."

Michael opened the article with the prophetic words, which appeared online first in 1993:

"Welcome to the 21st Century. You are a Netizen (a Net Citizen) and you exist as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net makes possible. You consider everyone as your compatriot. You physically live in one country but you are in contact with much of the world via the global computer network. Virtually, you live next door to every other single Netizen in the world. Geographical separation is replaced by existence in the same virtual space." [ *Netizens*, Chapter 1, p. 3]

Michael goes on to explain that what he is predicting is not yet the reality. In fact many people around the world were just becoming connected to the Internet during the period in which these words were written and posted on various different networks that existed at the time.

But now fifteen years after the publication of the print edition of *Netizens*, this description is very much the reality for our time and for many it is hard to remember or understand the world without the Net.

Similarly, in his articles that are collected in the *Netizens* book, Michael looked at the pioneering vision that gave birth to the Internet, he looked at the role of computer science in the building of the ARPANET network, at the potential impact that the Net and Netizen would have on politics, on journalism, and on the revolution in ideas that the Net and Netizen would bring about, comparing this to the advance brought about by the printing press. The last chapter of the book is an article Michael wrote early on about the need for a watchdog function over government in order to make democracy possible.

By the time the book was published in a print edition, it had been freely available online for three years. This was a period when the US government was determined to change the nature of the Net from the public and scientific infrastructure that had been built with public and educational funds around the world to a commercially driven entity. While there were people online at the time promoting the privatization and commercialization of the Internet, the concept of netizen was embraced by others, by many who supported the public and collaborative nature of the Internet and who wanted this to grow and flourish.

The article “The Net and Netizens” grew out of a research project that Michael had done for a class at Columbia University in Computer Ethics. Michael was interested in the impact of the Net and so he formulated several questions and sent them out online. This was a pioneering project at the time and the results he got back helped to establish the fact that the Net was having an important impact on a number of people’s lives.

Michael put together the results of his research in the article “The Net and Netizens” and posted it online. This helped the concept of netizen to spread and to be embraced around the world. The netizen, it is important to clarify, was not intended to describe every net user. Rather netizen was the word to describe those on the Net who took up to support the public and collaborative nature of the Net and to help it to grow and flourish. Netizens at the time often had the hope that their efforts online would be helpful toward creating a better world.

Describing this experience in a speech he gave in Japan and which subsequently became the preface to the *Netizens* book, Michael explained:

“In conducting research five years ago online to determine people’s uses of the global computer communications network, I became aware that there was a new social institution, an electronic commons, developing. It was exciting to explore this new social institution. Others online shared this excitement. I discovered from those who wrote me that the people I was writing about were citizens of the Net or Netizens.” [Netizens, Preface, p. ix]

Michael’s work which is included in the book and the subsequent work he did recognized the advance made possible by the Internet and the emergence of the Netizen.

The book is not only about what is wrong with the old politics, or media, but more importantly, the implications for the emergence of new developments, of a new politics, of a new form of citizenship, and of what Michael called the “poor man’s version of the mass media.” He focused on what was new or emerging and recognized the promise for the future represented by what was only at the time in an early stage of development.

For example, Michael recognized that the collaborative contributions for a new media would far exceed what the old media had achieved. “As people continue to connect to Usenet and other discussion forums, the collective population will contribute back to the human community this new form of news,” he wrote. [*Netizens*, Chapter 13, p. 233]

In order to consider the impact of Michael’s work and of the publication of the book, both in its online form and in the print edition, I want to look at some of the implications of what has been written since about netizens.

## II – Mark Poster on the Implications of the Concept of Netizen

One interesting example is in a book on the impact of the Internet and globalization by Mark Poster, a media theorist. The book’s title is *Information Please*. The book was published in 2006. While Poster doesn’t make any explicit reference to the book *Netizens* he finds the concept he has seen used online to be an important one. He offers some theoretical discussion on the use of the “netizen” concept.

Referring to the concept of citizen, Poster is interested in the relationship of the citizen to government, and in the empowering of the citizen to be able to affect the actions of one’s government. He considers the “Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen” as a monument from the French Revolution of 1789. He explains that the idea of the Rights of Man was one effort to empower people to deal with governments. But this was not adequate and the concept of the rights of the citizen, he proposes, was an important addition.

“Human rights and citizenship,” he writes, “are tied together and reinforce each other in the battle against the ruling classes.” [*Information Please*, p. 68] He proposes that “these rights are ensured by their inscription in constitutions that found governments and they persist in their association with those governments as the ground of political authority.”[*Ibid*, p. 68]

But with the coming of what he calls the age of globalization, Poster wonders if the concept “citizen” can continue to signify democracy. He wonders if the concept is up to the task.

“The conditions of globalization and networked media,” he writes, present a new situation “in which the human is recast and along with it the citizen.”[*Ibid*, p.70] “The deepening of globalization processes strips the citizen of power,” he writes. “As economic processes become globalized, the nation-state loses its ability to protect its

population. The citizen thereby loses her ability to elect leaders who effectively pursue her interests.” [Ibid, p. 71]

In this situation, “the figure of the citizen is placed in a defensive position.” [Ibid] There is a need, however, to find instead of a defensive position, an offensive one.

Also he is interested in the media and its role in this new paradigm. “We need to examine the role of the media in globalizing practices that construct new subjects,” Poster writes. “We need especially to examine those media that cross national boundaries and to inquire if they form or may form the basis for a new set of political relations.” [Ibid, p. 77]

In this context, for the new media, “the important questions, rather are these,” he proposes: “Can the new media promote the construction of new political forms not tied to historical, territorial powers? What are the characteristics of new media that promote new political relations and new political subjects? How can these be furthered or enhanced by political action?” [Ibid, p. 78]

“In contrast to the citizen of the nation,” he notices, the name often given to the political subject constituted on the Net is “netizen.” While Poster makes it seem that the consciousness among some online of themselves as “netizens” just appeared online spontaneously, this is not accurate.

Before Michael’s work, netizen as a concept was rarely if ever referred to. The paper “The Net and Netizens” introduced and developed the concept of “netizen.” This paper was widely circulated online. Gradually the use of the concept of netizen became increasingly common. Michael’s work was a process of doing research online, summarizing the research, analyzing it and then putting the research back online, and of people embracing it. This was the process by which the foundation for the concept of “netizen” was established.

Considering this background, the observations that Poster makes of how the concept of “netizen” is used online represents recognition of the significant role for the netizen in the future development of the body politic. “The netizen,” Poster writes, “might be the formative figure in a new kind of political relation, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the Net and to the planetary political spaces it inaugurates.” [Ibid, p. 78]

This new phenomenon, Poster concludes, “will likely change the relation of forces around the globe. In such an eventuality, the figure of the netizen might serve as a critical concept in the politics of democratization.” [Ibid, p. 83]

### III – The Era of the Netizen

While Poster characterizes our period as the age of globalization, I want to offer a different view. I want to propose that we are in an era demarcated by the creation of the

Internet and the emergence of the netizen. A more accurate characterization of this period is as the “Era of the Netizen.”

The years since the publication of the book *Netizens* have been marked by many interesting developments that have been made possible by the growth and development of the Internet and the spread of netizens around the world. I don’t have the time to go into these today but I will refer to a few examples to give a flavor of the kind of developments I am referring to.

A recent article by Vinay Kamat in the Reader’s Opinion section of the *Times of India* referred to something I had written. Quoting my article, 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 public affairs. The Internet makes it possible for netizens to speak out independently of institutions or officials.” [See “We are looking at the Fifth Estate”, by Vinay Kamat, Reader’s Opinion, *Times of India*, December 16, 2011, p. 2. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/opinion/edit-page/We-are-looking-at-the-fifth-estate/opinions/11133662.cms>. The quote is taken from, *The Rise of Netizen Democracy: A Case Study of Netizens’ Impact on Democracy in South Korea* by Ronda Hauben. For the url, see <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/misc/korean-democracy.txt>]

Kamat points 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 fifth estate?” the article asks, contrasting netizens’ discussion online with the power of the 4th estate, i.e. the mainstream media.

“Will social and political discussion in social media grow into deliberation?” asks Kamat. “Will opinions expressed be merely ‘rabble rousing’ or will they be ‘reflective’ instead of ‘impulsive’?”

One must recognize, the article explains, the new situation online and the fact that it is important to understand the nature of this new media and not merely look at it through the lens of the old media. What is the nature of this new media and how does it differ from the old? This is an important area for further research and discussion.

#### IV – Looking for a Model

While I was in South Korea in 2008, a friend asked if there is a model for democracy that could be helpful for South Korea – like in some country perhaps in Scandinavia. Thinking about the question I realized it was more complex than it seemed on the surface.

What I realized is that it isn’t that one can take a model from the period before the Internet, from before the emergence of the netizen. It is instead necessary that models for a more democratic society or nation in our times be models that include netizen participation in the society. Both South Korea and China are places where the role of

netizens is important in building more democratic structures for the society. South Korea appears to be the most advanced in grassroots efforts to create examples of netizen forms for a more participatory decision making process. (1) But China is also a place where there are significant developments because of the Internet and netizens. (2)

In China there have been a large number of issues that netizens have taken up online which have then had an impact on the mainstream media and where the online discussion has helped to bring about a change in government policy.

In looking for other models to learn from, however, I also realized that there is another relevant area of development. This is the actual process of building the Net, a prototype which is helpful to consider when seeking to understand the nature and particularity of the evolving new models for development and participation represented in the Era of the Netizen. (3)

#### V – Nerves of Government

In his article comparing the impact of the Net with the important impact the printing press had on society, 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.” [*Netizens*, Chapter 16, p. 299]

In my presentation today I want to focus a bit on the significance of this characteristic, on the notion that the Net has opened a communication channel available to a wide set of people.

In his study of the Net and Netizen, Michael recognized the new that was emerging. In trying to understand what impact the Net was having and would have on society, he also kept in mind that the technical processes of building the Net were important.

In order to have a conceptual framework to understand what these technical processes are, I recommend the book by Karl Deutsch titled, *The Nerves of Government*.

In the preface to his book, Deutsch writes:

“This book suggests that it might be preferable to look upon government somewhat less as a problem of power and somewhat more as a problem of steering; and it tries to show that steering is decisively a matter of communication.” [*Nerves of Government*, p. xxvii)

To look at the question of government not as a problem of power, or of democracy, but as one of steering, of communication, I want to propose is a fundamental paradigm shift.

What is the difference?

While power has to do with force, with the ability to exert force on something so as to affect its direction and action, democracy has to do with the participation and effect of people on the decisions made for society. Steering and communication, however, are related to the process of the transmission of a signal through a channel. The communication process is one related to whether a signal is transmitted in a manner that distorts the signal or whether it is possible to transmit the signal accurately. The communication process and the steering that it makes possible through feedback mechanisms are an underlying framework to consider in seeking to understand what Deutsch calls the “Nerves of Government”.

According to Deutsch, a nation can be looked at as a self steering communication system of a certain kind and the messages that are used to steer it are transmitted by certain channels.

I want to propose that some of the important challenges of our times relate to the exposure of the distortions of the information being spread. For example, the misrepresentations by the mainstream media about what is happening in Libya and Syria.<sup>(3)</sup> The creation and dissemination of channels of communication that make possible “the essential two way flow of information” are essential for the functioning of an autonomous learning organization, which is the form Deutsch proposes for a well functioning system.

To look at this phenomenon in a more practical way, I want to offer some considerations raised in a speech given to honor a Philippine librarian, a speech given by Zosio Lee. Lee refers to the kind of information that is transmitted as essential to the well being of a society. In considering the impact of netizens and the form of information that is being transmitted, Lee asks the question, “How do we detect if we are being manipulated or deceived?” [“Truthfulness and the Information Revolution” *JPL* 31 (2011), p. 105]

The importance of this question, he explains, is that, “We would not have survived for so long if all the information we needed to make valid judgments were all false or unreliable.” [Ibid] Also, he proposes that “information has to be processed and discussed for it to acquire full meaning and significance.” [Ibid, p. 106]

“When information is free, available and truthful, we are better able to make appropriate judgments, including whether existing governments fulfill their mandate to govern for the benefit of the people,” Lee writes. [Ibid, p. 108]

In his article “The Computer as a Democratizer” Michael similarly explores the need for accurate information about how government is functioning. He writes, “Without information being available to them, the people may elect candidates as bad as or worse than the incumbents. Therefore there is a need to prevent government from censoring the information available to people.” [*Netizens*, p. Chapter 18, p. 316]

Michael adds that, “The public needs accurate information as to how their representatives are fulfilling their role. Once these representatives have abused their power, the principles

established by Paine and Mill require that the public have the ability to replace the abusers.” [Ibid, p. 317]

Channels of accurate communication are critical in order to share the information needed to determine the nature of one’s government. (4)

While in general I have focused on the implications of the concept of Netizen that have emerged in the decade and a half since the publication of the print edition of the book, it is also important to realize that not everyone is friendly to the concept of Netizen. An article in the online newsfeed section of *Time* magazine proposed that the word netizen should be banished from the media.

Katy Steinmetz, who does an online column for *Time* claimed, “The word has been around for almost three decades (sic – it is less than 2 decades-ed), but the likes of the *Los Angeles Times* were using it as recently as last month. Perhaps it’s time to give it a rest....”

In the same article, she proposed to banish “occupy” and “# [the hashtag]”. [See “POLL: What Words Should Be Banished in 2012? NewsFeed Time.com”, *Time* magazine, January 11, 2012. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/01/11/poll-what-word-should-be-banished-in-2012/>]

The following week she acknowledges that there is very little sentiment to ban the word netizen.(5)

## VI – Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to point to an article in a blog at the Foreign Policy Association website which has the title: “Institutions And New World ‘Netizens’: Act 1”

The author, Oliver Barrett, reminds his readers of a quote from Mohandas Gandhi:

“First They Ignore You – Then They Ridicule You — Then They Fight You – Then You Win”

Barrett asks, “Will technology fundamentally change the relationship between the nation state and citizens? He asks if Net connected citizens are “a threat or opportunity for government?”

In response to this question, he writes, “But I am not convinced that government officials, even in industrialized countries, are cognizant of how technological innovations like social media have forever robbed them of their positions as trusted sources of timely and legitimate information.... I dare say that netizens have started to short-circuit the politico-corporate communications wiring, raising the political and social justice consciousness of the hyper-connected citizen in a way that might not be in the interest of the governing classes.”



“How will governments respond to this situation?” he asks. (6)

“I look forward to witnessing how Act 2 of Revolution 2.0 will unfold,” he concludes.

Barrett focuses on the opinions of those in government. Instead I propose that the important challenge is for Netizens. Netizens need to understand the conceptual nature of the information and communication changes represented by the Era of the Netizen so they will be able to successfully meet the new challenges these represent for our society.(7)

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### **Notes**

(1) In South Korea there are many interesting examples of new organizational forms or events created by netizens. For example Nosamo combined the model of an online Fan club and off line gathering of supporters who worked to get Roh Moo-hyun elected as President in South Korea in 2002. Also, OhmyNews, an online newspaper, helped to make the election of Roh Moo-hyun possible in 2002.

Science mailing lists and discussion networks contributed to by netizens helped to expose the fraudulent scientific work of a leading South Korean scientist.

In 2008 there were 106 days of candlelight demonstrations contributed to by people online and off to protest the South Korean government’s adoption of a weakened set of regulations about the import of poorly inspected US beef into South Korea. The debate on June 10-11 over the form the demonstration should take involved both online and offline discussion and demonstrated the generative nature of serious communication. See for example, Ronda Hauben,. “On Grassroots Journalism and Participatory Democracy”

[http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/netizens\\_draft.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/netizens_draft.pdf)

(2) Some examples include the Anti-CNN web site that was set up to counter the inaccurate press reports in the western media about the riot in Tibet, the murder case of a Chinese waitress who killed a Communist Party official in self defense, the case of the Chongqing Nail house and the online discussion about the issues involved. See for example, Ronda Hauben, “China in the Era of the Netizen”

[http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/02/14/china\\_in\\_the\\_era\\_of\\_the\\_netizen/](http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/02/14/china_in_the_era_of_the_netizen/)

3) See for example “Libya, the UN and Netizen Journalism”, The Amateur Computerist, Vol 21, no 1, Winter 2012.

[http://www.ais.org/~jrj/acn/Back\\_Issues/Back\\_Issues%5b2011-2015%5d/ACn21-1.pdf](http://www.ais.org/~jrj/acn/Back_Issues/Back_Issues%5b2011-2015%5d/ACn21-1.pdf)

Jay Hauben, “On the 15th Anniversary of Netizens: Netizens Expose Distortions and Fabrications”

[http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/Book\\_Anniversary/presentation\\_2.doc](http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/Book_Anniversary/presentation_2.doc)

(4) As Michael explains in *Netizens*:

“Thomas Paine, in *The Rights of Man*, describes a fundamental principle of democracy. Paine writes, “that the right of altering the government was a national right, and not a right of the government’.” (*Netizens*, Chapter 18, p. 316)

(5) Katy Steinmetz, “Wednesdays Words: Readers’ Choice for Banned Words of 2012 and More”, *Time Newsfeed*, January 18, 2012.

<http://newsfeed.time.com/2012/01/18/wednesday-words-readers-choice-for-banished-word-of-2012-and-more/>

(6) Will the officials that govern the modern nation state engage their respective societies in meaningful ways, or will they continue to hide their heads in the sand? From what I’ve learned from history and the very erudite Mohandas Gandhi – I think I know the answer.”  
Oliver Barrett

[http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/01/12/institutions-and-new-world-netizens-act-1/\(4/25/2012\)](http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/01/12/institutions-and-new-world-netizens-act-1/(4/25/2012))

(7) See for example: Ronda Hauben, “The Internet Model of Socio-Economic Development and the Emergence of the Netizen”

[http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/11/02/the\\_internet\\_model\\_of\\_socio-economic\\_development\\_and\\_the\\_emergence\\_of\\_the\\_netizen/](http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/11/02/the_internet_model_of_socio-economic_development_and_the_emergence_of_the_netizen/)

Ronda Hauben, “In Cheonan Dispute UN Security Council Acts in Accord with UN Charter”

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