

Is this a New Era?

by Jay Hauben

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I. Sequel to the *Netizens* Book: Remembering Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*

I want to tell a little story and ask a question.

At a meeting discussing the new book being worked on as a sequel to *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, I made an observation. This new book needs an analytical framework, a guiding idea that helps us pick what articles to put into the book and how to tie them together so the reader sees what we are trying to document and understand.

As an example of such a guiding analysis, I recalled that Lewis Henry Morgan, an American anthropologist in his 1877 book *Ancient Society*, saw human society unfolding through a number of stages. In particular he saw that human society could not enter the higher stage of civilization until the smelting of iron was invented.¹

I was remembering where Morgan had written, "The production of iron was the event of events in human experience. Out of it came the metallic hammer and anvil, the axe and the chisel, the plough with an iron point, the iron sword; in fine, the basis of civilization, which may be said to rest upon this metal. The want of iron tools arrested the progress of mankind in barbarism."

Ronda Hauben, one of the authors working on the new book, thought that such a breakthrough is what the invention of the internet and the emergence of the netizen represents for our time. She argued that many great things have happened but the advance of democracy has been stuck. With the emergence of the net and the netizens, human society can now move ahead with greater democracy and the means to solve problems that have been unsolvable for a long time.

I thought it is the reverse. There was a great worldwide democratic movement in the second half of the twentieth century as witnessed by the 1968 outburst of demands for more democracy in Paris, NYC, Prague, Tokyo, Mexico City and in other places around the world. Then again in 1987 in South Korea, 1988 in Burma, followed in 1989 in China and then Eastern Europe. Perhaps that movement was even seen more recently with the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. The emergence of the Net and the Netizen is the continuation of that movement and they are its product.

Ronda said that we have an interesting disagreement. But isn't Michael Hauben's article, "Participatory Democracy From the 1960s and SDS into the Future Online"² an argument that SDS, the 1960s group in the US, Students for a Democratic Society, could not succeed because it

lacked a communication network for the realization of full participation of the members of society in the decisions that affect their lives?

I was struck by this comparison with Michael's analysis and Morgan's and decided to read Michael's paper more carefully.

II. SDS and Democracy's Need for a Communications Network

Michael begins his essay on SDS appearing to agree with me. He writes, "The emergence of the personal computer in the late 70s and early 80s and the longer gestation of the new forms of people-controlled communication facilitated by the Internet and Usenet in the late 80s and today are the direct descendents of 1960s."

Michael found in the *Port Huron Statement* (1962),³ that SDS saw that people were tired of the problems and were yearning for change but politics had become a spectator sport. Something new was needed, a more participatory democracy. SDS sought "the establishment of a democracy of ... participation governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; [and] the society be organized to ... provide the media for their common participation. ... [C]hannels should be commonly available to relate men to knowledge and to power so that private problems ... are formulated as general issues." It was necessary "to make the human being whole by becoming an actor in history instead of just a passive object. Not only as an end in itself, but as a means to change, the idea of participatory democracy was our central focus."⁴

Michael quotes Al Haber, first SDS national officer, "The challenge ahead is to appraise and evolve radical alternatives to the inadequate society of today, and to develop an institutionalized communication system that will give perspective to our immediate actions. We will then have the groundwork for a radical student movement in America." Haber and Tom Hayden, author of the first draft of the *Port Huron Statement*, understood SDS to be this, "a national communications network."

But Michael analyzes that SDS could not be sustained. He writes, "While many people made their voices heard and produced a real effect on the world in the 1960s, lasting structural changes were not established. The real problems outlined earlier continued in the 1970s and afterwards. A national, or even international, public communications network needed to be built to keep the public's voice out in the open."

Today, an international, public communications network and the netizens exists. Will human society now make accelerated progress? Is Ronda correct that this is a new era?

III. Is a Revolution in Human Communications Happening?

Maybe we can see in his writings how Michael thought about this.

I will briefly look at two of Michael's articles, "The Computer as a Democratizer"⁵ and "The Expanding Commonwealth of Learning: Printing and the Net"⁶ about the printing press.

In "The Computer as a Democratizer" Michael writes, "The computer connects to th[e] democratizing trend through facilitating wider communications among individual citizens to the whole body of citizens." To understand what is needed for democracy to work, he studied an essay by James Mill, "Liberty of the Press" written in 1825. From Mill, Michael saw the necessity of an uncensored press "to keep watch on ... government in order to make sure this government works in the interest of the many." Mill champions freedom of the press, "as a realistic alternative to Rousseau's general assembly, which is not possible most of the time."

Now most people can have an "information access and broadcast station in their very own home." They can participate "in debates with others around the world, search for data in various data banks, post an opinion or criticism for the whole world to see." To Michael, it is a leap not only to have access to information but also to be able to broadcast. He writes, "These systems begin to make possible some of the activity James Mill saw as necessary for democracy to function... more oversight over government and a more informed population." Also, with the Net and the netizens, a new public space is opening up which can serve as an assembly of the whole people. Michael saw that the computer and the Net remove some of the obstacles to democracy. And I add make possible a more participatory democracy.

But is the emergence of the Net and the Netizen a revolutionary development?

To answer this question, Michael studied the history of the impact of the invention and spread of the printing press. The modern printing press was developed in the middle and late 15th Century. It quickly replaced the 2000 year old scribal culture surrounding hand copying of texts out of which it grew. Michael writes that "This scribal culture could only go so far in furthering the distribution of information and ideas. Texts existed, but were largely unavailable for use by the common people..." The printing press and the culture that grew up with it broke through barriers which had previously limited the production of books. "The broad distribution of presses ... ushered in the age of printing" which accelerated the Enlightenment. "The printing press facilitated the meeting of minds pursuing intellectual pursuits. The interconnection of people led to the quickening of the development of ideas and knowledge. These progenitors of the printing trade were in the forefront of the sweeping intellectual changes which the presses made possible." Michael agrees with Elizabeth Eisenstein the author he was reading, that the impact of the printing press was revolutionary not evolutionary.

Jumping to the present, Michael writes, "Just as the printing press essentially replaced the hand-copying of books in the Renaissance, people using computer networks are essentially creating a new method of production and distribution of creative and intellectual written works today." Besides making distribution and communication more universal, cheaper and easier, netizens are building the Net "from a connection of computers and computing resources into a vast resource of people and knowledge." Their activity has opened a new kind of public space accessible to all, inviting and encouraging participation by ordinary people in all the questions and potentially all the decisions of society. This public space is separate from either commercial purposes or religious or political limitations or ideas. The net is the "poor people's" public space and the poor people's media.

Michael concludes that, like in the age of the printing press, "we, too, are in an age of amazing changes in communications technologies, and it is important to realize how these changes are firmly based on the extension of the development of the printing press which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries." But he also tells us that "understanding how the printing press unleashed a communications revolution provides a basis to assess if the establishment of worldwide computer communication networking is the next communication revolution." His essay raises the question, are the net and the netizens continuing the important social revolution that the printing press had begun? The first sentence of his essay answers:

"A revolution in human communications is happening."

Back to my question, is Ronda's insight that we are entering into the Era of the Netizen correct? I would say it is hard to know. The net and the netizens are only recent developments. Also, we are in the middle of something very big. It is hard to see its full meaning and impact. I do not know what has been so strongly holding democracy back so cannot really know if the net and the netizens have broken it. I think Michael's thinking was moving in that direction.

As for my thinking, I can say I hope we will see more democracy. If pressed I would say my guess is that the Net and the netizens are ushering in a new era, the Era of the Netizen.

Notes:

¹ *Ancient Society*, page 42: "When the barbarian, advancing step by step, had discovered the native metals and learned to melt them in the crucible and to cast them in moulds; when he had alloyed native copper with tin and produced bronze; and, finally, when by a still greater effort of thought he had invented the furnace, and produced iron from the ore, nine-tenths of the battle for civilization was gained. Furnished with iron tools, capable of holding both an edge and a point, mankind were certain of attaining to civilization. The production of iron was the event of events in human experience, without a parallel, and without an equal, beside which all other inventions and discoveries were inconsiderable, or at least subordinate, Out of it came the metallic hammer and anvil, the axe and

the chisel, the plough with an iron point, the iron sword; in fine, the basis of civilization, which may be said to rest upon this metal. The want of iron tools arrested the progress of mankind in barbarism. There they would have remained to the present hour, had they failed to bridge the chasm. It seems probable that the conception and the process of smelting iron ore came but once to man. It would be a singular satisfaction could it be known to what tribe and family we are indebted for this knowledge, and with it for civilization. The Semitic family were then in advance of the Aryan, and in the lead of the human race. They gave the phonetic alphabet to mankind and it seems not unlikely the knowledge of iron as well." <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/morgan-lewis/ancient-society/ch03.htm>

² Available online at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/CS/netdemocracy-60s.txt>

³ SDS, "Port Huron Statement", as found in James Miller, *Democracy in the Streets*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987 Pp. 329-374.

⁴ Ibid, note ii. Quotes are from Miller pages 333, 144, and 374.

⁵ Available online at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x18>

⁶ Available online at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x16>