

Considerations on the Significance of the Net and the Netizens*

Topics: netizens, communication processes, communication channels, citizen empowerment, models for democracy, nerves of government, social impact

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Abstract: The book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* celebrates in 2017 the 20th anniversary of its publication in English and Japanese in 1997. The book documents how along with the development of the Internet came the emergence of a new form of citizen -- the netizen. In his pioneering online research in the early 1990s Michael Hauben gathered data and did analysis demonstrating that not only the Internet but also the netizen would have an important impact on society. This article explores Hauben's research recognizing that netizens are a new social force. The article also looks at other contributions which help to provide a conceptual framework to understand this new social force. Media theorist Mark Poster's work about netizens is discussed, as is Karl Deutsch's theoretical understanding of the role of communication in creating a new model for good government. But it is the candlelight revolution by citizens and netizens in 2016-2017 in South Korea which demonstrates in practice the importance of the netizen forging a new governance model for participatory democracy.

Key Words: netizens, communications, empowerment, impact, citizen, watchdog, democracy.

Introduction

With the introduction of the Internet, the question has been raised as to what its impact will be on society. One significant result of the impact already is the emergence of the netizen. Michael Hauben's work in the 1990s recognized the significant impact not only of the development of the Internet but also of the role of the netizen in forging new social and political forms and processes.

While the role of netizens in working for social change has been documented around the world, the role of netizens in working for social and political change has been an especially important aspect of South Korean experience for nearly the past two decades. Most recently, however, widespread political and economic corruption at the highest levels of the South Korean society has led citizens and netizens to take part in peaceful but massive candlelight demonstrations advocating the need for fundamental change in the political and economic structures of South Korean society. The question has been raised whether there are models for such change. In such an environment there is a need to consider the importance of the Internet and of the Netizen in helping to forge the new forms for grassroots participation in the governing structures of society. At such a time it seems appropriate to consider the conceptual framework for the role of the netizen in contributing to a new governing model for society

These developments in South Korea come at a time when the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* celebrates the 20th anniversary since its publication in 1997,

making a review of the significant contribution of the book particularly relevant to the events of our time.

Looking Back

Twenty years ago in May 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. In 2017, we are celebrating the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of these publications.

In honor of this occasion I want to both look back and 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 begin to consider what has happened in these 20 years toward trying to understand the nature of this advance and the developments the advance makes possible.

By the early 1990s, Hauben 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 be a beneficial impact. He had raised a series of questions about the online experience. He received responses to these questions from a number of people. Reading and analyzing the responses he explained,

"There are people online who actively contribute to the development of the Net. These people understand the value of collective work and the communal aspects of public communications. These are the people who discuss and debate topics in a constructive manner, who e-mail answers to people and provide help to newcomers, who maintain FAQ files and other public information repositories, who maintain mailing lists, and so on. These are the people who discuss the nature and role of this new communications medium. These are the people who as citizens of the Net I realized were Netizens."

The book was compiled from a series of articles written by Hauben and his co-author Ronda Hauben 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 Hauben's article, "The Net and Netizens: The Impact the Net Has on People's Lives." Hauben 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." [1]

Hauben 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 twenty 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, Hauben looked at the pioneering vision that gave birth to the Internet. He looked at the role of computer science in the building of the earlier network called the ARPANET, 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 Hauben 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 funding 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, many of whom supported the public and collaborative nature of the Internet and who wanted this aspect to grow and flourish.

The article “The Net and Netizens” grew out of a research project that Hauben had done for a class at Columbia University in Computer Ethics. Hauben 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 already in 1993 the Net was having a profound impact on the lives of a number of people.

Hauben 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 conceptualization of 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.

Hauben described this experience in a speech he gave at a conference in Japan. Subsequently in 1997, his description became the Preface to the *Netizens* book, Hauben 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.” [2]

Hauben'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 Hauben 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, Hauben 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," he wrote, "the collective population will contribute back to the human community this new form of news." [3]

In order to consider the impact of Hauben'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.

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 does not make any explicit reference to the book *Netizens* he finds the concept of the netizen that 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 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 though the concept of the rights of the citizen, he recognizes, was an important democratic milestone.

"Human rights and citizenship," he writes, "are tied together and reinforce each other in the battle against the ruling classes." [4] 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." [5]

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 register in which the human is recast and along with it the citizen." [6] "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." [7]

In this situation, “the figure of the citizen is placed in a defensive position.” [8] To succeed in the struggle against globalization he recognizes that there is a need 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.” [9]

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?” [10]

“In contrast to the citizen of the nation,” Poster 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 Hauben’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. Hauben’s work was a process of doing research online, summarizing the research, analyzing it while welcoming online comments at various stages of the process 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 interactively established.

Considering this background, the observations that Poster makes of how the concept of “netizen” is used online represents a 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.” [11]

This new phenomena, 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.” [12]

The Era of the Netizen

Poster characterizes the current times as the age of globalization. I want to offer a different view, the view that we are in an era demarcated by the creation of the Internet and the emergence of the netizen. Therefore, 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 will refer to a few examples to give a flavor of the kind of developments I am referring to.

An article by Vinay Kamat in the Reader's Opinion section of the *Times of India* referred to something I had written. Quoting the article "The Rise of Netizen Democracy", 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." [13]

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?" Kamat 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, Kamat 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.

Looking for a Model

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

I realized that one cannot just 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 not only of citizens but also 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 government decision making process. [14] But China is also a place where there are significant developments because of the Internet and netizens. [15]

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. [16]

In particular, I want to point to a paper by the research scientist who many computer and networking pioneers credit with providing the vision to inspire the scientific work to create the Internet. This scientist is JCR Licklider, an experimental psychologist who was particularly interested in the processes of the brain and in communication research.

In a paper Licklider wrote with another psychologist, Robert Taylor, in 1968 a vision was set out to guide the development of the Internet. The title of the paper was "The Computer as a Communication Device." [17] The paper proposed that essential to the processes of communication is the creation and sharing of models. That the human mind is adept at creating models, but that the models created in a single mind are not helpful in themselves. Instead it is critical that models be shared and a process of cooperative modeling be developed in order to be able to create something that many people will respect. [18]

Nerves of Government

In his article comparing the impact of the Net with the important impact the printing press had on society, Hauben wrote, "The Net has opened a channel for talking to the whole world to an even wider set of people than did printed books." [19] 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 order to have a conceptual framework to understand the importance of this characteristic, I recommend the book by Karl Deutsch titled, *The Nerves of Government*. In the preface to this 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. [20]

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

What is the difference?

Political power has to do with the ability to exert force on something so as to affect its direction and action. 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 via certain channels.

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 happened in Libya in 2011 or what has been happening in Syria since 2011. [21] 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?” [22]

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.” Also, he proposes that “information has to be processed and discussed for it to acquire full meaning and significance.” [23] “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. [24]

In his article “The Computer as a Democratizer”, Hauben 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.” [25]

Hauben 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 [Thomas Paine] and [James] Mill require that the public have the ability to replace the abusers.” [26]

Channels of accurate communication are critical in order to share the information needed to determine the nature of one’s government. [27]

Conclusion

The candlelight revolution is still in process in South Korea. It is demonstrating in practice that we are in a period when the old forms of government are outmoded. The paper by Licklider and Taylor proposes that the computer is a splendid facilitator for cooperative modeling. It is such a process of cooperative modeling that offers the potential for creating not only new technical and institutional forms, but also new political forms. Such new political forms are more likely to provide for the democratic processes that are needed for the 21st century. Hence it is the efforts of citizens and netizens who are involved in collaborative modeling to create the more

participatory forms and structures as is happening during the candlelight processes being explored in South Korea that provide for the development of a more equitable and democratic society. [28]

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- [2] *IBID.*, p. ix.
- [3] *IBID.*, p. 233.
- [4] Poster, M., (2006). *Information Please*. Durham: Duke University Press, p.68.
- [5] *IBID.*
- [6] *IBID.*, p. 70.
- [7] *IBID.*, p. 71.
- [8] *IBID.*
- [9] *IBID.*, p. 77.
- [10] *IBID.*, p. 78.
- [11] *IBID.*
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- [14] 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. Science mailing lists and discussion networks contributed to by netizens helped to expose the fraudulent scientific work of a leading South Korean scientist. And 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, 2008 over the form the demonstration should take involved both online and offline discussion and demonstrated the generative nature of serious communication. See for example, Hauben, R. On Grassroots Journalism and Participatory Democracy. http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/netizens_draft.pdf, Retrieved on 01.10.2017.
- [15] 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 Hauben, R. (2010, February 14). China in the Era of the Netizen. http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/02/14/china_in_the_era_of_the_netizen/, Retrieved on

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[23] *IBID.*, p. 106.

[24] *IBID.*, p. 108.

[25] *IBID.*, *Netizens*, p. 316.

[26] *IBID.*, *Netizens*, p. 317.

[27] Hauben explains: “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)

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