

# The Amateur Computerist

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Netizen Journalism in the Era of the Netizen

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## Introduction

The *Amateur Computerist* first began as a newsletter in 1988, over 25 years ago. In considering what would be an appropriate focus for an issue to celebrate that event, the question arose as to how to understand the phenomenon of netizen journalism, a phenomenon that has been the focus of several recent issues of the *Amateur Computerist*. By looking back at these issues, would it be possible to begin to develop a conceptual framework for the phenomenon of netizen journalism? The articles which have been collected in this issue of the *Amateur Computerist* represent that effort.

While the development of what we call “netizen journalism” has been a focus of work of the *Amateur Computerist* for several years, there are various other names used to describe similar phenomenon by others in the scholarly or journalist communities. For example, “citizen journalism,” “social media” and “fifth estate” are terms used to describe some aspect of what is encompassed in the concept of “netizen journalism.” All of these other terms however narrow the perspective of what they are describing so that they are only referring to much narrower phenomena than the

phenomenon encompassed by the concept of netizen journalism.

The mere use of these other terms, however, is an important sign that many scholars and journalists are coming to recognize that there is a significant phenomenon represented by the empowerment of citizens and journalists alike because of the Internet. What is needed to describe this broader phenomenon, however, is a concept that is inclusive of all the aspects of the phenomenon, rather than a term that limits itself to a narrow focus.

Essentially, the phenomenon is one in which “a new kind of public space” has emerged encouraging collaboration and participation of those inhabiting the space.

Recognizing the empowering potential of the Net, people online are exploring what it makes possible. Doing research in 1993 into this phenomenon, Michael Hauben recognized that something new was developing, something not expected.

He writes, “In conducting research...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....

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.”

The work is documented in the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*. It recognized the advance made possible by the Internet and the emergence of the Netizen.

What is this advance?

The book *Netizens* 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 a new form of media, which Michael called the “poor man’s version of the mass

media.”

Michael focused on what was new or emerging and recognized the promise for the future by what was at the time only in an early stage of development, “...as people continue to connect...the collective population will contribute back to the human community this new form of news.”

Netizen journalism is often a cooperative reporting of the news. In that context there may be different means of determining the accurate narrative of a news event. These may include discussion forums which examine the details of a news event, reports of different aspects of the event, analyses by a variety of netizens on diverse web sites or blogs, etc.

Since at the essence of the netizen phenomena is the recognition of the importance of accurate communication, netizen journalism also focuses on the importance of communication and on the need for a channel of communication different from the channel of distortion and misrepresentation representing those seeking to strengthen their power.

One objective of netizen journalism is to act as a watchdog over the abuse of power. Toward this objective it is often necessary to critique inaccurate news reports. It is even more important to determine what is an accurate narrative of a news event. The process of determining an accurate narrative may include:

- 1) Investigation to seek out and clarify the facts of the news story
- 2) Research toward determining an understanding of the broader context of the news story
- 3) An analysis to determine which are the significant aspects of the news story
- 4) Looking at the implications of the analysis. This can include asking the question who benefits and what is behind what is happening.

As an article which appears in this issue recognizes, while it is important to oppose distortion and misrepresentation of the news, it is equally important to open lines of communication with the different parties to a conflict, despite the difficulty.

The articles in this issue represent a response to the question, “What will be the new global media in the Era of the Netizen?” A new more cooperative and broadly participatory media is becoming possible. This new form of journalism represents a symbiosis in the relationship of the News, the Netizens (who may be journalists or others online) and the Net. It will be important to recognize the nature and importance of

this symbiosis in order to nourish its development.

We welcome discussion and comment.

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[Editor’s Note: A version of this article first appeared as the Introduction to the *Amateur Computerist* Vol 21, no 2, Spring 2012.\*]

## On the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Print Edition of *Netizens*

On May 1, 1997, the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* was published in a print edition. May Day, May 1, 2012, marked the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that occasion.

In 2007, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the print edition, an article in the online magazine Telepolis ([www.heise.de/tp](http://www.heise.de/tp)) noted that an anniversary “offers an occasion to consider the potential of the Net that was identified in *Netizens* and to assess what has developed with regard to this potential today.”

The article reviewed some of the background of *Netizens*: “During the course of his pioneering research in the early 1990s, Michael Hauben discovered a surprising phenomenon. He recognized that there was a new social consciousness developing among those in the online community. At the time, the Internet had recently emerged as a new communications infrastructure. More and more people were gaining access. The experience of being online and of having access to the participatory interactive online environment was proving to be a significance experience.”

The article continued, “People were eager to explore the nature and power of these new communication capabilities. To be online led to a feeling of empowerment. The idea began to impress itself on some in the online community that here was the potential for a new meaning for the concept of citizen. Could the Internet make it possible for the citizen to be able to act in a way not hitherto possible? Could the Net really make it possible for citizens to become active participants in the process of determining what happened in their society?”

The result of this process was that “a new identity was in the process of being generated. This was a social identity as a citizen of the Net, as a netizen.”

To celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the print edition of *Netizens the Amateur Computerist* gathered a number of articles written or presented as talks by Michael Hauben. That collection<sup>1</sup> brought together both new work Michael did after the publication of *Netizens* along with work done earlier which was not included in the book. Also included in that collection were some of Michael's articles that were published in *Netizens*.

The collection of articles and speeches particularly concentrated the ability Michael had to reflect on the importance of a current development through the perspective of a commentary on an earlier development. He was thus able to grasp the long range broader implications of the contemporaneous development of the Internet.

In his article "The Expanding Commonwealth of Learning: Printing and the Net,"<sup>2</sup> Michael writes, "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."

The articles in the collection considered how the Net is expanding the ability of the common people with access to the Net to communicate with each other to offer to the world their thoughts, ideas and questions, in short, for the common people to contribute to the intellectual and creative commonwealth still coming into existence in a way never before possible.

And it is this broadening of intellectual and collaborative cooperation that similarly makes possible and desired more democratic political structures and institutions.

For Michael, the key to this ferment is the Netizen, those who contribute to the ever expanding public set of resources. This is the unique advance. "Making a contribution is an integral part of Netizen behavior," writes Michael.

He sees the Net as a "new kind of public space," a space that makes "collaboration and cooperation possible." This new public commons, as Michael characterizes the public space made available via the Net, is one where "people are encouraged to share their views, thoughts and questions with others." It is a "many to many" process where netizens can broadcast to others around the world and get responses back. This participation Michael recognized is an empowering experience.

Personal computer pioneer Lee Felsenstein real-

ized that "the development of the commons to the exclusion of the big media representations makes this a grassroots medium or a new enlarged public commons." Michael concurs with this characterization of the commons created by the Net.

Similarly the ability of netizens to contribute to and create their own news is a means to create an alternative to the commercial business oriented media. This makes possible a means to effectively challenge the outdated forms and processes that have come to dominate in the commercial media environment.

The Net is "the poor man's version of the mass media" writes Michael. With the Net, the monopoly of the elites over the media was broken. One important example of the potential of the Net, Michael explains, is that the Net bestows, "the power of the reporter on the netizen."

Netizens now have the ability to not only critique the misrepresentations and limitations of the commercial media, but also to create a more broad ranging and accurate media.

Similarly in his article "Participatory Democracy: From the 1960s and SDS into the Future Online,"<sup>3</sup> Michael shows how an early goal of SDS, the 1960s group Students for a Democratic Society, was to create "a medium to make it possible for a community of active citizens to discuss and debate the issues affecting their lives." This new communication infrastructure would be one that would make it possible for people to have a means to participate in the discussion and determination of the political decisions of their society. Michael pointed out that the Internet provided what SDS saw as necessary but lacked, in Al Haber's words, "an institutionalized communication system that would give perspective to our immediate actions."

The aim of the Spring 2012 *Amateur Computerist* collection of articles was to stimulate thought and discussion over the potential of the Net and Netizen, but more profoundly, over how to recognize, as Michael did, the important prototypes that are developing and emerging. The aim continues to be to nourish those that will help to bring about the changes which will bring more power to the grassroots of society in the new global commons.

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#### Notes

1. "In Honor of Michael Hauben and the Emergence of the

- Netizens,” Volume 21 No. 2, Spring 2012  
<http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn21-2.pdf>  
2. <http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/feature.pdf>  
3. <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/CS/netdemocracy-60s.txt>

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\* <http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn21-2.pdf>

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[Editor’s Note: In celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> 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

by Ronda Hauben  
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### Part I – Introduction

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 society.

An article in the Reader’s Opinion section of the *Times of India* newspaper referred to a paper about South Korean netizens written in 2006. Quoting that 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 5<sup>th</sup> estate?” the article asks, contrasting netizens’ discussion online with the power of the 4<sup>th</sup> 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.

### 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 being referred to in this talk 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 in collaboration with Michael, research and writing was done. Different articles were often based on what was learned from people online and which were 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, this talk will 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 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 represents an important achievement.

There is one other netizen development 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 is of interest, however, is how netizens responded to this situation.

What is unusual and something 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 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 which were seen 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 global citizenship or netizenship are developing. As Hauben recognized, 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 all 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

There is 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."

In support of Poster's argument but beyond it 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, 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.

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[Editor's Note: A version of the following note introduced a collection of articles about the 2011 war in Libya. The articles were offered as examples of netizen journalism.]

## Netizen Journalism, Libya and the UN\*

There is a Special Issue (vol 21 no 1) of the *Amateur Computerist* on Netizen Journalism and the story of the resistance to the NATO aggression against Libya available at the ACN website. The url is: <http://www.ais.org/~jrj/acn/ACn21-1.pdf>

That issue is a collection of articles documenting what happened in Libya in 2011. It presents a critique of the inaccurate reports that were used to justify the NATO war against Libya.

The focus in the collection is on the role played by the UN in making possible the aggression against Libya. The actions taken by the Security Council and other United Nations bodies like the Human Rights Council were contrary to the obligations of the UN charter and other principles of international law. The articles document the process by which the UN became an accomplice in a NATO war against a sovereign nation that is a member of the United Nations.

These articles serve to argue that starting in February 2011 there was a media blitz supporting the NATO actions, largely based on unverifiable claims by the opposition against the government of Libya. The story that emerged is based on broadly circulated falsifications of what was happening on the ground. The media blitz was accompanied by a rush at the UN Security Council to authorize force against the Libyan government, military, infrastructure and civilians under Article 7 of the UN Charter. The resulting Security Council resolution gave NATO and special forces the pretext to support an armed insurrection inside Libya. This armed insurrection was supported by a military campaign of bombing and other aggressive acts on the part of the U.S., France, the U.K. and several other NATO nations. The harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure was ignored by those supporting the NATO aggression.

There were however a number of journalists, websites and independent news sources which provided an alternative account and critiqued the false narrative being presented to justify the NATO war. Such a form of journalism, contributed to online by many netizens, has been described as “netizen journalism.”<sup>1</sup> Netizen journalism takes as its mission to independently investigate situations, seek out the accurate story, and challenge the fact that much of the mainstream western media is but a media presenting the dominant viewpoint of those in power. Whereas the western mainstream media most often acts to reinforce this power, netizen journalism takes as its mission to challenge the abuse of power.

A number of independent journalists and journalists working for alternative media like TeleSUR covered the struggle in Libya against the NATO aggression and the damage inflicted on the civilian infrastructure and the civilian population. The *Amateur*

*Computerist* issue vol 21 no 1 includes not only articles documenting what happened in Libya but also contains references to some of the many independent news reports and analyses that explore the long term goal of the NATO war and the injustice done by that mainstream media which used unverified reports by opposition sources to spread a phony rationale for the invasion of a sovereign nation.

A list of journalists who provided this alternative coverage would include, among others, Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, Thierry Meyssan, Lizzy Phalen, and Franklin Lamb.

Some of the websites that have been part of this broader collaborative effort to understand what happened in Libya and to present it to the world include:

Center for Research on Globalization

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/>

Voltaire Network

<http://www.voltairenet.org/en>

Global Civilians for Peace in Libya

<http://globalciviliansforpeace.com/>

Libya360

<http://libya360.wordpress.com/>

Strategic Culture Foundation

<http://www.strategic-culture.org/>

Mathaba. Independent News Agency

<http://mathaba.net/>

Investig.Action

<http://www.michelcollon.info/>

TeleSUR

<http://multimedia.telesurtv.net/media/telesur.video>

[web/telesur-web/#!en](http://web/telesur-web/#!en)

Concerned Africans

<http://www.concernedafricans.co.za/>

April Media

<http://www.4thmedia.org/>

American Everyman

<http://willyloman.wordpress.com/>

In his article in the issue, “From Munich to Tripoli,” Yoichi Shimatsu refers to the resistance offered by the fighters of the Spanish Civil War and the work to spread the story of their resistance by the writers and commentators who conveyed this story to the world. In the issue of the *Amateur Computerist* tribute was paid to both the resistance offered by those in Libya who fought against the foreign intervention and to the journalists, websites, and other forms of netizen journalism around the world that

have helped to spread the story of the resistance to the NATO war against Libya and to the destruction of Libya that it wrought.

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#### Note

1. See for example, Ronda Hauben, "The Need for Netizen Journalism and the Ever Evolving Netizen – News – Net – Symbiosis"

[http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2011/05/01/need\\_for\\_netizen\\_journalism/](http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2011/05/01/need_for_netizen_journalism/)

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\* This article appears on the netizen blog at:

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/02/16/netizen-journalism-libya-and-the-un/>

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[Editor's Note: A version of the following article first appeared on the netizenblog on June 12, 2012 at:

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/06/12/un-and-houla-massacre/>]

## UN and Houla Massacre: The Information Battlefield

by Ronda Hauben  
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At a press conference held on June 4, 2012 marking the beginning of China's presidency of the UN Security Council for the month of June, Li Baodong, China's Ambassador to the UN, observed that there are different versions of the facts of the Houla Massacre. "Now we have different stories from different angles," he noted. "Now we have the story from the Syrian government, and from the opposition parties, and from different sources."

Since the Security Council had "a team...on the ground," he said, "We want to see first-hand information from our own people." He hoped this would make it possible to put the different pieces of information together and to come "to our own conclusion with our own judgment."<sup>1</sup>

The expectation was that Joint UN-Arab League Envoy, Kofi Annan, would be able to provide further information from the UNSMIS Observer mission when he came to speak with the Security Council on June 7. It was anticipated that Annan's presentation would help to clarify the facts of the massacre.<sup>2</sup>

On June 7, 2012, however, instead of providing

new information from such an investigation, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and several of the other speakers at the informal General Assembly (GA) meeting put the responsibility for the Houla Massacre on the Assad government. This was also the dominant response of the nations that spoke at the informal GA meeting even though there had not yet been any adequate investigation into facts of the situation.<sup>3</sup> Also, there were claims of a new massacre.

Some of the member nations that spoke at the informal GA meeting, however, objected to coming to such a conclusion, especially, in the absence of an adequate investigation.

In his comments referring to the massacres in Houla and on the outskirts of Hama, the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, said, "Clearly these are the most serious crimes that require a reliable detailed investigation."

Other nations including Venezuela, India, Cuba and Nicaragua expressed similar views. The Venezuelan Representative told the informal GA meeting, "We suspect the fact that these criminal acts happen to coincide with these debates at the UN. We have to wonder who does this benefit at this time?" He urged that, "an independent and transparent investigation into these massacres must take place and we must find convincing clarity."

India's Ambassador to the UN, Hardeep Singh Puri, noted that the attacks against civilians and security forces in Syria "have intensified over the last few weeks and have taken a significant toll." Also he drew attention to the sharp increase in the number of terrorist attacks in different parts of the country." He "condemned all violence, irrespective of who the perpetrators are," and called for the "cessation of all outside support for armed groups and serious action against the terrorist groups in Syria." And he asked that the crimes, "including the recent incident in El Houleh, are fully investigated and their perpetrators brought to justice."

After comparing what has happened in Syria with what had happened in Libya, the Nicaraguan Representative called for "an exhaustive investigation of these crimes and to bring the guilty to justice."

The Cuban Ambassador noted that the "information is fragmented, imprecise and the object of frequent manipulation." He denounced what he saw as the "complicity of the major broadcast media which are used to confusing reality and not accepting the responsibility for their acts."

During his comments, which were twice cut off by the UN video transmission system, Bashir Ja'afari, the Syrian Ambassador, asked how the Secretary General of the League of Arab States could render a judgment about who is responsible for the Houla massacre when such a judgment contradicts the report of the United Nations observers on the ground, and investigations of that atrocious massacre have not yet been completed. The massacre, he emphasized, had been condemned by the Syrian government.

Ambassador Ja'afari announced that, "Syria is ready to receive a commission of inquiry of states known for their independence and for their respect for the UN charter and for their refusal to interfere in Syrian internal affairs."

Later in the afternoon, after the Security Council's informal briefing with Kofi Annan, there was a media stakeout at the Security Council. One journalist asked Ban Ki moon, "Mr. Secretary General, what steps have you taken to comply with the request of the Security Council on 27<sup>th</sup> of May through the press statement to investigate fully, independently and transparently the killing in El Houleh?" The UN Secretary General did not answer the question.<sup>4</sup>

It is notable that as Ambassador Li Baodong had recognized during his press conference on June 4, several different narratives have been used to describe the Houla massacre. These offer different explanations of the circumstances under which it happened and therefore what the implications are for the future of the Kofi Annan six-point peace plan.

Those nations encouraging an investigation into the details of the Houla massacre want to determine the lessons from it toward solving the crisis in Syria. Those who were quick to jump to conclusions based on superficial information are helping to fan the flames of the conflict.

What were these major competing narratives?

### Western and Arab Media Narrative

The narrative that was being spread by much of the mainstream western and Arab satellite media was a narrative that blamed the Assad government for the Houla massacre. At first that media claimed that the people killed, including the women and children, had been killed by shelling from Syrian troops attacking the town.

In examining the videos and photos put online or provided by the opposition making these claims, however, it became evident that many of the victims,

particularly the women and children, had been killed at close range by bullets and knives and not by the shelling of heavy weapons by the Syrian military.

It soon became obvious that only 20 of the 108 who were killed may have been killed in combat fighting over the checkpoint and that the circumstances of these deaths were not yet determined.

The opposition to the Syrian government and the western and Arab media supporting the opposition, like BBC and Aljazeera, etc. had to quickly change their narrative. They invented a new force allegedly used by the Syrian government, the 'shabbiya,' which they claimed is a pro government militia.<sup>5</sup> The shabbiya allegedly came into the homes of people and killed them at close range.

### Russian News Team Narrative

A Russian news team interviewed people after the massacre. The explanation compiled from these interviews represents a very different narrative.

Their account noted that Houla is an administrative area, made up of three villages. It is not the name of a town. Some of this area had been under control of armed insurgents for a number of weeks. The Syrian army maintained certain checkpoints. This account explains that on the evening of May 24, the Free Syrian Army launched an operation to take control of the checkpoints, bringing 600-800 armed insurgents from different areas.

At the same time that there was the fight over the checkpoints, several armed insurgents went into certain homes and massacred the members of several families. Among the families targeted was a family related to a recently elected People's Assembly representative. This family and another family that were killed were said to be families that supported the Syrian government. "Other victims included the family of two journalists for Top News and New Orient Express, press agencies associated with Voltaire Network," reported the news and analysis site [Voltaire.net](http://Voltaire.net).<sup>6</sup>

### Template for Media Warfare

At a press conference held in Damascus shortly after the Houla massacre by Joint UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan, a question was asked which provides an important context to keep in mind when trying to determine what happened in Houla.

The journalist asked: "I am a Russian living in

Syria and reporting for various Russian online sites. What is happening in Syria reminds me of what happened in Yugoslavia that led to its division. We have sources that tell us that the Pentagon is preparing for war. If that happens, what do we do? What do Syrians do and what does the Government do?"<sup>7</sup>

Annan's response was that he had no information of the Pentagon "preparing for war." Nor did he have any indication that what was happening in Syria would be a repeat of "what happened in Yugoslavia." Despite the fact that Annan dismissed the journalist's question, the question provides an important perspective toward understanding what is happening in Syria.

Looking back at the form of media warfare used to prepare public opinion for the NATO aggression against the former Yugoslavia, a template emerges that reflects a pattern in these events.

In this media warfare, the mainstream western media was used to spread stories about the alleged "responsibility for" massacres in order to demonize certain forces. This demonization served to justify the NATO bombing of their country. Hence the Russian journalist's question to Kofi Annan raised an important and serious concern.

In his book *Liar's Poker*, which analyzes the role of the media in the Yugoslav war, Michel Collon writes "Information is already a battlefield, which is part of war." He writes that in 1991 the Slovenian government created a "media center which unleashed a flood of disinformation to international correspondents."<sup>8</sup> This disinformation created a false narrative about what was happening and about who was responsible for the violent acts that killed many innocent people. The false narrative was then used to provide the justification for foreign intervention on one side of the conflict.

Also Collon documents the use of U.S. public relations agencies to help mold public opinion in favor of the Croatian and Muslim nationalists and as media warfare against the Serbs. In a striking way, Collon shows how "a massacre happens unexpectedly each time certain Western powers plan to escalate measures against the Serbs."<sup>9</sup> He proposes what could be considered as the template used to create the climate of western public opinion justifying the escalation of the attack on Yugoslavia.

Here are the components of the template he presents:<sup>10</sup>

- Step 1: Preparation of a more or less hidden agenda
- Step 2: Images that shock Public Opinion

Step 3: Groundless and Wild Media Accusations Without Investigation

Step 4: Western Objectives are Achieved

Step 5: Corrections to Erroneous News Reporting: Too Late and No Impact

Collon argues that shocking events were "staged" for the international media so as to make possible a planned escalation of the attack on Serbia. The Houla massacre bears a striking resemblance to the incidents that Collon refers to in the 1990s that set a basis for the escalation of the aggression against the Serbian government.

Was the rush to judgment after the Houla massacre both at the UN, and in the mainstream western and Arab media but another example of support and encouragement for armed aggression against a sovereign nation, as in the Yugoslavian situation? Was it but a signal to the armed insurgents willing to carry out horrific deeds to achieve their goal of foreign intervention, that they should go ahead with their cruel agenda? These are questions that need to be asked as they may help to explain the underlying motivation for one of the narratives.

The failure of mainstream western and Arab satellite media and of a number of nations at the UN to acknowledge that there were different views of the underlying cause and implementation of the Houla massacre impeded the urgency with which the needed investigation and analysis had to be organized.<sup>11</sup> Such an investigation was critical to identify the actual problems and to understand what was needed to solve them.

It is important to acknowledge that there are two major narratives about the events of the Houla massacre. Such an acknowledgment recognizes, as Ambassador Li Baodong did, the need for evidence to determine what is an accurate narrative of the Houla Massacre. There are a number of blogs and news sites on the Internet where netizens contribute articles and comments that are helpful toward analyzing what is happening in Syria and at the UN and whether the actions at the UN are helpful or harmful for resolving the crisis in a way that is in line with the principles of the UN charter. There are examples of a substantial new netizen journalism developing on the Internet which is taking up the needed work to investigate the facts of the Syrian conflict so as to understand what is needed to contribute to a peaceful resolution.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1. Video of Press Conference marking the beginning of the Chinese presidency of the Security Council for the month of June 2012:

<http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/security-council/watch/li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-program-me-of-work-for-the-month-of-june-2012-press-conference/1672822951001>

2. The press statement issued by the UN Security Council on May 27, 2012 called for the Secretary General and UNSMIS “to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council.”

3. See for example the summary by Moon of Alabama, <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/the-syria-discussion-at-the-un-general-assembly.html>

4. “Joint press encounter with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Kofi A. Annan, Joint UN-Arab League Special Envoy on Syria and Nabil El-Araby, Secretary General of the League of Arab States.”

5. See for example the account by AP: “The assault came nearly a week after 108 people, many of them women and children, were killed in the area. Activists said government forces first shelled the area on Friday, then pro-regime fighters known as shabiha stormed the villages. The Syrian government denied its troops were behind the killings and blamed ‘armed terrorists’.”

<http://calgary.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20120531/UN-chief-warns-syria-houla-120531/20120531/?hub=CalgaryHome>

6. See for example: Thierry Meyssan, “The Houla Affair Highlights Western Intelligence Gap in Syria,”

<http://www.voltairenet.org/The-Houla-affair-highlights>

See also: Wassim Raad, “The Set Up Massacre and the American Fingerprint”

<http://www.voltairenet.org/The-set-up-massacre-and-the>

In German see for example Mathias Broeckers, “Der Hula-Hoax” <http://www.broeckers.com/2012/06/05/der-hula-hoax/> and Rainer Hermann, “Again massacre in Syria,” the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 7, 2012.

<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/neue-erkenntnisse-zu-getoetet-en-von-hula-abermals-massaker-in-syrien-11776496.html>

(An English translation FAZ is available at Moon of Alabama blog:

<http://www.moonofalabama.org/2012/06/prime-german-paper-syrian-rebels-committed-houla-massacre.html>)

7. Transcript of JSE Press Conference in Damascus, May 29, 2012, p. 4. For video see:

<http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unsmis/>

8. Michel Collon, *Liar’s Poker*, International Action Center, New York, 2002 p. 45. (This is an English translation of the book which was originally published in French.)

9. Ibid., p. 28

10. Ibid., p. 26.

11. The Human Rights Council passed a resolution calling for an investigation into the Houla massacre. Several sources, however, document that the Human Rights Council only considers information supplied by activists in support of the armed opposition. See for example “UN Commissions report on Houla? But they only talk to Syrian opposition – by phone,” May 31, 2012 “Anti-war campaigner Marinella Correggia worries the HR commissioner talks only to its sources: the opposition.”

<http://www.rt.com/news/houla-massacre-un-syria-635/>

12. A few of the English language web sites providing news and analysis of the Syrian conflict toward a directed peaceful resolution include:

Moon of Alabama: <http://www.moonofalabama.org/>

Centre for Research on Globalization:

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/>

VoltaireNet: <http://www.voltairenet.org/en>

Syria News: <http://www.syrianews.cc/>

Syria360: <http://syria360.wordpress.com/>

The 4<sup>th</sup> Media: <http://www.4thmedia.org/>

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[Editor’s Note: A version of the following article first appeared on the netizenblog on Nov 21, 2007 at:

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2007/11/21/new-news-challenges-false-narratives-of-reality/>]

## ‘New News’ Challenges False Narratives of Reality

by Ronda Hauben (Nov. 21, 2007)  
[netcolumnist@gmail.com](mailto:netcolumnist@gmail.com)

A 2007 article written for the online news journal Telepolis took up the issue of the false reality the U.S. press presented to the public with regard to Iran’s nuclear program. The article is titled, “Injecting a Synthetic Reality? Framing the narrative on Iran’s Use of nuclear energy.” The url is:

<http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/26/26630/1.html>

The false framing of reality by the neo-conservatives in the U.S. is a significant tactic they use to accomplish their political objectives. Unless there is a press to adequately challenge their activities, the public is left under the cloud of deception. A press that presents an accurate presentation of reality is critical for the public. This is why it is important that there be a ‘New News’ to counter the false narratives presented as the news by those with hidden agendas. The public will have a more effective means to oppose these hidden agendas if they are understood. See for example, Robert Parry’s article “Why We Write,” at Consortium News, The url is:

<http://www.consortiumnews.com/2007/111207.html>

A forum on “The Changing Media Landscape”\* was held on Nov. 13, 2007, at the Columbia Journalism School (CJS) exploring the new media. Such a program presents an opportunity to look at the changing media landscape and particularly at what the state of journalism is and what the new means of expres-

sion made possible by the Internet and netizens can contribute to journalism. Instead of this being the focus of the evening's events, however, it was an issue introduced into their presentations by the few speakers who had a concern with these issues. This meant that the state of journalism and how it is developing was peripheral to the evening's events rather than at the heart. However, since challenging the false presentation of reality in the press is a critical issue, it was good to see that it was even peripherally explored.

A brief review of the Columbia Journalism Program focused on the ways the panel treated this issue so crucial to the crux of journalism, so necessary for a journalism which can challenge the powerful and play a watchdog role over our political systems. The presentation and later the responses to questions offered by Hossein 'Hoder' Derakhshan, an Iranian-born blogger, and journalist who was then living in Great Britain, provided an important example of what is the importance of challenging false notions of reality and what this means with regard to journalism.

Hossein, who introduced blogging to Iran, has suffered from being censored in various ways for his posts. Despite this, he had taken on to challenge the attack in the mainstream English language press against Iran, defining this attack as a form of censorship. In a response to one of the questions about censorship, he explained how the Western press has heaped hostility on Iran. He gave the example of how a prominent U.S. newspaper attacked the nationalization of Iranian oil in the 1950s calling the prime minister of Iran at the time, Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq, a "dictator" and threatening that Iran's desire to nationalize its oil was playing with fire. Hossein explained how some U.S. newspapers were publishing similar articles 50 years later, focusing on Iran's nuclear "ambitions." Hossein pointed to the political use of the term "ambitions" to frame the Iran nuclear issue, rather than the media offering an accurate depiction of Iran's nuclear activity. "Since when has 'ambition' entered politics," he asked. He noted that with India, and other countries which already have nuclear weapons, the term "ambition" is not used with regard to them. There is no evidence that Iran is producing nuclear weapons, and none is provided. Instead the issue is framed as one of "ambition." In defining censorship, Hossein explained that for him censorship has to do with the distortion of reality. On his web site he had written that to "censor is controlling the reality by constructing various versions of it."

Hossein referred to corporate censorship as a serious problem. The issue of press censorship should not be restricted to the consideration of government censorship, he explained.

A related presentation at the forum was that by Andrew Lih. He was at the time living in China and working on a book about Wikipedia. One of the problems he raised is how journalism is funded. A nonprofit model like Wikipedia is a model to help those who are concerned about the strings that are attached to a journalistic effort. Andrew also pointed out, however, that Wikinews hasn't succeeded even though it is functioning on a nonprofit model.

During the question section of the forum, Josh Cohen of Google News was asked about Google News removing publications from being included in the publications it indexes. Josh said this was not his area of knowledge but gave some general criteria, none of which applied to the publication the question was raised about. Another panel member mentioned that Google News does not make public its criteria for including or removing sites from its News and that it would be helpful if it did.

As part of his concluding comments, Hossein referred to the stated purpose of journalism as helping people hold the powerful accountable.

While the forum helped to raise some important issues, it would have been more helpful if it had found a way to put the focus on these issues. Much of the other discussion was related to issues like using video for websites. These may be considered aspects of new media. More significant, however, are the difficulties of journalists and journalism that are encountered when one attempts to challenge practices like the media dissemination of the false notion of Iraq's 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD). The false narrative of WMD provided the pretext for the U.S. invasion and then occupation of Iraq. It is important that a focus of good journalism be on challenging such misrepresentations in the press, especially when the media is fomenting hostility toward Iran in the name of questioning Iran's "ambitions." Hossein is to be commended for proposing that these misrepresentations in the press are actually a form of censorship.

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\*The Program at CJS was: "The Changing Media Landscape, 2007"  
COLUMBIA JOURNALISM DIALOGUES

Tuesday, Nov. 13 / Columbia Journalism School / 6:30-9 p.m.

SPEAKERS at the program included:

Josh Cohen, business product manager, Google News

Hossein 'Hoder' Derakhshan, an Iranian-born blogger, journalist, and Internet activist

Jonathan Dube, director of digital programming, CBC

Andrew Lih, author of a new book on Wikipedia and expert on Chinese media

Mindy McAdams, new media education pioneer and professor at University of Florida

Michael Rogers, resident futurist of *The New York Times*

MODERATOR: Prof. Sree Sreenivasan, Dean of Students, Columbia Journalism School & WNBC-TV tech reporter

Producer: Citizen journalism platform GroundReport.com

Location: <http://groundreport.tv>

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[http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2011/05/01/need\\_for\\_netizen\\_journalism/](http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2011/05/01/need_for_netizen_journalism/)]

## **The Need for Netizen Journalism and the Ever Evolving Netizen – News – Net Symbiosis**

by Ronda Hauben  
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The international situation always raises important questions for discussion and analysis. In a complex world, how can one have a means to understand what is happening? While the mainstream media often project one view of the world, online discussion and analysis have begun to play an ever more important role in offering alternative viewpoints and analysis.

Around the world there has been a recognition that the mainstream western media can play a harmful role for those trying to develop an accurate understanding of the events of our times. The example of the U.S. media promoting the U.S. government misrepresentation that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction led to a number of critiques of how such a falsification could occur. The question was raised as to what is the means to prevent similar occurrences in the future. One such answer was to recognize that a serious problem with much of the mainstream U.S. media is that it presents only the dominant viewpoint of those in power, and in

so doing helps to empower that viewpoint even more.<sup>1</sup>

The situation in 2011 with the U.S., France, and the U.K. providing NATO military action against Libya again raised the question of the role played by the western mainstream media in reporting the actions of their governments.

As in the Iraq situation where the mainstream news media focused on the reports and views of the Iraqi exile opposition community, similarly in the Libyan situation, much of the mainstream western English language media, along with Al-Jazeera, were reporting overwhelmingly the Libyan defector and opposition reports and views. The question raised in that situation was whether there was any other means to get a broader perspective of the situation in the Middle East?

The problem of relying on the narrow perspective of much of the mainstream western English language media has been recognized in the past. Is there a means to solve this problem?

Exploring a similar problem, Michael Hauben, in his article, "The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media: The Usenet News Collective/Man-Computer News Symbiosis"<sup>2</sup> considered what the effect of both the netizen and the Internet would be on the future of the news and the news media. He recognized that a new form of news was in its infancy

Writing in the mid 1990s when he was doing his pioneering research on the social impact of the Internet and the netizens, a dominant form of this new news was online discussion. At the time the largest online discussion forum was Usenet. Hauben recognized that a new form of news was evolving into a new paradigm which would include both the contributions of netizens and the capabilities of the Internet. Describing the frustration of many netizens with the traditional media that they had to rely on before the Internet, Hauben wrote, "Today, similarly, the need for a broader and more cooperative gathering and reporting of the News has helped create the new online media that is gradually supplementing traditional forms of journalism."

What Hauben realized is that a symbiosis was developing between the News, netizens and the Internet. Symbiosis is a term describing an interdependent relationship between different species. For example, the relationship between the insect *Blastophaga grossorum* and the fig tree is described in an important paper by one of the pioneers of networking J. C. R. Licklider as a relationship in which each

is dependent on the other for survival. Licklider writes:<sup>3</sup>

“The fig tree is pollinated only by the insect *Blastophaga grossorun*. The larva of the insect lives in the ovary of the fig tree, and there it gets its food. The tree and the insect are thus heavily interdependent: the tree cannot reproduce without the insect; the insect cannot eat without the tree; together, they constitute not only a viable but a productive and thriving partnership. This cooperative ‘living together in intimate association, or even close union, of two dissimilar organisms’ is called symbiosis.”

Hauben realized that the news was evolving into a similar interdependent partnership which had become substantial. He wrote, “the collective body of people assisted by (Usenet) software, has grown larger than any individual newspaper....”

There are many examples that have developed of netizens making their contributions to the News and the Net.

One important example of this new media was the anti-cnn web site created in China in 2008. There is an article “Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China”<sup>4</sup> which documents how the website was created in response to western media distortions of the Tibet demonstrations and riots and how the website critiqued these distortions.

In 2010 netizens in South Korea and in various online sites around the world took on to challenge the inaccuracies and serious problems in the South Korean government investigation into the sinking of the Cheonan.

The article “Netizens Question Cause of Cheonan Controversy”<sup>5</sup> documents some of the many online contributions made to demonstrate the inaccuracy of the South Korean government’s conclusions.

The article “UN Security Council March 17 Meeting to Authorize Bombing of Libya all Smoke and Mirrors”<sup>6</sup> includes some of the online critique by netizens of the UN security council characterization of the conflict in Libya as that of peaceful demonstrators needing foreign military intervention for protection.

These are but a few references to the new form of news media that is evolving which is one of analysis and critique, especially of the inaccuracies portrayed by mainstream western media.

Similarly, given the claims of the U.S., French and U.K. governments that it was necessary to bomb Libya in order to protect civilians, a number of web sites have taken up the obligation to offer analysis and

perspective challenging such government views and the mainstream media promoting them. In the U.S. even some prominent alternative media like Democracy Now that had challenged the U.S. government’s false claims as the pretext for the invasion of Iraq, relied on the defector analysis of the situation in Libya. Despite the critique of how much of the mainstream U.S. media had failed in the period leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, similar superficial news reports were again a norm in the UN attack on Libya. With much of the mainstream U.S. news media presenting only the viewpoint of the dominant political interests in the U.S., there was a dire need for a netizen–news–net collaboration producing a more in depth coverage and critical analysis. Web sites like Global Research,<sup>7</sup> Counterpunch,<sup>8</sup> Mathaba,<sup>9</sup> and Voltairenet<sup>10</sup> are just a few of those which offered a broader critique of the U.S. and NATO military attacks on Libya.

The significance of this new form of news is that there are many netizens who are dedicated to doing the research and analysis needed to determine the interests and actions that are too often hidden from public view. By revealing the actual forces at work, netizens are making it possible to have a more accurate grasp of whose interests are being served and what is at stake in the events that make up the news.

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#### Notes

1. W. Lance Bennett, Steven Livingston, Regina G. Lawrence, *When the Press Fails*, Chicago, 2008.
2. Michael Hauben, “The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media: The Usenet News Collective – The Man-Computer News Symbiosis, in Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, Los Alamitos, 1997.  
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[Editor's Note: The following is an updated and edited excerpt from a talk given in Beijing in July 2012 at the April Salon.\*]

## The United Nations, China and Journalism in the Era of the Netizen

by Ronda Hauben  
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### Introduction

The year, 2012 was the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the English and the Japanese print editions of the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*.

To mark that occasion I wanted to try to understand the significance of this anniversary with respect to ongoing development of the Internet and the Netizen. Visiting China that year was an impetus to review my previous visits to China and the interesting events I was able to take part in related to netizens during these visits.

In 2005 when I first came to Beijing, it was because Beijing was the host of the International Congress on the History of Science. At the conference I presented a paper on "The International and Scientific Origins of the Internet and the Emergence of the Netizens." At the time there was a lot of new construction going on in Beijing and the city appeared to be new and developing. It appeared to be an appropriate place to present a talk on the importance of Internet development. With the continuing development of the Internet the phenomenon of the netizens was becoming more important to understand.

My second trip to Beijing was in April 2008 when I was invited to give a talk at the Internet Society of China. In my talk I asked the question "Is this is a new Age, the Age of the Netizen?" Also during this trip I was invited to give a talk on "the Global Media and the Role of Netizens In Determining the News." This talk was for a journalism class at Tsinghua University. On the day the talk was scheduled, there was a meeting

between students at Tsinghua University and several journalists from the International Federation of Journalists. The students at Tsinghua University were angry about the Western media coverage of China. They told the journalists their complaints. The journalists seemed surprised and found it difficult to respond. In the process I met students who were part of the anti-cnn web site that was created to challenge the falsifications about China that were then appearing in the Western press.

One of the reasons for my next trip, in September 2009 was to participate in a Netizens' Day event sponsored by the Internet Society of China. This Netizens Festival Day was observed on September 14, 2009.

For this Netizens' Day event, a stage was set up in front of the CCTV Tower. I was invited to present background on the development of the Netizen. I gave a short introduction about the discovery of the emergence of the Netizens. This was presented in English with a Chinese translation and the event is archived in videos on websites in China.

I described how in 1992-1993, Michael Hauben who was then a Columbia University student, sent out a set of questions across the networks asking users about their experiences online. He was surprised to find that not only were many of those who responded to his questions interested in what the Net made possible for them, but also they were interested in spreading the Net and in exploring how it could make a better world possible. Based on his research Michael wrote his article "The Net and Netizens."

The netizen, Michael recognized, was the emergence of a new form of citizen. This was a citizen who was using the power made possible by the Net for a public purpose, and who was not limited by geographical boundaries. The Net for Michael was a new social institution and the discovery of the emergence of the netizen was the special contribution that he made to the field of network study.

The 2009 Netizens' Day event held in China was the first official recognition of the netizen anywhere in the world. It was a celebration to honor the fact that the phenomenon of the netizen continues to develop and spread and to be recognized as a new and important achievement of our times. It is fitting that in China with its many millions of netizens pioneering the use of the Internet there is a day to celebrate netizens.

When I returned to New York in 2009 after my

visit to China, I went to an event at the Chinese Mission to the UN. On the way into the Mission, there was a rack with magazines about China. A magazine in the rack caught my attention. It was the July 5, 2009 edition of the magazine *NewsChina*. The title of the issue was “The Netizens’ Republic of China.”

The magazine was filled with articles documenting the impact of the Net and netizens on what is happening in China. It presented several examples of netizens speaking out in discussions in online discussion groups and forums. In an article titled “Netizens, the New Watchdogs,” the writer, Yu Xiaodong wrote, “It is the newly emerging Internet media, in particular, citizen journalism that has filled the need to kindle political discussion in China leading many to conclude that Internet media has become the mainstream itself rather than a peripheral form of communication.”

Based on these experiences I wrote an article with the title “China in the Era of the Netizen.” In the article I explained my sense that something significant is happening in China. Beijing, I wrote, was being developed as a world class city with the benefit of contributions made possible by the Internet and by netizens. “So perhaps a special characteristic of Beijing has to do with the emergence of the Netizen.” The *NewsChina* issue of the magazine helped to clarify that there were those in China who also recognized that netizens were crucial actors in the development of China.

I have had subsequent visits to China, in which I have been encouraged to give talks about netizens and about the development and spread of the Internet and its potential impact on China.

What seems significant about these experiences is that there is interest and support for netizen development in China that I have not found elsewhere in the world.

This introduction brings me to the subject of the talk I want to give today. This talk is about a problem with the mainstream western media and how the Internet and netizens are creating a needed alternative to solve this problem.

## Part I The UN and General Mood’s Missing Report on Conflicting Accounts of the Houla Massacre

The Houla massacre occurred in Syria on May 25, 2012. This was but a few days before Kofi Annan, who was at the time the joint Arab League-UN envoy, was

scheduled to visit Syria.

Immediately after the massacre, there was a media campaign in much of the Western media to blame the Syrian government for the deaths. There were 108 deaths reported which included men, women and children. A short time after the massacre, an alternative account was made available by a Russian online media group, Anna News.<sup>1</sup> The day following the massacre, a news team for this online site visited the area where the massacre had occurred. Their report appeared on a number of alternative news sites soon after the massacre.

The reports from the Anna News team, and other netizen news reports, challenged the mainstream Western media claims that the Syrian government was responsible for the killings.

Similarly, the Syrian government conducted a preliminary investigation. They provided witnesses that the massacre was carried out by armed insurgents and criminal elements.

The armed opposition’s account of events demonizes the Syrian government and campaigns for foreign intervention. The mainstream Western media accounts of the massacre (and some Arab satellite tv channels) mainly present what they claim is happening from this point of view of the armed opposition in Syria. But there have been a number of instances when the accounts from the armed opposition have been shown to be false.

Differing from the reports in the mainstream Western media is information presented by the Syrian government. Also there is the information in the alternative media that I refer to as netizen journalism. Netizen journalism exposes distortions and misrepresentations in the news coverage and does the investigation required to present an accurate narrative. For example, in the aftermath of the Houla massacre, a number of articles documenting the role of the armed insurgents in carrying out the Houla massacre appeared on alternative media sites. Similarly there were articles comparing what had happened in Houla with media campaigns advocating foreign intervention in the Yugoslavian conflict in the 1990s. Also there were articles considering what the motive was behind the massacre and the clues this provided toward determining who was responsible.

I want to propose that this form of alternative media is setting up a communication channel different from that of the mainstream Western media.

What has been interesting has been to consider

not only the two different channels that these different forms of news represent, but also to look at how different actors at the UN relate to these different communication channels.

In April 2012, the UN Security Council authorized a mission of 300 unarmed military observers to monitor what was happening in Syria and to try to encourage a cease fire between the conflicting parties. This mission was called the UN Supervisory Mission in Syria (UNSMIS). When the Houla massacre first occurred, UNSMIS observers went to investigate the massacre. The initial response of UNSMIS was that there were presented to them two views of what had occurred and who was responsible. UNSMIS said it was not yet possible to make a determination which was accurate and which was a falsification without further investigation.

The UN Security Council issued a press statement after the Houla massacre requesting that UNSMIS do such an investigation.<sup>2</sup> In June, Major General Robert Mood, the commander of UNSMIS told journalists that a report had been prepared and submitted to UN headquarters.

In the article “General Mood: ‘Two Versions’ of the Houla Massacre,” John Rosenthal writes, “At the June 15 press conference General Mood went on to say that the mission had assembled a report about the massacre, including the details of witness interviews and that this report had been submitted to UN headquarters in New York. This raises an obvious question,” writes Rosenthal, “Why has this report not been rendered public?”<sup>3</sup> Rosenthal did a service pointing to General Mood’s June 15 press conference in Damascus. The press conference is online only in a video format. I have transcribed the part of the press conference where General Mood talks about the report on the Houla massacre that he says was given to UN headquarters.<sup>4</sup>

Describing the investigation by UNSMIS into the Houla massacre and the report UNSMIS submitted to UN headquarters, General Mood tells journalists:

“The statement we issued after el Houla is still valid. Which means we have been there with an investigating team. We have interviews, interviewed locals with one story, and we have interviewed locals that has another story.

The circumstances leading up to el Houla and the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident itself, still remains

unclear to us.

We have put this together, the facts that we (can) could establish by what we saw on the ground. We have put together the statements, the witness interviews and we have sent that as a report to UN headquarters, New York.

And then the assessment on what is the way forward. Will there be a different investigation? [This] is a matter for headquarters in this context. But if we are asked, obviously we are on the ground, and could help facilitate that.”

According to General Mood’s statement during this press conference, UNSMIS provided UN headquarters with a report on the Houla massacre. This report included the facts on the ground that UNSMIS was able to establish, and also witness statements and interviews from “locals with one story” and from “locals that have another story.” This report, according to General Mood, was not able to establish “the circumstances leading up to el Houla, and the detailed circumstances, the facts related to the incident itself,” as these still remained unclear to UNSMIS.

But General Mood explained that if there was to be “a different investigation,” UNSMIS was “on the ground and could facilitate that.”

UN Security Council members have said that the Security Council did not receive the report nor does it appear that there was general knowledge at the Security Council that this report presented two conflicting accounts of what happened and that UNSMIS, which was on the ground in Syria at the time, was able to help conduct a more expansive investigation to determine who was responsible for the massacre.

The question is raised as to why the UN Secretariat did not make the UNSMIS report available to the Security Council? Why didn’t the UN pursue the course of a further investigation into the circumstances leading up to the Houla massacre and the facts related to the incident itself by taking up the offer that General Mood made to facilitate such an investigation?

When journalists asked the Secretary-General’s spokesperson what happened to Mood’s report and why it wasn’t given to the Security Council, the spokesman told the press the report had been given to various members of the UN Secretariat. But as several people at the UN and online have asked, “Why not to

the Security Council?”

One of the original purposes for the UNSMIS mission, according to Kofi Annan, was “to see what is going on” so as to be able to “change the dynamics.”<sup>5</sup>

In April 2012, outlining the need for UNSMIS, Annan said, “We continue to be hampered by the lack of verified information in assessing the situation. We need eyes and ears on the ground. This will provide the incontrovertible basis the international community needs to act in an effective and unified manner, increasing the momentum for a cessation of violence to be implemented by all sides.” This “eyes and ears on the ground” function was to be filled by UNSMIS. UNSMIS was deployed to Syria and was on the ground at the time of the Houla Massacre and was able to do an investigation.

Yet when UNSMIS submitted a report to UN headquarters documenting its investigation, it was withheld from the Security Council. Though Ban Ki-Moon’s spokesperson acknowledged that the report was received, the report was not given to the Security Council. It was not made available to the media and the public. Thus it could not be part of the eyes and ears on the ground that Annan said was needed. One can only wonder about the fact that shortly after this report was received by the Secretariat, General Mood left UNSMIS, and not long after that, UNSMIS was ended. The UNSMIS report on Houla did not blame the Syrian government for the massacre, but instead presented two conflicting views of the massacre and offered to facilitate a further investigation.

At least some Security Council members indicated that they wanted the kind of information General Mood explained was in his report. For example, on June 4, at a press conference to mark the beginning of the Chinese Presidency of the Security Council for the month of June 2012, China’s Ambassador Li Baodong, referring to the Houla massacre, said:<sup>6</sup> “Now we have different stories from different angles. Now we have the story from the Syrian government, and from the opposition parties, and from different sources. Since the Security Council has a team...on the ground,” he said referring to UNSMIS, “We want to see first-hand information from our own people.” He hoped this would make it possible to put the different pieces of information together and to “come to our own conclusion with our own judgment.”

The acknowledgment by China’s UN Ambassador that there were different views of what had happened in the Houla massacre and that there was a need to get

accurate information from an on the ground investigation was an important step for a member of the Security Council to make. This challenged mainstream media claims that their account was the only account of what was happening in Syria. The UNSMIS report was the kind of additional information the Chinese Ambassador indicated he was seeking.

The fact remains, however, that the report from UNSMIS that General Mood presented to Ban Ki-Moon’s UN headquarters was withheld from the Security Council, the press and the public. Instead of the UNSMIS report, and any in-depth independent investigation conducted by the UN, which General Mood said UNSMIS could facilitate, something different happened. On August 3, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the government of Syria for the violence in Syria. In his speech in support of the resolution, Abdallah Y Al-Mouallini, the Ambassador representing Saudi Arabia at the UN, blamed the Syrian government for the Houla massacre.

Similarly, in August, the Geneva based UN Human Rights Council issued a report blaming the Syrian government for the violence in Syria. The Human Rights Council made no effort to reconcile the conflicting facts or interviews submitted by UNSMIS to the UN, nor any effort to take up the offer made by General Mood that UNSMIS would provide on the ground assistance to do the needed investigation. The report of the Human Rights Council inaccurately claimed that<sup>7</sup>: “The lack of access significantly hampered the commissions ability to fulfill its mandate. Its access to Government officials and to members of the armed and security forces was negligible. Importantly, victims and witnesses inside the country could not be interviewed in person.”

Such a statement by the Human Rights Council misrepresented the fact that indeed the UN had had observers on the ground in Syria, and that those observers not only gave a report to the UN, but also said that they could facilitate a more thorough investigation if the UN desired to do so. Hence the claims of the Human Rights Council that the UN was unable to conduct an investigation “inside the country” are contrary to General Mood’s statement to the press.

Then in August the Security Council, without being able to review the UNSMIS report or to consider the need for the additional investigation that General Mood said was possible in order to determine

who was responsible for the Houla massacre, allowed the mandate authorizing UNSMIS to expire. Though there was an effort by some nations on the Council to introduce a resolution to extend UNSMIS, others on the Council refused to do so unless Syria was penalized, even though the issue of who was responsible for the violence against civilians, as had happened at Houla, had not been determined by the Security Council nor by any other UN body through an UNSMIS facilitated and impartial investigation.

Commenting on the Security Council action withdrawing UNSMIS from Syria, Archbishop Mario Zenari, the Vatican Nuncio to Syria, said that the withdrawal of UN forces from Syria was a “sad blow. Three or four months ago, there was a good bit of hope for their mission, and now their departure plunges us back into this reality....”<sup>8</sup>

His disappointment is understandable. The Annan plan was based on having eyes and ears on the ground as a way to discourage violence against civilians. The failure of the UN to make the UNSMIS report on Houla available to the Security Council and to the public, and to recognize the need for a more extensive pursuit of the facts of what happened in Houla, was a failure dooming the Annan mission in Syria.

Commenting on what she referred to as “fake” news reports about what is happening in Syria, Mother Agnes Mariam of the Cross, a Superior of the community at the monastery of St James the Mutilated in Qara, Syria, explained that the news reports were “forged with only one side emphasized.”<sup>9</sup> In her comments to the *Irish Times*, she included a criticism of UN reports that she said, were “one sided and not worthy of that organization.” Though she didn’t specify any particular reports, one would not be surprised if it were particularly the Human Rights Council Report she had in mind.

In a paper titled, “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the United Nations” presented in July 2012, at the International Relations and Political Science Conference in Beijing, I documented more of the particularities of netizen journalism in the media war at the UN over Syria.<sup>10</sup> There have been many articles and videos posted on a number of web sites challenging the Western mainstream media version of the events in Houla and providing facts that make a convincing case that the massacre was carried out by armed insurgents and local criminals.

With these articles acting as a catalyst, the mainstream German newspaper, the *Frankfurter*

*Allgemeiner Zeitung* published two articles documenting how the armed insurgency was responsible for the Houla massacre. The titles of the articles translated into English were “Syrian Rebels Committed Houla Massacre” and “On the Houla Massacre: The Extermination.”

In my paper on “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the UN,” I also consider the netizen journalism coverage of two other examples of conflicts that were under consideration by the Security Council and consider the impact on the Security Council of the netizen journalism on these issues.

## II Conclusion

The problem raised by this preliminary presentation concerns the importance of facilitating an accurate channel of communication about the conflicts under consideration by the Security Council.

In the example of the Syrian conflict, the fact that General Mood’s report on the Houla massacre could be withheld from the Security Council, and UNSMIS ended by the UN Security Council without any consideration of the issues raised by the report, represents a serious dilemma. This indicates that there is a problem with the communication channels at the UN. There is a problem with the integrity of these communication channels. This is an example of what happens when a communication channel can be blocked.

In a press conference held in March of 2011 when China assumed the month long rotating Security Council presidency, Ambassador Li Baodong referred to the international media as the “16<sup>th</sup> member of the Security Council.”<sup>11</sup>

While Ambassador Li Baodong was then referring to the mainstream media, it is important to recognize that there is a new form of journalism emerging. This new form of journalism is being created by netizens dedicated to doing the research and analysis to expose the interests and actions that are too often hidden from view in the reporting of the news. As a result of the failure at the UN to provide the Security Council with the conflicting facts of the UNSMIS investigation and to take up the UNSMIS offer to help carry out a more substantial investigation on the ground, an impartial investigation, the ability of the Security Council, and ultimately the UN, to determine what is an accurate narrative about the Houla massacre has been blocked.

This situation demonstrates in a graphic manner,

the need for a netizen journalism that can help to create a channel for communication to provide a more accurate understanding of the conflicts the Security Council is considering. Such a journalism can help to make more likely the peaceful resolution of these conflicts.

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Notes:

1. Early reports by Anna News about the Houla Massacre were on Syrianews.cc. Later many alternative web sites carried Anna News reports. Following is one url for an early report:

<http://www.syrianews.cc/syria-what-really-happened-in-al-hula-homs/>

2. *Security Council Press Statement on Attacks in Syria*, May 27, 2012. "Those responsible for acts of violence must be held accountable. The members of the Security Council requested the Secretary-General, with the involvement of UNSMIS [United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria], to continue to investigate these attacks and report the findings to the Security Council."

<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2012/sc10658.doc.htm>

3. John Rosenthal, "General Mood: Two Versions of the Houla Massacre." The Western media was quick to blame Assad. But does an unpublished UN report tell a different story?, June 26, 2012. Rosenthal writes: "What is perhaps most remarkable about General Mood's comments is that they have been almost universally ignored and this despite the fact that the video of the press conference has been made publicly available by UNSMIS on the mission's own website."

<http://pjmedia.com/blog/general-mood-two-versions-of-the-houla-massacre/>

4. June 15, 2012, General Mood Press Conference, Video part 2. The section where General Mood describes the UNSMIS report on Houla starts at min: 3:10 and ends at 4:17.

5. See "Kofi Annan tells UN We Need Eyes and Ears on the Ground," April 26, 2012.

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2012/04/26/kofi-annan-briefing/>

6. Video of Li Baodong press conference marking the Chinese Presidency of Security Council for the month of June 2012. June 4, 2012.

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2012/06/li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-on-the-programme-of-work-for-the-month-of-june-2012-press-conference.html>

7. Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. Human Rights Council, August 15, 2012.

<http://un-report.blogspot.com/2012/08/report-of-independent-international.html#more>

8. Cindy Wooden and Sarah MacDonald, "Nuncio in Syria: People stunned worried for the future," *The Tidings*, 24 August 2012.

<http://www.the-tidings.com/index.php/news/newsworld/2548-nuncio-in-syria-people-stunned-worried-for-the-future>

9. Patsy McGarry, "Media Coverage of Syria violence partial and untrue, says nun," *The Irish Times*, Monday Aug 13, 2012,

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2012/0813/1224322099930.html>

10. "The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the UN."

Draft Paper:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/r-china2012-aper.doc>

Talk:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/r-china2012-talk.doc>

11. Press Conference: Li Baodong (China) President of the Security Council for the month of March, 2 March 2011.

<http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2011/03/press-conference-li-baodong-china-president-of-the-security-council-for-the-month-of-march.html>

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\* The longer talk can be accessed at:

<http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/r-china2012-april-cafe.doc>

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[Editor's Note: A version of the following article first appeared in the Winter 2007 *Amateur Computerist* on page 1.\*]

## Challenging the False Narratives as Basis for a Netizen Press

One particular vision of the role for the press is that it acts as a watchdog over government. This is not a role that the press often succeeds in fulfilling. Writing in the early 1990s, Michael Hauben observed that the Net "gives the power of journalism or the reporter to the individual."<sup>1</sup> What is this power? Can the Net make it possible for the press to be such a watchdog so that the problems of the society can be brought to the surface and the means found to solve them?

There is an issue of the *Amateur Computerist* (<http://www.ais.org/~jrj/acn/ACn16-1.pdf>) which is a collection of articles that explore the potential of the Internet to make possible a journalism which will function as a watchdog. The articles first appeared in the online newspaper *OhmyNews International* (<http://english.ohmynews.com>) and sometimes in the online magazine *Telepolis* (<http://www.heise.de/tp>). They were an effort to explore what the power of the reporter makes possible.

The articles cover events over a one year period of time. They were selected so as to focus on what has happened with the North Korean situation at the United Nations (U.N.) and in the regional efforts

related to the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. They were an effort to contribute to a form of press coverage that would provide an accurate narrative of the events that make up the news.

On October 9, 2006, the South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ban Ki-moon, won the Security Council nomination to become the eighth Secretary General of the United Nations. The General Assembly voted in favor of the Security Council recommendation on October 19 to make Ban the next U.N. Secretary General.

This was a historic event for South Korea. This was an evolving story. How would Ban fulfill the obligations of the UN charter as Secretary General? Could the problems of the Korean peninsula, especially the struggle for Korean reunification make steps forward during the period while Ban would be at the helm of the U.N.?

A few months earlier, claiming that it had to protect itself from the hostile actions of the United States, North Korea had tested a nuclear device. The very next day after the General Assembly vote in favor of the Security Council's recommendation of Ban to be the next Secretary General, the Security Council began its work to pass Resolution 1718, to impose sanctions on North Korea. The Security Council's actions against North Korea were reminiscent of its actions against Iraq just a few years earlier.

Was there a story developing here? How would Ban do as Secretary General? Would the problems of the Korean peninsula, especially the tension over denuclearization and the struggle for Korean reunification make steps toward resolution or would there be greater instability in the region?

By fall of 2007, the U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution supporting the reunification of Korea and the Joint Declaration North and South Korea had issued at their October 2007 summit.

The articles in the *Amateur Computerist* issue present an account of what happened in the period between these events. During this period, much of the mainstream media in the U.S. supported the U.S. government's hostile treatment of North Korea, blaming North Korea for any delays that developed in the Six-Party Talks. Such framing helped to create a false narrative reminiscent of the fake claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The articles in the issue, instead were an effort to accurately document the events as they unfolded.

During the period leading up to the U.S. invasion

of Iraq in March 2003, much of the mainstream press in the U.S. wrote articles about Iraq's 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD) and how Iraq was a threat to the international community. The investigative journalist and author Robert Parry calls this activity the creation of a 'false narrative.' Parry explores the role of much of the mainstream media in helping the U.S. government to establish a pretext for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

This raises a number of questions. When the U.S. President George Bush described Iraq as part of an 'axis of evil,' he included Iran and North Korea in this same category. Would the Iraq scenario be repeated with respect to North Korea and Iran? Is it possible for the Internet and netizens press to provide a means to counter a 'false narrative' that the U.S. government creates to support its hostile policy objectives?

In his article, "Why I write," the writer George Orwell explains that for every piece he writes, "...there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing."<sup>3</sup> Orwell is describing how he strives for truthfulness in his work.

Does the Net give the power of the reporter to the netizens to counter the fictitious accounts that often make up much of the news? The *Amateur Computerist* issue was an effort to explore the nature of this power and whether the Net and the netizen can present the needed challenge to the false narratives presented by much of the mainstream U.S.

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Notes:

1. "The Net and Netizens: The Impact the Net Has on People's Lives" in *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook/>
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3. George Orwell, "Why I write," [http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e\\_wiw](http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw)

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\* <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/acn/ACn16-1.pdf>

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[Editor's Note: The following is a slightly edited version of a talk presented on May 1, 2012 at a small celebration in honor of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the publication of the print edition of the book *Netizens*]

## Netizens and Communication A New Paradigm

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### I – Looking Back

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. In 2012, we are celebrating the occasion of the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 predict-

ing 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 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 netizens would have on politics, on journalism, and on the revolution in ideas that the Net and netizens 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 U.S. 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 received 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, *Information Please*, 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 his or her government. He considers the “Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen” 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 that 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 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." [Ibid, p. 78]

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." [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.

An 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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.

I realized that one cannot 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.<sup>1</sup> But China is also a place where there are significant developments because of the Internet and netizens.<sup>2</sup>

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.

## 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]

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 netizens, Michael recognized that something new 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]

I want to propose that to look at the question of

government not as a problem of power, or of democracy, but as one of steering, of communication, is a fundamental paradigm shift.

What is the difference?

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 need for 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. The speech was 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, 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

## 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.<sup>6</sup>

“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.<sup>7</sup>

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

Jay Hauben, "On the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 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)

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)

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"

[http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/09/05/in\\_cheonan\\_dispute\\_un\\_security\\_council\\_discovers\\_un\\_charter/](http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/09/05/in_cheonan_dispute_un_security_council_discovers_un_charter/)

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[Editor's Note: A version of the following article first appeared on the netizenblog on May 10, 2008 at:

<http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2008/05/10/netizens-create-anti-cnn-forum-to-challenge-media-distortions-of-china/>]

## Netizens Create Anti-cnn Forum to Challenge Media Distortions of China

by Ronda Hauben  
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Who will win the contest to be the new global media, CNN or netizen media like the anti-CNN online forum and web site? This is a question that students in a 2008 global media literacy seminar at Tsinghua University in Beijing were given to grapple with as their final project.

The creation in 2008 of the anti-cnn online forum and web site by netizens in China has been a significant development. The global media literacy seminar at Tsinghua University was taught by Professor Li

Xiguang. Professor Li's background is as a journalist, covering science and technology, and as a journalism professor who is the author of significant papers about the role of the Internet in the development of the changing media environment in China. Professor Li had invited me to speak to his students in the global media literacy seminar about the spread of netizens and the impact of the Internet on society for his April 16<sup>th</sup> class.

The context in which this invitation came is the research I have been doing about the role of netizens in the development of a significant new form of journalism, a form of journalism which expands the spectrum of issues and problems from the more limited range common in the traditional forms of media.

Shortly before my trip to China was to begin, however, something quite unexpected occurred. When the western mainstream media, including CNN to BBC, pictured the events that occurred in Lhasa, Tibet, in April 2008, as a peaceful demonstration, Chinese netizens immediately documented that their coverage was often inaccurate or misleading.

Within a few days of the inaccurate reports, an online forum appeared on the Internet called anti-cnn. (<http://www.anti-cnn.com>) The forum included articles and videos documenting some of the many distortions in the coverage of the Tibet events. The forum also had areas in English and in Chinese for discussion and debate.

I had discovered the online forum while still in New York before my trip to China and was intrigued by the fact that it not only provided an important source of clarification about the misrepresentations in the media, but also it made available a space for discussion in both English and Chinese about the importance of identifying and countering the false narrative that the mainstream western media had been creating of the events in Tibet.

While the online forum was named anti-cnn it was not limited to countering errors in reporting by CNN. Rather the founder had chosen anti-cnn for the name as CNN has a global spread and the purpose of the anti-cnn forum was to counter the misrepresentations of China and events in China in the global media.

I was particularly excited to be going to China at a time when a netizen media form had been created to critique the narratives being circulated by mainstream western media organizations.

We arrived in Beijing early in the morning on April 16, 2008, the day I was to give my talk to Profes-

sor Li's seminar.

We had arrangements to see Professor Li's assistant in order to get ready to go to the class for my talk. It was 3 p.m., a little while before I was to get ready to go to the class, when Professor Li's assistant called up to our room and asked if she could come up. It was good to see her. I was in the process of putting some finishing touches on my slides for my talk.

She came into our room out of breath, explaining that she had tried to send an e-mail, which I hadn't seen. She said that several journalists had come to debate with Tsinghua University students about the frustrations netizens in China had with the reporting by several of the western media organizations. She urged us to come immediately with her to hear the debate.

I saved the version I had of my slides and we left to follow her across the Tsinghua University campus to the meeting between the students and the journalists.

The meeting was in a large room in the journalism building. Four journalists from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) were seated at a large table, along with Professor Li and a number of students. Other students filled the rest of the room.

The conversation was being held in English and Chinese with Professor Li doing translation from one language to the other depending on the speaker.

There were perhaps as many as 80 people filling the room.

I later learned that the journalists were probably part of a nine person delegation from the IFJ who had come to speak with the Chinese government about working conditions for the 30,000 journalists who were expected to come to Beijing to cover the Olympics.

While the purpose of the IFJ delegation appeared to be as advocates for the journalists who were to be covering the Olympics, the situation in the debate they were having with Tsinghua students was quite different. At this meeting the students were presenting their frustrations and complaints about the kind of erroneous reporting that had been documented on the anti-cnn forum and asking for an explanation of how such misrepresentations could have happened.

One of the students asked why the Western media did not report about the victims who had died in the fires set by those who took part in the riots. Another student asked why the western media reported that religious effigies had been burned but

didn't report about the people who had died as a result of the fires and other violence in the riot. The student wondered why journalists would give more weight to the destruction of property rather than of human life.

Still another student asked how journalists could cover the story of Tibet if they didn't first take the time to learn the history of what had happened in Tibet in the past.

"Does a free press mean the freedom of the journalist to present his or her own personal views or does it mean the freedom for the public to know the information," asked one of the students.

Many students had hands up when there was the call for questions.

The head of the delegation, Aidan Patrick White, who was the General Secretary of the IFJ, headquartered in Brussels, gave most of the responses, though others in the delegation also answered some of the questions raised by the students.

White explained that when he went into journalism he thought it would be something connected with public service. He had since learned that there is political pressure on journalists no matter what country they are from.

The manager of the anti-cnn web site, Qi Hanting, was a Tsinghua University student. He was at the meeting and his presentation to the journalists was eagerly greeted by the students. He explained why the students were upset with the distorted coverage anti-cnn had documented as prevalent in the reports of western media organizations.

Qi explained that there was a difference between a mistake in a story and a distortion. He offered as an analogy the core of an atom and the electrons surrounding it. The electrons can appear any place around the atom, but if an electron goes too far away it can break away.

Though reporters might write about different aspects of a story, he explained, their stories still can be accurate. But if the report is too far from the reality, it could be explosive.

The journalists from the IFJ responded that they weren't trying to justify bad reporting. There wasn't a conspiracy in the western media against China. Qi proposed that there was a need to have reporters who emphasize different aspects of a story in order to help there to be the proper understanding of a story, but that was different from presenting a distorted or inaccurate presentation of the story as had happened with a number of the reports of the Tibet riot in the western

media.

With less than 100 days remaining until the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, the issues and questions presented by Qi and the other Tsinghua University students to the IFJ journalists took on a broader significance. How would the 30,000 journalists who were expected to come to China to report on the Olympics, portray the story of China?

China has recently gone through a significant transformation. One indication of the changes are the many new buildings, the huge majestic structures that fill the Beijing skyline. These new structures, along with the people who live and work in them are a sign that Beijing has become a world class city. Could the journalists who were to come to Beijing that August recognize that there was an important story about what was developing in China? Could they become a force to investigate this story and present it, so that there would be an accurate portrayal in the media for people around the world?

This question was being considered by netizens in China and abroad.

Formerly, it may have seemed to netizens in China that the western media could be a reliable source of information about events and viewpoints that were not available in the Chinese media. After the Tibet reporting, the view that the western media could be relied on to present accurate news had been transformed in just a few short weeks in March and April 2008.

Instead netizens working together online were telling the story, not only of what they saw happening in Tibet, but even more importantly, they were documenting the failure of the western media to be a reliable source of information about China.

In place of the western media sprung up a netizen media, contributed to by some of the 570 million (2013) Internet users in China, and some of the many overseas netizens. There are many online sites where discussion among Chinese netizens takes place.

The story of these netizens in China and abroad is an important story as they have demonstrated a resolve and did not surrender the framing of the story of the Beijing Olympics to the distortions of a powerful western media. Through their own active participation and collaboration, they provided an alternative narrative.

Qi explained that the anti-cnn forum and web site had a staff of over 40 volunteers. These netizens did

the technical work, and the fact checking of the posts and the responses to the posts.

If a submission to the web site was emotional, he explained, it would appear, but the moderators would not allow any responses to it in order to prevent the discussion from becoming too heated.

One post in the anti-cnn forum raised the question of whether it would be possible to create an east west cultural exchange platform to facilitate communication across the cultural differences between the Chinese people and those from other cultures who will come to China for the Olympics.

During an interview with him a few days after the debate with the journalists from the IFJ, Qi expressed his view that it can be possible to communicate despite the differences and to be able to find out where the differences lay.

Every difference has two aspects, he explained, an emotional component and a rational component.

Even if people can't agree, they can communicate, he proposed. He was hopeful that discussion would go in more communicative directions rather than netizens in China just feeling that they wanted an apology from western journalists who distort the news about China.

His hope was that the anti-cnn forum on the Internet would make it possible to have comments on issues from a wide range of differing perspectives, rather than such differences leading to polarization and hostility.

His long term goal was that the forum become a site to support many different points of view but also where deviations from the truth would be critiqued.

Talking with Qi I found it important that he was seeking to open lines of communication with western journalists despite the fact it seemed so difficult to do so. He was actually proposing a conceptual framework to make such a communication process possible.

Listening to his views made me remember a struggle netizens had with the U.S. media in the early 1990s. There was a plan for the privatization of the U.S. section of the Internet which had been built with public funds. The U.S. press was misrepresenting the struggle of netizens who were challenging the illegitimate privatization process and who were upset with the spate of commercial ads that had begun to flood the Internet.

One reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* had written an article that misunderstood what the struggle was about. Netizens contacted him and asked if he would be willing to learn some of the history and

background of the struggle. He welcomed the input.

The next article he wrote was very different from the previous one. It talked about how netizens were struggling over the "soul of the Internet." This was indeed a helpful description of the struggle and it was good to see that this reporter had changed in his perspective.<sup>1</sup>

It is not to dismiss the possibility of journalists who are part of the western media who are interested in learning about what is happening in China and in providing an accurate portrayal. It is a worthy effort to seek out a means to make such communication possible.

The goal of the netizens who were contributing to the anti-cnn forum and web site was a goal that is an important one for China and for the many people around the world who wanted the 2008 Beijing Olympics to contribute to friendship and further understanding among the people of the world.

This is also a worthy goal for those of the western media and for other netizens around the world who want to be part of the creation of a 21<sup>st</sup> century media that spreads understanding rather than the political propaganda of one's own government. The Internet and netizens have begun to create such a truly global media.

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#### Note

1. Steve Stecklow, "Cyberspace Clash: Computer Users Battle High-Tech Marketers Over Soul of Internet," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 1993, p. 1.

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An earlier version of this article appears in OhmyNews International "Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China"  
[http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article\\_view.asp?menu=c10400&no=382523&rel\\_no=1](http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?menu=c10400&no=382523&rel_no=1)

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