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Toward a Second Netizen Book (Part 4a)

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Forward

This issue of the *Amateur Computerist*, Vol. 34 No. 4a, is the fourth issue in a series, each containing chapters that are the basis for a second netizen book. The chapters in this issue provide analysis and examples of an emerging new journalism. Michael Hauben wrote that the net “brings the power of the reporter to the Netizen.”

The first article is an interview that asks the question, what is new about this emerging journalism. It offers several examples of characteristics that distinguish netizen journalism from other journalism forms. The second article, “Netizen Reporting and Media Criticism Pressure for a New Journalism” argues that netizen activity in China has served as a pressure for a reexamination and recasting of journalist practice. The next article, “Netizens in Egypt and the Republic of Tahrir Square” describes how bloggers reported on the 2011 protests and discussed them online.

Their journalism became a significant part of the protest activities.

The article, “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the United Nations” shows that journalists with a social purpose and with blogs and other online forms, can on occasion influence even the UN. The article documents there are netizens who are dedicated to doing the research and analysis to determine the interests and actions that are too often hidden from public view 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.

The last article, ties this new journalism with the emergence of new developments, of a new politics, of a new form of citizenship, and of what Michael Hauben called the “poor man’s version of the mass media.” It cites the work of Mark Poster, who wonders if the role of citizen is being replaced with the role of netizen as globalization drives society to new forms of democracy.

[Editor’s Note: In September 2007, Ronda and Jay Hauben were in Germany for a conference celebrating German-Chinese networking collaboration. On the sideline to that conference, journalist and journalism professor Gabriele Hooffacker interviewed them on September 23, 2007. Dr Hooffacker published the interview in a book with the German title *Wem gehört das Internet?* (Verlag Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker, Munchen, 2008). The following is the original English interview, edited by the Haubens in December 2007.]

Interview with Ronda and Jay Hauben

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: Would you say that netizen journalism is the same as grassroots journalism?

Ronda Hauben: They are not quite the same. Netizen journalism includes grassroots journalism, but the significance I understand is that a netizen has a social perspective and does something from that perspective.

Some of the origin of the term netizen was when Michael Hauben, then a college student, did some research in 1992-1993. He sent out a number of questions on Usenet which was at the time and still is an online forum for discussion. Usenet was very active in the early 90s. He also sent his questions out on Internet mailing lists.

In the responses to his questions people said that they were interested in the Internet for the different things they were trying to do but they also wanted to figure out how to spread the Internet, to help it to grow and thrive and to help everybody have access. What Michael found was that there was a social purpose that people explained to him. People had developed this social sense from the fact that they could participate online and find some very interesting valuable possibilities online. Many of the people that responded to his questions shared with him that they wanted to contribute to the Internet so that it would grow and thrive.

In my opinion this set of characteristics is broader than grassroots journalism. Grassroots journalism I would interpret as people from the grassroots having the ability to post. But where there is also a social desire and purpose, that is what I would define as netizen journalism.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: You also said political participation?

Ronda Hauben: Yes a political and a social purpose. By social I mean that people support something happening for other people, that the net be shared and be available to a broader set of people. This includes a political focus as well.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: I just remember one of my first keynote speeches. I had to speak about empowering the information poor in 1994. It was a meeting of pedagogic teachers and I told them that they should try to make it possible for many people of all classes to have access to the Internet. That I think is some of the sense of being a netizen.

Ronda Hauben: That is being a netizen.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: I'm afraid many people think participation only means economical and not political and that especially people in Eastern Europe mainly wanted to take part economically.

Ronda Hauben: In the U.S. for example, there has been a lot of pressure supported by the U.S. government for seeing the Internet as a way to enrich yourself. But that is not what grew up with the Internet community. The pressure for the Internet to be for economic purposes was in opposi-

tion to the netizen developments in the U.S.

Jay Hauben: At one point it became clear that there was beginning to be the Internet for economic purposes in contradiction to the original Internet. That is when Ronda and Michael received a lot of help toward having appear a print edition of their book, *Netizens**. People said, we must defend the Internet from this new pressure, which is coming as an economic pressure. That was a great impetus and support for publishing the book.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: We just talked about the Chinese bloggers and you told me that they call themselves netizens.

Ronda Hauben: I asked a Chinese blogger, Zola Zhou, who I had written to if he thought of himself as a netizen. He said yes he did. Also, I have seen articles about the Internet in China that actually say that the netizens are a small set of the Chinese online population but are those who have political purpose and activities. That is in line with research that Michael originally did in the 1990s with regard to the Internet and which helped his coming to understand that such people online around the world were netizens.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: You told me that there is a great blogger community without censorship and also political?

Ronda Hauben: No, there is censorship in China. But there is a big blogger community and something that I found in one of the articles that I read I thought was very hopeful. It quoted a Chinese Internet user who said that focusing too closely on Internet censorship overlooks the expanded freedoms of expression made possible in China by the Internet. I thought that seemed correct. All I ever hear from the U.S. press is that in China the Internet is censored. Such framing of the Internet in China leads away from trying to look and understand what is happening in China with the Internet. It turns out that there is something very significant developing and that has already developed, which involves a lot of people who are being very active trying to discuss the problems of China and trying to see if they can be part of helping to solve those problems. That is the opposite of the sense you get from the news media that talks about censorship all the time.

Jay Hauben: The chairwoman of the Internet Society of China (ISC) Madame Hu Qiheng spoke to me about this. She said that there are some

very high Chinese government officials who have blogs and they invite anybody and everybody to comment. They answer as many comments as they can and they are learning the importance of blogging. She feels that they will be supportive to the changes that are needed to make the Internet even more extensive and more well spread in China. She was optimistic that at least some in the Chinese government were seeing the importance of the blogging activity and were learning how to be supportive of it in some way. She wanted that to be known to the world.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: I'm not sure whether I understand. Do they hope if the people blog they will learn to use the Internet?

Jay Hauben: No, she said the government officials themselves had their own blogs and receive from the population criticisms and complaints and other things and they try to answer some. Those officials who have entered into this back and forth exchange she feels will learn from it and be supportive in the expanding support for blogging in China.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: There are some examples that netizens can sometimes get control over the government. Could you give us one example?

Ronda Hauben: A question that I have is whether netizens can have some impact on what government does. Traditionally people like James Mill, writing in England in the 1800s argued that if a people do not have some oversight over government then government can only be corrupt. That is why a society needs processes and ways that people can discuss what government is doing and watch government. I like to use the word 'watch dogging' government. A piece of my research is to see if there are ways that by having the Internet and the ability to participate in the discussion of issues netizens can have an impact on what government is doing. I have found situations where there is an impact on government.

One example I give is a blog that is called 'China Matters.' Also there have been articles in 'OhmyNews International,' which is the newspaper for which I write. It is the English edition of the Korean Ohmy-News, an online newspaper started in 2000.

The blog China Matters was able to post some original documents from a case involving 'The SixParty Talks Concerning the Korean Peninsula.' The six parties are North Korea, South Korea, the U.S., Russia,

China and Japan. There was a breakthrough in the six-party talks in September of 2005 leading to a signed agreement toward denuclearizing the Korean peninsula.

Immediately after the breakthrough, the U.S. Treasury Department announced that it was freezing the assets of a bank called Banco Delta Asia in Macau, China. Macau is a former Portuguese colony now a part of China as a special administrative region. Banks in Macau are under the Chinese banking authority and supervision. The U.S. government was determining what would happen with this bank in China. The Banco Delta Asia had accounts containing \$25 million of North Korean funds. In response to the U.S. causing these funds to be frozen, North Korea left the six-party talks saying it would have nothing to do with the talks until this matter got resolved.

In late January and the beginning of February 2007 there were negotiations between a U.S. government official and a North Korean official in Berlin. An agreement was reached that there would be an activity to work out the Banco Delta Asia problem so that the negotiations could resume in the six party talks.

But often with negotiations with the U.S. whenever there is an effort to try to straighten something out, the implementation is not done in a way that is appropriate. In this case what was offered was that North Korea could send someone to Macau to get the funds but it could not use the international banking system to transfer the funds which is the normal procedure.

U.S. Treasury Department officials went to China for negotiations allegedly to end the financial problems the U.S. had caused for North Korea. Officials from the different countries were waiting to have this settled so the negotiations could go on. Instead the U.S. Treasury Department officials failed to allow the international banking system to be used to be able to get the funds back to North Korea.

On the China Matters blog, the blogger posted the response of the Banco Delta Asia bank owner to these activities. If you read the owner's response you would realize that the bank owner was never given any proof of any illegal activity that had gone on with regard to the funds in his bank, so there was no justification presented for having frozen the funds

of his bank. The U.S. Treasury Department under the U.S. Patriot Act was able to be the accuser and then the judge and jury, to make the judgement and then have banks around the world go along.

Jay Hauben: By posting these documents on his blog, the China Matters blogger made it possible for journalists to write about this aspect of the case. In one of his blog posts he also put links to the U.S. government hearing documents that helped to expose the rationale and the intention of the Treasury Department.

Ronda Hauben: Based on what I had learned from these blogs and then subsequent research that I had been able to do using the Internet to verify what the blogger said, I wrote articles that appeared on OhmyNews International. I was subsequently contacted by somebody from the Korean section of the *Voice of America*, the official U.S. State Department worldwide broadcasting service. She asked me about the articles I had written. Essentially the *Voice of America* reporter said that if this situation went on and the funds were not returned, the *Voice of America* was going to ask questions of the people I had identified who had come up with this policy. It would ask them to explain what they had done and to respond to the issues raised by my articles.

Just at this time, however, a means was found to get the funds back to North Korea via the international banking system. All the other prior times, this had failed.

It was very interesting that this was all happening at the same time. It provides an example of how a netizen media of blogs and online newspapers can take up issues like this one, get under the surface to the actual story and even have an influence on government activity.

The China Matters blog is very interesting because it says that there is U.S. policy about China being made without the knowledge of the American people. Therefore the American people do not understand what is going on or what the issues are. They are not given a chance to discuss and consider the policy. Somehow these issues have to be opened up, they have to be more public so that there will be a good policy with regard to what happens between the U.S. and China.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: So the way was from the netizens and the bloggers directly to the government and not via mainstream media?

Ronda Hauben: In this situation there was one mainstream press that was different from all the rest. It was the McClatchy newspapers. McClatchy actually had an article about the China Matters blog. It was helpful for people to know about the blog. Here was collaboration between the blogger and the mainstream media but it was not that the rest of the mainstream media picked up any of that or discussed it. Most of the English speaking mainstream media just said that North Korea is being very difficult and that it should be allowing the six-party talks to go on instead of making this trouble. McClatchy articles and my articles on OhmyNews tried to understand why North Korea was insisting that this money be returned using the international banking system. In this situation there was no need to influence what the rest of the mainstream media said or did. *Voice of America Korea* and the U.S. State Department responded to my articles in OhmyNews directly.

Jay Hauben: In a presentation at a recent symposium, Ronda spoke of a situation in China of child abduction and labor abuse with little response by the local government. The situation had been casually covered by local media but was not solved. Only later when the story appeared prominently in online discussion sites did it spread. Then it was discussed by a large cross-section of the population. Finally the government started to act. In this case, the government had not been influenced by coverage by the local mainstream media but was pushed by the coverage of the netizen media.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: Ronda, you are a featured writer for OhmyNews. I do not know whether there is a German edition?

Ronda Hauben: No, there is none at this point. OhmyNews has a Korean, a Japanese and an English language international edition. There are German writers who write in English for OhmyNews International. There is however a German online magazine which I am honored to write for in English, *Telepolis*, which I would call an example of netizen journalism.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: Why do you think that OhmyNews is a good thing?

Ronda Hauben: The Korean edition of OhmyNews pioneered a concept which is very interesting. The founder of OhmyNews, Mr. Oh Yeon-Ho, had worked for an alternative monthly magazine, *Mal*, for almost 10 years.

He saw that the mainstream media which is basically conservative would cover a story and it would be treated as news. On the other hand, he had uncovered for *Mal* a very important story about a cover-up of a massacre during the Korean War. His story, however, got very little coverage in the mainstream media and his coverage had no effect. About three years later, an American reporter covered the same story and got a Pulitzer Prize. Then the Korean mainstream media picked up the story and gave substantial coverage to it.

Mr. Oh realized that it was not the importance of an issue that determined if it would be news, it was rather the importance given to the news organization that determined that. He decided that Korea needed to have a newspaper that could really challenge the conservative dominance of the news. So he set out with a small amount of money and a very small staff to try to influence how the press frames stories, how it determines what should be the stories that get covered. He also decided to welcome people to write as citizen reporters, to support the kinds of stories that were not being told in the other newspapers. He ended up welcoming in and opening up the newspaper so that a broader set of the Korean population could contribute articles to it and could help set what issues were covered.

One example is the story of a soldier who had been drafted into the South Korean army. He developed stomach cancer. The medical doctors for the army misdiagnosed his illness as ulcers and hid the evidence that it could be cancer. He did not find out until the cancer was too far advanced for successful treatment. He died shortly after his term in the army was over. People who knew the soldier wrote the story and contributed it to OhmyNews. The OhmyNews staff reporters wrote follow up articles. There were a number of articles, which led to really looking into what the situation was.

Jay Hauben: There were 28 articles in 10 days. The government first said that the incident was not significant and that it happened all the time. But as more and more articles were written and more and more people were commenting and more and more people were writing letters and more and more people were blaming the government, the government changed its tune and acknowledged that there was something seriously wrong here. The government eventually said it would put 10 billion won

over a 5 year period to have a better medical system in the armed services. That was the result of this 10 days of constant articles. Everybody knew someone in the army that might get sick and they did not want that to happen. Every mother was upset. It was a major national phenomenon from these 28 stories in 10 days.

Ronda Hauben: That is the kind of thing that OhmyNews has done in the Korean edition. The English language edition does not have regular staff reporters the way the Korean edition does so is weaker in what it can do.

A lot of the analysis of OhmyNews in the journalism literature is only looking at the fact OhmyNews uses people as reporters who are not part of a regular staff. This literature does not look at the whole context of what ‘OhmyNews’ has attempted and developed.

But even the practice of the English edition is worth looking at. There, the Banco Delta – North Korean story was covered in a number of articles. The OhmyNews staff welcomed these articles. Not only did it welcome articles on this topic with no similar coverage elsewhere, there was on the staff an editor who used his experience and knowledge of North Korea to help the journalists with their articles. He was a very good person to have as an editor in the English language edition, to be helpful toward covering that important aspect of the Korean story. Unfortunately he is not an editor any longer as they had to cut back on their editors.

Journalism articles written about OhmyNews rarely describe this aspect of OhmyNews, that reporters need a supportive editorial staff that is knowledgeable about the issues and willing to be really helpful to the people doing the reporting so that they are not just off on their own but they can have a discussion and a communication with the people who work with the paper itself.

Jay Hauben: As a minor footnote, Ronda has some evidence that the U.S. embassy in South Korea reads OhmyNews. She heard this from the U.S. ambassador to South Korea and read it in a U.S. State Department press release.

Ronda Hauben: The press release referred to one of my articles and something that somebody else had written.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: So netizen journalism is something political?

Jay Hauben: From our point of view, yes.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: I'm asking this because some German publishers/newspapers have another kind of amateur journalism in mind. They think that journalists are too expensive because they must be paid wages. So they tell their readers to send them photos, videos and texts and say that they will publish them. The journalist union is not happy about this.

Ronda Hauben: The dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism in New York City wrote an article in *The New Yorker* magazine where he complained about what he called 'citizen journalism' and referred to OhmyNews. He wrote that it was "journalism without journalists." When you carefully read his article, what it came down to, was that the business form of journalism – which is basically corporate-dominated in the U.S. and which aims to make a lot of money – has very little regard for the nature and quality of the coverage that the newspapers are allowed to do. He was basically defending the business form of journalism in the name of defending the journalists. He was not defending the journalists because he was not critiquing in any way what the journalists who work for these big corporations must do to keep their jobs and the crisis situation that journalism is in in the U.S. because of it.

What was interesting is that he knew about OhmyNews and he is the dean of the Columbia Journalism School and yet he presented nothing about the important stories that OhmyNews has covered. Instead he referred to one particular day and he listed three stories covered by three different journalists on this day and said this was just like the kind of journalism you would have in a church publication or in a club newsletter. It showed no effort on his part to understand or seriously consider what OhmyNews has made possible.

I critiqued what he did in an article in OhmyNews International. I also sent an email message to him asking if he had seen a prior article I had done in response to what a professor of the journalism school had posted on 'The Public Eye' at CBSNews.com . My prior article answered the same argument the dean was now making. The 'Public Eye' even gave a link to what I had written in OhmyNews.

The dean of the Columbia Journalism School answered my email

acknowledging that he had seen my answer and still he made the same argument that had been made prior rather than answering my critique of the argument.

One of the things I pointed out in my critique was that OhmyNews had helped make it possible for the people of South Korea in 2002 to elect a candidate to the presidency from outside of mainstream political community. The dean mentioned nothing about that when he trivialized what OhmyNews has done and what the developments are. He presented none of the actual situations and had instead a trivial discussion about the issues. Yet he was allowed to publish his article in *The New Yorker*. OhmyNews sent my response to his article to *The New Yorker*. The magazine would not publish it. It was interesting that this is being promoted as the evaluation and the understanding of netizen journalism. It is totally inaccurate.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: I'm afraid that some professional journalism teachers in Germany think in narrow-minded categories and only see the professional standard of journalism and their own journalists but do not realize what the aim of journalism is anymore – the political participation and the control of the government.

Ronda Hauben: What I see is that netizen journalism is getting back to the roots of why you need journalism and journalists.

In the U.S. there is a first amendment because there was an understanding, when it was formulated, that you have to oversee government and that there has to be discussion and articles and a press that looks at what government is doing and that discusses it and that that discussion is necessary among the population. Now the Internet is making this possible. But the corporate-dominated, profit-dominated form of journalism in the U.S. will not allow that to happen even on the Internet. Netizen journalism fortunately makes it possible.

What is of interest to me is that the Columbia Journalism School claims that it supports ethics in journalism. Yet here is a challenge, a challenge to treat this seriously and to learn about it, to support it, to encourage it and to help it to spread it. Instead, its dean does the opposite.

Jay Hauben: Let me add two points. One is that OhmyNews and Telepolis pay their contributors. So this is not free journalism. This is a

respect for journalistic effort.

The second point is one Ronda is raising in her current research. Not only is this new journalism getting back to the roots and the purpose of journalism but also it is doing something new and different. Is there something more than just being the real journalist taking over because mainstream journalism is failing? There is an intuition that the Internet is making possible a new journalism. Perhaps the Chinese are speaking to that when they ask, “Are we not being citizens and is it not journalism when we communicate with each other about the news as we see it and our understandings as we have them?”

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: Do you think that netizen journalism will affect the mainstream journalism or that the mainstream journalism will learn from it?

Ronda Hauben: It turned out to be very surprising to me that the reporter from *Voice of America Korea* asked me some very serious and interesting questions. I would have expected maybe a left-wing journalist would ask these questions but not a mainstream or State Department journalist.

Why was the *Voice of America* reporter asking me these questions? Perhaps some people at the State Department realized there was serious discussion going on online reflected by my articles but not on *Voice of America* or in the mainstream media. And if there is discussion among people about what is going on, then that leads to the mainstream media having to learn something or become irrelevant.

Maybe that is already happening because even BBC is exploring ways of opening up its discussions and processes. Maybe netizen journalism has already had some impact and there is change happening even though we do not see it yet.

Jay Hauben: Maybe also the distinction between mainstream and other media is changing.

At least in South Korea, OhmyNews is already a mainstream media. Three years after it was created, OhmyNews was reported to be one of the most important media in the whole society, judged to be among the top six most influential media in South Korea.

It is not so clear that what we call the great media or the mainstream

media is left alone to have that title. The position might be changing. The founder of OhmyNews, Mr. Oh Yeon-Ho says he would like OhmyNews to be setting the news agenda for the Korean society. It is his objective that OhmyNews be the main, mainstream media or at least he says 50 percent of what happens in the mainstream media should be from the progressive point of view. There should not be only the conservative mainstream media but there should be a progressive mainstream media as well and then those two together – that is what would serve the society.

Ronda Hauben: Let me add that in South Korea other online progressive publications have developed and online conservative publications have developed. The media situation is much more vibrant now than it had been, I think this is a result of what Mr. Oh Yeon-Ho has achieved.

Dr. Gabriele Hooffacker: When you look into the future and imagine what journalism and netizen journalism will be like in 10 years? What are your expectations? What do you hope and what do you think?

Ronda Hauben: It is an interesting challenge that is being put to us. There is a lot of support from governments and others toward making big money off of the Internet. But meanwhile for example, the U.S. society is in deep trouble because of the ability of government to do things without listening to the people or considering what the people's desires are. In my opinion netizen journalism holds out the hope and the promise that there can be a means for the citizens and the netizens to have more of a way of having what is done by government be something that is a benefit to the society instead of harmful. The form this will take is not clear. But one of the things that Michael wrote in 1992-1993 was that the net bestows the power of the reporter on the netizens. He saw that that was already happening then. And we see Telepolis which last year celebrated its 10th anniversary and which unfortunately we did not get to talk about now but which has pioneered a form of online and netizen journalism that really is substantial and which has achieved some very important things. There is OhmyNews in South Korea and there are the Chinese bloggers and people posting to the forums. Even in the U.S. some important news forums and blogs have developed.

Jay Hauben: There are also the people's journalists in Nepal who took up to tell the story to the world about the struggle against the king's

dictatorial powers.

Ronda Hauben: They were able to do that because of OhmyNews International.

I just looked at those few countries for a conference presentation I gave in Potsdam. I did not look at all the other places where things are developing. It turns out that online there is a very vibrant environment. Something is developing and that is a great challenge to people interested in this, to look at it seriously and try to see, firstly what is developing and secondly, is there a way to give it support and to figure out if there is way of beginning to have some conferences for people to get together and have serious papers about what is happening and some serious discussion toward the question, can we give each other help for example, to start something like ‘OhmyNews’ or ‘Telepolis’ in America or similar things elsewhere. I feel that something will turn up. It is exciting that so much is in fact going on.

Note

**Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, Wiley – IEEE Computer Society Press, Los Alamitos, 1997, ISBN: 978-0-8186-7706-9. en

[Editor’s Note: The following paper was prepared for the International Summit on Reconstruction of Journalism conference held at the United Nations New York Headquarters on May 1-3, 2014.]

Netizen Reporting and Media Criticism Pressure for a New Journalism The South China Tiger, Anti-CNN and the Wenchuan Earthquake

I can say free media works the same way as less-free media. So what's most important? The people I'd say — If people dare to doubt, dare to think own (sic) their own, do not take whatever comes to them, then we'll have a clear mind, not easily be fooled.

kylin

I. – General Background: Media in Crisis

The dominant media in China and in the U.S. are targets of a common serious criticism. Scholars point out that the narratives that they contain are not the news but rather the picture painted under the influence of the governments and leading establishments in the respective countries (e.g., Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Li, 2003). The Chinese media, at least until recently, has been described as a party or propaganda press taking as its purpose to portray and explain the viewpoints of the leadership and party of China and to praise socialist development and cast a negative light on western capitalism. In the U.S., the closeness and reliance of the mainstream political media like the *NY Times* and the *Washington Post* on government-provided information and influence and corporate ownership results in a portrayal of the world in such a way as to support and give credence to the establishment's framing of events and realities. It is not just at the U.S. mainstream political media but also at the other major international media like CNN, BBC and Deutsche Welle that this criticism is aimed. Similar to the Chinese media, a purpose of the U.S. and major international media has been to show the superiority of market capitalism and freedom over socialism and communism.

The critics ask, whose media are these? They point out these media fail in any obligation to oversee or supervise their respective governments. The U.S. media is in crisis. The level of public confidence suggests a growing rejection especially after its coverage giving credence to the false story that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, justifying an invasion and occupation. The established media in China is also in crisis. Its traditional state and party support purpose cannot compete with the liveliness and breadth of Internet discussion and online investigative

journalism.

In this paper I will argue that netizen activity in China has served as a pressure for a reexamination and recasting of journalist practice. Netizens in China have taken many small events and made them into national discussions and calls for social or political change. One study is the case of the South China Tiger. It will show how the official announcement in 2007 of the sighting of a rare tiger was turned into an exposure of journalistic weakness and official misconduct. Another case study is of the anti-cnn website. It will show the netizen exposure of serious malpractice of the international media reporting on the March 2008 Lhasa violence. That exposure by netizens cast serious doubt about the positive expectation some in China had for the international media. Having the concrete evidence of the malfeasance of international media strengthened the anti-cnn netizens to create an online forum where media events were analyzed from many angles in an international participatory process that lasted for at least one year. The study of netizen criticism of Chinese media coverage of the May 2008 Wenchuan (Sichuan) Earthquake will document failures of prominent Chinese journalists and argue the value and impact of the media watchdog function netizens in China are increasingly playing. Journalism, at least in China, has begun to engage and benefit from this broadening of citizen participation in its domain.

II. – People in China as Media Critics

At least as far back as the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and others in the 1940s, there have been empirical studies and theoretical analyses suggesting that media audiences are not passive receptacles for media messages. More recently, Haiqing Yu (2009, p. 9) wrote, “Empirical research in active audience studies has demonstrated that people are not ... easily fooled and manipulated by media producers.” China is a good example. “Like media audiences everywhere, Chinese readers, listeners, and viewers are active interpreters of content, not passive dupes. Over time, they have learned to discern overtones, subtexts, and what is not said along with what is.” (Polumbaum, 2001, p. 270)

Active audience theory argues that people learn to be active decoders

of official messages. Many Chinese people have been and are critical readers of the state and party media. As an illustration, the story is told that when in January 1976, Zhou Enlai, a leader respected by many Chinese people at the time died, central leadership seeking to delay the announcement of that news reported that Zhou's condition was critical but still his doctors held out hope for his recovery. Most ordinary people interpreted these reports to mean Premier Zhou was dead (Naduvath, 2009, p. 116). Also, mass media and communications in China "have never operated as the well-oiled totalitarian machine envisioned by cold warriors." (Polumbaum, 2001, p. 270) Artists, intellectuals, scholars, and dissidents have always more or less provided a broader spectrum than the dominant hegemonic culture sought by the party and state.

But many people in China have had the expectation that the mainstream international media would be more credible. The emergence of the Internet and the netizens however has made it possible for ordinary people to share their suspicions about Chinese official media publically and to turn their critical media sense onto the faults of the international media like BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Reuters, etc. The Internet is making possible a concrete exposure by netizens of the character and faults of both the main Chinese media and the previously respected international media.

III. – Who are the Netizens?

Internet adoption in China rapidly expanded since 1995. Such expansion continues but at a slower pace. It was reported in January 2014 by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) that there are more than 618 million Internet users in China. In comparison, the U.S. was reported to have 260 million users. Approximately 80% or over 500 million Chinese net users access the Internet on mobile devices. Many users in China participate in online forums, some of whom also contribute to the over 280 million Chinese language microblogs, known as Weibo. CNNIC reports that a smaller set of net users are active contributors to forum and chat room discussions. Among the users who actively contribute online, I would locate net users who are "netizens," who practice some form of netizenship, that is, they defend the Internet and

contribute actively to it to affect social and political change.

Netizen as a concept of scholarly interest was first analyzed in the research of Michael Hauben at Columbia University starting in 1992. Hauben had participated in the mid and late 1980s on local hobbyist run bulletin board systems (BBSs) and in global Usenet newsgroups. He writes that he became aware of “a new social institution, an electronic commons developing.”¹ (Hauben & Hauben, 1997, p. ix) He undertook research to explore how and why these communications forums served as an electronic commons. He posted questions on newsgroups, mailing lists and portals and found a very high level “of mutual respect and sharing of research and ideas fostering a sense of community and participation.” Hauben found social and political issues being discussed with seriousness in this online community which the conventional media and his school courses rarely if ever covered or covered only from a narrow angle.

Hauben documented in the book, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Hauben & Hauben, 1997) which he co-authored with Ronda Hauben that he found in this community of net users many for whom their self-identity was generated by their online participation. Hauben found that there were people online who actively use and take up to defend public communication. They oppose censorship and disruptive online behavior. He recognized this identification and behavior as a form of network citizenship. He contracted “net.citizen,” the name on forums in the 1990s for such people, into “netizen” to express the new online non-geographically based social identity and net citizenship he attributed to these people.

As the Internet spread in the mid and late 1990s around the world so did the online self-identity and practice of netizenship. Two uses of the word netizen emerged. Especially in analyzing the net in China, it is necessary to distinguish among all net users (*wang min* meaning network people in Chinese) and those users who participate constructively concerning social and political issues in forums and chat rooms or on their blogs and microblogs.² This second category is the user who comes online for public rather than simply for personal and entertainment purposes. They act as citizens of the net “*wang luo gong min* meaning ‘network citizens’ in Chinese” and are the netizens of this article. The distinction

must be emphasized because the Chinese characters for network person *wang min* are very often translated into English as “netizen.”

I strictly adopt the second usage. Not all net users are netizens. My usage is similar to that of Haiqing Yu who writes, “I use ‘netizen’ in a narrow sense to mean ‘Net plus citizen’ or ‘citizen on the net.’ Netizens are those who use the Internet as a venue for exercising citizenship through rational public debates on social and political issues of common concern.” (Yu, 2004, p. 304)

I add, however, that netizens are not only ‘citizens on the net’ but also ‘citizens of the net’ signifying those who actively contribute to the development and defense of the net as a global communications platform (Hauben & Hauben, 1997, pp. ix-x).

In the examples and discussion to follow, it is important to recognize that the Internet is basically global. Geographic and political boundaries on the net are weaker than in the physical world. There are approximately 34 million Chinese speaking people living outside of mainland China including in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. There are perhaps at anyone time 380,000 Chinese students studying abroad.³ For example, in 2014 there are approximately 235,000 students from China studying temporarily in the U.S. Many Chinese speaking people outside of China take a keen interest in social and political issues in China. Those online often participate in forums, chat rooms and blogs hosted on servers in China and outside. Chinese speaking netizens outside China gain from the richness and vibrancy of the mainland netizen community and add viewpoints, media clips and information which further enrich the information environment and discussions in which netizens in China participate. Efforts at what the government and party of China call supervision and netizens call censorship have only a limited effect, in part because of the borderless essence of the Internet. In the examples that follow it is often likely but difficult to tell whether netizens from outside China have participated.

Information and communication technology (ICT), for at least the last 20 or 25 years, has been officially promoted as one of the most important driving forces of China’s economic development. The Chinese government and party actively support the spread of the Internet and its

active use by people within China. Tai Zixue (2006) reports, “The Chinese government has displayed an unusual level of enthusiasm in embracing the Internet since the mid-1990s ... by investing heavily in the infrastructure and in promoting Internet use among its government agencies, businesses, and citizens.” Another scholar commented, “In China, if the government does not push, hardly anything grows so quickly.” (Guo, 2006) When reporting about the Internet by media outside of China, the predominant stress of censorship in China misses this level of support and adoption. The long-standing governance philosophy and practice of “benevolent” supervision and guidance in all aspects of Chinese society are still prevalent and results in the censorship emphasized by that media.⁴ But official emphasis on “reform and opening” especially an economic market oriented development is changing the nature of such supervision and guidance. The result is the rapid spread of the Internet and its active use (averaging for net users in China in 2014 almost three hours per day) supported by the highest government and party officials. Broadband and mobile access was already available to about 40% of the population by the beginning of 2014. Although still disproportionately in the urban areas and with a little over 50% of the people of China without Internet access, the level, speed of adoption and the active participation by net users is significant. A foreign journalist working in Beijing commented that users in China “are usually too busy enjoying the Internet they have to lament the Internet they do not have.” And, as the examples which follow show, many of them are using it as netizen journalists with the purpose of social and political improvement.

IV. – Case Studies

China became a particular media focus during the dramatic events leading up to and surrounding the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. This paper however will start with an example from 2007 when netizens uncovered fraud and with the eventual help of the mainstream media achieved official recognition of the fraud and punishment of the perpetrators and covers up.

South China Tiger (2007)

Although there have been occasional reports in China that signs of the South China tiger have been seen or roars heard, the species has been thought to be extinct in the wild. There had been no confirmed sighting since 1986. However on Oct. 12, 2007 in a press conference, the Forestry Department of Shaanxi Province in northwest China announced a verified sighting. A South China tiger, the Department spokesperson claimed, was photographed by a farmer with optical and digital cameras on Oct. 3. One photo was released. The spokesperson also said that experts had confirmed that the 40 digital and 31 film photographs were authentic. The announcement was carried in local and a few national media. On Oct 13, China Central Television, CCTV, the predominant state television broadcaster in China briefly reported about the official announcement in its Joint News Broadcast: “Recently, the rare wild South China has been found in Shaanxi after going out of sight for more than twenty years. A peasant in Ankong town, Ping county took a clear photograph of a wild South China tiger near a cliff. Experts have determined the photograph to be authentic.” (EastSouthWestNorth, 2007)

But already in the afternoon of Oct 12, the one released digital photo had been posted along with the news release on a forum frequented by photographers and users of the Photoshop software application. Six hours later, a forum member raised suspicion that the photograph seemed to have been composed using Photoshop. The photo was reposted on other forums discussing photo presentation technologies. Soon a wave of doubt spread with online contributors citing irregular effects of illumination and focus, unreal fur color, lack of three dimensional effect, etc. Some netizens speculated that the digital photo may have been taken from a cardboard enlargement placed in the bushes to be photographed. The next day a self-described Photoshop expert argued that based on the size of the leaves in the released photo, if authentic, the actual size of the tiger would be near that of a rat.

Comments were reposted and other online communities became involved in the dispute. Various hypotheses were proposed but there was near unanimous conviction, despite the official announcement of authenticity and the reports in the press accepting the accuracy of the official

announcement, the photo was faked. National and international media picked up and welcomed the story of the sighting but also began to include mention of netizen skepticism. Experts answered some of the posts agreeing or disagreeing about the authenticity of the photos. The farmer reasserted that he had risked his life to photograph the tiger and that his photos were genuine. Shaanxi Province officials defended the announcement. Well-known wildlife photographers joined the online debate.

The demand arose online for more expert analysis of all the photos and an independent investigation of the farmer's claim. The motive of the Forestry Department was questioned. Why did it not take more time to verify the photos? Was it hoping for increased tourism or new money for a wild life preserve? The online discussion questioned even more the motives of the authorities than that of the farmer who also received reward money for the photos. One netizen posted on the Tianya Forum under the name *First Impression 1*. The post was a response to the CCTV broadcast welcoming the sighting and declaring it authentic. The netizen used Photoshop to make an animation of two photos that appeared online to show they had "identical facial features, outlines, stripes and height." He or she wrote, "At first sight, this photograph could not be more fake. The lighting, the expressions, the color, the environment ... how can this pass through the examination by experts on the South China wild tiger as well as photography experts? Did they make the examination with eyes shut?" (EastSouthWestNorth, 2007). On Fu Jianfeng's blog, (http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4776545401000_bob.html, Oct. 20, 2007), it was reported that the Shaanxi "Animal Protection Bureau director Wang Wanyun ... told the media: 'I am willing to guarantee the authenticity of this photograph with my head.'" The blogger also reported that a Chinese Academy of Science plant researcher, Fu Dezhi posted on the Yuanmu Shanchuan Forum that the leaves in the photos were either oak or hazelnut which are about 3 cm in size. In all photos one of the leaves is covering the tiger's forehead so the tiger in the photo must be part of a cropped photograph about 8 inches square. Fu Jianfeng ended his blog writing "... people don't need their heads, they don't need to swear, they only need to know the truth."

On Nov 15, a netizen posted that he had found the original picture

that was used to fake the South China tiger sighting. He had discovered a lunar new years calendar for 2001 which had all the features of the photos being debated. The Shaanxi authorities responded that they would continue the investigation. Eight months later, they tried to end the paper tiger saga, as it was called on the net, by announcing the photos were fake. The farmer was arrested on charges of fraud and 13 provincial officials were dismissed or disciplined for their role in the episode. But, netizen comments which followed mostly complained about official sluggishness.

Despite the efforts of the “pro-tiger” officials and the experts they found to defend the authenticity of the sighting, many netizens had kept up the exposure of fraud. As in the Hwang Woo-suk case in South Korea where netizens challenged the officially supported stem cell scientist, Chinese netizens were willing to challenge the photos as fake even when the provincial authorities and the mainstream media initially backed their authenticity. In the end the search for the truth prevailed.

Netizen attention to detail in photographs was repeated when media reports appeared especially in North America and Europe about the violence in Tibet in March 2008.

Anti-cnn (2008)

On March 14, 2008, Tibetan demonstrators in Lhasa the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China turned violent. A Canadian tourist and the few foreign journalists who witnessed the situation put online photos, videos and descriptions documenting the deadly violence of the rioters against citizens and property (*Al Jazeera*, 2008; cali2882, 2008; Kadfly, 2008). That was even before the official Chinese media started to report it. The mainstream media in China framed the story as violence against Han and Muslim Chinese fomented by the Tibetan government in exile. Much of the mainstream international media like BBC, VOA, and CNN framed the violence as the result of discriminatory Chinese rule and Chinese police brutality. (For an exception see Jill Drew, “Eyewitnesses Recount Terrifying Day in Tibet,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Thursday, March 27, 2008, online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/26/AR2008032603275.html>.)

Wide anger was expressed by many Chinese aboard when they discovered that some of the media in the U.S., Germany, and the U.K., were using photos and videos from clashes between police and pro-Tibetan independence protestors in Nepal and India to support that media's claim of violence by Chinese police. A digital slide show appeared online (dionysos615, 2008) containing an annotated presentation of 11 photos from CNN, *Der Spiegel*, the *Washington Post*, N24 German TV, BBC, *Fox News*, *Bild*, etc. The photos were mislabeled and in other ways inappropriate for the articles with which they appeared. The photos included screen shots from German TV stations that consistently labels Nepalese police as Chinese. A BBC photo showed an ambulance using it to illustrate a "heavy military presence." A photo used by CNN to show Chinese military violence was carefully cropped to hide rioters throwing rocks at a Chinese military vehicle. The slide show ended with a slide which read, "These western media should be shamed for the reporting they've made purposely and whoever in the world, intending to slander Chinese people to promote territorial integrity of China will be doomed to failure." The slide show spread widely in cyberspace in and outside China.

Within a few days of the appearance of the inaccurate and misleading reporting, Rau Jin a recent university graduate launched the anti-cnn website (<http://www.anti-cnn.com>). He explained that after netizen anger and discussion he wanted to "speak out our thoughts and let the westerners learn about the truth."⁵ The top page of anti-cnn featured articles, videos and photos documenting some of the alleged distortions in the coverage of the Tibet events. The website also had forum sections first in Chinese then also in English. The organizers set as the goal of anti-cnn to overcome media bias in the West by fostering communication between Chinese netizens and netizens outside of China so that the people of the world and of China could have accurate knowledge about each other. They wrote on their website, "We are not against the western media, but against the lies and fabricated stories in the media." anti-cnn was chosen as the site name, one of the organizers said, "because CNN is the media superpower. It can do great damage so it must be watched and challenged when it is wrong."⁶ But the site was not limited to countering errors in the reporting of CNN. It invited submissions that documented bias or countered misrepresentations of China in the global media.

Rau received hundreds of offers of help finding examples of media distortions. He gathered a team of 40 volunteers to monitor the submissions for factualness and to limit emotional threads. Posts that were name calling or attacks on individuals or groups were to be deleted. Emotional posts were not to be allowed follow-up comments. Forum discussions were started on “Western Media Bias,” “The Facts of Tibet” and “Modern China.” In the first five days the site attracted 200,000 visits many from outside of China. Over time serious threads contained debates between Han Chinese and both Westerners and Tibetan and Uyghur Chinese trying to show each other who they were and where they differ or where they agree.

On anti-cnn, in answer to the exposure of the Western media practice, many visitors from outside China posted their criticism of Chinese government media censorship. In their responses to such criticism, some Chinese acknowledged such censorship but argued it was easy to circumnavigate, that all societies have their systems of bias or censorship and that netizens everywhere must dare to think for themselves and get information from many sources. One netizen with the alias *kylin* wrote:

I can say free media works the same way as less-free media. So what's most important? The people I'd say— If people dare to doubt, dare to think own (sic) their own, do not take whatever comes to them, then we'll have a clear mind, not easily be fooled. I can say, if such people exist, then should be Chinese . . . the least likely to be brainwashed, when have suffered from all those incidents, cultural revolution, plus a whole long history with all kinds of tricks.

Some analysis of anti-cnn in the Western media criticized it as a form of nationalism (e.g., Kuhn, 2008) or of being somehow connected with the Chinese government. The Chinese government and anti-cnn organizers deny any connection with each other and no verifiable evidence of such a connection has been produced. There are often expressions of nationalist emotions in Chinese cyberspace, for example calls for boycotting Japanese and French products. After the riot in Lhasa, the Chinese government and media blamed the Dalai Lama and “splitists.”

There was an upsurge of nationalist defense of China including on anti-cnn. The moderators on anti-cnn and netizens in general however are opponents of nationalism arguing that it is a form of emotionalism and needs to be countered by rational discourse and the presentation of facts and an airing of all opinions. The moderators often answered Chinese nationalists with admonitions to “calm down and present facts.” While nationalist sentiment and love of country and anger appeared often on the anti-cnn forums, the opportunity for a dialogue across national and ethnic barriers is an expression of the internationalism characteristic of netizens.

Chinese citizens in general know that the mainstream Chinese media have a long history as a controlled and propaganda press. Since the 1990s, there has been a commercialization of that media and more openness but still much of the national media has strong remnants from its past. On the other hand the mainstream international media had been widely assumed in China as a more reliable source of information about some events such as SARS and for alternative viewpoints. The widespread distribution by netizens like Rau Jin of exposure of distortions and bias in major examples of the international mainstream media called into question for many Chinese people their positive expectation about that media. It also attracted the attention of others who questioned whether the so called Western mainstream media is any less a propaganda or political media than the Chinese mainstream media. After western media framing of the war in the country of Georgia in August 2008 as the fault of Russia, a Russian netizen started a thread on anti-cnn suggesting a Russian-Chinese alliance. He wrote:

Russian problems with the Western media are identical to Chinese problems What [do] we need to do so that their publications about countries like China and Russia will be written in a fair tone rather than being politically motivated? I would be most happy to hear your opinion on these matters.

Over its first year, the anti-cnn website had become a significant news portal. After a year, there was a debate to determine its future. Some of the founders left. The site continued with separate forum sections in Chinese and English but became less focused than it was before on exposing media bias. As a continuation of anti-cnn, the April Media Group

was founded by Rau Jin. April Media sponsored Chinese and English language websites both known as M4. The two sites carried news reports and comments not usually found elsewhere in Chinese media and exposures of the ongoing media fabrications, for example about alleged crimes of the government of Syria.

Wenchuan Earthquake (2008)

On May 12, 2008 at 14:28 in the afternoon local time a massive earthquake struck in south-central China. The epicenter of the earthquake was in rural Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province and measured 8.0 on the Richter Scale. The world outside of the quake zone began to learn of the earthquake one minute later, at 14:29, when a post on the “Tianya Mixed Talk” forum read, “Very Urgent!!!! Where has a massive earthquake occurred???” By 14:30 a video was posted on YouKu and by 14:35 a headline on the Baidu bulletin board reported, “Earthquake happens in Sichuan region.” From then on posts escalated. Tianya is the most popular forum website and had at the time on average over 200,000 simultaneous visitors. Likewise YouKu, the most popular video website at the time, and Baidu, the most popular search engine, had tens of thousands of users when the Wenchuan disaster first hit. Professional news reports began to online appear at 14:46 with a dispatch by the official online site Xinhuanet (Nip, 2009, p. 98).

Online communication was interrupted in the epicenter. But some witnesses and survivors were able to send out messages using mobile phones which the recipients put online. Also, survivors who were able to walk or drive out of the disaster area brought with them photographs and videos they took using their phones or cameras. These began to appear online and were picked up by off line media and by CCTV. With roads destroyed and all landline telephone service down to and in the hardest hit villages, material posted by netizens gave the mainstream media some of the stories and all of the graphics for its reports.

Great concern was felt and voiced throughout China and the rest of the world for the victims of the earthquake. There was a hunger for news. Netizens started a discussion thread on “Tianya Mixed-Talk” for

contributions of casualty information and estimates. As the thread was updated it was visited almost one million times in the first nine hours after the quake first hit.

Netizens provided information from the disaster zone, expressed their sympathy and emotions, started to organize grassroots relief efforts, organized missing person lists and in many ways contributed online in the relief and rescue effort. Some netizens also raised serious questions. A netizen posted on the Tianya Mixed Talk forum a few hours after the quake “Some questions and reflections about this quake.” He questioned why there was no early warning of the coming of such a major quake. Netizens searched for and found evidence that there were early warnings which the Seismology Bureau ignored. A netizen on Tianya left one remark, “Before May 12, some strange nature phenomena predicting earthquakes appeared in earthquake zone and some local persons worried about earthquakes coming, but local officials and forecast agencies declared that the rumor of earthquake was baseless and people need not worry.”(Xu, 2008) Mainstream journalists joined in the pursuit of this story questioning some of the relevant officials. Netizens also called attention to the number of schools which collapsed and questioned whether the problem was systemic.

The earthquake was the main news event for many days. Government officials allowed journalists unprecedented access to the disaster zone. The Internet and the off-line media were watched intently for news and understanding of the disaster and the unfolding rescue effort. Criticism began to appear online of the behavior and reporting of some of the professional journalists, especially those seeming to be insensitive to the victims and survivors. One well known anchor person from the Phoenix TV station in Hong Kong, Chen Luyu, appeared at a destroyed village with heavy makeup, wearing designer sunglasses and carrying a parasol. One netizen commented:

Phoenix Chen Luyu, you dressed like that kind of a show at the ruins I put many viewers to see your ugly performance . . . the majority of the audience spurned your behavior, you are a very individual phenomenon, 99% of people really want to help the suffering compatriots, not to see a show.⁷ (Reese &

Jai, 2009, p. 227; Tianya, 2008)

Many other netizens showed similar disdain toward Chen Luyu and other reporters who seemed frivolous or insensitive. Reese and Dai (2009, p. 227) reported that “[t]he same anger emerged online toward journalists when they forced busy rescuers and seriously injured or dying victims to be interviewed, when they took up seats in rescue helicopters, when they presented the tragedy of the earthquake with bloody and graphic pictures and descriptions, or when they shot flash photos of victims faces without regard for the trauma the bright lights would inflict on those who had spent so much time trapped under the ruins in darkness.”

Netizen criticism was also aimed at CCTV’s coverage of the disaster and rescue effort. The awkwardness and insensitivity of some of its coverage was not only blamed on the reporters but also on the media organization itself. A well read blogger and former CCTV reporter, Shi Feike, suggested that CCTV’s control over its reporters and infrequent live coverage of major disasters like the earthquake accounted for the failures of some of its earthquake rescue reporting⁸ (Shi, 2008).

During the time of the earthquake and rescue efforts, activities of the netizens became part of the news covered by the mainstream media. But also, netizen criticism of some well-known journalists and of, for example, CCTV was widely circulated online. As a result, respect for the netizens throughout China was enhanced. One observer commented, “I am deeply touched by the patriotism and humanism shown in the activities of our netizens.” Another wrote, “This catastrophic disaster aroused the civil conscience and responsibility of Chinese, and showed the power of Chinese netizens.”

V. – Discussion

The Three Cases

Professional or mainstream journalists in the three cases above required the collaboration of netizens and ordinary citizens for their coverage. It was difficult for the former to get to rural Wenchuan after the earthquake or to have the expertise and critical attitude of the online photographer community. Only after netizens around the world exposed

the media fabrications about the Lhasa riots was the mainstream media in China able to report about them by reporting about the anti-cnn website. But the mainstream media have more access to economic and official resources and TV and newspapers are still popular in China. Media scholars looking at China see an emerging netizen-journalist collaboration. But besides collaboration, netizens are playing the role of media critics.

The special significance of anti-cnn was that netizens took up the important task of media watchdog, but especially a watchdog over the most powerful media like CNN and BBC. Some scholars are calling such media practice the “Fifth Estate” because the watchdog is over the media itself. In an article, “The Computer as a Democratizer,” Michael Hauben argued for the crucial role in a society of a watchdog press (Hauben & Hauben, 1997, pp. 315-320). In every society, major sectors of the media echo and support the current holders of power either internally or in the world. Now, with the netizens, there is an emerging media and journalism which tries to serve society by watching and criticizing the abuses of those with power and the media which serves them. Anti-cnn provided for the whole world an alternative to the media which was distorting the truth about the Lhasa riot. The net users who launched anti-cnn took for themselves a public and international mission, using the net to watch critically the main international media. They took up to address journalism via exposures and discussion and debate. In the process they expanded the practice of journalism.

Similarly, at the time of the Wenchuan earthquake, netizens created a space for the public to examine and discuss journalistic operation not only at the individual level, but also at the organizational level (Reese & Jai, 2009, p. 228). Holding professional journalists to their own high standards was a service to the profession. Discussing the practice of CCTV, the predominant state television broadcaster in China, added to netizen supervision of the official media and encouraged public scrutiny and criticism of even the official media.

Context

In 2003 in China, there were numerous large scale netizen commotions and almost 58,000 officially acknowledged off line social and

political ‘mass incidents.’ In September 2004, the Fourth Session of the Sixteenth Chinese Communist Party Central Committee responded. The long standing policy orientation ‘Efficiency First’ was withdrawn. It had been criticized by netizens who in the course of their uprisings traced the specific problem to this systemic root. Netizens argued that ‘efficiency first’ meant putting business success before the welfare of the great majority of the people. The Central Committee replaced ‘Efficiency First’ with the policy orientation ‘Harmonious Society’. This conceptual framework seemed to be aimed at moving the focus in China away from only economic efficiency and toward a societal balance. One practice advised for the implementation of the harmonious society was to foster “interest expression” (*Li Yi Biao Da*) by accommodating more ordinary citizens’ voices in the public sphere (Lei, 2012, p. 135).

Some of the party and state support for netizen activity stems from this policy decision to encourage interest expression. So also does the increasing incorporation of reporting about netizen activity and netizen concerns in the mainstream media and parallel reporting by netizens and professional journalists of events which arouse netizen concern. The dominant stress of censorship reported by media outside of China hides this level of support and the rapidly expanding new use for social and political reporting, discussion and debate in China.

Every year since 2003, there has been dozens of national netizen uprisings and commotions around social and political issues, sometimes exposing fraud or corruption or questioning government actions or explanations, sometimes discussing foreign events like disruption of the Olympic touch relay, sometimes exposing failures of the press or of star journalists. They have become a normal aspect of Chinese society.

Netizen Effect on Journalism in China

Often ahead of the mainstream media, netizen uprisings set the news agenda. Local events are given by netizen activity national or international attention. In alliance with more independent journalists and editors, online issues can spread to the main stream national media and to the whole Chinese people. Netizen critical framing of issues often differs from government and mainstream media framing. When popular opinion is

formed about these issues it often follows the netizen rather than the government or mainstream media framing. Also, the fight around censorship is creative and spirited not only by netizens. When journalists have stories rejected they sometimes put the stories online, often in their own blogs or microblogs (called J-Blogs). More and more the stories get out despite the imposed restrictions. Even though there is still a significant level of official media supervision and control, a growing body of critical reporting is occurring often encouraged by or encouraging netizen excitement.

Some journalists come online for their leads and to find contacts to interview. Some are emboldened by netizen exposures and numbers to dig deeper and take on more controversial topics. The result is the media environment in China is livelier than in societies with less netizen activity even if those societies have less media supervision and guidance.

Setting the agenda, framing issues, arousing public opinion and supervising the media are all aspects of political power in modern society. That the netizens in China are able to play these roles, often with the help of more mainstream journalists and editors suggests a political dynamism in Chinese society that is denied by critics of China. Netizens in China are developing into a force contributing to motion of Chinese society in the direction of greater citizen participation. Those journalists who ally with the netizens are helping a new journalism to emerge, a netizen journalism in China but also globally.

Appendix: Two Case Studies

Case 1: The Death of Sun Zhigang⁹ (2003)

To help control migration of rural people to the cities, the Chinese government had in place for more than 20 years, “Measures for Internment and Deportation of Urban Vagrants.”¹⁰

On March 17, 2003, a college graduate from the city of Wuhan working away from home in the city of Guangzhou was stopped for an identity check. He was detained under these measures because he did not have the temporary residence card he was asked to show. In the police station he contacted two friends who came quickly to vouch for him and his employed status. The police would not release him. Three days later his friends tried to contact him and were notified that he died from a heart attack. After learning of

Mr. Sun's death, his relatives and friends contacted the local police for an explanation but received no definite answer as to what happened.

With financial help from Mr. Sun's former classmates, his family was able to have an autopsy performed which indicated that Mr. Sun was brutally beaten before his death. One of the classmates who was studying media in Beijing posted an appeal for help concerning Mr. Sun's death on a cyber forum for discussion among media professionals from all over China. A journalist working for the *South Metropolitan Daily* took the post as a lead and decided to initiate interviews of the family and authorities involved.¹¹ About one month after the death, a detailed report about it appeared in the *South Metropolitan Daily* with the headline, "University graduate detained and cruelly beaten to death for not showing temporary residence card."¹² On the same day, the journalist also made the report available online on the Southern Net news site.¹³

Following the reports, the news was picked up by editors of other online news portals. The net was quickly flooded with anger at the death and appeals for justice. Major national forums¹⁴ featured extensive discussions of the detention system, the death of Mr. Sun and its implications. Other netizens commented about the obvious injustice and denial of his constitutional rights. Portal sites made the case a Hot Topic where links to related stories were gathered. Chinese language forums outside of China were also used for discussions and analysis of the case.

A memorial page was launched by a software engineer. It eventually received over 200,000 visits, many visitors leaving comments, messages of sadness and some money donations to the family. Some comments gave examples of other cases of police brutality. Others went further, demanding an end to the official policy that treated migrants as lower class citizens.

The intense online reaction influenced further reporting first by big non-governmental media and then by the mainstream national media, feeding more online ferment. A special committee was formed by the Guangzhou government to investigate Sun's death. The subsequent blunt denial by the police of responsibility enraged many netizens. Their reaction was critical comments now focusing on the weakness of the investigation procedures.

Contributions of articles, responses, comments and calls for action appeared online from activists, lawyers and academics, all of whom had no other option of where to publish their critical analysis. Online news articles typically received tens of thousands of responses. Live chat discussions formulated demands for a thorough investigation, punishment for those involved, change or abolition of vagrancy measures, and an immediate end to deportations. The combination of online outrage and mainstream media coverage made the case a topic of household conversation everywhere in China. *People's Daily* began to publish selected netizen comments in its online news site. Pressure from online communities, social groups and the central government gave the local officials no choice but to initiate a more serious investigation. The investigators acknowledged that netizen pressure added to their determination, resulting in thirteen arrests reported. An open trial from June 5 to 9 ended with 12 convictions of guards at the detention center and

some of the detainees. There was one death sentence. Twenty-three governmental officials and police officers were disciplined for their roles in the death and lack of action after it.

Even after the arrest, online petitions were circulated and online protest letters were addressed to the National People's Congress calling for abolition of the current custody and repatriation system. Such letters virtually never appear in Chinese off line media. On May 15, a netizen posted an article, "On the Violation of 'Legislation Law' by the Holding System: The Case of Sun Zhigang" on a site maintained by the government which was followed by an online examination of the existing anti-vagrancy laws. On June 18, after over 20 years of enforcement, the State Council decide to abolished the 1982 Measures under which Mr. Sun had been detained. New measures were initiated which did not allow for detention but required a system of help for homeless people be available on a voluntary basis.

The collaboration of netizen and traditional media set the news agenda and helped public opinion to form so that the death of Sun Zhigang, an ordinary person, was given extensive national coverage. This led to the relatively quick end of a long standing oppressive and discriminatory law. One scholar described this as "one of the first cases of popular opinion overriding and resetting official agendas and the first demonstration of the sociopolitical power of Chinese netizenship."¹⁵

Case 2: BMW Incident (2003)

On Oct 16, 2003, two farmers, Liu Zhongxia and her husband, rode their tractor loaded with onions through a narrow street in Harbin, capital city of Heilongjiang Province in Northeast China. The tractor accidentally scrapped the rearview mirror of a car parked on the side of the street. The car was a BMW owned by Su Xiuwen's businessman husband. Ms. Su caused a commotion haranguing the two farmers because of the damage to her husband's expensive car. Then she got back into the car and drove it into the crowd which had gathered because of the commotion. Ms. Liu was killed and 12 bystanders were injured.

Ms. Su was tried in a Harbin court on Dec. 20. None of the bystanders testified. They had each received money from Ms. Su's husband. After two hours, the court ruled Ms. Su had not been properly handling her car. The death of Ms. Liu was judged accidental. Ms. Su was given a two year sentence which was suspended. There was brief local media coverage of the trial and it seemed it would pass as a fatal traffic accident, one of many every day in every country.

But two days after the trial, a post about the case appeared on the Strong Nation Forum, "Attention: The BMW killed a farmer." The person posting made three main points: 1. Ms. Su was related to a high ranking official. 2. Ms. Su had killed Ms. Liu deliberately. 3. The trial did not follow legal procedures. The post unleashed a wide spread questioning and discussion of the case throughout Chinese language cyberspace. Soon there were over 70,000 comments and opinions relating to the case on one portal alone. Many netizens saw in the incident a posing of the questions of rich versus poor in

China, and justice versus corruption.

Within two weeks the BMW incident became the online hottest topic in the China. Journalists from outside the province who followed the online commotion went to Harbin to investigate and report for their newspapers. After January 8, China's mainstream national media began intensive coverage. After all this attention, local authorities and legal organs began a reinvestigation.

The online uproar over the case put it on the national news agenda and offered an alternative framing to that of the court and the local media. Almost half of the early posts looked for "behind the scenes" reasons for Ms. Su's light sentence. Less than ten percent accepted the court's decision. Other netizens sought to understand the underlying causes. Some suggested remedies like greater government accountability to public opinion.

There was a growing call for the authorities to open a new investigation and hold a new trial. When it was reported in the press that province officials promised "a satisfactory solution to the 'BMW case' will be offered to the public," a post on the Strong Nation Forum titled "Why should we trust you?" precipitated a cynical thread casting doubt on the credibility of the officials.¹⁶ More and more the question raised was what kind of China do we want? A netizen with the alias *stellyshi* commented that history shows that "... justice originates with the truth. But now in the world, or in China, the truth means nothing. In modern China, with power and money, you can say anything as you like. Even you can kill one person as you want. So, what is this? Is this fare (sic)? Is this so-called socialist country? I don't think so. Never!!!"¹⁷

The hundreds of thousands of online posts took many forms including analysis, argumentation, poems, novels, dramas, letters, animations, and jokes. Most posts were sympathetic to Ms. Liu and hostile to Ms. Su. For many netizens, Ms. Su and Ms. Liu, the BMW and the onion cart became symbols of the growing gap and the character differences between the rich and the poor in China. While much coverage in the mainstream media called for government transparency and social improvement, a major direction taken in netizen posts was to raise the question of the direction in which China should be going. The mainstream media called for step-by-step social improvement, the online discussion raised deeper systemic questions.

The off-line media and the government in response to the massive netizen activity took more action than they would have otherwise. A new investigation was promised and a retrial of Ms. Su. But by mid January the government forbade the mainstream media from any further coverage. It also required the deletion of some and finally all old posts and any new netizen contributions on the major forums and portals. At the new trial there was no greater penalty for Ms. Su and the monitoring and deleting of BMW related posts caused online attention to shift to other incidents and issues including net censorship.

In this incident all the netizen activity did not lead to a different legal outcome. But it was another example that ferment around a not very uncommon event can lead to examination of contradictions buried in society. It is arguable that this netizen uprising had an effect on Chinese society regardless of the legal outcome or the deletion of hundreds of thousands of netizen comments. And in September 2004, the Fourth Session

of the Sixteenth CCP Central Committee rejected the long standing policy orientation “efficiency first” which had been criticized by some netizens who in the course of their uprisings traced the specific problem to this systemic root.¹⁸

Notes

1. “Preface: What is a netizen,” an earlier version is online at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.txt>
2. Forum software hosted on Internet accessible servers allows for sequential and threaded online text discussions which can be monitored and moderated. Similarly hosted chat room software allows for simultaneous multiple participant real time text conversations. In China, most forums allow alias registration and are often archived. Chat room sessions are ephemeral and are not easily monitored.
3. Chinese students are studying in some 103 countries and most densely populated in schools in the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, Germany, France and Japan.
4. For a discussion of Internet control in China, see Kluver 2006.
5. Quoted in *China Daily*, April 2, 2008, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-04/02/content_6587120_2.htm
6. Interview with anti-cnn webmaster Qi Hanting, April 19, 2008, translated from Chinese. See Hauben, 2008.
7. Machine translated from posts in Chinese at Tianya (2008) chat forum about the performance of Chen.
8. Chinese original cached at Baidu Content is no longer available.
9. This case is well covered in the scholarly literature. See for example, *Ibid.*, Tai (2006), pp. 259-268 and other references in the following notes.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
11. Shaoguag Wang, “Changing Models of China’s Policy Agenda Setting,” *Modern China*, 2008, 34 p. 79.
12. “A university graduate was taken into custody without a temporary residence permit and was beaten to death,” in *Southern Metropolis Daily*, April 4, 2003, online at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2003-04-25/09501015845.shtml> (In Chinese). See also, Haiqing Yu, “From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of Post-Mao China,” *Social Semiotics*, 16 (2), June 2006, pp. 303-326.
13. <http://news.21cn.com/social/shixiang/2003-04-25/1021755.html> (No longer available.)
14. Like Strong Nation Forum (qianguo luntan), Development Forum (fazhan luntan) and China Youth Forum (zhongqing luntan)
15. Haiqing Yu, “Talking, Linking, Clicking: The Politics of AIDS and SARS in Urban China,” *positions: east asia cultures critique*, 15 (1) Spring 2007, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265748880_Talking_linking_clicking_The_politics_of

AIDS and SARS in urban China

16. Christina Yuqiong Zhuo and Patricia Moy, "Frame Building and Frame Setting: The Interplay Between Online Public Opinion and Media Coverage," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Dresden, June 16, 2006.
 17. Comment #11 at: <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/redirect.php?tid=39672&goto=lastpost&highlight=n> (No longer available.)
 18. Ibid., Shaoguang Wang, note 11, p. 80.
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[Editor's Note: The following article documents how some of the unifying foundation was set for the broad nonviolent demonstrations of the people of Egypt which took place January 25 to February 11, 2011.]

Netizens in Egypt and the Republic of Tahrir Square*

by Ronda Hauben

On Wednesday February 8, 2011 the Egyptian Ambassador to the

United Nations, Maged A. Abdelaziz, spoke to journalists at a stakeout outside the Security Council.¹ There had been an ongoing set of questions to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and his spokesman and to the Security Council President by journalists covering the United Nations in an effort to understand what role the UN is able to play in the struggle going on in Egypt. In response to a question about the ongoing assault at the time on journalists by police in Egypt, the Ambassador said that someone from the foreigner side was instigating the uprising.

This refrain accusing outsiders of instigating the Egyptian uprising had also been expressed by Egyptian government officials a few days earlier. What is significant about this claim is that it denies the internal process by which the Egyptian people had organized themselves over a multi year series of struggles. These struggles included labor struggles, anti-repression demonstrations and online discussions to help to determine a set of political and economic demands uniting the different sectors of Egyptian society.

The claim of outside instigators ignores the role played by active online discussion and other forms of communication by a diversity of political actors, of citizens empowered by their access to the Internet, who had been striving for a more just and dynamic Egypt.

In the early 1990s, a university student in New York, Michael Hauben, took up to do research to explore the political power of the developing networks. Through his research he discovered that a new form of citizenship was being born online.²

In response to a set of questions Hauben sent out to people with Net access in the early 1990s, he received descriptions of how people were exploring how to use the Net to solve the many social and political problems of our times. He called these users who were active citizens exploring how the Net could help to make a better world netizens (Net + Citizen = Netizen). For Hauben, not all users were netizens. Instead he reserved the use of this term to describe those users who empowered by the Net, were exploring how to contribute to a better world.

Many of the characteristics that Hauben discovered among netizens in the early 1990s are also the characteristics of netizens who have been part of the struggle to change Egypt.

Describing some of how the process of mobilization developed, Charles Hirschkind, in his article, “From the Blogosphere to the Street: The Role of Social Media in the Egyptian Uprising” writes, “The seeds of this spectacular mobilization had been sown from across the political spectrum.”³ Hirschkind describes how a political alliance grew up between the secular leftist organizations and groups with Islamic ties (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood), working together to defend victims of state torture.

Another example of an organization working across the political spectrum in Egypt was the Kifaya movement, a coalition of those with diverse political leanings united in their demand that Egyptian President Mubarak step down and that his son Gamal not succeed him.

With the emergence of this movement in 2004-2005, bloggers became a significant part of the protest activities, reporting on the protests and discussing them online. One blogger, Wael Abbas is mentioned for distributing a video clip of a man being physically abused by the police in Cairo. This video and other forms of online reporting helped to build a movement in Egypt against police abuse.

Another contribution to the protests was from the many labor struggles in previous years. Strikes helped to spread the sense of the importance of struggle in Egypt. Bloggers, Facebook groups, and others online took part in the discussion of grievances and in spreading the information about mobilizations.

April 6, 2008 was an important example of the power of the alliance of online netizens and workers working together to challenge the abusive practices of the Mubarak government.

Hirschkind describes how online discussion and communication helped to transform diverse political ideas into a common set of political objectives. “They have pioneered,” he writes, “forms of political critique and interaction that can mediate and encompass the heterogeneity of religious and social commitments that constitute Egypt’s contemporary political terrain.”

It was this evolving communication among Egyptian netizens, not foreign instigation, that helped to provide the platform for a movement which was able to embrace a broad spectrum of Egyptian citizens.

Describing the movement that developed, Nubar Hovsepien, in his article, “The Arab Pro-Democracy Movement: Struggles to Redefine Citizenship” writes:⁴

Organizationally it is more like a network than our outmoded top down structures . . . This is a revolution in the making sparked by youth who are determined to alter the dominant paradigm of politics and power that precludes the central idea which undergrids democracy citizenship under a social contract.

Hovsepien argues that a new relationship between the Egyptian government and the citizens is at the heart of the movement:

Simply put, Arab youth are leading a profound revolt whose central objective is the transformation of former ‘subjects’ into ‘citizens’ with agency and voice to make demands of their rulers. The rulers are expected to be servants of their citizens – nothing less is acceptable.

Mohammed Bamyeh in his article, “The Egyptian Revolution: First Impressions from the Field”⁵ describes the 18 days of the Egyptian uprising as the dawn of a new civic order. He points to many of the grassroots forms that developed during the days of the uprising, one of which was a mass “civic character as a conscious ethical contrast to the state’s barbarism.” He describes the transformation of people’s sense of themselves and of their capability as an integral part of the process of the movement:

Like in the Tunisian Revolution, in Egypt the rebellion erupted as a sort of a collective world earthquake – where the central demands were very basic, and clustered around the respect for the citizen, dignity, and the natural right to participate in the making of the system that ruled over the person.

This goal, Bamyeh explains, was expressed as well by even,

Muslim Brotherhood participants (who) chanted at some point with everyone else for a ‘civic’ (*madaniyya*) state – explicitly distinguished from two other possible alternatives: religious (*diniyya*) or military (*askariyya*) state.

Describing the significance of these developments, Hovsepien

regards the Egyptian events as the Arab equivalent of the French Revolution. In a paper I presented in Paris at Sorbonne III in summer 2010, titled “Watchdogging to Challenge the Abuse of Power: Netizenship in the 21st Century,” I proposed that the important achievement of the French Revolution was the conceptual transformation of the former subjects into the citizens to be regarded as the sovereign of the State.⁶ “It was the citizens who were to possess the power of the nation It is among the citizens that the discussion and decisions to determine the progress of the nation belongs.” This goal or vision has been considered only as an ideal for over 200 years, as citizens have lacked the capability to exert their supervision over the government or corporate officials who have grabbed the power of the state.

The Egyptian revolution had its groundwork set by the Egyptian netizens and it is this foundation that provides a strength to meet the many trials to be faced in the days and years after 2011.

Hence it is not foreign instigators who are responsible for seeding the soil of the mighty movement that removed Mubarak from power. Instead it was a resurgence of the ideals and demands of citizens which fueled the French Revolution, but which are now strengthened by the actions and deeds of the netizens.

Notes

1. Stakeout at Security Council, Maged A. Abdelaziz to the press on February 8, 2011. <https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/U110/U110208g/>
2. Michael Hauben, “The Net and the Netizens, in On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet,” IEEE Computer Society Press, <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook/>
3. Charles Hirschkind, “From the Blogosphere to the Street: The Role of Social Media in the Egyptian Uprising,” *Jadaliyya*, February 9, 2011. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/599/from-the-blogosphere-to-the-street-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-egyptian-uprising>
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*This article was first published on April 16, 2011 on the netizenblog online at:
https://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2011/03/16/net_izens_egypt_tahrir_square/

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The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the United Nations*

by Ronda Hauben

Preface

The history of journalism includes many different forms of publication and many different methods of organization of those publications. Journalism scholars like Chris Atton and Tony Harcup of the U.K. point to a wide continuum of how the news is produced and who are the journalists who produce it. These scholars argue that it is too narrow to restrict the definition and consideration of journalism to commercially or government produced media. Instead these scholars propose that the many forms of alternative journalism should be considered as part of the spectrum of journalism and those who produce for these publications are to be considered in any study of journalists.

Traditionally alternative journalism provides for a broader set of issues to be raised than is common in commercially produced mainstream

media. Often, too, alternative publications allow for a broader set of sources to be utilized. Such a media often reflects not only a criticism of the limitations of the mainstream commercial media, but also a demonstration that another form and practice of journalism is viable.

With the creation and the spread of the Internet, the emergence of a new form of citizenship, know as netizenship, has developed. Also a critical and vibrant form of online journalism has begun to develop. I call this journalism, netizen journalism. A more detailed exploration of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper as the paper is for a panel on questions related to the United Nations. As such, the paper will focus on the impact of netizen journalism on the United Nations and on issues related to the United Nations. But an awareness of the emerging phenomenon of netizen journalism can help to provide a context for issues investigated in this paper.

Introduction

In this paper I take three conflicts which are or have been on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council. The paper will explore the role of netizen journalism in relation to the efforts to resolve these conflicts in a peaceful manner. The three examples the paper will consider in relation to the UN are 1) the *Cheonan* conflict in South Korea (2010), 2) the war against Libya (2011), and 3) the crisis in Syria (2011-2012).

I. Medvedev and the Challenge of Media Manipulation to International Relations

In a recent speech, Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, spoke about what he called “the new security dimensions” in international relations.¹ “Today,” he said, “we are witness to persistent attempts to make mass manipulation of public opinion a tool in international relations.” He offered as an example what he calls the media campaign against Syria.

“Syria’s case is illustrative in this respect,” Medvedev said. “A very active media campaign unfolded with respect to Syria.” He explained, “What is clear is that this media campaign had little to do with ending the

violence as rapidly as possible and facilitating the national dialogue that we all want to see there.”

He attributed this media campaign to the nature of what is considered the politics of certain countries. Describing this politics, he explained, “This sees a country or group of countries instill their own aims and objectives in the consciousness of others ... with other points of view rejected.”²

What I propose is important about his talk for our panel on “The UN is a Dilemma” is that Medvedev argues that media manipulation by certain political actors presents a serious problem for the field of international relations. He argues that such a media campaign against Syria interferes with the goal of international relations “to concentrate on professional and serious discussion rather than propaganda efforts,” so as to be able to work out “a common approach to settling this conflict.”

While he does not see journalism as able to help solve this problem, I want to propose that there is the development of an alternative form of journalism that is taking on the problem. This is the journalism I call netizen journalism. Netizen journalism seeks to challenge the misrepresentations and distortions of mainstream western journalism that Medvedev presents as a serious challenge to international relations. Netizen journalism encourages not only the exposure of the distortions in the mainstream media, but research and writing to provide the background and information needed to determine how to settle a conflict. By challenging the media campaign fomenting a conflict, netizen journalism becomes a participant in the media war at the UN.

II. The *Cheonan* Incident, the UN, and Netizen Journalism

I first turn to the details of what happened with the *Cheonan* conflict which was brought to the UN in 2010, to examine how netizen journalism affected the media war in that situation and helped to make a significant contribution to the peaceful resolution of the conflict that was embraced at the Security Council.

The *Cheonan* incident concerns a South Korean naval ship which broke up and sank on March 26, 2010. At the time it was involved in naval exercises with the U.S. military in an area in the West Sea / Yellow Sea

between North Korea and China. This is a situation that had been the subject of much discussion on the Internet.

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 on May 20, 2010, the South Korean government claimed that a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine exploded in the water near the *Cheonan*, causing a pressure wave that was responsible for the sinking. Many criticisms of this scenario have been raised.

There was no direct evidence of any North Korean submarine in the vicinity of the *Cheonan*. Nor was there any evidence that a torpedo was actually fired causing the pressure wave phenomenon. Hence the South Korean government had no actual case that could be presented in a court of law to support its claims.

In fact, if this claim of a pressure wave were true even those involved in the investigation of the incident acknowledge that “North Korea would be the first to have succeeded at using this kind of a bubble jet torpedo action in actual fighting.”³

The dispute over the sinking of the *Cheonan* was brought to the United Nations Security Council in June 2010 and a Presidential Statement was agreed to a month later, in July.⁴

An account of some of what happened in the Security Council during this process is described in an article that has appeared in several different Spanish language publications⁵ The article describes the experience of the Mexican Ambassador to the UN, Claude Heller in his position as president of the Security Council for the month of June 2010. (The presidency rotates each month to a different Security Council member.)

In a letter to the Security Council dated June 4, 2010 the Republic of Korea (ROK) more commonly known as South Korea, asked the Council to take up the *Cheonan* dispute. Park Im-kook, then the South Korean Ambassador to the UN, requested that the Security Council consider the matter of the *Cheonan* and respond in an appropriate manner.⁶ The letter described an investigation into the sinking of the *Cheonan* carried out by South Korean government and military officials. The conclusion of the South Korean investigation was to accuse North Korea of sinking the South Korean ship.

Sin Son Ho was the UN Ambassador from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which is more commonly known as North Korea. He sent a letter dated June 8, 2010 to the Security Council, which denied the allegation that his country was to blame.⁷ His letter urged the Security Council not to be the victim of deceptive claims, as had happened with Iraq in 2003. It asked the Security Council to support his government's call to be able to examine the evidence and to be involved in a new and more independent investigation on the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

How would the Mexican Ambassador as President of the Security Council during the month of June handle this dispute? This was a serious issue facing Heller as he began his presidency in June 2010.

Heller adopted what he referred to as a "balanced" approach to treat both governments on the Korean peninsula in a fair and objective manner. He held bilateral meetings with each member of the Security Council which led to support for a process of informal presentations by both of the Koreas to the members of the Security Council.

What Heller called "interactive informal meetings" were held on June 14 with the South Koreans and the North Koreans in separate sessions attended by the Security Council members, who had time to ask questions and then to discuss the presentations.

At a media stakeout on June 14, after the day's presentations ended, Heller said that it was important to have received the detailed presentation by South Korea and also to know and learn the arguments of North Korea. He commented that "it was very important that North Korea approached the Security Council." In response to a question about his view on the issues presented, he replied, "I am not a judge. I think we will go on with the consultations to deal in a proper manner on the issue."⁸

Heller also explained that, "the Security Council issued a call to the parties to refrain from any act that could escalate tensions in the region, and makes an appeal to preserve peace and stability in the region."

Though the North Korean Ambassador at the UN rarely speaks to the media, the North Korean UN delegation scheduled a press conference for the following day, Tuesday, June 15. During the press conference, the North Korean Ambassador presented North Korea's refutation of the allegations made by South Korea. Also he explained North Korea's

request to be able to send an investigation team to the site where the sinking of the *Cheonan* occurred. South Korea had denied the request. During its press conference, the North Korean Ambassador noted that there was widespread condemnation of the investigation in South Korea and around the world.⁹

The press conference held on June 15 was a lively event. Many of the journalists who attended were impressed and requested that there be future press conferences with the North Korean Ambassador.

During June, Heller held meetings with the UN ambassadors from each of the two Koreas and then with Security Council members about the *Cheonan* issue. On the last day of his presidency, on June 30, he was asked by a reporter what was happening about the *Cheonan* dispute. He responded that the issue of contention was over the evaluation of the South Korean government's investigation.

Heller described how he introduced what he refers to as “an innovation” into the Security Council process. As the month of June ended, the issue was not yet resolved, but the “innovation” set a basis to build on the progress that was achieved during the month of his presidency.

The “innovation” Heller referred to, was a summary he made of the positions of each of the two Koreas on the issue, taking care to present each objectively. Heller explained that this summary was not an official document, so it did not have to be approved by the other members of the Council. This summary provided the basis for further negotiations. He believed that it had a positive impact on the process of consideration in the Council, making possible the agreement that was later to be expressed in the Presidential statement on the *Cheonan* that was issued by the Security Council on July 9.

Heller's goal, he explained, was to “at all times be as objective as possible” so as to avoid increasing the conflict on the Korean peninsula. Such a goal is the Security Council's obligation under the UN Charter.

In the July 19, 2010 Security Council's Presidential Statement (PRST) on the *Cheonan*, what stands out is that the statement follows the pattern of presenting the views of each of the two Koreas and urging that the dispute be settled in a peaceful manner.

In the PRST, the members of the Security Council did not blame North Korea. Instead they refer to the South Korean investigation and its conclusion, expressing their “deep concern” about the “findings” of the investigation.

The PRST explains that “The Security Council takes note of the responses from other relevant parties, including the DPRK, which has stated that it had nothing to do with the incident.”¹⁰

With the exception of North Korea, it is not indicated who “the other relevant parties” are. It does suggest, however, that it is likely there are some Security Council members, not just Russia and China, who did not agree with the conclusions of the South Korean investigation.

Analyzing the Presidential Statement, the Korean newspaper *Hankyoreh* noted that the statement “allows for a double interpretation and does not blame or place consequences on North Korea.”¹¹ Such a possibility of a “double interpretation” allows different interpretations.

The Security Council action on the *Cheonan* took place in a situation where there had been a wide ranging international critique, especially in the online media, about the problems of the South Korean investigation, and of the South Korean government’s failure to make public any substantial documentation of its investigation, along with its practice of harassing critics of the South Korean government claims.¹²

One such critique included a three part report by the South Korean NGO People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD).¹³ This report raised a number of questions and problems with the South Korean government’s case. The PSPD document was posted widely on the Internet and also sent to the President of the United Nations Security Council for distribution to those Security Council members interested and to the South Korean Mission to the UN.

There were many blog comments about the *Cheonan* issue in Korean.¹⁴ There were also some bloggers writing in English who became active in critiquing the South Korean investigation and the role of the U.S. in the conflict.

One such blogger, Scott Creighton who uses the pen name Willy Loman, wrote a post titled “The Sinking of the *Cheonan*: We are being lied to”¹⁵ On his blog “American Everyman,” he explained how there was

a discrepancy between the diagram displayed by the South Korean government in a press conference it held, and the part of the torpedo on display in the glass case below the diagram.

He showed that the diagram did not match the part of the torpedo on display. The South Korean government had claimed that the diagram displayed above the glass case was from a North Korean brochure offering the torpedo identified as the CHT-02D.

There were many comments on his post, including some from netizens in South Korea. Also the mainstream conservative media in South Korea carried accounts of his critique.

Three weeks later, at a news conference, a South Korean government official acknowledged that the diagram presented by the South Korean government was not of the same torpedo as the part displayed in the glass case. Instead the diagram was of the PT97W torpedo, not the CHT-02D torpedo as claimed.

Describing the significance of having documented one of the fallacies in the South Korean government's case, Creighton writes:¹⁶

(I)n the end, thanks to valuable input from dozens of concerned people all across the world Over 100,000 viewers read that article and it was republished on dozens of sites all across the world (even translated). A South Korean MSM outlet even posted our diagram depicting the glaring discrepancies between the evidence and the drawing of the CHT-02D torpedo, which a high-ranking military official could only refute by stating he had 40 years military experience and to his knowledge, I had none. But what I had, what we had, was literally thousands of people all across the world, scientists, military members, and just concerned investigative bloggers who were committed to the truth and who took the time to contribute to what we were doing here.

'Forty years military experience' took a beating from 'we the people WorldWide' and that is the way it is supposed to be.

This is just one of a number of serious questions and challenges that were raised about the South Korean government's scenario of the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

Other influential events which helped to challenge the South Korean government's claims were a press conference in Japan held on July 9 by two academic scientists. The two scientists presented results of experiments they did which challenged the results of experiments the South Korean government used to support its case.¹⁷ These scientists also wrote to the Security Council with their findings.

Also a significant challenge to the South Korean government report was the finding of a Russian team of four sent to South Korea to look at the data from the investigation and to do an independent evaluation of it. The Russian team did not accept the South Korean government's claim that a pressure wave from a torpedo caused the *Cheonan* to sink.¹⁸

Such efforts along with online posts and discussions by many netizens provided a catalyst for the actions of the UN Security Council concerning the *Cheonan* incident.

The mainstream U.S. media for the most part, chose to ignore the many critiques which have appeared. These critiques of the South Korean government's investigation of the *Cheonan* sinking have appeared mainly on the Internet, not only in Korean, but also in English, in Japanese, and in other languages. They present a wide ranging challenge of the veracity and integrity of the South Korean investigation and its conclusions.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* on July 28 noted the fact, however, that the media in the U.S. had ignored the critique of the South Korean government investigation that is being discussed online and spread around the world.¹⁹ On August 31, an op-ed by Donald Gregg, a former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, appeared in the *New York Times*, titled "Testing North Korean Waters." The article noted that "not everyone agrees that the *Cheonan* was sunk by North Korea. Pyongyang has consistently denied responsibility, and both China and Russia opposed a U.N. Security Council resolution laying blame on North Korea."²⁰

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*. Such netizen activity had an important effect on the international community. It also appears to have acted as a catalyst affecting the actions of the UN Security Council in its treatment of the *Cheonan* dispute.

In his op-ed in the *New York Times*, Gregg argued that, “The disputed interpretations of the sinking of the *Cheonan* remain central to any effort to reverse course and to get on track toward dealing effectively with North Korea on critical issues such as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

North Korea referred to the widespread international sentiment in its June 8 letter to the Security Council. The UN Ambassador from North Korea wrote:

It would be very useful to remind ourselves of the ever-increasing international doubts and criticisms, going beyond the internal boundary of south Korea, over the ‘investigation result’ from the very moment of its release

The situation that the North Korean Ambassador referred to is the result of actions on the part of South Korean netizens and civil society who challenged the process and results of the South Korean government’s investigation. Also, there was support for the South Korean netizens by bloggers, scientists and journalists around the world, writing mainly online but in a multitude of languages and from many perspectives. Several of the non-governmental organizations and scientists in South Korea sent the results of their investigations and research to members of the Security Council to provide them with the background and facts needed to make an informed decision.²¹

The result of such efforts is something that is unusual in the process of recent Security Council activity. The Security Council process in the *Cheonan* issue provided for an impartial analysis of the problem and an effort to hear from those with an interest in the issue.

The effort in the Security Council was described by the Mexican Ambassador, as upholding the principles of impartiality and respectful treatment of all members toward resolving a conflict between nations in a peaceful manner. It represents an important example of the Security Council acting in conformity with its obligations as set out in the UN charter. In the July 9 Presidential Statement, the Security Council urged that the parties to the dispute over the sinking of the *Cheonan* find a means to peacefully settle the dispute. The statement says:

The Security Council calls for full adherence to the Korean

Armistice Agreement and encourages the settlement of outstanding issues on the Korean peninsula by peaceful means to resume direct dialogue and negotiation through appropriate channels as early as possible, with a view to avoiding conflicts and averting escalation.

Ambassador Gregg is only one of many around the world who have expressed their concern with the course of action of the U.S. and South Korea as contrary to the direction of the UN Security Council Presidential Statement. Gregg explained his fear that the truth of the *Cheonan* sinking “may elude us, as it did after the infamous Tonkin Bay incident of 1964, that was used to drag us [the U.S.] into the abyss of the Vietnam War.”²² Despite this dilemma, the Security Council action on the *Cheonan* dispute, if it is recognized and supported, has set the basis instead for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.²³ While the netizen community in South Korea and internationally were able to provide an effective challenge to the misrepresentations by the South Korean government on the *Cheonan* incident, the struggle over the misrepresentations of the conflict in Libya was less successful.

III. False Claims that Led to the War Against Libya

A short article at the Current Events Inquiry website lists several provocative claims which helped to provide a false pretext for the NATO bombing of Libya.²⁴ Among them were reports by *Al Jazeera* and the *BBC* that the Libyan government had carried out air strikes against Benghazi and Tripoli on February 22, 2011. Russia Today reports that the Russian military who had monitored the unrest in Libya from the beginning, “says nothing of the sort was going on on the ground.”²⁵

According to the report by the Russian military, the attacks had never occurred.

Another such claim widely circulated by major western media very early in the Libya conflict was that the Libyan government “is massacring unarmed demonstrators.” The NGO, the International Crisis Group (ICG) in its June 6, 2011 report says that such claims were inaccurate. The report explains that this version of the events in Libya “would appear to ignore evidence that the protest movement exhibited a violent aspect from early

on.” This includes evidence that early in the protests, “demonstrations were infiltrated by violent elements.”

Similarly the ICG report found no evidence for claims that the Libyan government “engaged in anything remotely warranting use of the term ‘genocide’.” A similar criticism was made of the claim that “foreign mercenaries” were employed by the Libyan government. A report by Amnesty International which is described in an article in *The Independent* newspaper in the U.K. on June 24, 2011 says that, “The Amnesty Report found no evidence for this.”

Netizen Journalism on the Conflict in Libya Presents a Different View

From the early days of the false media claims targeting Libya for an outside intervention to remove its government, a growing set of articles and comments were written and published online exposing the lack of evidence for these claims and demonstrating that they were distortions with a political purpose. These articles exposing the distortions were read and distributed by a growing set of online reporters. These examples demonstrate that a different form of journalism is emerging. While such a form of journalism may not yet appear to present an adequate challenge to the gross misrepresentations and inaccuracies spread by much of the mainstream western and Arab satellite media about the Libyan conflict, the nature of this newly developing form of journalism is important to explore and to understand.

This new journalism has at least two important aspects. One is serious research into the background, context and political significance of conflicts like that in Libya or Syria. Another is the application of this research to the writing of articles or to comments in response to both mainstream and alternative media articles.

As an example of this netizen journalism related to the conflict in Libya, I want to refer to a small collection of articles titled “Libya, the UN, and Netizen Journalism.”²⁶ This collection contains articles focusing on a critique of actions at the UN that provided the authority for the NATO war against Libya.

One article in that collection, “UN Security Council March 17

Meeting to Authorize Bombing of Libya All Smoke and Mirrors” is about the Security Council meeting which passed Resolution 1973 by a vote of 10 in favor and 5 abstentions. The article includes some sample comments from online discussions about what was happening in Libya at the time. While the UNSC members at the March 17 meeting speak about their support for the resolution to “protect Libyan civilians,” there was no acknowledgment that the resolution instead would in effect support the ongoing armed insurrection against the government of Libya.

While Security Council delegates and the mainstream media described what was happening in Libya as “peaceful protestors” attacked by a “brutal government,” online discussion of the situation during this same period described the opposition in Libya as engaged in an armed insurrection. The following sample from comments from a discussion of an article on the British *Guardian* website in March 2011 provides an example of netizens questioning and critiquing the actions of the Security Council and asking why the UN is protecting and supporting an armed insurgency:²⁷

“Armed civilians or uninformed fighters have no place being supported or protected by our air power. They carry a gun and get targeted that is their look out, not our job to hit the other side.” James St. George, 22 March, 2011.

“The thing is the rebels are ‘civilians’ when ever it suits us.” llundiel, 23 March, 2011.

“Of course once you start bombing, there will clearly be plenty of collateral damage.

This then makes a complete mockery of the stated purpose of the intervention, to save innocent civilians.” contractor000, 23 March, 2011.

“Yes tanks are not planes! Or in the air flying. The civilian protection has no place extending to armed rebels, they are not civilians.” Cock-fingersMcGee, 23 March, 2011.

“So we are supposed to accept this scenario that the Military aggression against Libya is to do with protecting the protesters, the revolution, innocent civilians, the rebels etc. This sounds very reminiscent of attacking Iraq because of WMD.” comunismlives, 22 March, 2011.

Similar discussions were going on at other websites. Here, for

example, are some comments from a discussion at the Hidden Harmonies website.²⁸

“Resolution 1973 is also directed at rebel force, but we are not bombing the rebels, but usurping the resolution to provide air cover in aid of the rebels. Prolonging Libya’s civil war only brings more harm to the civilians, and facilitating division of Libya’s sovereignty, are contravening/violating the resolution.” Charles Liu, March 22, 2011.

“We can argue technicalities, but everyone knows the current U.S.-led bombings are toward weakening Qadhafi and to bolster the rebel opposition. Obama and the Coalition publicly say so.”

“Its like seeing a thief caught on video sneaking around in a store and after seeing no one around, pockets the candy. He also says he is stealing.”

“Now we are suppose to ‘prove’ it? That’s quite retarded.” DeWang, March 22, 2011

“‘under threat of attack’ clause includes threat of attack by the rebels, yet we are not bombing them for their incursion outside Benghazi. This violates the preamble’s stated limit of military authorization to not divide Libya’s sovereignty. Not withstanding any sort of red herring and semantics wiggling, the selective air strike in aid of the rebels violates UN resolution 1973, while 1970 gave no legitimacy to the armed rebellion in Libya, which the legitimate government of Libya has the sovereign right to sanction against.” Charles Liu, March 22, 2011.

“I just don’t understand why the bombing is taking place at all.”

“1) It is a civil war. Why should the west take sides?”

“2) Wasn’t Gaddafi the U.S.’s pet since Bush II? Why is the U.S. seeking to remove one of their puppets? Is the U.S./west looking for another Iraq?”

“I wouldn’t be one bit surprised if this war was instigated by Wall Street looking to make a killing on oil and commodities.” colin, March 22, 2011.

“It’s a historical pattern of these UN Resolutions, including way back when the Korean War started, that ‘all necessary force’ is the general catch phrase for ‘unrestrained warfare’ limited only by what weapons are

available.”

“Now, even the high cost of the cruise missiles, \$1 million a pop, is not enough to deter the launching of 100s of these.”

“Well, I guess we are going to see the cost, sooner or later.” r v, March 23, 2011.

These two examples of selected comments from online discussions at the time demonstrate that netizens raised serious concerns and critiques of the Security Council action passing UN Resolution 1973, while the mainstream media mainly reported what western governments were saying.

Similar questions and critiques were raised throughout the conflict in articles by independent journalists who were in Libya during much of the period of the defense of Libya from the NATO bombing and the NATO support for the armed insurrection in Libya. Such journalists included Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya of Global Research, Thierry Meyssan, from Voltairenet, Lizzy Phalen who reported for various outlets including PressTV, and Franklin Lamb whose articles were carried on various websites.

Also a group that called itself Concerned Africans published an open letter which they also submitted to the UN Secretary General, the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. The letter which was signed by over 300 concerned Africans, described what it called the contribution to “the subversion of international law.” The letter maintained that in passing UNSCR 1973, “the Security Council used the still unresolved issue in international law of ‘the right to protect’ the so called R2P, to justify the Chapter VII military intervention in Libya.”²⁹ Other articles focused on the violations in Security Council procedures represented by allowing Libyan officials who had defected to appear at the Security Council representing Libya.³⁰

Similarly, Professor Mahmood Mamdani, at Columbia University who has studied the region and its history, points to the “political and legal infrastructure for intervention in otherwise independent countries,” namely the Security Council and the International Criminal Court working ‘selectively,’ that has been created by Western powers.³¹

Among the many websites at the time publishing articles critiquing

the UN's actions in Libya were The Center for Research on Globalization, Voltaire Network, Libya 360, Mathaba, April Media, and American Everyman.³²

During this period, several of the independent journalists or the journalists writing articles challenging the Security Council actions providing for the bombing of Libya appeared on satellite news programs like that of RT News and PressTV. Also there were interviews and videos posted online.

While these articles, discussions, critiques and analyses did not succeed in stopping the NATO attack on Libya, they created an example of more accurate reporting and analysis about the attack on Libya. A few months later when an *Al Jazeera* journalist explained why he resigned from *Al Jazeera*, he pointed to the pressure from *Al Jazeera* to misrepresent what was happening in his reporting. He explained that the support of Qatar for the militarization of the Libyan conflict was a turning point in the distortion of the news at his station.³³

Also as the following comment by a netizen indicates, someone who supported the attack on Libya and who has learned lessons from what happened, is more likely to question the media claims about Syria:

(It is also important to me that I feel I was deceived about the Libyan situation. Being like Libya would itself be reason to oppose intervention in Syria.

And others suggest that the experience of NATO's actions in Libya has been having an impact on what some at the UN and some of the nations of the UN will do with respect to Syria.

As one netizen wrote after hearing of the Houla massacre:³⁴

What has changed in the last week following the murder of more than 100 people in Houla, including dozens of children, is that a new urgency and disgust has been injected into an escalating crisis that has brought the country to the verge of civil war. The role of the Syrian opposition should also be clearly investigated as well. Rather than just blaming Assad in a media witch-hunt. As many of those killed were supposed to be people who refused to collaborate with the opposition.

It is obvious that the Russians and Chinese have learnt from

Libya too. Where the number of people killed by unbridled NATO bombing has been carefully suppressed, and the use of the UN to cover « regime change », has only bought chaos in its wake. So the oil there has changed hands, but most of the north of Africa is now transformed into a violent marasme. Both of those major powers now know from experience that – NATO with UN agreement means the destruction of peace, the loss of their assets in the region, and the continuation of war into other areas (Iran, Yemen, Pakistan, etc. or closer to their own spheres of influence. China sea – the ‘Stans,’ the southern (Muslim) aligned ex-Russian states, etc. or into South America). They do not see any end. So they must draw a line somewhere.

Is the object of the west once again to cause a major mid-eastern war? shaun 2 June 2012, 10:00 p.m.

IV. The Syrian Crisis and the UN: Critique of the Reporting on Syria

Similar to the mainstream media war against Libya, there is a set of false narratives in the mainstream western and Arab satellite media related to what has been happening in Syria. While such media essentially frames its news about Syria to demonize the Syrian government and its President Bashar Assad, its news stories support the armed opposition, and its journalists rely on opposition sources for the news that is to be reported.

In this situation, netizen journalism presents a critique of the mainstream media support for what is an armed insurrection against Syria. The forms this netizen journalism takes include articles, interviews, commentary, historical background, analysis and discussion. Critical articles about the mainstream media reports and misrepresentations are also common.

The Houla Massacre

The original mainstream media account of what has come to be known as the Houla massacre was that an opposition demonstration was suppressed by Syrian government shelling.

Criticism of this claim soon emerged pointing to the fact that the majority of those murdered were killed at close range, not by shelling. In response the mainstream western media produced a new element, a so called pro government militia that they claimed had gone into the homes of those killed and carried out the massacre. Why an alleged pro government militia, the so called 'Shabiha' would go into the homes of pro government supporters and massacre them, was not explained.

When Alex Thomson, a British Channel 4 reporter, went to the village that the opposition in Houla had said had produced the so called Shabiha accused of the attack in Houla, he found no evidence of any such militia. He writes, "Beyond a few languid soldiers and the odd policeman no sign of militias. No trace of heavy weapons. No tank tracks on the roads.... Well these Alawites insist there are not, nor have ever been, Shabiha in these villages."³⁵ Neither do the mainstream western media wonder why the Syrian government would carry out a massacre of civilians at the very time that the United Nations General Assembly and the United Nations Security Council are planning to discuss Syria.

In his book *Liar's Poker* which analyzes the disinformation used to justify the NATO bombing of Serbia, the Belgian journalist Michel Collon observes that "Information is already a battlefield which is part of war."³⁶

Seeking Facts About the Houla Massacre

Shortly after the news spread about the Houla massacre, netizen media sites included articles which revealed that the area where the massacre was carried out was under the control of the Free Syrian Army, not of the Syrian government. A Russian news team had gained access to the site the day following the massacre and did interviews to determine what had happened. Their report was originally published in Russia but soon was translated into English.

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. The Russian journalists' 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," reports the news and analysis site *Voltairenet*.³⁷

Soon after the news of the massacre appeared, there were articles challenging the claims that it was the work of the Syrian government. In his article "Death Squads Ravage Syrian Town – West Calls for 'Action,'" Tony Cartalucci of the Land Destroyer Report blog, writes "'Cui Bono?' To whose benefit does it serve to massacre very publicly entire families in close quarters and broadcast the images of their handiwork world-wide?"³⁸ He argues that this is in no way in the Syrian government's interest.

In another article he points to a U.K. government official blaming the deaths on "artillery fire" by the government. Claiming to be responding to such reports, several governments including the U.K. government expelled Syrian diplomats. Even though these claims were soon demonstrated to be false, Cartalucci points out that there was no retraction from the U.K. government or reversal of the expulsion of Syrian diplomats. Cartalucci writes:³⁹

U.K. Foreign Office Minister, Alistair Burt, peddling what is now a confirmed fabrication, told for days to the public as the West maneuvered to leverage it against the Syrian government. The UN has now confirmed that artillery fired by government troops were not responsible for the massacre, and instead carried out by unidentified militants. Despite this, the U.K. has failed to retract earlier accusations and has instead expelled Syrian diplomats in an increasingly dangerous, irrational, aggressive posture.

Others online recognized that a photo *BBC* posted which was

allegedly of the corpses from the Houla Massacre, was actually a photo that had been taken in 2003 of deaths in Iraq. Describing how the misrepresentation was detected, Sy Walker explains on his blog:⁴⁰

The information on which it's based comes from a pro-Syrian tweeter called Hey Joud, whom I've found to be well informed and savvy.

A friend of this tweeter discovered the misrepresentation and tweeted about it:

“@BBCWorld propaganda: [http://imageshack.us/photo/my-image ...](http://imageshack.us/photo/my-image...) showing a pic of bodies from Iraq claiming it's the ?#HoulaMassacre? ?#Syria?

BBC changed the photo, Walker explains, adding:

This is not the first time I've reported on image fakery with regard to Syria. The western media's sustained attack on that beleaguered nation has now been underway for more than a year. A comprehensive account of all its deceptions and misreporting over that period would fill many volumes.

In a blog post titled “Houla Hoax,” Mathias Broeckers also comments on the *BBC* presenting the 2003 Iraq photo as a photo of Houla. Broeckers writes:⁴¹

It is the forbidden geopolitical agenda, the big Picture that isn't talked about, as opposed to the horrors by which the wars are legitimized.

Other online journalists comment on the bias of the United Nations Human Rights Council and its inability to do an objective investigation of the facts of the Houla Massacre. Reporting about an interaction between an anti-war activist from the “No War Network,” Marinella Correggia, and Rupert Colville, spokesman for the Human Rights Council, an article on the Uprooted Palestinians blog is titled “UN report on Houla massacre? But they only talk to Syrian opposition – by phone.” Colville explains to Correggia that the Human Rights Council will do its investigation by speaking with the local network of opposition members they have contact with in Syria by phone, with opposition members they have met in Turkey and with opposition members they have met in Geneva.⁴² Martin Janssen, a Dutch Middle East expert and journalist who reports from Damascus and

whose articles appear online is also concerned that there are other important sources of information that have information about what happened, but that the Human Relations Council investigators will not speak with them because the investigators are only interested in hearing from opposition sources.⁴³

Janssen said that he was in contact with a Catholic organization in the area of Houla, a monastery in Qara in the Homs-Hana region, and the two Russian journalists, Marat Musin and Olga Kulygina, who were able to visit Houla the day after the massacre, on May 25 with a TV crew. Janssen reported that Musin and Kulygina tried to offer their findings to the UN Special Commission on Human Rights doing the investigation, but that the Commission was not interested in hearing from them. Colville indicated that the sources the investigators had were adequate because all their other sources had already informed them that the ‘shabibha’ were responsible for the massacre. The Commission was not interested in hearing from anyone with different views or with information different from that given to them by the opposition.

The online discussion in response to Janssen’s article was a serious discussion critiquing the mainstream media and putting forward the criteria of what a media should do. The discussion is an important one as it sets out both the failings of the current mainstream media and the needed objectives for a more competent media.

Netizen Journalism Coverage of Houla Massacre

Along with the account of what happened in the al Houla region, were articles proposing a broader perspective. This included historical background describing where the U.S. and NATO utilized death squads in prior conflicts. One article “Syria Under Attack by Globalist Death Squads,” by Bramdon Turbeville presents background on how certain U.S. officials including Robert S. Ford, the former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, and John Negroponte who was U.S. Ambassador to Honduras in 1981-1985 and later in Iraq, supported death squads first in Nicaragua (known as the “Salvador Option”) and later in Iraq.⁴⁴ Turbeville’s article and articles by others like the article titled, “The Salvadorian Option for Syria: US-NATO Sponsored Death Squads Integrate ‘Opposition Forces” by

Michel Chossudovsky, put the death squads functioning in Syria in this historical context.

Along with the articles I am describing that are available in English, there are also a wide range of similar articles online in French, German, and other languages. There are also online discussions and comments about the Syria conflict. A collection of articles, “The Houla Massacre: The Disinformation Campaign,” available at Global Research website, lists a number of the articles published on the media war over the Syrian conflict.⁴⁵ There are various forms of online discussions. One such discussion on an online forum was initiated with the post, “Houla Massacre, Syria: What If?” The discussion considered whether the Syrian government claims that it was not responsible for the massacre was or wasn’t a lie. Online sources referred to in discussions like this could be either mainstream media or alternative media sources. Through discussion, referring to various articles and details, netizens in this online forum concluded that armed insurgents were to blame, not the Syrian government.⁴⁶

The Media and Syrian Sovereignty

Since it is rare at the current time that the mainstream western media deviates from a hostility toward the Syrian government and a sympathy with the armed insurgents, it seems significant that in Germany one of the mainstream national newspapers, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* has printed a significant story documenting the role of the Free Syrian Army in the Houla massacre. The journalist, Rainer Hermann, speaks Arabic. He has been reporting from the Middle East for over 22 years and he did his thesis on modern Syrian social history. His article “Abermals Massaker in Syrien” appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on June 7.⁴⁷

His article had been welcomed by many netizens and was reprinted at various online news sites. Several online sites featured the article and offered an English translation of it. The story collaborated the report of the Russian journalists that the Free Syrian Army insurgents were behind the Houla massacre.

Similarly there was an anonymous criticism of Rainer’s article on the Houla massacre from opposition forces, and Rainer wrote a second article

“The Extermination” responding to the criticism.⁴⁸ His article appears to be in response to sources who are troubled over the attacks and discrimination that the armed insurgents have been introducing into the Syrian struggle, but it is perhaps also an indication that netizen journalism is having some effect in the current media war over Syria.

Similarly, there was a report by the British media criticism site, Media Lens on the low key recognition by a *BBC* journalist that it is not adequate to blame the Houla massacre on Syria’s President Assad, as several of the media was doing, without more knowledge of what actually happened, and with an approach which includes more shades of gray rather than just treating it as a stark black or white issue.

Netizen Journalism and the UN

After the Houla massacre, the Syrian conflict, some say, appeared to be at a turning point. Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had an article arguing that there are lessons that have been learnt from what happened with Libya and that the UN has to take into account these lessons. In his op-ed, “Oh the Rights Side of History,” Lavrov writes:⁴⁹

When deciding to support UN Security Council Resolution 1970 and making no objection to Resolution 1973 on Libya, we believed that these decisions would help limit the excessive use of force and pave the way for a political settlement. Unfortunately, the actions undertaken by NATO countries under these resolutions led to their grave violation and support for one of the parties to the civil war, with the goal of ousting the existing regime – damaging in the process the authority of the Security Council

It is clear that after what had happened in Libya it was impossible to go along with the UN Security Council taking decisions that would not be adequately explicit and would allow those responsible for their implementation to act at their own discretion. Any mandate given on behalf of the entire international community should be as clear and precise as possible in order to avoid ambiguity. It is therefore important to understand what is really happening in Syria and how to help that

country to pass through this painful stage of its history.

Along with such comments from diplomats, netizens covered and discussed what the UN was doing about the Syrian conflict. A summary by Moon of Alabama of the General Assembly meeting discussing the Houla Massacre described how the UN Secretary General, the Secretary General of the League of Arab States and other officials, along with many of the representatives of the nations at the UN, blamed the massacre on the Syrian government, even though there were few facts available as to what had happened and who was behind the events.⁵⁰ Though rarely mentioned in the mainstream media, there were comments by the ambassadors of several member states including the Syrian Ambassador and the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, those of Venezuela, of Nicaragua, and a few others calling for an investigation, into the details of the massacre, before making any rush to judgment.⁵¹

Conclusion: Channels of Communication for International Relations

In the Libyan and Syrian conflicts, the misrepresentations by the mainstream western media and Arab satellite media have seemed difficult to counter effectively. In the *Cheonan* situation, the misrepresentations were effectively countered both internally and on an international level. In his presentation to journalists at the press conference marking the start of China's presidency of the UN Security Council in March 2011, China's Ambassador to the UN, Li Baodong, recognized the impact of the international media on the work of the Security Council. He went so far as to refer to the international media as the "16th member of the Security Council."⁵² The *Cheonan* conflict is one where the international critique of the South Korean *Cheonan* report was an encouragement to at least some members of the Security Council, to act diplomatically to calm the conflict. Similarly, the North Korean Ambassador held a rare press conference and indicated that he found encouragement in the international support for the critique. Along with the many online articles by netizens critiquing the role of the South Korean government in the *Cheonan* conflict, progressive media in South Korea covered the activities of those challenging the *Cheonan* report and also reported on the Russian

investigation of the problem. There were also articles in the Chinese media and the Russian media that critiqued the South Korean efforts to blame the breakup of the ship on North Korea.

The actions of the Security Council in the Libya and the Syria conflicts show the serious nature of the problem Medvedev referred to in his talk in March.

Looking at the problem it is important to analyze the nature of the media manipulation and the means of responding to such distorted information.

In his book *The Nerves of Government* Karl W. Deutsch writes that: Men have long and often concerned themselves with the power of governments, much as some observers try to assess the muscle power of a horse or an athlete. Others have described the laws and institutions of states, much as anatomists describe the skeleton or organs of a body. This book concerns itself less with the bones or muscles of the body politic than with its nerves – its channels of communication and decision.⁵³

Deutsch goes on to explain that “it might be profitable to look upon government somewhat less as a problem of power and somewhat more as a problem of steering and communication.” He maintains that, “It is communication, that is, the ability to transmit messages and to react to them, that makes organizations” He proposes that this is true for the cells in the human body as it is for the “organizations of thinking human beings in social groups.”⁵⁴

The significance of this perspective is that distorted messages are the basis for distorted social organization. A social organization that can make an accurate assessment of the conditions on the ground in a conflict, is in a position to analyze what is needed for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

There are a number of scholarly articles studying the impact of the Internet on media and on communication among netizens. Some of the more interesting articles focus on the communication channels created, and the nature of not only the transmission of information, but also its reception.

Deutsch makes a distinction between power and information. He

writes that “Power, we might say, produces changes, information triggers them in a suitable receiver.”⁵⁵ It is not the amount of what is transmitted that is necessarily significant, but rather the nature of what it is, what the receiver is, and the effect of the information on the receiver. Deutsch gives the example of the relative weakness of the Nazi quisling government in Norway at the end of WWII, and the relative strength of the resistance because it had better channels of communication.⁵⁶

Joseph S. Nye in an article, “The Future of American Power,” argues that information is indeed important in the battle for the U.S. to try to maintain its power.⁵⁷ He writes that, “Conventional wisdom holds that the state with the largest army prevails, but in the information age, the state (or the nonstate actor) with the best story may sometime win.”⁵⁸ He advises, “It is time for a new narrative about the future of U.S. power.”⁵⁹ But for him whether or not the story helps to obtain the desired goal is important, not the truth or accuracy of the narrative.

At a program at the Japan Society in New York where Nye spoke about his book *The Future of Power*, he was asked a question about his view of U.S. actions in the NATO war against Libya. Nye responded that what President Barack Obama had done with respect to the NATO war against Libya was exactly right.⁶⁰ Obama had waited until he had the needed narrative to justify the military action against Libya. It was important, Nye explained, that the U.S. not be seen as once again attacking a Muslim country as had happened with Iraq. Instead the Arab League and the UN Security Council resolutions provided a narrative “of a legitimate enforcement of humanitarian responsibility to protect civilians.” This provided Obama with the ability to claim that the U.S. was taking “collective responsibility,” not that the U.S. was undertaking a military intervention.

The problem with Nye’s argument is that he is focusing on how the world perceives the action he is taking, not on the actual nature of the action itself.

But what happened in Libya was a military action to support an armed insurgency against the Libyan government. The NATO bombing of Libya was not for the protection of civilians, but for the protection of an armed insurrection against the government and people of Libya.

Similarly, when the UN Security Council passed UN Resolution 1973, many of the Ambassadors who spoke said the resolution was to protect peaceful protesters in Libya. A few days later the Russian Federation's President Vladimir Putin, who was then the Prime Minister of Russia, said that the "protection of civilians" was but a pretext by which to intervene in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation.⁶¹

Nye's contention that a convincing narrative can gain support for actions, fails to recognize the harm in lives lost and the devastation wrought that results from the use of "convincing narratives" to justify actions that are contrary to the obligations of the UN Charter and the pursuit of the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Also such duplicity sullies the image of the United Nations amongst peace loving people around the world.

I have briefly surveyed research in English about Chinese netizens and have found important scholarship developing in this field. Similarly, there is scholarship in journalism which explores the relationship of alternative journalism and citizenship. I want to propose that there is a need for research in the field of international relations and communication which explores the new forms of online media and discussion that are developing, often across geographic borders. Those who took up the struggle against the misinformation in the *Cheonan* case or against the media attacks on Libya and Syria are pioneering this relatively new form of alternative journalism, netizen journalism. Speaking about the potential for such a journalism Michael Hauben, whose pioneering research on the social impact of the Internet recognized the emergence of the netizens, writes:⁶²

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.

Hauben recognized that a new form of news was evolving 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 there was a symbiosis developing between the news, netizens and the Internet. These were evolving into an 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 website created in China in 2008.⁶³ The website was created in response to western media distortions of the Tibet demonstrations and riots and the website critiqued these distortions.

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*. Their work had an effect at the UN. In 2011, there was an online critique by netizens of the UN Security Council misrepresentation of the armed insurgency in Libya as peaceful demonstrators needing foreign military intervention for protection. The UN can only benefit from such input. It is still too soon to know whether netizens will be able to have a significant impact on the UN in its handling of the crisis in Syria, but those defending Syrian sovereignty have received support and encouragement from the increasing spread of netizen journalism.

The significance of this new form of journalism is that there are netizens who are dedicated to doing the research and analysis 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. If such a journalism can help to provide the UN with a more accurate understanding of the conflicts it is considering, it can help to make more likely the peaceful resolution of these conflicts.

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There are over 450 such lists indicated in the UN records. As each list can contain several or a large number of documents the Security Council has received, the number of such documents is likely to be in the thousands.

Under Rule 39 of the Council procedures, the Security Council may invite any person it deems competent for the purpose to supply it with information on a given subject. Thus the two procedures in the Security Council’s provisional rules give it the basis to find assistance on issues it is considering from others outside the Council and to consider the

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“When deciding to support UN Security Council Resolution 1970 and making no objection to Resolution 1973 on Libya, we believed that these decisions would help limit the excessive use of force and pave the way for a political settlement. Unfortunately, the actions undertaken by NATO countries under these resolutions led to their grave violation and support for one of the parties to the civil war, with the goal of ousting the existing regime – damaging in the process the authority of the Security Council

It is clear that after what had happened in Libya it was impossible to go along with the

UN Security Council taking decisions that would not be adequately explicit and would allow those responsible for their implementation to act at their own discretion. Any mandate given on behalf of the entire international community should be as clear and precise as possible in order to avoid ambiguity. It is therefore important to understand what is really happening in Syria and how to help that country to pass through this painful stage of its history.”

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Considerations on the Significance of the Net and the Netizens*

by Ronda Hauben

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

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

With the introduction of the Internet, the question has been raised as to what its impact will be on society. One significant result of the impact already is the emergence of the netizen. Michael Hauben's work in the 1990s recognized the significant impact not only of the development of the

Internet but also of the role of the netizen in forging new social and political forms and processes.

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

These developments in South Korea come at a time when the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* celebrates the 20th anniversary since its publication in 1997, making a review of the significant contribution of the book particularly relevant to the events of our time.

Looking Back

Twenty years ago in May 1997, the print edition of *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* was published in English. Later that year, in October, a Japanese translation of the book was published. In 2017, we are celebrating the occasion of the 20th Anniversary of these publications.

In honor of this occasion I want to both look back and forward toward trying to assess the significance of the book and of Michael Hauben's discovery of the emergence of the netizen. I want to begin to consider what has happened in these 20 years toward trying to understand the nature of this advance and the developments the advance makes possible.

By the early 1990s, Hauben recognized that the Internet was a significant new development and that it would have an impact on our world. He was curious about what that impact would be and what could help it to be a beneficial impact. He had raised a series of questions about the online experience. He received responses to these questions from a number of people. Reading and analyzing the responses he explained:

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

The book was compiled from a series of articles written by Hauben and his co-author Ronda Hauben which were posted on the Net as they were written and which sometimes led to substantial comments and discussion.

The most important article in the book was Hauben's article, "The Net and Netizens: The Impact the Net Has on People's Lives." Hauben opened the article with the prophetic words, which appeared online first in 1993:

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

Hauben goes on to explain that what he is predicting is not yet the reality. In fact, many people around the world were just becoming connected to the Internet during the period in which these words were

written and posted on various different networks that existed at the time.

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

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

By the time the book was published in a print edition, it had been freely available online for three years. This was a period when the 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 funding around the world to a commercially driven entity. While there were people online at the time promoting the privatization and commercialization of the Internet, the concept of netizen was embraced by others, many of whom supported the public and collaborative nature of the Internet and who wanted this aspect to grow and flourish.

The article “The Net and Netizens” grew out of a research project that Hauben had done for a class at Columbia University in Computer Ethics. Hauben was interested in the impact of the Net and so he formulated several questions and sent them out online. This was a pioneering project at the time and the results he got back helped to establish the fact that already in 1993 the Net was having a profound impact on the lives of a number of people.

Hauben put together the results of his research in the article “The Net and Netizens” and posted it online. This helped the concept of netizen to spread and to be embraced around the world. The netizen, it is important to clarify, was not intended to describe every net user. Rather netizen was the conceptualization of those on the Net who took up to support the public and collaborative nature of the Net and to help it to grow and

flourish. Netizens at the time often had the hope that their efforts online would be helpful toward creating a better world.

Hauben described this experience in a speech he gave at a conference in Japan. Subsequently in 1997, his description became the preface to the *Netizens* book, Hauben explained:

In conducting research five years ago online to determine people's uses of the global computer communications network, I became aware that there was a new social institution, an electronic commons, developing. It was exciting to explore this new social institution. Others online shared this excitement. I discovered from those who wrote me that the people I was writing about were citizens of the Net or Netizens.²

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

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

For example, Hauben recognized that the collaborative contributions for a new media would far exceed what the old media had achieved. "As people continue to connect to Usenet and other discussion forums," he wrote, "the collective population will contribute back to the human community this new form of news."³

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

Mark Poster on the Implications of the Concept of Netizen

One interesting example is in a book on the impact of the Internet and globalization by Mark Poster, a media theorist. The book's title is

Information Please. The book was published in 2006. While Poster does not make any explicit reference to the book *Netizens* he finds the concept of the netizen that he has seen used online to be an important one. He offers some theoretical discussion on the use of the “netizen” concept.

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

“Human rights and citizenship,” he writes, “are tied together and reinforce each other in the battle against the ruling classes.”⁴ He proposes that “these rights are ensured by their inscription in constitutions that found governments and they persist in their association with those governments as the ground of political authority.”⁵

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

“The conditions of globalization and networked media,” he writes, “present a new register in which the human is recast and along with it the citizen.”⁶ “The deepening of globalization processes strips the citizen of power,” he writes. “As economic processes become globalized, the nation-state loses its ability to protect its population. The citizen thereby loses her ability to elect leaders who effectively pursue her interests.”⁷

In this situation, “the figure of the citizen is placed in a defensive position.”⁸ To succeed in the struggle against globalization he recognizes that there is a need to find instead of a defensive position, an offensive one.

Also he is interested in the media and its role in this new paradigm. “We need to examine the role of the media in globalizing practices that construct new subjects,” Poster writes. “We need especially to examine those media that cross national boundaries and to inquire if they form or may form the basis for a new set of political relations.”⁹

In this context, for the new media, “the important questions, rather, are these:” he proposes, “Can the new media promote the construction of new political forms not tied to historical, territorial powers? What are the characteristics of new media that promote new political relations and new political subjects? How can these be furthered or enhanced by political action?”¹⁰

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

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

Considering this background, the observations that Poster makes of how the concept of “netizen” is used online represents a recognition of the significant role for the netizen in the future development of the body politic. “The netizen,” Poster writes, “might be the formative figure in a new kind of political relation, one that shares allegiance to the nation with allegiance to the Net and to the planetary political spaces it inaugurates.”¹¹

This new phenomena, Poster concludes, “will likely change the relation of forces around the globe. In such an eventuality, the figure of the netizen might serve as a critical concept in the politics of democratization.”¹²

The Era of the Netizen

Poster characterizes the current times as the age of globalization. I want to offer a different view, the view that we are in an era demarcated by the creation of the Internet and the emergence of the netizen. Therefore,

a more accurate characterization of this period is as the “Era of the Netizen.”

The years since the publication of the book *Netizens* have been marked by many interesting developments that have been made possible by the growth and development of the Internet and the spread of netizens around the world. I will refer to a few examples to give a flavor of the kind of developments I am referring to.

An article by Vinay Kamat in the Reader’s Opinion section of the *Times of India* referred to something I had written. Quoting the article “The Rise of Netizen Democracy,” the *Times of India* article said, “Not only is the Internet a laboratory for democracy, but the scale of participation and contribution is unprecedented. Online discussion makes it possible for netizens to become active individuals and group actors in social and public affairs. The Internet makes it possible for netizens to speak out independently of institutions or officials.”¹³

Kamat points to the growing number of netizens in China and India and the large proportion of the population in South Korea who are connected to the Internet. “Will it evolve into a fifth estate?” Kamat asks, contrasting netizens’ discussion online with the power of the 4th estate, i.e. the mainstream media.

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

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

Looking for a Model

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

surface.

I realized that one cannot just take a model from the period before the Internet, from before the emergence of the netizen. It is instead necessary that models for a more democratic society or nation, in our times, be models that include netizen participation in the society. Both South Korea and China are places where the role not only of citizens but also of netizens is important in building more democratic structures for the society. South Korea appears to be the most advanced in grassroots efforts to create examples of netizen forms for a more participatory government decision making process.¹⁴ But China is also a place where there are significant developments because of the Internet and netizens.¹⁵

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

In looking for other models to learn from, however, I also realized that there is another relevant area of development. This is the actual process of building the Net, a prototype which is helpful to consider when seeking to understand the nature and particularity of the evolving new models for development and participation represented in the Era of the Netizen.¹⁶

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

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

Nerves of Government

In his article comparing the impact of the Net with the important impact the printing press had on society, Hauben wrote, “The Net has opened a channel for talking to the whole world to an even wider set of people than did printed books.”¹⁹ I want to focus a bit on the significance of this characteristic, on the notion that the Net has opened a communication channel available to a wide set of people.

In order to have a conceptual framework to understand the importance of this characteristic, I recommend the book by Karl Deutsch titled, *The Nerves of Government*. In the preface to this book, Deutsch writes:

This book suggests that it might be preferable to look upon government somewhat less as a problem of power and somewhat more as a problem of steering; and it tries to show that steering is decisively a matter of communication.²⁰

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

What is the difference?

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

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

Some of the important challenges of our times relate to the exposure of the distortions of the information being spread. For example, the mis-

representations by the mainstream media about what happened in Libya in 2011 or what has been happening in Syria since 2011.²¹ The creation and dissemination of channels of communication that make possible “the essential two-way flow of information” are essential for the functioning of an autonomous learning organization, which is the form Deutsch proposes for a well-functioning system.

To look at this phenomenon in a more practical way, I want to offer some considerations raised in a speech given to honor a Philippine librarian, a speech given by Zosio Lee. Lee refers to the kind of information that is transmitted as essential to the well being of a society. In considering the impact of netizens and the form of information that is being transmitted, Lee asks the question, “How do we detect if we are being manipulated or deceived?”²²

The importance of this question, he explains, is that, “We would not have survived for so long if all the information we needed to make valid judgments were all false or unreliable.” Also, he proposes that “information has to be processed and discussed for it to acquire full meaning and significance.”²³ “When information is free, available and truthful, we are better able to make appropriate judgments, including whether existing governments fulfill their mandate to govern for the benefit of the people,” Lee writes.²⁴

In his article “The Computer as a Democratizer,” Hauben similarly explores the need for accurate information about how government is functioning. He writes, “Without information being available to them, the people may elect candidates as bad as or worse than the incumbents. Therefore, there is a need to prevent government from censoring the information available to people.”²⁵

Hauben adds that, “The public needs accurate information as to how their representatives are fulfilling their role. Once these representatives have abused their power, the principles established by [Thomas Paine] and [James] Mill require that the public have the ability to replace the abusers.”²⁶

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

Conclusion

The candlelight revolution is still in process in South Korea. It is demonstrating in practice that we are in a period when the old forms of government are outmoded. The paper by Licklider and Taylor proposes that the computer is a splendid facilitator for cooperative modeling. It is such a process of cooperative modeling that offers the potential for creating not only new technical and institutional forms, but also new political forms. Such new political forms are more likely to provide for the democratic processes that are needed for the 21st century. Hence it is the efforts of citizens and netizens who are involved in collaborative modeling to create the more participatory forms and structures as is happening during the candlelight processes being explored in South Korea that provide for the development of a more equitable and democratic society.²⁸

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5. *IBID.*
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13. Kamat, V. (2011, December 16), “We are looking at the Fifth Estate,” Reader’s Opinion, *Times of India*, p. 2. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/ampnbspWe-are-looking-at-the-fifth-estate/articleshow/11133662.cms>, Retrieved on Jan. 10, 2017. The quote is taken from Hauben, R. “The Rise of Netizen Democracy: A Case Study of Netizens’ Impact on Democracy in South Korea,” <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/misc/korean-democracy.txt>, Retrieved on Jan. 10, 2017.
14. In South Korea there are many interesting examples of new organizational forms or

events created by netizens. For example, Nosamo combined the model of an online fan club and off-line gathering of supporters who worked to get Roh Moo-hyun elected as President in South Korea in 2002. Also, *OhmyNews*, an online newspaper, helped to make the election of Roh Moo-hyun possible. Science mailing lists and discussion networks contributed to by netizens helped to expose the fraudulent scientific work of a leading South Korean scientist. And in 2008 there were 106 days of candlelight demonstrations contributed to by people online and off to protest the South Korean government's adoption of a weakened set of regulations about the import of poorly inspected U.S. beef into South Korea. The debate on June 10-11, 2008 over the form the demonstration should take involved both online and off-line discussion and demonstrated the generative nature of serious communication. See for example, Hauben, R. "On Grassroots Journalism and Participatory Democracy." http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/other/netizens_draft.pdf, Retrieved on Jan. 10, 2017.

15. Some examples include the anti-cnn website that was set up to counter the inaccurate press reports in the western media about the riot in Tibet. The murder case of a Chinese waitress who killed a Communist Party official in self defense. The case of the Chongqing Nail House and the online discussion about the issues involved. See for example, Hauben, R. (2010, February 14). "China in the Era of the Netizen." https://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/02/14/china_in_the_era_of_the_netizen/.

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