

[Editor's Note: This article was written in February 2010.]

China in the Era of the Netizen*

by Ronda Hauben

I recently returned home from a trip to China. Back in New York City, I was left with the feeling that there is something significant happening in China. Some have referred to Beijing as the equivalent in the 21st century of the interesting environment that Prague symbolized for the 1990s. In the air in Beijing one senses that something new is emerging, something that must build on the old but will emerge with its new characteristics.

In Beijing, I had many interesting conversations trying to understand the significance of what is happening there. One was with a friend who is from China but who has lived outside of China for over 20 years. She was back visiting China for a special event and also planned to visit her parents who live in China, as she does every year.

Comparing current day Beijing with the Beijing she knew as a university student, she observed that Beijing has grown and developed in the Era of the Internet. Her observation helped me to realize that not only was Beijing being developed with the benefit of the Internet's contribution, but also that Beijing is a world class city developing in the Era of the Netizen.

In some notes I wrote as I left Beijing, I observed:

The insight of the trip was that Beijing is a city being developed in the Netizen Era.

It is perhaps one of the first world class cities substantially developed in the Netizen Era. So perhaps a special characteristic of Beijing has to do with the emergence of the netizen.

It was not clear to me what the significance was of this observation at the time.

When I returned home from my trip, I came across a publication about the importance of the netizens in China. The publication was the July 5, 2009 edition of the magazine *NewsChina*.¹ This is the English language version published each month of the Chinese weekly magazine *China Newsweek*. The subject of this particular issue was "The Netizens' Republic of China."

The magazine contains several articles and an editorial about the impact of netizens on the political sphere in China. The editorial was titled "The Netizens Public Square." One of the articles, "Netizens, the New Watchdogs,"² had an equally alluring subtitle which asked the question, "Has the era of 'Internet supervision' pitted Chinese netizens against the government in the promotion of democracy and political reform?"

The particular form of 'Internet supervision' the article was discussing was whether netizens empowered by the Internet could effectively monitor the actions of their government officials. Can the "era of 'Internet supervision,'" be "one in which netizens can compel visible transformation in the behavior of government bureaucrats," the article asks.

The question of whether or not netizens can affect the actions of their government officials is a question raised by netizens around the world from the early days of Internet development. How this question is being explored by netizens in China is an important development. Yet few around the world, especially those who do not read Mandarin, are aware that this question is being actively explored by netizens in China.

The issue of *NewsChina* devoted to netizens presents several examples of netizens speaking out online in Chinese discussion groups and forums. Their actions are having an impact on government decision-making processes and on uncovering fraud or corruption. A particular case

described in the magazine was the case of Deng Yujiao, a 21-year old waitress who was sexually assaulted by a government official. She tried to defend herself using a knife and in self defense killed her assailant. The magazine describes how her plight became a cause célèbre (famous) among netizens in China, who helped her to get a lawyer and to have the charge against her reduced so she did not have to serve any time in jail.

The magazine gives several other examples of cases of injustice that Chinese netizens championed so as to have justice prevail. Among these is the case of a young college graduate who moved to a different city to take a job, but who did not have the appropriate temporary residence permit. Picked up for his permit violation, he was placed in a detention center. He became a victim of foul play by residents of the center and security guards and was murdered, but the story was covered up by the police. Netizens began to discuss what had happened to him and the real story of his death began to be unraveled. His assailants were arrested and tried. Eventually the measures the young college graduate was detained under were abolished by the State Council.³

Similarly, Chinese netizens have challenged some of the many inaccurate reports about China in the mainstream western media. In 2008 some netizens started a web site that they called www.anti-cnn.com. On the web site they documented many distortions or misrepresentations that appear in the western media.⁴

These are just a few of the many examples of netizen action online that have had an important impact on what the government does. Discussing such netizen actions, Zhan Jiang, a Professor at the China Youth College for Political Science, maintains that “the public supervision [of government] via the Internet serves to promote public participation in political life.”⁵

My visit to Beijing in September 2009 was my third trip to China. The first had been in November 2005 when I was participating in a panel at an international history of science conference held in Beijing. The title of my talk for the conference was, “The International and Scientific Origins of the Internet and the Emergence of the Netizens.” The second trip was in April 2008 when I gave a talk at the Internet Society of China raising the question whether this is a new Age, the Age of the Netizen? One of the reasons for my trip one year later in September 2009 was to participate in a ‘Netizens Day’ the first such day anywhere in the world, which was to be observed on September 14, 2009. The importance of this date is that it marks the date listed on the first e-mail message (Sept. 14, 1987) that was to be sent from China onto the international e-mail network known as CSNET. The e-mail message and link were the result of collaborative research between German and Chinese computer science researchers.⁶

The netizens celebration on September 14, 2009 was held at the CCTV Tower in Beijing. There was a stage set up in front of the tower for the ceremony. I was invited to give one of the presentations for the program.⁷ My talk, which was presented in English and then translated into Chinese, explained the origin of the concept of the netizen through the research in 1992-3 of Michael Hauben who was a university student doing pioneering online studies about the social impact of the development of the Internet.⁸

I described how in the early 1990s, Hauben sent out a set of questions across the networks asking users about their experiences online. He was surprised to find that not only were many of those who responded to his questions interested in what the Net made possible for them, but also they were interested in spreading the Net and in exploring how it could make a better world possible. Based on his research Hauben wrote his article “The Net and the Netizens.”⁹

The netizen, Hauben recognized, was the emergence of a new form of citizen, who was using the power made possible by the Net for a public purpose, and who was not limited by geographical

boundaries. The Net for Hauben was a new social institution and the discovery of the emergence of the netizen was the special contribution that he made to the field of network study.

The celebration on September 14, 2009 in Beijing thus was an event not only to celebrate the research and technological advance making possible the connection of China to the international network CSNET. But it was similarly, and perhaps even more significantly, an event recognizing the emergence of the netizens in China and hence, of a new social identity.

The September 14 event was covered in the online media and other media.¹⁰ Being the first such Netizens Day, knowledge of the day was not yet widespread. Some net users commented that they weren't aware that there had been a Netizen Day. For me, however, the event on September 14, 2009 in Beijing was remarkable. In 1994, 15 years earlier, the first edition of the Netizens netbook with Hauben's article about netizens had been put online.¹¹ At the time there was much less access to the Internet and many fewer netizens. Nevertheless, the phenomenon first identified more than 15 years earlier had continued to develop and spread around the world. And in Beijing, in a city where much is new, and grand, and hopeful toward the future, there was a ceremony in front of the tallest of structures in Beijing, the CCTV Tower, recognizing the importance of the Internet and of the netizen.

This event in Beijing was the first Netizen Day, the first official recognition of the netizen anywhere in the world. It was a celebration to honor the fact that the phenomenon of the netizen continues to develop and spread and to be recognized as a new and important achievement of our times.

Notes

1. NewsChina, Vol. 12, July 5, 2009. The magazine website is: <http://www.newschinamag.com/>. See also, <https://www.facebook.com/NewsChinaMag/>. (Requires Facebook logon.)
2. Ibid, p. 17, Yu Xiaodong, "Netizens, the New Watchdogs,"
3. This is the case of Sun Zhigang. See "Selected Cases Exposed on the Internet," *NewsChina* July 5, 2009, p. 20. This and other examples are described in a paper by Jay Hauben, "China: Netizen Impact on Government Policy and Media Practice." <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/j-paper.doc>. (Also, in this issue.)
4. Ronda Hauben, "Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China: Ronda Hauben on the 'Anti-cnn' forum and Web site," *OhmyNews International*, May 8, 2008. Also, in <https://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn20-2.pdf>, p.7.
5. Quoted in Yu Xiaodong, "Netizens, the New Watchdogs," *NewsChina*, July 5, 2009, p. 17.
6. Jay Hauben, "The Story of China's First Email Link and How It Got Corrected." <https://www.informatik.kit.edu/downloads/HaubenJay-ChongqingSpeech-12Jan2010.pdf>.
7. See "Honoring the Netizen," talk presented on September 14, 2009. The URL is: http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2009/10/02/first_netizen_celebration_day_held_in_beijing_china/.
8. See, for example: Michael Hauben, "Preface: What is a Netizen" in *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, online version: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.xpr>.
9. Michael Hauben, "The Net and the Netizens" in *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, online version: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x01>.
10. On September 15, 2009 there was a program on the China Radio International (CRI) English language show "Beijing and Beyond" discussing the development of the netizen in China. The part of the program about netizens is hour one.
11. The book put online in 1994 is also now published in a print edition titled *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*. The co-authors are Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben. Originally published by the IEEE Computer Society, the book is now distributed by John Wiley. The print edition was published in 1997. The URL for the online edition is: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120>.

*This article appeared on the netizen blog on Feb 14, 2010 at http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2010/02/14/china_in_the_era_of_the_netizen/.