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Toward a Second Netizen Book (Part 4b)

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Forward

This issue of the *Amateur Computerist*, Vol. 34 No. 4b, is the fifth issue in a series, each containing articles that are the basis for possible chapters for a second netizen book. The articles in this issue continue to provide analysis and examples of an emerging new journalism, this time focusing on journalism at the UN and journalism exposing media fabrications in the context of the vision of the netizen role in the present and the future.

The first article “Doing Democracy,” celebrates the introduction of the concept of the netizen by Michael Hauben in 1993. In his essay, “The Net and Netizens,” he identified and described the important role of the online user in creating a new social institution, an electronic commons that had come to be known as the Net. On the net, the previously isolated individual could now communicate with and broadcast to others around

the world, sharing news and views from a grassroots perspective. This first article seeks a practical operational framework to explore the net and the netizen as a model for democracy.

The second article applies the predictions of “The Net and Netizen” to the ongoing struggle in South Korea for more democracy. Already in 2002-2003, netizens in South Korea were active in political struggles and had helped elect a progressive president. By 2008, online discussions and organizing led and supported more than 100 nights of candlelight demonstrations, protesting the next president’s conservative plans especially the importation of poorly inspected beef. Members of online cooking clubs, music societies, fashion clubs, sports fan clubs etc., brought their online communities offline to the candlelight political stage. Netizens brought their laptops and did texting, live broadcasting and held online/offline debates and discussions. The net and the netizens gave rise to new forms of democratic expression, creating an online and offline public square.

The next two articles look at netizen journalism at the UN and about global politics. They see an emerging alternative journalism in the era of the netizen. This journalism is not tied to the national interest of the dominant powers. It seeks instead to overcome the manipulation by those powers of public opinion characteristic of the international mainstream media. The net and netizens make possible a more serious attention to the importance of facilitating an accurate channel of communication. 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.

The final article, “China and Syria: Netizens Expose Media Fabrications and Distortions,” gives two case studies. One is that of the anti-CNN website, which took up to be a watchdog of international media coverage of China. In the process of exposing the distortions prevalent at the time of the Beijing Summer Olympics of 2008, the website developed an international discussion format so the world would better know the real China and Chinese people could better know the West. The widespread online netizen exposure of distortions and bias in major examples of the international mainstream media called into question for many Chinese people their positive expectation about Western media.

The other case study examined reporting about Syria in Spring 2011.

As in the case of anti-CNN, many net users realized that much of the so-called documentation of Syrian government crimes was suspicious. Using online search engines, original sources were found and posted to prove that many reports of supposed “crimes of the Syrian government” were distortions and fabrication. Often crimes were traced to the armed opposition itself. The article concludes that the vision of netizens becoming more and more a force in society continues to be relevant and powerful.

[Editor’s Note: The following article was written to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the first posting online in 1993 of “The Net and Netizens”. The article below is reprinted from its publication in German and English in the German online journal *Telepolis* on July 9, 2003. The English version is at: <https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Doing-Democracy-3430319.html>.]

Doing Democracy

Reflections on the 10 year Anniversary of the Publication of “The Net and Netizens”

by Ronda Hauben

This is a period marked by serious political dissatisfaction around the world. There is the promise of democratic societies, but the promise too often is far removed from the reality of people's lives. Yet there is the widespread yearning for a better world, for a society where democracy is practiced, not merely pretended. In this situation the question is raised: “What does democracy look like? How does it function? Are there any operational models to observe and learn from?”

Fortunately, there is a model to be examined, a practice to be investigated. Ten years ago, on July 6, 1993, a student, Michael Hauben,¹ posted a paper on the Net. The title of the paper was “Common Sense: The Net and Netizens.” The first sentences:

Welcome to the 21st Century. You are a Netizen (Net Citizen),

and you exist as a citizen of the world thanks to the global connectivity that the Net gives you. 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.

It was a long paper so it was posted in three separate parts: Preface,² Paper,³ Appendix.⁴

The paper introduced a concept, which has since spread around the world, both online and off (see also *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*).⁵ This concept can provide a practical operational framework to explore a model for democracy. Describing how he hoped to focus the paper, Michael Hauben wrote:

The Net and Netizens: A Revitalization of People Power, a Strengthening of People Power. Bottom Up is the Principle of this paper.

The interesting aspect of “The Net and Netizens” is that it identifies and describes the important role of the online user in creating the new social treasure that had come to be known as the Net. The net.citizen, or netizen, as Michael Hauben writes, was the active agent in creating something new, the democratic online content and form of the 1993 network of networks. The netizen contributed information and viewpoints that made it possible to consider an issue or problem and come to a reasoned judgment or decision. Netizens would help other netizens if they deemed it worthwhile.

The initiative that was being developed was from the netizens themselves. Examples included a mailing list by a person in Ireland summarizing the weekly news and sending it out to over 1000 people around the world who wanted to stay current with Irish news; Usenet newsgroups like misc.news.southasia and soc.culture.india which made it possible for people from an area to continue contact with what was happening; a mailing list to watch the prices of gas in California to warn against price gouging. There were many other examples that Michael Hauben provided which he had learned from his research online.

The key aspect, however, of this new form of democracy, was that

the previously disenfranchised reader could now broadcast to others around the world, news and views from a grassroots perspective. Previously, there had been central control of the mass media. Now the participant himself or herself, could provide information to the online world about an event or an area of knowledge. Netizens also had the ability to be citizen reporters, to offer a more wide ranging set of view points and perspectives on issues or problems, a broader basis from which to form one's own opinion, than hitherto had been possible.

Netizens could meet online, discuss issues and problems, and from the process decide on the goal or direction to pursue. Michael Hauben saw this process as a way of revitalizing society, as a way that those previously disenfranchised could gain power over both their society and over their personal lives.

In this operating model of democracy, there were no elections or representatives. Rather this embryo of democracy was focused on the active participation and contributions of the many in a manner not hitherto possible. Michael Hauben described some of the broad ranging ages and occupations of the more than 10 million computer users who, by 1993, were connected around the world. At the time the computer networking connections were made possible by gateways between different networks, like the scientific and educational Internet, the academic BITNET, the technical research Unix UUCP and Usenet network, the Cleveland Freenet for community people, and other networks.

While the netizen was an active contributor to the developing social treasure, Michael Hauben realized the need to make it possible for everyone to have access to this new communication paradigm to realize its potential. He writes:

This complete connection of the body of citizens of the world does not exist as of today, and it will definitely be a fight to make access to the Net open and available to all. However, in the future we might be seeing the possible expansion of what it means to be a social animal. Practically every single individual on the Net today is available to every other person on the Net International connection coexists on the same level with local connection. Also the computer networks allow a more advanced connection between the people who are

communicating.

Although the path was difficult, Michael Hauben also appreciated the importance of the goal. He writes:

Despite the problems, for people of the world, the Net provides a powerful way of peaceful assembly. Peaceful Assembly allows for people to take control over their lives, rather than control being in the hands of others. This power has to be honored and protected. Any medium or tool that helps people to hold or gain power is something special and has to be protected.

The focus of democracy, as described in “The Net and Netizens,” is on the people themselves, and on their ability and achievements in determining the nature and development of their society. It is on support for the ever increasing contributions of more of the populace in the process.

Notes:

1. <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/>.
2. http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/CS/Common_Sense1.txt.
3. http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/CS/Common_Sense2.txt.
4. http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/CS/Common_Sense3.txt.
5. <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/netbook/>.

[Editor’s Note: The following is a slightly revised version of a presentation made to a Social Movements class at Barnard College in New York City in Nov. 2017.]

Netizens and the Vision for the Future of the Net: A Special Moment and Netizens in Candlelight 2008

by Ronda Hauben

Part I – Context

First I want to offer a context for the origins and importance of “The Net and Netizens; the Impact of the Net Has on People’s Lives,” an article that became the basis for Chapter 1 of the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*. Then I will take a brief look at netizen activity in the 2008 Candlelight demonstrations in South Korea.

The article and the chapter are a collection of some of the experiences made possible by the Internet in what might be called the Dawn of the Internet’s development. The author of the article, Michael Hauben is also the co-author with me of the book. I will refer to this book as the Netizens book in this talk. The book was first put online Jan. 12, 1994 and then published in a print edition in May 1997.

In 1992-1993 Michael was an undergraduate student at Columbia University and at the time he was interested in studying communication and the potential impact of the Internet. In 1992, he enrolled in a course in ethics and computer science. The professor wanted students to do a project, which was not based on information from books.

The obvious possibility for Michael was to go online and try to gather material about a question he was deeply interested in, which was the impact that the Internet would have on society.

The Internet had been in the process of development for 20 years by this time. But it was only in 1992-1993 that it was becoming accessible to the public and connections were becoming available to people and institutions around the world.

So this was, one can say, a special moment when Michael was able to be online at Columbia University and able to do research for his class using the Internet.

There is another aspect of this moment that is important to recognize. The research process creating the Internet was in general a public process. Public funds were used and during this period it was available free to those with an educational purpose who had a means of connecting. Commercial entities, during this period were restricted in what they could do online. Michael’s use of the Internet fell within its education scope. In general those online did not pay time or access charges for the time they were

online. At the time, there were also commercial networks like Compuserve where one did pay time charges for being online. But also the U.S. government was claiming that in the next few years it would make the Internet commercial and turn it over to private corporations.

In planning his project, Michael formulated a few questions and sent them out online, via some different networks that were available and on mailing lists he had access to. In the appendix to the book version of Chapter I, there are copies of some of the questions Michael posted online for his research.

Fairly quickly, he received a number of substantial email responses to his questions. He gathered these, studied the content and then wrote the article he called “The Net and Netizens: the Impact the Net has on People’s Lives.”

Essentially what the “Net and Netizens” article does is document a number of ways that the people who wrote to him had found the Net to be a significant contribution to their lives.

As I remember this period, those of us who had gotten access to the Net were busy exploring what this access would make possible.

For example, an Irish expat living in the England was able to keep up with events in Ireland by reading a weekly newsletter sent out online by a man who worked for a computer company in Galway. A music fan in the U.S. was able to learn from the Internet about a Roger Waters concert held in Berlin one week after the Berlin Wall came down and so was able to go to Berlin in time for the concert. There were four computer science researchers in different parts of the U.S. who were able to write a research paper because of the connectivity the Net made possible. There was a poem written by two people using the Net together, which one of the authors described as “a surprisingly good poem.”

These are just a flavor of some of the different contributions to people’s lives that the Net made possible which people online shared with Michael via email or as comments on his posts.

There are two special aspects that he included in “The Net and Netizens.” First is the reference to the vision for the Internet that was put forward by JCR Licklider whom Michael calls a “prophet of the net.”

Licklider was a psychologist and computer scientist brought by the Department of Defense’s research entity known as ARPA to be the head

of its first “Information Processing Techniques Office” (IPTO). Essentially, Licklider recognized the important role that the computer could play in human communication. “When minds interact, new ideas emerge” was one of his understandings that helped to guide the research for the development of the Net. In a paper Licklider wrote with another researcher, Robert Taylor, in 1968, they recognized the creative role of the new forms of communication that the Net would help bring into being, and the collaborative activity that these new forms of communication made possible.

Another significant aspect of the “Net and Netizens” article is the introduction and explanation of the new identity of the Netizen that had emerged with the development of the Internet.

Remember, the article was written in 1992-1993. Yet it begins with a prediction for the future in the new century that at the time was just a few years away.

The article opens with the greeting:

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

It goes on to explain that the situation being described “is only a prediction of the future, but a large part of the necessary infrastructure currently exists....” And this new infrastructure would make possible some important developments. Among these Michael proposed was that “a new world of connections would be possible, from individual to individual or from individuals to the collective mass of those on the Net. The old model of distribution of information from a central network broadcasting company was being questioned and even challenged. The top-down model of information being distributed by a few for mass consumption was no longer the only news. Now the formerly excluded sections of society would have a means to have a voice.”

But for these developments to be realized, there would be the struggle to make access to the Net open and available to all.

When Michael posted his articles like “The Net and Netizens,” he

was greeted with encouragement. And the concept of netizen spread both around the Net and then offline. For example one of the netizens writing Michael was Philip Fleisser from Ottawa. He encouraged Michael to put together his articles in a book and to gather other articles as well which Phil tentatively titled “Readings on the Emergence of a Better World Due to the Participatory Nature of Public Computer Networks.”

As the concept of netizen spread, Michael recognized that two different uses of the concept were developing. In a talk he gave at a conference in Japan, he pointed out that one use of the concept was to refer to all users as netizens. But this was not the usage that he had in mind for the concept when he introduced it. For Michael the discovery of the emergence of the netizens was based on the recognition of the empowerment that the Net made possible and he identified netizens as those who used this empowerment to contribute to the net and the larger world it was part of. Michael reserved the use of the concept of Netizens to describe such users.

In May of 1997, the Netizen book was published in a print edition in the U.S. and in October 1997 it was published in a Japanese edition. Five years ago in 2002 in South Korea some of the significant potential of the netizens which Michael foresaw was demonstrated, with the candlelight demonstrations and the netizens electing the President.

Part II – South Korea and Netizens

Over the years there have been many examples of researchers referring to netizen developments in various parts of the world. Some of the most advanced examples of both the research and practice of netizens have been in South Korea.

There is a proud tradition of protest and sacrifice on the part of South Koreans to win the minimal democratic rights they have gained. Also South Korea is one of the most wired countries in the world where a larger percentage of its population, compared with many other countries, have access to high speed Internet connectivity.

My connection to South Korea began in February 2003 when I saw a headline on the front page of the *Financial Times* newspaper that the new President of South Korea had been elected by netizens. For me, of course, this was a surprising and important headline.

I began to try to learn what was happening in South Korea. I learned that many netizens in South Korea had backed Roh Moo-Hyun who was a candidate for the South Korean Presidency from outside the political mainstream. Roh Moo-Hyun won the election in the December 2002. That event and subsequent events I learned about led me to understand that already in 2003 netizens had become an important phenomenon in South Korea.

I learned, too, that the Korean word for netizen is 네티즌, the same as the English word, though spoken with a Korean pronunciation “netijeun.”

I was also encouraged to see that our book was known in South Korea, and that over the years, several commentators and scholars in South Korea have written about the importance of the concept of netizens.

Part III – 2008 Candlelight Demonstrations

By the 2007 South Korean presidential election, however, a law came into effect which penalized with fines or even jail time netizens who tried to post online about the election. And the posts were removed. That censorship contributed to the conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak being elected with the lowest percentage of the population voting in the election. Then in April 2008, the newly inaugurated president Lee Myung-bak met with the U.S. President George W Bush. On April 18 President Lee signed an agreement to end the former restrictions on the import of U.S. beef into South Korea.

The new beef import agreement provided that beef of any cut, any age and with bone in, could be imported into South Korea from the U.S. This was a striking departure from the previous beef agreements which since 2003 had required U.S. imports to meet requirements designed to protect the South Korean public against exposure to the human version of Mad Cow Disease.

On April 29, a South Korean TV station aired a documentary exposing the poor U.S. safety practices in inspecting U.S. beef for Mad Cow Disease. Following the program there was increased online discussion about the problem of importing U.S. beef given the minimal U.S. government inspection of this beef. In response to a lot of online discussion about the beef deal, a candlelight demonstration was called for May

2, 2008 by middle-school girls and high-school students using their cell phones and a fan website among other online sites. The efforts of some of the members of one online group called “Soul Dressers” helped organize toward the May 2 demonstration. Over 10,000 people are reported to have come to the demonstration. When that large turnout appeared at the demonstration, many were surprised and it was decided to continue the next day.¹

Then for more than 100 nights candlelight demonstrations were held in South Korea protesting the Lee Myung-bak actions and asking for regulations against the import of what much of the South Korean public deemed potentially unhealthy beef imports from the U.S.

These demonstrations were nonviolent evening vigils with candles. People of all ages and all walks of life took part, from students to families, to older people.

Though called to protest the U.S.-South Korean beef agreement, the underlying demand of the demonstrators was that the program of Lee and his conservative party not be allowed to take South Korea back to the days of autocratic rule. There was also a call for Lee Myung-bak’s impeachment.

People participated both online and in person at the demonstrations. Among the participants were “members of a cooking club, a classical music society, a fashion club, a U.S. major league baseball watching club,” and other similar groups on the Internet. “Some of them joined the protests with their flags, distributed snacks and water to fellow protesters and started fund-raising for paid advertisements in daily newspapers.” One researcher who described these various participants and their activities noted that such online clubs and groups had not previously engaged in politics. But remarks made by some in the group led others to join the online discussion and participate in trying to get a harmful government policy changed.

Part IV – Closing Observation

In “The Net and Netizens,” Michael writes, “The Net introduces the basic idea of democracy as the grassroots people power of the Netizens.” One report by the international TV channel France 24, agreeing with Michael, describes what happened:²

In South Korea a new form of democratic expression has emerged via the Internet. Its followers call themselves Netizens and when demonstrating against the government they carry their laptops to broadcast the event live

One researcher, Min Kyung Bae poses the problem as the contrast between “Analog Government, Digital Citizens.”³ He documents how the South Korean government continues to follow old, outmoded ways from pre-digital days, while the netizens, the digital citizens, are acting in line with the new capabilities and advances of the times. Min argues that, “The gap between Lee’s 1980’s style analog government and the digital citizens of 2008 is huge.” He gives as one example that the “Lee administration was more interested in knowing who paid for the candles than in understanding why people were holding them.” Min explains that when Lee Myung-bak closed off the Plaza to the public, the netizens took on to create an online public square and from that online commons to move the public back onto the offline public square.

Min ends his article with the call, “Analog politicians must realize that the Internet offers an opportunity for a breakthrough to improve Korea’s stagnant political culture. The candles lighting up Gwanghwamun Plaza are carrying the demand that representative democracy evolve into a new form suitable to the Internet age.”

Notes:

1. A 42 minute film, “Shall We Protest?” is online which documents how the 2008 candlelight demonstrations in South Korea were initiated by high school students. It can be viewed at: <http://www.engagemedia.org/Members/shallweprotest/videos/ShallWeProtest1.3en.ogv/>, (in Korean with English subtitles).
2. Nathalie Touret, “South Korean ‘Netizens’ Take to the Streets,” *France 24 International News*, June 18, 2008.
3. Kyung Bae Min, “Analog Government, Digital Citizens,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 3 No. 3; Sept. 2008, pp. 94-103. Online at: http://www.globalasia.org/v3no3/feature/analog-government-digital-citizens_kyung-bae-min.

[Editor’s Note: This is a slightly edited version of a talk presented at “The

International Conference on Soft Power” on September 8, 2009, at the Tsinghua International Center for Communication Studies, in Beijing, China.]

Netizen Journalism and the UN*

New Media and the Challenge of Reporting from the UN

by Ronda Hauben

I want to share some lessons that have been learned in the three years I have been reporting from the United Nations (UN) as a resident correspondent for the online South Korean newspaper, “OhmyNews International.”

This past December, I won the Silver Award for Excellence in Print and Online Journalism presented by the United Nations Correspondents’ Association in honor of Elizabeth Neuffer, a *Boston Globe* reporter who died while on assignment reporting from Iraq.

In the brief remarks I made accepting the award I referred to the importance of the judges presenting this award not only for me, but also for other reporters at the United Nations who are willing to write about the issues or viewpoints that are rarely covered by the mainstream western news media.

For example, one of the articles that was the basis for the award was an article about a meeting of the UN Security Council where there was discussion over whether or not to have a public debate about the issue of the Middle East.¹

The meeting took place on January 30, 2008. The South African Ambassador to the UN at that time was Dumisani Kumalo. Kumalo told the Security Council, “My delegation believes that silence on the situation in the Middle East is more dangerous than even meetings where there might be a raising of temperatures or heat.”

He was responding to a comment by the British Ambassador Sir John Sawers, who proposed that perhaps it was better not to have debates

in the Security Council on the Middle East since these issues brought up expressions of strong differences among the delegates.

These comments followed a week of discussion among delegates marked by different views on Israel's action closing the border crossings into Gaza. This was a year before the attack on Gaza by Israel in December 2008.

Some member nations of the UN claimed the closure of the border crossings into Gaza was an action contrary to the obligations of Israel as an occupying power in the Gaza Strip. Another member of the Security Council, notably the U.S., said that the issue was that Israel was under siege and it was not appropriate for the Security Council to condemn Israel's actions. Instead the U.S. wanted a statement to condemn the rocket attacks being fired into Israel as coming from "terrorists."

After a number of days of various efforts, it became evident that no agreement on the wording of a statement by the Security Council was possible. This led South Africa's Ambassador to remind the members of the Security Council that the United Nations "has a special responsibility in supporting a peaceful resolution in the conflict in the Middle East."

The Indonesian Ambassador to the UN, Marty Natalegawa, agreed with Kumalo, telling the Security Council that its silence on this issue "is indeed a deafening silence."

This example of reporting about UN Security Council issues helps to highlight a situation that American journalism professors and media critics have recognized as a problem with the mainstream media in the U.S. These media scholars explain that much of the U.S. media too often watches to see which side has the most power and represents only that singular view of an issue or phenomenon.

In reporting from the UN, what is interesting is that there is often a range of views from different nations on issues that are being discussed. But too often nations, as in closed meetings or consultations of the Security Council for example, do not make their views on issues available to journalists at the UN. Only when the full range of views is available to the press and the public, is it possible to have a meaningful public discussion to clarify what is in the public interest. The challenge for the media covering the UN is to report on the broad range of views among different nations on various issues, rather than on only the viewpoint of the

most powerful nation or nations.

There are a number of examples of issues where there have been different views expressed by different nations, but too often one view continues to dominate mainstream western media coverage. These issues include:

1. What is happening in Darfur.
2. Security Council action regarding North Korea.
3. Security Council action regarding Iran.
4. Security Council action on the listing and delisting of individuals or organizations related to Security Council Resolution 1267.

For example, on the issue of Darfur, the book, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur Politics and the War on Terror*, by Columbia University Professor Mahmood Mamdani, presents a different narrative of the problem in Darfur than that presented by much of the mainstream western media.² The book is based on a five year study of the current conditions and the factors leading up to the current situation.

Mamdani presents significant evidence that the changing weather patterns and environmental conditions in Darfur, along with the role Great Britain played as a colonial power, changed the conditions which formerly had made possible coexistence among the different strata of Darfurian society. This account has been discussed in blogs, in online reviews, and in Youtube videos, as well as in programs aired by the Iranian English language news on PressTV. Journalists familiar with Mamdani's book had the facts and analysis to determine that what is happening in Darfur is not a genocide but instead a civil war.

Another challenge to the mainstream media narrative is being presented with respect to the reporting about North Korea and the Six Party talks. Some scholars of Korean studies and some media sites on the Internet have presented the frustrations of North Korean negotiators, rather than focusing on the point of view of the American government, as in the reports by the mainstream western media.³

The book, *Meltdown* by the former CNN journalist Mike Chinoy, along with articles by U.S. researchers like Leon Sigal and Rob Carlin, also help to make the case that the position the U.S. government presents on the problem related to North Korean nuclear development is a problem that needs to be understood from the perspective of North Korea's need

for a means of defense to protect itself from hostile U.S. actions.

In analyzing the problem with the mainstream media in the U.S., W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, authors of the book *When the Press Fails*, explain that the “American mainstream news code favors those who wield the greatest power, even when what they say is subject to serious challenge.”⁴

A presentation of different perspectives on international issues is the basis for a better understanding of these issues, than is any single viewpoint. Just as American mainstream media coverage of U.S. related issues is harmed by the fact it is too often limited to one dominant viewpoint, similarly, for an understanding of complex international issues, it is important that various views be presented and debated publicly in the international media and at the UN, rather than only during closed door consultations. This is, I want to propose, a means to develop not only a more accurate understanding of the issue. It is also the basis for a form of journalism that presents a process of debate over the facts and analysis of an issue or phenomenon, rather than just the presentation and acceptance of one viewpoint or one conclusion.

The form of journalism that offers this broader perspective on issues, a journalism that provides for a debate on such issues, I call netizen journalism. Netizens and the new Internet media help to make this broader discussion of issues possible.⁵

Scholars like W. Lance Bennett and his colleagues point out the poor practices of the mainstream U.S. media. In order to be able to develop a form of international media that can present a broader point of view of issues, it is important to understand this critique and encourage the debate over different views. Similarly, when considering the issue of soft power, as has been discussed at this conference, it is important to critique practices used by other nations, rather just adopting what may be poor or deceptive practices. I propose that one goal for journalism is to foster better communication among nations and peoples. A media to facilitate such communication is needed everywhere. Communication between peoples and between nations is based on an equality between those involved in the act of communicating. Thus communication is different from exerting power in the process, whether it be soft power, in the terms advocated by Joseph Nye, or other forms of power.

As one former Tsinghua student, Lili Xiao, who did her master's degree paper studying netizen discussion of the Tibet riots of March 2008, recently wrote about the goal of netizens and so also, of netizen journalism: "Maybe in some ways we are part of the netizen family because we want communication to help connect people so there is a better world."

Notes:

1. Ronda Hauben, "Security Council Fails to Act on Gaza Crisis 'The silence is deafening,' says Indonesia's UN Ambassador," OhmyNews International, February 7, 2008. Online at: <https://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn17-2.pdf>, pp. 6-9.
 2. Ronda Hauben. "Untangling the False Narrative of a 'New Humanitarianism' for Darfur [Book Review] Mahmood Mamdani's 'Saviors and Survivors,'" OhmyNews International, March 31, 2009. Online at: https://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2009/03/30/the_historical_roots_and_reality_of_the_darfur_conflict_book_review_of_saviors_and_survivors_by_mahmood_mamdani/
 3. Ronda Hauben, "U.S. Policy Toward North Korea Fails to Engage [Opinion] UN Security Council should be neutral in its dealings with North Korea," OhmyNews International, June 6, 2009. Online at: <https://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn28-1.pdf>, pp. 27-29.
 4. W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, p. 30.
 5. See for example: Ronda Hauben, "Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China," OhmyNews International, May 9, 2008. Online at: <https://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn20-2.pdf>, pp. 7-9.
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*A version of this article appeared at: http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2009/10/18/netizen_journalism_and_the_un/.

[Editor's Note: The following article is a version of a talk given in Beijing in July 2012 at the April Café and Salon.]

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

I. – Introduction

I am happy to be here today and to accept Rao Jin's invitation to make one of the first presentations at April Café and Salon.

The title of my talk is "The United Nations, China and Journalism in the Era of the Netizen".

As Jay mentioned in his talk today, this year, 2012 is the 15th anniversary of the publication of the English and the Japanese print editions of the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*.

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

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

My second trip to Beijing was in April 2008 when I was invited to give a talk at the Internet Society of China. In my talk I asked the question "Is this is a new Age, the Age of the Netizen?" Also during this trip I was invited to give a talk on "The Global Media and the Role of Netizens in Determining the News." This talk was for a journalism class at Tsinghua University. On the day the talk was scheduled, there was a meeting between students at Tsinghua University and several journalists from the International Federation of Journalists. The students at Tsinghua University were angry about the Western media coverage of China. They told the journalists their complaints. The journalists seemed surprised and found it difficult to respond. In the process I met students who were part of the anti-CNN web site that was created to challenge the falsifications about China that were then appearing in the Western press.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The magazine was filled with articles documenting the impact of the

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

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

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

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

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

II. – The Global Political Situation

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

Around the world there has been a recognition that the mainstream western media can play a harmful role for those trying to develop an

accurate understanding of the events of our times. This problem is often obvious in online comments and articles by netizens.

One such situation occurred in 2003 when the U.S. media promoted the false claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. used this false claim as the pretext to invade Iraq. But there were no such weapons in Iraq.

The question was raised among scholars in the U.S. about the poor quality of U.S. journalism. How would it be possible to prevent the U.S. media from making similar false claims in the future. One answer was to recognize that there is a serious problem with much of the mainstream U.S. media. Instead of the U.S. media presenting the debate of different viewpoints on an issue, or acting as a watchdog over the U.S. government, this media presents only the dominant viewpoint of those in power. In so doing the mainstream U.S. media helps to strengthen those in power even more.

Exploring a similar problem, Michael wrote an article titled, “The Effect of the Net on the Professional News Media.” He considered what the effect of both the netizen and the Internet would be on the future of the news and news media. He recognized that a new form of news was in its infancy.

Michael saw that this new form of news was evolving into a new paradigm which would include both the contributions of netizens and the capabilities of the Internet. Describing the frustration of many netizens with the traditional media that they had to rely on before the Internet, Michael 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 supplanting traditional forms of journalism.” What is this new form of news and what are its characteristics?

With the creation and the spread of the Internet, the emergence of a new form of citizenship, known as netizenship, has developed. Along with this new form of citizenship, a critical and vibrant form of online journalism is emerging. I call this journalism netizen journalism. I propose that this new journalism has at least two important aspects.

One is that it encourages serious research into the background, context and political significance of the conflicts of our times, conflicts like those in Libya or Syria. Another important aspect of this new form of

journalism is the application of this research to the writing of articles or to comments in online discussions on issues of public concern, and in response to both mainstream and alternative media articles. Often the comments by netizens on these issues include criticism of false claims like the claim that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Video news and oral interviews can also be examples of netizen journalism if they meet the above criteria.

At a conference held in Russia last March, Dmitry Medvedev, who is now the Prime Minister of the Russia Federation, presented a speech describing the need to recognize the problem of media manipulation of public opinion in the international arena.

Medvedev particularly referred to the Syrian situation.

“A very active media campaign unfolded with respect to Syria,” he explained. “I will not now discuss the nature of these events,” he said, “but what is clear is that this media campaign has little to do with the task of ending violence as rapidly as possible and facilitating the national dialogue that we all want to see.”

Medvedev proposed that such a media campaign against a country presents “the new security dimension.” Such a security danger needs to be recognized and exposed.

“Today we are witness to persistent attempts,” he explained, “to make mass manipulation of public opinion a tool in international relations.”

A somewhat different approach to the problem Medvedev has pointed out is offered by the political scientist Karl Deutsch.

In his book *Nerves of Government*, Deutsch explores problems of communication that develop in politics. He proposes that it is helpful to look at the problems that develop in government or in the governance of other political organizations as if such organizations are a nervous system consisting of channels of communication and feedback. Deutsch writes, “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, ... as the skeleton or organs of a body. This book,” Deutsch explains, “concerns itself less with the bones or muscles of the body politic than with its nerves – its channels of communication and decision.”

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 “organization of thinking human beings in social groups.”

Deutsch raises the question, “To what extent are failures in the steering (i.e. of the problems that develop) of an organization due to the absence of some crucial communication link not to the presence of some evil elements?”

While Deutsch is allowing for the situation where a problem in communication is responsible for a failure in the functioning of an organization, Medvedev is presenting the problem of media manipulation in international relations as a problem where the “security” danger must be recognized.

Considering Medvedev’s warning about the security danger presented by media manipulation, and Deutsch’s warning that a communication problem can lead to a breakdown in an organization, I want to look at some examples of United Nations Security Council experience and consider the significance of the problems in communication reflected in these examples.

The example I will focus most on, is that of the role of the UN in what is happening in Syria.

In my treatment of Syria, I want to focus on the Houla massacre as the situation to analyze in order to understand the media war at the UN over Syria.

The Houla massacre occurred in Syria on May 24, 2012.

This was but a few days before Kofi Annan, the joint Arab League-UN envoy, was planning a visit to Syria.

Immediately after the massacre there was a media campaign to blame the Syrian government for the deaths (there were over 100 deaths). A short time later, an alternative account was made available by a Russian online media group Anna News. This news team for an online site visited the area where the massacre occurred the following day. Their report appeared on a number of alternative news sites soon after the massacre.

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

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

If one were to read or hear mainstream western media accounts of the massacre, however, they mainly present what they claim is happening from the point of view of the armed opposition in Syria. The armed opposition presents an account of events which demonizes the Syrian government. There had been a number of instances when the accounts from the armed opposition have been shown to be false.

Along with the different set of information presented by the Syrian government, there is the information in the alternative media that I refer to as netizen journalism. Netizen journalism will challenge distortions and other problems in the news coverage provided by the mainstream western media. In the aftermath of the Houla massacre, a number of articles documenting the role of the armed insurgents in carrying out the Houla massacre appeared on alternative media sites.

I want to propose that this form of alternative media which I call netizen journalism, is setting up a communication channel different from that of the mainstream western media.

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

In April, the UN Security Council authorized a mission of 300 unarmed observers to monitor what is happening in Syria and to try to encourage a cease fire of the conflicting parties. This mission is called the UN Supervisory Mission in Syria or for short (UNSMIS). When the Houla massacre first occurred, UNSMIS went to investigate the massacre. The initial response of UNSMIS was that there were two views of what had occurred and who was responsible presented to them.

Then in response to a request from the UN Security Council that UNSMIS do an investigation, Major General Mood, the commander of UNSMIS said that a report had been prepared in June.

He submitted the report to Ban Ki Moon.

In his article “General Mood: ‘Two Versions’ of the Houla Massacre” posted by John Rosenthal, June 26, 2012, Rosenthal writes that “At the June 15 press conference General Mood went on to say that the mission had assembled a report about the massacre, including the details of witness interviews and that this report had been submitted to UN headquarters in New York. This raises an obvious question,” writes John Rosenthal, “Why has this report not been rendered public?”

Similarly, UN Security Council members report that they have not received the report.

When journalists asked the Secretary-General’s spokesperson what happened to Mood’s report and why it wasn’t given to the Security Council, they were told that it had been given to various members of the UN Secretariat. But as journalists at the UN asked, “Why not to the Security Council?”

One of the original purposes for the UNSMIS mission, according to Kofi Annan, was “to see what is going on” so as to be able to “change the dynamics.”¹

This past April, Annan said, “We continue to be hampered by the lack of verified information in assessing the situation We need eyes and ears on the ground. This will provide the incontrovertible basis the international community needs to act in an effective and unified manner, increasing the momentum for a cessation of violence to be implemented by all sides.”²

Yet when UNSMIS did create a report, it was withheld from the Security Council by the Secretary General of the UN.

At a press conference to mark the beginning of the Chinese Presidency of the Security Council for the month of June, China’s Ambassador Li Baodong, referring to the Houla massacre, said:

“Now we have different stories from different angles. Now we have the story from the Syrian government, and from the opposition parties, and from different sources.” Since the Security Council “has a team . . . on the ground,” he said referring to UNSMIS, “We want to see first-hand information from our own people” He hoped this would make it possible to put the different pieces of information together and to come “to our own conclusion with our own judgment.”³

This acknowledgment that there are different views of what had happened in the Houla massacre and that there is a need to get accurate information from an on the ground investigation is an important step for a member of the Security Council to make. This challenges the armed opposition claims that their account is the only account of what is happening in Syria.

In a recent paper I am working on titled, “The Role of Netizen Journalism in the Media War at the United Nations” I document some of the various forms netizen journalism has taken in the media war on Syria.

There are many articles and videos posted on a number of web sites challenging the mainstream media version of the events in Houla and explaining the facts that demonstrated that the massacre had been carried out by the armed insurgents and local criminals.

With these articles acting as a catalyst, the mainstream German newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* carried two articles condemning the armed insurgency for the Houla massacre. The titles of the articles translated into English were “Syrian Rebels Committed Houla Massacre” and “On the Houla Massacre: The Extermination.”

In the longer paper I am working on on the Media Warfare at the UN, I consider the strength or weaknesses of the netizen journalism coverage of two other examples and consider its impact on the Security Council action in these examples.

III. – Conclusion

The issue raised by this preliminary presentation concerns the need for serious attention to the importance of facilitating an accurate channel of communication with respect to the issues being considered by the Security Council. This will make it more difficult for the media manipulation that Medvedev identified as a serious security concern to succeed.

In the situation of the Syria conflict, the fact that General Mood’s report on the Houla massacre could be withheld from the Security Council for more than a month and that there is not yet any indication of when it will be given to the Security Council, represents a serious problem. This indicates that there is a problem with the communication channels at the UN with the integrity of these communication channels. This is an example of what happens when a communication channel can be blocked.

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

While Ambassador Li Baodong was then referring to the mainstream media, it is important to recognize that there is a new form of journalism emerging. This new journalism is being created by netizens, many of whom are dedicated to doing the research and analysis to expose the interests and actions that are too often hidden from 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.

Notes:

1. See “Kofi Annan tells UN We Need Eyes and Ears on the Ground,” April 26, 2012. Online at: https://blogs.taz.de/netizen_blog/2012/04/26/kofi-annan-briefing/.
2. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/un-s-annan-calls-syria-situati-on-bleak-1.1286096>.
3. A summary of Li Baodong’s press conference marking the Chinese Presidency of Security Council for the month of June 2012. June 4, 2012 can be seen at: https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/120604_SC.doc.htm.

[Editor’s Note: The year, 2012, marked the 15th Anniversary of the publication of the English and Japanese print editions of the book *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* by Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben. To help celebrate this anniversary Ronda and Jay Hauben participated in a salon on July 22 in Beijing which launched the April Café and Salon. What follows is one of the presentations.]

China and Syria: Netizens Expose Media

Fabrications and Distortions*

by Jay Hauben

My story is about netizen activity in China. But to be sure there is netizen active in virtually every society. I will add an epilogue about the Syrian crisis. Netizen activity takes many forms. Anti-CNN and my epilogue about Syria are examples of netizens as watchdogs over the mainstream and online media, but anti-CNN is also an example of the value of discussion forums.

Netizen as a vision of something new emerging and as a concept of scholarly interest was first analyzed in the research of Michael Hauben at Columbia University starting in 1992. Michael Hauben wrote that he became aware of “a new social institution, an electronic commons developing.”¹ He 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 found that there were people online who actively use and take up to defend public communication. They support open communication and oppose disruptive online behavior. He recognized this as a form of network citizenship.

At the time, a net user who defended the net was often referred to as a “net.citizen.” Hauben contracted net.citizen into “netizen” to express something new. It is an online, non-geographically based, social identity and net citizenship. He wrote, “My research demonstrated that there were people active as members of the network, which the words net citizen did not precisely represent The word citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership. The word Netizen reflects the new non-geographically based social membership”²

The online self-identity and practice of netizenship spread around the world. Two uses of the word netizen emerged. It is necessary to distinguish between all net users and those users who participate constructively concerning social and political issues in forums and chat rooms or on their blogs and microblogs. This second category of net users comes online for public rather than simply for personal and entertainment purposes. They

act as citizens of the net and are the users I feel deserve the name netizen.

To be clear, not all net users are netizens. In 1995 Michael Hauben wrote:

Netizens are not just anyone who comes online. Netizens are especially not people who come online for individual gain or profit. They are not people who come to the Net thinking it is a service. Rather they are people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone's part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource. Netizens are people who decide to devote time and effort into making the Net, this new part of our world, a better place.³

My usage is that of Michael and 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."⁴ I add, also, 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.

With this concept of netizen, I want to argue that anti-CNN was a netizen activity and prototype of the watchdog function that netizens are beginning to play in China and around the world.

On March 14, 2008, Tibetan demonstrators in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China, turned violent. A Canadian tourist and the one or two foreign journalists who witnessed the situation put online photos, videos and descriptions documenting the ethnically targeted violence of the rioters against citizens and property.⁵

That was even before the Chinese media started to report it. The Chinese media framed the story as violence against Han Chinese 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.

Wide anger was expressed by many Chinese aboard when they discovered that some of the media in the U.S., Germany, France, and the U.K., were using photos and videos from clashes between police and

pro-Tibetan independence protestors not in China but in Nepal and India to support that media's claim of violence by Chinese police. One poster wrote:

Xizang terrorists raided Lasha (Lhasa), they killed more than 10 innocent people and destroyed others' properties. But western media called such a terror a 'peaceful' protest. Ridiculous, isn't it? Many western media simply say: People died in the protest. This implicitly tells their audience or readers that Chinese government killed protests.

Do they dare mention who died? who attacked whom? and who killed whom? Amazing, isn't it? Other than that, they distorted the facts by using pictures from violence in other countries and commented as what happened in China.

The poster followed his post with links to 15 examples of distortions.⁶

A digital slideshow was put online which contained a narrated presentation (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSQnK5FcKas&feature=related>)⁷ of 11 mislabeled photos inappropriate for the articles with which they appeared. It spread widely in cyberspace inside and outside of China.

The slideshow contains some of the photos that were put online to show the distortions and false narrative of many international mainstream media. Very crudely, the major media used photos from elsewhere to support their false story of Chinese police brutality in Lhasa in March 2008.

Within a few days of the appearance of the inaccurate reports, Rau Jin a recent Tsinghua University graduate launched the anti-CNN website. He explained that after being part of netizen anger and discussion, he wanted to "speak out our thoughts and let the westerners learn about the truth."⁸

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 western media 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.”⁹

Anti-CNN was chosen as the site name, Qi Hanting, 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.”¹⁰ But the site was not limited to countering errors in the reporting of CNN. It invited submissions that documented bias or misrepresentations of China in the global media.

Rau Jin quickly received from net users hundreds of offers of help to find examples of media distortions. He gathered a team of 40 volunteers to monitor the submissions for factualness and to limit emotional threads. Rau Jin and his group decided on some rules. Name-calling or attacks on individuals or groups were to be deleted. Emotional posts were not allowed to have follow-up comments.

Forum discussions were started on the topics: “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. At its maximum, the site received millions of daily hits. Over time, serious threads contained debates between Han Chinese and both Westerners and Tibetan Chinese and Uyghur Chinese trying to show each other who they were and where they differ or where they agree.

Many visitors from outside China posted on the anti-CNN English forum. Some expressed their criticism of Chinese government media censorship. In the responses to such criticism, some Chinese posters acknowledged such censorship but argued (1) it was easy to circumnavigate, (2) that all societies have their systems of bias or censorship and (3) 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 on 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.”¹¹

Often there are expressions of nationalist emotions in Chinese cyberspace, for example calls for boycotting Japanese or French products. After the riot in Lhasa, there was an upsurge of nationalist defense of China including on anti-CNN.

At least some moderators on anti-CNN however were 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.

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 dialog 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. On the other hand, there was a wide spread assumption among people in China that the mainstream international media like CNN and BBC are a more reliable source of information and alternative viewpoints.

The widespread online exposure of distortions and bias in major examples of the international mainstream media called into question for many Chinese people their positive expectation about Western media. The exposures 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.

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.

Today [2012], the April Media Group founded by Rau Jin is a continuation of anti-CNN. It has Chinese and English language websites both known as M4. Recently M4 had its comment section closed while the Chinese government decided how it would deal with a major political scandal.

For me the special significance of anti-CNN was that it took up the

important task of a media watchdog, but especially a watchdog over the most powerful media like CNN and BBC. In an article “The Computer as a Democratizer”¹² Michael Hauben argued for the crucial role in a society of a watchdog press.

In every society, major sectors of the media serve the current holders of power. Now, with the internet, there is an emerging media and journalism which tries to serve society by watching and criticizing the abuses of those with power. Anti-CNN provided for the whole world an alternative to the established 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. In the process there was discussion and debate on difficult social and political questions. They and those from China and around the world who take up the exposures and discussion and debate are examples for me of netizens.

I want to add a short epilogue to the story of anti-CNN. This is about Syria in 2011.

Some time in early March 2011, protest demonstrations in Dara’a in Southern Syria were given a violent component. On March 17 or 18, 2011 armed people attacked policemen in Dara’a, killing seven. Media reports said at least four other people were killed at that time.¹³ The Syrian state media framed the story as “armed gangs attacking security forces and public property.” Western and Gulf satellite media quickly framed the story that “the Syrian government is killing its own people.”

This time there was very early a massive use of videos and photos purporting to document the “crimes of the Syrian government,” not only in or on the Western and Gulf satellite media, but also on websites and Facebook and Youtube and with tweeted links.

As in the case of Tibet, many net users realized that much of this so called documentation was suspicious. Using online search engines, original sources were found and posted to prove that many supposed “crimes of the Syrian government” were distortions and fabrication. Often crimes were traced to the armed opposition itself.

I did a brief online search using a search engine and in microblogs and Facebook on the phrase ‘Syria Distortions’. I found net users and

groups in the U.S., Tunisia, Palestine, Syria and elsewhere who were able to show that many of the videos and photos were from many places other than Syria.

At blogs like *Tunisian Quest for Truth and Uprooted Palestinians*¹⁴ and on their related Facebook pages I found exposures of online media distortions that were very similar to those done at the beginning of anti-CNN.

These sites also turned up as links sent out as tweets and the photo exposures on these sites then also appeared on many websites. The photos were found to be from the Civil War in Lebanon, from gang murders in Mexico, from Israeli atrocities in Palestine, rebel crimes in Libya, but they were all labeled as Syrian government atrocities.

Some were found to be photos of mass demonstrations in support of the Syrian government doctored to claim these were in support of the armed uprising.

I found an ongoing online war between the fabricators and the exposers. The exposures often attract a set of comments supporting the effort to have an accurate narrative. But I have not yet found where the exposures have been turned into discussion forums as happened on anti-CNN.

In my short search I also found the website *Moon of Alabama*.¹⁵ On that site a detailed exposure appeared when the U.S. Government distributed satellite photos claiming to show military shelling of the city of Homs. *Moon of Alabama* looked at Google Maps and Google Earth satellite photos to demonstrate for example that some of the satellite photos were of a Syrian military training base not of shelling of the city of Homs.

Similarly the blogger argued that each of the claims by the U.S. government about these photos was false. The same blogger also viewed a video purported to be a one hour live video cast from the shelling of the city of Homs. The blogger wrote a script to guide viewers so that the level of fabrication was apparent.

In addition to the research bloggers who find and expose fabrications and distortions, there is a growing number of journalists, websites and news sources which provided an alternative account of the crisis in Syria and a critique of the Western and Gulf state media narrative about Syria.

Among these are the Center for Research on Globalization, Voltairenet, Syria360, Russia Today (RT), Prensa Latina from Cuba, to name a few.

A serious analytic, research journalism with a public purpose is emerging which attempts to give a solid base so net users can arrive at an accurate understanding of crises and situations like that in Syria. Ronda Hauben calls such journalism “netizen journalism.”

My conclusion is that the vision of netizens becoming more and more a force in society continues to be relevant and powerful. The net continues to empower people toward a greater participation in more and more aspects of their societies. As with the anti-CNN website and with the opening of an alternative channel of information, news and analysis in the Syria crisis, netizens are becoming a force not only in domestic politics but in international politics.

* This presentation was accompanied by slides which can be seen at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/beijing2012/j-china2012-april-cafe.ppt>.

Notes:

1. “Preface: What is a netizen” in *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet*, Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, IEEE Computer Society Press, Los Alamitos, CA, 1997, p. ix. Also, an earlier version is online at <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.txt>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. “From Active Audience to Media Citizenship: The Case of post-Mao China” in *Social Semiotics*, Vol 16 (2), June 2006, page 304. Online at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233195520_From_Active_Audience_to_Media_Citizenship_The_Case_of_Post-Mao_China.
5. See for example the blog entry by Kadfly, March 15, 2008 <http://kadfly.blogspot.com/2008/03/lhasa-burning.html> (access restricted), the report on March 15 by Al Jazeera <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfnBVKrzX6Y>, the video posted on YouTube by cali2882 on March 15, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZLzKBvvGMg>. There was also a reporter for *The Economist*, James Miles who was in Lhasa and described on March 20 the riots in a CNN interview as “ethnically-targeted violence” and the Chinese police response as gradual and cautious. See, <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/36371/PDF/1/play/>.
6. See for example post by FIA_cn, on the Militaryphotos.net website on March 23, 2008, “Who Lie about Xizang (Tibet) Violence and How!” at: <http://www.militaryphotos>

[.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-130727-p-6.html](http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn20-2.pdf).

7. "Riot in Tibet: True face of western media" posted by dionysos615 on YouTube on March 19, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSQnK5FcKas>.

8. Quoted in *China Daily*, April 2, 2008.

9. Quoted in "Chinese netizens' war against western media" April 3, 2008 by ruxincindy (Cindy Ru) online at: <http://jmsc.edublogs.org/2008/04/03/chinese-netizens-war-against-western-media/>.

10. Interview with anti-CNN webmaster Qi Hanting, April 19, 2008, translated from Chinese. See Ronda Hauben, "Netizens Defy Western Media Fictions of China." <http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn20-2.pdf>, pp.7-9.

11. The anti-CNN forum is no longer online.

12. Online at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~rh120/ch106.x18>.

13. See The Center for Research on Globalization, May 3 article at: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=24591>.

14. Tunisians Quest for Truth, <http://tunisianquestfortruth.wordpress.com/> and Uprooted Palestinians, <http://uprootedpalestinians.blogspot.com/>.

15. <https://www.moonofalabama.org/>.

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