

NETIZENS: On the History and Impact Of Usenet and the Internet

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The book aims at presenting the development and significance of the participatory global computer network evolving into "an ambitious look at the social aspects of computer networking. It examines the present and the turbulent future, and especially it explores the technical and social roots of the 'Net'". The readership aimed at, is comprised not only of those who are already Netizens but - maybe notably - of those who strive towards getting this status, within the perspective of passing from the latter condition to the former. So, before moving forward, let us see where such a gratifying title comes from - according to Michael Hauben: "*My research demonstrated that there were people active as members of the network, which the words net citizen do not precisely represent. The word citizen suggests a geographic or national definition of social membership. The word Netizen reflects the non-geographically based social membership. So I contracted net.citizen to Netizen.*" Anyhow, the book makes it evident that the word - as well as its denotation and ramifications - are here to stay.

The volume is divided into **four Parts**; each part comprises between three and six Chapters ordinarily consisting of articles written over a four-year period (1993-1996) and set up to be read individually.

The **first Part**, *The Present: What Has Been Created and How*, has **four Chapters** providing an introduction to the net world: the effect it has on people's lives (now, after the moment when the critical mass of people and interests has been reached), Usenet (its evolution and goal as "poorman's ARPANET"), the social forces behind its development, and the description of the Usenet (including the conceivable antithetical features of structure anarchy and the system of rules known as "Netiquette"), emphasising the advantages of this new world as well as the possibility of a "more democratic government".

The **second Part**, *The Past: Where Has It All Come From*, is the largest one, being composed

of six chapters, and starts with the "vision of interactive computing and the future" originated by Licklider and proceeds on describing the foundations of the cybernetic revolution, time sharing, man-computer symbiosis and their implications. **Chapter 7** looks "behind the Net", introducing "*the untold story of the ARPANET and computer science*" highlighting the new way of viewing the computer: a communication device rather than (only) an arithmetic one, whereas the next Chapter is a comprehensive narrative of the birth and development of the ARPANET. The last two Chapters bring into focus the early history and impact of Unix, and the roots of the "co-operative online culture", respectively. In one of its Appendices are listed two Newsgroups appearing in Usenet in 1982.

The **third Part**, *And the Future?*, comprises **five Chapters**. In **Chapter 11**, the National Telecommunications Information Administration virtual conference on the future of the Net (held in November 1994) is described as a very significant event, attempting to create a prototype for a democratic decision-making process. The next Chapter, with the inciting title "Imminent Death of the Net Predicted!" - a phrase often used in the past, by Usenet pioneers, when problems seemed insurmountable - explains the new problems ensued by the envisaged changes in the nature, ownership, and oversight of the Net, defending the principles that place its development into the hands of the public, educational, and scientific sectors of society (i.e. considering the privatisation harmful). **Chapter 13** investigates the effect of the Net on the professional news media, under the metaphor of "*Will this kill that?*"; its conclusion is rather optimistic: the user masses becoming "netizen reporters" will force the acknowledged news media - to avoid being increasingly marginalized - to evolve a new role, challenging the premise that authoritative professional reporters (almost always biased, consciously or not) are the only possible ones. **Chapter 14** scrutinises the effect of the Net upon the future of politics, forecasting the "*ascendancy of the Commons*"

by reason of the new technologies presenting "the chance to overcome the obstacles preventing the implementation of direct democracy". The last Chapter of this part departing from the changes on a world scale, explores the New York City's online community, showing a snapshot of "nyc.general", and concluding that, in spite of being problems online, the advantages are "more important and outweigh the disadvantages".

The **fourth Part**, *Contributions Toward Developing a Theoretical Framework*, consists of three Chapters. Two of them address characteristic areas: "The Expanding Commonwealth of Learning" and "'Arte': An Economic Perspective", respectively. As regards the first issue, "making a contribution is an integral part of Netizen behavior" and "both the printing revolution and the Net revolution have been a catalyst for increased intellectual activity". With respect to the second question, after accentuating the role of "Arte" in the production of social wealth, the authors defend Hume's observation that "arte" leads to intellectual ferment, and, in turn, this ferment "is the needed support for the development of technology". The last Chapter merges the consequences of the former ones into a whole, synthesising them in its title - perhaps the bannerol of the entire book: "The Computer as a Democratizer", one main idea being that the "step toward universally available and affordable access" and "uncensored accessible press" demonstrate that "it is now possible to meet more of Mill's requirements for democracy".

At the end, before the substantial and numerous references, the Glossary of Acronyms is, particularly for readers outside the American cultural milieu, an invaluable asset.

Maybe, this condensed passing through the content can give you an idea about this book, but it could be inconclusive, because the mesmerising force is originated by - or, better, in - the multitude of quotations from known, and mostly unknown, "co-authors", the conventional ones remaining in the background, as unpretentious editors, devoting themselves to the chore of taskbuilding. Consequently, "Netizens" becomes rather an aggregate of articles, than an orchestrated ensemble with its unbroken composition and, in turn, the articles become a kind of syncretic and chaotical, but very enthusiastic and, first of all,

very fertile opinion pool. Though, the whole might be seen in the optimistic view of the Net, as well as the cyberspace it embodies, as a "meritocratic" environment; the book suggests us a microsnapshot of such an ambience. The feeling - intended or not - is that the book has been written by Netizens for themselves, as an entreaty, a summons to all readers - whatever and where ever they are - to join them in the extraordinary world they live in. Thus, the book employs, at its much smaller scale, the "large-scale customization" made workable by the Internet it fights for. By the way, have you seen many books with Foreword, Preface and Introduction? Yes, the book is full of redundancy and heterogeneity - just like the Net, just like life itself (fortunately, some of the redundancies are quite pleasant, covering most crucial historical moments of the marvellous phenomenon they depict). Reading it, you will find a very rich authentication, a host of peoples with a lot of ideas, comments, proposals and - sometimes - displeasure, rising their voices; you will discover rather the atmosphere of a "multimodal chat" than that of a conference with invited papers. So, if you imagined that you could learn from this book about network programming, forget it. Yes, the Internet is in there, but as an actor - in all interpretations of this polysemantic word - not as a computerised tomography. Thus, paradoxically, the book is net-centred *because* it is human-centred, or, pure and simple, human.

If you read it again - it is in no way a chore - and all seems all right, nothing is amazing or frightening, then you are prepared for full Netizenship (of course, you need a computer, too!). Moreover, from the wording as well as from some rare photographs, you may scent the flavour of old battles (with legendary heroes like Wiener, Shannon, McCarthy, Licklider, Thompson, Ritchie ...), fought for forwarding not only the Net, but the Computer Science itself. Such a flavour acts in the age of Netizens as a catalyst for the Information Technology. Thus, the book can be seen - and used - as a kind of second-degree catalyst: the written catalyst for the living one...

Boldur Barbat