

Gabriele Hooffacker (Hg.)
Wer macht die Medien?

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Back to the Roots of Journalism

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Ronda Hauben, Gabriele Hooffacker and Jay Hauben

“Netizen journalism is getting back to the roots of journalism”

Ronda Hauben is co-author with Michael Hauben of the book “Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet” which was published in the 1990s and is one of the pioneering histories and studies of the social impact of the Internet. Currently, Ronda is a featured writer for OhmyNews International, the English language edition of the OhmyNews newspaper in South Korea. She covers the United Nations in New York. She also writes freelance for the German online magazine Telepolis, and has just begun a blog at the German newspaper, Tageszeitung. Jay is a netizen reporter for OhmyNews International and works in the Libraries at Columbia University.

Gabriele Hooffacker conducted the interview with Ronda Hauben and Jay Hauben in Berlin, 2007.

Would you say that netizen journalism is the same as grassroots journalism?

Ronda Hauben: They are not quite the same. Netizen journalism includes grassroots journalism, but the significance I understand is that a netizen has a social perspective and does something from that perspective. Some of the origin of the term netizen was when Michael Hauben, then a college student, did some research in 1992-1993. He sent out a number of questions on Usenet which was at the time and still is an online forum for discussion. Usenet was very active in the early 90s. He also sent his questions out on internet mailing lists.

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

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

You also said political participation?

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

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

Ronda Hauben: That is being a netizen.

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

Ronda Hauben: In the US for example there has been a lot of pressure supported by the US government for seeing the internet as a way to enrich yourself. But that is not what grew up with the internet community. The pressure for the internet to be for economic purposes was in opposition to the netizen developments in the US.

Jay Hauben: At one point it became clear that there was beginning to be the internet for economic purposes in contradiction to the original internet. That is when Ronda and Michael received a lot of help toward having appear a print edition of their book, *Netizens**. People said, we must defend the internet from

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

this new pressure, which is coming as an economic pressure. That was a great impetus and support for publishing the book.

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

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

You told me that there is a great blogger community without censorship and also political?

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

posite of the sense you get from the news media that talks about censorship all the time.

Jay Hauben: The chairwoman of the Internet Society of China (ISC) Madame Hu Qiheng spoke to me about this. She said that there are some very high Chinese government officials who have blogs and they invite anybody and everybody to post. They answer as many posts as they can and they are learning the importance of blogging. She feels that they will be supportive to the changes that are needed to make the internet even more extensive and more well spread in China. She was optimistic that at least some in the Chinese government were seeing the importance of the blogging activity and were learning how to be supportive of it in some way. She wanted that to be known to the world.

I'm not sure whether I understand. Do they hope if the people blog they will learn to use the internet?

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

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

Ronda Hauben: A question that I have is whether netizens can have some impact on what government does. Traditionally people like James Mill, writing in England in the 1800s argued that if a people do not have some oversight over government then

government can only be corrupt. That is why a society needs processes and ways that people can discuss what government is doing and watch government. I like to use the word 'watch dogging' government. A piece of my research is to see if there are ways that by having the internet and the ability to participate in the discussion of issues netizens can have an impact on what government is doing. I have found situations where there is an impact on government.

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

The blog China Matters was able to post some original documents from a case involving 'The Six-Party Talks Concerning the Korean Peninsula'. The six parties are North Korea, South Korea, the US, Russia, China and Japan. There was a breakthrough in the six-party talks in September of 2005 leading to a signed agreement toward denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. Immediately after the breakthrough, the US Treasury Department announced that it was freezing the assets of a bank called Banco Delta Asia in Macau, China. Macau is a former Portuguese colony now a part of China as a special administrative region. Banks in Macau are under the Chinese banking authority and supervision. The US government was determining what would happen with this bank in China. The Banco Delta China had accounts containing \$25 million of North Korean funds. In response to the US causing these funds to be frozen, North Korea left the six-party talks saying it would have nothing to do with the talks until this matter got resolved.

In late January and the beginning of February 2007 there were negotiations between a US government official and a North

Korean official in Berlin. An agreement was reached that there would be an activity to work out the Banco Delta Asia problem so that the negotiations could resume in the six-party talks. But often with negotiations with the US whenever there is an effort to try to straighten something out, the implementation is not done in a way that is appropriate. In this case what was offered was that North Korea could send someone to Macau to get the funds but it could not use the international banking system to transfer the funds which is the normal procedure.

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

On the China Matters blog, the blogger posted the response of the Banco Delta Asia bank owner to these activities. If you read the owner's response you would realize that the bank owner was never given any proof of any illegal activity that had gone on with regard to the funds in his bank, so there was no justification presented for having frozen the funds of his bank. The US Treasury Department under the US Patriot Act was able to be the accuser and then the judge and jury, to make the judgement and then have banks around the world go along.

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

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

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

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

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

So the way was from the netizens and the bloggers directly to the government and not via mainstream media?

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

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

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

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

Why do you think that OhmyNews is a good thing?

Ronda Hauben: The Korean edition of OhmyNews pioneered a concept which is very interesting. The founder of OhmyNews, Mr. Oh Yeon-Ho, had worked for an alternative monthly magazine, Mal, for almost 10 years. He saw that the mainstream media which is basically conservative would cover a story and it would be treated as news. On the other hand, he had uncovered for Mal a very important story about a cover-up of a massacre during the Korean War. His story, however, got very little coverage in the mainstream media and his coverage had no effect. About three years later, an American reporter covered the same story and got a Pulitzer Prize. Then the Korean mainstream media picked up the story and gave great coverage to it.

Mr Oh realized that it was not the importance of an issue that determined if it would be news, it was rather the importance given to the news organization that determined that. He decided that Korea needed to have a newspaper that could really challenge the conservative dominance of the news. So he set out with a small amount of money and a very small staff to try to influence how the press frames stories, how it determines what should be the stories that get covered. He also decided to wel-

come people to write as citizen reporters, to support the kinds of stories that were not being told in the other newspapers. He ended up welcoming in and opening up the newspaper so that a broader set of the Korean population could contribute articles to it and could help set what the issues were covered.

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

Jay Hauben: There were 28 articles in 10 days. The government first said that the incident was not significant and that it happened all the time. But as more and more articles were written and more and more people were commenting and more and more people were writing letters and more and more people were blaming the government, the government changed its tune and acknowledged that there was something seriously wrong here. The government eventually said it would put 10 billion won over a 5 year period to have a better medical system in the armed services. That was the result of this 10 days of constant articles. Everybody knew someone in the army that might get sick and they did not want that to happen. Every mother was upset. It was a major national phenomenon from these 28 stories in 10 days.

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

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

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

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

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

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

So netizen journalism is something political?

Jay Hauben: From our point of view, yes.

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

Ronda Hauben: The dean of the Columbia University School of Journalism in New York City wrote an article in the 'New Yorker' magazine where he complained about what he called 'citizen journalism' and referred to OhmyNews. He wrote that it was "journalism without journalists." When you carefully read his article, what it came down to, was that the business form of journalism - which is basically corporate-dominated in the US and which aims to make a lot of money - has very little regard for the nature and quality of the coverage that the newspapers are allowed to do. He was basically defending the business form of journalism in the name of defending the journalists.

He was not defending the journalists because he was not critiquing in any way what the journalists who work for these big corporations must do to keep their jobs and the crisis situation that journalism is in in the US because of it.

What was interesting is that he knew about OhmyNews and he is the dean of the Columbia Journalism School and yet he presented nothing about the important stories that OhmyNews

has covered. Instead he referred to one particular day and he listed three stories covered by three different journalists on this day and said this was just like the kind of journalism you would have in a church publication or in a club newsletter. It showed no effort on his part to understand or seriously consider what OhmyNews has made possible.

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

The dean of the Columbia Journalism School answered my email acknowledging that he had seen my answer and still he made the same argument that had been made prior rather than answering my critique of the argument.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The second point is one Ronda is raising in her current research. Not only is this new journalism getting back to the roots and the purpose of journalism but also it is doing something new and different. Is there something more than just being the real journalist taking over because mainstream journalism is failing? There is an intuition that the internet is

making possible a new journalism. Perhaps the Chinese are speaking to that when they ask, “Are we not being citizens and is it not journalism when we communicate with each other about the news as we see it and our understandings as we have them?”

Do you think that netizen journalism will affect the mainstream journalism or that the mainstream journalism will learn from it?

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

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

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

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

At least in South Korea, OhmyNews is already a mainstream media. Three years after it was created, OhmyNews was

reported to be one of the most important media in the whole society, judged to be among the top six most influential media in South Korea.

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

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

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

Ronda Hauben: It is an interesting challenge that is being put to us. There is a lot of support from governments and others towards making big money off of the internet. But meanwhile for example the US society is in deep trouble because of the ability of government to do things without listening to the people or considering what the people's desires are. In my opin-

ion netizen journalism holds out the hope and the promise that there can be a means for the citizens and the netizens to have more of a way of having what is done by government be something that is a benefit to the society instead of harmful. The form this will take is not clear. But one of the things that Michael wrote in 1992–1993 was that the net bestows the power of the reporter on the netizens. He saw that that was already happening then. And we see Telepolis which last year celebrated its 10th anniversary and which unfortunately we did not get to talk about now but which has pioneered a form of online and netizen journalism that really is substantial and which has achieved some very important things. There is OhmyNews in South Korea and there are the Chinese bloggers and people posting to the forums. Even in the US some important news forums and blogs have developed.

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

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

I just looked at those few countries for a conference presentation I gave recently in Potsdam. I did not look at all the other places where things are developing. It turns out that online there is a very vibrant environment. Something is developing and that is a great challenge to people interested in this, to look at it seriously and try to see, firstly what is developing and secondly, is there a way to give it support and to figure out if there is way of beginning to have some conferences for people to get together and have serious papers about what is happen-

ing and some serious discussion towards the question, can we give each other help for example to start something like 'OhmyNews' or 'Telepolis' in America or similar things elsewhere. I feel that something will turn up. It is exciting that so much is in fact going on.