

# Internet Histories

## Between marginal and mainstream. Communities and ecosystems at stake

--Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	This editorial is presenting the three research articles of this special issue and the interview with Ronda Hauben. They are partly the result of the 4th RESAW conference, that brought together through the RESAW network, a community of researchers, web archivists and professionals, united around a common interest, namely web history and web archives.
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## Between marginal and mainstream. Communities and ecosystems at stake

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The three research articles in this special issue and the interview with Ronda Hauben are partly the result of the 4<sup>th</sup> RESAW conference, that brought together through the RESAW network<sup>1</sup> a community of researchers, web archivists and professionals, united around a common interest, namely web history and web archives. The 4<sup>th</sup> RESAW conference, organised on 17 and 18 June 2021 by the C<sup>2</sup>DH (Centre for contemporary and digital history) at the University of Luxembourg,<sup>2</sup> sought to examine the tension between marginal and mainstream in web history, and to go beyond this binary view. The aim was to study all the nuances, shifts in meaning, difficulties in defining and measuring audiences, as well as the evolution over the course of history of digital practices, content, producers, and communities, from the fringes and peripheries to the centre and the core of the Web. The RESAW conference was also an opportunity to launch the HIVI research project<sup>3</sup>, hosted at the C<sup>2</sup>DH, and the topics that were addressed at the conference were also related to virality, as reflected, for example, in Gustavo Gomez-Mejia's article on "buzz".<sup>4</sup> Studying online virality and historicising the Web actually raise a number of methodological questions concerning the producing and user communities, movements between web spaces and socio-digital networks and the challenges of measuring and searchability. These topics could benefit from the issues raised by other web history researchers, such as the question of comments and moderation in the article by Jonathan Paßmann, Anne Helmond and Robert Jansma, that of scaling up and popularising software in the article by Derren Wison and his colleagues, or the question of the vocabulary to qualify phenomena linked to developing digital cultures, thanks to the study of Gustavo Gomez-Mejia on the word "buzz" and its shift from the marketing sphere to the general public sphere, notably via the press.

The three articles are the result of this meeting in 2021, but also discussions with Ronda Hauben on that occasion, setting out her account on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (1997). The interview looks back at her trajectory and illustrates the posterity of this important publication, while placing it in a historical context. This account and vision (often premonitory) of an era and a relationship with a thriving digital world, have become a source for historians, after having been an object of information for the communities and the stakeholders involved in online exchanges in the 1990s, but also for journalists or theorists (i.e., the section, "The life of the book", in the introduction to the interview).

Although this section does not reflect all of the submissions and discussions that took place during the RESAW conference – given that some thirty submissions were presented at the event<sup>5</sup> – it does allow us to explore issues at the heart of current research, particularly those

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<sup>1</sup> With a view to promoting the establishing of a collaborative European research infrastructure for the study of archived web materials the RESAW community — A Research Infrastructure for the Study of Archived Web Materials — was established in late 2012 as a coordinated, self-organising, and self-financing network. <https://resaw.eu/about/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.resaw2021.net>

<sup>3</sup> HIVI is a project running from 2021 to 2024, which is supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (C20/SC/14758148). <https://hivi.uni.lu>

<sup>4</sup> "This French perspective also fits the broader scope of contributing to the understanding of the brighter and darker sides of a certain 'Internet imaginaire' (Flichy, 2008), since popular 'Buzz' representations intersect with emerging research projects about the 'history of online virality'" (Gustavo Gomez-Mejia's paper).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.resaw2021.net/programme/>

concerning communities (and their organisation, moderation, negotiations, etc.), discursive content, politics, which comes up in every paper (understood here in the broadest sense, whether in terms of governance, commons, agencies, etc.). The methodologies for tracing digital cultures of the past are also well mirrored, may it be through discourse analysis, code studies, the analysis of web archives and, in particular, blogs, the reconstruction of online comments, or even oral history.

## Communities

What the four papers in this special edition have in common is that the focus of their analysis is on the communities, either directly or more indirectly and subtly in the case of Gustavo Gomez-Mejia. There is specific reference to communities in Ronda Hauben's account, when she looks back at Usenet communities, which bridge several types of actors. As Avery Dame-Griff, Tristan Miller and Camille Paloque-Bergès point out in the introduction: "Through this interview, we remember early adopters, but also important theorists from the early days of online exchanges, activists and communities that are gradually being structured around digital uses and publications, both online and offline, such as the Amateur Computerist, which we will come back to". Communities are also referred to in the article by Jonathan Paßmann, Anne Helmond and Robert Jansma, but through the prism of Disqus' policy and its vision "to keep communities 'healthy' and to facilitate and semi-automate active and interventive forms of moderation". This is also reflected in Gustavo Gomez-Mejia's article as both articles make reference to toxicity and trolls. The article by Derren Wilson, Saeed-Ul Hassan, Naif Radi Aljohani, Anna Visvizi and Raheel Nawaz sheds light on other types of communities being formed, namely professional communities and communities of practice, by looking at the CSS Zen Garden and its "spontaneously established online community of web designers" from the early days, which grew as the number of voluntary contributions and popularity of the system increased.

## Discursive content

To understand these communities, their discussions and negotiations, it is striking to see the importance of the discursive (and often textual) dimension. The role of exchanges and discussions, but also of the spaces assigned to them, and the weight of words is clearly highlighted by Ronda Hauben when she reflects on the origin of the concept "Netizen", and its use by her son Michael following a questionnaire posted online:

"In 1992–1993 Michael sent out a series of questions online as he was interested in what would be the impact of the Net and how to contribute to it to have a constructive impact. [...] Imagine Michael's surprise when responses came via email from many people explaining how the Net was something important to them and some added that they wanted to help spread the Net broadly and widely.

Michael put together another set of questions and got additional feedback. He wrote an introduction to what would become a paper and posted it online. In it he introduced the phenomenon of the netizen, describing those who had written him."

The adoption of digital terms and their trajectory are analysed by Gustavo Gomez-Mejia through the words "buzz" and "troll". He "highlights the role of mediations which help turn once-marginal 'jargon' terms into popular digital keywords". Just as Michael and Ronda Hauben's publication is a boundary object here and mediates between the existing community and an emerging identity, so Gustavo Gomez-Mejia shows how "The emergence of the Internet

1 culture goes hand in hand with the arrival of new words...”. The discursive construction of  
2 technology is approached at another scale in the article by Jonathan Paßmann, Anne Helmond  
3 et Robert Jansma: “Disqus, a central producer of online commenting software, has changed its  
4 language about its technology. The self-presentation of a software company has strategic  
5 motives and provides insights into the discursive construction of a technology and its practices.  
6 Thus, rather than analysing the writing of comments, their moderation, or maintenance of  
7 commenting technologies, we study the evolution of discursivation of those technologies and  
8 practices from the perspective of their producer”. Just as the discursive study allows Gustavo  
9 Gomez-Mejia to identify a polysemy of the terms “buzz” and “troll” and to propose a typology  
10 and chronology (for example, from paleo-buzz to neo-buzz), the authors of “From healthy  
11 communities to toxic debates: Disqus’ changing ideas about comment moderation”  
12 highlight: “it was necessary to better understand the evolving context of the semantics of  
13 moderation, as the term invoked many different meanings”. Whether in *Netizens*, the French  
14 press or in the case of Disqus, there are also many metaphors. Lastly, as highlighted by Derren  
15 Wilson et al., “The Zen Garden started out as a rhetorical device, a grassroots project, to  
16 encourage designers to use CSS to create web design, and it returned as a rhetorical device to  
17 encourage them to use CSS to create responsive web design”. Behind these rhetorical and  
18 discursive choices also lie political aspects.  
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## 22 **Politics**

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25 “What was the Amateur Computerist, home to many of your writings, and how and to whom  
26 was it distributed? The Amateur Computerist started as a continuation of the struggle to get the  
27 computer programming classes back that were cut out at Ford. Some of the Ford workers who  
28 had been active in the struggle at Ford, and Michael and I, decided to start a newsletter to keep  
29 the fight alive and to continue computer education through the articles in the newsletter. The  
30 first proposed name for the newsletter was the ‘Beginning Computerist’ but Michael objected  
31 to that name and instead proposed the Amateur Computerist. One of the United Auto Workers  
32 labor pioneers who we had met in another context was willing to write for the newsletter and  
33 he was impressed with the name Amateur Computerist as for him this referred to someone who  
34 did computing for the love of it” (Ronda Hauben’s interview).  
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38 The Amateur Computerist is only a milestone in Michael and Ronda Hauben’s broader  
39 reflection on the democratic potential of “electronic commons”, as evidenced in the final section  
40 of *Netizens*, which “shifts focus to technology’s role within modern democracy (Part IV -  
41 “Contributions Towards Developing a Theoretical Framework”)”. “Throughout the book, the  
42 authors emphasise how these new global participatory networks allowed many more individuals  
43 access to the public sphere”, recall Avery Dame-Griff, Tristan Miller and Camille Paloque-  
44 Bergès.  
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48 Politics also comes under scrutiny, whether in the content of buzz (“The recurring mentions of  
49 Sarkozy’s 2008 ‘Casse-toi, pov’ con’ and of minister Hortefeux’s 2009 racist comment as  
50 examples of ‘buzz’ are emblematic of this type of Internet-fueled popular media events”) or in  
51 the analyses of “troll” presented by Gustavo Gomez-Mejia:  
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54 “On the other hand, looking back at ‘Trolls’ allowed us to retrace the word’s figurative  
55 trajectory from marginal forum sightings to platformised mainstream politics. As shape-  
56 shifting antagonistic figures, over the last decades ‘Trolls’ have been portrayed in French media  
57 outlets as anecdotal forum provocateurs, localised troublemakers, digital folklore icons and  
58 finally as ideological (or even criminal) ‘troll army’ agents. It could thus be argued that ‘Trolls’  
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ended up being perceived as ubiquitous entities as they were associated to diverse types of French news frames and Internet textualities: across forum threads, media comment sections or social media platforms, ‘Trolls’ were blended into a complex agenda, operating at the local, national or international scales of Internet related mainstream debates”.

There is also the impact of internal policies, embodied in discussions and negotiations between CSS developers, on functionality and usage. Derren Wilson, Saeed-Ul Hassan, Naif Radi Aljohani, Anna Visvizi and Raheel Nawaz also show that “The source code of the CSSZG has values and ethics encoded within it (Kennedy, 2012)”. Finally, in the case of Disqus and its moderation policy, educational values, but also a certain form of control, are highlighted, while the authors also underline the use of popularity metrics which “were also claimed to serve other purposes than filtering conversations” and evolving strategies, “shifting moderation from the object to the person”.

## Methods and sources

What the articles in this special issue also have in common is their ability to follow with great skill and detail the evolution of their object of study. It is at the intersection between distant and close readings that a better understanding of Disqus and its evolution is formed, through the analysis of a vast corpus, where two types of content meet, namely the company’s website and blog between 2007 and 2021. As noted by Jonathan Paßmann, Anne Helmond and Robert Jansma: “Within media studies, analysing Internet companies’ (evolving) self-description is a well-known approach, community guidelines of Internet platforms have been examined for doing ‘important discursive work’ because they ‘articulate the ‘ethos’ of a site’ (Gillespie 2018, 47)”. The authors confirm the importance of this approach, which is also based on data triangulation and scalable reading procedures that take full advantage of the complementarity between the living and archived web. Similarly, Gustavo Gomez-Mejia bases his reflection on a vast corpus of French press releases taken from the Europresse database, which he combines with Web archives. Derren Wilson and his colleagues offer a variety of sources, from the book, *The Zen of CSS Design* (Shea & Holzschlag, 2005), which describes how some official submissions were designed and built, to the live GitHub repository, while also including blog archives or even archived versions of the CSSZG website, with varying numbers of submissions and different versions of the underlying HTML file. Their study is based on “critical code studies”, with computational tools (“a ‘modern’ open-source CSS analyser built by Project Wallace (CSS-Analyzer, 2017/2021) was employed for in-depth analysis of the official submissions’ CSS files. The analyser produces JSON output, which contains a wealth of data on the CSS file, including its use of selectors, its properties and its overall complexity”). This innovative and original approach in no way detracts from more traditional methods which have shown their richness and interest in Web history and the digital age as in many other fields, notably the use of oral history (Brügger & Goggin, 2022).

In this special issue, we put to you the question raised by Tristan Miller, Avery Dame-Griff and Camille Paloque-Bergès in their introduction to Ronda Hauben’s interview: “Alternatively, we wonder what role this research might play as a resource for future historians trying to understand the social and cultural impact of contemporary platforms”. We hope that this introduction and this special issue provide some answers, which we leave to readers to explore as they go along.

## References

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