Graduation Presentation

My graduation did not end at this year's University Commencement ceremonies. I did receive my Diploma on Wednesday, but my graduation was not completed until Friday. On Friday, I was interviewed about the Internet by a Japanese camera crew for a television documentary to be shown on TV Tokyo. In speaking with these people the result of my four years both here at Columbia and connected to the outside world was revealed.

During the interview I described Netizens and the world-wide community which the Internet and Usenet News make possible. Netizens are people who use the various computer communications networks and feel they are citizens of this net. People desire to communicate with others around the world. In order to communicate, to share information and to have a discussion, it is necessary to share a common space and to accept differences. People who connect to the Internet willingly help others and work collectively to have a place which allows their personal speech and which allows the speech of others. It is in this spirit of an open forum that we are holding this party today. The Internet and other communications networks are about people and are about people communicating with each other. It is this understanding and experience which I shared with the interviewers. The Internet is not about computers and isolated experiences, it is a very social human experience.

I entered Columbia asking the question "Why are people, so complacent in this country?" I asked this question on my application essay in 1990 considering that people in Eastern Europe and China were fighting their governments for a better life and a better world, while here at home little seemed to be happening to combat the worsening times.

In thinking about this question, I chose the joint Philosophy/Economics major as my prospective major. My introduction to the Columbia bureaucracy came about when upon visiting campus. I discovered this major had been turned upside down, and was now based in the Economics Department rather than the Philosophy Department and was renamed Economics and Philosophy. The emphasis was: similarly shifted from classical philosophy to contemporary economics.

In arriving at Columbia and setting up my computer account, I connected to the' world by using Usenet Newsgroups My unix account, hauben@columbia.edu, gave me access to Usenet Newsgroups which are public discussion forums that are circulated around the world. It was in discussions on these newsgroups that I developed my academic study. I was fascinated by the Internet and Usenet News and wanted to find out more about this network which connected people from around the world.

It was on the Internet and Usenet where I posed questions and conducted research into what other people found valuable about being on-line and how it was important in their lives.

In researching these questions during different history and literature classes, along with several independent studies, I became an active participant of the Usenet Newsgroups and mailing lists. I submitted questions and thought pieces to these forums, and people around the world responded

with their opinions and thoughts. I became interested in the Net itself, and I posed questions about it online. Many people online found they shared this interest, and they connected to me and contributed their understandings of the value of the Net to their lives. Many of these private electronic mail messages and public usenet responses were extremely thoughtful. I also raised questions about how it was possible for such a medium to develop where people were helpful to total strangers. In starting to research the history of the Internet and Usenet News, students and professors who were part of that history sent me personal accounts and supporting documentation.

My papers and research about the Internet and Usenet have been guided and helped by many real people around the world. When I finished my papers, I contributed back to the Net by making them publicly available and asking for comments and criticism. In addition to various responses of that sort, I also received much encouragement and support. People wrote thanking me for making my writings available. Also, I received various requests from professors and others to reprint and make my writings available to classes and other more public forums. This support was of course in addition to help and encouragement from my parents. All of this support came outside of Columbia. There were two professors in the Computer Science Department, namely Professor Unger and Professor Greenleaf, and Professor Garton from the Music Department who were helpful, but there was very little help from the University or computer science department as a whole. My connection to the outside world and online community is what has both made my research possible, and provided feedback that this research was important and valuable to others. I have mainly enjoyed the time I have spent at Columbia because of the feedback I received from other people saying they appreciated my effort, and that my writings have been useful for more than just a grade.

Identification of this value to society came slowly but surely. People sent various email messages, and this was helpful, but did not feel to be lasting. These past two years have been marked by various events which have helped to solidify my understanding of the value. The word Netizen started to appear both online and in print, papers I wrote were published in three journals. Ronda and I gave several presentations in New York City and Michigan from the book we put together. A radio station in California interviewed me last semester. And currently Ronda and I are negotiating with a publisher to publish our online book in a printed form. Lastly, professors from a Global Communications Institute in Japan have been communicating with me about my participating at a conference in Japan later this year. The Interview on Friday was the culminating event which identified that this work has been recognized as important.

After four years, I feel I have answered the question with which I entered Columbia. The Internet and Usenet News provides a place where people can communicate with other people at a grassroots level to make their lives better and to attempt to make the world a better place. By connecting to others with similar interests, questions and problems, along with people with different understandings, it is now possible to try and do something about the world, and to gain some power in how one lives his or her life.

All in all, while Columbia has been a difficult place to live for the last four **years,** it has been an honor to be able to contribute to the world some understanding of how to make a better future.