

# UC Berkeley I School Commencement Address

## May 16, 2009

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Good Afternoon -- First thanks to Anno for inviting me to speak --- To be honest, such honors can be a mixed blessing. How many of us actually have anything profound to relate, to say nothing about sharing life lessons. However, this year I have something I want to say -- profound or not -- and this is the group I want to say it to -- so thank you.

This is actually the second time I've given a commencement address. My first was two years ago at Stanford's Communication School graduation. I learned two things. One was that there is value in brevity. And second, that the ratio of football team members to communication school graduates at Stanford is extraordinarily high.

That was a joke. I should be allowed.

I spent four years as a lecturer in the Berkeley Journalism School and I grew up in Palo Alto sitting in the Junior Rooter section when the football team was referred as the Stanford Indians.

As I indicated, I will be brief. I don't intend to tell you to stay hungry. Or stay foolish. Or to go make a damn difference. You came here. You already know that.

Instead I want to talk about the fate of the newspaper industry and suggest that -- if it sadly is too late to save newspapers -- just maybe -- you -- the people who will design the information systems we will all use in the future-- are the ones who will be instrumental in saving journalism.

There is little question that our society has already decided that it can live without newspapers.

Barely a week goes by without a newspaper failing. And although neither the automobile nor the banking industry is mentioned in our constitution as being essential to a democracy, there is nothing to indicate that we as a nation will actually spend money to preserve the press.

However up until now the argument has largely been about the production rather than the consumption of news.

Let me boil the debate that I am hearing almost everywhere down to two questions: One -- can bloggers and citizen journalists cover city hall as effectively as traditional reporters? And two -- In the future will there be money in selling news?

They are both great topics for conversation, but I believe they both miss the point.

There is a third question that I want to pose about the simple act of reading the news.

Let me set the stage by describing an incident that happened six years ago. I was being interviewed by Adam Clayton Powell the Third and casually suggested that blogging might in the end become the CB Radio of the 21st Century.

From that comment -- first -- I learned how easy it is to game Technorati -- the bloggers all went nuts and I jumped right to the top of its ranking system as a prime example of the clueless MSM <that's mainstream media> -- second -- I learned that when it comes to itself, the blogosphere lacks a sense of humor.

In addition to gently tweaking bloggers, what I was trying to do was make what I thought was an obvious point about the impact of Moore's Law, the consequential accelerating rate of change, and how it would affect both our inventions and our institutions.

Sadly, my point was missed.

Let me quote, in particular from Jeff Jarvis, a journalism professor who at the time I had not met. Here is what he wrote:

“Hey, fool, that's your audience talking there. You should want to listen to what they have to say. You are, after all, spending your living writing for them. If you were a reporter worth a damn, you'd care to know what the marketplace cares about. But, no, you're the mighty NYT guy. You don't need no stinking audience. You don't need ears. You only need a mouth.”

I have since met Mr. Jarvis and found him to be a genuinely nice guy. Obviously we have a basic disagreement over what makes a good reporter.

Whether you write for the Times or TechCrunch, reporting is about asking the right questions and being persistent. Nothing else. It's about turning over rocks and seeing what crawls out.

The best lesson I ever received about reporting was from a crusty Times veteran, Robert J. Cole. He once told me: “if you want to find something out you call some son-of-a-bitch, and if he won't tell you, you call the next son-of-a-bitch, and so on, until you find out”

What makes a good reporter not withstanding, with the rise of Twitter, I have to say I feel a certain sense of vindication.

My blogging friends are spending so much time tweeting that they scarcely have any time left to blog!

Just as the rise of blogging changed everything, so has Twitter.

And I have to add that what it conjures up for me first is George Orwell's Newspeak, the language that was distinguished by a vocabulary that actually shrank each year. Not to mention the research that shows the more frequently you are distracted, the lower your IQ.

Lest the Twitterati descend on me in the same manner as the Digerati once did, I want to make certain to point out that I am a fan.

I mean, how else could I stay up to the minute in knowing when Lance Armstrong drops his kids off at school or when Levi Leipheimer comments on the latest in bike racing equipment?

But the emergence of Twitter also serves to underscore my original point about the acceleration we are all in the thrall of. Andy Grove described it as "Internet time." Things change, and not at a constant -- but rather at an accelerating -- rate.

I'm certain that it will only be a matter of months or maybe days or minutes before Twitter is displaced by the next communications technology of the moment.

In an era that is defined by Moore's Law, new technologies are always carnivorous, and the center of gravity is always shifting.

Since we are in Berkeley, the home of the slow food movement I think that it is fitting that I'm here today to basically propose the concept of slow news.

So what the heck is "slow news?"

Reading newspapers is my idea of slow news, reading news on the web is anything but.

Whatever that intangible experience is, whether its visual bandwidth or something as simple as the sheer size of a newspaper page, it hasn't been replicated in a web browser or even on an iPhone.

Let me explain.

Some time ago when the first Kindle was introduced I conducted a small personal

experiment. I read the Sunday New York Times newspaper and then I read it again on the Kindle.

Same news, a very different experience.

What was different? When people tell me that they would be willing to pay to help save a post-paper-era New York Times, they almost always refer to the experience of the Sunday Times with a religious reverence that usually includes bagels and coffee.

I'm sure all of you who are over 40 know exactly what they mean.

Newspaper design has evolved over many centuries and today it represents a highly refined way to consume information. By contrast, news via computer seems to me to be the bastard child of the hierarchical file system.

True, it is efficient, but it is largely vertical, linear, and unpleasant. Comparing newspapers to online news sites is a little bit like comparing the ring tones on a cell phone to an orchestra. Yes they're both music.

Add Ted Nelson's hyperlink to today's web design and and I believe you are at the crux of why the Internet today provides such a powerful and yet simultaneously unsatisfying experience.

And that brings me to the dilemma facing the New York Times.

It can be summed up in a single, simple, metric.

Our print readers, on average, spend more than 30 minutes reading the paper each day. By contrast, our on-line readers spend, on average, roughly 30 minutes each month reading the New York Times.

This startling gap grows directly from the fact the Internet disaggregates everything it touches. In the process it has taken power from the editor and given it to the reader -- I might add, for good and for ill.

This chasm is so immense that it means we are deeply into Marshall McLuhan's territory.

The medium is very clearly the message.

If this was just about the quality of the experience, I think I would agree with our critics. "Long live the press, the press is dead." But I think that here as elsewhere there is no

free lunch. Why, for example, in an era when there is an explosion of news -- if not reporting -- has news literacy actually declined?

Let's assume that insuring that our citizens have a command of the news is in fact good for society. Is it possible that the way we are consuming information is in some fundamental way undermining that goal?

Without question such a notion is controversial. True or not, I believe the answer to our dilemma lies in returning to something of a balance of power between editor and reader. But how to get there?

That's where you come in.

Let me take you back to the newsroom of the San Francisco Examiner in the mid-1980s. We had someone called a wire editor. In the business department of my afternoon daily, the wire editor followed seven wires all day long, constantly alerting me to the stories on my beat. He read the wires so I didn't have to.

It was a great system. I had my own personal agent.

But the job itself was a terrible one.

I'm reminded of a cartoon that once appeared in ComputerWorld. It depicted some poor sod chained to an oar in the belly of a slave galley. Two guys are watching him and one turns to the other and says, "they call it a workstation."

I would submit to you that that is what today's Internet has done to us. It has turned us into a nation of wire editors. We have our RSS feeds, our Twitter feeds, our Facebook feeds, our Friend Feeds and our news feeds. Now we don't have to follow seven wires, we have to follow seven thousand, and soon seven million.

People have been promising me intelligent software agents since my days as a cub technology reporter in the late 1970s to deal with this. The sad fact is I still don't have one that is worth a damn.

I guess it's a hard problem. And maybe an agent isn't the answer.

Maybe it's about user interface design. Recently I've begun to see hopeful signs. Take a look at WonderWall, an intriguing Flash-based experiment in celebrity news. Not only is it a break from vertical web site design, but what caught my eye is that its engagement numbers - the measure of how many stories are consumed by each reader -- are off the charts.

The New York Times' own Times Reader -- relaunched this month -- is also worth considering as an example of an alternative design for reading the news online. I think it cries out to be mated with a 10-inch wirelessly-connected tablet that I can slip effortlessly in my backpack.

Of course that's simply a matter of waiting for Moore's Law to play out.

My suspicion is that we will reach this information promised land and possibly sooner than later. There will be a Macintosh moment when some smart designer -- maybe one of you -- finds the right chemistry to present news in radically different fashion. How long will it be before we look back fondly at web browsers as the moral equivalent of the Model T hand-crank?

Hopefully it will be a re-design that makes it possible to reflect on what we read -- genuinely slow news.

My fear is that what may not make it across the chasm are the news gathering organizations that support reporters who write about more than gadgets and gossip.

Once again that's where you come in. Paid subscriptions and drawing eyeballs to advertisers simply can't be the last word in underwriting a vibrant information economy.

It was Alan Kay who many years ago said that "the best way to predict the future is to invent it."

With a little luck, I will still be around to report on it when you do.

Thank you.