

Reflections of the Class of 1996

The Internet Comes of Age

By Pete Shannon

In the 21st Century, our lives are filled with the pleasure and convenience of modern communication: The animated e-card you received for Mother's Day; a tweet from J-Lo about Steven Tyler wearing a blouse to the set this morning – and being a bit envious; the webcast of David Brooks drawing connections between the French and Scottish Enlightenment in social anthropology; the viral U-Tube video of that poor Miss Teen USA contestant from South Carolina blaming a shortage of maps for our geographic knowledge deficit; a podcast from NPR about education reform in inner-city Oakland; the fantasy football disappointment of Tom Brady throwing only five touchdowns against the Browns; the trove of groceries delivered to your doorstep. Who deserves credit for all of these treasures? No, it's not Al Gore. It's the class of 1996 from Franklin & Marshall College, of course, for it was us, the college community of the early 1990's, who fully embraced the technical innovations surrounding the internet and propelled this platform to dominance as a communication vehicle.

The innovations on the internet in the early 90's were many: in November 1992 the information service Delphi opened the first public gateway to the internet; in 1993, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications developed the first browser for the world wide web, called Mosaic, functioning on multiple operating systems and introducing a graphical interface to the internet; in September of 1993 the U.S. Government proposed the creation of an "information superhighway" of interconnected computers and servers; in March of 1996 Microsoft transmitted the Academy Awards over the internet as a "webcast". By the time of our graduation, 17 percent of adults and nearly 10 percent of households in the U.S. had access to the internet. Our college campus during this time was composed of willing guinea pigs, consuming whatever technology was shoveled into the trough. And, amazingly, most of it worked and a lot of it greatly enhanced our collegiate experience. While in college, I have very fond memories of the wonders of the internet. There were web sites with all sorts of information, endless opportunities for investigation and contemplation, introducing a robust reference source for research papers. But, how, exactly, does one reference a web address in a bibliography? Hmmm . . . While studying abroad in Denmark in 1994, I discovered that I could write a letter to family on a computer, click an icon, and have it delivered to their computers in the United States in near real time. Email was born! And no postage fees! Although, the Danish postage stamps were pieces of art not received, so perhaps with every gain there is a loss.

Regardless, our legacy as technology catalysts was inextricably cemented during our four years as undergraduate students. Gosh darn it, we invented the internet! Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Larry Ellison, take note! Or, at least smile the next time you logon to Facebook and remember your fellow Fummer alums who got you there.