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## Hillsdale College

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#### Education in the Internet Age

##### Sky Dayton

Sky Dayton, the founder and chairman of EarthLink and the founder and CEO of Boingo Wireless, was introduced to computers in 1980, when he was nine years old, by his grandfather, an IBM Fellow. He graduated from the Delphian School, a private boarding high school, in 1988 and decided to forgo college to pursue his interests in technology. After two years managing the computer graphics departments of two advertising firms, he co-founded the Café Mocha coffee house in West Hollywood, California. In 1992, while still managing the coffee house, he co-founded Dayton Walker Design, a computer graphics boutique catering to the entertainment industry. In 1994, he founded EarthLink, which is now the largest independent Internet service provider in the U.S., with five million customers, over \$1 billion in annual revenue and thousands of employees. He launched Boingo Wireless in December 2001. Mr. Dayton and his wife, Arwen, live in Los Angeles.



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*The following is abridged from a speech delivered at a Hillsdale College seminar in Rancho Mirage, California, on February 18, 2003.*

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#### Education in the Internet Age

I was first introduced to Hillsdale College and its speaker tradition in 1985, when I was 14 years old. I had recently enrolled at a private boarding school that occupied a converted Jesuit monastery atop a hill in the Oregon countryside. It was a fall day, and I was in the school library working on an assignment. After a while, I glanced around and noticed the library magazine rack nearby. Among the current periodicals, the school kept a stack of Imprimis issues. I picked one up and noticed the motto under the title: "Because ideas have consequences." This struck a chord with me. It was simple and powerful, and it fit with how I was raised. But I realized even then that the popular culture I had been exposed to as a teenager was lined up diametrically against this concept. An underpinning of the MTV generation, my generation, was that things like personal feelings ranked higher in importance than ideas, personal responsibility or morality.

"Because ideas have consequences" is perhaps especially resonant in the Internet Age, when one thought or idea can travel thousands of miles and touch millions of people in a second. So today I

want to talk about what the Internet means for our culture and the free exchange of ideas, and why, through my rough-and-tumble experience as an entrepreneur, I have come to believe that great education is now more important than ever.

### **The Internet and the Media**

In the past ten years, the Internet has become the most powerful communications medium ever invented, surpassing radio, television and the telephone in its potential for mass communication. In fact, recently, the amount of email and other data traffic flowing across the Internet has surpassed the amount of traffic generated by telephone calls. This is less than ten years after the invention of the commercial Internet.

The technology underlying the Internet is tremendously more efficient than any previous communications technology. Activities that used to be very costly are now nearly free. For example, you can now make phone calls over the Internet. A call from here to Africa that costs \$3 per minute using AT&T is nearly free using the Internet. This technology is relatively new, but with cost savings like that you can expect everyone to be using it in the coming years.

My generation takes the Internet for granted. It's woven into the fabric of our lives. On the eve of Valentine's Day this year, I was sitting on a plane in Seattle waiting to fly home when the pilot announced a delay in our departure. So I took out my laptop and connected to the airport's wireless Internet network. While checking my email, I started exchanging text instant messages with my wife back home. At the same time, I had a hand-held wireless Internet device with a camera attached to it. After breaking the news that I'd be home late, I took a picture of my face and sent it to her with a Valentine's Day message. Events like this are occurring millions of times a day. People are using the Internet in many different ways, but the common thread is that they're communicating more, with more people, faster, more easily and at a lower cost than ever before possible.

The Internet is also shifting the balance of power with regard to who controls the information we receive. Before the Internet, access to communications media was limited to the few entities capable of mustering the millions or billions of dollars necessary to purchase expensive printing presses and distribution systems or scarce broadcast spectrum. High costs served as a barrier to entry for anyone who wanted to promulgate their ideas over a broad area. Now, anyone with a computer and an Internet connection has the potential to reach anyone else in the world at almost no cost. I stress potential since – as I found in courting my wife – the fact that you have something to say doesn't mean others will listen. But the potential is truly there. You can put up a Web site that anyone in the world can see, and if it's interesting enough, the world will beat a path to your door. In contrast, the astronomical costs required to build an old media firm – a TV or radio station or a newspaper – mean that relatively few people control those channels of communication.

Naturally, those who control old media tend to favor their own viewpoints. The result is that a relatively small group, consisting of mere thousands of people, has been responsible for promulgating ideas and dictating culture to billions. This "media elite" is often out of touch with the rest of the world. As Pat Sajak pointed out in his speech at Hillsdale last year, there's a major disconnect between Hollywood and America. It's not that the people who run old media are bad people, but they live in a cloistered world.

The Internet changes two things about the media business: First, it's much less expensive to get into the business. This results in a significantly higher level of competition within the media, and in theory, a much better product. Second, unlike any mass medium before it, the Internet is two-way. The audience can talk back, instantly. When a newspaper runs a story tainted with bias, their email boxes overflow and Web sites spring up overnight to defend alternative viewpoints. The people who run old media have never before had to contend with immediate reaction on such a massive scale.

Even after the full effect of the Internet is felt, each of us will likely choose to get our news from a limited set of sources that serve as content filters and editors. Opinion leaders will have broad audiences and entertainers will entertain, but the underlying economics will no longer require mass media to be in the hands of a relative few. Competition and immediate feedback will lead to a higher standard of quality and force those who produce content to confront their audience, often for the first time.

Today I still read the online edition of the Wall Street Journal, but I also get my industry news and analysis each day from dozens of other sources on the Internet, a few of which are only staffed by one person. Billions of people connected to the Internet will each have the ability to reach every other human being on the planet. The result will be a much more efficient market for information. With the Internet, ideas have the potential to flow freely to where they are most desired and most useful.

### **The Internet and Civilization**

The Internet offers much more than simply changing the media. History shows that nearly every great advance in civilization was preceded by an advance in communications technology – from the earliest invention of language to the printing press to the telephone. In the Middle Ages, for instance, books were rare commodities. Monks and scholars spent lifetimes copying texts by hand. Because few could afford to own books, knowledge was available to only a small number of people. In the mid-1400s, Johannes Gutenberg developed the printing press. Suddenly, written works could be copied quickly, accurately and in great quantities. Books were cheaper and easier to come by, and, for the first time ever, the common man had firsthand access to knowledge. An ordinary person could read his own copy of the Bible, for example. Soon he would be able to read it in his own language – German, French or English – rather than in Latin. He could see for himself what the Scriptures said, and no longer had to accept without question an authority's view of his religion. As we know, this new, widespread access to knowledge led to the Reformation and great changes in Western culture. This pattern has been repeated throughout history. When it becomes easier to communicate, civilization advances.

Since September 11, 2001, I think most would agree it would be good to witness a further advance of civilization. And indeed, I believe the Internet has a vital role to play in reducing hatred around the world and the terrorism it promotes.

Obviously, one ingredient missing between people who are blindly prejudiced against one another is a free exchange of ideas and communication. Other things may be missing as well, such as the concept of religious freedom or even, as in the example of al-Qaeda, basic human decency. Evil exists, and must sometimes be dealt with using force. But even evil people require the support of others for their success. Although the vast majority of people have good intentions, such people can be misled. This is where freer communication offers promise. Consider how dictators like Saddam Hussein are so adamantly opposed to Western television and the Internet. They say they don't want their cultures "corrupted," but their real motive is keeping their populations in the dark.

The boom in Internet-enabled communication has already brought the world closer together. It's common these days for us to send emails to people around the globe. Through the Web, people of all nations interact with each other billions of times a day, and in the process, learn of each other's cultures, customs, religions, dreams and daily life. This creates aspects of common reality and affinity among people. It makes it harder for prejudiced people to support the murder of innocents when they have seen their faces and share a common reality – even if that reality is only a love of basketball or of the latest Britney Spears album. And again, I'm not talking about having a beneficial effect on lunatics, but rather on those who might fall under their spell. People come under the sway of tyrants when they lack adequate judgment and experience to see those tyrants for what they are – when they are so much in the dark that even lunatics seem to offer light.

More and less-fettered communication is always a force for good. The Internet promises to make geography – in the sense of distance between people – less relevant. This is vital in those places still isolated from the outside world today. Even though Internet access is often forbidden, it is cracking open places like China and the Middle East, exposing their peoples to the ideas and experiences of the rest of humanity. Over the long run, its influence cannot help but extend civilization and promote the conditions of peace.

### **Good Education and Bad**

As you can probably tell by now, I'm very passionate about communication. I also love to start companies. I've been doing it since I was about 10 years old, when I launched a window washing service in my family's apartment building. Given these two passions, it's no wonder that I eventually found a way to start an Internet company.

Like many great businesses, EarthLink was born out of frustration. I was sitting at home late one night in 1993, staring at my computer screen. After about 80 hours of punching buttons, twisting knobs, loading software and conjuring voodoo spirits, I finally managed to get myself connected to the Internet for the first time. There it was. Even in its primitive state back then – the Web hadn't even been invented yet – I recognized that I was looking at a way to reach anyone, anywhere in the world, practically for free. I saw immediately that the Internet would become a channel making all human knowledge available to anyone, anytime, anywhere. I knew that the Internet was going to become the next mass medium. But first, it had to get a lot easier. So I took all my frustration and turned it into a company with the simple mission of making it possible for anyone to connect to the Internet and use it to its full potential. We signed up our first EarthLink customer on July 1, 1994. Back then, it was just me and a couple of employees in a little 600-square-foot office. Today it is a Fortune 1000 company.

Along the way, as an entrepreneur struggling to build a fast-growing business, I've seen the fruits of our current education system firsthand, and it's deeply troubling. For example, it's nearly impossible these days to find executives who know how to write. This vital skill appears to be vanishing quickly. I'm not just talking about high school graduates, but people with degrees from prestigious Ivy League schools. The lack of this basic ability turns day-to-day business into a trudge through the swamp. Either it takes forever for someone to construct a letter, or they write something incomprehensible, or – even worse – they write something misleading. What's the point of an email if you have to pick up the phone and call a person to find out what he is trying to say?

There is an even more fundamental skill than writing – thinking. When it comes to finding employees who know how to think rationally and evaluate information for themselves, combing through a crop of recent high school or even college graduates is like looking for a needle in a haystack. These people are so hard to find that when you get them, you make sure you never let them go. Entrepreneurs recognize these people as the pillars that companies are built on. The question is: why do we have so few of them?

When I look to the current education system, I don't see this problem being resolved. Instead, I see what passes for solutions. Take, for example, the school-enforced drugging of children who won't sit still in class. Millions of school children in this country are now being prescribed Ritalin, a drug which shares many of the pharmacological effects of amphetamines, and which, along with amphetamines, meth-amphetamines, cocaine, opium and methadone, is classified by the DEA as a drug with a high potential for abuse. We are raising a generation on the premise that brain chemistry is the root cause of our education failures. Even worse, it is the brightest kids with the highest innate ability that are most likely to be labeled as "problematic" because they get bored or don't like to sit still. I probably would have been labeled that way myself. I don't believe that the children of this country have a Ritalin deficiency.

I have learned firsthand what kind of education makes great employees and leaders. It is one that

first gives individuals the basic tools to learn, and then the ability to analyze information – to accept what they think right and reject what they don't. It is an education that makes them able to reason, to expand their knowledge on their own, and finally, to communicate. This kind of education is hard to find these days, but there are still a few schools that are guided by this philosophy. Hillsdale College is one of them. The high school I attended in Oregon, the Delphian School, is another.

One of the courses at Delphian requires students to look through current magazines and newspapers and find inconsistencies – stories that draw on inappropriate sources, stories with incomplete or contrary facts, and so forth. This is an enlightening process for a fourteen-year-old. Suddenly you realize that your reasoning, your logic, your ability to observe, are as important to your life as those of any authority's. Since doing that exercise all those years ago, I've never read a newspaper, magazine, or book or watched debates or news on TV blindly. From then on, I felt more in control of the sources of information I chose to use.

I left the Delphian School understanding the value of individual thought and action. That is, perhaps, the biggest difference between an education that preserves a student's ability to reason and act based on his or her own understanding and observations, and an education aimed more at "socializing" or inculcating. The former helps create people who understand that they are responsible for themselves, their families and their country, and who are capable of taking responsibility. They are not the victims of circumstance or involuntary followers of the status quo. They are the entrepreneurs and leaders that create industries and shape our culture.

### **Education and the Internet**

This brings us back to the Internet, its role in our civilization and its reliance on education. Like any other major technological advance, the Internet must be met with an increased level of responsibility. Whether it achieves its potential depends on who uses it and how.

Representing, as it does, the first two-way global forum for communication, the Internet's value is determined by the quality of the ideas that flow over it. Thought and reason take on new meaning in a frictionless medium where ideas cross thousands of miles instantaneously. It is especially vital, then, that education return to its roots – that thought and reason, once again, become the vital core of learning.

The Internet holds incredible power. Applied well, it promises to move ideas where they can best be used, allow understanding and collaboration on a global scale, and increase the standard of living worldwide. It stands to become the vehicle of a new kind of economy – an "idea-economy" – where ideas and the ability to think clearly are all that matter.

Creating thinking people is now the challenge and the mandate for education. If each year sees even a few more men and women enter the world as thinking, capable, responsible individuals, we will have the basis for a country and a world that can truly benefit from the Internet and the free flow of ideas it makes possible. Ideas are the fuel of the next hundred years of human endeavor. It's up to schools like Hillsdale to light the way.

Now more than ever, ideas have consequences.

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### **What Hillsdale Means**

**William J. Brodbeck, '66**

## **Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Hillsdale College**

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*The following is abridged from a speech by the newly elected Chairman of the Hillsdale College Board of Trustees, Bill Brodbeck, at the College's Spring Convocation on April 3, 2003.*

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### **What Hillsdale Means**

Among the many reasons I love Hillsdale is that I met my wife of the last 36 years here. Many in our family have followed us, including all three of our daughters, two of their husbands, my youngest brother and his wife – we have our own smallish alumni club. And this grandpa is expecting the number to continue to grow.

Becoming the successor to Don Mossey, the College's longest serving chairman, is an intimidating thing to do. Don has served all of us very well and we owe him much. I, like Don, was also – once upon a time – a student here. And I think that's an important fact. It means I have had a longstanding connection to this place – and not only a connection, but also a genuine love of it. I have seen its progress, its trials, its successes, its many sides, the carrying out of its central ideas. Hillsdale is an intimate community. This year's graduates will return for Homecoming next year and in the years to come and will find friends here. Your professors know you by name. They know your habits, your interests, your strengths and weaknesses. I well remember late night bridge games Jan and I had at a professor's home who had become a friend. These things have always happened here and they will continue for as long as this school stands.

But there is more that unites Hillsdale's alumni than the seal on our diplomas. This college has always stood for freedom, for equality of opportunity, for piety and decency, and for academic achievement. These principles have helped to teach us the lessons of independence, of duty to God, country and family, and have prepared us to enter the world in a variety of professions. The College has always proclaimed its allegiance to these principles. You are undoubtedly aware of our great support for the Union army during the Civil War. Over 400 of our male students fought on the side of the Union. Aside from the military schools, no other school came close to sending as many of its own to war. The history of the College is one of public action on behalf of such principles.

It is likely that many of the students here today came to Hillsdale because a parent or grandparent has had some connection with the school's public declaration of these principles through Imprimis. I arrived here because my parents encountered a similar message through a chance meeting with the school's vice president.

I didn't even know about Hillsdale until late in my senior year of high school. I had planned to follow my father to Northwestern. But over a dinner with the College's then-Vice President Larry Taylor and some students, my parents became enthusiastic about Hillsdale. And their enthusiasm proved contagious. I quickly changed my plans and decided to come here sight unseen. Beyond marrying my wife, it has been my best decision.

My years here were filled with an excitement for learning and for life. I grew in my appreciation of the free market and of entrepreneurship. I was quite active as the president of my fraternity, Men's Council and the Leadership Workshop, and as vice president of Omicron Delta Kappa, the Senior Class, Young Americans for Freedom, the Student Union Board and Inter-Fraternity Council. And of course I met Jan.

My maternal grandfather had been a college professor and I thought that would be a fine life for me as well. I had hoped to attend NYU, where von Mises still taught, earn a doctorate and return to

Hillsdale as a professor. But a week before I graduated, President Phillips and Vice President Taylor asked me to consider working for the college. I agreed to stay for two years, working in development, before continuing my advanced degree track. And then I ended up returning to Wisconsin, instead of going to NYU, because of my father's health. I began working with him, and eventually bought and ran his grocery business for 28 years.

When I was asked to join the Board of Trustees, I eagerly accepted another opportunity to continue giving back to the College through a direct involvement in its operation. When later I was asked to head up the search committee for our current president, I knew what our ideal candidate would have to believe – it's been spelled out here for nearly 160 years.

Those who came to this convocation today were handed a copy of a speech by a former College president, Edmund Fairfield, delivered on July 4, 1853. That speech gives a wonderful account of the College's founding, mission and history. I would like to read you a quote from it:

Here, if nowhere else, the mind is the measure of the man. Long genealogies and endless pedigrees are a sorry offset for short memories and shallow brains. Here is valued not so much the crown as the head that wears it. Lace, and ribbons, and purple and fine linens, are a poor compensation for a deficient cranium. Nor does a full purse make amends for an empty head. Gold is not legal tender for College honors. A soft hand is no passport for a soft head. The sun-burnt farmer's boy, with his inheritance of poverty, hardships and toil, stands side by side with the fair-browed youth who is heir of millions, and who eats the bread of another's sweat; only that like Saul among his fellows, he is not unfrequently higher than any of the sons of wealth and luxury, from his shoulders and upward.

Hillsdale College takes seriously the liberal arts. Study is undertaken for its own rewards, and in the process we come to see the things in life that are important, and to recognize the things that are eternal. No matter the material success that any of us may acquire, our time here instructs us that it is the intellectual pursuits that help to make a full and complete life. This grocer's son has certainly found the truth of this.

It was late one night during the winter of my senior year – I can picture it like it happened yesterday – that I walked to the front campus from my apartment on Manning Street. It was snowing steadily and the night was quiet, and I began to think about all I had learned here about the world, myself and others. I came to a stop in front of Central Hall and spent a long while pondering all I had gained here, and the debt I owe to this place. It was one of the most emotional moments of my life.

I am overwhelmed to be able now to serve this school in a new capacity, and I pledge to you to do all I can to ensure that this great school continues to produce proud, loyal alumni who are willing to make a difference in this world, and who are well equipped to do so.