MIT Students Are Often Out of Touch with the World

Stone, from Page 5

A Different Perspective on the World

There’s something irresistible about The New York Times Sunday Edition. It seems to promise everything within its alphabetically ordered sections. My mother always told me to go through the Sunday paper first before buying it, to make sure all the sections were there, to be certain that it had been packed properly. I still do this. I go to the newsstand and start to flip through the paper. First I have to read the front page headlines though. I then begin my methodical section search. When I was younger I didn’t care too much if the newspaper man had forgotten to include the business or real estate sections. But now I find my eyes drawn to their headlines as well. The whole process takes me nearly 10 minutes as the anticipation of the enclosed articles builds... “What is the latest trend in... What did people in — have to say about...” Surprisingly, I’ve never been shown out of a newspaper, although the Boston vendors tend to be more polite than the New Yorkers who ask, “You gonna buy it or memorize it?”

Growing up in Manhattan, The Times was always a part of my Sunday, sometimes my Saturday night as well. I’d always thought it was a part of everyone’s Sunday; like pas- tries, or church for my Christian side of the family (and sleeping past noon for my non-Christian side). I used to marvel at the idea that whatever I was reading — mostly future articles when I was younger — the same thing was being read by people all over who were so different from myself. And I would wonder what their take on the articles would be, how differently they might be affecting them.

I was shocked when I came to college and found that hardly anyone read The Times. I was further shocked and dismayed to find myself — at a time when news seemed to become more crucial, as I came upon journalism as my chosen profession — being pulled into a vacuum along with my fellow MIT undergraduates, losing touch with the events of the world around me, going weeks without even seeing the Sunday Times.

I suppose the argument could go, it’s not very practical to read a newspaper when you’re being sprayed by a firehose. But the average MIT student’s lack of knowledge about current events is not merely a matter of practicality. Certainly there are those who would be avid news readers if they only had the time. Yet, the majority of MIT students seem to hold a general apathy towards activi- ties of the world around them. I’ve had friends tell me point blank that they don’t care about current events. Of course, part of my pride might have me respond that I don’t care about RISC technology — parallel processing, in-tegrated circuits — the idea being that you don’t care about my chosen profession, journalism, and I don’t care about yours. But that’s not true. Anything, whether it be some quirky Course VI gadget, or the price of gas, is affected by current events.

When I decided to write a piece for the yearbook discussing how MIT students are so out of touch with current events, I was applauded: the editors felt it needed to be said, my friends agreed it was a problem, the gener- al response I received was, “Oh God, that’s so true.” Then I mentioned it to my father who warned that I might appear cocky; it’s not sur- prising that my parents would sense a certain arrogance in my dissatisfaction with my peers’ knowledge of the goings on in the world around us. After my freshman year, I told my parents I wanted to transfer out of MIT. When they asked me why, I responded, “Salman Rushdie.” I explained that one spring day I had found myself at a large table in Lobel’s, with a group of freshmen and upper- classmen, I brought up Salman Rushdie and no one at the table knew who he was. This in itself was not a reason to transfer, but at the time it represented the final straw in my growing frustration. I’d always imagined my col- lege experience as a continuous intellectual feast. I saw myself sitting in cafes dis- cussing literature politics, philosophy, how John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism predicted the 80’s boom and the eventual Black Monday. I was desperate for endless discussions about what people in the world around us was affecting us.

At MIT I found myself in such an awkward position. I dropped Structure and Fourier Transforms of Computer Programs (6.001) and struggled in Physics II (E.02). I felt so humbled by my classmates who seemed to complete the freshman core with such ease. Yet, at the same time, I felt particularly aware of this vast knowledge that I possessed and that my peers did not. I knew what was going on in the world. Not that this was not an entirely positive thing — but I felt the need to read The New York Times cover to cover and instead read a bit more of Steinbeck’s Cannery and Haliday and Kuenne, I might not have been forced to eliminate all the even numbered majors I’d previously had my eye on.

For my senior year Independent Activities Period, I went to Beijing. I met a Chinese journalist there who told me about the univer- sity experience in Beijing. He eagerly asked me question after question about MIT. He said, “Do you talk politics?” He then said with enthusiasm and an edge of envy, “At MIT, you talk politics.” It was a statement, not a question, nevertheless I felt inclined to respond, “We can, but we don’t.” That statement seems to sum it all up for me. We had four years here, perhaps we will all start reading about the world. But if MIT students don’t read, then who’s going to read this?

The Tech congratulates these graduating students, faithful members of our staff...

Sam Chen
Sande Chen
William Chuang
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Rick Roos
Mark A. Smith
Joanna E. Stone

Thanks for all of your help,
and good luck in your future endeavors.