Review by Paul Duguid

Fred Turner

From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism

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History may be the prerogative of victors, but it is written by writers. Hence Fred Turner's intriguing account of changing perceptions of the computer primarily concerns neither the engineers and programmers who built computers, nor the people who used them, but the ideologues who wrote about them. Turner convincingly portrays a cadre of journalists who strove to transform the idea of the computer from a threat to personal freedom in the cold war into a means to such freedom in an emerging digital utopia. Both extremes are one part technological determinism, and, unsurprisingly in the land of the technological sublime, one part religion. Each abandons nuance to persuade us that if we only follow the technology we are either all likely to go "direct to heaven" or "all going direct the other way".

At the heart of the utopian mission stands Stewart Brand, whose last name fortuitously reflects his considerable marketing talents. Brand famously coined the aphorism "information wants to be free". (He hedged this exposed position by immediately adding that it also wants to be expensive.) Throughout his career, Brand has shown an eye for a phrase to tantalize the susceptible with intimations of profundity. "We are as gods", he wrote at the opening of his celebrated *Whole Earth Catalog,* "and might as well get good at it". (Such sub-Neitzschian language, filtered through figures like Ayn Rand, entranced several countercultural writers of the day, including Brand's fellow *Rolling Stone* journalist Hunter S. Thompson.) Brand created a sort of Hippie

bible in the *Catalog*, though astutely he never took it, or its progeny, too far from their Sears' antecedent. He followed this with a couple of lower-profile and less successful periodicals (*Co-Evolution Quarterly* and *Signal)*, before rising to prominence again in the pages of *Wired*, the propaganda organ of the digital age. Here Brand's unclear role but undoubted influence vindicated the sinewy networks which he had assiduously built and Turner diligently maps. Brand also helped found the WELL (the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), an early cluster of computer chat rooms whose unexceptional online gossiping was elevated to a higher plane when Howard Rheingold, another ideologue of the digerati, adroitly annointed it a "virtual community" where people could "homestead on the electronic frontier".

As a young man, Brand hung around Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. That he missed Kesey's legendary bus is indicative of his often liminal role. Nonetheless, he turns up at significant moments in U.S. postwar countercultural history with the regularity of Woody Allen's Zelig. He dropped acid with Timothy Leary, hung out with Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan, walked the fringes of the 1960s New York art scene, filmed the first "be-in", and got to San Francisco in time to catch Beats turning into Hippies. Here he also cultivated the geeks, Turner shows, absorbing Norbert Weiner's theory of "cybernetics" and encountering Douglas Engelbart and Alan Kay, pioneer computer scientists whose considerable triumphs in personal computing Brand would embellish. There he was again at the 1984 "Hacker's Conference" in Marin County, the nerd's equivalent of the first "be in" or, as one hacker described it, "the Woodstock of the computer elite". Moving between these different world, though never clearly in any, Brand (who in a 1972 article in *Rolling Stone* introduced the laity to the Internet) gave cultural respectability to the emerging world of computers, helping, in Turner's words, "to create the cultural conditions under which microcomputers and computer networks could be imagined as tools of liberation" and to portray "technological production and research as hip".

Brand is rightfully the centre of this account of the domestication of the computer. He helped what is little more than an office accessory today both to shed its association

with military research and to develop a mystique whereby, as we thrash out ever-more-tedious spreadsheets, we nevertheless can feel at one with the awful fascinations of "cyberspace". But Brand was alone only in the relative level-headedness of his judgments. Beyond him, Turner draws a group of self-proclaimed spokesmen of the age who had ever more facile ways of making hype seem profound and the mundane and self-serving seem alluring and emancipatory. Among these is John Perry Barlow, a former campaign manager for Dick Cheney of multiple religious convictions but steadfast evangelical zeal. He encapsulated the ability of such cyberrevolutionaries to rise above contradiction by churning out the bombastic "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" while sitting at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Republican politics comes with several of these ideologues, including Lou Rossetto, former chair of Columbia University's Young Republicans and co-founder of *Wired*. So too does evangelical zeal and revolutionary rhetoric. George Gilder, a former Nixon speechwriter, claimed messianic powers of prophecy in his *Telecosm: How Infinite Bandwidth Will Revolutionize Our World.* His limited visions lured hundreds to lose millions with the collapse of the fibre optic bubble accompanying the stock market crash of 2000. (Gilder's main regret seems to have been that the losers could no longer afford to subscribe to his lucrative newsletter.) There are few women in this world (Gilder vaunted his election as the Male Chauvinist Pig of the Year by the National Organization of Women), where not only sexism but other troubling prejudices lurk behind the layers of rhetorical varnish. Esther Dyson, a former financial journalist, seems to have survived by making relentless pixie-ness inseparable from ruthless networking. She, with Gilder, the futurist Alvin Toffler, and Ronald Reagan's science advisor George Keyworth (we must assume he advised against), wrote a "Magna Carta for the Digital Age", struggling to trump Barlow's "Declaration". As one reader pointed out, its argument that digital technologies would enhance individual freedom made its case by equating such freedom with corporate deregulation.

If Brand was the impresario, his protegé Kevin Kelly was the ringmaster. A born-again Christian, Kelly had been a staff member of both the *Co-Evolution Quarterly* and

Signal before his translation to executive editorship of *Wired*. Matching Barlow's thoughts about discovering "the underlying grammar of nature" with his own about a "new era in human evolution", Kelly encouraged the magazine to trawl depths of digital superficiality while missing most of the important and interesting questions of the day. One of several at this time to reduce the complexity of society to utilitarian self-interest by ingesting the tenets of "information economics" raw, he wrote a creed for the "New Economy". He also barked the reputations of figures like the futurist Alvin Toffler, the politician Newt Gingrich, and the MIT academic Nicholas Negroponte, while cycling the words of his ideologue cohort through the pages of *Wired*. This feedback loop transformed their urgings into a higher- and higher-pitched scream until, in a hubristic moment that gives one faith in markets, *Wired*, the cheerleader of dot com stock jobbing, failed twice to sell itself to otherwise voracious investors.

Though this cast would tax the powers of Dickens, Turner, a journalist turned academic, reveals many of the skills (and but few of the failings) of both professions in telling this important story. It may be a result of his training in journalism, his obligation to his sources, or simply his restraint, that his own thoughts on the carnival passing before our eyes are often muted. Indeed, on occasion it is not clear whether juxtaposition indicates tactful judgment or mere coincidence, so restrained is his hand. Whichever, it is as enjoyable as apt to find that a single page which opens with Brand claiming "I had no idea about the future" ends with him publishing a book called *Media Lab: Inventing the Future at MIT*.