

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

(University of Chicago Press, 2006)

**Book Review by Anna McCarthy**

Stewart Brand was the consummate networker. The founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and later the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a figure present virtually at the creation of both the Merry Pranksters and the MIT Media Lab, a man whose address book included both Ken Kesey and Herman Kahn, Brand's professional biography is a recitation of links between countercultural institutions of the 1960s and cyber-topian networks of the 1980s. Brand made himself at home in sites as diverse as the Fluxus happening, the Hippie commune, and Los Alamos National Laboratory; as he moved from one to the other he galvanized individuals of all political stripes to connect with each other in projects tinged with the techno-libertarian collectivist vision that Fred Turner, in his fascinating study of Brand and his worlds, calls *New Communalism*.

Recent analysts of "digital utopianism," Turner notes, tend to simplify its origins, tracing the communitarian ethos of the early Internet back to "what they have imagined to be a single, authentically revolutionary social movement that was crushed or co-opted by the forces of capitalism." (33) Collapsing the New Left and the counterculture into a single historical bloc called "the sixties," such accounts feed into contemporary digital media theories that "re-imagine...peer-to-peer technologies as the rebirth in hardware and software of a single, 'free' culture that once stood outside the mainstream and can do so again." (33-34). Turner's history of the New Communalism, a cultural formation as rooted in the collaborative, interdisciplinary research culture of Cold War defense science as it is in Trips Festivals and tofu potlucks, offers us a far more complex, and to my mind, more interesting and politically necessary story of how present day visions of new media came to be. If contemporary spin offers us a potent, if naïve, vision of the digital network as a space where community, democracy, and economic growth can finally coexist, Turner's book is a convincing account of very tangible social networks, embodying and disavowing certain forms of power and privilege, that made such visions possible.

Turner's narrative begins with a chapter detailing the historical contexts in which the languages and metaphors that assign certain kinds of values to computing emerged. Tracing the "shifting politics" of concepts such as cybernetics, systems, information, and automation across multiple sites of collective practice, he shows how the perceived power of computing to foster

personal freedom, lateral collaboration, knowledge-sharing, dispersed authority, and altered consciousness sprung from a surprising array of sources. Of particular value, I think, is the way he compellingly details the collaborative context of Cold War defense science. Like other recent histories of science, most notably Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi's fascinating *The Worlds of Herman Kahn* (Harvard University Press, 2005), Turner counters perceptions of military science institutions as top-down, bureaucratic behemoths. Rather, he details how institutions such as the Rand Corporation and MIT's Radiation Laboratory fostered a flexible, interdisciplinary, and creative culture. It was in these arenas that pioneers in computing like Norbert Weiner encountered the physiologists and engineers with whom he would formulate the interdisciplinary realm of cybernetics. Turner's account is historically acute and theoretically sophisticated. These arenas of knowledge production, he suggests, were themselves cybernetic systems: "the rhetoric of cybernetics not only embodied, but also actively facilitated, networking and entrepreneurship." (25).

Subsequent chapters focus on Brand and his peers, tracing a trajectory through the worlds of science, knowledge, and community building where Brand encountered such individuals as biologist Paul Ehrlich, composer John Cage, and utopian Buckminster Fuller. With these and other individuals, Brand built a vision of technology as the key to social and personal transformation, sustaining a wide range of networks and projects. Later chapters bring in a new cast of characters: computer pioneers Steve Wozniak, future *Wired* magazine editor Kevin Kelly, a libertarian born again Christian, Shell Oil executive Peter Schwartz, and Media Lab impresario Nicholas Negroponte. By the end of the book, which charts the role of cyber-topian rhetorics in the shaping of the so-called New Economy, the New Communalist vision has achieved a level of legitimacy that would have been unimagined in its earliest days, a legitimacy forcefully conveyed by the fact that by 1993 cyberculture ideologue John Perry Barlow, a man who wrote lyrics for the Grateful Dead in the 1970s, was riding on Air Force Two advising Al Gore on Internet policy.

Juxtapositions such as this abound in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, embodying the network model that, Turner suggests, materializes the metaphors of connectivity and distributed knowledge on which techno-utopian languages are built. This model has a textual analog, too, taking shape in the publications and forums that Brand convened in the 1970s and 1980s. The two most well known, the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the WELL, receive extensive examination in their own separate chapters. Of these, the chapter on the *Whole Earth Catalog* is particularly compelling material. Entitled "The Whole Earth Catalog as Information Technology," the chapter details how Brand arrived at the planned miscellany of the *Catalog*, which did not sell things directly but rather offered subscribers tools for living that ranged from buckskin jackets to geodesic domes. In describing the *Catalog*, Turner paints a picture of a textual and pictorial field that bears uncommon similarities to the World Wide Web, albeit "within a design framework that echoed the frontier preoccupations of the back-to-the-land movement and the psychedelic design inclinations of the contemporary alternative press." (80). Moreover, in Turner's analysis of the implied reader of the *Catalog* as a kind of "cowboy nomad" we can see the outlines of a prototypical model of the web surfer take shape.

This gendered model of readership is deliberate. As Turner notes, the "new elite" that the *Catalog* assembled as its readership had very specific characteristics: "It would be masculine, entrepreneurial, well-educated, and white. It would celebrate systems theory and the power of technology to foster social change. And it would turn away from questions of gender, race and class, and toward a rhetoric of individual and small-group empowerment." Moreover—and

importantly, to my mind, for any understanding of the limits of locating a radical political agenda in techno-utopianism—Turner observes that "[d]espite the fact that the years of its publication overlapped the peak of American involvement in Southeast Asia, the *Catalog* almost completely ignored the conflict." (98) This might seem shocking to those for whom amnesia or misinformation fuse the New Left and the counterculture into one entity, but not for those readers who have followed Turner's meticulous reconstruction of New Communalist ideals. Brand's justification for ignoring the war, printed in the *Catalog* in response to a reader's complaint and excerpted in all its self-righteous efflorescence by Turner, speaks volumes about the universalist aspirations of the white masculine self in this period: "Work I did a few years ago with Indians convinced me that any guilt-based action towards anyone (personal or institutional) can only make a situation worse." (99). Reducing outrage to the war as the expression of a pathological, guilt-ridden psyche, this (and other long quotations from Brand throughout the book) convey just how profoundly apolitical (or more accurately, anti-radical) the techno-utopian politics of personal transformation actually was.

In such moments it is easy to see how the social networks Brand assembled in the 1970s morphed into such institutions as *Wired* magazine. (Founded by a libertarian former college Republican, the magazine would feature House Speaker Newt Gingrich on its cover in 1995.) Reading Turner's history, one wonders whether things could have been different. What if, rather than a schism between New Communalists and New Left, there had been a collaboration? There is surely the beginning of a bridge when one considers the rhetorical parallels between Brand's ideal of the "whole earth" and the 1968 Democratic Convention protesters' chant, "the whole world is watching." Unfortunately, the conclusion of the book suggests that the disconnect between radical politics and techno-utopian visions remains very deep. In Turner's words:

The rhetoric of peer-to-peer informationalism...much like the rhetoric of consciousness out of which it grew, actively obscures the material and technical infrastructures on which both the Internet and the lives of the digital generation depend. Behind the fantasy of unimpeded information flow lies the reality of millions of plastic keyboards, silicon wafers, glass-faced monitors, and endless miles of cable. All of these technologies depend on manual laborers, first to build them and later to tear them apart. This work remains extraordinarily dangerous, first to those who handle the toxic chemicals required in manufacture and later to those who live on the land, drink the water, and breathe the air into which those chemicals eventually leak. These tasks continue to be the province of those who lack social and financial resources[.]...In the 1990s, all of this work was invisible to those who promoted the Internet and the network mode of production as evidence of a new stage in human evolution. Like the communards of the 1960s, the techno-utopians of the 1990s denied their dependence on any but themselves. At the same time, they developed a way of thinking and talking about digital technologies from within which it was almost impossible to challenge their own elite status. (261)

Although *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* does not offer suggestions for intervening in this situation, the history it tells—meticulously researched in primary and secondary materials, marrying insights from media studies and science studies, and written in a lucid, pointed prose—provides rhetorical fuel for those who wish to counter the pie-eyed futurology of the governing figures Toby Miller has called "cybertarians." Some might quarrel with the ways Turner characterizes social networks as cybernetic systems or describes

interdisciplinary collaboration as "legitimacy exchange," although others—especially those interested in researching the workings of power in media organizations—will find them very helpful. And there are those (I am one) who would wish for illustrations interspersed throughout the text rather than those reproduced, at a scale that renders text somewhat illegible, in the center of the book. But then again, in calling attention to questions of readability and foregrounding the very "bookiness" of the book, this design choice raises questions about how we commonly expect to interact with texts and images, questions that are very appropriate given the subject matter of the book. As the viral ideology of virtuality continues to capture the popular imagination—and the academic too, given that this review appears in an online journal—Turner's materialist focus on the origins of the virtual world is a valuable and bracing antidote.

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