From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism
FRED TURNER
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From Counterculture to Cyberculture makes a solid contribution to the history of the rise of networked collaboration and entrepreneurial, project-based work styles, particularly in Silicon Valley, and it helps explain how, in the latter half of the 20ᵗʰ century, computers and computer networks shifted from being feared as "tools of the bureaucracy" to being embraced as "tools of the people." Fred Turner tells the story by following artist, journalist, and entrepreneur Stewart Brand from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, as Brand constructs what Turner refers to as "the Whole Earth network." By tracing Brand's movements among various circles of countercultural figures, technologists, journalists, and businesspeople, he shows how the histories of military-industrial research culture and (certain strands of) American counterculture are entangled with one another. He argues that Brand and his collaborators aligned personal computers with personal freedom, and in doing so helped produce in the San Francisco Bay Area an environment in which collaborative, entrepreneurial work styles pioneered within Cold War research cultures could diffuse into the world outside the military-industrial complex.

Moving chronologically, Turner follows first Brand and then his friends and partners through the various projects they pursued. He begins with Brand's involvement in the 1960s conceptual art scene, takes us through his founding of the *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968, to the creation of the WELL online conferencing system and the Global Business Network (GBN) consulting organization in the 1980s, and finally to the heyday of *Wired* magazine and its role in the Internet bubble of the late 1990s. Beginning with the *Whole Earth Catalog*, which grew exponentially during the three years Brand published it, several of these projects were innovative and successful business ventures that combined ideas from disparate domains. Turner attributes this success to their

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functioning as "network forums," mediums that translated the interests of participants into Brand and his cohort's cybernetic language, and bridged formerly separate networks.

In addition to interviews with Brand and key figures from Brand's social networks, Turner relies on a range of primary materials from Stanford University's special collections, including Brand's personal papers and the *Whole Earth Catalog* records, as well as memos, technical reports, and newsletters from Stanford's extensive collections of Silicon Valley historical documents. He uses these well, uncovering a wealth of connections among Brand and some of the key institutions behind the rise of personal computing such as Douglas Engelbart's research group at Stanford Research Institute, the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, and the Homebrew Computer Club. Turner's former career as a print journalist is evident in his clear prose, making the book a pleasure to read as he weaves together the disparate strands of his story.

One weakness of Turner's "follow the actors" approach is that that there is too great a focus on the "network entrepreneurs" and not enough on the groups systematically left out of the networks they constructed. He does make an effort to discuss the the lack of female or minority participation in the network forum of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, as well as the willful blindness of "new economy" evangelists to the dark sides of the transformations they celebrated. But these discussions make up less than 20 pages of the 327-page book, and Turner's critical voice through the rest of the book is so subdued that the hasty reader may mistake his work for a hagiography of Brand and his pals.

From Counterculture to Cyberculture uncovers the origins of the now-ubiquitous marketing of personal computing and access to the Internet as tools of personal empowerment. It also adds to our understanding of the roots of the techno-utopianism of the late 1990s that culminated in the Internet bubble. But its greatest contribution may be the detailed descriptions of how Brand and his partners slipped back and forth between making news and reporting on it, providing grounds for rethinking

the role of business and technology journalists in the development of public discourse. This is particularly valuable in a period when businesspeople and technologists are increasingly taking on the role of journalist, using new media technologies such as blogs and podcasts to both report on their own activities and to track the industries and actors in which they are interested.

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