



From Mass Media to the Digital Revolution

An Interview with Fred Turner

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In this new interview, Fred Turner addresses the historical links between American democratic propaganda in the Cold War era, the counterculture movement and the rise of the computer. In doing so, he provides an enlightening outlook on the history of mass media and its relevance in the digital age.

Fred Turner is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Stanford University. He is currently the Director of Stanford's Program in Science Technology and Society, and Director of Undergraduate Studies in Communication. His research and teaching focus on media technology and cultural change. He is especially interested in the ways that emerging media have helped shape American life since World War II. He earned his PhD in communication from the University of California (San Diego). He then worked ten years as journalist. He has written for newspapers and magazines ranging from the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* to *Nature*. He taught Communication at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government and the MIT's Sloan School of Management. He is the author of three books: *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and The Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); and *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (Anchor/Doubleday, 1996; 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

Books & Ideas: Your last two books, *The Democratic Surround* (2013) and *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006), deal with the cultural archeology of the digital and transmedia era and its developments all through the 20th century. To me, this extensive historical scope could be split into three media periods: in the first place, the media as mass culture during the 1930s and the 1940s, then the media as counterculture from the 1960s to the 1970s, and finally the media as communities, from the 1980s to nowadays. How do you define these three particular periods and the connections between them?

Fred Turner: The starting point for me is World War II. At that time in America, some people feared the mass media would literally turn the country fascist. Many thought that there was something about the one-to-many transmission model that caused people to stop to be able to reason, to stop being individuals and to become massified. And for Americans in that

period, Germans were the epitome of that process. Americans thought that Germany was a highly cultivated nation. How did they become a fascist nation so quickly? The answer for many specialists at that time was mass media, due to both Adolf Hitler's control of it and something in the mass media themselves.

Now right at the same moment, among sociologists and technologists, a different media vision emerged. In 1941, a group of sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists - including Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson - calling themselves the Committee for National Morale, gathered in New York. They wanted to create propaganda that would promote the development of what they called the "democratic personality". This kind of person was a psychologically complete individual, tolerant, anti-racist, and above all, able to work with others without losing his or her individuality. The Committee proposed the creation of multi-image environments, surrounds really, that they believed would allow Americans to practice making choices, thinking together, being individual but also being collective. Later, Mead and Bateson particularly brought those views into early meetings with the information technologists who created cybernetics. These cybernetics scholars, Norbert Wiener especially, had a vision of communication, which is not top-down, but is instead a matter of individuals seeking feedbacks from each other.

Books & Ideas: The development of cybernetics was also the starting point of the network metaphor, used to refer to social organization.

Fred Turner: Networks have been political since the beginning. They were seen during the forties as an alternative to the top-down hierarchical mode of mid-century mass media. Norbert Wiener published a book in 1950 called *The Human Use of Human Beings* which talked about the way to prevent societies from becoming authoritarian. His counter models in the forties when he wrote that book were, first, Nazi fascism and then Soviet communism. Promoting networks meant specifically and explicitly to promote democratized social practices. That vision flowed into the counterculture of the 1960s.

Books & Ideas: Let us consider the social scientists of the forties. You pointed out in *The Democratic Surround* the key role of three subgroups: first, communication scientists like Paul Lazarsfeld or Harold Dwight Lasswell, second, developmentalists like Abram Kardiner or Kurt Lewin, and then cultural anthropologists, especially Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson and the famous *Balinese Character*. Could you explain the social and intellectual principles of this academic convergence and how they collected material in a political way?

Fred Turner: From a distance of sixty years, we can see these people as three distinct fields, but in their own time they interacted in such a way that they felt like to belong to one field, and saw themselves as people concerned to produce the "democratic personality". Going out from culture to personality in anthropology, they believed that every society had its own personality type.

So to them, if you wanted to make a democratic society you had to make a democratic personality type. And the political scientists wanted to structure the social world and communication people wanted to do it through communication systems, the anthropologists wanted to find a moral culture of personality for America and psychologists wanted to find out what their psychology could be. So they were all thinking about this question when World War II started. The sixty who formed the Committee for National Morale theorized that if one-to-many media produced authoritarians, as the German example seemed to show, then

Americans would need many-to-many media, *multimedia*, to become a unified nation of individualists.

Books & Ideas: How was this group of social scientists connected with the artistic vanguard like Bauhaus refugees, John Cage or MoMA exhibits?

Fred Turner: The artistic and cultural life during the forties concerned a really small social world, a network with New York City as its main core. The members of the Committee for National Morale could not build multimedia themselves, but they were connected through the universities and art centers to Bauhaus refugees who had come to New York in the 1930s. And those Bauhaus artists had very elaborate theories of multimedia design that they had developed in Germany during the twenties, which they were very happy to turn into techniques for producing democratic citizens.

This artistic circle fulfilled the mission which social scientists identified. During World War II, former Bauhaus artists helped build complex propaganda exhibitions. They also started a school, the New Bauhaus, in Chicago, where John Cage taught for a year during the war. When he returned to NYC, he brought the Bauhaus's surround sensibility and its pro-democratic-personality politics with him, into the new music scene, right at the heart of the counterculture. There is a direct line from social sciences and Bauhaus refugees through NYC, then to the New Bauhaus in Chicago, then back to NYC and Black Mountain College, and in the middle of hippie culture from the sixties.

Books & Ideas: In terms of social process, how could a vanguard artistic culture have turned into a mainstream culture?

Fred Turner: We need to follow two lines to understand that process. The first one runs through the artistic world. There the artists who built multimedia surrounds for performances became increasingly less political. In the 1940s, the notion of the surround was linked to a personality who should not be racist, should be tolerant, empathic with people, love diversity, be sexually tolerant, etc. By the late 1960s, the antiracist, sexually egalitarian performances had just disappeared. It is very interesting. Suddenly there were women on stage, wearing sheets but nothing on underneath, their mouths stuffed with vegetables; Yoko Ono made her reputation covering herself with whipped cream to be licked off by other men.

The second line ran through the propaganda enterprise. In the mid-1950s, the American State looked over to the Soviet Union and their political program, and they saw something they called "The People's Communism". And it looked like it was working. There was a terrible fear that in fact Communism was attractive and effective. So the American State, together with the American advertising industry, created a massive campaign called "The People's Capitalism". It meant to export the idea that in fact, choice in consumption and choice in politics are the same thing. And if we just bring those two things together, we can free the world. We started to build multimedia environments to sell this idea, starting in 1956, first in Afghanistan, in Kabul, across Europe, in Brussels, Rome, Madrid, and eventually we ended

up in Moscow in 1959, with a national exhibition where the multimedia environment was explicitly designed to turn Soviet citizens into democratic people.¹

These environments were multimedia but they were also carefully monitored. As people entered these spaces, they were supposed to be free, to choose the image which mattered to them, but their movements had been monitored. Moscow was the best example of this: the translators, all Russian speakers, answered the visitors' questions, and at the end of the day they reported all the conversations they had heard to the information agency. A computer in Moscow had been pre-programmed to answer 40,000 questions about America. Soviet and Russian people came and asked questions and what did the computer do? It recorded the questions. It provided a database on how Soviets thought about America at the time. So these environments were both persuasive and designed for information solicitation and therefore they became a way to manage the populations that the Americans tried supposedly to free.

Books & Ideas: Would you define this political movement of managing people to free them and vice versa as Joseph Nye did, that is to say a "soft power"?

Fred Turner: The concept of soft power is important, but scholars have not paid enough attention to the management of attention and the senses. The notion of soft power says a lot about consumption, the export of goods, opportunities and culture, but I think it misses the management of the senses. And this management is even more common now in the digital world. The concept of soft power does not quite get at that. The other thing is that the concept requires that the State remains the central actor. But in fact, the State was not a monolith even at this time. People inside the government were arguing all the time about how much propaganda they should do in the US in the fifties, how they should do it, how democratic people should be, etc. It is not like the State had a single mind and deployed its power. It was a much more conflicted space where art and media could do all different kinds of work - be persuasive or not, a propagandist or a space where conflict could be deployed, etc.

Books & Ideas: How were the two lines you are dealing with put in conflict and synthesized by a new generation of young, educated people on campuses during the 1960s, mobilized against all the emblems of the "square" mindset: the State, the army, big companies, authority and massive technologies?

Fred Turner: This new generation in the sixties grew up under the threat of the nuclear holocaust and they didn't want to live to work in the corporate sector, to partition themselves, and I always thought that they didn't want to embrace technology. In fact, they didn't want to embrace the big technology, but they had also grown up alongside the automobile, the highway system, recreational drugs, movie theaters and concerts, and even more importantly: the personal record player. Small record players allowed people to go to their room with no need to listen to their parents' music anymore. This generation did not praise the American military's big technology but they wanted to save this small-scale technology. They took the products of American industry and turned them into tools through which they could imagine a kind of post-American society.

¹See for instance "Glimpses of the USA", a video by Charles and Ray Eames which served as an introduction to the U.S. during the 1959 American National Exhibition held in Moscow <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ob0aSyDUK4A>

Books & Ideas: Could you explain the political division in this generation during the 1960s between the Free Speech movement and the new communalists?

Fred Turner: I grew up being told that the counterculture was only one movement, that it was all the same community. Then I spoke with members of this so-called community, and what became clear to me and took a while to accept is that in fact, two quite different forms of counterculture existed at the same time. One, the New Left, was institution-oriented. It formed committees and parties, was involved in political actions and marches in the street, and was based in the town of Berkeley. The other one was what I call the “New Communalists”. They were centered in San Francisco, and thought that the best way to change the world was to abandon politics and to turn instead to small-scale technologies, drugs, business, and to building a better domestic space. It is members of this second group who have primarily shaped our views of networked computing here in the U.S.

Books & Ideas: What had been the role of cultural gatherings and technologies like happenings, lightning shows, concerts and psychedelic drugs in this generational movement?

Fred Turner: There were two different moments. The first one was during World War II when multimedia environments meant to be very political, and to democratize people in very specific ways: to be more individual and also to bound people together collectively across differences, and get beyond racism, ethnicity, sexual intolerance, and to work together in an American mode of unity. Then, during the sixties, this mode faded away. Instead, people gathered around the idea that they could share a single consciousness: they needed to get in a space together, where music, drugs, and artistic expressions were going to put them in the same invisible way of life, without government action and exogenous political order. They thought they did not need the government anymore, because the invisible forces of the natural world would be visible to them, and they could live in harmony with them. Information technologies have been used in this exact purpose, starting with cybernetics. Early fans of cybernetics believed that the field had developed a technology which made visible the links connecting people in an organic world. Economy, society, nature, and so on, were all systems of information. A person who wanted to be a powerful citizen and not a bureaucrat at that time had to try to get in touch with these forces and follow them, like a surfer. Of course, this is a really Californian thing to do.

Books & Ideas: How do you explain the micro-macro symbolic shifts at this time, like mushrooms - from nuclear bombs to psychedelic drugs - or the Earth - from a flat battlefield divided between Western and Soviet camps to a unique three-dimension sphere?

Fred Turner: What you got your finger on there is a kind of translation process that occurred in civilian environments, in which large-scale technology and projects are reconfigured symbolically and practically into personal meaningful activities. The mushroom is a great example: the mushroom cloud could destroy the world but the psychedelic mushroom renders visible all the cosmic forces of the world. It is the same thing for space. It was the new frontier during the 1960s for both the US government and the Soviet Union. But at the same time, the youths who started to smoke pot spoke of “getting high”, which means “to get spaced out”. Think about David Bowie who sang *Space Oddity* in 1969, about Pink Floyd and their *Dark Side of the Moon* in 1973.

Suddenly people imagined themselves in all kinds of places. Some musicians, from jazzmen to rock'n'roll singers, went on stage dressed up as astronauts in part because they were

appropriating these technologies. Taking drugs was like imitating, in a very low-key and vernacular way, the major project of the State. It is a symbolic appropriation process.

Books & Ideas: How do you explain the failure of the communes?

Fred Turner: Between 1960 and 1973, Americans saw the largest wave of commune-building in their history. More than a million Americans went to live in communes. Most of these fell apart over a year or so. They wanted to get together, based on a common shared mindset, and they stopped having explicit language for government. They did not have bureaucracy, hierarchy, or clear rules about how to divide up resources. Instead of rules, they had norms, charisma, cool. But only those that had strong authoritarian leadership or religious structures survived more than just a little while. In any kind of community, you need explicit principles to negotiate resources and organize recognition of talents and values. Consciousness does not substitute for negotiation, nor do technologies substitute for politics. But ironically, I think communes failed in a different and very interesting way. When they were actually trying to build communities around small-scale technologies, they ended up reproducing the racism and sexism of mainstream America. At that moment, all the ways of how people had power in culture suddenly became important. Stereotypes and gender got really important – they began to give people the same power on communes that they could give out in the ordinary world. When you look at the communes, most were white, middle-class, male-dominated, and for all the time of free love, they were mainly heterosexual. They looked culturally like the suburbs and it's not surprising because their mode of governance was cultural and imported from the suburbs.

Books & Ideas: What was the *Whole Earth Catalog*? And how does it fit in the counterculture's influence on computing?

Fred Turner: Well, I began researching this book when I moved to California in 1996 and saw my first copy of *Wired* magazine, the bible of all things digital at the time. I was surprised by two things in the magazine – it is neo-psychedelic in design, and features a number of writers who I knew had been active in the counterculture. I had already written a book about how Americans remember the Vietnam War (*Echoes of Combat*, 1996), so I knew that during Vietnam, most Americans saw computers as tools of the Cold War militarized state. How was it, I wondered, that computers became the emblem of the revolution against the State thirty years later? And what were former hippies doing promoting computers in *Wired*?

It turned out that *Wired* and much of the digital utopianism of the 1990s owed its ideology to the counterculture. That ideology travelled from the 1960s to the 1990s through a group of writers and speakers who first came together to produce a publication called the *Whole Earth Catalog*. The *Catalog*'s editor, [Stewart Brand](#), wanted to show hippies heading out to communes how to get the tools they would need to start new communities.

The *Catalog* not only showed them the tools, but it became an access device and, for many hippies, an early model of the virtual communities that would later flourish online. The *Catalog* ultimately sold more than a million copies and the core editorial team worked off and on together for the next thirty years. They were the ones who taught us to think of computers as tools of personal transformation – as LSD had once been.

Books & Ideas: How and why did former communalists start to be connected with computer scientists and specialists during the 1980s?

Fred Turner: There were lots of ties between former cultural figures and computer scientists, some of them in the East, but more in San Francisco and California. The *Whole Earth Catalog* offices were just a mile away from Stanford University. Stewart Brand was in close contact with the artificial intelligence laboratory of Stanford, and he wrote an article about them for *Rolling Stone*. Another example is the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, right beyond Stanford: it was the place where the original interface of the Mac was developed, and then Steve Jobs came and visited it, took that design back to Apple, and it became the basis of the company. And at the beginning, their library included nothing other than books that had been advertised in the *Whole Earth Catalog*. They just read it and bought the books the catalog mentioned, too. There is a variant in the East, in Massachusetts: you can see it with Richard Stallman from MIT, who developed a much more New Left kind of vision. California is more a New Communalist vision. According to its, we need to build technologies which connect people and allow them to create new communities, far away from politics. California is 3,000 miles away from Washington, and that really matters. In California it has been possible to recreate communities pretty much based on an independence principle. In the east, it is the politicized face, much more oriented to Washington, New York and Boston.

Books & Ideas: Could you shed light on the WELL as the missing link between the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the Internet?

Fred Turner: When I found *Wired* magazine for the first time, I saw lots of former communalists, including people who had created and participated to the *Whole Earth Catalog*. And I did not know how they got there. So I started to follow them back in time. And I found out they all participated to the WELL: the [Whole 'Lectronic Link](#). And then I discovered that an entrepreneur named Larry Brilliant created it in order to try and put the *Whole Earth Catalog* online with Stewart Brand's help. And Brand said to him: no, we need to build a conversation system, not a catalog. There was a surprising organizational and personal continuity, especially through Stewart Brand. It started with the *Whole Earth Catalog* during the sixties and early seventies, then moved through its successor publication *CoEvolution Quarterly*, to the WELL in 1985, and finally, to *Wired*. Brand made conscious choices about what ideas to promote. We usually think ideology is a process which is going through people. And it is partly true. But the problem with that discursive model is that it cannot explain the active choice to promote some ideas against others, thanks to technologies.

Books & Ideas: How do you define and qualify the evolution of the idea of community during these different steps?

Fred Turner: I think we have to recognize that each period is responding to a set of different historical circumstances. During the 1930s and the 1940s, for Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and the New Bauhaus people, community was the American mode of unity that you could use to challenge fascism, hierarchy and the dissolving of the self. Democratic unity was about putting individuals together. Fast forward to the 1960s, the anti-racist, pro-sexual-equality political context had faded away. Communities were a place to fulfill ourselves, to be psychologically rather than politically together. There was a mystical unity out there, somewhere in the center of the consciousness, vibes, order. People used small-scale technologies to see that, and feel that, and make themselves happier. The sixties opened the

door to a consumption-oriented model of self-centered gathering. And many of us live in that model now. We are living in this highly managed world in which we imagine ourselves as free individuals. It is somehow like living in a shopping mall: we can meet friends and go wherever we want inside it. But the sounds and products have been selected for us.

Books & Ideas: Would you say that the two movements in the sixties, the international one through institution actions and the micro-oriented counterculture, have just mixed up during the last decades with the Gafa, i.e. Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon?

Fred Turner: I would say that, with this distinction that the American State does not understand what is exactly going on. In the 1960s, some people thought that the State and American corporations would be working together to export the American way of life around the world. They believed that American soft power - culture and commerce - would always be backed by hard power, i.e., the military. I think these two arms are operating with only limited knowledge of each other. Facebook, Google, and the others are just going through the world and even with its extensive surveillance apparatus, the State is mostly just trying to catch up.

Books & Ideas: What has been the legacy of the community tradition to the Gafa?

Fred Turner: The modes of gathering, self-production, and collaboration that emerged in counterculture have now become the cultural basis for new modes of manufacturing and labor. The engineers at Google work in small teams, and they need to express and know each other very well to a personal level to decide whom to work with, develop collaborations through projects, etc. And it is exactly the same social organization within the ongoing countercultural festival called [Burning Man](#) - work on collaborative and artistic projects, very intensively in small teams, with costumes which express truly who you are.

These people try to change the world and build a new kind of community through small-scale technologies. It is just the working ideology there. Another legacy of the sixties' community movement in the present is about discrimination. One of the common phenomena in the Silicon Valley now is a soft discrimination. Few people on social networks would say "I don't want to be with people unlike myself, because of your color, your sexuality, your social status", etc. And yet somehow, our social networks end up being selective and discriminating. I think though that with these new invisible forms, we are entering in a new era of discrimination, of the white inclusion community, and that is what exactly happened in the communes during the sixties.

Further Reading

WIENER, N., *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* [1950], Da Capo Press, 1988.

Whole Earth Catalog [website](#)

[Books&Ideas.net](#), 16 December, 2014.

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