

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WHOLE EARTH CATALOG

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According to Stewart Brand, the founder of the Whole Earth Catalog, the story of the catalog begins with Buckminster Fuller. In 1967, under the combined influence of Fuller's book *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* and about 200 micrograms of acid, Brand becomes convinced that circulating NASA's photographs of the planet from space is an important way to catalyze a new awareness of people's role as planetary stewards.

His second idea, a year or two later, after inheriting a large sum of money, is to go into business connecting commune dwellers with useful goods.

After visits to Drop City, Libre, the Lama Foundation, and other visionary communes in the Southwest, Brand introduces the first Whole Earth Catalog in Fall 1968, with NASA's Earth pictures on the covers. It's an eclectic compilation of resources, mostly available by mail order from various distributors around the country. Wood stoves, well-digging equipment and instructions, and home medicine manuals appear side by side with books on teaching, Taoism, electronic music, and the theory of cybernetics and feedback processes. The book begins with a manifesto:

We *are* as gods and might as well get used to it. So far, remotely done power and glory—as via government, big business, formal education, church—has succeeded to the point where gross defects obscure actual gains. In response to

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this dilemma and to these gains a realm of intimate, personal power is developing—power of the individual to conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the WHOLE EARTH CATALOG.

So there are some major themes: devolving power to individuals, a focus on individual development, and provision of ACCESS TO TOOLS as the means to social transformation. (And sexist language.)

The Catalog is republished yearly, with more or less quarterly supplements full of corrections and suggestions from readers. In 1971 the project closes down completely and gives away their surplus money.

In 1974 Brand revives the project, publishing a new edition of the Catalog and launching a magazine in the same vein, called CoEvolution Quarterly. The focus in the CoEvolution Quarterly is on ecology, sustainability, forecasting the future of the planet, and appropriate technology.

Brand has little connection to computer technology, and neither does the magazine, until 1983, when his agent talks him into taking on a Whole Earth Software Catalog. The Software Catalog and accompanying magazine, the Whole Earth Software Review, are a huge failure, but they mark a major change in the course of the Whole Earth project.

In 1985, when the Software Catalog has failed and the Software Review is about to, the decision is made to combine the Software Review with the CoEvolution Quarterly.

Thereafter the new magazine, Whole Earth Review, focuses far less on ecology and far more on flexible business management, scientific ideas

about complex systems and self-organization, and computer software and networking. This period also sees the launch of the WELL, the “Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link”, a computer bulletin board for Bay Area folks to talk and network with each other. The WELL is staffed predominantly by former residents of the Farm, the rural community headed by Stephen Gaskin in Tennessee.

In the 90s Stewart Brand becomes primarily involved with the Global Business Network, a think tank founded by Brand together with executives and business consultants from Shell and the Stanford Research Institute, whose purpose is to advise corporate executives about new ideas and help them embrace flexible management strategies, network forms, and self-organizing processes.

In 1992, the Whole Earth Review's managing editor, Kevin Kelly, is hired away to run a new magazine called *Wired*, bringing a number of Whole Earth contributors over to that world, including Brand, cyberspace civil-liberties promoter John Perry Barlow, virtual reality entrepreneur Jaron Lanier, and Howard Rheingold, the author of *Virtual Communities*. Rheingold, by the way, who edits the Whole Earth Review after Kelly, once told the New York Times, “We are living in an age when it is getting more and more unpleasant to leave your home. The WELL enables you to find like-minded souls.” *Wired*, of course, is the primary print organ of the dot com boom. During Kelly's tenure as managing editor, *Wired* features right-wing heroes George Gilder and Newt Gingrich on its cover.

The Whole Earth Review and its successor, Whole Earth magazine, struggle for about another 10 years and then the magazine folds. *Wired* continues to this day.

In the last few years, Stewart Brand has begun to promote nuclear power as the best approach to global warming and energy policy, and he says that

“the personal computer is the only thing the hippies got right”.

So the Whole Earth Catalog project begins as a tool for the 60s counterculture, to help people work out how to create a new society, and it ends up promoting the dot-com economy, which is a disaster not only for the people who lost their investment but for electronics sweatshop workers, people living in areas poisoned by the fabrication and disposal of computer chips, people evicted in the Northern California real-estate bubble, and everyone on the bottom end of the widening gap in wealth it induced.

How did this happen? How should we understand the Whole Earth Catalog in light of how it ends up, as well as on its own as an artifact of the end of the 60s?

Appearing in 1968, the Catalog appears to be part of a move away from Vietnam War activism, the New Left, and the rising militancy exemplified by the Black Panthers and Weatherman, and toward an emphasis on lifestyle and changes in consciousness. Andrew Kirk makes this point in Professor Doyle's book [*Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960's and 70's*], and so does Langdon Winner in *The Whale and the Reactor*.

Theodore Roszak, in *From Satori to Silicon Valley*, in 1986, identifies two coexisting traditions in utopian thinking: the reversionary tendency, which calls for a return to nature and more primitive or pastoral ways of living, and the technophilic tendency, which promotes progress and new technologies. In his view, the Whole Earth Catalog is part of an attempt to synthesize the two traditions: computers AND advanced cybernetic scientific ideas AND intimate rural living AND eastern mysticism. But, as Roszak writes, “the synthesis crumbled, and the technophilic values of the counterculture won out. . . They are, after all, the values of the mainstream

and the commanding heights, forces that have proved far more tenacious than most members of the counterculture guessed.”

More recently, Frederick Turner's recent dissertation at UCSD deals with this history in detail. The title of his dissertation is “From Counterculture to Cyberculture: How Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth Catalog brought us *Wired Magazine*”.

Turner highlights the Catalog's joining of high-tech research and counterculture ideology. Making this connection, he says, allows the two to legitimate each other, connects disparate communities—cybernetics and computer researchers, and commune dwellers—and creates what he names a *contact language* that allows ideas to cross over between the two domains. This is crucial in redefining the image of the computer, from a tool of centralized regimentation and oppression, to a tool of personal and political liberation. This hybrid image was central to the mythology of the dot com era.

Turner identifies a number of ironies in the history of the Whole Earth project, in addition to the shift from opposing centralization and hierarchy to promoting government deregulation and concentration of political and economic power. While espousing equality and focusing heavily on futurism and models of global trends, they ignored trends of increasing wealth disparity from the 1970s to the 90s and “created a rhetoric that masked them”; they consistently obscured existing hierarchies of power, from Stewart Brand's dominance of the publishing projects to the impacts on workers of the “flexible” business practices they promoted. And finally the creation of a business model, beginning with the original Catalog and continuing with the WELL, that blurs the line between the company and its customers, essentially inducing customers to create the product, and then selling the customers and their work to each other and keeping the profits (a

current example is myspace.com).

I would add the shift from serving visionary rural communitarian projects to promoting “virtual community”, while contributing to the destruction of real communities in the Bay Area and overseas by the dot com economy.

The Whole Earth Catalog was also influential in the transformation of the counterculture into a form of consumer identity, in obvious ways. And promoting globalization. (Think of Whole Foods Market: there you have both at once.)

So some people I've talked to about this say, “Well, Brand, you know, he just got older and sold out: just like Jerry Rubin and the rest of them.” And it's true that he really changed in the 80s. But there's a lot of continuity as well.

Going back to the beginning: the patron saint and inspiration of the catalog is Buckminster Fuller; it says so on the first page of the catalog. Fuller's central position in that the modern world has such an abundance of know-how that if we choose, we can eliminate scarcity and depletion of resources, by the intelligent application of DESIGN. When people understand that there is no more scarcity, he says, there will be no more war and we will enter a new era of peace and intelligent stewardship.

This ideology of design, with its faith in the power of ideas, and denial of the persistence of inequality and exploitation, is almost identical to the mythology of the dot com era—that new technology can bring with it a new social order that will set everyone free without hardly trying.

And it's not like nobody brought up the issues the Catalog was ignoring. Let me share with you part of a letter that appears in the Jan. 1970 supplement. It's from a guy named Jay Bonner:

Sometimes I don't care about nothing, but right now I do. It sickens me to think that over 150,000 people are going to pick up the Whole Earth Catalog and thoughtlessly think it's great, like I did.

The function of the catalog is to provide access of tools for and from the WHOLE Earth. Roughly 80% of the peoples of this *Whole* Earth are being sucked on by various capitalistic countries of this world. Yet for some reason the problems of these "third world" people are not even mentioned in the catalog. There are books and various publications written by educated and experienced writers on these problems and their solutions. I really don't think the title "Whole Earth" is quite adequate for the catalog at this point.

Stewart Brand, the man who originally created and conceived the idea of a Whole Earth Catalog and truck store, does not seem to share my feelings that these types of political books and various publications should be in the catalog. Once, while working with him on the catalog, I asked Mr. Brand if he would not carry any of a various number of politically oriented underground newspapers. Upon reply he told me that three of the first restrictions he made for the catalog were no art, no religion, no politics.

I would like to point out that, although Mr. Brand apparently does not think so, all of the three basic ground rules he set up for himself at the beginning and told me of little over three months ago, he has broken.

To start with art . . . Then we move on to religion . . . Lastly we come along to items of political significance. In this we find quite a few.

Handbook for Conscientious Objectors

The Population Bomb

Population Evolution and Birth Control

Birth Control Handbook

Atlas Shrugged

The Wall St. Journal and any number of “future” books.

I can understand why Mr. Brand makes such a distinction between, for example the Handbook for Conscientious Objectors, and a good book on Marxian theory, it's because he's a capitalist. The inclusion of books on such subjects would hinder catalog sales, and after all it's not serving the people he's interested in, it's making money, and believe me he has plenty of it. Besides, it's against all his economic beliefs.

Yes, Mr. Brand's personal feelings really show up in what should properly be called the “Stewart Brand Catalog”. From all the 128 pages of the Whole Earth Catalog there emerges an unmentioned political viewpoint. The whole feeling of escapism which the catalog conveys is to me unfortunate.

. . . The idea of the catalog is a good one. The people need a Whole Earth Catalog, but not the one they're getting! If you feel at all the same, write Stewart Brand.

Stewart Brand responds:

[Jay worked with his brother Joe doing layout on the Fall Catalog and was not rehired for January production, because of too many technical mistakes on his pages. Jay is 17. (I'm 31. How old are you? It matters, more than any of us like.) Correct I have some money, thanks to parents, which I'm putting into work like the Catalog. My salary is \$5/hr. The Catalog is non-

profit, so our income . . . can only be spent on further educational projects.] The capitalism question is interesting. I've yet to figure out what capitalism is, but if it's what we're doing, I dig it. [Oppressed peoples: all I know is I've been radicalized by working on the Catalog into far more personal involvement with politics than I had as an artist. My background is WASP, wife is American Indian.] Work I did a few years ago with Indians convinced me that any guilt-based action toward anyone (personal or institutional) can only make a situation worse. . . . I'm for power to the people and responsibility to the people. . . .

This is not the same as going to bat for Shell Oil, but I do think that in place of saying that the Whole Earth folks were co-opted and corrupted by the so-called libertarian capitalists, we could just as well say that they were pretty much libertarian capitalists all along. And definitely when he says “no politics” he also means keeping it predominantly white and male-dominated.

But also: Really a lot of good people did good work that appeared in the catalogs and magazines, and it was very useful. I think there's a lot of value in the work they did, of connecting the scientific project of modeling whole systems to values of communitarian living and social revolution, and Eastern philosophy and psychedelic transformation of consciousness. I believe, or at least I want to believe, that there's a lot of value in those connections.

As it happened in this history, the valuable insights of system theory and ecology were joined to an uncritical promotion of technology, faith in progress, and a hopelessly idealistic conception of social change, and the whole project ended up corrupt and destructive.

Is it possible to make a synthesis of technically advanced knowledge and human-scale social transformation without falling into these traps? It seems to happen again and again. What could *that* project look like?