Don't Be Evil:

Fred Turner on Utopias, Frontiers, and Brogrammers

Fred Turner is one of the world's leading authorities on Silicon Valley. A professor at Stanford and a former journalist, he has written extensively on the politics and culture of tech. We sat down with him to discuss how Silicon Valley sees itself, and what it means when the tech industry says it wants to save the world.

Let's start with the idea that technology is always a force for good. This strain of thought is pervasive in Silicon Valley. Where does it come from? What are its origins?

It owes its origins to 1960s communalism. A brief primer on the counterculture: there were actually two countercultures. One, the New Left, did politics to change politics. It was very much focused on institutions, and not really afraid of hierarchy.

The other—and this is where the tech world gets its mojo—is what I've called the New Communalists. Between 1966 and 1973, we had the largest wave of commune building in American history. These people were involved in turning away from politics, away from bureaucracy, and toward a world in which they could change their consciousness. They believed small-scale technologies would help them do that. They wanted to change the world by creating new tools for consciousness transformation.

This is the tradition that drives claims by companies like Google and Facebook that they are making the world a better place by connecting

people. It's a kind of connectionist politics. Like the New Communalists, they are imagining a world that's completely leveled, in which hierarchy has been dissolved. They're imagining a world that's fundamentally without politics.

It's worth pointing out that this tradition, at least in the communes, has a terrible legacy. The communes were, ironically, extraordinarily conservative.

When you take away bureaucracy and hierarchy and politics, you take away the ability to negotiate the distribution of resources on explicit terms. And you replace it with charisma, with cool, with shared but unspoken perceptions of power. You replace it with the cultural forces that guide our behavior in the absence of rules.

So suddenly you get these charismatic men running communes—and women in the back having babies and putting bleach in the water to keep people from getting sick. Many of the communes of the 1960s were among the most racially segregated, heteronormative, and authoritarian spaces I've ever looked at.

But how were computers in particular supposed to create a world without bureaucracy or hierarchy or politics? How was information technology going to facilitate the kinds of transformations the New Communalists were looking for?

So the New Communalists failed, in a big way. By 1973, virtually all of the communes had disappeared or dissolved.

Through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, most of the folks who used to be on the communes are still in the Bay Area. And the tech world is bubbling up around them. They need work, so many of them start working in the tech world.

The folks associated with the commune movement—particularly Stewart Brand and the people formerly associated with the Whole Earth Catalog—begin to reimagine computers as the tools of countercultural change that they couldn't make work in the 1960s.

Stewart Brand actually calls computers "the new LSD." The fantasy is that they will be tools for the transformation of consciousness—that now, finally, we'll be able to do with the computer what we couldn't do with LSD and communes. We'll be able to connect people through online systems and build new infrastructure around them.

Do you think this techno-utopian tradition runs as deep in the tech industry today as it did in the past?

It varies depending on the company. Apple is, in some ways, very cynical. It markets utopian ideas all the time. It markets its products as tools of utopian transformation in a countercultural vein. It has co-opted a series of the emblems of the counterculture, starting as soon as the company was founded.

At other companies, I think it's very sincere. I've spent a lot of time at Facebook lately, and I think they sincerely want to build what Mark Zuckerberg calls a more connected world. Whether their practice matches their beliefs, I don't know.

About ten years back, I spent a lot of time inside Google. What I saw there was an interesting loop. It started with, "Don't be evil." So then the question became, "Okay, what's good?" Well, information is good. Information empowers people. So providing information is good. Okay, great. Who provides information? Oh, right: Google provides information. So you end up in this loop where what's good for people is what's good for Google, and vice versa. And that is a challenging space to live in.

I think the impulse to save the world is quite sincere. But people get the impulse to save the world and the impulse to do well for the company a bit tangled up with each other. Of course, that's an old Protestant tradition.

What about techno-utopianism *outside* of these companies? Do you think it's as strong as it's been in the past?

Back in the 1990s, the idea that technology was a force for good enjoyed broad mainstream appeal. I'm thinking of Al Gore, *Wired*, the hype around the dot-com boom and the "New Economy."

Today, that narrative hasn't disappeared—especially within Silicon Valley. But overall, the mood of the national conversation has become more skeptical. There's more talk about the dark side of technology: surveillance, data mining, facial recognition software, "fake news," and so on. We've seen more resistance to the basic utopian line. Where do you think that comes from?

I think you can track it directly to the Snowden revelations.

I've taught a course every year for fifteen years called Digital Media in Society. And when I started teaching the course in 2003, my students were always like, "Oh Turner, he's so negative. It would be such a better course if you would just read Apple's website." And then more recently, it's like, "Oh Turner, he's so positive. What's his problem?"

The turning point was Snowden. In terms of the public conversation, Snowden is when people became aware of surveillance and began to see it as a problem.

The other thing to say about the utopian idea is that it lives in the Valley partly as a marketing strategy. This is a political operation of the first importance. If the Valley can convince Washington that the Valley is the

home of the future and that its leaders see things that leaders back in stuffy old DC can't see, then they can also make a case for being deregulated.

Right.

Why regulate the future? Who wants to do that?

So, it's very tactical. Claiming the high ground of the utopian future is a very tactical claim.

It seems that tech companies also prefer the deregulatory approach when it comes to what content to allow on their platforms. Their default is laissez-faire—to not interfere with what people can post. Where does that attitude come from?

I see the laissez-faire attitude as rooted in engineering culture and rewarded by business. Some people see it as a very calculating business decision. I think there's an element of that—certainly it's rewarded—but I see something deeper going on.

Engineering culture is about making the product. If you make the product work, that's all you've got to do to fulfill the ethical warrant of your profession. The ethics of engineering are an ethics of: Does it work? If you make something that works, you've done the ethical thing. It's up to other people to figure out the social mission for your object. It's like the famous line from the Tom Lehrer song: "'Once the rockets are up, who cares where they come down? That's not my department,' says Wernher von Braun."

So I think that engineers, at Facebook and other firms, have been a bit baffled when they've been told that the systems they've built—systems that are clearly working very well and whose effectiveness is measured by the profits they generate, so everything looks ethical and "good" in the Google

sense—are corrupting the public sphere. And that they're not just engineers building new infrastructures—they're media people.

Several years ago, I spent a lot of time around Google engineers who were connected to the journalism enterprise early on. They had a robust language around information control and management. When the conversation shifted to news, however, they had no idea what the conversation was about. News was something different.

Engineering-based firms that are in fact media firms like Facebook are really struggling to develop new ethical terms for managing the encounter they're having. I give them the benefit of the doubt. I think they are sincerely trying to deploy the ethical frameworks that they have from engineering. And they are sincerely baffled when they don't work.

What are those ethical frameworks?

Engineers try to do politics by changing infrastructure.

That's what they do. They tweak infrastructure. It's a little bit like an ancient Roman trying to shape public debate by reconfiguring the Forum. "We'll have seven new entrances instead of six, and the debate will change."

The engineering world doesn't have a conception of how to intervene in debate that isn't infrastructural.

Let's switch gears a bit back to history. One of the things that I loved about your book _From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism_ was its very measured perspective.

Thanks. I worked really hard at that. I took some lumps inside the left academic world where I live for being too nice to Stewart Brand.

You seem to have a certain affection—maybe affection is too strong a word, but certainly an appreciation—for the tradition that's identified with Stewart Brand, but which also has earlier antecedents like Norbert Wiener and others.

But today, techno-utopianism—for lack of a better word—seems pretty hollowed out. It's been weaponized by these big companies to sell products and push their agenda. It's hard not to feel cynical about its rhetoric.

So my question is: Is there any hope for techno-utopianism? Can we salvage a piece of that original vision, or is it a line of thinking that we should try to move on from?

Any utopianism tends to be a totalizing system. It promises a total solution to problems that are always piecemeal. So the problem from my perspective isn't the technological part of technological utopianism but the utopianism part.

Any whole-system approach doesn't work. What I would recommend is not that we abandon technology, but that we deal with it as an integrated part of our world, and that we engage it the same way that we engage the highway system, the architecture that supports our buildings, or the way we organize hospitals.

The technologies that we've developed are infrastructures. We don't have a language yet for infrastructure as politics. And enough magic still clings to the devices that people are very reluctant to start thinking about them as ordinary as tarmac.

But we need to start thinking about them as ordinary as tarmac. And we need to develop institutional settings for thinking about how we want to

make our traffic laws. To the extent that technologies enable new collaborations and new communities, more power to them. But let's be thoughtful about how they function.

Utopianism, as a whole, is not a helpful approach. Optimism is helpful. But optimism can be partial: it allows room for distress and dismay, it allows room for difference. It's not, as they used to say in the 1960s, all one all the time.

What are the "politics of infrastructure"? What does that phrase mean?

It means several different things. First, it involves the recognition that the built environment, whether it's built out of tarmac or concrete or code, has political effects. I was joking earlier about reshaping the Forum, but I shouldn't have joked quite so much, because the fact that the Forum was round encouraged one kind of debate.

Think about an auditorium where someone sits onstage and the audience watches, versus a Quaker meeting where everyone sits in a circle. They're very different.

So, structure matters. Design is absolutely critical. Design is the process by which the politics of one world become the constraints on another. How are those constraints built? What are its effects on political life?

To study the politics of infrastructure is to study the political ideas that get built into the design process, and the infrastructure's impact on the political possibilities of the communities that engage it.

The Electronic Frontier

One of the most visible emblems of the techno-utopian tradition is Burning Man. You wrote a great article called "Burning Man at Google" about what the festival means for Silicon Valley.

I'm never going back. I've been three times. I'm done.

What are some of the social practices and cultural institutions around the tech industry that come to life at Burning Man?

Burning Man is to the tech world what the nineteenth-century Protestant church was to the factory.

In the nineteenth century, if you lived in a small factory town, you'd work six days a week through Saturday. Then on Sunday, you'd go to church, and the bosses would sit up front, the middle managers would sit right behind them, and all the workers would sit in the back. You'd literally rehearse the order of the factory. You'd show, in the church, how you oriented all of your labor toward the glory of God.

At Burning Man, what you're rehearsing is project-based collaborative labor. Engineers flowing in from the Valley are literally acting out the social structures on which Valley engineering depends. But they can do something at Burning Man that they can't do in the Valley: they can own the project. They can experience total "flow" with a team of their own choosing. In the desert, in weirdly perfect conditions, they can do what the firm promises them but can't quite deliver.

The Valley's utopian promise is: Come here and build the future with other like-minded folks. Dissolve yourself into the project and emerge having saved the future. Well, at Burning Man, you can actually do that. You pick your team, you make a work of art, people admire your art, and you are in

a self-described utopian community that, at least for that moment, models an alternative future.

So Burning Man is a way to fulfill the promise that Silicon Valley makes but can't keep.

Burning Man is the very model of the Puritan ideal. What did the Puritans want? The Puritans, when they came to America, imagined that they would be under the eye of God. They imagined they would build a city on a hill. "The eyes of all people are upon us," John Winthrop said.

When I went to Burning Man, that's what struck me: I am in the desert. The desert of Israel, from the Bible, under the eye of heaven, and everything I do shall be meaningful. That's a Protestant idea, a Puritan idea, a tech idea, and a commune idea. All of those come together at Burning Man and that's one of the reasons I'm fascinated by the place.

Burning Man has many problems, of course, and I am distressed by many pieces of it. However, there was a moment I had during my first visit when I went two miles out in the desert and I looked back at the city and there was a sign that looked just like a gas station sign and it was turning, the way gas station signs do. It could've been a Gulf or Citgo sign, but it wasn't. It was a giant pink heart. And for just a moment, I got to imagine that my suburbs back in Silicon Valley were ruled over not by Gulf and Citgo, but by love.

That's a thread running through Burning Man. And it's a thread that I treasure. In the midst of all the other things that made me crazy.

Burning Man also seems to embody Silicon Valley's fascination with the idea of the frontier. You mentioned John Winthrop, and in *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, you discuss John Perry Barlow and

Kevin Kelly and the other folks who popularized the notion of the internet as an "electronic frontier."

It certainly became a very popular metaphor in the 1990s—but how do you think it's aged? Would it be fair to say that the electronic frontier has "closed" like the physical American one did in 1890—or was it never a satisfying metaphor to begin with?

The first thing to know about that metaphor is that it comes not only from deep American history but very specifically from the Kennedy era.

After World War II, we transform from being a bush-league country that doesn't even have a unified highway system yet into a place that has enough abundance, enough money, and enough technology to do things like send hippies out across the country in VW buses for two years to make movies. That's a big transformation. On the industrial and intellectual side, people like John F. Kennedy begin talking about the "New Frontier." They promote the idea that space will be the new frontier, that technology will be the new frontier, that science will be the new frontier. And the technical world in particular becomes preoccupied with that. Those folks from the 1990s you mention are children of that world.

One of the great myths of the counterculture is that it wasn't engaged with the military-industrial complex. That's true of the New Left—but it's not true of the New Communalists. The communalists were engaged with cybernetics in a big way. They bought deeply into the hope that through LSD, they would attend to new psychological frontiers and build new social frontiers.

Today, the American rhetoric of a new frontier has disappeared. Trump is about making America great again in his retrograde, macho, pseudo-fascist kind of way. Nobody thinks they live on a frontier anymore.

However, inside the tech world, there are still people microdosing with LSD. There are still people experimenting with polyamorous relationships. There are still people pursuing the intersection of consciousness change and new social structures. And those worlds are still quite tightly intertwined with the legacy of the counterculture. So although the language of the new frontier has gone, and the frontier itself has been closed off by surveillance and commerce, people who work within tech are still treating their lives as if they were frontier settlers. And that's fascinating to watch.

The other aspect of the frontier metaphor is its libertarian politics. There's always been a libertarian core to the techno-utopian tradition. It seems to come out of the anti-institutional ethos of the counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and then morphs into a kind of hippie Reaganism in the 1980s and 1990s. That's how you get *Wired* running these flattering pieces on Newt Gingrich in the 1990s.

Oh, it's so horrifying.

And that's why everyone thinks the tech industry is full of libertarians. But there's also a sizable constituency of workers in tech with very different politics—people who identify as leftists or socialists. After all, a lot of tech workers supported Bernie during the Democratic primaries. Do you think new political space has opened up in the industry recently? Or was the industry always more politically diverse than its reputation?

That wing has always been there. One of the things I've been trying to figure out is whether it's changed more recently. The answer to the question can be found, more or less, in something called the Silicon Valley Index, which is a wonderful demographic study of the Valley. It's been done for about fifteen years, and what it suggests is that the politics of the Valley

have held constant—which surprises me. It has been a liberal, left-leaning, Democratic region as a whole pretty steadily for fifteen years.

But the people who get most of the attention in the Valley are the big CEOs. I think that the vision of the Valley as a libertarian space is a combination of actual libertarian beliefs held by people like Peter Thiel and a celebration of libertarian ideals by an East Coast press that wants to elevate inventor types. Steve Jobs is the most famous. East Coast journalists want to rejuvenate the American hero myth—and they're going to find a world to do it in.

In order to make these heroes, however, they have to cut them off from the context that produced them. They can't tell a context story. They can't tell a structure story. They have to tell a hero story. Suddenly the heroes themselves look like solo actors who pushed away the world to become the libertarian ideal of an Ayn Rand novel. So I think it's a collaboration between actually existing tech leaders and the press around a myth.

That really resonates with how the press covers someone like Elon Musk.

Exactly: Elon Musk is the classic example. And I actually really admire Elon Musk. I should say that one of my principles for working on Silicon Valley has been to take people at their word.

The first news story I ever did when I was a journalist was about a guy who bilked widows out of their houses. My job was to figure out how he did it. So I spent all afternoon with him. He was a totally charming man. He didn't lie to me. He told me exactly how he did it. I reported the story and I got two kinds of letters. One kind of letter said, "You finally busted the prick. You nailed him." The other kind of letter was written by his friends. I

was sure they were going to hate me. But they said, "You finally showed the world what a great businessman he is."

As we try to figure out Silicon Valley, I think it's important to pull back a bit and try to see it from both sides. That can be tough if you have stakes in the debate. But it also gives you more room to see the whole world.

I also wonder whether one of the reasons that tech CEOs dominate the media narrative is that the ubiquity of nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) make it very hard for rank-and-file tech workers to have a public voice.

One of the ironies of the Valley is that the NDAs do prevent the transmission of stories from the Valley to Washington, New York, Boston, and elsewhere. But within the Valley, everybody knows everybody, more or less, so the NDA doesn't apply.

The Birth of the Brogrammer

Why is the tech industry so young? And why does it put such a premium on youth? Is that also the legacy of the 1960s counterculture —the cult of youth?

The industry wasn't young during its early days, when it was funded by the government. At first, Silicon Valley was dominated by federal funding— you had big military contractors like Texas Instruments. In the 1970s, virtually every chip that's made gets put in a Polaris missile. There were young people, sure, but there were also career-length engineers.

The startup culture we have now only really begins in the 1980s—and with it, the project-based work style emerges. That's when a premium starts to get placed on people who can pump out ninety hours a week and don't have kids and also have the most recent technical training from places like

Stanford and Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon and Harvard. That's when youth comes pouring in.

Today, age discrimination is a central feature of the Valley. But another thing to remember about the Valley is that people tend not to live there forever. They migrate in and out. I often think of the Valley as an island. I believe 40 percent of its residents at the moment were not born in the United States. People come to the Valley for ten years and then they go back to their home country and start a firm. It's a long-term migrant spot. It's not like my hometown, where people have been there for three generations.

So do you think Silicon Valley's obsession with youth is driven more by economic imperatives than the cultural residue of the 1960s?

Our society tends to give permission to younger people to do certain kinds of experimenting that also happen to be really valuable inside the tech world. So, for example, we give our young people permission not to get married or have kids until they're in their mid-thirties. That gives you your whole twenties to live in tech dorms, to try stuff out, to do things that my grandmother would have considered screwing up. My grandmother wanted to get married by twenty-seven. She was committed to that. And she wanted to have stability. She wanted to buy a house. She wanted to grow her family. She had a very particular vision of the progress of life.

If your vision of the progress of life includes a long hiatus for your twenties, that's great for tech firms. If you stay all night at Google, that's great for Google. They can bring you the barber. They can bring you the restaurant. You can have your love life at the firm. Have multiple partners, they don't care. As long as you are super flexible and committed to the firm.

Because you mentioned age discrimination, I wonder if you could speak to the prevalence of sexism and sexual harassment in the tech industry. There's been a lot of media coverage recently about a spate of recent scandals—but sexism is obviously something that's been a core feature of Silicon Valley for awhile.

Any professional world in which you have extremely powerful men who are gatekeepers to lifestyles that young women want, predation occurs. What's particular to the tech world, I think, is the fantasy.

A lot of the guys that I've talked to who are tech people are really excited about the moment when they turn on a computer that they had built themselves and it works. These are men whose careers revolve around making stuff do things. And they see the world as a whole that way sometimes. They feel a mode of control associated with this kind of God's eye view.

In that kind of world, a man who is a gatekeeper with a lot of power may imagine that a young woman can be manipulated like a switch on a computer. That she's part of a system that they can control and manage. And they have a need—a need to be gratified. Well, the computer gratified them the last time they turned it on. Maybe they can turn a woman on, in that same very mechanical sense. That's what I see.

That's pretty scary.

I have a theory, and I offer it to you as a pocket theory. I have a category of theories that I call pocket theories. Because there is no evidence, no research behind them. So my pocket theory is that different eras have different focal communities—places they use to think with. In the late nineteenth century, it would have been Edith Wharton's New York. Or maybe a little later, Theodore Dreiser's Chicago.

Dreiser's Chicago became a place that people used to think through the consequences of the rise of industry. All sorts of things that weren't unique to Chicago, like immigration, became things that people thought about in that space.

I think the Valley is where we do our thinking now about gender and sexuality. How people do sexuality has changed enormously with the introduction of new media. My wife and I have been married for thirty-plus years. When we were courting, we wrote beautiful handwritten letters on blue paper and mailed them long distance. You'd wait weeks for them. You'd fill in every little gap of the page. Now, we FaceTime. There's no withheld gratification.

Romance of the kind that I grew up with was something that took time. It required restraining your desires. It required thinking about another person. I mean, one of the most erotic things you can do with a person is think about them, right? Just think about them. That's different in a world where you can press a button and their face appears. The possibility of push-button sexuality is very much alive in the Valley.

That mode of sexuality seems like another artifact of the counterculture, to return to the beginning of our conversation. Do you have any closing reflections on the legacy of the counterculture in tech, or on the techno-utopian tradition more broadly?

I want to say one more thing about politics.

One of the legacies of the counterculture, particularly on the left, is the idea that expression is action. This idea has haunted those of us on the left for a long time.

But one of the reasons that the Tea Party came to power was that they organized—they built institutions. So the challenge for those of us who want a different world is not to simply trust that the expressive variety that the internet permits is the key to freedom. Rather, we need to seek a kind of freedom that involves people not like us, that builds institutions that support people not like us—not just ones that help gratify our desires to find new partners or build better micro-worlds.

The New Communalists believed that the micro-world was where politics happened. If we could just build a better micro-world, we could live by example to create a better world for the whole. I think that's wrong. Our challenge is to build a world that takes responsibility for people not like ourselves. And it's a challenge we won't meet by enhancing our expressive abilities, or improving the technologies of expressive connection.