

The Counter-Cultural Online Frontier – Or the Quest for Mythological Balance through Eternal Movement

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This article grows out of a general interest in popular music and its connected practices – in relation to notions and theories of consumption and/or use, as well as a more specific interest in the movement of such practices unto a new terrain via the Internet. A different, but closely related area of concern, is the issue of how the various histories of popular music associated with the counter-cultural sixties are a part of this new terrain, histories which upon examination are found to involve the propagation of a wide range of cultural ideals.

Such a perspective allows one to focus on particular practices connected with the consumption of popular music and those of the Internet, namely the interrelated aspects of community and (commodity-) exchanges. The ensuing enquiry focuses primarily on the former of these. In particular, I want to draw attention to the various ways in which certain early and agenda-setting conceptualizations of community in relation to the Internet may be seen to be rooted in specific historical experiences and cultural practices. Examinations of these in one form or another still underpin a substantial part of the rapidly expanding number of Internet-community studies, producing what might be seen as a special sixties-inflected view of mediated communities; I wish to discuss why

these conceptualizations have had such a sustained impact both within academia and the wider culture.

My principal point of departure in this discussion is the writings of two of the best-known personalities of the digital age, variously referred to as cybergurus, cyberelite, cyberfuturists, cyber-hippies and partisans: John Perry Barlow, author of "The Declaration of Independence in Cyberspace," co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, frequent contributor to *Wired* magazine, and lyricist of the Grateful Dead; and Howard Rheingold, author of *Virtual Communities* and founder of the Hotwired webzine. In their diverse ways, Barlow and Rheingold embody affiliations between the practices of rock communities, the counter-cultural sixties, and the new technology (and ideology) of the Internet, establishing a loose alliance that Barbrook and Cameron have described as "the Californian ideology."¹ What has emerged is a somewhat strange amalgam of the ideologies of the New Left and Right, two sides that Rheingold and Barlow respectively can be connected to, and whose common ground this article seeks to elucidate.

Setting the Stage: The Well

John Parry Barlow was one of the most visible among what has been called the civil libertarians who took part in the (semi-)public debate related to what Bruce Sterling calls the "The Hacker Crackdown" in the early 1990s, a debate and development set in motion by Barlow when he "published" his account of his encounter with the FBI in the midst of the federal effort to crack down on illegal uses of communication technology.² After this successful entry unto the digital scene, over the following years Barlow produced a number of journalistic and/or essayistic

1. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology" (2000), <http://www.wmin.ac.uk/media/HRC7ci/calif5.html>. Accessed May 15, 2001.

2. Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992). Due to his connection to – in the words of Sterling – "a yearly Californian meeting of digital pioneers" called "The Hackers Conference," Barlow was visited by an FBI representative in the early 1990s. However, The Hackers Conference had "little if anything to do with the hackers of the digital underground" (Sterling 237).

pieces, most of which are written in a somewhat muddled, sappy style full of references to history and popular culture and (nearly) always with clear a expository, polemical and somewhat idealistic leaning. The best known of these are probably "The Declaration of Independence in Cyberspace" (1996), "The Economy of Ideas" (1994), and "Crime and Puzzlement" (1990).³

The last of these came into being as a manifesto for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which Barlow established together with Michell Kapor, co-inventor of Lotus 1-2-3, who had contacted Barlow after reading his story about FBI's visit to Barlow's house.⁴ "Crime and Puzzlement" was an attempt to extend the Constitution unto the digital sphere, and the text was, according to Sterling, "distributed far and wide through computer networking channels and also printed in the *Whole Earth Review*," a quarterly update of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the electronic extension of which was established in 1985 as the "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link," the WELL.⁵

Indeed, the texts and persons in focus here all seem to coalesce around this early electronic conference system, or bulletin board, in the San Francisco Bay Area. "Once the Internet had been privatized," says Abbate,

many users of cooperative networks began to switch to Internet Service Providers. This represented the convergence of two strands of network development: the users of grass-roots networks adopted the Internet infrastructure, while the Internet community adopted newsgroups and other applications that had been popularized by the cooperative networks.⁶

But if this "convergence" is merely a source of excitement and wonder for Abbate, it is the foundation of dynamic potential for Howard Rheingold:

3. My discussion of Barlow is based primarily upon these writings, and not on his numerous other articles in *Wired*, most of which basically repeat the arguments from these articles.

4. "Based in San Francisco, EFF [The Electronic Frontier Foundation] is a donor-supported membership organization working to protect our fundamental rights regardless of technology; to educate the press, policy-makers and the general public about civil liberties issues related to technology; and to act as a defender of those liberties." <http://www.eff.org/abouteff.html#who>. Accessed August 14, 2001.

5. Sterling, 229. These publications will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

6. Janet Abbate, *Inventing the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 205.

The Net is so widespread and anarchic today because of the way its main sources converged in the 1980s, after years of independent, apparently unrelated development, using different technologies and involving different populations of participants. The technical and social convergence were fated, but not widely foreseen by the late 1970s.⁷

One of those "different populations of participants" was the cooperative, grass-roots network, the WELL, which started in 1984 and which shifted unto the Internet in the early 1990s. It began as the electronic bulletin board of the Point Foundation, an organisation headed by Stewart Brand, which since 1968 had published *The Whole Earth Catalog* and its later (magazine) offsprings and incarnations, the *CoEvolution Quarterly*, *The Whole Earth Software Catalog*, as well as the *Whole Earth Review*, which is still in print, and for which Howard Rheingold served as editor emeritus from 1990 till 1994. It is Rheingold's involvement with the WELL that lies behind his much-quoted *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993), part of which is a rather impassioned and impressionistic account of his own affiliation with this conferencing system from the mid-eighties to the publication of his book in 1993.

Jan Fernback surely has a point when he remarks that Rheingold nourishes the community of the WELL by "cultivating the group's legacy," and so do the many references to this community in academic writings and other media. But rather than using Rheingold's account as primary research material in an investigation of the WELL community per se (even though his deliberations obviously somehow contribute to the symbolic construction and continuation of that community), his thoughts and feelings are in the following seen as specific attempts at description/theorization of this community, and with that of online communities in general. Rheingold very explicitly portrays the WELL as an example of the potentials of online communities. Thus, he has been one of the major contributors to the process by which the WELL became "a force whose influence was wildly disproportionate to its size"; Rheingold would himself presumably second Hafner's opinion that the "idea of the WELL is in some ways more potent than the actuality."⁸

7. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 6.

8. Katie Hafner, "The Epic Saga of the WELL," *Wired*, Issue 5.05 (May 1997).

The WELL, says Rheingold, was “rooted in the San Francisco Bay area and in two separate cultural revolutions that took place there in the past decades.”⁹ The first of these was the Haight-Asbury counterculture that lay behind Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*, an “access to tools and ideas to all communards,” or, in Brand’s own words: an “access-to-tools compendium”;¹⁰ the second cultural revolution was that instigated by the personal-computer pioneers in the late seventies. In the account of Rheingold (and Brand) these two cultural revolutions are seen as intricately linked in the sense that they share the visions of emancipation in terms of both politics and consciousness that emerged in, and grew out of, the sixties. But whereas the latter “revolution” (at least to some extent) constituted a means, the former was and somehow continued to be an end, namely that of communal and self-sufficient living.

Brand started the WELL together with Larry Brilliant, two people who, according to Rheingold,

shared a history at the center of several of the most colorful events of the 1960s: Brand was “on the bus” with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters (Kesey’s pot bust, as described in Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Acid Test*, happened on the roof of Brand’s apartment ...) ... [and] Brilliant had been part of the Prankster-affiliated commune, the Hog Farm.¹¹

In Rheingold’s account, the establishment of the WELL was a very conscious attempt to implement the experiences of the Hog Farm in order to build an online community, a “cultural experiment” with the potential of being a “vehicle for social change.” Thus, in its early years, the WELL was managed by veterans from the Farm: Matthew McCluere, Cliff Figallo and John “Text” Coate. Rather than hiring them for their computer skills, Brand allegedly employed these people because of the experiences “from the frontlines of communal living about the way people

9. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 39.

10. Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab – Inventing the Future at MIT* (New York: Viking, 1987).

11. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 40. Katie Hafner points out that Brilliant delivered the technology and money, while Brand supplied the people. See Hafner, 1997. The (Hog) Farm was a hippie commune established in Taos, New Mexico, in the late 1960s. The Merry Pranksters was a group set in motion by, and travelling with, Ken Kesey on a many-coloured bus dubbed “Further.” Kesey (famous author of *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*) had taken part in a government drug research program in which he encountered a variety of psychoactive drugs, and it was his experiences from that program that lay the foundation for his activities with the Pranksters.

reach decisions and create cultures collectively – and the ways people fail to reach decisions and create cultures.”¹² Yet, the WELL was not established simply as an unspecified community, but more precisely as “a community ... that reflected the nature of the Whole Earth publications.”¹³

It is interesting to dwell for a moment on the purpose of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the first in the line of Whole Earth publications. According to Rheingold, the purpose was – as the groups of people moved out from Haight-Asbury and the city – to provide “access to tools and ideas to all the communes who were exploring alternate ways of life in the forests of Mendocino or the high desserts outside Santa Fe.”¹⁴ In opposition to the obscuring effects of government, big business, formal education and the church, and in alliance with a developing “realm of intimate personal power,” the overall, and self-stated goal of the publication was to give access to, and promote tools, that aided the process of developing the “power of individuals to conduct their own education, find their own inspiration, shape their own environment, and share the adventure with whoever is interested.”¹⁵ Essentially, the catalogue was a collection of short reviews (by many different people) of various things – tools, seeds, fertilisers, books, etc. – which were put together in the hope that they somehow might help people realize the goal of personal empowerment.

The things reviewed could not, however, be obtained directly from the publisher, or the foundation behind the publication: the purpose was not to sell but to exchange information, or “to point,” as it says (whether that is why the organisation behind the initiative is called the Point Foundation is not entirely clear). What is important here is thus, as the subtitle says, “tools and ideas,” and the catalogue, therefore, does not only give access to tools, but access to tools seen and selected through the experiences of people in “similar” positions and with a similar world-view. Broadly speaking, it is a sharing of knowledge and experiences that might advance small and self-sustained groups/communes in some unde-

12. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 40.

13. Kevin Kelly, as quoted in Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 43.

14. Howard Rheingold, “A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community,” in Linda M. Harasim, ed., *Global Networks: Computers and International Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 72.

15. J. J. Baldwin, *The Essential Whole Earth Catalog* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 2.

financed opposition to larger structures and more established channels of information and communication, i.e. people “exploring alternatives and ideas not available in the mass media.”¹⁶

Seen in the light of such a purpose, the online community of the WELL would seem an almost natural extension of the catalogue, as it was meant to be, and Rheingold – well-aware of and linked to the Whole Earth enterprise – in many ways thinks about the WELL (and other online communities) in relation to such a continuity. The WELL is thus seen as a new medium that, with a purpose similar to the catalogue, can serve those “exploring alternatives” but who no longer reside in rural communes. In that regard the WELL may be seen as a response to an increasingly fragmented and scattered “audience” having been severed from their (hmm!) WELL(s). In any case, and I will return to these issues below in relation to Rheingold’s thoughts on community, the connection between the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the bulletin board and later Internet service, the WELL seems to be not only ideological but also formal. Not only did the “WELL’s Whole Earth parentage [bring] with it a reputation for collaboration between publisher and reader,” as Cliff Figallo points out, but the actual format of the catalogue seems to have pre-empted the electronic bulletin board as well as the web-page.¹⁷ The uniqueness of the catalogue, a frame for, and conglomeration of, disparate “reviews” by and for readers, thus seems to have foreshadowed at least some of the net’s functionality. It is, or rather was, a kind of rudimentary portal, or “life-style” gateway, and as such it was a unique publication, and a very successful one at that. To what extent Rheingold is right when he points out that the “first *Whole Earth Catalog*” was “the first idealistic enterprise from the counterculture, besides music, that earned the cultural legitimisation of financial success” is of course debatable.¹⁸ In any case, the “*Whole Earth Catalog*, and its sequels, sold two and a half million copies and won a National Book award.”¹⁹

The WELL was thus to begin with primarily populated by the “*Whole Earth Crowd*,” partly, according to Cliff Figallo, because of the “impor-

16. Rheingold, “A Slice of Life,” 72.

17. Cliff Figallo, “The WELL: A Regionally Based On-Line Community on the Internet,” in Brain Kahin and James Keller, eds., *Public Access to the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

18. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 43.

19. Sterling, 237.

tant promotional value of constant mention in the small but influential *Whole Earth Review* magazine.”²⁰ This “crowd” was, however, soon joined by a group of computer and programming enthusiasts as well as a big group of “Deadheads,” “the subculture that had grown up around the band the Grateful Dead.” Rheingold points out that the Deadheads knew “instinctively how to use the system to create a community among themselves.” In fact, this part of the WELL was so successful that “for the first several years, Deadheads were by far the single largest source of income for the enterprise.” To what extent these separate groups intermingled is not entirely clear. In any case, they had their “origins in the milieu,” and Rheingold furthermore asserts that those “Deadheads who did ‘go over the wall’ [to the other parts of the WELL] ended up having a strong influence on the Well at large.”²¹

Rheingold is, however, not very precise here. What was it specifically that the Deadheads brought with them? Was it the instinct for community-building? Or was it simply that this kind of music-related community was well-gearred for this kind of social interaction in that they brought with them a sense of communion created through concerts, records and tapes? That they, in other words, were especially good at imagining community in relation to shared media. Or, finally, was it simply that music as such was one of the primary common denominators/disseminators or icons of the environment that Rheingold talks about? This may hold at least part of the explanation. The common ground may thus be described as the shared experience of an advancing community through, exemplified or symbolized by, music and its slow dissemination and/or corporate take-over. It is partly in relation to this and related historical and social processes that Barlow and Rheingold’s use of the frontier metaphor must be understood, a term also employed by a number of other observers.²²

‘[M]etaphors are no longer necessary for [the Internet’s] description,’ says Steven G. Jones. Although this might be premature, it certainly is true that the Internet has developed into a “popular cultural (and com-

20. Figallo, 52.

21. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 49.

22. There are a number of accounts in which this and similar phrases occur: Peter Ludlow, *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), and Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown*, to mention a couple.

mercial) icon,” whose cultural appropriation arguably does not necessitate explicit, large-scale metaphors, but which nevertheless holds a number of connotations that are understood metaphorically.²³ However, these metaphors, Jones continues, “are necessary insofar as they allow us to place the history of the Internet as a project rather than only technology.”²⁴ The notion of the frontier in relation to the Internet is thus closely connected to the developmental stage of the online-services industry, the legal framework, cultural online practices and the various attempts or discursive “projects” to conceptualize and shape the overall terrain. This metaphor and its specific usages by Barlow and Rheingold may thus serve as a point of entry into notions of community and the cultural heritages at stake here.

Communities on the Frontier

For both Rheingold and Barlow, the “frontier” is closely linked to the notion of community, which consequently means some kind of frontier community. American history and culture should, according to the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, largely be seen as the product of the progressive and “Americanizing” movement of a conglomerate of (mainly) European cultures across the North-American continent.²⁵ Much has been said and written about this highly influential thesis in relation to its historical legitimacy and accuracy, or rather lack thereof; yet, its wider cultural significance has remained. In fact, Patricia Nelson Limerick points out that the attempts to “declare Turner irrelevant” by the direction of study that became known as “the New Western History” in the mid-eighties rather “restored his [popular/public] celebrity.”²⁶ Coincidentally,

23. Steven G. Jones, “Information, Internet, and Community: Notes Toward an Understanding of Community in the Information Age,” in Steven G. Jones, ed., *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), 1-2.

24. *Ibid.*, 2.

25. For an exposition of the thesis, see Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *A Nineteenth-Century American Reader* (Washington, D.C.: USIS, 1989).

26. Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World,” *The American Historical Review* 100: 3 (1995), 698-699.

Nelson Limerick's article appeared around the time that Barlow and Rheingold developed an interest in the digital sphere.

Thus, by using the frontier metaphor, Barlow, Rheingold and others clearly situate themselves within, and draw upon, a long tradition of divergent and more or less "popular" attempts to conceptualize American history and its various "directions" of progress and expansion as a movement from some kind of established society into "unsettled" and wide-open spaces. The "frontier" thus refers to the processes within, and the consequences of, this meeting between establishment and openness, a meeting taking place at or in the frontier community.

In addition, by inserting the emergent mediascape of the early 1990s into the historical landscape of the American Revolution, Barlow argues against what is seen as the erosion of individual rights, and for a return to a more unrestricted market based upon self-reliant individuals. By writing his own "declaration of independence," Barlow positions himself as "a typical democratic product of the frontier" much in the same way that Turner saw Thomas Jefferson. The "Declaration of Independence in Cyberspace," which probably is the best known of Barlow's writings, is written in a somewhat fake, sixteenth-century style, and progresses along a boundary between the periods and the people of the past and those of the future – with the assumed frontier communities somewhere in between. Based upon the proposition of a fundamental lack of continuity between the mores and legislation of the industrial past and present, and those of the new and somehow detached cyberspace, the declaration argues for a "revolution" by historical analogy: the industrial past and present are imagined in terms reminiscent of the eighteenth-century British government unable and unequipped to deal with colonial reality around the time of the American Revolution; the new cyber frontier and its inhabitants, on whose behalf Barlow speaks and whose independence he is arguing for, are in this analogy thought of as equally progressive as the "New Americans" of two centuries ago.

Although the processes within the frontier community always have given rise to ambiguity, both in real and theoretical terms, Barlow's metaphorical framework makes it explicitly so, in the sense that his analogies alternately position and reposition him – and the online, frontier communities – on opposing sides of the frontier line (if such can be conceptualized at all): one moment the independent colonizer of the

wide-open, the next an immersed “native” in danger of being colonized by the imperial Government (and/or old-fashioned sociality). It is this temporary state in which a restrictive civilization has not quite caught up that (at least in theory) grants the individual both autonomy and power, and it is this in-between state in which the twin pulls of modernity – liberty and discipline – seem to be perfectly balanced that has exerted an extensive cultural power in the Euro-American consciousness. This mythological construction Barlow transposes onto the Internet.

In contradistinction to the real frontier, however, Barlow’s mythological “movement” is without costs; the “wide open” is here some kind of *Terra Nullius*, free land for the taking for whoever wants it. Yet, although there is no “outer” limit enforced upon the ever-moving digital frontier, Barlow clearly expresses a proprietary and excluding attitude arising from his having moved into this new terrain ahead of others. Barlow, and those who he takes it upon himself to represent, apparently think of themselves as having taken possession of this “place” and feel entitled to it; their “collective actions” and “gathering conversations” created the “wealth of our [their] gathering marketplaces.”²⁷ Possession here means occupying, which – since there is no “matter” – means practices, and community is thus – in the words of Jones – “constituted in conversation and interaction,” i.e. by those who are “there.”²⁸ The “founding” property is here defined as a “place” for such practices, and property rights consequently mean unrestricted rights of use, i.e. practices unhampered by “public interference.” Yet the irony is, as Donovan D. Rypkema points out in relation to the “property rights” movement (whose rhetoric Barlow leans heavily on) that

the most severe and limiting land-use restrictions ever enacted by the federal government were those placed on the homesteaders of the western frontier. To be able to lay claim to their 160 acres, the men and women of the western frontier had to clear, cultivate and live on their land for five years.²⁹

27. Barlow 1996, *op.cit.*

28. Jones, 5.

29. Donovan D. Rypkema, “The Misunderstandings of the ‘Property Rights’ Movement,” in Amita Etzioni, ed., *Rights and the Common Good: The Communitarian Perspective* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 119.

And, as those restrictions were related to the “public getting a return on its investment,” so is the unrestricted “place” claimed by Barlow and others the result of long-term Governmental spending.

Yet, at a fairly broad level, Barlow argues along an opposition between communities (societies) based upon elected governments with executive branches and bureaucracies exerting restrictive measures and laws upon the collectivity (laws which ultimately may be out of synch with actual practices) and a libertarian-inspired community in which order is the continuous result of “collective action” based upon “ethics, enlightened self-interests and our commonwealth,” and where conflicts are identified and addressed through internal “means.” Barlow’s libertarian leanings clearly come out in this call for a return to a Jeffersonian democracy somehow based on possession and property, and in relation to which State interference is seen as inherently damaging, and that partly because of a lack of knowledge. Yet Barlow is leaning towards minarchism rather than anarchism, and he thus uses the overall legal framework of the constitution to “legitimize” his claims:³⁰ in the Declaration, he argues specifically against the “Telecommunications Reform Act” (of 1996), which is seen as being un-Constitutional. Yet there is a sense in which the practices that Barlow defends become normative, and what is reproduced is a certain blindness to other aspects of life at “the frontier.” Barlow is thus not really interested in the frontier community as such, but merely sees it in opposition to imperial and choking practices. Barlow’s community is in other words defined wholly in negative or defensive terms, i.e. as an absence of interference.

Rheingold’s argument is somewhat similar in its opposition to the concentration of power but different in its emphasis upon the positive aspects/movement of community building. The leaning is here towards the left rather than the right. The overall impetus of Rheingold’s book seems to be a call for wider, grassroots practices and community-use of the online in order to establish a set of de facto standards before commercial interests move in. In other words, use this medium, and we may all be part of a set of defining social uses that will be difficult to neglect in future attempts at regulation. The historical parallel that Rheingold, (and

30. This distinction is adopted from the entry entitled “Libertarianism,” in David Miller et al., eds., *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

Brand) argue from is the process through which radio became regulated by the industry (the industry setting de facto standards later raised into legislation). In that sense, just as with Barlow, the frontier and homesteading here means “occupying” the territory before big business and/or big government move in. As left and right find common ground in their opposition to mass culture, so does the defence of a “‘third sphere’ of free public deliberation, untainted by state or commerce” also constitute a common ground in relation to the new media.³¹ But although Barlow and Rheingold share enemies, it is for different reasons: whereas Barlow seeks to maintain a situation of “free competition,” Rheingold aims at upholding a space for collective social liberation. The means are, however, the same, namely the new digital media. Yet, as will be argued below, the common ground is constituted by more than simply an optimistic (and somewhat deterministic) view of new media technologies.

Although Rheingold stigmatizes the mass media in order to present himself as a different kind of media user, he simultaneously is aware that the bulletin board, and the Internet, to a range of user also constitutes a mass medium. This kind of usage is, however, not his concern here. What Rheingold emphasizes is the interchanging positions between sender and receiver, and it is precisely this interchange that for Rheingold constitutes the main foundation for the establishment of the online community. To begin with, the online community is fairly loosely conceptualized as a somewhat different kind of idealized “third place” (in addition to the home and the workplace), i.e. those informal meeting places in which small-talk, gossip and convivialities are exchanged, often in relation to a more formal exchange at the café, the barber’s etc., places that one seeks out voluntarily and which contain few degrading aspects of provincialism. Rheingold quotes himself from Brand’s *Media Lab* with reference to the WELL:

There’s always another mind there. It’s like having the corner bar, complete with old buddies and delightful newcomers and new tools waiting to take home and fresh graffiti and letters, except instead of putting on my coat, shutting down the computer, and walking down to the corner, I just invoke my telecom program and there they are. It’s a place.³²

31. Damian Tambini, “New Media and Democracy,” *new media & society* 1:3 (1999), 306.

32. Brand, 24, and Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 24.

This public place, the bar – the “underside” of Habermas’s coffee-house – is what constitutes the frame of Rheingold’s thinking about the processes of communion via the Internet. It is an idealized warm place, which can contain both formal and less formal interactions, and which one seeks voluntarily and often in some kind of opposition to more formal public spaces controlled by either government or the media industries. This spatial metaphor (in addition to the underlying notion of a frontier community, or homesteading) is, however, if not over-shadowed, then at least supplemented by that of the market(place), the agora. The virtual community is basically seen as an “electronic agora,” although many of the bar-like connotations remain.³³

The *Whole Earth Catalog*’s double nature in relation to community – the small, local and enclosed community with all its notions of “organic” and the wider imagined community between communes sustained in part by the publication – is here seemingly seen as merged by Rheingold. The marketplace is both the “organic” meeting place – with all its connotations of fresh and deliciously smelling vegetables and flowers – where one momentarily and at will associates and exchanges things and gossip, tools and ideas (like the local bar), and a wider, market-like exchange over distances. And it is basically in relation to the latter, reconceived in relation to knowledge, that Rheingold develops his theme of community.

It is here that the terms producer/supplier and consumer/receiver may be more appropriate when trying to understand how the interchange between positions relates to a market-like exchange. The online community is in this discourse basically described as a set of processes catering to the individual and his/her specific needs of communion and information, a “marketplace” based upon the exchange of knowledge and emotional support in various combinations, ranging from “pure” information to passionate comfort but without the introduction of the prototypical commodity, money. Stripped to its essentials, the community is thus seen as a kind of gift economy, based upon notions of reciprocity. As with the *Whole Earth Catalog*, it is the “personal” – knowledge, advice, experience – that constitutes the main resource, and the purpose and character of this publication, as discussed above, clearly shines through in Rheingold’s argument. It is the “access to tools and ideas” that he attempts to

33. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 63.

develop along the lines of a gift economy. Whereas the contributors to the *Whole Earth Catalog* had been paid for their reviews out of the money gained from the sale of the catalogue, the scale and character of the exchange via the WELL was/is different. Here the members pay a monthly fee (and originally an additional fee for the time online), and each thus contributes according to will and need. One no longer pays for a specific content, but for access, access to each other, whose "content" is exchanged according to other forms of reciprocity than those characterizing formal commodity exchanges. It is thus not the "social aggregations that emerge from the Net" that should be stressed in Rheingold's definition of the virtual community, but rather the underlying and sustaining "public discussions." What is emphasized is the "*formation* of personal relationships in cyberspace."³⁴

Although the spatial metaphors of frontier and homesteading suggest a location with specific boundaries, the underlying emphasis is rather placed upon the *processes* of community, which are seen as a set of "economic" processes in opposition to, or next to, the anonymity of commodity exchanges through the levelling intermediary of money. It is an exchange based upon notions of the personal and the common, in which one simultaneously, or alternately, gives something to a specific person as well as to a community, and in which one takes and receives when in need. Rheingold does stress the emotional aspects involved here, but it is primarily the notion of "knowledge" or information that pervades his discussion. And there is a sense in which – despite the constant references to "place" and neighborhood – the concept of continuous intimacy is downgraded. "My friends and I," says Rheingold, "can often attest to the truth" to Licklider and Taylor's "prediction that 'Life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests than by accidents of proximity'."³⁵ Just as the frontier, at least initially, was something that one sought out in relation to a commonality of (perhaps contradictory) interests, the on-line affiliations are relations that one seeks and dismisses in relation to specific needs. It is, as Steven G. Jones points out with reference to "cyberspatial social relations," a "*ritual* sharing of information

34. *Ibid.*, 5; emphasis mine.

35. *Ibid.*, 24.

(Carey, 1989) that pulls [the community] together,” and it is this that creates the kind of community that Carey (in relation to a different cultural setting) has described as “formed by imaginative diaspora – cosmopolitans and the new professionals” in relation to the “growth of cities during the late 19th and early 20th century.”³⁶ Such a description indeed seems apt considering Rheingold’s notion of association. What surely has increased, however, is the distinguishing factor of choice, and of self-development and/or unrepressed personal needs.

What might seem like a longing for a bounded and local community is rather a continuation of what Tallack calls the sixties’ “Counter-Cultural individualism.”³⁷ This is thus not – as Fernback argues – a nostalgic call for some romanticized *Gemeinschaft*. It is perhaps rather a flight from it; or, put differently, a search for and use of something that may *look* like an “organic” community or place, but which in fact is a relation based on rationality and convenience, and in that sense much closer to a “life-style enclave.”³⁸ The opposition argued by both Rheingold and Barlow is thus somewhat more and different than what is normally perceived within the (popular) dichotomy of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.

In Rheingold’s own words, the association via the net is “a way of both making contact with and maintaining a distance from others.”³⁹ Although this obviously is a feature common to most human relationships, one cannot but help noticing how Rheingold praises the rationality of negotiating this double bind via the net. In relation to the process of finding friends he talks about a rational, convenient and efficient process in which inconvenient and dissimilar attitudes and interests can be filtered out and thus save one the time of trying to get to know somebody that might turn out to be uninteresting. And in relation to the exchange of knowledge he says: “I find that the help I receive far outweighs the energy I expend helping others: a marriage of altruism and self-interest.” In all fairness, it should be added that Rheingold actually does stress the

36. Jones, 15-16.

37. Douglas Tallack, *Twentieth-Century America: The Intellectual and Cultural Context* (London: Longman, 1991), 207.

38. Dave Healy makes a similar point with regard to Rheingold, and I am here using his adoption of Bellah’s term, “life-style enclave.” See Dave Healy, “Cyberspace and Place: The Internet as Middle Landscape on the Electronic Frontier,” in D. Porter, ed., *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

39. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 26.

importance of the aspect of time in the development of personal relations that furthermore often have been extended and nourished in face-to-face meetings and toward which one feels a certain sense of imperative. Here Rheingold's notion of community becomes closely linked to locality. Yet the overall framework is based upon segmentation and choice, and what Rheingold – as well as Barlow – do not talk about is the potential of this notion of community – the self-chosen enclave disguised as organic community – being both highly conservative and “excluding.” Although both Rheingold and Barlow seemingly advocate a certain diversity and openness in relation to the net, their hailing of the net as somewhat “blind” to gender and ethnicity elicit undertones of a dreaming return to the (white) counter-culture before its fragmentation by identity politics. Yet Barlow and Rheingold never see the embeddedness of their own conceptions – their community needs are throughout perceived as “universal.”

The Counter-Cultural Frontier

By aligning the “Telecommunications Act” with parental attempts at control based upon incomprehension and fear, Barlow establishes a clear parallel to the sixties. Many generational arguments in the sixties were based precisely upon the strategy of arguing that the parental society, government and bureaucracies had repudiated, or developed away from, the intentions of the Constitution and the Founding Fathers. Whether the bulk of these arguments actually were grounded upon detailed historical knowledge of the early political thinkers of the US is doubtful. Yet the sentiment was rather clear: it was a feeling of renewal from below, a youthful reinvigoration of notions of personal freedom, grass-roots community and participatory democracy in opposition to an increasingly bureaucratized society in which power was now in the hands of some indefinable and diffuse “Establishment”.

A substantial part of that establishment was made up of the mass media. Underlying Barlow, and Rheingold's (and Brand's) arguments are – as already mentioned – certain generalized assumptions about the traditional mass media. To start with, one may argue that a range of the more or less implicit comparisons are inappropriate in the sense that very dif-

ferent media are seen as synonymous in relation to for instance the purpose of community-building. Part of this rhetorical strategy is (a return to) a fairly problematic use of the term “mass media,” which in many ways reproduces a number of very generalised assumptions about the reception of mass-mediated communication. This is somewhat strange when one considers the importance of recorded music in their cultural trajectories, but perhaps not so when one considers the experiences of Barlow et al. with the media in relation to more conventional politics. In any case, they all to some extent adopt a view of the media as centralized conglomerates feeding and deceiving an only slightly differentiated mass audience.

It is hardly surprising that such a view of the mass media should set the stage for a highly positive evaluation of the Internet. Or, conversely, the enthusiastic embrace of the new technology somehow requires this portrait of the traditional mass media. Yet this is not only about the positioning of media, but certainly also an argument about media-usage and identity in larger terms. Again and again Rheingold talks about himself as belonging to a group of “intellectual misfits,” whose life and needs are ill-served by mass society. Underneath or attached to such a view is, to use Garnham’s words, “a historical theory of modernity as rationalisation, alienation and reification.”⁴⁰ Yet the Internet and the counter-cultural misfits (or the combination) have, by some developmental fluke and/or somewhat “freaky” history escaped this “logic” and provided us with a unique historical chance of taking back cultural power from (conglomerate) media producers. Indeed, as Andrew Ross points out, the focus of the counter-culture had shifted from a “technology of folklore” to a “folklore of technology,” or, in the words of Jodi Dean, from “technocracy to technoculture.”⁴¹ The ability to benefit from this unique chance of avoiding earlier mistakes is thus based upon a perceived parallel or continuity between counter-cultural grassroots and the net – “Real grassroots ... are a self-similar branching structure, a network of networks,” says Rheingold.

40. Nicholas Garnham, *Emancipation, the Media, and Modernity: Arguments about the Media and Social Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.

41. Andrew Ross, “Hacking Away at the Counter-Culture,” in David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds., *The Cyberculture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 258; Jodi Dean, “From Technocracy to Technoculture,” *Theory & Event* 5:1 (2001).

What is allowed by the new media is for Barlow and Rheingold a renewal from below. And what is being renewed is mainly the right to speak, the right to partake in a open and international conversation, which partly is premised on the notion of a cost-less and infinite production, reproduction and distribution of the human mind and/or its "products." It is simultaneously a longing for community, civility and sociality which undergirds much political discourse in the US, but which here is more specifically linked to something that is felt to have disintegrated since some golden or mythical moment in the sixties, when a certain, world-wide community was simply "there" – mysteriously held together by opposition, visions, "age," and, not least, performed and mass-mediated music. It is the kind of community, or prolonged moment, that Woodstock has come to exemplify and stand for. This huge and harmonious gathering was the sign of something bigger, a large-scale "conversation and interaction" at some un- or loosely defined off-centre wavelength. It is perhaps not coincidental that Quarterman and Carl-Mitchell in 1994 referred to the wide-spread practice of asserting that the Internet was the "biggest hype since Woodstock."⁴²

The Transposition of Mythological Balance

In as much as Barlow's rhetoric centers upon notions of break, revolution and clashing spheres, it is thus woven together by an underlying continuity not only between the off- and the on-line, but more importantly between earlier struggles/attempts at "freedom" and those made possible by the Internet. And that which reawakens this dormant continuity, that which connects the development of the industry, the frontier, the counter-(or sub-)cultural, youth, subjectivity and the Internet is a certain positive and somewhat arch-American and Turner-founded evaluation of *movement*, a counter-attack upon fossilization, and an attempt at making the transitory permanent by continuous reinvention and revitalization. It is, in other words, a quest for *mythological balance*. Joshua Quittner men-

42. Jens F. Jensen, "Roadmap til Informations-Motorvejen," in Jens F. Jensen, ed., *Internet, World Wide Web* (Netværkskommunikation, Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 1999), 25.

tions that “By 1970 Barlow himself had written his first song for the Dead and had just finished a novel called *The Departures*. It was about ‘looking for frontiers after there aren’t any.’ It’s never been published.”⁴³ In the same vein, Rheingold’s book is mainly about community-building (‘home-steading’), not about being or living in something well-established. And it is somewhat telling that after – or alongside – the WELL, he started a new community venture called “Electric Minds,” “framed as a marketable commodity,” as Jones points out, after which he began “the brainstorms community” to which you either have to be invited or accepted by Rheingold personally.⁴⁴ And, says Rheingold, advising on the establishment of on-line communities, “there must be some plan for bringing a continuing stream of newcomers into the community.”⁴⁵ The community thus grows, or ought to grow, “naturally” as an “organism” – and, one might add, also die “naturally” as such.⁴⁶

Indeed, just as a counter-culture, subculture, commune or (small-scale) community to some extent are premised on a somewhat antagonistic relation to the mainstream towards which they either expand or are constantly drawn (consequently and constantly threatened by disintegration), so is the frontier a temporary state in which forces seem more or less perfectly balanced and larger structures merely enabling, a state in which community is there when needed, and in which laws are rudimentary and/or ambiguous and thus partly to be determined by practice (much like the legal circumstances around LSD in the sixties). It is thus a “‘middle-landscape’ between nature and civilisation, between the country and the city,” or – one might add in rather broad terms – between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.⁴⁷ Youth, too, is obviously a transitory position hovering between the restrictions/possibilities of both child- and adulthood; and, finally, so is a market situation in which free competition (and room for expression) exists in the absence of oligopoly situated in an economy producing enough spending-power for a relative large

43. Joshua Quittner, “The Merry Pranksters Go to Washington,” *Wired*, 2.06, 1994. <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.06/-effpr.html>. Accessed April, 2001.

44. For a presentation of the Brainstorms community, see <http://www.rheingold.com/community.html>

45. Rheingold, “Community Development in the Cybersociety of the Future,” in David Gauntlet, ed., *Web Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000), 174.

46. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 6.

47. Healy, 56. My interpretation here is in certain ways an elaboration upon the theme of “middle-landscape” as developed by Healy, who (however) is more concerned with the aspects of subjectivity.

enclave outside the established work-force. All this somehow comes together here.

As much as Barlow (and to some extent Rheingold) thinks of the frontier community as “occupation” of new territory in order to keep out a “defining” superstructure, it is also about preserving states of in-between. Underneath or within the frontier metaphor of history is a longed for moment, a frozen point in the intersecting (and inevitable?) trajectories of culture that is transposed unto a new technology and historical moment. It is nostalgia for a mythological past/moment disguised as Utopia. When Rheingold talks about virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net,” it might be more appropriate to talk about some kind of perceived re-emergence of existing – although in a rather loose form – small communities of choice and taste, or lifestyles that now have found a new way of communicating.⁴⁸ The actual virtual community must thus be seen within this wider and lifestyle-related community that in a sense forms the backdrop of the association via the net. When Rheingold regards the community as “necessarily sedimented deeply in time” – as James Slevin points out – it is arguably this wider community that guides his thinking, and not only the specificities of the human associations online. In this regard, the computer-mediated communication is somehow merely the means through which a “common” and already existing “purpose” can be pursued.⁴⁹

As a consequence, the relation through practice with people with whom one is not intimately related is here *not* contrary to the feeling of the “‘organic, evolutionary, teleological, functional or syndromic relationship[s]’ associated with traditional communities,” as Slevin has it. Slevin rightly argues that Rheingold’s notion of community is caught up in the past and that he does not meet head on the underlying (and founding) sociological dilemma relating to community in general, and to its position within radical or high modernity in particular. Yet Slevin arguably fails to see that the dichotomies inherent in his own version of the on-/off-line community dilemma – purely voluntary relationships vs. functional ones – are not oppositions in Rheingold’s case.⁵⁰ It could be

48. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 5.

49. James Slevin, *The Internet and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 97.

50. *Ibid.*, 97. Slevin’s distinction between on- and off-line community is between communities interacting solely (or mainly) via digital technology and those bound together through a shared location.

argued that it was precisely the shared feeling of a somewhat mythical, “organic” togetherness and purpose, and its transformation and linkage to the sphere of technoculture that constituted the backdrop to Rheingold’s experiences with online communion. The organic and its temporal development were thus prior to the emergence of the online community.⁵¹

What had been laying dormant was called to life by a set of “appropriate” circumstances that for a number of reasons did not “resist” this overlaying of meaning. For one, the online-services industry may indeed have been at a stage similar to the music industry in the sixties, a period in which the corporate world had not yet caught up with the ferment growth of small labels and artist; this, as with the online industry in the early nineties, made room for lots of experiments and upstarts. And, furthermore, there was a counter-cultural (youth) “movement” attached or linked to the new medium, namely the “hackers.” Despite the libertarian attempts to “downplay” their significance, this group – caught in the twin pulls between governmental attempts at definition that would “help rationalize the attacks” and the libertarian “rescue” attempts – somehow played a significant role in the legitimization of the libertarian and counter-cultural vanguard. One could argue that in terms of subculture – and Sterling’s 1992 account certainly points in that direction – the digital civil libertarians somehow seized the opportunity of publicity and/or a cause in the wake of “the hacker Crackdown” in the early 1990s. Barlow, and others on the WELL, could thus rejuvenate some of their lost radicalness by bringing the already-once won (at least for whites) battle of civil rights unto another arena, namely that of the electronic frontier, as well as the bureaucratic attempt to stop (semi-)illegal youth practices – “white, masculine and middle-class” – which it was somewhat easy to identify with.⁵²

Ultimately, of course, this was not about these youth practices, but rather about the longing for communities created through opposition. At

51. Indeed, Slevin’s overall critique of Rheingold is misguided, or at least out of proportion, in the sense that Slevin expands Rheingold’s use of the organism-metaphor of community growth to embrace the entire argument, which is seen to evoke “a spectre of individuals being propelled by uncontrollable needs comparable with those of biological organisms.” Rheingold’s community is in Slevin’s reading a grouping which “band[s] together because of some mysterious attraction.”

52. Ross talks about the media-coverage that helped “rationalize the attacks” (258) and also points out that the “hacker mythology ... has been almost exclusively white, masculine and middle class” (256).

one level, the nostalgic community (or commune) underlying Barlow and Rheingold's discussions is a self-contained entity and locale sustained by a "direct" communication "unmediated by technology." At another level, however, the community longed for is a much broader (even global) community based on a certain consciousness and symbolically mediated across time and space, mainly by mass-mediated music, as well as by other cultural artefacts (e.g. clothing) and practices (e.g. sit-ins and concerts). As has been argued above, the intersection at which these two types of communities may seem to coalesce is precisely the moment when the one is developing into the other, and at which neither "pole" excludes the other. It is the point at which Barlow's negative definition of community somehow coalesces with Rheingold's more positive notion – the point at which the community is in obvious opposition while growing (rapidly). This is of course a fragile moment, a point of mythological balance, that one continuously must attempt to recreate; and it is arguably the slightly desperate clinging to precisely such a point that may hold the contradictory beliefs of these Californian ideologies together. As long as that moment can be extended and the final goals remain unfulfilled, the two interrelated but opposing sides of the "ideology" can convene around the means, the new technology.

For Rheingold and Barlow the "frontier" continues, and there is a sustained interest in arguing that things are "still fluid," as Rheingold recently said.⁵³ Yet, the glorification of the fluidity by these attempts to uphold the transitory is arguably a way of paving over the actual and very consistent inequalities beneath that very fluidity, a "state" directly linked to the experiences of being centrally but loosely connected to the centre of the digital economy. The most obvious divide here is not one of access, but rather one of "lifestyle" and profession. That Rheingold's self-interest primarily is "professional" and thus geared towards acquiring knowledge and information is evident throughout. And this is of course linked to his position as self-employed. He is, as he explicitly states, a writer, and the WELL thus catered specifically to the "occupational hazard of the self-employed, home-based symbolic analyst of the 1990s," which is isolation, and, he continues, "[i]nformation-age hunters and

53. Rheingold, "Community Development," 171.

gatherers were lone wolves until we found the Net.” It is this process and moment that gains so much in significance by being overlaid with a number of well-know cultural overtones, and which arguably reverberates throughout the international “community” of symbolic analysts. With this in mind, one might quote Jonathan Friedman, who has remarked in relation to the widespread notion of hybridity (in a different but related context) that the “new transnational ideology is certainly a force in the world, but it does not come from the grassroots.”⁵⁴

Considering some of the hype, it is as if the Internet is seen as some sort of technological fix that not only will vindicate certain marginalized cultural practices, but also restore the hope of/for communities in an increasingly heterogeneous and dispersed society. The infrastructure and technology of the Internet might in this context be viewed as a mediation that can help alleviate the social dilemma posed by (late) modernity, that of “constructing a viable community [or communities] for autonomous rational subjects.”⁵⁵ And indeed, stripped of its utopian garments, such a concern is welcomed in media studies. Still, the concern underlying many studies remain trapped in isolation, that is, not attempting to see how the particular communities may relate to other attempts or be part of a larger emancipatory project. Emancipation is in the views discussed here rather seen in fairly individualistic terms in the sense that the technological solution caters to a felt need of being both marginally and centrally located, both hip and square at one and the same time. And this, in addition to broader arguments linked to the sociality of late modernity, may in fact hold part of the explanation for the resurfacing-/resurgence of the interest in community, which as such could be seen as both instigator and symptom.

The WELL was situated in a particular context that made it very visible; this visibility was exacerbated by its “theoretical” incarnation through Rheingold. The very ambiguity of the quest for a mythological balance uniting Rheingold and Barlow may have struck a chord of resonance deep within the experiences of being an academic, an environment

54. Jonathan Friedman, “Indigenous Struggles and the Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,” in Henk Driessen and Ton Otto, eds., *Perplexities of Identification: Anthropological Studies in Cultural Differentiation and Use of Resources* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000), 158.

55. Garnham, 6.

which in many instances is infiltrated by a spate of unsaid and unfulfilled promises of the sixties. Indeed, not only is there a number of close links between the development of the net and research practices, but the (social and professional) networking between “free” individuals in some undefined opposition to bureaucratic power as envisioned by Barlow and Rheingold may come very close to being an unstated self-perception on the part of many academics. As such, the ambiguity of the view of online communities as eternal movement may explain the sustained positive and negative reactions. The resurgence of interest in community may thus simply be the result of a self-propelling spiral of academic (self-)importance; if that is the case, this article is perhaps merely yet another contribution.