Summary of Fred Turner’s “Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy”

Turner earned his Phd in Communications from the University of California and taught at Harvard. In his article “Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy” he describes the rise of a culture that lead to the online communities we have today. The major influences were the Whole Earth Catalog, The WELL, and the convergence of communication technology.

The Whole Earth Catalog was a collection of information that offered an emerging culture access to materials of curiosity for cheap. Starting out small, the magazine quickly became a publication of over 400 pages. All manner of articles, learning, tools, books and instructions could be found inside the catalog. This became a common trend among the counterculture that was rising against the Cold War era.

As technology developed, enthusiasts took the movement online with the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL). This became the medium for the culture and content that was once carried by the catalog. Turner describes this as coming to “undergird popular understandings of early computer networks.” The WELL offered many early computer enthusiasts the knowledge they needed to innovate and deliver new ideas. One of which was Steve Jobs. Turner explains that the WELL became a “network forum” by linking “scattered members… as members of a single social network.”

This merging of ideas, instruction, and technology was what Turner lead to when he explains the convergence of communication technology. The WELL opened a market of products by alerting the culture to the value. Turner says this trend became the economy of our online communities.

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

Turner, F. (2005). Where the counterculture met the new economy: the WELL and the origins of virtual community. Technology and Culture, 46(3), 485-512. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/40060901