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The discrete charm of the digital entrepreneur in popular fiction[1]

David Larsson Heidenblad [a]

[a] *Department of History, Lund University, Sweden*

From feature films about Steve Jobs to the Spotify series *The Playlist* and Swedish Television's dramatization of The Pirate Bay's rise and fall - what does it mean for the notion of the digital revolution that its historiography is mainly unfolding in popular culture?

The adaptation of the digital revolution of the early 2000s is in full swing. Swedish Television has dramatized the story of the file-sharing site The Pirate Bay. Netflix recounts Spotify's story in *The Playlist*. Meanwhile, films about *Tetris* and *Super Mario Bros* are being released, and HBO is heavily investing in the video game series *The Last of Us*. For someone born in the early 80s and a lifelong gamer like me, it is hard not to feel directly struck by these portrayals. It is my generational peers who are being fictionalized.

In many ways, it is about time that the first decade of the 2000s becomes part of popular culture. It was a transformative period. At its start, smartphones and social media did not exist. A daily presence online was far from being a given. By the decade's end, blogs, podcasts, and apps had gained widespread traction. Rising companies like Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) disrupted the media and advertising industries.

All this is history for today's teenagers. They are 'born digital' and have no memory of dial-up modems or landlines. For many of them, printed newspapers and banknotes are historical relics. They have been digitally photographed and filmed their entire lives. Events like World War II, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and September 11 are stories they have heard about. Their own lives and experiences are contemporary with other historical events. *Stranger Things* is a streamed tale of their own lives, not a nostalgic throwback for old-school role-players.

The ongoing pop-cultural processing of the digital society's emergence is not entirely new. The film catalog already includes titles like *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999), *The Social Network* (2010), *Jobs* (2013), and *Steve Jobs* (2015), as well as series like *Silicon Valley* (2014–2019) and *Startup* (2016–2018). It is a growing collection of portrayals of young men with visions and coding skills who start companies and change the world.

There is a particular allure to the early phase of these stories. When the protagonists work in a garage or dorm room, keyboards clatter as the code takes shape. Equally iconic is the meeting with investors such as Sean Parker (Napster) or Martin Lorentzon (Spotify), who are opening doors to capital and connections. This is followed by global success and influence but also

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CONTACT: David Larsson Heidenblad, david.larsson_heidenblad@hist.lu.se. Department of History, Lund University, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden.

conflicts over money, ideas, ownership, and control. Those who are best friends at the story's beginning are rarely so as the credits roll.

What impact do these works have on our understanding of the recent past? And what do they say about our present? Historians tend to gravitate towards the latter question when analyzing historical fiction, arguing that films like *Gladiator* (2000) or *Braveheart* (1995) tell us more about the time they were made and marketed than about ancient Rome or 13th century Scotland. Historical events may inspire these stories, but they are primarily commercial products created in and for their own era.

In this perspective, dramatizations of the histories behind Spotify, Facebook, and Apple can be linked to other corporate fictions, such as *Air* (about Nike) or *Succession* (allegedly about Rupert Murdoch). They also align with the success of documentary-style narratives about entrepreneurs, such as the Swedish podcast *Dynastin* or Netflix's *Inside Bill's Brain: Decoding Bill Gates* (2019). One might indeed ask: have we ever been this interested in corporate history, entrepreneurship, and venture capital? And if so, why?

Scholarly accounts on Silicon Valley and the rise of the digital society can provide some clues to these questions. Recently, I have spent a lot of time reading and reflecting on Fred Turner's *From Counterculture to Cyberculture* (2006). It is one of the richest studies in this field, and its main thesis is that there is a straight line from the counterculture "*back-to-the-landers*" of the late 1960s to the advent of personal computers and the early hacker culture in Northern California. The phenomena may seem unrelated, but Turner shows that central individuals, networks, ways of thinking, and ideologies connect them.

At the heart of Turner's book is Stewart Brand, born in 1938 and best known as editor of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, published between 1968 and 1972. It was a hybrid magazine and product catalog aimed directly at counterculture communities. Brand himself lived a mobile life within this new social world of young people seeking alternatives. They rejected the conformist adult world, with its government agencies, rigid institutions, hierarchical corporations, and the Vietnam War. They aimed to create a new, freer world. Their path was envisioned through a transformed and expanded consciousness. LSD and transcendental meditation held promises. Traditional political organizing did not. The last thing they wanted was to wear suits and join corporate America.

At the same time, however, Stewart Brand was also an entrepreneur. His greatest talent was connecting different social worlds, creating dynamic networks, and building relationships. *The Whole Earth Catalog* functioned as a forum for avant-garde art and experimental lifestyles, but also for new technology, various practical guides and handbooks. Brand organized 'happenings' and music festivals featuring bands like The Grateful Dead. He also ensured that the catalog's readers became co-creators by submitting stories, photos, and recommendations. Through Brand's creation, the people belonging to the counterculture made themselves visible to one another. The catalog was a kind of information technology, albeit in analog form. Yet, to understand our own era and what has shaped it, we need more nuanced depictions of the societal digitalization and its different phases.

In the 1970s, Brand's interest in technology and computers grew. Garage entrepreneurs and tech pioneers aiming at changing the world by letting information flow freely became part of his network. This early hacker culture rejected the same things as the counterculture: hierarchies and bureaucracies. Individuals were to actualize themselves in loosely organized networks. The future would emerge through a change in consciousness, with digital technology as the pathway to elevated humanity.

Yet, Brand himself was not a hacker. He was a network-oriented entrepreneur who founded computer magazines and built relationships with journalists, academics, engineers, and designers. In 1984, inspired by Steven Levy's *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984), Brand, however, organized the first hacker conference at which a "hacker ethic" was articulated. This ethic emphasized free information, universal computer access, and skepticism of authority. The future was to be decentralized. Such ideas resonated with Brand and his contemporaries with roots in the 60s counterculture.

As computerization accelerated and the corporate valuations soared, Brand identified an economic paradox. On the one hand, "*information wants to be free*" because the cost of distribution is constantly decreasing. On the other hand, "*information wants to be expensive*" because it is immensely valuable. The right information at the right time can change your life. Levy points out that this paradox creates tension between those who want to commodify and sell information and those advocating open access. This tension defines the landscape in which Spotify, The Pirate Bay, and the major record labels found themselves two decades ago.

For figures like Stewart Brand, Steve Jobs, and later tech profiles such as Peter Thiel and Reid Hoffman, entrepreneurship is the best—and freest—way to change the world. You do not need to come from a wealthy family, navigate political hierarchies, appeal to the masses, or climb complex institutional ladders. With coding skills and independent thinking, a 20-year-old can drive social change by starting a company. You do not need to make a detour to bypass the established way of life. Instead: "*Move fast and break things*."

However, fast-moving tech companies hardly emerge in a societal vacuum. Like everyone else, they are influenced by great forces, including politics. Not least, Silicon Valley has been shaped by the military industry and its financial resources and public funding – without which no memory chips, microprocessors, and personal computers would have been developed. Also in Sweden, public investments in the IT infrastructure – such as subsidized municipal computers, broadband expansion, the first IT commission's efforts, and the establishment of the many research hubs - have been decisive for tech start-ups; Would Spotify and The Pirate Bay even have existed without all this?

It is unlikely that commercial film and TV companies will dramatize or document this history. The market for such stories is reasonably limited. But perhaps it is time for historians, journalists, and authors to explore the 90s more closely? To understand our era and its roots, we need richer accounts of the various stages of societal digitalization. Start-ups, technological innovation, and venture capital are essential parts of this story. But so are public investments in school computers, the creation of new courses, university programs, educational materials, and large-scale infrastructure development.

When that research is done, Swedish Television and other major broadcasting companies will perhaps order a documentary?

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