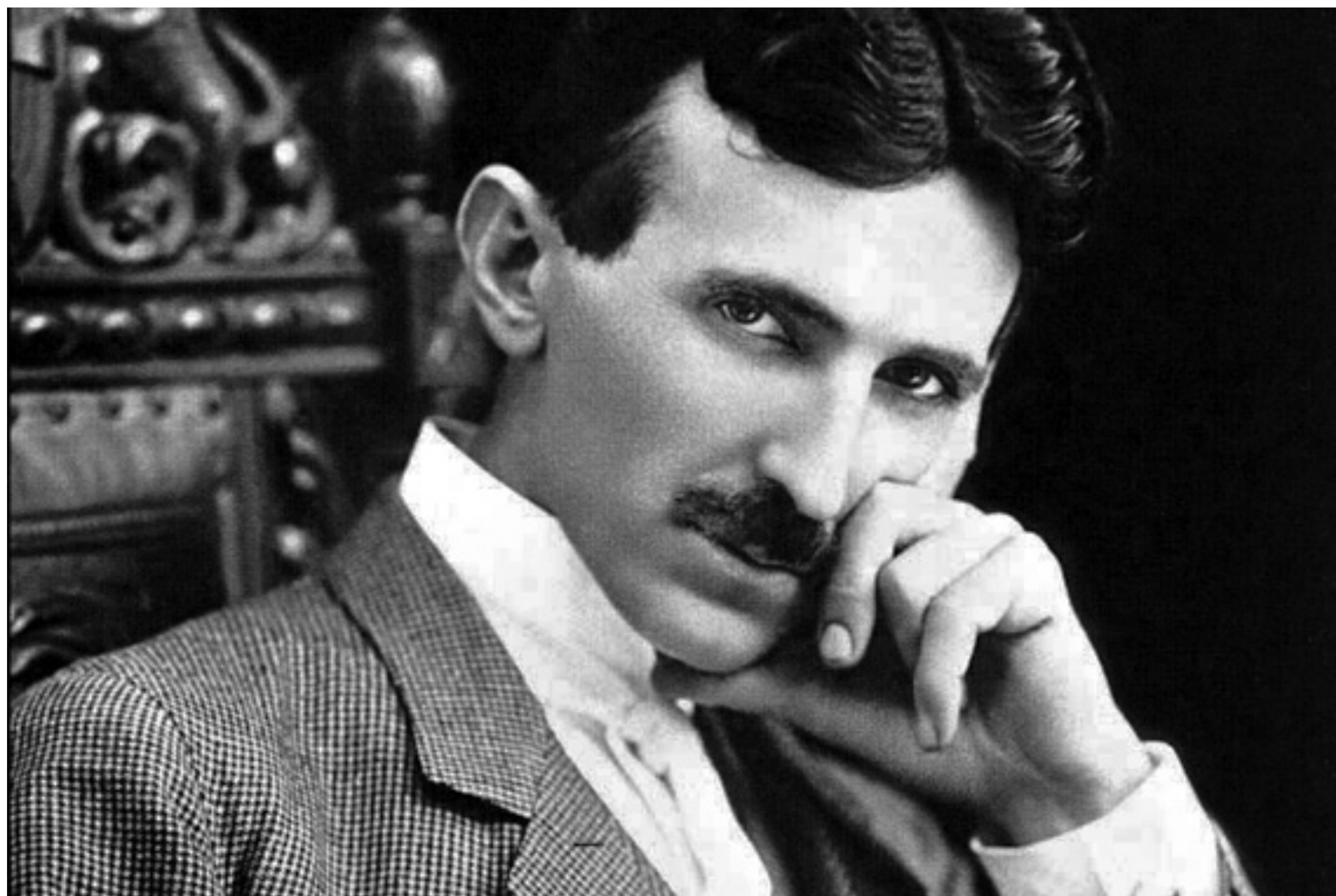
JUNE 17 2013 8:00 AM

FROM SLATE, NEW AMERICA, AND ASU

Is Cyberutopianism Really Such a Bad Thing?

In defense of believing that technology can do good.

By Ethan Zuckerman



In 1993 Howard Rheingold published ***The Virtual Community***, reflections on the time he'd spent in early electronic forums, including Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a text-based, real-time chat system created in 1988 but still popular today in technical circles. With chapter titles like "Real-time Tribes" and "Japan and the Net," the book offers the hope that online dialogues will be more fair, more inclusive, and more global than those we've known before. "Thousands of people in Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United

Kingdom, and the United States are joined together at this moment in a cross-cultural grab bag of written conversations known as Internet Relay Chat (IRC)." Rheingold wonders, "What kinds of cultures emerge when you remove from human discourse all cultural artifacts except written words?"

Rheingold was not the first to hope that an emerging technology would transform the ways distant strangers relate to one another. In his book ***The Victorian Internet***, Tom Standage, the Economist's technology editor, offers a compendium of optimistic predictions for the telegraph, or "the highway of thought," as one contemporary commentator called it. In one of Standage's many examples, the completion of a submarine cable linking the United States and the United Kingdom moved the historians Charles Briggs and Augustus Maverick to assert, "It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth."

The arrival of the airplane inspired similar rhetoric. Commenting on Louis Blériot's crossing of the English Channel in 1909, the Independent of London suggested that air travel would lead to peace because the airplane "creates propinquity, and propinquity begets love rather than hate." A similar logic led Philander Knox, U.S. secretary of state under President Howard Taft, to predict that airplanes would "bring the nations much closer together and in that way eliminate war."

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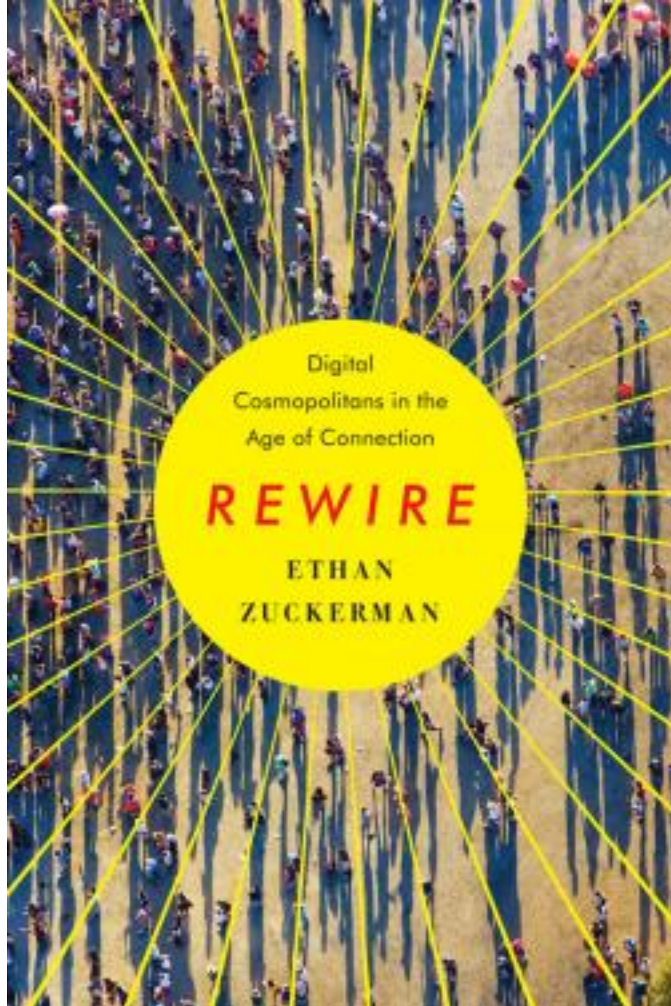
Interviewed in 1912, the radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi declared, "The coming of the wireless era will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous." Even after the Great War had rendered Marconi's pronouncement absurd, the inventor Nikola Tesla saw an even grander future for radio: "When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain. ... We shall be able to communicate with one another instantly, irrespective of distance."

As befits a man of his genius, some elements of Tesla's 1926 vision were surprisingly accurate. "Through television and telephony," he said, "we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face, despite intervening distances of

thousands of miles; and the instruments through which we shall be able to do his will be amazingly simple compared with our present telephone. A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket."

These and other observations will sound familiar to anyone who witnessed the rise of the Internet. As the historian and technology scholar Langdon Winner suggests, "The arrival of any new technology that has significant power and practical potential always brings with it a wave of visionary enthusiasm that anticipates the rise of a utopian social order." Technologies that connect individuals to one another—like the airplane, the telegraph, and the radio—appear particularly powerful at helping us imagine a smaller, more connected world. Seen through this lens, the Internet's underlying architecture—it is no more and no less than a network that connects networks—and the sheer amount written about it in the past decade guaranteed that the network would be placed at the center of visions for a world made better through connection. These visions are so abundant that they've even spawned a neologism: "cyberutopianism."

The term "cyberutopian" tends to be used only in the context of critique. Calling someone a cyberutopian implies that he or she has an unrealistic and naïvely overinflated sense of what technology makes possible and an insufficient understanding of the forces that govern societies. Curiously, the commonly used term for an opposite stance, a belief that Internet technologies are weakening society, coarsening discourse, and hastening conflict is described with a less weighted term: "cyberskepticism." Whether or not either of these terms adequately serves us in this debate, we should consider cyberutopianism's appeal, and its merits.



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In a Skype conversation with Howard Rheingold, I mentioned that I planned to include some of his thoughts in the discussion of cyberutopianism of my book *Rewire*. On being linked to the term, Rheingold was flustered, and I briefly thought he might hang up on me. Instead, he paused, composed himself, and offered the observation that "the Abolitionists were utopians." In a later email he explained further,

"I am enthusiastic about the potential for tools that can enhance collective action, but as I stated on the first page of Smart Mobs [his 2002 book on technology and collective action], humans do beneficial things together and they do destructive things together, and both kinds of collective action are amplified. … So although I recognize that Communism and Fascism were sold as utopias, I like to reverse my logic—not only do people do really bad things under utopian banners, they can also do things like move for the abolition of slavery."

Rheingold's comment reminds us not to let our opponents frame the debate. "Cyberutopianism" is an uncomfortable label because it combines two ideas worthy of careful consideration into a single, indefensible package. The belief that connecting people through the Internet leads inexorably to global understanding

and world peace is one not worth defending. Believing that technologies influence whom and what we know and care about is a more complicated idea, and one worth our close consideration. It’s not enough to be enthusiastic about the possibility of connection across cultures, by digital or other means. Digital cosmopolitanism, as distinguished from cyberutopianism, requires us to take responsibility for making these potential connections real.

If we reject the notion that technology makes certain changes inevitable, but accept that the aspirations of the “cyberutopians” are worthy ones, we are left with a challenge: How do we rewire the tools we’ve built to maximize our impact on an interconnected world? Accepting the shortcomings of the systems we’ve built as inevitable and unchangeable is lazy. As Benjamin Disraeli observed in ***Vivian Grey***, “Man is not the creature of circumstances, circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter.” And, as Rheingold suggests, believing that people can use technology to build a world that’s more just, fair, and inclusive isn’t merely defensible. It’s practically a moral imperative.

Excerpted from **Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection** *by Ethan Zuckerman. Copyright © 2013 by Ethan Zuckerman. With permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.*

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