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Time, Technology and the Value of Slowing Down for the Future

REVIEWED BY Clark Blaise

Sunday, July 11, 1999

The clock of the long now

Time and Responsibility By Stewart Brand

Basic Books, 190 pages, \$22



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When stagecoaches were replaced by railroads in the early 19th century, passengers were cautioned to focus on distant church spires; otherwise the speed could scramble their vision permanently.

Today, as technology grows exponentially, outpacing our capacity to make sense of it, society lacks a far-off point to keep it from being confounded.

Stewart Brand and the cutting-edge computer designers and musicians (such as Brian Eno) who have dreamed up the Long Now clock (which records time over a 10,000-year span) are ready to provide that focus.

In "The Clock of the Long Now," Brand (the Sausalito author of "The Whole Earth Catalog" and other grandly unclassifiable texts) treats '90s computer technology respectfully and knowledgeably, but holds it to a '60s standard of accountability. It's a Peninsula book with an East Bay conscience.

Think of the Clock of the Long Now -- one powered by solar positioning, with a related library of selected books -- as Dr. Watson to technology's Sherlock Holmes, asking the questions, providing the human context, keeping the records.

The Long Now, Brand hopes, will serve as an archive, posing questions that can be answered only after a thousand years (for example, were we right about global warming?). He believes the future should know about our concerns, and that we should acknowledge our responsibility to posterity.

"To the government of the region formerly known as New Mexico," begins one of Brand's satiric letters-in-a-bottle to the future. "Upon periodic review of the long-term hazards file for your area, it has been determined that a large -- an extremely large -- quantity of radioactive waste was buried in salt structures a short distance east of what used to be called Carlsbad Caverns."

Heeding the slow forces, the ecologies of nature and culture that sustain us, would cool our computer-driven, hell-for-leather progress, Brand argues, and help keep us from catastrophe.

The threat of catastrophe lies in innovation itself. By 2015, Brand estimates that the computer chip will have increased its speed and density 137 billion times since its invention in 1959.

As technology increases in sophistication, the programs and systems in which knowledge has been stored up till then become obsolete, giving the rough beast slouching out of Silicon Valley the potential for obliterating human culture.

One of the startling examples Brand cites is our inability to access applications merely 15 years old. We can read cuneiform 5,000 years old and Galileo's notes, but we have no record of engineers' discussions leading to the creation of the dominant technologies of our age.

Brand goes on to list an alphabetical necrology of defunct systems, creating a kind of found poetry:
` `Altair, Amiga, Amstrad, Apples I, II, III, Apple Lisa, Apricot, Atari, AT&T, Commodore, CompuPro, Cromemco, Epson, Franklin, Grid, IBM PCjr, IBM XT, Kaypro, Morrow, NEC PC-8081, Northstar, Osborne, Sinclair, Tandy, Wang, Xerox Star, Yamaha CX5M.

` `Buried with them are whole clans of programming languages, operating systems, storage formats and countless rotting applications in an infinite variety of mutually incompatible versions. Everything written on them was written on the wind, leaving not a trace."

Brand's evocation of past monstrous losses of knowledge, such as Shih Huang-ti's burning of the Chinese scrolls (culture destroyed by ` `governance") and the destruction of the library of Alexandria seem parochial compared to the disaster we can soon expect.

He hints, following the lead of certain science-fiction writers, that we are heading to ` `Singularity," the end of existence as we know it, when our culture disappears over an ` `event horizon" into a black hole.

That moment will arrive when computers become self-correcting, self-conscious and self-generating, a date estimated as 2037. Because it is our fate as a species to undergo continual spatial-temporal bombardment, our challenge is to adjust without lapsing into Luddite rebellion.

Brand is posing an inventive response to a contemporary anxiety: In a time of increasing speed, slowness must be re-invented and its value re-assessed.

We've been here before (thinking of redwoods, clean air and water, blue whales and the rain forest), but now the problem, literally, is at our fingertips and staring us in the face.

Clark Blaise teaches at the University of California at Berkeley and is working on a study of the 19th century invention of standard time.

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This article appeared on page **RV - 4** of the San Francisco Chronicle

