The Democratic Surround
Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties

“…a dazzling cultural history.”

- Lynn Spiegel, author of TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television

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“This is the true story of how a small group of artists and anthropologists set out to create an alternative to fascism during World War II – and ended up setting the stage for the consumer-driven, media-saturated world we inhabit today. A gripping, well-balanced, and surprising history.”

- Douglas Rushkoff, author of Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now
Summary

We commonly think of the psychedelic ’60s as an explosion of creative energy and freedom that arose in direct revolt against the social restraint and authoritarian hierarchy of the early Cold War years. Yet, as Fred Turner reveals in The Democratic Surroumd, the decades that brought us the Korean War and communist witch hunts also witnessed an extraordinary turn toward explicitly democratic, open, and inclusive ideas of communication and with them new, flexible models of social order. Surprisingly, he shows that it was this turn that brought us the revolutionary multimedia and the wild-eyed individualism of the 1960s counterculture.

In this prequel to his celebrated book From Counterculture to Cyberculture, Turner rewrites the history of postwar America, showing how in the 1940s and ’50s American liberalism offered a far more radical social vision than we now remember. Turner tracks the influential mid-century entwining of Bauhaus aesthetics with American social science and psychology. From the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the New Bauhaus in Chicago and Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Turner shows how some of the most well-known artists and intellectuals of the forties developed new models of media, new theories of interpersonal and international collaboration, and new visions of an open, tolerant, and democratic self in direct contrast to the repression and conformity associated with the fascist and communist movements. He then shows how their work shaped some of the most significant media events of the Cold War, including Edward Steichen’s Family of Man exhibition, the multimedia performances of John Cage, and, ultimately, the psychedelic Be-Ins of the sixties. Turner demonstrates that by the end of the 1950s this vision of the democratic self and the media built to promote it would actually become part of the mainstream, even shaping American propaganda efforts in Europe.

Overturning common misconceptions of these transformational years, The Democratic Surround shows that the artistic and social radicalism of the sixties grew out of the liberal ideas of Cold War America, a democratic vision that still underlies our hopes for digital media today.

Fred Turner is associate professor of communication at Stanford University. He is the author of Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War inmerican Memory and From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism, also published by the University of Chicago Press. A former journalist, he has written for publications ranging from The Boston Globe Magazine to Nature. He and his work have been featured in a wide variety of documentary films, television programs and radio shows in the United States and Europe. He lives in California.

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