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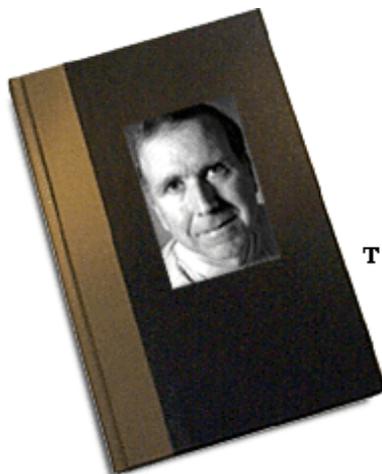
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what does  
TECHNOLOGY  
want?

Kevin Kelly talks about his "New Rules for the New Economy" -- and why managing technology is like raising kids.

BY R.U. SIRIUS | **H**arking at least back to his days as editor of the Whole Earth Review, Kevin Kelly has had a fascination with how human technologies and organizations function in a biological manner. His seminal 1995 book, "Out Of Control," was a fascinating exploration of this terrain. Since Kelly is also the founding and ongoing executive editor of Wired, response to "Out of Control" quickly turned political: Critics, connecting the book with the libertarian tendencies they found in the magazine, read it as advocating a kind of mercilessly Darwinian free enterprise.

Kelly's latest book, "New Rules for the New Economy" (Viking Penguin, 164 pages), will only serve to bolster that perception. Formatted as a business advice manual along the lines of Tom Peters' "Thriving on Chaos," "New Rules" doesn't stop to shed a tear for those left behind as it excitedly delineates the shift from old industrial rules to a dangerous world of "constant flux" and networked, process-oriented business activity -- a marketplace that is truly out of control.

The book, which developed out of a [Wired article](#), propounds a kind of businessperson's anarchism, with rules like "Follow The Free," "Let Go at the Top" and "No Harmony, All Flux" -- and recommendations like

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intentionally disrupting smooth operations to get innovation, giving away free product and decentralizing control. But while the reader of "New Rules" has to presume that Kelly is advocating this "new economy" as a sort of ideal, his stance emerges a little differently in this interview with Salon.

**While I wouldn't take issue with most of your points in "New Rules" about the ways network capitalism functions, I question whether this is a new economy, or simply a mutation of the same old one. The same technologies in a different political, historic and economic situation would have some similar impacts, but some different ones. You imply that a certain biological inevitability has taken us to this point. Aren't these "rules" largely an accident of history and the psychology of consumer capitalism that's been passed down to us from the Industrial Age?**

I certainly agree that our heavily "businessized" society is a product of contingency. And yes, if history had played out differently, our culture would be different. Technology and values are in a push-pull dance, one shaping the other. Where I diverge from the obvious is my assertion that at this moment in time, our values worldwide are so fragmented, pluralistic and shriveled that they're overwhelmed by global technology -- and that technology, therefore, is the most powerful force of change in our culture. It certainly doesn't *have to be* this way; indeed I would rather it not. But I don't see any evidence to the contrary -- other than some decent folk wishing it were otherwise. So I feel very safe in saying that for the horizon of my book -- 30 years or so into the future -- technology will shape our economy.

**You're taking a surprisingly critical view of the "shriveled" culture you're pitching to. You did include a critique at the very end of the book, giving it basically three paragraphs. It's like 140 pages of exhilaration, and then a little pin-prick of deflation. Would you agree with Arthur Kroker that digital culture is bipolar, constantly mood-swinging between exhilaration and exhaustion, "wired" and "tired"?**

Yes, I think it does oscillate wildly. My own observation is that we have a love-hate relationship with technology, just as we have with nature. In one breath we bow down before the natural world for its beauty, power and sustenance, for without an untainted natural world we're dead. But in the next breath we erect walls, sterile barriers, vaccines, and hack living things back so they won't conquer us.

It's clear life would overrun us quickly if we didn't push back. As technology accrues some of the power and complexity of life, we are beginning to treat it with the same two minds: We're intoxicated by technology's emerging beauty, power and ability to feed our

creativity, but in the next moment, it's obvious that unless we hack technology back it will overtake us. I actually share these two minds.

But of the two perspectives, I find the latter more fascinating because of our ignorance. We already know what pushing technology back is like because we'd done little else for hundreds of years. But we have no serious inkling of what technology wants. As technology becomes more animated and autonomous, I think we should be asking ourselves where it wants to go, what its biases are and how far it can govern itself. We need to know this at the very least in order to push back expertly and with appropriate force -- otherwise we push in blindness.

Both "Out of Control" and "New Rules" are explorations of the internal dynamics of technological systems to see what kind of worlds they create on their own. I am inclined to give them some room and see what it is that they can do, even with the knowledge that we can't easily undo them. It's sort of like raising kids.

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**You just said, "We already know what pushing technology back is like." What's the evidence for that? It seems to me that both industrialism and the Information Age have been pretty much pedal to the metal.**

Sure, economic and technological development has been full steam ahead for a century or longer, but two things are different now. One is that, previously, the presence of technology in our awareness was tiny and could be manipulated. Alan Kay defines technology as anything that was invented after you were born. For most people, for most of the time previous, there was little technology in their lives, little that had been invented after they were born. It wasn't until this last generation where we saw technology (new ideas made concrete) saturate our lives.

And secondly, the penetration rates of technology earlier were glacial. It took almost 100 years for the invention of the telephone to reach the penetration that cable TV reached in 25 years. So, people's lives pushed it away more then. Now we are speeding acceptance up by beginning to push back less.

Earlier, technology was marginal as a cultural engine. It could be easily pushed around. There was much more of a social habit of saying "no" to new things, or at least "wait." And what was being questioned was pretty solitary and inert; it could be easily cowed. The kind of technologies we're making now -- networked technologies -- are far more robust, far more dynamic, far more insidious, far more self-sufficient, far more pervasive and far more likely to exert their own dynamics on the situation. So refusing them in the same way won't work.

**Can the surface of this planet -- and our small, soft, easily distressed bodies -- survive allowing technology to run its course?**

Technologies are *extensions* of our soft, easily distressed bodies. Can the biological planet survive us and our extensions? Absolutely. Network technology

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eases the pain on the earth. I know this statement is controversial, and I'm reluctant to introduce it without discussion, but discussion of this requires far too much complexity and room than what we can go into here. Indeed, it is worthy of a book. But it wasn't the topic of this book. What this book is about is how technology is shaping our economy. More than anything else, pervasive networking technology (which does more with less material) is determining how money flows and wealth is created. If one can understand the logic of networks, one will have a good grasp of how the network economy works.

**Must networked technological evolution lead to a culture of connections and relationships that reduce the participants to consumers and "prosumers" (consumers who participate in the production process) defined by their preferences and credit ratings. Or could you be viewing the digital world through a backwards telescope, missing a much wilder (and more popular) party in which commerce occupies a much smaller attention space?**

Is it possible that I'm overemphasizing the role of commerce in people's lives, or their future lives? I don't think so. The really big story of the last two decades has been how economic values have penetrated all aspects of our lives; how money has almost replaced sex; how even the poorest are caught up in the language of riches. And I don't see this suddenly terminating. Rather it seems to me that this economic obsession has not yet peaked, to put it mildly.

Although I can imagine alternatives, I was around too many hippie communes to believe that this economic fixation can be put aside quickly. Would it be a wilder party if we were not so addicted to this money rush? Probably. Do I see it happening? No.

What I am trying to say in my book is, here is the kind of technology we are now in the process of inserting into every village on earth. Let's ask what kind of an economy it -- the technology -- is biased toward. And my answer is: one that ends up building on relationships, trust and human attention -- but with a very commercial orientation. Is it possible to make it all that but minus the commercialism? I'd say it was possible, but highly unlikely, judging on how people behave around the world.

**With all this talk of new economic strategy, didn't Wired, the magazine, finally succeed by using the industrial model -- tightening the focus and cutting its fringe projects loose to drift off on their own?**

Did Wired use the new rules of the new economy? Yes and no. Magazines in general obey many of the new rules because they operate on the postal network. Anyone can send anyone else in the world a message or thing, without permission, without going through a

centralized hub, without a lot of capital. It makes starting a zine pretty easy. This has made magazines very decentralized and Internet-like.

We see all the kinds of net effects from magazines that we will with online stuff. Lots of niches, increasing returns and "follow the free." Most magazines "give away" their issues. Sometimes, as in controlled circulation magazines, they actually give them away, and other times they behave as if they are giving them away -- the cost of printing and distributing copies is not covered by the price subscribers pay. So Wired, like most magazines, "gave away" its issues and made its money on advertising.

We were among the first magazines to put author e-mail addresses on articles. This we did deliberately to promote peer-to-peer communication, another rule I discuss in the book. Why should readers have to write to the magazine if they wanted to reach the author, and have their correspondence intercepted by the editors, rather than write the author directly? We also pioneered online subscriptions (as did a few other magazines). Here I felt we never went far enough.

I tried unsuccessfully from Day 1 to have Wired adopt the policy that the magazine should be like an ISP service: We should only accept subscriptions with credit cards, and we should send subscribers the magazine until they tell us not to (this is now the way Europeans subscribe), and subscribers should start and maintain their own subs -- changing their address themselves when they moved. This would eliminate the bane of magazines, that endless pathetic wasteful parade of junk mail renewal notices. But here I failed to make a dent, and Wired ran a very old-economy, direct-mail model.

We also set up our expansions in a very decentralized, network way. We didn't want to be a large vertical organization, so a new project was organized as essentially a separate company. We thought a company should not be larger than about 100 people, and our goal was to spin off projects as separate and sometimes competing companies as they grew beyond 100 people, just to keep things nimble and fast. This is what we did with Hardwired books and what is now called Wired Digital. There were some new economy inefficiencies, as I preach -- we did overlapping work, there were redundancies, we competed against each other. But it worked.

The larger Wired holding company was broken up recently not because this decentralization wasn't working, but [because of] very complex and horribly disastrous board infighting between the founders and the venture capitalists. That part was certainly very old economy.

We have a very generous "work wherever/whenever

you can" philosophy, which I think works. In the end, I'd give Wired passing marks, but not a stellar grade for playing by the new rules. It is important to note that I wrote the book, and not Wired -- and that while I had some influence on Wired, I wasn't running the company.

SALON | Dec. 10, 1998

Freelance writer and cyber-iconoclast [R.U. Sirius](#) will be the presidential candidate for the new political party [the Revolution](#) in 2000.



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