

Technology Journal: Books: Bandwidth Evangelist -- - Articulate Discussion Marred by Lengthy Ranting

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

There is a Good [George Gilder] and a Bad George Gilder. The Good George Gilder writes about technology in a lucid, prescient way that is rich with research and gives full credit where it is due to the engineers and inventors who really change our world. The Bad George Gilder goes off on wild rants about the evils of government, the stupidity of television and the vapidness of anyone who doesn't agree with him.

As I sit here typing this on a miserable product from Microsoft, it is hard to take the idea seriously that all government is bad and all companies have the consumer's interests at heart. But in Mr. Gilder's world, all wheeler-dealers, even the brazenly criminal like Michael Milken, are good. Gilder even credits Mr. Milken with launching the current bandwidth revolution by using junk bonds to finance companies like MCI in the 1970s and 1980s.

At the start of "Telecosm," Mr. Gilder advises those readers interested in technology to read certain sections and those interested in business to read others. Indeed the book has the slight feeling of disjuncture that comes from being articles patched together. My advice would be to read it all, except for perhaps the conclusion, where Mr. Gilder allows his rhetoric to soar off into an atmosphere where it becomes disoriented from a lack of oxygen.

FULL TEXT

Telecosm

By George Gilder

Free Press

There is a Good George Gilder and a Bad George Gilder. The Good George Gilder writes about technology in a lucid, prescient way that is rich with research and gives full credit where it is due to the engineers and inventors who really change our world. The Bad George Gilder goes off on wild rants about the evils of government, the stupidity of television and the vapidness of anyone who doesn't agree with him.

It is this George Gilder that began his career writing demagogic gibberish about race, marriage and economics before he morphed into the libertarian technoguru (i.e. someone who makes very expensive conference speeches) that he is today. Good George publishes one of the best tip sheets on technology and is meticulous in his research. Bad George interrupts all this with ludicrous flights of fancy about webs of light all couched in the cheesy pseudo-mystical language of a televangelist.

Inevitably in the long-awaited "Telecosm," you get a mix of Good George and Bad George. This book, essentially an amalgam of a long series of articles for Forbes ASAP, tells the story of bandwidth and how an infinite supply of it through optical cables and through the air is going to change the world.

His basic idea is that every stage in industrial development wastes some abundant resource. In the pre-industrial age land and manpower were there to be wasted but horsepower was scarce. With steam machines, horsepower became abundant but land scarce. With the dawning of the Microcosm, as he calls the current computer age, transistors on silicon chips were the abundant resource to be wasted but bandwidth had to be conserved. Now with optical pipes and mobile links, bandwidth will become abundant while energy and chips will be conserved (in small battery-powered mobile devices).

"This reversal is forcing a massive and drastic re-orientation of the entire structure of the information economy," he writes portentously.

This idea is not as surprising now as when Mr. Gilder first broached it several years back, when Microsoft was still dominant and the PC looked as though it was impregnable. Now broadband communications and mobile-internet applications are seen as the future with the computer hollowed out of its power, instead relying on distant servers and limitless connections.

Mr. Gilder traces all the developments necessary for this, from the development of lasers, optical cables, wireless technology and software languages like Java. He starts out asserting his vision for the future: Photonics will beat out electronics as the central means of communication and dumb networks will beat smart ones. What this means is the triumph of optical transmission, not just through glass fiber but through the air, and the reduction of the switching gear that slows data minutely as it whirls around the world.

Unusually for a book of this type Mr. Gilder is equally adept describing the technological advances and the business strategies that are just as important in determining which products gain the widest use.

Mr. Gilder explains certain satellite systems were doomed from the start while others will transform access to rural areas, why telephone companies will be trapped in their copper cages of wires, unable to break out of their rigid ways of doing business and why certain optical networks will triumph over others.

He is less clear when he goes off on digressions about the role of government and regulation, which he absolutely despises. All regulation is bad, all big corporations that operate in any regulated market are bad. Government is just a huge weight on the tech industry, he writes, conveniently ignoring all the subsidies that filter through to the industry in the United States and the fact that so much innovation has been kickstarted by government. He undermines his message by repeatedly pointing out how often companies like AT&T have stifled innovation.

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When the book crosses over into this realm it become shrill and grating, ignoring so many of the reasons why the U.S. is successful in the technological realm and how many of those things have to do with its government. Mr. Gilder credits immigration and the entrepreneurial spirit for America's success, and who could argue with that.

But the rule of law, educational opportunities and the protection of property are all issues that are inextricably bound to government and indeed are the reasons why so many immigrants want to go to the United States. Mr. Gilder's silly libertarianism and his elitist rants about television detract from what is otherwise an excellent book.

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He starts to sound like George W. Bush when he mangled his stump speech and came out with the immortal phrase, "This is where wings take dream." Mr. Gilder should save his burbling about "the global efflorescence" and a "radiant chrysalis from which the new economy is born" for his own expensive corporate stump speeches and keep his books focused on the essentials.

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