What the Dormouse Said: How the Sixties Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry

John Markoff (New York: Penguin, 2005)

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John Markoff has hit upon an unbeatably apt title for a book that explores and expounds the connections between the laying of the groundwork for personal computing in California in the 1960s and the culture of psychedelic drugs, social experimentation, and political protest that provided the backdrop to that development. The Dormouse nicely links those two worlds. In evoking the author of Alice in Wonderland, it calls to mind someone who was not merely an accomplished mathematician, but who made innovations in the information technology of his day. Charles Dodgson communicated with the ageing Charles Babbage to offer suggestions for improvements to his Analytical Machine, he employed and improved the electric pen, and he invented the nyctograph to enable him to take notes in the dark.1 And, of course, Alice’s Dormouse was adopted by Grace Slick when she composed the Great Society/Jefferson Airplane acid-rock song “White Rabbit”.2 “Feed your head, feed your head” were the words the Dormouse stentoriously proclaimed, at least on the Surrealistic Pillow version of the song.3

What the Dormouse Said is the revisionary backstory of Silicon Valley; in particular, the roots of the current model of human interface with personal computers (video screen, keyboard, mouse) and the early stabs at creating the Internet. Markoff is a long-standing hi-tech reporter for the New York Times who, over the past 20 years, has co-written three computer-related books.5 In Dormouse, his fourth book (but first solo effort), he takes us back to the pre-ironic age — “the Flintstones era of computers”6 — when batch processing and beatniks still roamed the earth. His claim is that the various accounts of the birth of personal computing have failed to attend sufficiently to the significance of the unique social milieu of San Francisco-area culture of the 1960s. There is much debate, not to mention much confused popular memory, over what the essence of the 1960s was, but in Markoff’s view, it was characterized by a bohemian sensibility that was open to experiments in alternative living arrangements, a disposition to anti-establishment politics (especially opposition to the military-industrial complex and its war in Vietnam), and a willingness to experiment with altered psychic states, especially through ingesting and inhaling certain substances. More fundamentally, in Markoff’s slightly elegiac account of the period, what was shared by the hippies and the personal computing pioneers based in and around Stanford was a commitment to transforming the world and the nature of humanity in a fundamental way — bringing about a change that hadn’t come before.

Markoff’s claim appears to be that these phenomena — the counterculture and the birth of the personal computer — did more than simply share physical propinquity and some notable aesthetic parallels. As he documents in Dormouse, many of the people who were at the forefront of changes in personal computing were not simply living and working in proximity to the counterculture. Rather, they were, at least in some cases, participants in it. Dormouse’s account of the contacts between LSD and Stanford-based computer scientists does not begin with the widespread and much-publicized recreational use of that chemical in the late 1960s, but rather with the more systematic and controlled experimentation of the late 1950s and early 1960s, before acid was criminalized. For instance, he describes group LSD sessions by computer scientists at the Stanford Research Institute, where the participants dropped acid in an effort to see whether they might be able to invent something new while under its influence.7 Participants included Doug Englebart, who would go on to invent the mouse, though the device Englebart con-

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ceved while on an acid trip, the tinkle toy, was considerably less influential.

Throughout *Dormouse*, the exploratory ferment in and around Palo Alto is contrasted with the buttoned-down, conformist hierarchy of back east, exemplified by MIT, IBM, and Digital Equipment Corporation. It also contrasted with the conservatism of Xerox, which had a west-coast outpost in Palo Alto but was dominated by a thoroughly east coast corporate culture. Xerox, in particular, is offered as a cautionary tale — the company that might now be the largest and most successful corporation in the world today had its executive drones not fumbled the personal computer ball due to lack of imagination about the technological potential they held in their hands. *Dormouse* seems to suggest that if the folks at Big Blue and Xerox had simply spent more time toking up and grooving to the Grateful Dead, then those organizations might have led the way in personal computing and companies such as Apple, and, in a different vein, Microsoft, would never have seen the light of day.

*Dormouse*’s argument faces the initial hurdle that some readers may view any thesis that involves the west-coast American counterculture as inherently flaky. Scholars who advance historical theses regarding various social sub-groups — migrant farm-workers or Jamaican immigrants, for example — have little difficulty being taken seriously. Those who make claims about the contribution of the hippies, however, may be tainted or marginalized by the disrepute in which the objects of their study are widely held. Some readers may be reluctant to credit a claim that any group as naïve and hedonistically self-indulgent as the hippies could have any historical impact, and in particular, that a group characterized by anti-intellectualism, Luddism, and drug use could have affected the growth of hi-tech.

However, Markoff is undeniably on to something. The phenomenon of the early 1960s exposure of Stanford’s hi-tech community to psychedelics has been touched on before in works dealing with the history of LSD in North America, but not in ways that sought to explore the downstream impacts on personal computing. And when we turn to accounts of the developments in computing in this period, most of those either ignore the counterculture altogether, or mention it only in passing. In so doing, they are leaving something out of the picture. An instructive illustration here is Freiberger and Swaine’s 1984 study *Fire in the Valley.* That tale of the rise of personal computing made passing reference to the fact that the “late 1960s were a turbulent time on American college campuses, a time when many were questioning received values and structures and building their own.” Yet, although the counterculture loiters in the background of *Fire in the Valley*, nothing much is ever made of it in the text. Interestingly, however, when the reader of *Fire in the Valley* turns to its 32 pages of photographs and notes that the young men pictured there have shoulder-length hair, blue jeans, and, at least in one case, a psychedelically-painted VW microbus, one cannot help but feel that something has been left out of the picture by not considering the effects of the counterculture on the development of the personal computer.

It is this gap that *Dormouse* purports to fill. To be sure, its theme is not completely original. Steven Levy’s book *Hackers* certainly demonstrated that in the 1960s and 1970s, significant developments in computing, especially in software, were due to nonconformist individuals working outside the typical corporate and academic environments. But although Levy’s account touched intermittently on the links between adventurous computer visionaries and the Computer Lib and anti-war movements, he demonstrated little interest in Markoff’s chief theme: psychotropic drugs and the associated Merry Pranksterish mindset. Theodore Roszak, the man who coined the word “counterculture”, had expounded on the computer/LSD link in his 1985 Alvin Fine Memorial Lecture, subsequently published as From *Satori to Silicon Valley.* However, Roszak’s work was sociological analysis. What Markoff purports to offer in *Dormouse* is history. Moreover, it is history of a certain sort, based on Markoff’s extensive personal interviews with the surviving participants. This sort of book will not be possible in another 30 years, for by then the *dramatis personae* will be dead.

The result is an assured and intriguing account of interesting times. There is much that is new here, including doubt cast on the widespread view that it was Steve Dompier who liberated/stole Altair BASIC from Bill Gates. To be sure, Markoff slips here and there: his account of Moore’s Law is imprecise, the Viennese-born Ivan Illich was not a “radical Chilean educator,” and Atlanta was not the city in which the Québec –Washington–Guantánamo peace marchers were beaten and jailed. In addition, Canadian readers will snicker at Markoff’s references to such non-existent institutions as the University of Vancouver and the University of Ontario. But these are minor gaffs that do not undermine the author’s assured feel for the period. *Dormouse* is pleasant and untaxing reading. The only significant qualification to that is that for readers who place a high priority on precise chronology, Markoff does not provide dates often enough. This shortcoming is compounded by a structure that eschews a consecutive account. *Dormouse* adopts the “great man” approach to history and focuses on a number of individuals — Doug Englebart, Myron Stolaroff, Fred Moore, Stewart Brand, John McCarthy and Larry Tesler. For each, Markoff offers a brief overview of their formative years, and then brings them to Palo Alto in the late 1950s or the 1960s, at which point the account becomes more detailed. Then, when we encounter the next individual whose contribution will be examined in detail, we backtrack (flashback?) to their early days and repeat the process. The reader interested in chronology will have to invest
too much mental energy in remembering what year
Markoff is dealing with on any given page. However, that
aside, Dormouse is a respectably researched, engagingly
written, and provocative tale.

But is it anything more than mere provocation? The
book is not heavily theorized. For instance, no attempt is
made to group the hippies and the computer pioneers
together as late flowerings of questing romanticism,
standing side by side at the same crossroads. Dormouse
excels as a catalogue and chronicle. We should be
grateful to Markoff for the fine legwork, but at the analy-
tical level, the book seems like a missed opportunity.

However, perhaps that is to criticize a book that is
principally a historical study for not also being a work of
sociology. The real problem with Dormouse is that, even
assessed as a work of history, it fails in a primary obli-
gation. Markoff is frustratingly imprecise about his central
thesis — the nature of the connections between west-
coast 1960s counterculture (LSD in particular) and the
birth of personal computing in particular, the computer
interface we continue to use. Markoff is adept at showing
that a number of the persons who were instrumental in
the rise of the personal computer — from Doug
Englebart to Steve Jobs — dropped acid during the
1960s, and that like most who did, they were mightily
impressed by it. He usefully catalogues the aesthetic par-
allels between the geeks and the freaks — the beards and
beanbag chairs that were found both in hippie commu-
nies and Stanford computer labs, but not at Honey-
well or IBM.

But in what sense might it matter if some of the
code that still supports the Internet was written by a
stoned, long-haired anti-war activist? More to the point,
did LSD make any causative difference to the timing or
nature of the development of the personal computer?
On these questions, it is no easy matter to pin Markoff
down. He writes that those “computer technologies that
we take for granted today owe their shape to this unruly
period, which was defined by protest, experimentation
with drugs, counter-cultural community, and a general
sense of anarchic idealism.” This appears to gesture
toward a causal connection. However, something owing
its shape to a period that was defined by X is quite a
different thing from owing its shape to X.

Markoff further muddies the waters on this crucial
point by unnecessarily resorting to drug-related meta-
phors. For instance, of Moore’s Law, he notes that it “was
a straightforward insight, but for those who made the
leap it was the mind-expanding equivalent of taking a
psychedelic drug.” Apart from being unhelpfully hyper-
bolic — coming to terms with the implications of
Moore’s law can be startling, but compared with drop-
ning acid, it’s small beer — such metaphorical flourishes
tendentiously complicate the task of trying to isolate a
thesis about the connections between mind-expanding
drugs and the birth of personal computing.

Of course, this is a work of history, an area where
those who assert a causal hypothesis are rarely able to
rigorously prove it to the satisfaction of all. However,
difficulties of irrefutable proof do not absolve historians
of the obligation of at least trying to advance and sub-
stantiate some causal claim. And the potential claim that
might arise from Dormouse is a significant one. If LSD is
an interesting backdrop to the development of personal
computing, that is one thing, but if exposure to
psychedelics facilitates advances in the field of informa-
tion technology, then that is rather more important. It
might prompt some countries to rethink their criminal-
ization of those chemicals. Markoff’s extensive interviews
laid the groundwork for advancing a claim about the
effects of psychotropic chemicals on changes in informa-
tion technology, and it is a pity that opportunity was not
pursued.

There is a second and related way in which
Markoff’s claims are exasperatingly vague: viz., his
attempts to draw parallels between the period on which
he focuses — roughly 1959 to 1975 — and the situation
today. Markoff notes that the scene today is characterized
by a “schism between information propertarians and
information libertarians [that] divides not only the com-
puter industry but increasingly the entire digital world,
affecting the consumer electronics, recording, and
motion picture industries.”

He observes that during the period he is examining,
“the idea that the codes were intellectual property was
actually laughable to the experimenters.” His claim
appears to be that there is something about computer
technology that flourishes best in a non-hierarchical cul-
ture of personal experimentation under a depropertyzed
legal regime. If that comedy-of-the-commons vision is
justified, then again, it might have consequences for a
range of legal issues current before courts and legisla-
tures, from the war on drugs to the war on cyberpunks.

But Dormouse is insufficiently elaborate on this
connection. For one thing, Markoff ends his narrative in
the mid-1970s without any serious attempt to track the
subsequent morphing (not to mention repackaging) of
1960s counterculture. He mentions the post-1975 scene
only to imply that there is a direct link between today’s
file sharers (a.k.a. cyberpunk thieves) and the homebrew
computer pioneers of the early 1970s. Evoking a parallel
between the propertarian/libertarian split of today and
the IBM/LSD split of a generation ago raises interesting
questions. Conceivably, some parallels of at least an
attenuated nature can be drawn. However, to explore
them adequately, one would need to offer some account
and interpretation of the intervening years. After all, the
period from 1975 to 2005 was not without its significant
historical and cultural developments: disco, AIDS, the
Internet, cocaine, the end of communism, punk and
grunge, 9/11, hip hop, the war on terror, awareness of
imminent environmental collapse, etc. Any attempt to
extract lessons from the Palo Alto of the 1960s and early 1970s, and apply them to the debates among today’s knowledge workers, would seem to require some effort to factor those developments into the equation. Markoff offers none; he simply adverts to the debates in the period that he studies and suggests that they offer lessons for resolving, or at least understanding, today’s struggles.24

At the end of the day, Dormouse is a diverting read that brings to light some interesting facts and gestures toward some significant claims about them, but then sacrifices any serious attempt to articulate and substantiate those claims, and lapses instead into overstatement and sensationalism. One value shared by the hippies and the computer visionaries of the 1960s was that they were in it simply for the money. There is room for doubt about whether the same can be said for John Markoff’s Dormouse.

Notes:

2 Grace Slick, “White Rabbit,” on Jefferson Airplane, Surrealistic Pillow (RCA, 1967). Citation of “White Rabbit” presents perplexing difficulties. The most authoritative source on citation of music in Canadian legal scholarship prescribes citation to “the song’s first appearance on a commercially available song recording”; Vaughan Black and David Fraser, “Cities for Sore Ears (A Paper Moon)” (1993) 16 Dalhousie L.J. 216 at 229. But the purpose of that rule is to give a clue as to the song’s date. In the case of “White Rabbit”, Slick had written and performed that song as a member of The Great Society, and she brought it with her when she joined the Jefferson Airplane. After the Airplane hit it big, Columbia attempted to cash in on Slick’s name by issuing a live recording by The Great Society: Conspicuous only in its Absence (Columbia, 1968). That album features a version of “White Rabbit” performed at The Matrix in 1966, the year before Surrealistic Pillow.
3 The Dormouse in Alice in Wonderland uttered no such words. Furthermore, it is worth noting in passing that by the mid-1970s, at about the time that Bill Gates was getting Microsoft off the ground, Slick, singing with the Jefferson Starship, was known to alter the lyrics in concert and sing “keep your head” — which can be sage advice when monopolists are in the ascendant.
7 Markoff, Dormouse, supra note 4 at 66-67.
8 Ibid. at 67. Englebar’s tinkle toy was a small waterwheel that would float in a toilet bowl and spin when peed upon, thus operating as a potty-training device.