From Anarchy to Power, by Wendy M. Grossman

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#)

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Is the culture of the Web something genuinely new, or is it merely "human nature plugged-in"? The extreme points of view on this—call them the Huxleyan and the Luddite—consider the same phenomena, trends and evidence and invariably arrive at wildly different conclusions. Wendy Grossman, who is a freelance writer living in London, wrote an earlier book, *net.wars*, about the Internet in its infancy, to which the present volume can be seen as a sequel.

There is a lot to like about this survey, especially the diligent research and reading the author has invested in it. The endnotes are vast and informative. Yet because the book's aim is never clearly stated and the chapter titles are flip and obscure ("Free Speech, Not Free Beer," for example), even a careful reader will at first wonder what the author has in mind.

Fortunately, *From Anarchy to Power* gathers strength as it goes along. Grossman's later chapters on such things as shareware and hacking, copyright and privacy are particularly good. They usefully document how the often-conflicting interests of business and the general public have required grudging concessions from both.

The Web is an especially difficult subject to consider, particularly from a cultural standpoint, whether one approaches it as a Huxleyan or a Luddite. On no other topic does the "received wisdom" date so quickly. Further, I suspect that even those of us who spend a lot of our working and leisure hours on the WWW don't care much about "the man behind the curtain" (assuming there is one), or the unsettling human potentialities of our activities, though perhaps we should. Rather than go offline and think about the personal, cultural and even political implications of what we are doing, most of us prefer simply to jump in and keep going.

Ironically, considering this book's very contemporary subject matter, it has a distinctively 1960s accent: there is a folkloric "you should have been there when" perspective throughout. (For example, people who use the Web extensively are frequently referred to here as "netheads.") It is unlikely that the message of books like this—"Consider (and possibly mend) your Web-centered ways"—is likely to be heeded.