

Steve Jobs: The Next Insanely Great Thing

By Gary Wolf

The Wired Interview

The following is an extract from the interview published in the February 1996 edition of Wired. *Steve Jobs is the founder of Apple.*

Rethinking Revolution

What's the biggest surprise this technology will deliver?

The problem is I'm older now, I'm 40 years old, and this stuff doesn't change the world. It really doesn't.

That's going to break people's hearts.

I'm sorry, it's true. Having children really changes your view on these things. We're born, we live for a brief instant, and we die. It's been happening for a long time. Technology is not changing it much - if at all.

These technologies can make life easier, can let us touch people we might not otherwise. You may have a child with a birth defect and be able to get in touch with other parents and support groups, get medical information, the latest experimental drugs. These things can profoundly influence life. I'm not downplaying that. But it's a disservice to constantly put things in this radical new light - that it's going to change everything. Things don't have to change the world to be important.

The Web is going to be very important. Is it going to be a life-changing event for millions of people? No. I mean, maybe. But it's not an assured Yes at this point. And it'll probably creep up on people.

It's certainly not going to be like the first time somebody saw a television. It's certainly not going to be as profound as when someone in Nebraska first heard a radio broadcast. It's not going to be *that* profound.

Then how will the Web impact our society?

We live in an information economy, but I don't believe we live in an information *society*. People are thinking less than they used to. It's primarily because of television. People are reading less and they're certainly thinking less. So, I don't see most people using the Web to get more information. We're already in information overload. No matter how much information the Web can dish out, most people get far more information than they can assimilate anyway.

The problem is television?

When you're young, you look at television and think, There's a conspiracy. The networks have conspired to dumb us down. But when you get a little older, you realize that's not true. The networks are in business to give people exactly what they want. That's a far more depressing thought. Conspiracy is optimistic! You can shoot the bastards! We can have a revolution! But the networks are really in business to give people what they want. It's the truth.

So Steve Jobs is telling us things are going to continue to get worse.

They are getting worse! Everybody knows that they're getting worse! Don't you think they're getting worse?

I do, but I was hoping I could come here and find out how they were going to get better. Do you really believe that the world is getting worse? Or do you have a feeling that the things you're involved with are making the world better?

No. The world's getting worse. It has gotten worse for the last 15 years or so. Definitely. For two reasons. On a global scale, the population is increasing dramatically and all our structures, from ecological to economic to political, just cannot deal with it. And in this country, we seem to have fewer smart people in government, and people don't seem to be paying as much attention to the important

decisions we have to make.

But you seem very optimistic about the potential for change.

I'm an optimist in the sense that I believe humans are noble and honorable, and some of them are really smart. I have a very optimistic view of individuals. As individuals, people are inherently good. I have a somewhat more pessimistic view of people in groups. And I remain extremely concerned when I see what's happening in our country, which is in many ways the luckiest place in the world. We don't seem to be excited about making our country a better place for our kids.

The people who built Silicon Valley were engineers. They learned business, they learned a lot of different things, but they had a real belief that humans, if they worked hard with other creative, smart people, could solve most of humankind's problems. I believe that very much.

I believe that people with an engineering point of view as a basic foundation are in a pretty good position to jump in and solve some of these problems. But in society, it's not working. Those people are not attracted to the political process. And why would somebody be?

Could technology help by improving education?

I used to think that technology could help education. I've probably spearheaded giving away more computer equipment to schools than anybody else on the planet. But I've had to come to the inevitable conclusion that the problem is not one that technology can hope to solve. What's wrong with education cannot be fixed with technology. No amount of technology will make a dent.

It's a political problem. The problems are sociopolitical. The problems are unions. You plot the growth of the NEA [National Education Association] and the dropping of SAT scores, and they're inversely proportional. The problems are unions in the schools. The problem is bureaucracy. I'm one of these people who believes the best thing we could ever do is go to the full voucher system.

I have a 17-year-old daughter who went to a private school for a few years before high school. This private school is the best school I've seen in my life. It was judged one of the 100 best schools in America. It was phenomenal. The tuition was \$5,500 a year, which is a lot of money for most parents. But the teachers were paid less than public school teachers - so it's not about money at the teacher level. I asked the state treasurer that year what California pays on average to send kids to school, and I believe it was \$4,400. While there are not many parents who could come up with \$5,500 a year, there are many who could come up with \$1,000 a year.

If we gave vouchers to parents for \$4,400 a year, schools would be starting right and left. People would get out of college and say, "Let's start a school." You could have a track at Stanford within the MBA program on how to be the businessperson of a school. And that MBA would get together with somebody else, and they'd start schools. And you'd have these young, idealistic people starting schools, working for pennies.

They'd do it because they'd be able to set the curriculum. When you have kids you think, What exactly do I want them to learn? Most of the stuff they study in school is completely useless. But some incredibly valuable things you don't learn until you're older - yet you could learn them when you're younger. And you start to think, What would I do if I set a curriculum for a school?

God, how exciting that could be! But you can't do it today. You'd be crazy to work in a school today. You don't get to do what you want. You don't get to pick your books, your curriculum. You get to teach one narrow specialization. Who would ever want to do that?

These are the solutions to our problems in education. Unfortunately, technology isn't it. You're not going to solve the problems by putting all knowledge onto CD-ROMs. We can put a Web site in every school - none of this is bad. It's bad only if it lulls us into thinking we're doing something to solve the problem with education.

Lincoln did not have a Web site at the log cabin where his parents home-schooled him, and he turned out pretty interesting. Historical precedent shows that we can turn out amazing human beings without technology. Precedent also shows that we can turn out very uninteresting human beings with technology.

It's not as simple as you think when you're in your 20s - that technology's going to change the world. In some ways it will, in some ways it won't.