

A Tech-no-color World

I want to thank the Meadowlark Institute for inviting me to participate in their series “Dialogues with Great Plains Writers.” I appreciate the opportunity to join you today by holographic image. This afternoon we’ll hear from James Pierson and his twin brother Mark, who are the inspiration for my new e-book, *Traveling the NetRoads*. James is joining us from his home in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He works as Director of Global Security for North Star Robotics. Mark is at the Fort Abraham Lincoln Cultural Center in Mandan, North Dakota where he lives and works as Director of the National White Buffalo Parklands. James and Mark were born and raised in Chadron, Nebraska and attended the University of Nebraska. James studied communication system engineering and Mark studied wildlife biology.

But before we get to their stories, I was asked to give you some background on my writing, about the region and myself. I’m Matt Youngblood, born and raised in Alexandria, Minnesota. My birthday is a day no one will ever forget, September 11, 2001. My parents used to talk about that day and how it changed the American psyche and led us to look for ways to increase security, which usually involved advanced technologies like retinal and fingerprint scanning or identification and tracking devices. In 2009 my parents had isafe© chips implanted in the whole family to ensure we would always be able to find each other.

I’ve been interested in technology for as long as I can remember, and started blogging when I was about 10. My blogs were usually about technology or politics in the northern Great Plains. They caught the attention of the *New York Times*, which offered me a job as an online reporter when I was 14. This e-book is a collection of articles and blogs about the northern Plains region from the past 35 years.

I’ve been known to cause quite a stir with my writing. In 2012, I claimed that the US financial system was vulnerable to hackers by being solely electronic and that it was creating a new social class of tech-poor. Also that year, I told North Dakotans they deserved to lose their youth, since they weren’t providing them with any real future. I had evidence to back it up. Sure they had just elected their first female Governor, but she was so focused on traditional infrastructure, that technology hardly even registered... but the bigger story was the youth that were running for office. Of the 60 that ran, only four won seats. What hope did that offer young people?

But things were entirely different in Minnesota. In 2014, they elected a 32-year-old governor and had young people filling 30% of the state senate and 50% of the state house. They created a future for themselves by jointly developing the “Agenda for the Future of Minnesota.” Its focus was technology and it required all elementary and secondary education programs to immediately use technology to the fullest extent possible.

Two years later, Congress created the Federal Department of Transportation and Communications (FDTC) in recognition that the Internet was really a part of the transportation system as the “virtual highway of information.” The FDTC provided single infrastructure block grants to the states and they could choose whether to fund transportation infrastructure or technology infrastructure.

Obviously the Minnesota Legislature chose to use the money to fund technology when it passed the “Minnesota Technology Universal Access Act.” This Act guaranteed every Minnesotan a laptop computer and wireless access within three years. Several of the urban centers invested additional funds in technology. Iowa and Nebraska followed suit with their own versions of the Act.

North and South Dakota directed 90% of their funding to public transportation infrastructure. They really did need quality roads for the vitality of rural schools, medical services and communities. They saw technology use as an individual’s choice, yet each state did make some technology funding available to individual communities.

Then it happened. On September 11, 2021 the New York City financial sector got attacked by cyber terrorists. It completely destroyed the national financial system - no banks, stock exchange, credit cards or shopping. Even the backup systems were destroyed! But a group of previously unknown computer hackers stepped forward and offered to restore the system. Turns out they had been quietly creating a mirror of the financial system.

This attack caused a major cyber scare. It was decided to decentralize the national financial system by creating data hubs where there were existing financial infrastructure and tech workers. The federal government and Minnesota invested millions in technology infrastructure and jointly established a Cyber Warfare Center (CWC) in Minneapolis. They drafted cyber-skilled youth, as young as 15, to the new Cyber Combat Core to help defend our country and its financial sector. But a short two years later, disaster struck the world again. A cy-attack on the financial markets in Beijing shut down the entire Asian financial system for two weeks. The EU, Japan and China joined the US in leading the fight against cyber terrorism.

The second attack had united the world, but left this region divided. By 2025 two distinct societies were emerging. One centered in the areas that had invested in technology; the other evolved in the places where technology was a choice, not mandatory. This is where I’ll turn the story over to James and Mark Pierson. They were born in 2021, so really don’t know a time when cyber security wasn’t ingrained into our everyday lives. While they have both lived on the northern Great Plains their whole lives, they have lived in very different worlds. Let’s start with James, and then turn to Mark.

(JAMES) Thanks Matt. Well like you said, we were born at a pretty crazy time. Even though we’re twins, our differences appeared early on. I started surfing the web at 2 ½ and Mark usually played outside or was drawing and painting.

I was 15 when I finished my degree at the University of Nebraska. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do so I enlisted in the Cyber Combat Core and was stationed in Minneapolis. I served my three years and started looking for a job in security. No one stayed with a company more than a year, so companies started competing to hire the best. Well, I was pretty good, so after five years of job jumping I was offered a ten year, \$20 million contract by North Star Robotics. How could I say no?

North Star is sweet; I work from home of course, and have a great pad with every new electronic gadget and system you can imagine. My office is a high security room where I run the company's security operations. My partner and I don't go out much, don't need to, everything is right here. We did run into a little bit of trouble early on with cyber addictions but the company had a great treatment program and sent us to a rehab Cy-Spa. We've both been clean ever since.

We have two beautifully cloned children. They love being able to log into class anytime they want. They are taking classes in technology, history and cyber social skills with classmates from around the globe. I don't even think they realize people speak other languages, with the instant translation. One wants to live in the Mars colony and the other plans to live on the ocean floor. We're stoked about taking our very first vacation to visit the kids!

And the best part about technology is that it's eliminated racism, ageism, sexism, all the "isms." People participate to their fullest extent based on their abilities since computer ID's don't reveal any of those unnecessary details about a person.

And people have never been healthier! In fact, just the other day I was watching a story on my 24-hour news wall that a Minneapolis woman just reached 136 years old. They say the centennials are the fastest growing segment of the population in the region! We used to think that the region's population would drop since the baby boomers were dying off, but technology has changed all that.

But it rocks to join this conversation from my virtual entertainment room, it's like I'm right there with you. Tomorrow night from right here we'll be attending the last Rolling Stones concert ever. I guess all the health advances have finally run their course with Keith Richards. And yeah, back to you Matt.

(MATT) Thanks James and now Mark...

(MARK) Thanks Matt. While I love my brother dearly, I could never live like he does. And, he really doesn't tell the whole story. Sorry James.

Like those urban elderly living to 130 – they live in isolated senior facilities with no outside contact. And while he raves about his kids, he fails to mention that 67% of urban youth under age 16 are addicted to cyber drugs. He doesn't tell you the real reason they don't leave home it's because outside is a concrete world that's one large metropolis for hundreds of miles. There's no grass or animals, no nature. The closest they get to nature is watching it on a screen while walking on a treadmill – James calls that a "nature walk."

And the idea that technology has addressed the issue of racism, seriously! What technology has done is push the issue into the shadows and created this bland, tech-no-color world where everyone pretends to be alike and no one has any real identity, culture or uniqueness to celebrate.

But James was right about one thing; I have always loved nature and the arts. I live in a small, vibrant artist colony near Mandan, North Dakota. Some may think of us as technophobes because we are focused on the environment and on living well-balanced lives, but we aren't. We just have different priorities. And it's not that we are against technology, we use it. For example, most of the farmers around here use communication technology and robotic machines to do a lot of the work. Our agriculture production focuses on bioenergy crops that are processed at high tech plants. We have some of the most technologically advanced organic farms in the nation.

Like Matt said, I'm joining you from the beautiful Fort Abraham Lincoln Cultural Center just south of Mandan on the edge of the White Buffalo National Parklands. This is a place where cultural differences are honored and celebrated and where we work to address the "isms" through dialogue, building understanding and learning to respect and honor each other's differences. The Parklands, which stretch from Miles City, Montana to New Town, North Dakota to Grand Island, Nebraska is a place where urban tourists come to connect with nature, find balance in their lives and step into a slower pace of life. We offer real wildlife tours, community festivals and visits to small family farms – where you can pick and eat your own vegetables. It's so beautiful here; I hope each of you will make the trip someday.

But not all rural communities have fared as well. Many small towns have disappeared, including our hometown of Chadron. But the communities that invested in themselves and embraced change are wonderful places with a lot to offer. They have incredible teacher-driven schools where students learn both online and experientially in nature's classroom; spiritual centers where people of all denominations can worship; low poverty rates due to sustainable food systems and helpful communities; holistic living centers for the centennials that connect residents with community life and; active artist communities that have led to a rebirth in nature art, especially electronic nature art – so people like James can take their walks and have some exposure to the natural world.

Last month, we had an amazing concert featuring musicians from rural communities all over the region sharing a virtual stage to premiere the "Grassland Suite." A sense of community and collective spirit is something technology can erase if you let it; we've chosen to retain it.

I think you can tell I'm passionate about the wonderful life I have, and love to share it – so all of you who are watching come visit us soon. Let me end by extending thanks to Matt for the stories you have told about life on the northern Great Plains.

(MATT) Thank you, James and Mark. And now I would invite you all to open your dialogue monitors to share your stories and journeys as you've traveled the crossroads of our history in this region.