The Early Years of Computer-based Communication: An Amazon Review of *THE FRIENDLY ORANGE GLOW: THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE PLATO SYSTEM AND THE DAWN OF CYBERCULTURE* by Brian Dear

by Stuart Umpleby, January 2, 2018

Brian Dear claims that much of the digital technology that we find so amazing today actually existed decades earlier at a university in the Midwest.  How could that be?  It happened because after Sputnik people in government believed in the potential of computer-based education and were willing to fund the needed research.  Most of the work at the PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations) Laboratory focused on education and programmed learning.  But there was also some research on computer-based communication and citizen participation. There were experiments with a variety of formats – email, conferencing, issue discussions, web-like programs and simulations.  The book is a dramatic portrayal of the development of computer media from the 1950s to recent years.  It describes how ideas became reality through technology and how changes in technology led to the downfall of a once very innovative company.

The book presents explanations of technology, debates among academic specialists, descriptions of some very effective educational activities, and incidents in organizational politics.  What was the original intent?  What new technology was needed?  What alternative designs were considered?  What struggles occurred among various groups?  Why was a notes program, always essential on every time-shared computer system, seen only as an aid to programming rather than as an application in itself?  Why did a very capable technology not become a successful commercial product?  When costs came down, the technology was quickly adopted and innovation flowered. Brian Dear presents an exciting new view of the digital revolution.