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Brainy bettors lay odds on the future of tech

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The predictions about all the wonders technology will offer in the future could fill a large Dumpster.

Now, veteran Silicon Valley big thinkers Stewart Brand and Kevin Kelly have a new venture designed to make the punditocracy accountable: the Long Bets Foundation.

The foundation, which is online at www.longbets.org, asked tech mavens (and some non-techies) to offer their best guesses on the future and then back up their predictions with bets of \$1,000 or more. The money will go to charity, except for a small amount to cover the foundation's costs.

Here are some of the forecasts: The universe will stop expanding. By 2007, people will rely on Weblogs more than on the New York Times for their news. By 2030, commercial airlines will switch to pilotless planes.

Anyone can put a prediction, accompanied by an argument, on the Web site, along with the wager. Anyone else can counter. Soon, people will be able to take sides in the argument.

Some heavy hitters have turned over as much as \$20,000 to show they have the courage of their convictions. Bettors include Google Chief Executive Officer Eric Schmidt, Lotus founder Mitch Kapor and Internet pioneer Vint Cerf.

The effort is part fun, part fund-raiser, and mostly a way to advance Brand and Kelly's agenda: to get people to "think about what's going to happen beyond the next quarter," said Kelly, the former executive editor at Wired magazine.

Long Bets will get a boost with a kickoff feature in the May issue of Wired,

and Brand and Kelly will discuss it at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco at 7 p.m. next Wednesday. (The talk will cost \$10 for club members and \$15 for all others; for more information, see www.inforumonline.org.)

For Wired, the effort represents a reach into its past. Many of the bettors,

such as entrepreneur and author Esther Dyson, Global Business Network founder Peter Schwartz and

artificial intelligence pioneer Ray Kurzweil -- to say nothing of Kelly, a founding editor, and Brand, founder of online community the Well and the Whole Earth Catalog -- made regular appearances in the early years of Wired. Although Kelly left Wired when Conde Nast bought the magazine, he remains on the masthead as editor at large.

"Kevin is an extraordinary force, Stewart as well," said Wired Editor in Chief Chris Anderson, who joined the magazine last year. "They may be old, but they're still very good."

THE HP PAYDAY: The dust hasn't even settled on the Hewlett-Packard proxy fight, and the first book deal has already been announced. The six-figure prize goes to George Anders of Fast Company magazine, who will write his tome for the Portfolio imprint of Penguin Putnam.

Adrian Zackheim, who edited David Packard's famous book, "The HP Way," will oversee Anders' work.

In 1998, when Anders was at the Wall Street Journal, he wrote a long piece on the Packard Foundation. More recently, in Fast Company, he wrote about how HP chief executive Carly Fiorina is held to a different standard because she's a woman.

"This is a once-in-a-decade opportunity to do a book about a fascinating, important company in Silicon Valley, an American legend coping with stress and change that it's never experienced in its 65-year history," Anders said.

HERE COMES THE SUN: Caroline Waxler was in the San Francisco Main Library when she got the call on her cell phone: Editors at the New York Sun, a new daily newspaper starting up this month, wanted to talk to her about a business columnist position.

Waxler, 31, asked if the call could wait, but "they had to do it right then, " she said. "I had to do it in the stacks, with everyone 'shushing' me. . . . It was the biggest faux pas that ever was."

Perhaps, but Waxler got the job. She starts work today, and the Sun comes out on April 16. It will publish five days a week, printing 60,000 copies a day and selling them for 50 cents apiece.

Waxler has no newspaper experience, but she's a Forbes magazine vet who moved to San Francisco in 2000 to help start up eCompany Now, the magazine now known as Business 2.0.

She will be writing a column twice a week at first but has ambitions to go daily. "Is that crazy?" she asks.

No crazier than starting New York's fourth daily newspaper during a recession. The Sun is led by former Wall Street Journal reporter and editor Seth Lipsky and former Los Angeles Times reporter Ira Stoll; Lipsky also ran the Forward, where Stoll was an editor and Washington correspondent. Although Times Mirror pulled the plug on New York Newsday, the last stab at a new daily in Gotham, Lipsky and Stoll have backing from a list of New York businessmen in getting the paper off the ground.

PAPER SOURCES: They may be niche-oriented paper industry trade journals, but the dispute between Forestweb and Paperloop threatened to have serious implications for journalists everywhere.

The suit has now been settled, and the journalistic question -- can reporters keep their sources as they move from one publication to another -- is no longer an issue. The answer remains yes.

The issue arose when Internet upstart Forestweb hired three journalists away from Paperloop -- a new name for the corporate parent of the established industry leader, Pulp and Paper Week. Paperloop sued, arguing that the sources the reporters developed at its publication were part of Paperloop's intellectual property.

After several early rounds in court and a mediation session, Paperloop agreed to drop the charges. "It's a victory for us," declared Diane Keaton, the editor of Forestweb.

Paperloop CEO Ian Johnston said he "would call this a tie." He dropped the case because he feared he was only "pouring money down a legal drain," but he asserted that the case was about intellectual property that went beyond mere sourcing.

"That's a crock," said Neil Shapiro, attorney for Forestweb. Shapiro characterized the case by saying, "Somebody tried to stop reporters from using their sources and eventually gave up. . . . I'd say the press did all right."

Media Bytes appears every Wednesday in The Chronicle. Send buzz, dirt, tips and comments to dfost@sfgate.com.

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