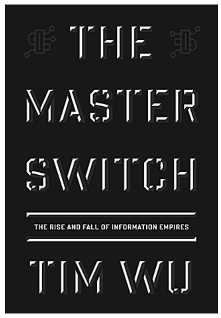
Critical book review

Wu, T. *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, 366 p. ISBN: 978-0307269935



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The Master Switch by Tim Wu is an important book by virtue of 3 things: one its eminent readability, the prominence of its author in multiple realms of American society, and the breadth of the argument it advances in tying together the development of the telephone, radio, television, film and internet industries.

Wu is a prominent law professor at Columbia Law School, a columnist at Slate (an online website of some significant popularity), a self-described policy advocate as Board Chair of Free Press (arguably the largest advocacy organization addressing media reform in the U.S.), and a Future Tense Fellow at The New America Foundation. Given these multiple roles, he has legitimacy in both legal academia and in popular culture, and his ideas regarding the arc of information industries advanced in the book will undoubtedly be wielded or critiqued in the ongoing policy debates within the U.S. and beyond.

The book, not unambitiously, provides a history of the communication industries in the United States from 1861 to the present day. Though with only occasional reference to industries beyond the borders, it does so with an appreciation of what Wu calls "the cycle", which he argues all cultural and communications empires follow. The cycle begins with the technological invention in question, the subsequent centralization of control over it, and ultimately its break-up (either as a result of regulator intervention or new technological innovation). His account is rich in thumbnail sketches of the key protagonists – both leaders of the industries, regulators and the inventors of what he characterizes as Schumpeterian disruptions - as well as what he considers the key moves made by these actors.

Though he doesn't spell it out directly, he has obvious sympathy for the wronged inventor, regards the actions of regulators critically and skeptically, and credits all powerful industries as driving (for the most part) the shape of media and electric and electronic communications infrastructure. His account, written to be consumed by a non-academic audience, is necessarily partial. He relegates the break-up of AT&T to eight pages, something covered by Steve Coll in his 1986 book in no less than 380 pages. More recently, the unarguably more deeply primary sourced *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications* by fellow Columbia Professor Richard R. John charts the history of just the formative era of electrical communications, the telegraph and telephone between 1840 – 1920, in no less than 413 pages.

Both comparisons, though, are to books that, though they utilize many more primary sources, don't attempt what Wu attempts in the final section of his book; that is, to look to the future and "face squarely the question that the story told heretofore is meant to help us answer - Is the internet really different? .... which is mightier: the radicalism of the internet or the inevitability of the cycle?" (p. 256). Here his law professor colors come to the fore. In the last chapter he succinctly makes a normative argument in favor of "a Separations Principle for the information economy." In his way Wu is resurrecting and extending a policy he outlines earlier (p.184), advanced by President Nixon's White House with respect to cable television, and doing so (as a law professor is wont) in such a way that it might have purchase with policymakers and other actors. He outlines this argument in the last 21 pages and does so straightforwardly.

His proposal is one that Wu, who also authored of the concept of "net neutrality," an idea he characterizes as a modern day resurrection of "common carriage to a twenty-first century industry" (p. 311), sees as likely to be necessary for the latter to continue to exist. Though he refers to it as constitutional, his "separations principle" is not proposed as an amendment to the U.S. Constitution but as "a norm taken as axiomatic" (p. 308 footnote), effectively a call to all actors to keep discrete "each of the major functions or layers in the information economy" (p. 304), i.e. those who provide the conduits shouldn't also own the content. He also argues that regulators should keep their distance and not favor one technology or company, but rather act "as a check on private power, never as an aid to it" (p. 308). He recognizes that some of the "benefits of concentration and unified action" (p. 305) will be lost, but still considers his separation principle valuable as its implementation will release innovation and preserve free speech through “the habit of fostering a practical environment in which the ideal can be realized.” (p. 306).

This latter point he underscores as important in a way that earlier information monopolies and technological closures (such as that of the later Apple generation computers) were not, due to the internet’s uniquely efficacious design, which has resulted in the convergence of communications. As a result, its control by a small number of corporate information empires could be extremely problematic in a world with today’s “society in which electronic information represents the substrate of much of daily life” (p. 319).

If one takes the subject he addresses as important, as this reviewer does, then his calls for more effective regulation (using the existing bodies and existing law) and industry restraint (which seems to be lacking at present) appear inadequate. Even Wu himself admits that calling for self-regulation could be considered as “hopelessly naïve” (p. 313). Given the history he recounts, whereby inventors have been swindled out of both intellectual credit as well as financial riches, with inventions consigned to a backroom until an empire falls (see p. 106 for a mention of the invention of the magnetic tape recorder in the 1930s, an eminently useful yet unexploited technology as it was considered a threat to telephone usage, and pp. 129-135 for the regulatory delays advanced by NBC regarding FM radio, including the tragic decision of its inventor to take his own life), his call for industrial restraint (though backed up with modern day examples of such) seem overly optimistic. Moreover, the style of writing and summary nature of much of the history recounted by the book leaves Wu open to the criticism that he, at the very least, provides an inadequate record of the political economy to make the argument he does, or errs in his emphasis on one or another actor or event. For instance, his only passing mention of events outside the US and lack of mention of the introduction of cell phones and only passing mention of the fax machine merely serve to underline that not all communications technologies are examined equally.

That said, the book is an eminently readable introduction to the rise and fall of multiple U.S. communications empires and their regulation, posing and providing an answer to perhaps a key question of our time – why are they important and under what principles should such industries operate and be regulated? That he answers these questions with clarity, which regulators, politicians, and industry leaders have so far failed to do even after President Obama campaigned prominently on the issue of “net neutrality”, suggests that the book’s final chapter may be a record of what might have been rather than what will be. Only time will tell whether policymakers and industry will heed Wu’s call.

References

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