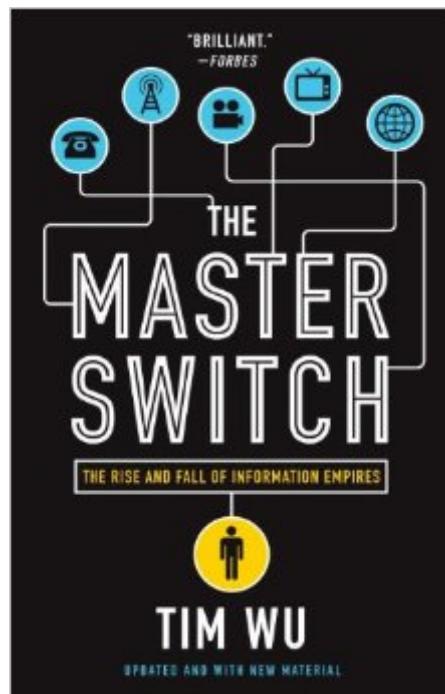


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The Master Switch: The Rise And Fall Of Information Empires



Synopsis

It is easy to forget that every development in the history of the American information industry "from the telephone to radio to film" once existed in an open and chaotic marketplace inhabited by entrepreneurs and utopians, just as the Internet does today. Each of these, however, grew to be dominated by a monopolist or cartel. In this pathbreaking book, Tim Wu asks: will the Internet follow the same fate? Could the Web "the entire flow of American information" come to be ruled by a corporate leviathan in possession of "the master switch"? Analyzing the strategic maneuvers of today's great information powers—Apple, Google, and an eerily resurgent AT&T—Wu uncovers a time-honored pattern in which invention begets industry and industry begets empire. He shows how a battle royale for Internet's future is brewing, and this is one war we dare not tune out.

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Customer Reviews

Warning: This is not light reading. The book is well-written but is not designed as entertainment. If, however, you are concerned about the Internet and potentially where it might go in the near future, or more specifically, how it might wind up controlled, this book will be an interesting and informative read. Important too because communication and information dissemination are vital to the freedom of us all. Columbia University Professor Tim Wu takes us on an in-depth tour of the history of the communication empires of telephone, radio, television, and now the Internet. Wu's analyses and conclusions are both brilliant as well as at times somewhat surprising. Every page gives evidence of Wu's thorough research, careful thinking and insights that went into the writing of this fine work. The

internet has become part of the lives of almost everyone, with its freeing and empowering presence; in fact in important ways it has become indispensable. A not-too-surprising worry might be that the federal government may someday try to control it, not so overwhelmingly as does the government of China of course, but the possibility is there. What Wu so sagaciously points out is that that threat of control could just as easily, or actually more easily, come from the private sector, because in fact the existence of the internet and its smooth functioning are dependent, not on the government, but private enterprise. A different kind of monopoly looms ahead of us as a distinct danger, and this present information age presents new policy and regulation challenges. One hopes that the right government officials at the federal level take heed to this awesomely researched book.

Unless you're very young, you have memory of the "Dark Ages" of technology. Yes, there was a time before the Internet...even a time before the ancient 14 kbs modem. I know it's hard for us to believe, but you used to have to be there if somebody was calling AND you didn't know who it was until you picked up the phone! The answering machine could have been available in the 1950s, but why didn't they come out until a few decades ago? The book has interesting points on technology cycles, which I'll get into in a moment, but first I'd like to congratulate the author on doing such a great job of giving a background history lesson. The topic helps because the history of information empires is every bit as interesting as the rise of military empires. It's all about strategies, "bloody" battles, and luck. It's just the weapons used that differ. Still, most of us have seen even exciting history made boring by poor writing. Mr. Wu keeps things interesting by giving the personal reasons for certain decisions and the circumstances leading to them, not just a bunch of dry dates. Some of the history discussed I was familiar with, but a lot of it was brand new to me. Several ideas presented on the cycles were thought provoking. Most of us are conditioned to immediately think monopoly = bad, but the point of view of the monopolists helps explain why society allowed them to exist. For example, before modern telephone infrastructure existed it almost took a gigantic AT&T to have the drive to force to link up every person to a phone line; while their methods of dealing with opposition were at times abhorrent, they still succeeded in using the monopoly's advantages (economies of scale, no duplication of research by different companies, steady income, etc.) to do a great deal of good.

The Master Switch is part history, business theory and technology presented in a clear and enjoyable read. This is neither a business book, nor a history book, nor a novel but it has the best elements of all three. Some advice for the reader, be prepared to read a book about business

information and technology this is deep, complex, expansive and thoroughly enjoyable. Wu demonstrates throughout the book his ability to research and capture the historical events that led to the world we have today and present them more like James Michener than a dry recitation. The details and descriptions led me to feel like I was reading a historical novel more than a business book. Yet all of the conversation revolves round issues of information, technology and business ownership of it. Wu demonstrates his business thinking through the book and research findings. This is a business book as it discusses how information and new technologies often start out as an explosion of small companies that coalesce into a few dominate firms that then often explode into smaller more innovative companies. Those ideas, the decisions and actions behind them are the context that gives the business history context. The Master Switch is a rare combination of history, theory and technology. People looking to read the book from one of these perspectives will either be delighted or deeply disappointed. As a history, the book is a delight as I learned things I never knew before. As a business book, one with a very clear argument, sequential prose and an explicit 'bottom line' this book suffers because it meanders through the history parts. Readers looking for a business book should reset their expectations and get the Master Switch.

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