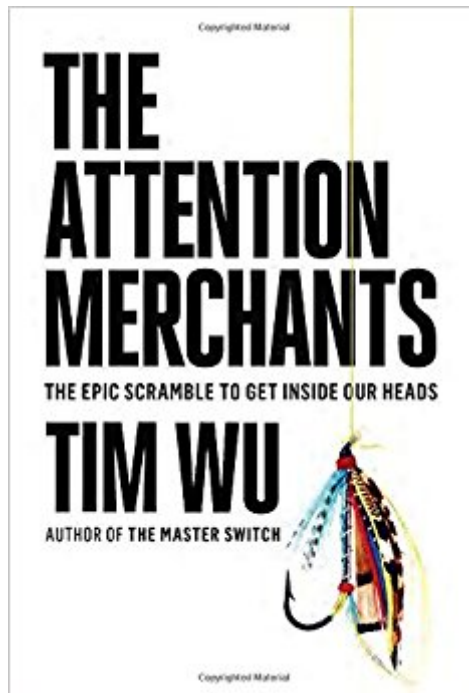


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The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble To Get Inside Our Heads



Synopsis

From Tim Wu, author of the award-winning *The Master Switch* (a *New Yorker* and *Fortune* Book of the Year) and who coined the term "net neutrality," a revelatory, ambitious and urgent account of how the capture and re-sale of human attention became the defining industry of our time. Feeling attention challenged? Even assaulted? American business depends on it. In nearly every moment of our waking lives, we face a barrage of messaging, advertising enticements, branding, sponsored social media, and other efforts to harvest our attention. Few moments or spaces of our day remain uncultivated by the "attention merchants," contributing to the distracted, unfocused tenor of our times. Tim Wu argues that this condition is not simply the byproduct of recent technological innovations but the result of more than a century's growth and expansion in the industries that feed on human attention. From the pre-Madison Avenue birth of advertising to the explosion of the mobile web; from AOL and the invention of email to the attention monopolies of Google and Facebook; from Ed Sullivan to celebrity power brands like Oprah Winfrey, Kim Kardashian and Donald Trump, the basic business model of "attention merchants" has never changed: free diversion in exchange for a moment of your consideration, sold in turn to the highest-bidding advertiser. Wu describes the revolts that have risen against the relentless siege of our awareness, from the remote control to the creation of public broadcasting to Apple's ad-blocking OS. But he makes clear that attention merchants are always growing new heads, even as their means of getting inside our heads are changing our very nature--cognitive, social, political and otherwise--in ways unimaginable even a generation ago. "A startling and sweeping examination of the increasingly ubiquitous commercial effort to capture and commodify our attention. We've become the consumers, the producers, and the content. We are selling ourselves to ourselves." Tom Vanderbilt, *The New Republic* "An erudite, energizing, outraging, funny and thorough history. A devastating critique of ad tech as it stands today, transforming "don't be evil" into the surveillance business model in just a few short years. It connects the dots between the sale of advertising inventory in schools to the bizarre ecosystem of trackers, analyzers and machine-learning models that allow the things you look at on the web to look back at you. This stuff is my daily beat, and I learned a lot from *Attention Merchants*." Cory Doctorow, *BoingBoing* "Illuminating." Jacob Weisberg, *The New York Review of Books*

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Customer Reviews

“Comprehensive and conscientious” Wu writes with elegance and clarity [his] chapters about the early days of advertising are some of this book’s most enjoyable, easily serving as a reader’s companion to “Mad Men.” Mr. Wu concludes his book with a cri de coeur, imploring us to regain custody of our attention, written so rousinglly that it just may make you reconsider your priorities. “Compelling” sharp Wu [is] a skilled thinker he applies the thesis of a business cycle to explain the development of the advertising market and the ways in which it has adapted to avoid our natural inclination to ignore it Wu dramatizes this push and pull to great effect “Hidden Persuaders” for the 21st century, just as we stand squarely on the threshold of a post-broadcast world where the algorithmic nano-targeting of electronic media knows our desires and impulses before we know them ourselves. “A startling and sweeping examination of the increasingly ubiquitous commercial effort to capture and commodify our attention” We’ve become the consumers, the producers, and the content. We are selling ourselves to ourselves. “Tom Vanderbilt, The New Republic “Illuminating.” “Jacob Weisberg, The New York Review of Books “Lively” An engrossing study of what we hate about commercial media Vigorous and amusing, filled with details of colorful hucksterism and cunning attention-grabbing ploys along with revealing insights into the behavioral quirks they instill in us. “Publisher’s Weekly “Part history and part social wake up

call, this book is for everyone. • Library Journal • “Forget subliminal seduction: every day, we are openly bought and sold, as this provocative book shows. • Kirkus Reviews • “Tim Wu has written a profoundly important book on a problem that doesn’t get enough • well, • attention. Attention itself has become the currency of the information age, and, as Wu meticulously and eloquently demonstrates, we allow it to be bought and sold at our peril. • James Gleick, author of *Time Travel: A History* • “I couldn’t put this fascinating book down. Gripping from page one with its insight, vivid writing, and panoramic sweep, *The Attention Merchants* is also a book of urgent importance, revealing how our preeminent industries work to fleece our consciousness rather than help us cultivate it. • Amy Chua, Yale law professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and *The Triple Package* • “Television entranced the masses. Digital media, more insidiously, mesmerizes each of us individually. In this revelatory book, Tim Wu tells the story of how advertisers and programmers came to seize control of our eyes and minds. *The Attention Merchants* deserves everyone’s attention. • Nicholas Carr, author of *Utopia Is Creepy* and *The Shallows* • “The question of how to get people to care about something important to you is central to religion, government, commerce, and the arts. For more than a century, America has experimented with buying and selling this attention, and Wu’s history of that experiment is nothing less than a history of the human condition and its discontents. • Cory Doctorow, *Boing Boing*

TIM WU is an author, policy advocate, and professor at Columbia University, best known for coining the term "net neutrality." In 2006, *Scientific American* named him one of 50 leaders in science and technology; in 2007, *TIME* magazine listed him as one of Harvard’s 100 most influential graduates; in 2013, *National Law Journal* included him in "America’s 100 Most Influential Lawyers

If you’ve been paying attention, you can’t have missed the changes in the character of advertising over the course of your life. Certainly, I have. Chances are, you were born in the age of radio, at the earliest. If so, you’ve witnessed a string of new technologies enter the realm of news and entertainment, almost always paired with aggressive advertising sooner or later: network television, cable TV, the personal computer, the Internet, and the smartphone. In his insightful history of the business of advertising, Columbia University law professor Tim Wu casts a wider net. Beginning with the advent of the penny press in the 1830s, he explores in telling detail the now centuries-long battle between the commercial interests who want to

seize our attention for their own ends and the individuals who want to keep our lives private and access news, information, and entertainment without distraction. This is a colorful story, and Wu tells it well. Though Wu opens with the introduction of the Sun in New York in 1833, his history more properly begins much later in the 19th century with the emergence of the advertising industry to sell Snake Oil and other patent medicines. (Yes, Snake Oil Liniment was actually a widely sold product Good for Man and Beast.)

“From the 1890s through the 1920s,” he writes, “there arose the first means for harvesting attention on a mass scale and directing it for commercial effect . . . [A]dvertising was the conversion engine that, with astonishing efficiency, turned the cash crop of attention into an industrial commodity. The penny press, Amos Æœn Andy, and pop-up ads Beginning in the early years of the 20th century, Wu frames his story around the development of radio and the four “screens” that have dominated our attention over the decades that followed: the “silver screen (film), television, the personal computer, and the smartphone. The author relates the history of each of these technologies as a human story, describing the often outrageous personalities who pioneered and dominated each of these media in turn. However, in focusing on radio and the four screens, Wu overlooks the billboards that mar every urban line of sight and barely mentions the direct mail that floods our mailboxes. Though less than comprehensive, his historical account is engrossing and enlightening. Here you’ll learn about the development of propaganda by the British government in World War I and its perfection by Nazi Germany . . . the first radio serial that was a smash hit (the grossly racist “Amos Æœn Andy” in the 1920s . . . the invention of the soap opera in the 1930s . . . the battle between the networks on radio and later on TV from the 1930s through the 1990s . . . the development of geodemographic targeting for ads in the 1970s . . . the emergence of celebrity culture in the 1980s and its perversion by reality television in the 2000s . . . the wild proliferation of blogging in the 2000s . . . the identity theft committed by Google and Facebook in the 2000s and beyond . . . and, finally, “unplugging” and the emergence of free online streaming services like Netflix in the 2010s. This is not a pretty story. A harsh judgment The author is not a fan of the “new media” that have come to hold our attention in recent years. “The idealists had hoped the web would be different,” he notes, “and it certainly was for a time, but over the long term it would become something of a 99-cent store, if not an outright cesspool. Similarly, Wu’s judgment about the advertising industry is harsh. “[U]nder competition, the race will

naturally run to the bottom; attention will almost invariably gravitate to the more garish, lurid, outrageous alternative . . . It's difficult to find fault with any of this. About the author He is the man who coined the term "network neutrality." A specialist in media and technology, Tim Wu has written several books and numerous articles, all nonfiction. His work has influenced the development of national media policy under the Obama Administration.

This was an excellent history of the advertising industry, with lots of thought-provoking historical analogs and anecdotes. It's a good follow-up to Tim Wu's earlier book, *The Master Switch*, that focuses on technology monopolies. The basic thrust of the book is that ever since the days of the earliest printing presses, there was a realization that the real money to be made from content was around harvesting "user attention". Through the 1800s and 1900s, the exact mechanisms used to harvest attention (newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, and, eventually, the Internet) may have changed, the industry was always driven by the lucrative delivery of some percentage of some audience's time for commercial messages. The end of the book is, predictably, where the anecdotes become weaker and less interesting, as we transition to discussions of attention harvest and sale at companies like BuzzFeed and Facebook which are all very well covered by the popular press, at this point. But luckily the meat of the book is the (lesser known) history, and that's the portion I found most fascinating.

This book is well written with copious notes and insightful explanations of the degree to which propaganda and advertising (a commercial version) has taken over the public's attention. What we see on our televisions and on the internet is a never ending stream of attempts to have us think in a particular way or buy products that we often either don't need or are detrimental to our well being. Worse, its overpowering and heightens anxiety at a time when we have a lot to be anxious about. Tim Wu has done his fellow citizens and others a favor by writing this high quality book.

Review of *The Attention Merchants* by Tim Wu written by Jerry Woolpy
What our founders derived from the Age of Enlightenment was freedom to depart from the dogmatism of religious faith, to be rational, individual, and not subject to the authority of a king. What we got was society consumed with agents competing for our attention. At first it was snake oil salesmen, then candidates, and eventually entertainment paid for to persuade on behalf of a product or service. Radio, television, internet, smart phones attracted us and eventually made our habits into products to be marketed. As

technology made delivery ever more efficient our concentration was compromised. Our time to think, dream, and create was challenged. Our news was driven by drama. We elect people with the loudest voices without consideration of what they are saying. But there is hope. At the theater and in our sanctuaries we turn off our phones. We have ad blockers for the internet and recorders like Tivo to bypass commercial interruption and allow us to view programs at leisure. We have public radio and television relatively free of the incessant commercials that the Attention Merchants are bent upon. The book is an exposé of the sale of our attention. Will our awareness protect us? We will reclaim our minds? Is the election of Donald Trump going to lead to an epiphany of the freedom our forefathers envisioned for us?

Tim Wu's quick run through the history of advertising is a very good read. He combines the fundamentals of how advertising came to be with the history mass messaging and propaganda. He takes this journey to our inevitable present day of Facebook, Instagram and the advertising technology that seemingly follows us everywhere. This book would be well read by anyone in advertising, pay TV or the media content business.

I spent 30 years in the advertising business. Unfortunately the tools of persuasion have been unleashed on us all--in every dimension, from politics to every facet of life. In the content of the current political scene, this book is a great study in "How We Got Here. "

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