

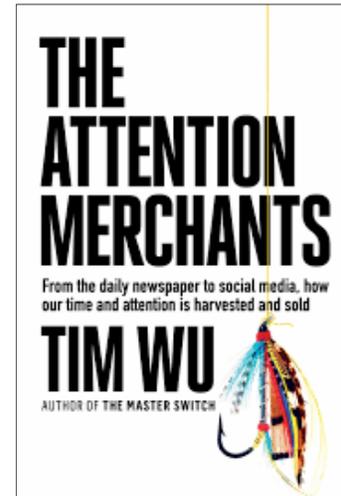
Tim Wu, **The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads**, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016, 403 pp., \$18.06 (hardcover), \$13.95 (paperback).

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Tim Wu is a storyteller—a good one. His current yarn focuses on efforts to attract the time and attention of would-be buyers, from the days of the first penny newspapers in the 1830s to the present day assault on our senses that comes at everyone from all directions. Wu's message is that for nearly two centuries advertisers have expanded and improved their tactics for selling all manner of goods and services to the public. Sometimes, as with snake oil salesmen, attention merchants sold their own products, but over time a new breed of advertising agencies emerged as intermediaries between those with something to sell and those they wanted to persuade to spend their money in a certain way. Sometimes these efforts altered the way people acted; sometimes they provoked backlash among buyers who realized they were being manipulated.



Wu's previous volume, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (2010), described the rise and fall of information industries through the exploits of disruptive founders: Theodore Vail, telephones; Adolph Zukor, movies; David Sarnoff, radio and television; and Steve Jobs, personal computers. This time Wu focuses more on technologies than on leaders, which makes for a somewhat less compelling narrative.

To varying extents, the approaches of advertisers remained consistent. The first goal was to create "the desire for products that otherwise might not exist." The second goal was branding, to create "loyalty for some maker . . . by creating the impression, valid or not, that something truly set it apart from others like it." Third, advertisers "targeted" specific audiences, such as female consumers (p. 53).

As in *The Master Switch*, Wu favors a chronological and sectoral approach. Efforts at word-of-mouth and print marketing begin the process. Radio and television as tools of influence and persuasion dominate the central portion of the volume. For those not enamored of history and eager instead to jump to the current era of the Internet and social networking, they will need to first wade through more than 250 pages of background. The evolution of attention grabbing proceeds as follows:

Religious leaders throughout history sought to influence the minds of people

1833: Penny papers like *The New York Sun* charge 1 cent, not 6 cents

1860s: Giant Parisian posters

1893: Snake oil sold at Chicago World's Fair

1896: William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech

- 1914: Kitchener's efforts to recruit soldiers for World War I
- World War I: Psychological warfare and propaganda
- 1923: Bernays: "manipulation on behalf of business interests" (p. 49)
- 1920s: Takeoff of advertising agencies
- 1920s: Takeoff of radio advertising (Amos 'n' Andy)
- 1929: Campaign to persuade women to smoke
- 1930s: William Paley and CBS
- 1930s: Hitler: To teach/persuade is harder than to stir emotion (p.111)
- 1936: Audimeter: "scientifically measure human attention" (p.104)
- 1938: Orson Welles's Mercury Theater on the Air
- 1947: First Nielsen radio rating
- 1950: Nielsen showed that NBC dominated early television
- 1950s: Networks achieve "peak attention" Ed Sullivan show (p. 129)
- 1955: Leo Burnett's "Marlboro Man" (p. 132)
- 1955: "The \$64,000 Question" (p. 142)
- 1957: Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (p. 146)
- 1963: "The Pepsi Generation" (p.158)
- 1971: Fred Silverman: *Mary Tyler Moore, All in the Family, M\*A\*S\*H*
- 1970s: Emergence of the "Celebrity-Industrial Complex," *People*
- 1980s: Channel surfing and MTV
- 1980s: The Oprah model and the celebrity-industrial complex
- 1980s: The Third Screen: Computers
- 1986: Fox Broadcasting Company
- 1991: Steve Case and AOL—the rise of e-mail

The final section of *The Attention Merchants* focuses on the rise of "new media" as the "old media" that dominated attention in the 20th century declined. During the 1990s, Microsoft, which had earlier displaced IBM as king of the hill, hoped to extend its dominance by "merging television and the Internet" (p. 257) to broadcast content, but this proved too simplistic. Instead, Google, which was founded in 1998, moved aggressively to seize the moment by using its search engine to harvest attention and provide targeted advertising to users to fund its explosive growth with advertising. Google built its dominance on advertising-driven search.

But companies were not the only attention grabbers. The rise of blogs in the early 2000s allowed individuals to establish their own Web presence and to get out their messages. Some blogs went viral, creating new media stars who were able to cash in on their media popularity. Almost immediately, online providers such as the Huffington Post, advertisers, and bloggers devised "clickbait" to attract attention so that viewers would click on their webpages to help them monetize their sites.

Enter Facebook. Founded in Mark Zuckerberg's Harvard dorm room in 2004, Facebook pushed aside Friendster and other antecedent firms and launched in earnest the social networking revolution. In record time it became "the place to be." By the time Facebook launched its IPO in early 2012, it attracted close to a billion active visitors every month. Others sites like YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat,

BuzzFeed all emerged rapidly and all were active in creating an “attentional environment” (p. 327). Storytelling spun out on Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and eventually on Apple iPhones, captured more and more attention, including spurring the advent of widespread binge watching.

Wu concludes that the critical question is not “whether advertising is good, bad, or a necessary evil. The most pressing question in our times is not *how* the attention merchant should conduct business, but *where* and *when*” (p. 341). He worries that our attention is now captive, implies that society and social relations are more and more distorted by attention merchants, and wonders how we can reestablish our independence from those who would distract us from serious thought and work.

What he does not do is make concrete suggestions for what users should do or what information merchants and advertisers could and should do. In addition, unlike Wu’s earlier volume, *The Attention Merchants* makes no effort to set out policy recommendations. In short, the situation we find ourselves in and path we took to get there is laid out with élan, but the path forward remains cloaked.

#### Reference

Wu, T. (2010). *The master switch: The rise and fall of information empires*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.