

Activism and Change Leading to Personal, Societal and Organisation Transformation

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Book Review on **The Master Switch - Navigating the Cycles of Communication Evolution** by *Tim Wu, 9780307390998, Vintage, 384 p. 2011*

Introduction: "The Master Switch" by Tim Wu is a thought-provoking exploration of the historical cycles that communications industries undergo, tracing their evolution from chaotic beginnings to eventual consolidation under powerful entities. At the heart of the book is a crucial question: Is the internet destined to follow the same path, succumbing to control by corporations or governments, or can it maintain its revolutionary potential? Wu's meticulous examination of the past, from the Bell telephone company to radio, cinema, TV, and beyond, sets the stage for a critical analysis of the internet's future.

The Historical Cycles: Wu delves into the history of communication technologies, highlighting their transformative potential and subsequent consolidation. The narrative begins with the Bell telephone company, which evolved into the formidable AT&T monopoly. The author skillfully weaves the stories of charismatic figures like Theodore Vail and David Sarnoff, demonstrating how each new medium's early years were marked by optimism and openness.

The Cycle Unveiled: Wu introduces the concept of "the Cycle," a recurring progression from a new technology's infancy as a hobby to its transformation into a controlled system dominated by a single corporation or cartel. The pattern repeats across telephony, radio, cinema, and television, leading to the eventual capture of these industries by monopolies or cartels. The author underscores the risks posed by charismatic entrepreneurs who, with improved propositions, seize control as the novelty of a technology wanes.

The Internet's Uncertain Fate: Amidst the upheavals triggered by the internet, Wu raises the crucial question of whether it will escape corporate or governmental control. Drawing parallels between historical cycles and the potential trajectory of the internet, he introduces contemporary equivalents to past moguls, such as Steve Jobs. The stakes are higher in the digital age, with all media converging onto a single network. Wu

challenges readers to confront the possibility of a captured internet, urging vigilance and forewarning.

The Atomic Bomb and Sandia National Laboratories: Shifting gears, Wu narrates the intriguing story of Sandia National Laboratories, highlighting the unprecedented collaboration between the government and AT&T after the development of the atomic bomb. This historical context adds depth to the discussion, emphasizing AT&T's significant role in national security during the Cold War.

AT&T's Rise and Fall: Returning to the central theme, Wu explores the rise of AT&T as a monopoly and its subsequent breakup by the Federal Communications Commission in the 1980s. He argues that the reconstitution of AT&T in the 1990s contributed to the secrecy of the Bush administration's wiretapping program, showcasing the enduring impact of telecommunications on societal and political dynamics.

"The Master Switch" Framework: The author introduces the concept of "the Cycle" as a framework to analyze the progression of information technologies. Through a detailed examination of phones, radio, television, movies, and the internet, Wu identifies patterns of consolidation, emphasizing the pivotal role of networks in shaping the destiny of these industries.

Radio and Its Evolution: Wu draws parallels between the early days of radio and the internet, both starting as open systems with diverse voices. However, the consolidation of radio into major networks, led by AT&T and the Radio Corporation of America, mirrors the historical pattern of industries moving from openness to controlled systems.

Movies and Television: The book explores the evolution of the movie industry, initially characterized by creative chaos and a multitude of independent filmmakers. However, the rise of studios and the consolidation of power through vertical integration led to a controlled system dominated by major studios. Television follows a similar trajectory, with radio networks adapting their structure to control both content and distribution.

Telephone Industry Lessons: Wu delves into the lessons learned from the telephone industry, highlighting the challenges posed by monopolies seeking to control every aspect of the system. The breakup of AT&T in 1984 and subsequent reconfiguration

of the Baby Bells underscore the cyclical nature of the industry, emphasizing the dangers of inattentive regulatory systems.

Internet at a Crossroads: As the narrative shifts to the internet, Wu sees it at a critical stage of development, with Google playing a central role as the "master switch." The open nature of the internet is contrasted with the potential threats posed by those advocating for a controlled system. Wu presents a blueprint for public policy, advocating for measures to prevent the vertical integration of content and infrastructure.

Conclusion: "The Master Switch" offers a comprehensive exploration of the historical cycles shaping communication industries and their potential implications for the internet's future. Wu's compelling narrative, rich with historical anecdotes and insightful analysis, prompts readers to reflect on the delicate balance between open systems and controlled consolidation. As society grapples with the evolving landscape of communication technologies, the book serves as a timely guide, urging vigilance to safeguard the principles of openness and innovation.