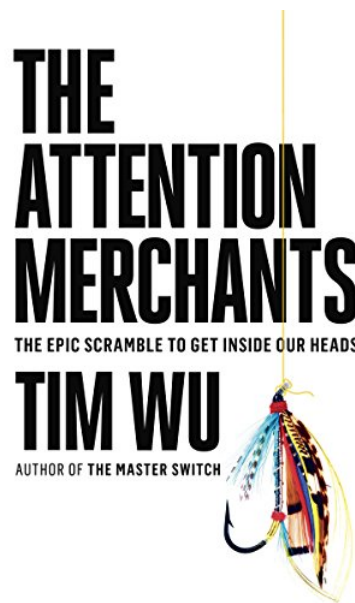


THE ATTENTION MERCHANTS: THE EPIC SCRAMBLE TO GET INSIDE OUR HEADS BY TIM WU



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TIM WU

AUTHOR OF THE MASTER SWITCH



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THE ATTENTION MERCHANTS: THE EPIC SCRAMBLE TO GET INSIDE OUR HEADS BY TIM WU PDF

From Tim Wu, author of the award-winning *The Master Switch* and who coined the phrase "net neutrality", a revelatory look at the rise of "attention harvesting", and its transformative effect on our society and our selves.

Attention merchant: an industrial-scale harvester of human attention. A firm whose business model is the mass capture of attention for resale to advertisers.

In nearly every moment of our waking lives, we face a barrage of advertising enticements, branding efforts, sponsored social media, commercials and other efforts to harvest our attention. Over the last century, few times or spaces have remained uncultivated by the "attention merchants", contributing to the distracted, unfocused tenor of our times. Tim Wu argues that this is not simply the byproduct of recent inventions but the end 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 TV's golden age to our present age of radically individualized choices, the business model of "attention merchants" has always been the same. He describes the revolts that have risen against these relentless attempts to influence our consumption, from the remote control to FDA regulations to Apple's ad-blocking OS. But he makes clear that attention merchants grow ever-new heads, and their means of harvesting our attention have given rise to the defining industries of our time, changing our nature - cognitive, social, and otherwise - in ways unimaginable even a generation ago.

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- Released on: 2016-10-18
- Format: Unabridged
- Original language: English
- Running time: 925 minutes

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2 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

A great read

By Ryan

I greatly enjoyed this book. Not too in depth about the history of advertising the author provides background as to the sea change moments over 100 years of industry. Also reads fast and well paced.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Two Stars

By David W

Interesting material but presented at a very superficial level.

20 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

Very impressive history of an interesting side effect of our information age

By Abacus

We often refer to our civilization as the information age. Maybe a slightly more descriptive metaphor would be our advertising sponsored “free” information age. Tim Wu does an outstanding job of mapping out the history leading to this “free” information age. He starts a long time ago when Benjamin Day started a newspaper in New York City in the 1830s based on a revolutionary model at the time of being funded primarily by print advertising. Unlike his competitors, he sold his daily at a big loss. But, he more than made up for it by advertising. He started the business by creating unsolicited ads in his newspaper to trigger the interest of the merchants he had advertised on their behalf without their asking. Tim Wu goes on meticulously on detailing a succession of pioneers that will essentially leverage derivatives of this pioneering advertising sponsored business model onto radio, TV, internet, and ultimately mobile. By the end the advertising merchants have created trading networks that make hedge fund nanotradors seem like boy scouts on bicycles. Indeed, such advertising networks make so many near instant decisions to route whatever the most relevant ad is delivered to the highest commercial bidder on monitor and screens of all sizes.

At almost any time there is a tension or trade-off between getting wonderful information services for much below cost or entirely free and essentially suffering from advertising pollution that impairs our brain’s focus to achieve what we were meant to do on this earth.

Tim Wu feels the above issue has reached a boiling point. He is not alone. Even technology industry leaders have taken that position. In one of the last chapters, he focuses on Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, who championed this position. He indicated that the advertising invasion is really impairing customer experiences including underperformance (in terms of speed, video-streaming quality, etc.) of all related information appliances when surfing the internet. Along those lines Tim Cook delivered ad-blockers that are readily available on all Apple’s devices.

Tim Cook’s position is both laudable and self-serving (and not necessarily in a bad way, but a smart way). When you think of the four major behemoths of the technology field: Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Apple; they increasingly overlap and compete with each other over various domains be it cell phones, cloud servers, operating systems, and numerous other software platforms. But, when you look at the funding sources the first two (Google and Facebook) are essentially dominant advertising agencies. Meanwhile, Amazon is the major retail clearinghouse middleman who also benefits a great deal from advertising. On the other hand, Apple is from a funding source standpoint in a silo earning a buck the old fashion way by selling mainly hardware (I Phones, I Pads, I Watch) and services (music, apps). It does not make money from advertising. So, for Tim Cook to lead and facilitate the campaign of the ad-blockers is a direct arrow at the advertising based business of his main competitors.

In the last chapter, Tim Wu goes on that we should regain our consciousness and our focus. We should think more deliberately about the choice we make. Do we want to keep on selling ourselves for “free” to be part of massive audiences that are very lucratively marketable by the Big 3 (Facebook, Google, Amazon)? I have recently experienced what it is like. I just recently got a mini I Pad, a really cool little machine. And, I remember attempting to read a serious article that demanded focus in order to be understood. The mini I Pad screen is plenty big for reading. However, it seems that nearly three fourth of the screen was wasted on ads in various forms. And, I literally could not practice the type of slow attentive reading I needed to understand the article. I quickly gave up and read the article a few days later on a printed copy with no problem and a lot more enjoyment and retention. So, I should consider the ad-blocker apps as many of you have already. And, Tim Wu’s nearly spiritual call at the end does promote such attitude. Let’s reclaim the independence of our brain. Let’s focus. Let’s maximize the outcome of our respective destinies.

Tim Wu's position is really attractive and nearly unquestionable. Could one really take the opposite position? Let's waste our time being distracted by an unending stream of advertisement and related vapid entertainment and distraction and don't leave a legacy whatsoever of our passage on earth. Ok, that's not a very good rebuttal of Tim Wu's position.

However, if we look at the underlying economics the underlying argument may get more complicated. Let's say the Big 3 entirely lose out their ad revenues. And, they do not make enough from selling various apps and games to cover their costs. They actually would have to charge for their "free services." They could use different models such as monthly subscriptions or paying for each unit of services. Given that, how much would you be willing to pay monthly to maintain access to your Facebook profile and its related networking activities? How much would you be willing to pay for one single Google search? Similarly, how much would Facebook and Google have to charge to effectively cover their lost advertising revenues? Those questions become a chicken and the egg issue because the price affects the demand. For "free" those services have nearly infinite demand. But, for any realistic price the demand for all those "free" services would crater. Such economic questions most often render problems or issues much more complicated than otherwise. This economic conundrum was not Tim Wu's objective when writing "The Attention Merchants." And, that is perfectly fine. His book probably packs in a more effective punch by focusing on the tension between "The Attention Merchants" and the self-actualization of our own focused consciousness.

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