

Non-Fiction

The Attention Merchants by Tim Wu – how advertising triumphed

Over the course of a century, marketing has managed to infiltrate every area of life. Is resistance futile in the internet age?



KB: +11 00 at the premiere of 'Safari' at the Venice Film Festival in September © Andreas Rentz/Getty Images

Hannah Kuchler DECEMBER 23, 2016

Tim Wu does not even mention Donald Trump in *The Attention Merchants*, his investigation into how advertisers, the media and technology industries get inside our heads. Yet he could hardly have chosen a better time to publish a history of attention-grabbing than the year in which a reality-TV star and infamous tweeter was elected as US president.

In his previous book, [*The Master Switch*](#) (2011), Wu posited that technologies that start out with a promise of openness often become monopolies or cartels. In *The Attention Merchants*, the Columbia Law School professor charts a different but related sort of cycle. Citing cases from Lord Kitchener to Kim Kardashian, he argues that every form of media developed since the 19th century has been rapidly adopted by advertisers eager to intrude further into our consciousness.

Wu starts with the newspapers distributed in New York in the 1830s, selling thousands of copies with fake stories of winged creatures discovered on the Moon, and the first mass-produced advertising, posters that covered 1860s Paris with seven-foot-high images of half-naked women.

The Attention Merchants traces the evolution of advertisers' techniques, from a crude 1922 beauty

Feedback

brand and the idea of stimulating demand from previously untapped groups. This can be seen, for example, in the efforts of advertisers in the late 1920s to sell cigarettes to women by presenting them both as a symbol of feminism — “torches of freedom” — and a slimming aid.

Some of the early efforts at targeting seem tame today. In the 1980s, Coca-Cola decided that their customers could be divided into just six categories, including “Furs & Station Wagons” and “Money & Brains”; Wu contrasts that basic profiling with the operations of Facebook, the master targeter of our times. He describes the world’s largest social network as “a business with an exceedingly low ratio of invention to success” — one that inverted the usual deal, of swapping attention and personal information for compelling content, to a bargain in which users give up the most detailed demographic data for what is simply an easy way to connect to their friends.

Wu also studies the history of backlashes against such attention-grabbing measures, and how they almost always fail. The original wireless remote control, the Zenith Flash-Matic, was shaped like a revolver and invented so that a TV-watcher could “shoot-out” the ads. In fact, channel-surfing ended up creating a distracted mental state that benefited advertisers. The hippies of the 1960s seemed like a threat to the thriving new TV advertising industry, but marketers quickly adopted their rhetoric and idealism to sell soft drinks to their generation and to “teach the world to sing”, the theme of a 1971 advertisement for Coca-Cola that was revisited in the closing scene of the series *Mad Men*.

The hippies of the 1960s seemed like a threat — until the marketers adopted their rhetoric to sell drinks

The Attention Merchants sees another backlash brewing against the latest wave of marketing on social media and smartphones. Wu points to the rise of ad-blockers in the west and the popularity of streaming services, which encourage sustained attention and show that people will pay to avoid the distraction of advertising. (In comparing *House of Cards* binges on Netflix to Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, however, he may be taking this line of reasoning a bit far.)

The author is not optimistic that such strategies will be any more successful than their predecessors. He traces a sustained march of marketers further into our lives, entering the home with radio, mealtimes with TV, our work lives with the internet and desktop computers, and our personal relationships with AOL and Facebook. Now they are able to reach us during previously unused minutes while we are browsing social media at the bus stop, waiting for a friend at dinner or even during conversations. Wu compares advertisers’ discovery of the smartphone, on which Americans now spend about three hours a day, with the invention of the fracking technologies that allowed the energy industry to access previously unreachable oil.

This march is put in a broader context of what the author calls the movement towards the

THE ATTENTION MERCHANTS

From the daily newspaper to social media, how our time and attention is harvested and sold

TIM WU

AUTHOR OF THE MASTER SWITCH



“individual as deity” — in which our obsession with celebrity turns into an aspiration to make ourselves celebrities, via preened social media profiles. It is easy to see this process as culminating in the figure of Trump, able to start a political movement and win an election by relying on fame and social media rather than a large campaign fund.

Wu is at times delightfully catty, bringing life to his argument. Of the actor James Franco’s social media presence — his posts reach almost 4m followers on Twitter and nearly 7m on Instagram — he writes: “Calling it a business model as opposed to mere narcissism at least provides an excuse, insofar as many careers excuse what would otherwise be considered unhealthy or insane behaviour.”

The author does not discuss the many personal strategies that people can employ to protect the private

sphere. (Readers might turn to Sherry Turkle’s *Reclaiming Conversation* for advice on how to find focus in a distracting world.) Ultimately, *The Attention Merchants* is most concerned with the proper scope of advertising — with *where* and *when* rather than *how* it should be done. Have we reached the point where limits need to be set? As Wu writes, it is a question “that goes to the heart of how we value what used to be called our private lives”.

The Attention Merchants: From the Daily Newspaper to Social Media, How Our Time and Attention is Harvested and Sold, by Tim Wu, *Atlantic Books*, RRP£20/*Knopf*, RRP\$28.95, 416 pages

Hannah Kuchler is an FT San Francisco correspondent

Photograph: Andreas Rentz/Getty Images

Feedback

FT Future of News Europe

Brussels
28 November 2018

Trust, Disruption and Growth in a Shifting Political Landscape



Register now

Presented by

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2018. All rights reserved.

Knowledge Builder: Non-Fiction



11

1000



-2 since last visit

Knowledge Builder measures how much of a topic you have covered and suggests the best articles for you to expand your knowledge.

[Give feedback](#)

Follow the topics in this article

- Advertising
- Non-Fiction
- Social Media
- Life & Arts
- Hannah Kuchler

Feedback