BOOK SUMMARY

The Attention Merchants

by Tim Wu

Free content in exchange for your attention, resold to advertisers. How that deal, struck in 1833, came to run modern life.

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Key ideas

1. **You are the product.** Since Benjamin Day's New York Sun, the model has stayed the same: attract an audience with free content, then sell its attention to advertisers.
2. **The race to the bottom.** Competition for attention pulls toward the lurid and outrageous, and the limits are rarely self-imposed.
3. **Every sanctuary gets colonized.** Radio breached the home, television claimed prime time, and social networks reached into our friendships.
4. **Revolts are part of the cycle.** When the industry asks too much, people push back with consumer movements, remotes and ad blockers, and the industry adapts.
5. **Reclaim your attention.** Your life is what you pay attention to, so protect certain times and spaces from commercial capture.

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Introduction: Here's the Deal

Tim Wu opens with a school district in central California. By the early 2010s, Twin Rivers was so short of money that one student photographed a classroom thermostat reading 44 degrees Fahrenheit. A company called Education Funding Partners offered a way out: let corporate advertisers into the schools, and the district could earn as much as $500,000 a year. The students, a captive audience by law, were the asset being sold. The board signed in 2012, and what struck Wu most was how little debate the deal provoked. Administrators treated it almost as a duty.

Twin Rivers was not unusual. Schools elsewhere put ads on lockers and hallway floors, and one Florida school board printed the McDonald's logo on report cards. Wu asks where this norm came from. There was once a time when home, school and social life were sheltered from commerce. His answer is the rise of the attention merchants, an industry that barely existed a century ago and whose business is to capture human attention with free content and resell it to advertisers. Each new medium since radio has become commercially viable through that same trade.

Wu calls attention a commodity, harvested and resold like wheat or crude oil. The industry's winning strategy has been to find parts of life that were once walled off and commercialize them bit by bit, until what was once shocking feels normal. The result is what he calls homo distractus, a species with a shrinking attention span, always checking its devices.

He is not trying to argue that every trade is bad. We entered this bargain willingly, and some of its terms are good deals. His goal is to make the terms visible. People are not powerless: they can ignore, tune out and unplug, and history shows that when the industry asks too much, public disenchantment can grow into a full revolt that forces better terms. As William James put it, our life experience is what we have paid attention to.

CHAPTER 1

The First Attention Merchants

The story begins in New York on September 3, 1833, when a 23-year-old printer named Benjamin Day launched the New York Sun. The leading paper of the day sold only 2,600 copies at six cents, a luxury for business and political elites. Day sold his for a penny, below what it cost to print. He understood that readers were not his customers. They were his product, and his real income would come from reselling their attention to advertisers.

To build that audience, Day filled the Sun with suicides, police court cases and con men, and hired what may have been the first full-time news reporter in the country. Within a year advertising revenue passed production costs and the model took off. In 1835 the Sun published the Great Moon Hoax, claiming the astronomer Sir John Herschel had found winged man-bats living on the moon. Circulation jumped to 19,360, making the Sun the most widely read newspaper in the world. Wu sees an eternal dynamic here: competition for attention pulls toward the lurid, and limits are rarely self-imposed.

The second milestone came from Paris, where Jules Chéret created giant, vivid posters of half-dressed dancing women. Wu calls the poster an early screen. It worked by exploiting our reflexes: motion, bright color and sex catch automatic attention in idle moments, such as waiting for a streetcar. Our brains receive about 11 million bits of information every second and survive by ignoring most of it. The attention merchant's task is to break through that filter.

Paris soon became what one observer called an immense wall of posters, and the public turned against them. Wu uses this backlash to set out a pattern that runs through the whole book. A minor revolt is the disenchantment effect, when repeated exposure makes a stimulus invisible. A major revolt comes when people feel used or deceived, with commercial or legal consequences. Paris restricted where posters could go, limits that still help keep the city beautiful.

CHAPTER 2

The Alchemist

Claude C. Hopkins, born in Michigan in 1866, was an unlikely revolutionary. He was a timid former preacher who delivered a heretical final sermon, was disowned by his mother and then found work writing advertisements. Wu argues his religious background matters. Before the nineteenth century, organized religion was the great enterprise built on capturing human attention, through daily rituals and demands for undivided devotion. Commercial advertising barely existed and was thought vulgar. As new commercial rivals for attention appeared, Wu suggests, they helped weaken faith, since attention is a zero-sum game.

Hopkins learned his craft in patent medicine, the industry where modern advertising was forged. Showmen like Clark Stanley, the Rattlesnake King, sold snake oil with invented legends and a trademark face. These remedies promised to cure everything, and the secret ingredient became a standard device that Wu sees today in antioxidants and açaí berries. Hopkins wrote copy for Dr. Shoop's Restorative, mailing hundreds of thousands of pamphlets a day, and then promoted Liquozone, a cheap germicide claimed to cure malaria, anthrax and cancer. He invented the free sample, and by 1904 he and his partner had earned a fortune.

The backlash came from Samuel Hopkins Adams, a crime reporter whose 1905 series in Collier's, The Great American Fraud, tested the medicines. Liquozone turned out to be diluted sulfuric acid, and infected guinea pigs given it died faster than untreated ones. Along with Upton Sinclair's The Jungle, the exposé helped pass the Food and Drugs Act of 1906, which required truthful labels. Wu argues that public disenchantment did more than the law. Snake oil became a byword for fraud, Stanley was indicted and Hopkins retreated to a cottage in disgrace. The techniques, however, lived on.

CHAPTER 3

For King and Country

In August 1914, Britain faced Germany's 4.5 million soldiers with only eighty thousand regulars. Lord Kitchener decided the country needed a million men and, with conscription ruled out, appealed directly to the public. This was the first systematic propaganda campaign aimed at a civilian population. The famous poster of Kitchener pointing at the viewer ran alongside rallies, parades and films shown from vans, and by war's end some 54 million posters had been printed. The campaign proved attention could be converted not only into cash but into service unto death.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, George Creel created the Committee on Public Information, America's first federal propaganda agency. Creel called it the world's greatest adventure in advertising. His committee used every channel it could: newspapers, films, classrooms, churches and post office walls. It printed 75 million pamphlets and sent 75,000 Four Minute Men to give 755,190 short speeches in movie theaters. Hate films like The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin drew crowds, while dissenters such as Eugene Debs were sent to prison.

The war shaped thinkers in opposite ways. Walter Lippmann, who had worked for Creel, concluded in Public Opinion that consent could be manufactured and lost faith in the old dogma of democracy. Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew, drew the opposite lesson: if propaganda worked for war, it could work for peace, and he became the father of public relations. Advertising spending doubled between 1918 and 1920. In Germany, a jailed veteran admired British propaganda and believed he could do better. His name was Adolf Hitler.

CHAPTER 4

Demand Engineering, Scientific Advertising, and What Women Want

In the 1920s advertising declared itself a science. Hopkins, now at Lord & Thomas in Chicago, boasted that copywriters could sway millions from their desks. Big agencies such as J. Walter Thompson worked like laboratories, running campaigns without end. Wu names three techniques. The first was demand engineering, creating desire for things people did not know they wanted. Listerine turned the obscure word halitosis into a national fear, and Hopkins had readers run their tongues across their teeth to feel the film Pepsodent claimed to remove.

Wu challenges the popular story that Freud's ideas drove these methods. The leading agencies trusted American behaviorism instead. J. Walter Thompson's president, Stanley Resor, hired John B. Watson, famous for conditioning a baby to fear white rats. Watson summed up the business bluntly: since the serpent persuaded Eve, the world has tried to control behavior, and in advertising we call it selling.

The second technique was branding. Theodore MacManus, who built Cadillac and Dodge, disdained Hopkins's hard sell and aimed to turn customers into devotees through suggestion. He invented the word dependability for Dodge, and Cadillac became a general term for the best. Brands proved that reputation could be manufactured and could pay dividends for a century.

The third was targeting women, who made most household purchases. Helen Lansdowne's ad for Woodbury soap, A Skin You Love to Touch, sold a better version of the reader herself. She ran a women's department at J. Walter Thompson staffed by suffragists who insisted that women are people. Yet their work relied on scare campaigns, borrowed feminist slogans and paid celebrity endorsements, often reinforcing the very stereotypes they had fought.

CHAPTER 5

A Long Lucky Run

George Washington Hill, the obsessive head of the American Tobacco Company, wanted Lucky Strike to dominate. He raised its advertising budget from $400,000 in 1925 to nearly $20 million a year by 1931, perhaps the most ever spent on a single product at the time. He hired both Albert Lasker of Lord & Thomas and Edward Bernays. Lasker began with a trick straight from patent medicine: Luckies were toasted to protect the throat, and ads claimed that 20,679 physicians found them less irritating.

Hill then set his sights on women. Bernays believed propaganda could change customs, not only sales. In 1929 he staged the Torches of Freedom stunt, hiring women to smoke Luckies in the Easter Parade in New York. Wu is skeptical of the legend. Press coverage at the time was thin, and Bernays's greatest triumph may have been winning the attention of historians.

The cruder campaign did more. Lasker's slogan Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet sold cigarettes as a diet aid, playing on women's worries about weight. Sales rose by billions of units in 1928, and women's smoking rates tripled between the 1920s and the mid-1930s. Lucky Strike overtook Camel as the country's leading cigarette for no clear reason beyond its advertising. The success came at the expense of public health.

By 1929 American companies spent nearly $3 billion a year on advertising, about 3 percent of the economy. The retired Hopkins declared that the principles of his trade were as enduring as the Alps. Admen grew rich and began to see themselves as a new priesthood. President Coolidge said advertising served the spiritual side of trade, and Bruce Barton's bestseller The Man Nobody Knows portrayed Jesus as an early adman. Being constantly sold to had become a defining feature of modern life.

CHAPTER 6

Not with a Bang but with a Whimper

Then came the revolt. Stuart Chase, an accountant, and Frederick Schlink, a standards engineer, wrote Your Money's Worth, which argued that consumers buy what they are made to want. It became a bestseller and, with the Depression, sparked a consumer movement. The authors were not radicals. They defended free markets and attacked advertising for distorting them. They founded Consumers' Research to test products scientifically. Insiders joined in: MacManus wrote that advertising had gone amuck, and James Rorty described admen emptied of human qualities.

Wu pauses to ask what advertising is good for. In theory it informs markets, since nobody can buy what they do not know exists. In practice its most valuable function is creating demand, and branding builds loyalties that shield products from better competitors. The Lucky Strike campaign shows the harm: more smoking, a lasting oligopoly and many cancerous lungs.

Reformers tried to regulate. Rexford Tugwell drafted a bill that would have banned misleading advertising, including false impressions created by inference. The industry fought back, calling him a communist, and the law finally passed in 1938 covered only outright false statements. Advertising spending fell to about a third of its peak. Yet the real threat was that Depression-era consumers could not afford to buy, and two new inventions were about to open a new supply of attention.

CHAPTER 7

The Invention of Prime Time

Before 1930, advertising lived in newspapers, magazines, billboards and the mail. The home was still a sanctuary. Radio advertising was widely seen as contemptible, and Herbert Hoover said it was inconceivable that radio should be drowned in advertising chatter. Sponsors instead lent their names to musical acts like the Clicquot Club Eskimos.

In 1928 Walter Templin of the struggling Pepsodent company heard Amos ’n’ Andy in a friend’s home in Chicago and watched the whole family fall silent to listen. The show, two white actors voicing Black characters, was a fifteen-minute daily serial. Templin saw that radio could capture attention inside the home. Other advertisers laughed at him, but Pepsodent sponsored it on NBC, the first sponsored serial in network history.

By 1931 the show drew about 40 million listeners a night out of a population of 122 million, a Super Bowl audience every evening with a single advertiser. Pepsodent’s sales more than doubled. NBC became an attention merchant like Day’s Sun, and entertainment and advertising, once thought incompatible, merged. Most importantly, an industry could now own a part of the day. Soap operas soon colonized daytime for housewives, with characters praising cake mixes mid-episode.

Wu sees prime time as a massive ritual of collective attention that forged a shared national identity. Unlike wartime propaganda, it worked with carrots rather than sticks, and it proved no less effective.

CHAPTER 8

The Prince

William S. Paley, a wealthy young playboy, discovered radio while advertising his family's cigars and persuaded his father to buy CBS, a weak network NBC's David Sarnoff had written off. Paley offered stations free programming and paid them to carry his full schedule. Within three months he signed twenty-five affiliates, and CBS grew larger than either of NBC's networks. Under the guise of a giveaway, he was buying audiences cheaply, much like the penny press.

Sarnoff, an immigrant who loved technology, never grasped that NBC sold attention and liked to say, "We're the pipes." Paley, by contrast, had a pure ear for talent. On Bernays's advice he made CBS the Tiffany Network, mixing the New York Philharmonic and Orson Welles's War of the Worlds with Jack Benny and soap operas. Wu notes that lasting success requires sensation balanced with respectability. Paley also limited ads to 10 percent of airtime, aware that too much advertising drives listeners away.

Paley invested heavily in news, and Edward R. Murrow became its first star, broadcasting from London rooftops during the Blitz. Meanwhile, Arthur Nielsen's Audimeter created scientific ratings, a feedback system for the industry that would gain outsized power over programming decisions.

CHAPTER 9

Total Attention Control, or The Madness of Crowds

On March 17, 1935, Hitler announced military conscription over radio to an estimated 56 million Germans, probably the largest broadcast audience in history to that point. Wu treats the Third Reich as the most extreme test of attention capture. Hitler had studied British wartime propaganda and his own early work painting advertising posters. His theory was simple: aim at the masses, catch attention first, repeat a few slogans endlessly and stir emotion rather than argue.

He perfected his technique in Munich beer halls, following an unvarying structure that built from soft intimacy to fury. Wu draws on crowd psychology, from Gustave Le Bon to William Jennings Bryan's Cross of Gold speech, to show that crowds dissolve individual judgment everywhere. The Nazis simply industrialized the effect.

Goebbels's ministry scaled the rally to the whole nation through radio. It sold a cheap people's receiver, mixed light music with political messages and staged national moments when a Radio Guard herded citizens into listening rooms, a conscious imitation of church worship. Wu explains why this matters for freedom. Advertising usually persuades among existing choices, while total propaganda makes alternatives unthinkable.

After the war, lessons diverged. The Soviets expanded state media, West Germany decentralized broadcasting to prevent propaganda, and in the West official propaganda became a dirty word. Commercial advertising suffered no such disgrace and filled the vacuum.

CHAPTER 10

Peak Attention, American Style

Television spread from 9 percent of American homes in 1950 to 72 percent by 1956, and viewing soon reached nearly five hours a day. Wu separates transitory attention, quick and often involuntary, from sustained attention, deep and voluntary. Selling depends mainly on the first, but happiness requires a balance of both. CBS overtook NBC with I Love Lucy, which drew 71.3 percent of the audience in 1953, and with Ed Sullivan, whose show gave Elvis Presley an 82.6 percent share on September 9, 1956. Wu calls this moment peak attention.

The whole nation watched the same programs and commercials at once, and Wu links that uniformity to the conformity of the 1950s. Advertising spending quadrupled over the decade. Rosser Reeves hammered home unique selling propositions, Leo Burnett created the Marlboro Man, and Ernest Dichter brought Freudian motivation research and the focus group.

NBC’s Pat Weaver answered by claiming new hours of the day with Today and Tonight and invented the magazine format, which sold each show to many advertisers. CBS replied with The $64,000 Question, starting a quiz show arms race. As ratings ruled, Murrow’s See It Now lost its slot and was canceled in 1958. Murrow warned that television was insulating Americans from hard truths.

CHAPTER 11

Prelude to an Attentional Revolt

The first technological countermeasure came from Zenith, whose eccentric chief, Commander E. F. McDonald, sensed viewers' irritation with commercial breaks. His engineers built the Flash-Matic, a gun-shaped remote that let viewers mute ads. It was feeble, but Wu sees it as the start of a popular resistance, a desire to take back control of one's attention.

Orson Welles captured the mood when he said he hated television as much as peanuts but could not stop eating peanuts. In 1957 Vance Packard's The Hidden Persuaders exposed the use of psychology in advertising and stayed on the bestseller list for months. Packard called for a right to mental privacy.

The decisive blow was the quiz show scandals of 1958 and 1959. A standby contestant found answers in a player's notebook on Dotto, and the fraud spread to Twenty One and The $64,000 Question. Charles Van Doren confessed to Congress, and Walter Lippmann called television the prostitute of merchandising. Wu argues that this crisis, not the 1960s, first sowed deep doubt about American institutions. It revealed the attention merchants' arrangement with the public as a confidence game.

CHAPTER 12

The Great Refusal

In 1966 Timothy Leary met Marshall McLuhan, who advised him that to wean people off media he had to use advertising's own methods. Leary coined Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out, unveiled at the Human Be-In in 1967, and it became the counterculture's motto. It was a broader call to attentional revolt than Packard's, urging people to ignore television, school, work and every authority. Herbert Marcuse supplied the philosophy with his idea of the Great Refusal.

Leary never imagined that advertisers would absorb his cause instead of fighting it. Pepsi, a perennial underdog to Coca-Cola, decided in the 1960s to stop talking about the product and talk about the user. The Pepsi Generation campaign sold not cola but an image of the young consumer's own liberated self. Later ads depicted something close to Marcuse's earthly paradise, selling liberation itself.

The revolution failed because most people never stopped watching television. What the decade released was not a wish to withdraw but a desire to feel like an individual, which commerce was happy to serve. Public broadcasting offered a milder alternative, with Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, Sesame Street and NPR. Meanwhile CBS's Fred Silverman replaced rural comedies with relevant shows like All in the Family and M*A*S*H, and agencies like Wells, Rich, Greene embraced love power. Even Coca-Cola wanted to buy the world a Coke. Capitalism proved a perfect chameleon.

CHAPTER 13

Coda to an Attentional Revolution

The 1960s politics of recognition for women, Black Americans and other groups became a business of recognition. Jonathan Robbin, an NYU professor who modeled urban riots, founded Claritas and in 1978 built PRIZM. Using census data and ZIP codes, it sorted America into forty clusters with names like Shotguns & Pickups and Money & Brains. Coca-Cola used it to launch Diet Coke in 1982 without cannibalizing TaB. Wu notes that it is much harder to ignore messages that seem to speak to you personally.

Media followed marketing. Cable brought MTV, ESPN, BET and Bravo, each built for a slice of the audience, and in 1986 Rupert Murdoch and Barry Diller launched Fox, chasing the unserved with Married…with Children, The Simpsons and later Fox News. Reformers had imagined thoughtful viewers choosing wisely. Instead audiences fragmented and began grazing, flipping channels without finishing anything.

The remote and the VCR made commercials easy to skip, so advertisers tried to make ads entertaining, from Michael Jackson dancing for Pepsi to Apple's 1984 Super Bowl spot. Wu's counterintuitive point is that tools meant to increase control over attention can do the opposite, freeing our most impulsive circuits and leaving us wandering. The Great Refusal ended not with a bang but with a whimper.

CHAPTER 14

Email and the Power of the Check-in

The computer, Wu writes, idled for years as a hobbyist toy before finding its use, but its plasticity let it capture attention in ways broadcasting never could. In 1971 Ray Tomlinson at BBN was asked to make the struggling ARPANET useful. He added a small feature that let users leave messages in each other's mailboxes and chose the @ symbol. By 1973 email took up 75 percent of network traffic. It was the Internet's first killer app.

DARPA director Stephen Lukasik carried a thirty-pound terminal everywhere to read his mail, becoming perhaps the first email addict. Wu names this habit the check-in and argues it would rival prime time in importance. He explains it with B. F. Skinner's variable reinforcement: because a rewarding message arrives only occasionally and unpredictably, people keep checking even when most checks are pointless. The spread of email through offices was one of history's great feats of mass conditioning.

In 1978 Gary Thuerk of DEC typed in 393 addresses and sent the first mass commercial email. The Pentagon called it a flagrant violation and made him promise not to repeat it. Thuerk, history's first spammer, later called himself the father of e-marketing.

CHAPTER 15

Invaders

In the late 1960s engineer Ralph Baer looked at America's forty million television sets and decided to plug in a game. His idea became the Magnavox Odyssey in 1972. Nolan Bushnell's Atari put computers into coin-operated cabinets, starting with Pong. The breakthrough came from Japan in 1978, when Tomohiro Nishikado of Taito created Space Invaders, a reworking of Breakout where aliens descended and dropped bombs.

Players and critics described it as an addiction. In 1982 it was the highest-grossing entertainment product in the United States, outearning Star Wars one quarter at a time, and by the early 1980s the game industry briefly out-earned Hollywood. Wu notes two differences from earlier media. Games sold experience directly for cash rather than reselling attention, and they were brutally hard, engaging players through challenge rather than story. The best games kept people in what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called flow.

Namco's Toru Iwatani, asked to draw women into grimy arcades, created Pac-Man, a maze game about eating. It outsold Space Invaders. When Atari brought such games home, the Atari 2600 became the first computer in many households. Games were the killer app that justified home computers, which then waited as a sleeping giant.

CHAPTER 16

AOL Pulls ’Em In

In 1991, when Steve Case became CEO, AOL was the smallest of four online services. CompuServe served male hobbyists. Prodigy, backed by Sears, CBS and IBM, spent some $650 million and pioneered the attention merchant model online, with ads on every screen and professional content. AOL had no money for content, so it let users entertain each other, promising electronic community. Its chat rooms, open to anyone, became its signature and grew to nineteen thousand by 1997.

The chat rooms gained a racy reputation, but that only helped. Email mattered even more. AOL made it unlimited and greeted users with You’ve Got Mail. Its floppy disk campaign achieved a 10 percent response rate. Prodigy, by contrast, charged heavy emailers and censored its chat rooms. By 1997 AOL had nearly 12 million users. Wu’s key insight is that the surest draw of networks was other people, which brought the attention merchant into one of the last sacred spaces: our personal relationships.

After switching to unlimited pricing, AOL needed money and hired Bob Pittman, a cofounder of MTV, who saw AOL’s future in selling attention. His Project Confidence built nearly $2 billion a year in ad revenue by 2000, much of it by squeezing desperate dot-coms, selling user data and, finally, accounting fraud charged by the SEC. Wall Street valued AOL above General Motors. But users escaped to the open web, and the merger with Time Warner could not save it. Still, AOL made the online check-in a daily ritual.

CHAPTER 17

Establishment of the Celebrity-Industrial Complex

Wu argues that religion was the first great harvester of attention and that the urge to idolize has moved to celebrities. When Life magazine was dying in the early 1970s, Time-Life's Andrew Heiskell drew on Henry Luce's old insight that only individuals are exciting. He launched People in 1974, a magazine devoted entirely to famous people. Critics sneered, but its first issue sold nearly a million copies, and by 1991 it was the most profitable magazine in the world. Editor Richard Stolley's rule for covers: young beats old, pretty beats ugly, and anything beats politics.

Wu explores why celebrities grip us. Being starstruck feels almost religious, and sociologist Chris Rojek calls celebrity secular society's answer to the decline of religion. Television added what psychologists in 1956 called para-social interaction, an engineered illusion of intimacy.

The key change of the 1970s was that stars began discussing their sex lives, families and faith, and that fame itself became professional capital. Celebrities became attention merchants in their own right, endorsing products for Polaroid and Hertz. The result was an arms race of exposure that made the old privacy norms impossible to restore.

CHAPTER 18

The Oprah Model

Oprah Winfrey defied the industry's rules. On Roger Ebert's advice she syndicated her own show from 1986, competing with the networks. She toned down the lurid bookings of her early career while keeping an emotional, confessional style. Her rivals, like Geraldo Rivera and Jerry Springer, chased freak shows. Winfrey offered something else: food for hungers once fed by religion. She described her show as her ministry.

Her theology linked spiritual growth with consumption, which made her audience immensely valuable. One passing remark about a reading light brought a small company $90,000 in sales in an afternoon. Her book club turned The Deep End of the Ocean from 68,000 copies to four million. She never took money for on-air endorsements, but her Favorite Things episodes and a giveaway of 276 cars blurred the line. She became the first African American billionaire.

Her embrace of the Law of Attraction and The Secret drew criticism from evangelicals and rationalists alike, and her 2007 endorsement of Barack Obama may have swung the primary. Her show ended in 2011, and her OWN network struggled. Her model lived on through successors like Dr. Phil and Ellen DeGeneres.

CHAPTER 19

The Panopticon

MTV had a remarkable model: record labels supplied music videos free, so it sold ads against what were really other ads. Fearing audiences would tire of videos, it hired Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray, whose scripted teen soap was too expensive. They borrowed from the 1973 PBS series An American Family and put seven young strangers in a loft with cameras, paying each only $1,400. The Real World debuted in 1992. Its stars were paid in attention.

Producers soon learned to cast difficult people who guaranteed drama. Survivor, whose 2000 finale drew 50 million American viewers, added game show structure. By 2002 to 2003, reality shows held 63.1 percent of prime time, since they could draw an audience at half the price of drama. Wu argues reality TV democratized celebrity, making fame seem a reasonable aspiration for anyone, though for most, like The Real World's Eric Nies, it faded fast.

The Kardashians broke that curse. Launched in 2007, Keeping Up with the Kardashians was panned by critics yet built a family empire of endorsements, apparel, fragrances and apps, earning $65 million collectively in 2010. Wu warns that no format outruns the disenchantment effect forever. By the millennium, television remained the champion of attention, but it depended on manufactured versions of real life.

CHAPTER 20

The Kingdom of Content: This Is How You Do It

At the millennium, conventional wisdom held that old media was doomed and the web would free people from television. In 1996 Bill Gates wrote that content is king and spent billions on interactive shows and MSNBC. The effort failed, because Microsoft treated the Internet as a new broadcast channel instead of understanding it on its own terms.

Google succeeded where Microsoft failed, but first it had to choose a business model. Its users offered intentional traffic: people leaning into their screens and typing their wants into a search box, minds open, desirous and impressionable. Larry Page and Sergey Brin had written in 1998 that advertising-funded search engines would be biased toward advertisers. They were repelled by Bill Gross, whose GoTo.com sold top search rankings, an idea that drew hisses at TED.

Their solution, a Diet Coke form of advertising, was AdWords, built by engineer Eric Veach and launched in 2001. It inverted the old model: instead of carpet-bombing audiences, it showed short text ads only when users signaled commercial intent and dropped ads nobody clicked. It also proved for the first time that ads worked, linking clicks to purchases. Revenue soared into the billions. The founders' contempt for advertising made them its greatest sellers, but Wu calls it a Faustian bargain, since Wall Street's demand for growth would test it.

CHAPTER 21

Here Comes Everyone

Millions of bored office workers with fast connections formed what Jonah Peretti called the Bored at Work Network, with more reach than CNN. Newspapers were slow to adapt, so amateurs seized the opportunity. Blogs such as Drudge, Slashdot, Instapundit and Andrew Sullivan's formed communities built purely on interest. With no expectation of profit, bloggers had no temptation to compromise, and linking spread information like conversation.

Wikipedia refused ads, with Jimmy Wales comparing it to a library. YouTube, launched in 2005, became the first real challenge to television. Time named You its 2006 Person of the Year. Wu sees a parallel with the 1960s: a new Great Refusal of content handed down from above.

But he warns the triumph was premature. Nothing in the web's code kept it free and noncommercial, and most bloggers could not make a living. Where attention gathers, the attention merchant waits patiently to collect.

CHAPTER 22

The Rise of Clickbait

In 2001 MIT graduate student Jonah Peretti asked Nike to put the word sweatshop on custom shoes and published the email exchange, which went viral before the phrase existed. He then set up a contagious media lab to study whether virality could be made on purpose. His conclusions: keep ideas simple, and success depends only on whether people share.

In 2005 Peretti, Ken Lerer and Arianna Huffington launched The Huffington Post as a liberal answer to Drudge. Critics mocked it, but it pioneered clickbait: sensational headlines, provocative images and unpaid contributors. By 2010 it had 24 million monthly readers. Yet it never made solid profits, because advertisers no longer needed to fund content. It still forced rivals to become more like it. AOL bought it in 2011 for $315 million.

Gossip blogger Perez Hilton claimed four million daily visitors, and YouTube star Lonelygirl15 was revealed as a paid actress. Wikipedia's editors declined after 2007, and most bloggers hit an invisible wall. Wired advised readers in 2008 not to start a blog. Creative energy moved to social networks, which Wu calls the most invasive attention capture apparatus yet.

CHAPTER 23

The Place to Be

In 2004, nineteen-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, on probation for his Facemash hack, decided he could build Harvard's electronic facebook better and faster than the university. Wu argues that Facebook proves execution matters more than invention. What set Zuckerberg apart was social insight, not technical genius, along with an early grasp of network effects.

AOL's anonymous chat rooms had collapsed under trolls. Friendster pioneered real identity but crashed technically, and MySpace filled with flashing ads and fake profiles. Facebook re-created real campus communities and kept ads almost invisible, with Zuckerberg turning down Sprite's $1 million offer. The profile was the bait. By 2008 users fled MySpace, and being absent from Facebook became a disadvantage.

After its 2012 IPO, Facebook faced a problem: users were not searching for anything, so they rarely clicked ads. It answered with branding arguments, pages, the like button and trackers across the web. Wu calls the result attention arbitrage. Users supply data and content in exchange for access to their friends, like tenants improving their landlord's property. Studies linked the site to depression, as users compared themselves with others' highlight reels.

CHAPTER 24

The Importance of Being Microfamous

When Rex Sorgatz moved from Seattle to New York in 2008, he noticed that the city's web crowd wanted to be famous rather than rich. He named the phenomenon microfame, a kind of celebrity in which the fans take part in its creation, and said it could be achieved like a marathon.

Fame once had a clear line: People magazine defined it as a face known to 80 percent of the public. Hollywood ranked stars from the A-list to the C-list, and reality TV added a D-list. Google search results became a rough measure. Then Twitter, with its follower counts, gave fame a precise scale, from Katy Perry's 83.2 million followers down to a tech founder's 80,000.

Wu calls this a democratic mirage, like the promise that anyone can become president. The hunger for fame spread like a pandemic, bringing more of its costs and few of its rewards.

CHAPTER 25

The Fourth Screen and the Mirror of Narcissus

The fourth screen began with Research in Motion's BlackBerry, first sold to corporations and officials who wanted to be reachable. Apple and Google then built the iPhone and Android, and smartphone sales jumped to 472 million in 2011. Wu compares the phone to fracking: it extracted attention that had been left on the table, and by 2015 it claimed nearly three waking hours a day.

Instagram, founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, combined photo filters with a social network in which the image was mandatory. Likes offered instant approval, and the selfie became its signature. Users curated idealized lives, and the most popular sold product placements. Kim Kardashian posted a nude photo to break the Internet, and fitness star Jen Selter built a career from photos of her backside. James Franco summed it up: attention is power.

Drawing on René Girard's idea of mimetic desire, Wu calls the self as its own object of worship the dystopia of late modernity. Essena O'Neill quit Instagram in 2015, confessing that everything she did was for likes. Facebook bought Instagram for $1 billion in 2012, and ads arrived in 2013.

CHAPTER 26

The Web Hits Bottom

Peretti’s BuzzFeed billed itself as the first true social news organization, spreading content through shares. It rewrote headlines for virality and measured viral lift, finding that awe, outrage and anxiety drive sharing. It reached over 200 million monthly visitors, yet it earned little profit, and Comcast’s 2015 investment valued it at $1.5 billion.

By the mid-2010s the web was a stream of listicles and celebrity nonstories, degraded for paltry commercial gains. The advertising was worse. Visiting one news site set off twenty or more tracking messages, and ads followed people like stalkers, offering funeral services to a cancer patient. Pages loaded slowly under ad tech. Jeff Hammerbacher lamented that the best minds of his generation were thinking about how to make people click ads.

Google and Facebook, pressed by Wall Street, loosened their early restraint. YouTube added preroll ads, and native advertising blurred the line between editorial and ads. Critics like Nicholas Carr and Jaron Lanier sounded alarms, and the web grew ripe for a challenger.

CHAPTER 27

A Retreat and a Revolt

In 2011 Netflix bid for House of Cards, offering David Fincher two full seasons and reportedly $100 million. Nearly alone online, Netflix rejected advertising, and Reed Hastings refused to cram ads down viewers' throats. It had rediscovered deep, sustained attention. Releasing all thirteen episodes at once in 2013 set off mass binge watching.

Commercial-free television from HBO onward thrived, with The Sopranos and Game of Thrones drawing huge audiences. Sports also held steady, perhaps because they never abuse the viewer's attention. Advertisers adapted with product placement and live commercials.

The real innovation, Wu argues, was immersive television. Producers realized that viewers in a chaotic media world wanted a full alternate reality. Vince Gilligan called the form the hyperserial, a story with consequences that cannot be joined midway. That TV's storytelling potential emerged only after commercials disappeared says much about what the attention merchants owe us.

CHAPTER 28

Who's Boss Here?

On June 1, 2015, Tim Cook attacked companies that monetize personal data, repeating the old line that if a service is free, you are the product. Critics noted that Apple sells hardware, so the speech also struck at its rivals' business. Days later Apple allowed content blocking in iOS 9's Safari. When it launched in September, ad blockers became the most popular apps, and an estimated 100 to 200 million Americans used some form of blocker by year's end.

The industry called it robbery and a threat to democracy. Defenders replied that web ads had become creepy, bloated and insecure. As Michael Wolff noted, once people learn to avoid ads, they rarely go back. Apple's move hit Google hardest. Google now faced the prophecy its founders had written in 1998, that advertising makes it hard to build the best product.

Wu ends the chapter on the body. Following McLuhan, he argues that smartphones and wearables have become prosthetics, turning the check-in into something like a bodily function. The closer technology gets to us, the more trust it requires.

Epilogue: The Temenos

By the late 2010s, cord cutting, ad blocking and subscriptions made it look as if the attention merchants' reign might end. Television earned half its revenue from subscriptions. Wu urges caution. The industry has been left for dead at least four times, and each time it came back stronger. The 1960s and the early web both ended up absorbed. Revolts are part of the system, a way of policing the deal as the industry keeps demanding more attention for less in return.

The real question, Wu says, is not whether advertising is good or bad but where and when it belongs. He frames it as zoning. Custom once protected religious practice, family meals and the home, but technology has erased those limits. Our new power to shape our attentional lives has coincided with the erosion of private life.

He proposes a human reclamation project, like restoring wilderness over a parking lot. Individuals can set aside time beyond the merchants' reach, such as weekends or digital Sabbaths, and society can reclaim sanctuaries like classrooms, offices and homes. It will be hard, given years of conditioning. But if our lives are what we pay attention to, then attention is precious, and we must reclaim ownership of the very experience of living.

About Tim Wu

Tim Wu is an American legal scholar and a professor at Columbia Law School, where he wrote The Attention Merchants. He is best known for coining the term net neutrality in the early 2000s, the principle that internet providers should treat all data equally. His work focuses on media, technology, competition policy and the power of large information industries.

Wu has also served in government. He worked as a senior adviser at the Federal Trade Commission and later served in the White House as a special assistant to President Joe Biden for technology and competition policy. He has written widely for publications including The New Yorker and The New Republic, where he developed many of the ideas in this book.

The Attention Merchants, published by Knopf in 2016, follows his earlier book The Master Switch, a history of the information industries from the telephone to the internet. He later wrote The Curse of Bigness, a short book on antitrust and monopoly power.

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