

Technology and Society (5 book reviews)

Tim Wu's *The Master Switch* (NYT, David Leonhardt)

- **Net neutrality** and the case of “Google versus Apple”
- “AT&T is the star of Wu’s book, an intellectually ambitious history of modern communications. The organizing principle — only rarely overdrawn — is what Wu, a professor at Columbia Law School, calls “**the cycle.**” “History shows a typical progression of information technologies,” he writes, “from somebody’s hobby to somebody’s industry; from jury-rigged contraption to slick production marvel; from a freely accessible channel to one strictly controlled by a single corporation or cartel — **from open to closed system.**” Eventually, entrepreneurs or regulators smash apart the closed system, and the cycle begins anew...The story covers the history of phones, radio, television, movies and, finally, the Internet. All of these businesses are susceptible to the cycle because all depend on networks, whether they’re composed of cables in the ground or movie theaters around the country. Once a company starts building such a network or gaining control over one, it begins slouching toward monopoly. If the government is not already deeply involved in the business by then (and it usually is), it soon will be.”

Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion* (Guardian, Ed Pilkington)

- Debunking the **cyber-utopians** (and the “Twitter revolutions”...)
- “Morozov is fast becoming a leading voice of what might be called the cyber-sceptic school of internet studies...the more he looked into it, the more he came to the conclusion that western views of social networking were hopelessly naïve and out of kilter with the realities on the ground.”
 - The internet debate over **privacy**, anonymity, and identity. (Morozov is often balanced against Jeff Jarvis, who advocates for increased openness online.)

Jarod Lanier's *You Are Not a Gadget* (NYT, Michiko Kakutani)

- [A similar work to this: Doug Rushkoff's *Program or be Programmed...*]
- “Mr. Lanier, a pioneer in the development of virtual reality and a Silicon Valley veteran, is hardly a Luddite, as some of his critics have suggested. Rather he is a digital-world insider who wants to make the case for “a new digital humanism” before software engineers’ design decisions, which he says fundamentally shape users’ behavior, become “frozen into place by a process known as lock-in.” Just as decisions about the dimensions of railroad tracks determined the size and velocity of trains for decades to come, he argues, so choices made about software design now may yield “defining, unchangeable rules” for generations to come...Decisions made in the formative years of computer networking, for instance, promoted online anonymity, and over the years, as millions upon millions of people began using the Web, Mr. Lanier says, anonymity has helped enable the dark side of human nature. Nasty, anonymous attacks on individuals and institutions have flourished, and what Mr. Lanier calls a “culture of sadism” has gone mainstream.”
- Online culture as “a culture of reaction without action”

Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble* (NYT, Evgeny Morozov)

- Why is internet search personalization “a cause for concern”, according to Pariser (and Morozov)?

Clay Shirky's *Cognitive Surplus* (NYT, Farhad Manjoo)

- And from a review of his more recent *Here Comes Everybody* (by Boingboing's Cory Doctorow): “Clay's gift here is in explaining why the trivial minutiae of Internet communications -- Twittery nothings and LiveJournalish angst -- matter, and why the weighty gravitas of the Internet -- dissidents risking arrest, victims finding succour -- aren't the only thing online that's worthy. In so doing, he manages to illuminate the way that every institution is prone to being recast by the net, and how to manage that change for the best possible outcome.”