A Complex History of the Commercial Internet

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The intertwining of the Internet with private-market production and consumption in the US so far has been told only from an “internalist” perspective, largely by the professional business press and mostly about a few ongoing examples of online business success, especially Amazon.com and Google. In The Internet and American Business, two accomplished historians of information technology, William Aspray and Paul Ceruzzi, bring more balance and complexity to this record. These editors know how to communicate a nuanced historical analysis to a popular audience—Aspray, a professor at the University of Texas School of Information, was a co-author with Martin Campbell-Kelly of Computer: A History of the Information Machine (Westview Press, 2004) and Ceruzzi, a historian and curator with the Smithsonian Institution, wrote A History of Modern Computing (MIT Press, 2003). In this readable and useful collection, they have assembled a who’s who of contemporary computing historians to analyze the recent history of the commercial Internet in greater depth and, to a lesser extent, to problematize the practice of doing such history in the first place.

Toward a dot-com world

The first half of the book lays the groundwork for a relatively consistent narrative on the adoption of Internet and Web technology by consumers and producers (not to mention the state) through the 1990s. This part of the book will be most useful for those new to the histories of networked computing and business restructuring. Historians of technology—Campbell-Kelly, Ceruzzi, James Cortada (in a later chapter that belongs with the first few), and Thomas Haigh—as well as scholars of management and economics—Brent Goldfarb, Shane Greenstein, Daniel D. Garcia-Swartz, Ward Hanson, and David Kirse—cooperate to piece together this narrative. These authors take us step by step through the pre-Web era of closed corporate and consumer networks, to the development of Web-based email, search, and portal systems, through the first attempts of brick-and-mortar business organizations to enter the dot-com world.

This first section presents a solid historical background, although some of the chapters could have enjoyed a bit of trimming (so as not to mention every network provider, online start-up, and initial public offering) and consolidation (to avoid the repetitive defining-the-Internet introduction that many of the chapters share). Echoing the management literature’s impulse to identify best-practice business choices, many of the chapters also tend to describe the historical actors’ decisions and understandings as, for example, “in retrospect, clearly flawed” (p. 174) rather than framing these decisions in their own rich and rather contingent historical context.

With a few exceptions (such as the concise Campbell-Kelly and Garcia-Swartz piece on the recurring quest for a “computer utility”), these chapters err on the side of encyclopedic completeness rather than present focused historical arguments. But this is a minor complaint for such a thorough summary of this vibrant period of technological and economic change.

Reframing digital communication

The second half of the book, where each chapter focuses on a particular facet of the new online economy, will interest historians of information technology in particular and scholars of online culture in general. Most of these focus on the mass communication aspects of the Internet—for example, Aspray’s chapter on downloadable music, Christine Ogan and Randal Beam’s overview of online journalism and advertising, and Blaise Cronin’s piece on the Internet sex industry. Even Jeffrey Yost’s catch-all chapter on “travel agencies, realtors, mortgage brokers, personal computer manufacturers, and information technology service professionals” is consciously titled “Internet Challenges for Nonmedia Industries.” With such an apparent split between media and nonmedia Internet business, some more contextualization and conceptualization drawn from mass communication or media studies research might have been helpful here. Keeping this in mind, undergraduates might find it helpful to read Mark Deuze’s overview Media Work (Polity, 2007) in parallel with this section.

The most useful chapters of the book are two that call into question our customary understandings of both Internet use and online community. Nathan Ensmenger’s chapter “Reluctant and Selective Users of the Internet” reminds us to watch out for the easy historical explanations for the commercial adoption of new technology—“the seemingly imperative logic of economic rationality: reduced transaction costs, efficient distribution channels, disintermediation, and economies of scale and scope” (p. 351). Instead, he asks how and why potential users of new technologies might reject, reframe, or reinterpret those imperatives. Using university
professors and physicians as examples, Ensmenger argues that “the negative response of users to new technologies often reveals the underlying assumptions, values, and power relationships that are embedded in those technologies” (p. 351).

Similarly, Atsushi Akera’s chapter on the broad category of community-oriented Internet businesses—from the social networking service MySpace to the online dating intermediary Match.com—demonstrates how the tools and concepts of social informatics can help historians understand “how, exactly, technology interacts with and mediates the social interactions within specific communities” and how the very definition of “community” itself changes over time and space in such ventures (p. 424).

**Where to go from here**

Concluding chapters from Wolfgang Coy as well as Aspray and Ceruzzi round out this volume. Although a collection overtly focused on “business” cannot fairly be faulted for failing to cast its analytical lens elsewhere, I was disappointed to see that “labor” appears only once in the index (under “labor costs”). If much of the strategic deployment of Internet technology in American business has attempted to provide more flexible labor arrangements to highly valued creative workers, to leverage the free labor of consumers as content producers, and to access low-cost labor markets for lower-value tasks, then historians might want to reconsider the place of labor as a conceptual category in these narratives. A parallel reading of Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco’s edited volume *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) might be useful here.

With profound interest in digital divides and online diversity accompanying the rapid adoption of the Web all through the 1990s, it is unfortunate that we have not begun to analyze the way social categories of gender, race, and ethnicity connect with the online circulation and accumulation of capital. For example, does Internet-based commerce provide new entrepreneurial opportunities for women- or minority-owned businesses?

While *The Internet and American Business* is by no means the last word on how cyberspace and corporate space have become intertwined since the early 1990s, it is, as the editors hoped, a clear step away from the internalist story of e-commerce told by the business press. It is also a superb introduction to the various ways that current historians of computing have begun to study the new digital mediation of production and consumption in the US.

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