

Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930. By *Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007. xx + 429 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$89.95; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-822-33912-0; paper, 978-0-8223-3928-1.

Reviewed by Daniel R. Headrick

In *Communication and Empire*, Dwayne Winseck and Robert Pike set out to overthrow the conventional wisdom on the history of telecommunications before 1930, which they call “a caricatured version of the past” (p. xv). To do so, they argue that “the ‘global media system’ was much more multinational and far less governed by considerations of national interest than usually assumed” (p. 2). Hence, their book has two goals: to describe in detail the supranational links between the global communications companies and those who challenged them; and to downplay the role of governments and national interests in using and controlling these media. They succeed in the first and fail in the second.

Winseck and Pike concentrate on the communication companies and the news agencies they served, as well as their relations with the governments of the major nations. The details they provide on corporate history and on the rivalries, cartels, and collusions between firms are a welcome contribution to the history of telecommunications. The book is particularly strong in describing the penetration of these new technologies into Persia, the Ottoman Empire, China, and Latin America. Despite its emphasis on entrepreneurs and corporations as the main actors, this work is very critical of the way they conducted their businesses. Rather than a glorious advance on the road to progress, Winseck and Pike depict the history of telecommunications as a missed opportunity to make the best use of new technologies for the greatest number of people.

Winseck and Pike also devote considerable attention to the critics of the communications enterprises, a topic neglected by other works. These critics included the press agencies that resented the high cost of cabling, social reformers who wanted to make long-distance

communications accessible to a wider public, and liberal internationalists like Woodrow Wilson who believed that better international communications would serve the cause of world peace and mutual understanding.

The scholarly apparatus of the book is most impressive. Winseck and Pike have consulted an enormous number of primary sources, both published and archival, in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, and even a few from Australia and New Zealand. All the primary sources cited in the bibliography are in English, as are all the secondary sources, except for three books in Chinese, one in French, and one in Danish. The result is obvious from the text. Granted that most of the world's cables and wireless companies were either British or American, the paucity of sources in other languages, especially those written during the period in question, give this work a very two-sided Anglo-American perspective and reinforces the belief, common in non-English-speaking parts of the world, that globalization is another word for Anglo-American hegemony.

For all its virtues, this book suffers from two major flaws. The first is Winseck and Pike's neglect of technology. Except for some brief references to fat cables and Permalloy cables, cables are cables, and there is no explanation for why some failed and others succeeded, technically or financially. This is disappointing, not only because some readers like to know how things work, but also because cables are an important aspect of business history, as their technology had a major impact on costs. Winseck and Pike, who are very sensitive to the prices the cable enterprises charged and the impact of these companies on their customers, are surprisingly blind to the cost side of these enterprises.

Submarine telegraph cables, for example, had the highest ratio of fixed to variable costs of any industry. Companies had to spend millions of pounds sterling to buy and lay a cable before they could earn the first shilling in revenue. Cables also had a far longer life-span than almost any other investment, some lasting forty or fifty years. It is the peculiar nature of this technology, and not just the conservatism of the entrepreneurs and financiers, that made the companies so slow to change their pricing and marketing practices.

Likewise, to Winseck and Pike, wireless is wireless, for they do not acknowledge the difference (except in name) between spark and continuous wave, or between longwave and

shortwave radio. Yet here too, the technology had important business implications. To be able to communicate across oceans, longwave radio transmitters had to occupy hundreds of acres of land and consume as much electricity as a small town. Hence, when they were introduced after World War I, they could only supplement the cables, rather than compete with them. Shortwave sets, in contrast, cost one-twentieth as much to build and to operate, and they really heralded the end of the age of copper cables.

The other major weakness in this book is the utter neglect of the military, strategic, and security aspects of telecommunications. Granted, there is already a book on that subject, namely this reviewer's *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851–1945* (1991). It is true that during the late nineteenth century, an age of laissez-faire, the British government intervened little (and the United States not at all) in the cable business, confident that the interests of the enterprises coincided with those of the nation and empire. The French and German governments, however, viewed cables as national enterprises as early as the mid-1890s, as did the United States Navy during and after World War I. The authors' overreliance on English-language sources has made them discount the connections between telecommunications and nationalism.

Nowhere, not even in a section called "Communication, Security, and Empire" (pp. 333–37), do Winseck and Pike recognize that cables carry military and diplomatic secrets as well as press releases and business or personal messages. Yet, from the beginning, companies and governments understood that only cables operated by one's own citizens could be trusted to keep message secret and that cables that passed through foreign territory were vulnerable to espionage. As for radio, the success of code-breakers in World War I reinforced the paranoia that war itself had stimulated, even between allies. By neglecting the importance of communications security and discounting the events of the war, the writers leave us with an oddly incomplete view of the role of telecommunications in the first age of globalization.

Daniel R. Headrick is professor of history and social science at Roosevelt University in Chicago. He is the author of The Invisible Weapon (cited in this review) as well as The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century (1981), The Tentacles of

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Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940 (1988), and When Information Came of Age: Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700–1850 (2000), and coauthor of The Earth and its Peoples: A Global History, 4th ed. (2007). He is currently working on the history of global imperialism from 1400 to the present.