

Book Review

Don Tapscott

The Digital Economy Anniversary Edition: Rethinking Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence

New York, N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 2014

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

There are plenty of books that are sufficiently popular that they are reprinted many times. Some are published in 2nd, 3rd, 4th or even 20th editions. A number of them will be altered slightly or significantly and are therefore said to be “revised” editions. Very few books, however, merit and even fewer succeed in being reproduced in “anniversary” editions. To be thus honoured by one’s publisher is to be given a tremendous stamp of approval. Even if the gesture is no more than a clever marketing trick, the claim is implicitly made that the book *matters*. It is advertised as being important. Its special reproduction implies that it may have offered fresh insights, changed people’s minds, provided important new information or inspired readers in a uniquely memorable fashion.

I have several such books on my shelf. One is the 40th anniversary edition of George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (1965). Another is the 25th anniversary edition of Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (1998).

Democracy is not a concept that is compatible with vast technological empires. The United States is such an empire, the largest to date.”

George Grant, 1965

Grant’s book offered an interpretation of Canadian history that was based on authentic conservative principles and modes of thinking. It offered a critique of American imperialism and Canadian elite complicity in what Grant elsewhere argued was the hideous and unconscionable conflict in Vietnam. It was mainly a reflection on the failure of what George Grant admitted was an absurd project; namely, the construction of a conservative society adjacent to the most powerful and dynamic liberal country in human history, the United States of America.

Today, people may, I suppose, wonder how a “conservative” could reasonably argue against American influence and speak openly of “American imperialism”; that, however, merely reveals how words like “liberal” and “conservative” have been grotesquely distorted in the late 20th century. (Hint: alleged conservative icons like British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, political parties like the American Republicans, especially in its “Tea Party” mutation, politically engaged multi-billionaires like the (in)famous Koch brothers and current Canadian leader Stephen Harper are, in reality, strident liberals or, more accurately “neoliberals” passionately committed to some of the most up-to-date ideas of the 18th century. They are (or were) enabling instruments of global capitalism, there is almost nothing that is authentically conservative about them.

All the difficulties in Marxism obviously stem from the fact that the capitalist system has persisted and restabilized itself repeatedly, over a much longer period than had been expected.

..- Harry Braverman, 1958

Braverman's book, in the alternative, earned the distinction of starting a vigorous and crucial debate in Marxist circles. It reconceptualized the entire discourse of social class under capitalism and drew unprecedented attention to class dynamics and what has come to be known as the labour process. Agree with him or not, it cannot be denied that Harry Braverman shifted political discussion on the left as much or more than any single thinker and writer coming out of North America.

Whether either man "will go down in history" as more than an intriguing and appealing 20th-century footnote is unknown. What each did, however, was to have an enormous effect on some of the most vital themes of our era: the nature of the American Empire and the Future of Marxism. More crucially, both caused people to take practical action as a result of the ways in which each, from profoundly dissimilar ideological positions, made a *difference* to a significant number of supporters and detractors alike. Grant, a devout Christian, lived to the Biblically appointed age of 70 and participated fully in the elaboration of his argument about the fate of the futile Canadian experiment; Braverman, regrettably, died prematurely at the age of 55, just two years after his masterwork was published.

A collaborative approach has [a] tremendous opportunity to free up resources and capacity for stretched service providers.

Don Tapscott, 2014

Don Tapscott is not in their league. That, however, is not a mean or demeaning judgment. Tapscott is a charming man. He seems passionately to believe in his own arguments. He is committed to helping make a better world. He is also not shy of accepting a challenge.

In *The Digital Economy*, he has set himself a huge task: the "rethinking of promise and peril in the age of networked intelligence." He did not say that he was intent on rethinking the promises and perils of networked intelligence; instead, whether he meant it or not, he said he was about to rethink the concepts "promise" and "peril" themselves. No small order.

Don Tapscott is Chancellor of Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. He is an adjunct professor at the Rotman School of Business at the University of Toronto. He gets invited to speak at celebrated gatherings of important people such as the National Community Knowledge Exchange Summit (November, 2014). He is highly regarded and, in 2013, he was named one of the top five business thinkers in the world by Thinkers 50, a reward often described as an Oscar of Management Thinking.

Thinkers 50, by the way, has three "core beliefs":

- Ideas have the power to change the world;
- Management is essential to human affairs;
- New thinking can create a better future.

Don Tapscott readily agrees. *The Digital Economy* is (so far) his major contribution to popularizing those beliefs. He has championed open cities, calling for new ways of thinking in addressing all the problems for which big cities are justly famous for failing to solve. He has ideas about economic development, public safety, transportation, energy, clean air and water, human services, education, food security and democracy.

Tapscott tells us that:

Today's digital networks enable all citizens to be aware of what is going on in the city and be able to contribute their ideas to the way they are governed. To achieve social cohesion, good government and shared norms, the new realities demand a second wave of democracy based on a culture of public deliberation and active citizenship. This is not direct democracy: it is about a new model of citizen engagement and politics appropriate for the 21st century.

Tapscott has supported “radical openness” in a TED book of the same name (2013) in which he called for more organizational transparency, wide sharing of intellectual property, increased collaboration and freedom and justice for all. He even seems to endorse “Wikileaks.”

Tapscott is certainly easy to mock. He is a self-promoting intellectual entrepreneur hurtling down the pipeline that started with the curl out of Alvin Toffler's *Third Wave*. His ideas are not new, but they are well-marketed. They are consistent with the “progressive” side of the corporate mantra that has provided the justificatory rhetoric for organizational change over the past half-century or so.

Tapscott's advertising is, of course, false. He is credited and credits himself with devising a “revolutionary new philosophy” that promises “exciting” opportunities to reinvent ourselves, our social institutions and our collective future. He does not do so. The kind of slogans that he offers have been around in one form or another since I was in graduate school in the middling 1960s and read people such as Erich Fromm as he outlined the conditions of *The Sane Society* (1955), Warren Bennis and Philip Slater (1968) as they contemplated social organizations that would realize the humanistic values piled up on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs and took semi-seriously the efforts of Stewart Brand (1974) to apply cybernetic theory and the nascent computer technology to new and revolutionary ways of life.

Almost fifty years ago, for instance, Bennis (1968, pp. 58-59) spoke about “a new concept of organizational values, based on humanistic, democratic ideals, which replaces the mechanistic depersonalized values of bureaucracy.” In the wake of such good cheer, governments became interested (briefly) in concepts such as TQM (Total Quality Management) and some even dabbled in “Participative Management.” A few took seriously the words of Peter Drucker who summarized his wisdom in the simple statement that “the first policy—and the foundation for all the others is—abandon yesterday” (Drucker, 1999, p. 74).

In fact, from time to time, the predecessors of Tapscott's current notions have captured the imagination of both private and public sector employers. Even the now antiquated “Japanese Model” with its guarantee of job security and its enthusiasm for employee suggestions in support

of efficiency and productivity had its moment of passing fancy. The problem is that the “yesterday” which business forgot was the post-war “grand bargain” in which private sector employers, labour unions and governments worked out a way of working together that, despite numerous bumps and potholes nonetheless built a road to mutual success. Prosperity and a rough measure of equity seemed to prove that liberal capitalism, with a substantial mix of Keynesian economics could yield stability, productivity and the semblance of a just society.

“The digital revolution enables cities to better integrate social services, reducing cost and improving value.”

.. - Ron Tapscott, 2014

That arrangement lasted no longer than it took Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan to grab the reins of their respective governments, introduce devastating programs of neoliberal economics including assaults on unions, social programs and public investment combined with an enthusiasm for deregulation, privatization and an end to employment stability. The consequence for the public sector, of course, was the triumph of the “new public management,” in which all of the negativities of neoliberalism were adopted by the new public managers (whose numbers seemed to grow at least as much as full-time workers were replaced by contract employees of various sorts. The culture and ethic of the public service was dismantled. Even the relationship between government and the public was redefined. And here, in my opinion, we find Don Tapscott’s finest moment: “Please stop calling me a taxpayer, dammit! I’m a citizen” (Tapscott, 2014, p. IN3).

What Tapscott surely knows, of course, is that the public and the private sectors are different. The dominant “reform” slogan from almost all sides is that government should be run more like a business. Costs should be controlled and client or customer or consumer satisfaction should be the measure of success. Rarely, if ever, do we hear someone explaining that business should be run more like government.

So, when (as he often does) Don Tapscott shares his ideas (old, new, recycled, repackaged or what you will), he emphasizes the need to welcome innovation, to embrace change, to take advantage of the vast opportunities for information sharing and to plug public service into the wonderful world-wide web, not merely to exchange files more expeditiously but to turn organizations into semi-organic thinking machines.

Such a breathless endorsement of the new way of thinking unfortunately requires a new way of thought. I have no reason to doubt Tapscott’s sincerity. When he speaks passionately about building trust, inviting community stakeholders into government planning processes and ridding ourselves of industrial-age approaches to governance, I choose to think that he is in earnest. When he urges “shared ownership, decentralized decision making and community engagement, I feel that his words are heartfelt. And, when he tells us that imminent ecological and environmental problems require fresh approaches to problem-solving that include inclusive, open and profoundly democratic and even populist principles, I empathize with his sentiment that an “us vs. them” mentality should be exchanged for a frank recognition that “we’re all in this together.”

“Policing is moving into a new paradigm, where police focus on engaging citizens rather than delivering services to them.”

Don Tapscott, 2014

I hope that I will be forgiven and I assuredly take no pleasure in saying so, but I recall having heard this all before—often from “futurists” whom I personally like and admire. Jim Dator (2012), Director of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, has been saying this sort of thing eloquently and often since I first met him in 1970. This is not to discount what Don Tapscott is telling anyone in commerce, finance, manufacturing or government at any level. His solutions to our organizational problems need to be elaborated and assessed individually and as a collection, but there is no doubt that he has collected some important bases for much needed reform. What is missing, however, is a *serious* account of existing power structures and power relationships.

Perhaps my wish to keep a distance from Tapscott is merely the result of location and circumstance. I encounter rigidly authoritarian decision-making structures in almost all of my encounters with the public sector—as an employee, a health care patient, a taxpayer and a citizen. Secrecy in the collection and manipulation of information, hostility to anyone daring to criticize existing policy makers, punishment of “whistle-blowers,” draconian laws and discriminatory law enforcement, constant surveillance and flagrant denial of life-altering and life-threatening economic and environmental trends are just a few of the elements of twenty-first century governance in too many liberal democracies where an increasing concern is the “democratic deficit” (an unpleasant combination of electoral apathy and voter suppression).

So, I’d be more than happy to back Mr. Tapscott’s views on many, if not most of the changes in public sector management. I fear, however, that existing power structures—both in the dominant private and the largely reactive public sectors—make it clear that his propositions will not be put to the test, his experimental suggestions will not be tried, and the creative, innovative and redemptive future he wishes us to enjoy will simply not happen or, at the least, will not happen until we are shaken out of our complacency and our fears.

The reasons? They go back to the core principles of Thinkers 50, the self-congratulatory circle of like-minded thought provokers. My response:

- Ideas have the power to change the world, but only when they are consistent with the interests of existing or growing centres of power and Tapscott’s are apt to be robustly resisted by almost everyone in the ruling classes today;
- Management is essential to human affairs, but it is in a constant, inherent struggle with its workers and clients that will remain toxic until and unless it becomes fully accountable to the people it purports both to guide and to serve;
- New thinking can create a better future, but not until the material conditions of society are altered in such a way that such new thinking supports the material interests of the people, democratically expressed and rigorously followed. Everything else is show business.

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