

# Chapter Summary of *World Without Mind*

*This chapter summary is intended to help you gain a big-picture view of the book and begin to see the themes and connections of themes in the book. It is will not substitute for reading the book, and you should not quote this summary in any of your work—always go back to the book and quote it.*

Created by L. Lennie Irvin

## Prologue

The Prologue introduces the author's key themes and critiques he will make in the book. He critiques the fundamental irony that these big tech companies say they value the individual, empower the user, but their world view contradicts and destroys these values. These companies (Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple) are dangerous and destroying important things. This book is about companies and people behind this big tech wonders and the ideas behind them and the imperative to resist these companies.

## Section 1: The Monopolists of Mind

Chapter 1 is about the social and philosophical roots of the technology revolution that has birthed these tech monopolies, especially in Silicon Valley and Stewart Brand. He seeks in the chapter to get at the roots of the grandiose rhetoric and goals of these companies—social good, global harmony, undoing alienation of humankind (12). Their theory of knowledge is different-- technology enables world brain, hive mine, wisdom of the masses. They operate on the assumption that humans are not simply motivated by self-interested economics. People are driven by passion—the rise of the amateur. Collectivist view of human nature. Representative figure of early computing was the “hacker”—the ultimate amateur expert/genius radical individual thumbing his nose at big institutions, self-taught.

He discusses the rise of monopolies like Microsoft, Google and Amazon as against competition. Prophet of new monopolies, Peter Thiel, preaches against competition—technology markets are winner take all, everything is one (ties to theme of wholeness).

## 2. The Google Theory of History

Chapter thesis: Larry Page's and Googles goal is to achieve “‘AI complete,’ the creation of machines with the ability to equal and exceed human intelligence” (37). Author says Google is seeking to dominate something far more than an industry, but to dominate by imposing its values and theological convictions on the world (55).

Details Larry's pages upbringing by father and how AI not a lofty engineering goal but an ideology. The author links this quest to the historical figure of Rene Descartes similar quest with his “automaton” — liberate the mind (soul) from the body, pure understanding, pure intellect. Links back also to Alan Turing and the “Turing Test” as well as Ray Kurzweil's quest for the “singularity.” Discusses Google's past incremental work toward AI and their aspirations with “Google Brain.”

### 3. Mark Zuckerberg's War on Free Will

This chapter focuses on Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg. It begins with Zuckerberg's "hacker" roots and how the phoniness of Facebook's ideas are reflected in Zuckerberg himself. Facebook has strong, paternalistic views on what is best for you, and its trying to transport you there. Zuckerberg and this quest to control us has long roots—discussion about French Revolution and "technocracy", automation has come in waves, engineers automating physical labor will now automate intellectual thought, outsourcing our intellectual work to machines.

Power of Facebook is in algorithms (as well as Google). The author has a long section on Gottfried Leibniz, genius mathematician, sought a new alphabet of human thought, convert thought to mathematical equations—links Leibniz's quest to current algorithms. Algorithms are a human artifact, not a mathematical truism; they reflect the minds of the creators. It's a problem when we outsource our thinking to these marvelous machines because we really are outsourcing our thinking to the organizations running the machines. He discusses how Facebook experiments with its algorithms to control people's behavior. Algorithms are meant to erode free will, to relieve humans of the burden of choosing, to nudge them in the right direction. Facebook is always surveilling users, using them like lab rats. It creates illusion of free choice while it paternalistically pushes users in the direction it deems best for them, which happens to be the direction that addicts them.

### 4. Jeff Bezos Disrupts Knowledge

While this chapter focuses on Bezos and his development of Amazon, it groups Amazon, Apple, and Google in the same class of "knowledge monopolies." It states that their monopoly is not in a thing or product, but in the ability to organize and make information accessible—they don't make or produce anything. In the process, they have been active agents in the devaluing of knowledge because the value of their service is in access to free information, the infinitude of the internet.

### 5. Keepers of the Big Gate in the Sky

The author focuses on the role of gatekeepers traditionally in media and the production of knowledge, and critiques Jeff Bezos and Amazon's façade as an un-bias gatekeeper. Traditionally, newspapers were a reflection of the editor's bias and getting a book published meant going through the gatekeepers of editors and publishers with their selectivity and bias. It is a theory of history based upon scarcity. But in the age of the internet, the gatekeepers have all come down. Amazon seen by Bezos to be an open and free marketplace. Anyone could publish. It is a radically different approach to the stewardship of knowledge. But there is falsehood, irony in Bezos and Amazon's stance. They don't want to play the role of gatekeeper, but that is exactly what they do by giving better treatment to some artifacts than others, promoting them in its recommendation algorithms. It is tremendous cultural power. Publishing now depends upon Amazon and their practices have upended the publishing industry from the \$9.99 Kindle book to working with new authors to forcing publishers to agree to their terms or no longer recommending or selling their books. Ends the chapter with a section on the dangers of the consolidation of media due to loosening of government regulation. Convergence. All media rushing over

the same digital falls. In Amazon's vision of the future there is just one gate, and the health of the book business has come to depend upon one company.

## 6. Big Tech's Smoke-Filled Room

The author starkly claims that these "knowledge monopolies" are a danger to democracy. His thesis is that companies that control the flow of words and ideas can abuse their power in their own self-interest and go beyond picking the fate of a book, but can influence our democracy. Cites examples in the history of Western Union's tactics to gain its monopoly and the Associated Presses influence over the 1876 election, swaying it to Rutherford Hayes (with disastrous consequences, ending Reconstruction and ushering in age of segregation and Jim Crow in the south). The author believes it is foolish to think that this kind of intervention in our political process can't happen again. (Interestingly, the author does not go into Facebook's role in the 2016 election.)

The author recounts his own brush with monopoly as the editor of the New Republic when he published an article critical of Amazon and Amazon decided to punish the magazine. They dominate the market for disseminating ideas; thus, every writer, media outlet, and book publisher depends for their survival on them. Criticizing them is suicidal—he knows, because he experienced it. He believes Amazon's power and its potential abuses must be debated and discussed.

The author then cites to examples of how Facebook and Google have shaped voters in the past, pointing to Google's assistance to Obama in 2012 election. Knowledge monopolies claim to be transparent, open spaces without human gatekeepers. But actually Google, Facebook, and Amazon are all seeking to influence their users in ways that are not clear. Some type of information is given more favorable treatment but for no apparent reason. American democracy was built on richly deserved fear that power might pool in one institution at everyone else's expense. The problem is that companies that are indifferent to democracy have acquired an outsized role in it.

## Section 2: World Without Mind

### 7. The Virality Virus

This chapter is about the historic forces of the internet and Silicon Valley values that have undercut and changed the nature of journalism—and thus our access to information. The author recounts his experience of this happening as the editor of the New Republic under the new owner Chris Hughes (co-founder of Facebook). He discusses the emerging science of web traffic how stories go viral. It is really cognitive science and enticing readers through bias, irrational forces, manipulation and hidden persuasion.

His next section is about the history of journalism, recounting how the ethical safeguards of dividing editorial content from economic/business concerns are new, going back to post WWI and Walter Lippmann. He details the pressures of what is trending, the ability of data and analytics to moment by moment reveal readership (Chartbeat). The pressure of the market pursuing audience becomes a popularity contest—this pressure has no patience for journalism's old ethos of detachment. CrowdTangle a tool for tracking trends leading journalist to jump on the trending bandwagon to milk a

trending topic—example, Cecil the lion. Data a Pandora box—once they know what works, which stories yield traffic, they pursue it. This is the definition of pandering and it has horrific consequences.

The author talks about the dangers of “branded content” where the difference between editorial content and advertising crosses over. You can’t tell when you are being pumped a bought message shaped in the interests of the purchaser of that story.

## 8. Death of the Author

Technology companies have worked to overturn the entrenched idea at the heart of Western civilization since the 18th century of the author and individual accomplishment and genius, insured through copy write law. Silicon Valley has a different view on human creativity, valuing collaboration and groups working together more than individuals. They have worked to dismantle the structures that protect our ideas of authorship. They have pursued a business plan that radically deflates the value of knowledge, rendering writing a cheap, disposable thing. Discusses Larry Lessing and read-write culture.

Describes fairly recent growth of copy write laws—William Wordsworth, Mark Twain. When we protected American copy write, it resulted in the growth of America letters and profession of writing. His point: we need to perpetuate the idea of genius and protect the rights of authors because it breeds innovation. Amazon has tattered this view of authorship.

## Section 3: Take Back the Mind

### 9. In Search of the Angel of Data

If the previous two sections have outlined the problem and danger from these “knowledge monopolies,” this chapter begins a section where he proposes a way forward to manage the threat from these companies. He believes government needs to regulate the internet.

To address the problem, though, he believes we need to understand where it came from, and this is what this chapter is about. His next section goes into the history of monopolies and anti-trust laws and the two schools of thought about them and their threat. Thurmond Arnold against bigness because it threatens competition and consumer prices (the economy). Brandeis against monopolies because of the threat to self-government and “intellectual privacy”: “the protection from surveillance or interference when we are engaged in the process of generating ideas.” Brandeis hated the prospect that society might elevate efficiency to the highest value; he feared we would surrender our liberty for the benefits of efficiency—that’s the authoritarian temptation. It’s not worth having free email if the price is our privacy. Google, Facebook, and Amazon embody all Brandeis’ fears. They preach a gospel of efficiency—even lower prices—as they engage in the most extensive surveillance in human history.

Today we don’t see a problem with these monopolies. We buy the myth that they have gained dominance fairly in the pure competitive environment of the web, but that is false—they have built their dominance on innovation but also on tax avoidance.

Solution: What we need is a Data Protection Authority to protect privacy like the government protects the environment with the EPA. He then outlines what this DPA should do and how it would work.

## 10. The Organic Mind

This chapter continues to present another solution to the “knowledge monopolies” based upon individual choices and the choices of media companies and publishers (producers of knowledge). He believes we need to rebel against the knowledge monopolies like the food revolution of the 60s where the counterculture and hippies rebelled against the processed food revolution.

He has a section on the importance of undoing the devil’s bargain of advertising where attention of audiences can be sold for profits to advertisers. To rescue themselves, media will need to charge readers, and readers will need to pay. Subscriptions are the route away from the aisles of click bait. We need to hold on to myth of publishing and journalism as keepers of culture and cultivators of minds.

## 11. The Paper Rebellion

The last chapter presents his third solution to this problem—decoupling from their sphere of influence by reading print books. He compares books and the internet, reading print and reading online.

Internet surveillance may not be totalitarian but that doesn’t mean it does no harm. We’re watched so that we can be manipulated. Convenience of machine is surrender of free will—algorithms make the choices for us. We willingly submit to manipulation, but are we surrendering far more than we intend and being manipulated far more than we know. His point pushing print reading is to find moments when we can willfully remove ourselves from the orbit of these companies.

Present moment feels unsettling: our faith in technology is no longer consistent with our belief in liberty. Privacy and thus liberty can’t sustain present trajectory of technology. We are ripe for authoritarianism. We need to protect ourselves, no longer delude ourselves in to caring more deeply about convenience and efficiency than about things that last.

## Historical/Philosophic References

Chpt. 1—Counterculture movement of 1960s, Stewart Brand, Marshall McLuhan.

Chpt. 2—Rene Descartes's quest to build an automaton is compared to Google's AI aspirations (Google is succeeding where Descartes failed). Liberate mind and soul from body, seek pure intelligence.

--Alan Turing and his Turing test.

Chpt. 3-- Zuckerberg and his quest to control us has long roots—discussion about French Revolution and “technocracy”, engineering revolution.

--Section on Facebook and algorithms, going back to Gottfried Leibniz seeking new alphabet of human thought, convert thought to mathematical equations, the automation of reason.

Chpt. 4—Some discussion about government's role in protecting the value of knowledge in the form of patent, copyright, and intellectual property laws.

Chpt. 6—History of two 19<sup>th</sup> century monopolies—Western Union and Associated Press. Section on role of AP in influencing the election of 1876 in Hayes' favor, ending Reconstruction.

Chpt. 7—History of journalism and how safeguards in journalism have not always been there. Yellow Journalism's influence in WWI. Describes Walter Lippmann's crusade to reform journalism as a profession post-WWI.

Chpt. 8—History of copyright laws in US. Gapping hole in US Constitution not honoring copyright of European authors and struggle to correct this law in 19<sup>th</sup> c. Led to flowering of American letters when cheaper copies of foreign works not legal anymore.

Chpt. 9—History of anti-trust laws in 20<sup>th</sup> century and two schools of thought: Thurmond Arnold and Brandeis. Discussion of Constitution Framers' preference of liberty, protection of individual rights, in the place of efficiency (checks and balances in govt.).

Chpt. 11—History of reading from medieval to modern times. Growth of private reading.