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This is a work of immense scholarship describing the development of global electronic communications from its beginnings in the 19th century until the inter-war period. It builds on the work of writers like Daniel Headrick and Jill Hills but also contests what the authors argue is a caricatured view of this era. Others have emphasized the relationship between communications and imperialism, interpreting the shift from British to American dominance of international communications as a symptom and a cause of their changing political and economic fortunes. Winseck and Pike believe a ‘struggle for control’ did occur at the end of the era, in the late 1920s, when ‘nationalism had become a super-heated ideology and was pressed into service by many of the major players’. But they think historians ‘have stretched this moment back into the past’, obscuring the interdependent, co-operative character of global media before World War One. (332)

The book is truly global, covering Japan, China, Russia and South America, not just North America, Europe and the British Empire. It explores the complex and constantly shifting relationships both between the carriers—telegraph companies—and the news agencies that controlled one of the most important and lucrative forms of content that used the networks. Monopolies and cartels lessened competition, sustaining high prices that ensured international telegraphy remained mainly a tool of commercial messaging. Social communication stuck with the slower but cheaper mails.

Winseck and Pike think ‘the globalization of capitalism was actually a stronger influence on the organization and control of global communication than was imperialism’. (xvi) Multinational communications corporations were not mere tools of the nation-states where their head offices were located. They worked together in ways that did not always serve individual imperial interests; national governments were willing to rely on the infrastructure of foreign companies; and imperialism itself was to some extent a collaborative process—‘a kind of shared hegemony rather than a single hegemonic power’. (xvii) Much attention is given to the ‘media reformers’ who tried to reshape global communications to serve citizens ahead of corporations and governments. From John Henniker Heaton’s Imperial Penny Post and Sandford Fleming’s Pacific Cable to Woodrow Wilson, these reformers are seen as older parents of the doctrine of ‘free flow of information’ than the Cold War.
While greatly enriching understanding of this era, *Communication and Empire* does not wholly succeed in overturning existing interpretations of it. Plenty of evidence is cited to show that the agendas of communications corporations did not always coincide with those of the governments that regarded them as national champions, especially before the First World War. But it is less convincing in diminishing the importance of imperialism than in making the lesser case that governments worked tirelessly to turn communications to national ends but their power to do so, then and now, was constrained by many factors. In the arguments that will continue about the relative influence of these factors in shaping the global communications system, Winseck and Pike’s research will be crucial evidence.

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