

BOOK REVIEW

Jacob Ward, *Visions of a Digital Nation: Market and Monopoly in British Telecommunications*

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Jacob Ward's *Visions of a Digital Nation* examines digitalization in the Post Office and British Telecom (BT) from the 1950s to the 1990s to bring insights from the history of technology to bear on narratives of nationalization and privatization in Britain. Histories of liberalization often do not credit the critical function that technology has played in moulding political economies and Ward argues that these histories are therefore incomplete. He places telecommunications at the heart of his enquiry to contend that the history of privatization is more protracted than preceding literature has recognized. By mapping the chronology of this narrative from the mid-twentieth century, Ward resists interpreting privatization as strictly top-down. In doing so, he introduces to this history an expansive network of employees, engineers, managers and users who responded to, and helped to steer, the politics of nationalization and privatization. Ward's comprehensive coverage of this chronology produces a unique and perceptive history of British telecom infrastructure.

The book has a tripartite structure. The first section, 'Plans' (Chapters 1 and 2), focuses on the Post Office's early conceptions of a new digital infrastructure in the 1950s and 1960s. Ward examines how the Post Office developed visions for a nationalized digital infrastructure, particularly evaluating the power that cybernetics and information theory had on this process. He astutely highlights that the Post Office's digital visions and expectations for the future were complex and occasionally unsuccessful, detailing the failure of the Highgate Wood project, a mid-1950s attempt to build a computerized telephone exchange. Continuing the themes from the first chapter, Ward maintains his assessment of the Post Office's visions for the future by exploring the history the Long Range Systems Planning Unit, futurology, and the institutional response to the ever-changing political economy.

The book's second part, 'Projects' (Chapters 3 and 4), illuminates the ways these visions came to fruition. Switching, an essential element of telecommunications, permits users to make phone calls, and Ward's third chapter narrates the shift to electronic switching in telephone exchanges, revealing how the Post Office and BT's monopolies not only impacted their services but also had far-reaching implications for the telephone exchange's employees and suppliers. Ward's bottom-up approach to this history explores how maintenance staff and telephone operators were forced to grapple with the ways in which digitalization and corporatization redefined their roles within these institutions or phased them out of employment entirely. This chapter also makes visible the gendered nature of this history and highlights the essential work carried out by women in telephone exchanges. Chapter 4 then shifts to a focus on BT's plans to develop a fibre-optic network, a form of transmission

technology that enables the sharing or sending of signals. Stretching this narrative back to the 1960s, Ward surveys the Post Office and BT's vision to establish a digital network capable of supporting video, data and telephony transmission in their attempts to both entrench and broaden their monopolies and expand into television broadcasting. He illustrates that the derailment of the fibre-optic network was driven principally by Thatcher's need to disrupt BT's entry into broadcasting.

The final instalment, 'Places' (Chapters 5–7), interlaces histories of technology and the environment to consider how place, space and temporality have been integral to digitalization, corporatization and privatization. Chapter 5 investigates Martlesham Heath, the destination for the Post Office's research laboratory relocation in the 1960s. Ward unpacks the temporal tensions between the stylish research site, its contemporaneous development into the corporate Adastral Park and the archaic design of the 'new village'. He explores the ways Martlesham Heath attempted to reinforce institutional visions of the future and modernity through urban planning, while simultaneously adopting an aesthetic for the surrounding 'new village' that embraced traditional English vernacular architecture. This close analysis of Martlesham Heath prompts readers to reflect upon how digitalization and privatization influenced the built environment. Moving to consider the transnational examples of communication cables and satellites, Ward's sixth chapter evaluates the Post Office and BT's transition from national to private to assess the interplay between digitalization and liberalization at an international level. He treats the North Atlantic as a 'technological zone' (p. 173), to divulge how the Post Office, BT and AT&T used cable and satellite communications to establish a claim over both communication infrastructures and the environment. Returning to the national level, the seventh and final chapter brings to light the interrelation between Conservative policies on information technology and the privatization of BT. The chapter concentrates on the City of London to emphasize the importance of the financial sector in steering privatization and liberalization in the late twentieth century. Ward creatively frames the City of London as an organized group of business users to illuminate the connections between the City's institutions, 'popular capitalism' and the sale of BT.

The dynamic case studies Ward employs throughout *Visions of a Digital Nation* testify to the hold that technology had, and has, over both national and international political economies. Chiefly, Ward reinforces for historians of technology and computing that histories of telecommunications are valuable for understanding the interaction between digitalization and modern politics. Through tracing the process of digitalization in Britain, Ward shows that the transition to privatization was not a sharp break from earlier trends, nor did the genesis of privatization begin with the sale of BT in 1984. His attention to the key historical actors involved in this process breaks through this black-boxed history to recover an enduring legacy of corporatization, beginning in the 1950s with the Post Office's early visions of a digital infrastructure. The interdisciplinary nature of *Visions of a Digital Nation* will no doubt appeal to readers of *BJHS*. Chapters will also likely appeal to urban, environmental and labour historians curious about the ways in which digitalization, nationalization and privatization have driven, and been driven by, people, nature and urbanization. The open-access status of the book means that this insightful and engaging resource is available to be enjoyed by all.