

# **A Week in Culture: Tim Wu, Professor**

Tim Wu

November 10, 2010

## DAY ONE

11:00 A.M., *Oakland University, Michigan*

“We don’t actually have wires sticking out of our heads,” I say, “but if you have an iPhone in your pocket and a laptop on your bag you’re pretty close. You’ve already delegated your memory to Google and Wikipedia; Facebook is there to remind you who your friends are.”

I have a bad habit. Whatever I happen to be reading influences me to a degree that is often, in retrospect, embarrassing or ridiculous. You might say I’m a slave to what I’m reading. And that may explain why I’m here with a group of undergraduates discussing whether or not we are, in fact, already cyborgs.

While these are my ideas (sort of), they are more honestly a take on Kevin Kelly’s new book *What Technology Wants*. I’m obsessed. He has got me talking about weird tech-philosophy stuff, such as whether we are cyborgs (see above) or whether it’s a good idea to quit technology altogether and go live in the wild.

I’m talking to undergraduates because my first book, coauthored with Jack Goldsmith, was selected to be read, campus-wide, by Oakland University in Michigan. For their part, the undergraduates seem to accept the idea that we are already more machine than man without much resistance, proving again that it is hard to shock the young. Perhaps to them, Darth Vader had roughly the right idea.

7:00 P.M., *Ann Arbor, Michigan*

I hit up Twitter, where I find that I have said something insane about someone named Dorothy:

**superwuster** DOROTHY you don’t know shit about SHIT so fuck you.

Someone must have hacked my Twitter account. It is a bit of a surprise to see things written in my name that don’t fully reflect what I think. On the other hand, that was also the experience of rereading my first book.

A little later I notice that in addition to a hacker, I have a Twitter hater, apparently one of the students forced to read my book for school. He writes:

**julianmgsantos** Fuck you tim wu #crazyrhyming

**julianmgsantos** #whatreallycheesesme tim wu and dumb bitches

To his credit: At least Mr. Julianmgsantos appears to be enjoying Twitter. Most everyone else views it as a duty, like washing the digital dishes. Nonetheless, my appearance at a student Q & A yesterday prompted a reappraisal:

**julianmgsantos** Not gonna lie i hated tim wu. Until he showed up to this Q&A fried as hell. Im actually gonna read his book now

Kelly gets credit for that change in heart.

10:00 P.M., *Ann Arbor, Michigan*

While golfing today, Judy and Chuck lend me a club with a hickory shaft and small, leaden head. I take a whack, and the ball flies a long-line drive. In amazement, I stare at the club to try and identify it: It is imprinted with only the word *jigger*.

This was the trigger for a round of my online obsession, a game called I Gotta Know.

Late at night on Google books, I find a guide to golfing written in 1910 that explains, “A jigger is a cross between a midiron and a mashie.” Turns out there were once clubs named Mashies, Niblicks, and other things. From what I can tell, the jigger was roughly like a four-iron.

Also, I find out that Michigan remained part of Canada for about ten years after the revolution. I knew it!

## **DAY TWO**

**4:00 P.M.**, *Continental Airlines, Detroit → Newark*

On the flight, I try to do some work on “The Slow Photography Movement” for Slate. It is, well, slow. It’s hard to write about photography without sounding like an ass. At times like this, I think using a pseudonym could be very liberating.

**6:00 P.M.**, *train to Manhattan*

I finish Kelly’s book. The bad part about his book is that it forced me to admit that I agree with the Amish on certain particulars, and like Kelly, I am forced to agree that the Unabomber made some interesting observations. His point was that it’s all or nothing: Either you disconnect entirely with the technological world, or you become its slave. I must admit I am, like him, occasionally obsessed with the idea of fleeing civilization and setting up shop somewhere in the wild.

The idea is so powerful that it often feels less like an idea and more like a tractor beam. In fact, over the summer, when I read Edmund Burke’s *The Sublime and the Beautiful* and then a biography of John Muir entitled *A Passion for Nature*, the call became so strong that I went on several slightly dangerous mountain-climbing trips by myself.

Most people may think guns or alcohol are dangerous. For me, Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* is far worse.

**8:00 P.M.**, *home, West Village*

An old friend e-mails with subject line: “Inside the heart of the Dull Reliable Guy.” He wants, in other words, to talk about Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*.

While reading that book I had on what I’d call Franzen goggles. I saw everyone I met as damaged and depressed, regardless of any signs of external cheer. The goggles filtered out everything but pain. Why that made the book such a good read I don’t quite know.

## **DAY THREE**

**11:00 A.M.**, *Waterfront Bicycle Shop*

It is embarrassing how much I do is the result of some damn book. Last summer, I fell under the influence of Matthew Crawford’s *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, the book about work. He suggests that too much mind work will drive you nuts. I decided it would be fun to do more mechanical work, so I help a friend who runs a local bicycle store. The result is that I’m now pretty good at changing flat tires.

The bike shop serves as a forum for debate. Today the question is whether you should sleep with a woman even if you know she has STDs. The fellow who runs rentals thinks it essential not to forgo any opportunities, particularly if the woman is

hot. Most everyone else in the shop disagrees. To stir the debate I say it depends on whether you're just using the barest possibility of STDs as an excuse to stay home.

**3:00 P.M.**, *Grounded Café*

It occurs to me that a culture diary ought to include music. Most of the music I end up hearing is from cafés in the West Village where I write or bars in the East Village. It strikes me that I have heard Joy Division or New Order played at least six times over the past few days. My tastes are not being broadened.

**5:00 P.M.**, *Amtrak Regional Train, New York City → Washington, D.C.*

Trains are my favorite place to write. While working on my last book, *The Master Switch*, I would often get stuck; when that happened, I jumped on the train. At the lowest point, I rode from New York to Seattle and wrote for days and days in perfect peace.

Right now, I'm working on a piece for *The Wall Street Journal* called "Monopoly Times." When I get tired of that, I decide to watch a movie. Looks like I have a choice of *The King of Kong*, about the race to achieve the top score in Donkey Kong, or *Out of Africa*. I've already watched the first, so *Out of Africa* it is.

I spent a couple of weeks in Kenya over the summer. In the film's opening shot, the sun sets over the grasslands of southern Kenya, bringing tears to my eyes. I'm capable of a deep nostalgia even for events that happened mere months ago. The only thing I don't like about the movie is Robert Redford. I mean, I like him. But the trouble is that he is supposed to be playing a British aristocrat named Denys Finch Hatton turned big-game hunter. Instead, he decides to be Robert Redford circa 1983 who happens to be hanging out in colonial Kenya.

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*Tim Wu is the author of The Master Switch, a professor at Columbia Law School, and a contributing writer at Slate. Check back tomorrow for the second installment of his culture diary.*

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The Paris Review, The Culture Diaries.

<[theparisreview.org/blog/2010/11/10/a-week-in-culture-tim-wu-professor](http://theparisreview.org/blog/2010/11/10/a-week-in-culture-tim-wu-professor)>

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