



# Etkileşim

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**WIRING THE NATION: THE POLITICS OF TELECOMMUNICATION IN THE  
UNITED STATES - A REVIEW OF DAN SCHILLER'S 'CROSSED WIRES'**

**ULUSU AĞLARLA ÖRMEK: AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ'NDE TELEKOMÜNİKASYONUN  
POLİTİKASI - DAN SCHILLER'İN 'CROSSED WIRES' ADLI ESERİ ÜZERİNE BİR İNCELEME**

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*Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.*

This article offers a review of Dan Schiller's *Crossed Wires: The Conflicted History of US Telecommunications from the Post Office to the Internet* within a perspective of communication studies. Rather than framing postal services, the telegraph, the telephone, and digital networks through narratives of technical progress or market efficiency, Schiller adopts a political-economic perspective that foregrounds the relationships among labor struggles, state interventions, and corporate interests. Challenging assumptions that portray communication technologies as politically neutral, the book explores telecommunication through the persistent tension between public service principles and market-driven priorities. This review analyzes Schiller's work along three main themes: (i) the historical continuity of U.S. telecommunications from the postal system to digital networks; (ii) the significance of workers' labor struggles and political movements and (iii) the political-economic origins of digital capitalism preceding the internet. In doing so, *Crossed Wires* offers a historically grounded counter-narrative to technology-determinist paradigms prevalent in communication studies with a focus on infrastructure, labor, and state relations. The review concludes by discussing the book's key contributions including its historical depth, labor-focused approach, and structural analysis as well as its relevance for contemporary debates on the public dimensions of communication in the digital age.

Dan Schiller's *Crossed Wires: The Conflicted History of US Telecommunications from the Post Office to the Internet* provides a comprehensive historical criticism of the technology-determinist paradigms that have long dominated

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communication research. Rather than construing the development of postal services, the telegraph, the telephone, and digital networks as the outcome of technical innovation or market dynamics alone, the book asserts that these infrastructures have been shaped through the interaction between labor struggles, state interventions, and corporate interests. The fact that the work of Schiller is based on extensive archival research is one of its strongest aspects. He relies on federal archives, regulatory reports and union documents, corporate documents and contemporary press sources. Such a diverse range of sources allows a more comprehensive description of communication infrastructures, one that no longer dwells on formal policy reports and corporate histories, but instead tracks conflict, contestation, and alternative demands. One more significant aspect of Schiller's methodology is his focus on labor history. Telegraphers, telephone operators, and postal workers are depicted as historical actors who actively shaped political debates over the organization of communication rather than being subordinate subjects of corporate and regulatory processes. The approach predicts a dimension that is usually ignored in communication research. Labor struggles are framed as more than disputes over workplace conditions; they also unfold debates over whether communication should be organized as a public service or governed by market principles. Holding regulatory authority while often using it to reinforce corporate interests, the state emerges as a paradoxical actor. According to Schiller, this trend demonstrates a recurring tension at the heart of the political economy of communication infrastructures. Through foregrounding infrastructures, ownership structures, and state regulatory apparatuses rather than privileging culturalist or user-centered analysis, he frames the communication systems as embedded in the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and class power.

In the introduction, Schiller provides a detailed account of the telephone strike that occurred during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Workers at 'Illinois Bell' delayed the installation of microwave circuits needed for live broadcast, causing a lag in the transmission of coverage of protests and police violence. This episode illustrates the role of labor relations and political negotiation in shaping communication infrastructure and shows their influence on democratic processes. Given this interpretation the introduction chapter serves as a microcosm of the book's analytical orientation: Rather than recounting a top-down technological history, *Crossed Wires* adopts a historical methodology centered on bottom-up struggles and institutional contestation. For Schiller, communication networks are not the natural outcome of engineering decisions; rather they are historical structures molded by class relations, institutional power struggles, and state intervention (pp. 15-17). The book thus advances a sustained critique of the technology-determinist paradigms that have long structured communication studies.

In *Crossed Wires*, Dan Schiller traces the development of the postal, telegraph, and telephone systems in the United States not as discrete technologi-

cal phases, but as historically interwoven institutional and political processes. Throughout the book, the three infrastructures reflect an ongoing struggle over public-service versus market-driven corporation. The first chapter opens by tracing the historical divergence between the postal and telegraph systems, key to the development of modern communication infrastructure in the United States. Schiller links this divergence to processes of imperial expansion, state formation, and democratic struggle, emphasizing that communication infrastructures were integral to the United States' consolidation as a "territorial empire." From the very beginning, the chapter brings its central concern into focus: would American telecommunications evolve as a public service, or as a market system dominated by private capital? Throughout the first century of the republic, the Post Office was the federal government's most geographically expansive institution and its largest employer. By the 1830s, it employed nearly three-quarters of the civilian federal workforce. More than a carrier of correspondence, it served as a network through which state authority and market relations were extended across the territory. Meanwhile, the Post Office was deeply entangled in political rivalry. The postal rates, delivery routes, and service priorities were closely tied to regional interests and party politics. Nevertheless, Schiller argues that the postal system demonstrated that communication could, in fact, operate as a public service (pp. 31-32).

The telegraph initially revolutionary in speed and reach, was structured under private ownership, favoring commercial and institutional needs. Controlling rates, lines, and corporate clients access illustrates this process in the case of Western Union as it turned the telegraph from a public network into a tool for capital circulation with political consequences (pp. 49-53). By its close alignment with news agencies, monopolistic access to financial markets, and control of information flows, the telegraph system entrenched corporate authority and expanded capitalist control over communication, presetting the rise of an early corporate communication order (pp. 54-60). Furthermore, the telephone offered an alternative at first but eventually adopted a corporate-dominated strategy.

Labor struggles, particularly postalization<sup>1</sup> movements, emphasizing communication as a public good, manifested demands for nationalizing telegraph and telephone services. These movements also received support beyond unions, including farmers and reformers. Telegraph workers, who were exposed to harsh working conditions, put forward economic and political demands. The temporary state takeover during World War I marked a turning point for public control. Women telephone operators, who were laboring under low pay and strict supervision, highlight the gendered structure of communication labor and early debates on commodification.

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<sup>1</sup> Postalization is the structuring of communication as a public service modeled on the postal system, with universal access and standardized rates.

The telephone became embedded in everyday life, from the mid-twentieth century onward, marking a shift toward consumer culture and market orientation. Regulatory policies expanded public access while promoting commercialization. The evolution of the Yellow Pages from a simple listing to a medium controlled by corporations reflects the integration of the telephone into advertising and highlights tensions between public service and corporate interests. The introduction of 'WATS' and 800-number services also integrated residential phone services into corporate marketing, turning users into consumers. Principles of equal access and the public good were gradually replaced by market benchmarks, such as consumer satisfaction and service efficiency (pp. 330-340). The New Deal is considered as a conjunctural moment marked by the expansion of state intervention in telecommunications and the reorganization of labor relations within newly consolidated regulatory and institutional apparatuses. State regulation not only helped to stabilize the sector, but it also restructured the terrain of capital-labor relations in ways that recalibrated the balance between corporate power and collective labor rights. With the Second World War and the Cold War, however, the growing subsumption of communication infrastructures under national security concerns further consolidated corporate-state alliances, significantly constricting the political sphere within which labor could articulate its demands. Under these circumstances, labor struggles appeared to be marginalized, as communication systems were subsumed under strategic and ideological apparatuses of the state.

Among its most theoretically significant insights, the book challenges the widespread assumption that digital communication represents a new historical break. Schiller refuses to depict the Internet as a spontaneous technological revolution, instead, he situates its emergence within decades of state policy, institutional interests, and regulatory interventions that collectively structured the digital landscape. Central to his analysis is packet-switching technology, which according to Schiller, is a pillar of early digital capitalism. More flexible and cost-effective than circuit-switched telephone systems, packet switching was initially developed in military and academic settings. However, as Schiller emphasizes, it was soon commercialized to meet the interests of the corporations. Early commercial data network providers, such as 'Telenet' and 'Tymnet', provided data transmission as a "value-added" service, integrating communication fully into capitalist market logics. This transition transformed data communication from a public-service-oriented infrastructure into a profit-driven industry (pp. 547-559).

From the 1960s forward, responding to demands by business users and tech companies, executive branch agencies and regulators enabled early data networks to be built as proprietary corporate systems, stripped of public accountability and public-service requirements, under the banners of "competition" and "deregulation". Schiller describes this process as a reflection of complex forms of capitalist concentration, depicting the Internet not as a de-

centralized or liberating medium, but as a system of organizational consolidation and structural power dynamics. Within this continuum, digital capitalism reproduces the hierarchies and corporate control evident in telegraph and telephone networks, while labor becomes increasingly invisible. Computerization erodes previously secured labor gains and restructures telecommunications in ways which are simultaneously technological, political, and profoundly social.

Finally, *Crossed Wires* depicts almost two centuries of telecommunications—from the post office to the Internet—not as a series of phases but as an unbroken chain of transformation, with telecommunications continuously restructured across technologies under enduring political and economic forces. Such historical depth is rare in communication studies, but essential for understanding modern digital infrastructures. *Crossed Wires* further advances communication systems by integrating historical analysis of infrastructures with labor and political-economic perspectives, analyzing telecommunications through infrastructures and institutional structures rather than media content or user interactions. By tracing the history of telecommunications through labor, state, and capital, Schiller not only rewrites U.S. telecommunications history but also provides a sharp analytic framework for probing telecommunications, labor, and corporate authority in the digital age.<sup>2</sup>

## References

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