James Schwoch's *Wired into Nature* is an ambitious history of the telegraph in nineteenth-century western America. Schwoch effortlessly combines environmental history, the history of technology, military history, and the history of the American West to map how the telegraph was shaped by western landscapes and how in turn the telegraph changed the West. It might be more accurate to call *Wired into Nature* a network history. However, this network is more than just a collection of poles and wires; it extends into the very nature of the West as well as the scientific and military systems that organized and controlled that frontier. *Wired into Nature* reminds me of works by Bruno Latour (*Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* [2005]) and William Cronon (*Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* [1991]), both masters of networks and of shortening the distances between nature, humans, and technology. Schwoch masterfully connects the US political, military, business, and scientific communities and examines how they managed and controlled the West and its Indigenous populations through the telegraph. *Wired into Nature* is a fresh take on the history of the telegraph in the United States, one that eschews the common eastern business history and recenters it on the role of the US government and military's development of the telegraph in the West.

Schwoch introduces four major themes that come in and out of focus to varying degrees throughout the book: the high ground, signal flow, state secrets, and secure command. For example, the high ground focuses on the historical challenges of surpassing the physical and logistical challenges of constructing telegraph lines in the American West. Access to trees and river crossings, destructive wildlife, and hostile weather all posed major challenges to government and commercial efforts to build a transcontinental telegraph. The focus on the high ground proves that “the penetration of experts and technology was not smooth and even but contingent, shaped in large part by the environments encountered during construction and operation” (p. 27). Considerations of environment and landscape have regularly been a feature of histories of the American West but have not been common features in histories of technologies and their expansion westward.

One chapter focuses on the development of a government military telegraph that could secure state secrets and the chain of command during the American Civil War. One of the more fascinating anecdotes from the Civil War was the complete
lack of any government or military telegraph infrastructure before or during the war. The telegraph was not the providence of the Signal Corps but was controlled by the United States Military Telegraph Company (USMT), which itself was closely associated with Western Union. USMT telegraph operators were not subject to orders from any Union officer, and USMT operators were instructed to continue to send non-military telegrams while on the battlefield and they frequently gave preference to commercial business and press dispatches even in military emergencies. Schwoch’s analysis of the telegraph in the Civil War highlights a transitionary period “where the military became more corporate and the corporate became more military” (p. 52).

Much of Wired into Nature is focused on the ways the telegraph was used as a tool of surveillance and control of America’s Indigenous peoples. One such example, the US Army’s Great Prairie Fire of 1865, was an attack coordinated by telegraph over three hundred miles to drive away Native Americans who had been launching retaliatory attacks around Julesburg, Colorado. Schwoch also highlights how the telegraph allowed for the precise measurement of longitudes, which helped the US government determine the exact boundaries of Indian reservations without relying on local landmarks. The telegraph had been used as a tool to survey and control American Indians, often due to its ability to control and gather knowledge on landscapes. One example of this was the monitoring of watering holes in the Southwest, allowing the US and Mexican militaries to track and defeat Apache warrior Victorio. The use and knowledge of the telegraph by Native Americans has often been a subject of debate. Schwoch argues against the myth that Indians were afraid of the telegraph and would not attack the lines. Schwoch demonstrates that such stories were often relayed by American settlers and soldiers with little evidence to suggest that such attitudes among Native Americans were common. However, I disagree with some of Schwoch’s conclusions that “it is more likely to imagine that among the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains there were those who did, over time, eventually teach themselves ... Morse code and how to tap a telegraph line” (p. 68). While it is beneficial to imagine Indigenous people as able to learn Morse code and to move away from racist stereotypes that cast them as ignorant and wary of western technology, Schwoch does not provide evidence for this claim. While Schwoch provides evidence of Indigenous sabotage of telegraph wires and of Native Americans carrying telegrams taken in raids on telegraph offices, these examples do not equal knowledge of Morse code or operation of telegraphs.

Schwoch shows how developments in the early history of the telegraph are still with us and that government, military, and corporate decisions in how the telegraph worked still color much of our modern communications. Schwoch demonstrates that modern issues of net neutrality, the coordination of nuclear weapon systems, and the use of drone surveillance at Standing Rock all have their origins in the development of the telegraph. The relationships, decisions, and systems that the telegraph helped to create are still with us. Schwoch demonstrates that histories of the West, of Indian reserves, and of American wars and imperialism are incomplete without considering the role of the telegraph and communications.
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