

Book Review
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Thomas L. Friedman
The World is Flat
A brief history of the twenty-first century
New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007
639pp.
Amazon.com \$16
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Introduction

Author Information

Thomas Friedman currently serves as the foreign affairs columnist for the New York Times. He is author of three other bestselling books: *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, and *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11*. The first release of the subject of this book review, *The World is Flat*, earned Friedman the first Financial Times and Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year Award. *U.S. News & World Report* named Friedman one of America's Best Leaders. Friedman lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with his family.

The World is Flat is Thomas Friedman's platform to preach the gospel of globalization in a technology-driven economy. Friedman is qualified to have an opinion having won the Pulitzer Prize three times for his work at the *New York Times* where he continues to write prolifically to this day. Friedman is the author of three previous books.

The World is Flat is a history lesson in technology sharing stories and anecdotes from the days of Columbus to a modern day Indian call center. The metaphor of a "flat world" came to him after hearing an Indian software executive explain how the world's economic playing field is being leveled. Friedman traces the world-flattening trend from major world events like the Great Depression to the fall of the Berlin Wall to 9/11. He spans cultures, industries, and various schools of thought. In his brief history of the 21st century, Friedman explains how the digital superhighway paved with fiber optic cable is drawing players like India and China (representing hundreds of millions of new potential workers and customers) into the epic battle for the sale of goods and services. He contends that for America to stay competitive in the international market, individuals, businesses, and the U.S. Government must stay ahead of the trends. He goes in great detail to describe what he thinks these trends might be.

The book is written in a highly personalized style inviting the reader on a journey to many lands, as if the reader were his executive assistant. We meet his wife and kids and are introduced to many of his friends as we sit in on numerous interviews.

Content Summary

The 600-plus page technology tracing treatise includes Friedman's gallant attempt to tackle globalization head-on in order to explain (in his award winning style) and understand the forces driving the flattening of the world, though he confesses that the very concept itself prevents one from having all of the answers. Friedman masterfully chronicles ten forces that flattened the world which include:

Flattener #1 - "11/9/89 - The New Age of Creativity: When the Walls Came Down and the Windows [Microsoft Windows, that is] Went Up" (p. 51). The story of Microsoft, Bill Gates' brainchild, and Windows, its flagship operating system as a revolutionary disruptive technology.

Flattener #2 - "8/9/95 - The New Age of Connectivity: When the Web Went Around and Netscape Went Public" (p. 60). Friedman explores Apache, Netscape, open source software, FTP, web browsers, and web servers and how companies like Novell and Big Blue (IBM) rode the wave. He also coins new terms like Globalization 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0. He clarifies why fiber optic cable changed everything. He closes this section explaining the significance of iconoclastic companies such as Mosaic, eBay, Amazon, and Google,

Flattener #3 - "Work Flow Software" (p. 77). SMTP protocols make their appearance, getting data out of silos and into the flow, and companies becoming "interoperable" are signature conversations in the work flow software flattener, according to Friedman. "Interoperable" is an important word in the globalization vocabulary meaning no matter the computer, operating system, or software, each had the capability to talk to one another for data exchange and collaboration. Friedman reports that this is the birthplace of companies like PayPal who quickly emerged and made eBay and Amazon a household word. Cloud based software, Web 2.0, and the drive of Microsoft, Linux, and Apple to integrate their products and services with the emerging World Wide Web hastened this flattener.

Flattener #4 - "Uploading - Harnessing the Power of Communities" (p. 93). Friedman catalogs VPN, wireless broadband, instant messaging, TCP/IP, HTML, HTTP, XML, and how all departments need to be able to connect to a supplier in China. Windows Live and Office Live concepts are explained. Wikipedia is brought into the conversation as it relates to free operating systems like GNU.

Flattener #5 - "Outsourcing - Y2K" (p. 126). The marriage between the dot.com failure and the manifest destiny of fiber optic cable installed across ocean floors to distant ports like Bangalore, India set the stage for the flattener of outsourcing. Bangalore's technology as a service is showcased.

Flattener #6 - "Offshoring: Running with Gazelles, Eating with Lions" (p. 137). The moral of this subtitle is whether you are a starving lion in Africa or a gazelle trying to stay out of the jaws of a starving lion, when each mammal wakes up in Africa, they had better start running. The chapter is devoted to exploring how American companies are running to foreign soil for faster, cheaper, higher quality products and services. Leveraging the international time zone, companies find that they can set up near 24-hour work cycles by sending business processes offshore.

Flattener #7 - "Supply Chaining: Eating Sushi in Arkansas" (p. 151). The story of one of the planet's most successful companies, Wal-Mart, and its dynamic supply chain that revolutionized an industry.

Flattener #8 - "Insourcing: What the Guys in Funny Brown Shorts are Really Doing" (p. 167). This chapter takes the reader on a fascinating journey through creative innovation that changed (and further flattened) the world - this time involving "the boys in brown," global giant United Parcel Service (UPS).

Flattener #9 - "In-Forming: Google, Yahoo!, MSN Web Search" (p. 176). How Google and search engines changed the way the world currently finds information.

Flattener #10 - "The Steroids: Digital, Mobile, Personal, and Virtual" (p. 185). Friedman describes life on a Japanese bullet train with Wi-Fi commuting along at 249km/hour without missing an email. Friedman explores how digital, mobile, personal, and virtual technologies have had a profound impact on the world in bringing us closer and closer and closer together.

Each of the ten flatteners provide a rare glimpse behind the scenes of technology that most readers today take completely for granted when reaching for a case of bottled water at Sam's Club.

Review

Friedman, in addition to be a prolific writer, has a research style that hints of ethnography often preferring to gain insight by traveling on-site and conducting numerous interviews among the digital natives. For example, tens of thousands have ordered Dell computers online and happily unpacked the product days

later. But when Friedman wants to explore Dell's theory of conflict prevention, he orders a new Dell laptop (chapter 16) and then schedules an in-person meeting with Dell managers to meticulously document the entire manufacturing process of his sales order through delivery and then publishes the process in his book. His research is less virtual and more actual. He even describes American corporate buildings that he can see from the tee at a golf course in Bangalore, India to prove his points. He interviews dozens of persons of significance and lets them tell the story from the insider's view to present as evidence for his assertions. The point: Friedman seems to be a credible source of information and knows what he is talking about. There are few, if any books on the market, that attempt to tackle a brief history of the 21st century from such an in-depth technological globalization perspective like *The World is Flat*.

Conclusion

Friedman calls attention to interesting statistics that demand a verdict relative to his gospel of globalization. Examples of jaw-dropping factoids include:

- In 2005, an accounting firm in Bangalore was able to prepare 400,000 American IRS tax returns
- In the late 90s, General Electric led the way in offshoring recognizing that Indian engineers could handle most technical jobs they needed done at a tenth of the cost
- When you order a Big Mac at the drive-through McDonald's on Interstate 55 near Cape Girardeau, Missouri, the person taking your order is at a call center 900 miles away in Colorado Springs

Friedman's gospel of globalization by way of the flat world metaphor is very clear: Ready or not, here globalization comes and it will impact American workers and their children and grandchildren immensely. His solution is to get creative, get educated, and get technically prepared to compete with smart persons in other countries.

Friedman winds down *The World is Flat* with a warning about threats presented by terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda who will potentially harness technology for nefarious purposes. But the tone of the book is one of optimism, and Friedman idealistically casts vision for people becoming more collaborative, competing and sharing with people of other cultures, religions, languages, and educational pedigrees. The book does not address nor answer every problem (like the role of government as a flattener or inhibitor to the flattening effect due to politics). Further, Friedman may be too much of an apologist for globalization, failing to fully recognize or acknowledge the inherent dangers of homogenizing practices to the point of discouraging local customs that can lead to innovation. For example, although Bangalore is on the cusp of raising a technology savvy workforce, the cultural and religious tradition of India's caste system still prevents full globalization in that part of the world from being realized at this point in history.

Nevertheless, Friedman is successful in conveying his message with humorous stories, a witty writing style, incredulous facts and statistics, on-site visits and in-depth interviews with early creators or adopters of innovative technology, and a compelling scenario of the future implications of a flat world.

Friedman concludes his work warning that people in advanced countries have to find ways to increase their value, obtain special skills, and/or create superior products for which they can increase their profit margin. He uses UPS as a model illustration. UPS expanded their services from a delivering goods service to a (albeit clandestinely) computer repair shop (what Friedman terms as managing a supply chain). Further, he maintains that strong economic relations are a powerful deterrent to war.

This thick book is well worth the time required to wade through and may be considered reference material in some technology circles.

Reference

Friedman, T. L. (2007). *The world is flat: A brief history of the 21st century*. New York: Picador / Farrar, Straus and Giroux.