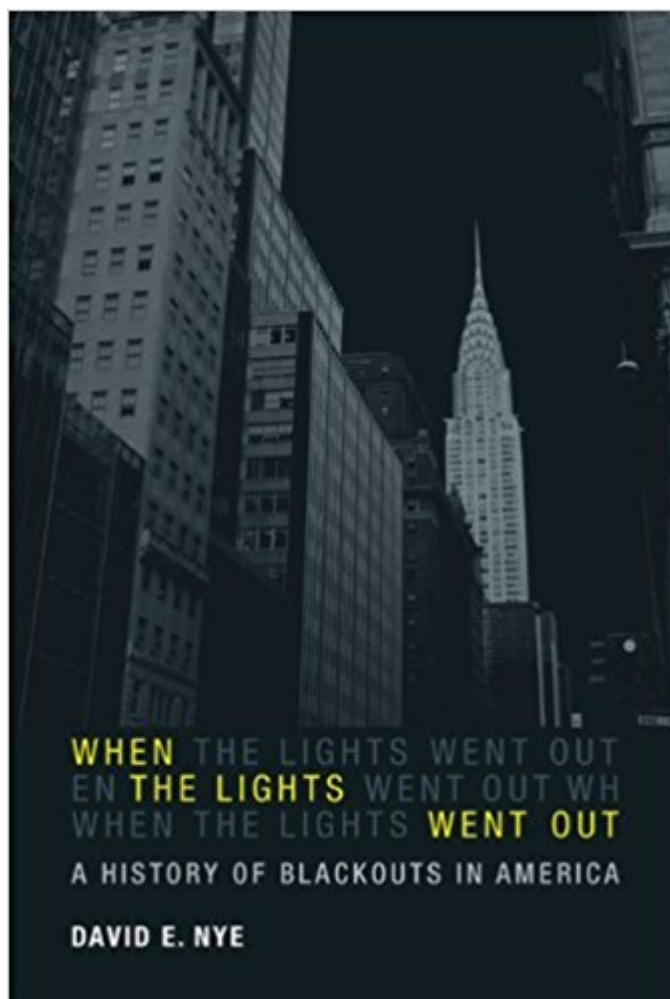


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# When The Lights Went Out: A History Of Blackouts In America (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Where were you when the lights went out? At home during a thunderstorm? During the Great Northeastern Blackout of 1965? In California when rolling blackouts hit in 2000? In 2003, when a cascading power failure left fifty million people without electricity? We often remember vividly our time in the dark. In *When the Lights Went Out*, David Nye views power outages in America from 1935 to the present not simply as technical failures but variously as military tactic, social disruption, crisis in the networked city, outcome of political and economic decisions, sudden encounter with sublimity, and memories enshrined in photographs. Our electrically lit-up life is so natural to us that when the lights go off, the darkness seems abnormal. Nye looks at America's development of its electrical grid, which made large-scale power failures possible and a series of blackouts from military blackouts to the "greenout" (exemplified by the new tradition of "Earth Hour"), a voluntary reduction organized by environmental organizations. Blackouts, writes Nye, are breaks in the flow of social time that reveal much about the trajectory of American history. Each time one occurs, Americans confront their essential condition -- not as isolated individuals, but as a community that increasingly binds itself together with electrical wires and signals.

## Book Information

Series: MIT Press

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: The MIT Press (September 13, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0262525070

ISBN-13: 978-0262525077

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 5 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #769,315 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #166 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Energy Production & Extraction > Electric](#) #230 in [Books > Science & Math > Physics > Electromagnetism > Electricity](#) #808 in [Books > Science & Math > Technology > Social Aspects](#)

## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. This captivating book zooms in with a telescopic intensity on America's blackouts, from the 1930s to the massive 2003 Northeast power failure that had many suspecting terrorism;

anyone who reads this history will be unsurprised to find it was actually due to an over-burdened power grid. Beyond familiar individual frustrations, a blackout can cause major social and economic disturbance, signal political problems, and represent a massive failure of infrastructure; American history professor Nye contextualizes power failures in the U.S. as the result of long-term energy buildup and overuse. Nye examines how a "utopian" vision of electrical convenience at the 1962 Seattle World's Fair—television sets, movie equipment, a "clothes conditioning closet," the home computer—became law ("in building codes and in the 'war on poverty' electricity became a legal requirement akin to a natural right") and how, when that right is denied, utopia can give way to chaos. Nye captures the disastrous 1977 New York City blackout in its broad causes, effects, and implications, as well as its small, frightening details: "Guests of the Algonquin Hotel found that electronic locks had sealed their doors." Other chapters discuss rolling blackouts and activist-driven "greenouts." Fans of urban studies will find this text rich with insight and information. 26 illus.

David Nye's history of blackouts in America is much more than a history of these events. What he has given us is an insightful and often surprising social and cultural history of our relationship to, and increasing dependence on, electricity and its unseen grid. (Paul Israel, Director and General Editor, Thomas A. Edison Papers Project, Rutgers University) Meticulously researched and engagingly written, *When the Lights Went Out* is part history and part cautionary tale. David Nye illuminates his subject with such insight and skill that a reader won't ever be able to flip on an electrical switch without thinking of this book and its consequential message. (Robert Schmuhl, Walter H. Annenberg-Edmund P. Joyce Chair in American Studies and Journalism, University of Notre Dame) Fifteen years ago, David Nye's groundbreaking *Electrifying America* showed us how the social, cultural, and political terrain shifted when the lights went on. Now he shows us what happened *When the Lights Went Out*—a must-read for anyone who lived through or just heard about the big-city blackouts of 1965 onward and wonders what they meant. (Arthur P. Molella, Director, Smithsonian Lemelson Center) Fifteen years ago, David Nye's groundbreaking *Electrifying America* showed us how the social, cultural, and political terrain shifted when the lights went on. Now he shows us what happened *When the Lights Went Out*—a must-read for anyone who lived through or just heard about the big-city blackouts of 1965 onward and wonders what they meant. (Arthur P. Molella, Director, Smithsonian Lemelson Center)

My day job is an engineer for an electric utility. I have viewed outages from a very technical perspective. Why, how long will it last, and how to prevent. This book showed me a different point of

view. The book seems fairly accurate from a technical perspective, so give it some engineering cred. From a social perspective I learned, or perhaps pondered, some points. I found it to be an easy and fun read.

Interesting starting point on blackouts. Informative and entertaining.

Excellent book with timely shipping

Here is an outline of what you can find in this book: Introduction: Author provides a brief summary of what will be covered in each chapter as the story moves between technical, social, political, and cultural history of blackouts. Chapter 1 Grid: Overview of growth of electrical power in America, from early independent systems used mainly for lighting streets and small businesses, to huge interconnected systems now vital for many aspects of normal daily life. Chapter 2 War: In 1935, the New York Times used the term "blackout" in relation to a one-hour darkening of Gibraltar related to military exercises. Prior to and during World War II, millions of civilians turned out lights to make cities less vulnerable to attack from the air. Before and after that war, a second form of intentional blackout was the result of power outages related to strikes by union workers. Chapter 3 Accident: New York power failures in January 1936 and November 1965 are compared. The 1936 outage affected only about half of New York City, and life returned to normal in about three hours. The 1965 disruption affected Toronto, much of New England and upstate New York, and all of New York City except Staten Island and parts of Brooklyn. The blackout lasted as long as 13 hours in some parts of New York City, but the public generally behaved well, as illustrated by many anecdotes. Chapter 4 Crisis: A power failure in July 1977 was accompanied by widespread looting in New York City. The author explains how increased demand for electricity, especially for air conditioning, and rising cost of oil contributed to a crisis mentality, but goes on to report that the 1977 disruption was not caused by insufficient generating capacity. Lightning initiated the outage, but a properly maintained system should have recovered in a few seconds. Instead, the loss of two 345-kilovolt power lines led to the automatic shutdown of a nuclear power plant. When more lightning shut down two more power lines and another major generating plant, the remaining system was stressed by a huge overload. A federal report concluded that the system collapsed due to a combination of natural events, equipment malfunctions, questionable system design features, and operating errors. Chapter 5 Rolling Blackouts: In the 1980s, faced with public resistance to building new power plants and transmission lines, utilities dealt with peak demands that exceeded capacity by cutting off groups of

customers in rotation for short periods of time. Deregulation of generation of electricity encouraged construction of new plants to increase supply, but inadequate attention to the distribution network and lack of regulation of energy traders such as Enron led to disastrous results in California in 2001. In August 2003, a blackout affecting an area from Ohio and Michigan through Toronto to New York City cost consumers an estimated \$7 billion. Chapter 6 Terror: Discusses fears of blackouts due to possible attacks by terrorists. Chapter 7 Greenout? Discusses use of voluntary demonstrations to help build a future of alternative power generation and greater energy efficiency. Notes: 35 pages of endnotes, grouped by chapter. Bibliography: 15 pages Index: 8 pages.

I set out in an ecopsychology class to write a term paper that looked at electricity dependence. This was influenced by Hollywood interpretations of apocalypse scenarios, that got me thinking about what it means to be psychologically dependent on electricity. When the lights go out, as in a blackout scenario, people come to terms (especially in a metropolis) with just how much they depend on electricity to run everything. The key points I got from this very comprehensive history of the engineering science and psychology of blackouts are: -People meet the neighbors they would never talk to except for their basic everyday greeting, for an information source, for supplies, and to discuss how spacey the phenomenon of intense silence is. People often make friends for life from these contacts. -A detailed history of the building of the U.S. Electricity Grid and its vulnerability to blackouts -An expanded personal meaning attached to the rare times that I completely remove myself from using electricity (except for body generated of course), leading to a greater appreciation for silence. -My favorite passage, which discusses the romantic shadows cast by candlelight vs. electrical light, which tends to drown out the personality of the shadows of objects.

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