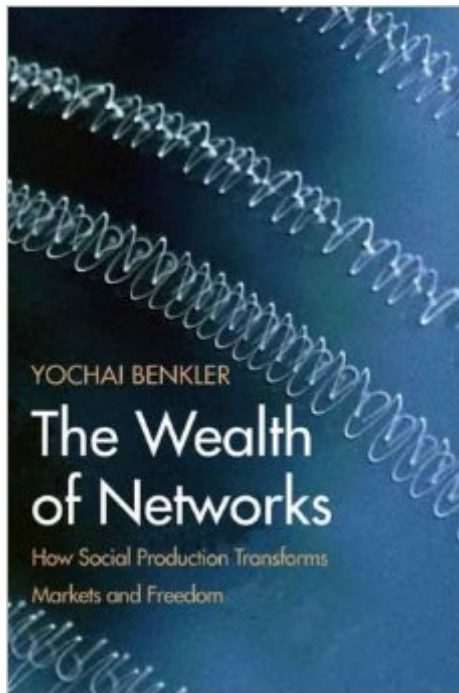


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The Wealth Of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets And Freedom



Synopsis

With the radical changes in information production that the Internet has introduced, we stand at an important moment of transition, says Yochai Benkler in this thought-provoking book. The phenomenon he describes as social production is reshaping markets, while at the same time offering new opportunities to enhance individual freedom, cultural diversity, political discourse, and justice. But these results are by no means inevitable: a systematic campaign to protect the entrenched industrial information economy of the last century threatens the promise of today's emerging networked information environment. In this comprehensive social theory of the Internet and the networked information economy, Benkler describes how patterns of information, knowledge, and cultural production are changing—and shows that the way information and knowledge are made available can either limit or enlarge the ways people can create and express themselves. He describes the range of legal and policy choices that confront us and maintains that there is much to be gained—or lost—by the decisions we make today.

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Customer Reviews

First, I should note that *The Wealth Of Networks* is terribly edited. Given that Benkler thanked his editor for his Herculean work at the beginning of the book, I can only imagine the state it started in; as it is, it ended with glaring grammatical errors, including using "effect" when he meant "affect" and "wave" when he meant "waive". (I'll provide specific examples sometime tomorrow.) Editing, apparently, is a craft that is only noticed in its absence. I didn't realize this until I read *The Wealth of*

Networks. By the time I was done with the book, I was copyediting every page. None of this mentions the stylistic errors, which are rife. Benkler uses the first-person singular pronoun once, or possibly twice, in the whole book; its use is jarring. The rest is passively voiced and all the words are sesquipedalian. Nothing's wrong with inconsistency in style, when deployed artfully, but it feels more like an oversight here than a deliberate plan. Those of you who've read the book will perhaps object to all this cavilling over style. Again, it's only noticeable because it's so bad; normally I would almost ignore the style and get to the meat of the argument. It was hard to do so here. Benkler's argument is quite systematic and nearly has the force of pure logic. His claim -- propounded over a decade's worth of papers and synthesized in this book -- is that the new economics of the Internet fundamentally change deep parts of our culture. Cheap communication allows projects like Linux and the Wikipedia to emerge and more to the point work very well. Each of us can invest trivial amounts of our time and money, yet the end result is something much greater than any of us could have expected.

Edit of 14 Apr 08 to add links (feature not available at the time). Lawrence Lessig could not say enough good things about this book when he spoke at Wikimania 2006 in Boston last week, so I ordered it while listening to him. It arrived today and I dropped everything to go through it. This book could well be the manifesto for 21st Century of Informed Prosperous Democracy. It is a meticulous erudite discussion of why information should not be treated as property, and why the "last mile" should be built by the neighborhood as a commons, "I'll carry your bits if you carry mine." The bottom line of this book, and I will cite some other books briefly, is that democracy and prosperity are both enhanced by shared rather than restricted information. The open commons model is the only one that allows us to harness the distributed intelligence of the Whole Earth, where each individual can make incremental improvements that cascade without restraint to the benefit of all others. As I write this, both the publishing and software industries are in the midst of a "last ditch" defense of copyright and proprietary software. I believe they are destined to fail, and IBM stands out as an innovative company that sees the writing on the wall--see especially IBM's leadership in developing "Services Science." The author has written the authoritative analytic account of the new social and political and financial realities of a networked world with information embedded goods. There have been earlier accounts--for example, the cover story of Business Week on "The Power of Us" with its many accounts of how Lego, for example, received 1,600 free engineering development hours from its engaged customers of all ages.

I have been hearing about Yochai Benkler's book, "The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedoms," for some time and his exposition around what he (and many others) have called the "networked information economy." Benkler, a Yale law professor, also offers his 527 page (473 in text) book as a free PDF from his web site under a Creative Commons share alike license. First, let me say, there are a couple of worthwhile insights in the book, which I'll get to in a moment. But mostly, I found the book overly long, often off-subject, and too political for my tastes. In fairness, some of this might be due to the fact it was written in 2005 (published in 2006) and the social and participatory aspects of the Web are now widely appreciated. Yet I fear the broader problem with this polemic is that it proves the adage that you see what you look for. Benkler's argument is that cheap processors and the Internet have removed the physical constraints on effective information production. This is in keeping with the non-proprietary nature of information as a "nonrival" good, and is also leading to the democratization of information production and the emergence of large-scale peer-produced content. Benkler generally allies himself with the camp of technology optimists. His observations about trends and new developments from Ebay to Wikipedia to SETI@home and open source software are now commonly appreciated. With the costs of information duplication and dissemination trending to zero, the limiting factor of production becomes human creativity and effort itself. But here, too, with hundreds of millions of Internet users, just a few hours of contributed content from each can easily swamp the ability of even the largest firms to compete.

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