

The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom

Written by Yochai Benkler

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For more than fifteen years, scholars and technologists have spoken extensively of the Internet's tremendous potential to transform the way in which we experience and perceive the world around us. Proponents of the new technology predicted that the Internet would liberate the masses by providing them with affordable, near-instant access to a practically limitless range of information. Dissenters expressed concern that constant connectivity would lead to a catastrophic decrease in face to face interaction. In the time since that discussion began, networking technologies have progressed immeasurably and culture reliance thereon has skyrocketed. These changes have become so ingrained that for many people any mention of the so-called "Internet revolution" borders on the cliché, and as a result the debate over the Internet's effects has waned.

In *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler emphasizes the importance of maintaining this dialogue as technology continues to advance. He believes that the Internet has already fundamentally changed our cultural landscape, but has the potential to do much more. He notes that the benefits the Internet can provide are not necessarily the inevitable result of its mere existence, but that by implementing legal, economic, and social policies more suited to maximize its unique capabilities, the Internet really can increase personal autonomy, provide greater opportunities for cultural production, and lead to an improved democracy.

The author is a professor of law at Yale Law School. He has published numerous journal articles regarding commons-based information production and exchange in the digital

environment. This is his first book.

Until the end of the twentieth century, efficient transmission of information over wide geographic areas was no simple task. Participation in this “industrial information economy”¹ required a significant investment of capital in printing presses, large transmitters, or other costly technologies. As a result, the power to communicate on a large-scale was available only to a few, while the average individual was unable to participate in any meaningful capacity beyond reading, listening, or watching. This initial investment requirement caused the information economy to develop in a proprietary fashion resembling the models of other industries.

The growth of the Internet has radically altered the landscape of mass communication. Specifically, it provides a means for mass communication that requires only a computer and a network connection. Having substantial financial resources is no longer a prerequisite to actively participating in public discourse. In light of this new opportunity for widespread information production and the inherent differences between information and traditional economic resources like materials and manual labor, the industrial model is no longer as essential in the dissemination of information. Benkler calls the new model developing in its place the “networked information economy,”² and he focuses the first part of the text on explaining its emergence and quantifying its efficiency and sustainability.

In detailing the rise of this new economic model, Benkler explores several successful non-proprietary innovations. He devotes particular attention to open-source software, *Wikipedia*, and the [SETI@home](#) collaborative computing project. With each of these technologies, he

1 Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* 2 (Yale University Press 2006).

2 *Id.*

explores the motivation for users to devote their time and resources to these projects when there is little to no possibility for financial gain and compares the effectiveness of each to its respective market-produced alternatives. He presents compelling evidence supporting each innovation's long-term viability, while simultaneously rebutting common criticisms of commons-based non-market productions. Most notably, he emphasizes the importance of peer review as a tool for ensuring the reliability and relevance of the information presented. While the sheer breadth of his coverage is quite ambitious, Benkler delves into each topic with considerable detail and provides a thorough description of the current state of the information economy.

In the second part of the book, Benkler thoroughly examines how this economic shift affects the individual. He centrally argues that the rise of alternative means of information production and distribution furthers social goals by increasing individual autonomy, making the political system more participatory, providing a greater opportunity for cultural criticism, and encouraging social justice. He supports each of these assertions in great detail, and thus this section is the focal point of the text.

In support of each argument, Benkler presents seemingly countless case studies providing concrete examples of the “networked information economy” in action. The sheer volume of information laid forth is at times almost overwhelming. The depth of the research, however, and Benkler's obvious passion for the subject make his words quite convincing, even though at times it becomes tedious to process all the facts and information he presents. In the hands of a less capable writer, this section could easily have become a mess, but Benkler generally manages to keep it compelling.

The author's strongest arguments come when he emphasizes information and culture as fundamental inputs into human well-being. At first thought it seems preposterous to assert that

the networked information economy can improve social justice in the face of tremendous problems like hunger, disease, oppressive governments, and discriminatory class systems. Benkler shows that access to information truly can go a long way toward improving these problems. Greater agricultural knowledge leads to healthier and more affordable crops. Access to medical knowledge can lead to longer life expectancy and greater quality of life. Greater access to information as a whole leads to an educated populace more capable of resisting oppressive governance. Benkler does a tremendous job of demonstrating potential benefits without ever slipping into utopian rhetoric.

In the final section of his book, Benkler explores legal and social reactions to the change in economic environment and the policies that can maximize the new model's benefits. Unsurprisingly, industries that flourished under the old model (like the film and recording industries) have fought hard to quell the emergence of the new economy. Benkler contends, however, that it is inefficient and unsound from a policy perspective to force emerging technologies to conform with an out of date economic model through legal and technological restrictions. Placing extensive regulations on new technologies will impede the growth of the networked information economy and all that it has to offer. The better solution, he argues, is to allow the technology to develop freely. Surely this development presents a significant danger to the film and recording industries in their current forms. To withhold the tremendous social benefits the new system can deliver for the sake of preserving an outdated business model would be counterproductive and detrimental to society. Benkler points out that it would be asinine to think that music, an art form as old as civilization itself, would no longer be produced because the distribution model it briefly assumed failed. The likely result of user-based distribution of film and music through peer to peer technologies like BitTorrent, he argues, is a more robust

artistic environment where users can more easily access works created outside of the mainstream. It is simply an archaic distribution method that is in danger of becoming extinct, not artistic creation itself.

The Wealth of Networks is a sprawling but ultimately rewarding read for anyone interested in non-market means of information production. It is, however, momentous in scope and as a result not every topic the author explores will be of interest to every reader. At nearly 500 densely packed pages, it can be a chore at times to keep track of everything the author presents. In the end, though, this scope is necessary to do justice in describing the truly profound impact of the networked digital environment. By the end of the text, Benkler has established himself as one of the foremost advocates for the information age. For those readers with any interest at all in the subject matter, the depth of Benkler's writing and his optimistic yet realistic perspective make the book a tremendously informative and engaging read.