

Book Review Editor: Jeffrey Jablonski,
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Journal of Business and
Technical Communication

Volume 23 Number 3

July 2009 376-379

© 2009 Sage Publications

<http://jbt.sagepub.com>

hosted at

<http://online.sagepub.com>

Benkler, Yochai. (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 515 pages.

DOI: 10.1177/1050651909333279

With its explicit invocation of Adam Smith's encyclopedic and prescient analysis of the workings and consequences of free-market economics at the beginning of the industrial revolution, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* is a less than modest title. Despite its lack of modesty, however, the title is an entirely appropriate one for Yale law Professor Yochai Benkler's similarly encyclopedic analysis of the contemporary complex of social and cultural changes driven by the emerging economic and legal consequences of the digital revolution. *Wealth of Networks* is exhaustively and comprehensively researched, and its analysis draws together factors—historical, technological, economic, legal, and sociological—as diverse as those addressed by Smith in order to make a compelling argument about the networked information economy in which our various forms of communication and information production take place. For this reason, although Benkler's volume is in no way explicitly concerned with writing, it merits attention from scholars and instructors in writing studies concerned with the changing technological, economic, and social contexts in which we teach.

Writing studies is not unaware of the ways that emerging digital technologies have given rise to what Benkler terms the *networked information economy*. Recent monographs have drawn from both within and beyond our discipline to offer focused accounts of how such topics as new media, digital literacies, networked rhetorics, and the changing shape of intellectual property have demanded revised understandings of the ways that technology-driven social, cultural, and economic changes have reshaped the work of the writing classroom. But to this point, we have lacked a comprehensive framework within which to place such understandings. *Wealth of Networks* offers the possibility of such a framework. In addition to that possibility, Benkler's project—driven by an examination of the effects of

technological and economic change in the social and cultural spheres, including an abiding concern with the production and communication of information—also allows for extending the nascent project undertaken by scholars in writing studies to understand the writing classroom as a site that produces economic value.

Some will contend that this study is old news: Arguments about the shift to an increasingly information-based economy have been around for decades. According to Benkler, what is new is today's "increasing role for nonmarket production in the information and cultural production sector, organized in a radically more decentralized pattern than was true of this sector in the twentieth century" (p. 3). In other words, with the increasing availability of networked digital technologies, knowledge production and distribution no longer rely on the capital-intensive imperatives of the market: Individuals produce and exchange information for motivations other than profit. (Although Benkler's application of the digital context to economic activity is relatively original, his hypothesis concerning alternatives to market-based economic activity is an extension of increasingly widely accepted theories of political economy that understand gift, barter, feudal, communal, and other forms of transactions as important forms of economic activity.) We have moved away from "mass-mediated" tendencies of the late 20th century's "industrial information economy" and into a distributed and individuated "networked information economy" (p. 165) that relies considerably more on social production than on the old "construction of consumers as passive objects of manipulation" (p. 133). Benkler takes pains to make clear, however, that this economic reorientation is no zero-sum game, pointing out that "the rise of social production does not entail a decline in market-based production" (p. 122). Rather, the increase in social production turns former factors of economic consumption (including communicative factors) into factors of economic production, leading to a circumstance wherein the nonmarket aspects of the networked information economy serve as productive complements to commercial mass media. The revision in the relationship between the production of nonmarket and market information, however, is not without its complications: Of particular concern to writing studies is the way that revised understandings of the ownership of communicative technologies and dynamics, as Benkler illustrates, make arguments about knowledge and information into arguments about property.

This pattern of analysis is used consistently throughout the book: An example of an innovation in digital technology will stand as a starting point for a chain of analysis that concludes in assertions about wide-ranging

cultural consequences. As Benkler puts it, he “assign[s] a very significant role to technology” (p. 16) in the economic, legal, and social changes that he charts, but he also attempts to avoid what he characterizes as “a naïve determinism” (p. 17) in his understanding of technology’s role. Rather, he carefully documents and examines from multiple perspectives his well-contextualized historical tracings of how technologies and their uses lead to revisions in economic and legal practices before he charts how those changes lead in turn to new arrays of social and communicative practices with their accompanying cultural consequences.

Refreshingly, Benkler’s mode of analysis manages mostly to avoid the starry-eyed enthusiasm that is unfortunately common in recent accounts of the social and economic effects of technological innovation although many of the exhaustively examined examples that he rests his analyses on will be familiar to those acquainted with such accounts: The 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act, the role of Weblogs in Trent Lott’s resignation as Senate majority leader in 2002, the 2003 scandal involving Diebold voting machines, the controversy over the Sinclair Broadcasting Group’s *Stolen Honor* documentary in 2004, and the 2005 US Supreme Court decision affecting technologies for peer-to-peer file sharing are perhaps a sufficiently representative handful. Although these examples share a concern with technology and communication, and so perhaps something of a common audience, the book’s intellectual influences are considerably more wide-ranging—from intellectual property scholars Siva Vaidhyanathan and Lawrence Lessig to critical theorists Antonio Gramsci and Jürgen Habermas to Nobel laureate economists Ronald Coase and Kenneth Arrow. Such an encyclopedic range of expertise may present a barrier to entry for some readers. Furthermore, just as Benkler’s examples and influences may be at times excessively technical, so too may be some of his explanations: Although he excels at laying out the finer points of legal argument and precedent, his economic analyses and terminology may leave behind some of those who have not taken Econ 101.

Structurally speaking, Benkler’s occasional lapses into abstruse and esoteric discussions come early in the book because the large-scale structure of his argument follows the small-scale structure of his analyses: *Wealth of Networks* progresses from an examination of the new economic behaviors associated with emerging digital technologies in the first portion of the book to a later examination of the social and cultural changes following from those new economic behaviors in the second portion of the book. Although Benkler’s economic material may be at times challenging for some, it is substantially more rewarding than are some of his detours into pop

sociology in the final third of the book precisely because those detours lack the earlier economic rigor. These paired weaknesses may seem symptomatic of Benkler's ambition to offer an encyclopedic accounting of every aspect and consequence of the networked information economy. But we might also consider what such a comprehensive accounting offers us: In their conventional perspectives, neither neoclassical nor Marxian economists are willing to take into consideration the place of human motivations for engaging in economic activity. For neoclassical economists, economic activity is simply a question of utility, whereas for Marxian economists, economic activity is simply a question of value appropriation. The question of motivation Benkler raises reintroduces the human and the social as essential components of economic activity, and the implications of his question complicate not only economic analysis in its own right but also the applications of economic analysis to writing studies, which has, to this point, largely regarded economic questions as ultimately dehumanizing and beyond its interests.

For those reasons, *Wealth of Networks* will likely be of first interest to those in writing studies who are concerned with widening the scope of the discipline's economic understanding and to those concerned with the intersection of technology, business, and culture. Beyond those audiences, though, the book also offers a broad and deep foundation that can usefully contextualize our own and our students' valuable work as independently motivated economic agents, thereby opening the opportunity to begin building a careful accounting of the writing classroom as a site of economically valuable labor. Although Benkler's impulse toward the encyclopedic may at times frustrate, it is also the fundamental strength behind his book, because it motivated what is perhaps the first genuinely systematic attempt to understand the consequences of the networked information economy. I would recommend *Wealth of Networks* to anyone concerned with how economic matters affect our students today.

Mike Edwards

United States Military Academy, West Point, New York