



Wikinomics and its discontents: a critical analysis of Web 2.0 business manifestos

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Abstract

‘Collaborative culture’, ‘mass creativity’ and ‘co-creation’ appear to be contagious buzzwords that are rapidly infecting economic and cultural discourse on Web 2.0. Allegedly, peer production models will replace opaque, top-down business models, yielding to transparent, democratic structures where power is in the shared hands of responsible companies and skilled, qualified users. Manifestos such as *Wikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams) and ‘We-Think’ (Leadbeater) argue collective culture to be the basis for digital commerce. This article analyzes the assumptions behind this Web 2.0 newspeak and unravels how business gurus try to argue the universal benefits of a democratized and collectivist digital space. They implicitly endorse a notion of public collectivism that functions entirely inside commodity culture. The logic of *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ urgently begs for deconstruction, especially since it is steering increasingly mainstream cultural theory on digital culture.

Key words

co-creation • manifestos • participatory culture • user-generated content • Wikipedia

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of Wikinomics where collaboration on a mass scale is set to change every institution in society. (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 10)

Welcome to the world of We-Think. We are developing new ways to innovate and be creative en masse. We can be organised without an organisation. People can combine ideas and skills without a hierarchy. (Leadbeater, 2006)

In their respective books *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think', Tapscott and Williams (2006) and Leadbeater (2007) usher their readers into a brave new world of web-based economics where cultural values such as participation, collectivism and creativity are the mantras. These mantras not only inform the new business models of the digital economy, but their declared cultural roots suggest an ideological paradigm shift that is about to restructure post-industrial societies and post-service economies. As the cover of *Wikinomics* illustrates, initiatives such as YouTube (www.youtube.com), MySpace (www.myspace.com), Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), Flickr (www.flickr.com), Second Life (www.secondlife.com), Linux, InnoCentive and even the Human Genome Project are all grounded in the same basic principle: they are created by crowds of (mostly) anonymous users who define their own informational, expressive and communicational needs, a process touted as 'mass creativity' or 'peer production'.¹ As a result, the conventional hierarchical business model of producer-consumer is rapidly replaced by the so-called 'co-creation' model, a term frequently surfacing in business literature (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b). Mass creativity, peer-production and co-creation apparently warrant the erasure of the distinction between collective (non-market, public) and commercial (market, private) modes of production, as well as between producers and consumers; the terms also cleverly combine capital-intensive, profit-oriented industrial production with labour-intensive, non-profit-oriented peer production.

This article will take *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think' as exemplifying a currently popular wave of business and management books that favour terms such as collectivism, participation and creativity to argue their economic benefits for Web 2.0 business and production models.² A decade of experimenting with e-business models appears to have resulted in a smooth integration of communal modes of production into the largely commoditized infrastructure of the internet. Academics commonly look upon these kind of manifestos as pamphlets written by business gurus trumpeting the victory of 'dot communism' over late capitalism. Indeed, Tapscott and Williams, such as many of their colleagues, are first and foremost consultants who are in the business of selling their high-priced advice to (internet) companies. Yet what is interesting in their manifestos is the undeniable urge to prophesy an

ideology of cultural collectivism as the gateway to economic cornucopia. Underneath the rhetoric of these manifestos lies an intriguing complex of thought which has combined roots in hardcore business economics and the sociopolitical idealism of the 1960s counterculture – a hybrid discourse which of late has become increasingly popular in Web 2.0 theories (O’Reilly, 2005).

In his historical analysis of cyberculture, Fred Turner (2005) argues that the rhetoric of the counterculture always has been intimately wedded to the rhetoric of capitalism. As he concludes in his study of the earliest manifestations of internet communities such as the Whole Earth Farm and The WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), countercultural ideals linger on in 21st-century discourses of the internet. However, this time they no longer ‘offer an alternative to life in the economic mainstream. On the contrary, they provide a vision by which to steer one’s way through the complex currents of increasingly mainstream network economy’ (Turner, 2005: 511). How does the integration of grass roots collectivism into mainstream business take place? By analyzing a sample of Web 2.0 business manifestos, this article seeks to uncover the assumptions underpinning these popular discourses – implied conjectures about creativity and consumption, producers and users, commerce and commons. As we will argue, these conjectures not only buttress the logic of economic and business discourse beyond these manifestos, but they can also be found in academic cultural theory books promoting convergence and participatory culture.

THE RHETORICAL STRATEGY OF WEB 2.0 MANIFESTOS

Manifestos are a historically significant genre of texts, as theorized by Janet Lyon (1999): its authors try to win over a majority of readers to a programme of mass political action or a line of thinking which, from that moment on, needs to be considered as the best way to organize society. Although Lyon analyzes mostly sociopolitical tracts, from Olympe de Gouges’ *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791) and Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (1848) to Donna Haraway’s ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ (1991), she identifies a number of interesting features which also may be applied to the kind of business manifestos at stake here. Lyon defines manifestos as inherently persuasive texts that are used to convince their readers of a profound paradigm shift, or a revolutionary way of thinking that will affect how people go about their everyday life. Most manifestos emphasize concrete transformations of institutions by applauding a spirit of liberation and change, and in a more political context, they urge readers to let the flowers of the revolution bloom. Evidently, manifestos strongly differ from each other in tone and urgency due to their historical and geographical specificity, but Lyon observes a few typical characteristics. For one thing, manifestos resound invocation of an apocalyptic present tense: ‘now is the time for action’ and therefore they are ‘documents of demand,

rather than reason' (1999: 30). Another common feature is that they want to fashion a new or rehabilitated universal ideal that serves the interests of everyone, and whose benefits are superior to any previous ideal (Lyon, 1999). In addition, Lyon points at the significant use of the pronoun 'we' in most manifestos, pointing at the leaders of a (silent) counterrevolution – visionaries of what the masses have yet to accept as common knowledge.

Of course, manifestos celebrating the victories of the Web 2.0 revolution are distinctly different in scope and effect from the sociopolitical discourse that Lyon analyzes in her study, and yet their general features are strikingly similar and deserve to be considered closely in this context. Ever since the early stages of the internet, manifestos have announced the beginning of a new era in which the countercultural ideals of communalism, collaboration and creative sharing were prophesied to prevail over purely consumerist values; the resulting discourse yielded an odd combination of grass roots values of commonality and hardcore capitalist values. As Fred Turner (2006) has traced in his admirable history of the rise of digital utopianism, the key to this seamless concatenation of communalist thinking and good business sense was the ability of its propagandists to speak within multiple registers simultaneously: the discourses of economy as well as the discourse of friendship and community-building. Speaking in multiple registers was not only the clue to understanding the early stages of the internet, it is still key to analyzing contemporary manifestos that trumpet the benefits of Web 2.0 – a world populated by an internet generation that supposedly is defined by users rather than producers.

One of the earliest manifestos hailing the 'newconomy' of the internet was Christopher Locke and colleagues' *A Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* (Locke et al., 2000). If we look at this manifesto through Janet Lyon's rhetorical looking glass as well as through Turner's historical eyes, we can identify some relevant features typifying this genre. *Cluetrain* announces a radical change in the way that corporations are conducting their business: the internet is 'crafting tools and communities, new ways of speaking, new ways of working, new ways of having fun' and 'people by the millions are discovering how to negotiate, cooperate, collaborate – to create, to explore, to enjoy themselves' (Locke et al., 2000: np). The pamphlet urges managers to think twice: many major corporations are changing their organizations already to incorporate formerly countercultural ideals, as a structural makeover is imminent and inevitable. *Cluetrain* is indeed a document of demand rather than of reason. Its language is short, apodictic, fact-stating rather than fact-finding, matter-of-fact rather than persuasive:

All talk of revolution notwithstanding, the struggle is already largely over. It's genuinely tough to find anyone who will stand up and defend the standard

traditional conventional old-school way in which ‘everyone knows’ business should be conducted. (2000: np)

The universality of the ideal that Christopher Locke and his co-authors champion overrides previous ideologies, which contained at best partial truths. In the world ruled by a new generation of web users, businesses adapt to the creativity of its users and common users are taken seriously as content producers. This ideology will be good for business and thus replace business as usual: companies dictating consumer needs and demands. It is interesting to notice how this manifesto, written well before the Web 2.0 wave really took off, needs to resort to ‘imaginary’ imperatives to prove its claims:

Imagine a world where everyone was constantly learning, a world where what you wondered was more interesting than what you knew and curiosity counted for more than certain knowledge. Imagine a world where what you gave away was more valuable than what you held back, where joy was not a dirty word, where play was not forbidden after your eleventh birthday. Imagine a world in which the business of business was to imagine worlds people might actually want to live in someday. Imagine a world created by the people, for the people not perishing from the earth forever. (2000: np)

The authors present themselves as visionary realists; the manifesto carefully crafts web-based interaction as a communal effort that is already well on its way to becoming an established practice in everyday life. Seven chapters of the book are full of casual observations on how ‘Big Business’ has been ignoring the needs of the common people and how the new web economy is now creating the biggest business opportunity ever for corporations. ‘We’ – the people who work in web-based communities – are both producers and consumers of cultural goods, so businesses had better start paying attention to these communities, because they are busy pulling the rug out from under their conventional structures. The language of *Cluetrain* is full of conversational interjections, foregrounding a profuse ‘we’ as the common brick layers of a silent revolution: ordinary, well-thinking human beings who are intent on changing the world for the better.

Cluetrain perfectly illustrates the genre features that Lyon identifies for manifestos in general; in hindsight, it is one of the precursors of Web 2.0 manifestos calling for the unproblematic merger of countercultural ideals and the ‘new’ economy. If we look at more recent Web 2.0 manifestos, such as *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’, it is easy to see how they remain structured by universal claims, revolutionary urgency and inclusive pronouns, and yet are more sophisticated in terms of rhetorical refinement and persuasive tactics. Their universal truths are supported by specific examples, and the triumphant tone of an already-won revolution is embroidered frequently by elaborate tales of success. In order to refine the armamentarium of rhetorical analysis as

it applies to Web 2.0 manifestos, this article will scrutinize some of the most poignant claims underpinning the triumphant ideology of *Wikinomics* and “We-Think”. By celebrating a perfect match between producers and users, commerce and commons, creativity and consumerism, the authors smoothly turn the alignment of countercultural ideals with mainstream business interests into a hegemonic ideology supported by the masses.

All users are equally creative and are created equal

The most profound claim structuring both *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ is the idea that ‘mass collaboration’ and ‘communal creativity’ define the way in which people will work and live in the future. The world wide web and the software infrastructures built on its foundations enable masses of people to participate in the economy by being creative; ‘smart firms’ better harness this collective capability and genius in order to spur innovation and growth. As Tapscott and Williams argue:

The New Alexandrians will bring you up to speed with a new science of sharing that will rapidly accelerate human health ... all the while helping companies grow wealth for their shareholders. (2006: 32)

Leadbeater (2006) explains the basic turnaround as:

The guiding ethos of this new culture is participation ... In these vast communal efforts the consumers willingly become workers, devoting some of their time, effort and imagination to developing products for one another.

Users constitute an army of volunteers or amateurs who dedicate their time and energy to developing and sustaining a vast array of networked products and services (from Linux and Wikipedia to YouTube and MySpace); all users supposedly contribute content out of a basic human need to communicate, gather knowledge and information or express oneself creatively. In so doing, users create value for shareholders and companies provide platforms for people such as this to share and create content.

There are several unwarranted premises underlying this claim. First, the authors of *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ assume that all users who contribute content are (equally) creative and that their motivations for contributing articulate the same expressive desire. To illustrate the personification of this anonymous user, both books single out exemplary champions of this new spirit: Jimmy Wales, the inventor of Wikipedia, fervent uploaders of videos on YouTube or the most ardent peer-reviewers on Amazon (www.amazon.com). According to these manifestos, users are by definition creators and all users have outstanding qualifications in terms of contributory agility. Not coincidentally, it is this generic creative ‘you’ that *Time* magazine pronounces

'Person of the Year 2006'. But how generic or representative is this anonymous 'you' or 'user' for all participants in the Web 2.0 economy?

If we look at sociological studies mapping actual internet activity, a very nuanced picture emerges. A recent Forrester survey of American adult online consumers distinguishes six categories of users hovering between the two poles of 'actual creators' and 'inactives' (Li, 2007; Li and Bernoff, 2008). Of those people who use the internet regularly, 52 percent are inactives, another 33 percent are 'passive spectators' and only 13 percent are actual creators.³ Other reports and studies more or less confirm these statistics: the majority of users are in fact those who watch or download content contributed by others.⁴ They form a homogeneous demographic and psychographic of highly educated, well-connected and well-paid professionals whose average income is well above the American median household income (Li, 2007). An interesting detail in these figures is the stratification of income among different types of users: the average income of passive spectators of user-generated content sites is significantly higher than the median income of content creators.⁵ In other words, the contingent of spectators and inactives, which is much larger than the 13 percent of actual creators, constitutes an appealing demographic to site owners and advertisers. The active participation and creation of digital content seems to be much less relevant than the crowds they attract: the homogeneous term 'users' is misleading in that it conceals the difference between active and passive involvement or, put differently, between producers and consumers of user-generated content. Manifestos such as *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think' make one believe that, since every user is an active, creative contributor, the very idea of 'consumer' is definitely passé. The term 'user' turns out to be a catch-all phrase covering a wide range of behaviour, from merely clicking to blogging and uploading videos. Mass creativity, by and large, is consumptive behaviour by a different name.

Second, by assigning equal creativity and motivations for use, Tapscott and Williams attribute a driving spirit of collectivism to all users. Leadbeater's 'guiding ethos' of 'communal efforts' presumes a fallacious group awareness that inspires people to form communities. Indeed, the spirit of collectivism certainly applies to a number of user-generated content sites. Various examples bespeak the communal efforts and selfless contributory spirits as described enthusiastically in these manifestos. There are active, idealistic bloggers who consistently contribute journalistic reports to OhMyNews (www.english.ohmynews.com) and other citizen-journalist projects. A site such as Etsy (www.etsy.com) offers designers a forum for exchanging and distributing their arts and crafts; sites such as Freecycle (www.freecycle.org) and Bookmooch (www.bookmooch.com) help to form communities for the purpose of sharing, giving away and receiving goods. Nonetheless,

how representative are these sites as prototypes of an all-encompassing web-based economy? It is a far stretch to extend the spirit of collectivism to all (commercial and non-commercial) endeavours on the internet by assigning a collective, goal-driven consciousness to all users.

In fact, not all users are equally creative, and neither do they have equal motivations for use. Even if the authors of *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think' attribute most peer-produced content to users' need to express themselves creatively or to communicate with each other, the figures in the same Forrester survey show that entertainment is an overwhelmingly driving force behind user-generated content sites and most users like to *be* entertained. Career and family rate second and third as drivers. Evidently, contributors to the online Wikipedia encyclopaedia have different motivations to the uploaders of video clips on YouTube, and teenagers who put up their profiles on MySpace may do this for entirely different reasons than amateur developers of game modifications (mods). For the majority of users, their activity is anything but a communal effort towards a shared cause; they may participate simply to satisfy their individual curiosities or because they are interested in the same product, brand, band or topic.⁶ As social scientists have found out, often users of online community sites are driven by pressures of social hierarchization: becoming the top-posting user, the top-ranked video, etc. Sportsmanship is known to be a strong driver for participating in virtual communities: as in any game, people's participation is motivated by goal-oriented behaviour, not only the desire to be the best but also to gain peer recognition (Wiertz and de Ruyter, 2007).

Third, both Leadbeater and Tapscott and Williams gloss over the significant distinction between users of commercially driven online communities and not-for-profit, community-based exchange sites. They claim universal benefits for users, whether they contribute their creativity to Amazon.com, Wikipedia, YouTube or Bookmooch, or whether they seek friends through community-based sites or corporate online social networking sites such as Hyves (www.hyves.nl), LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) or Facebook (www.facebook.com). However, most people who visit user-generated content sites are 'driven' there by (viral) forms of social media ('friends' networks) or by plain marketing mechanisms. For example, the overnight success of Dutch teenager Esmee Denters as a YouTube popstar can be attributed largely to effective networking strategies via Hyves friends groups and Justin Timberlake's professional marketers.⁷ What is designated as 'collectivity' or 'mass creativity' is often the result of hype from networking activity – a type of activity heavily pushed by commercially driven social platforms and aggregator sites. Established companies as well as e-commerce firms are looking for ways to engage with their customers

online, to harness their knowledge potential and to engage in a meaningful dialogue. There are a number of (successful and unsuccessful) examples of firm-hosted commercial online communities, such as the oft-cited example of Lego Mindstorm or Coca-Cola's efforts to build online web communities associating specific music with their respective brands; however, as Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007) found, people are not attracted to these sites out of an overwhelming desire to build communities. To align all kinds of user motives for online participation as community driven is a rhetorical ploy popular among advertisers, who like to present telephone companies as being in the business of 'connecting people' or who promote credit card companies as 'facilitators of love and affection'.

Aligning commons and commerce

In marketing and business discourse, cultural terms such as 'communities' and 'collaboration' are rapidly replacing economic terms such as 'consumers' 'commodities' and 'customization'. The process of value creation is shifting gradually from a product and company-centric view towards a view of networked active co-creators who are becoming the locus of value extraction. For example, Tapscott and Williams describe the new role of digital contributors as 'the lifeblood of the business' (2006: 43), a view echoed by an impressive number of experts in business and management journals (Berthon et al., 2007; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a; Sawhney et al., 2005). Typical of manifestos, they do not offer the new model as a choice; the *Wikinomics* authors' advice to company owners and managers is either to pursue the integrated, systematic usage of collaborative innovation mechanisms, or to be driven out of business, hence turning it into an inevitable move: 'Harness the new collaboration or perish' (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 13). Just as every company has a website, every company needs to extract value from user contributions or it will be left behind in the bowels of Web 1.0. What makes this new vision of collaboration persuasive as a new business model? The *Wikinomics* answer to that question is basic and simple: 'Customers get more of what they want and companies get free R&D [research and development]' (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 132).

Manifestos such as 'We-Think' and *Wikinomics* show a distinctive tendency to push hybrid concepts that merge consumer interests with producer interests. Notions such as 'prosumer' have permeated management-speak ever since 'experience' became the magic word to tout customer engagement (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Toffler, 1981). Yet the growth of Web 2.0 technologies, translating networked information into mass creativity, spurs the full integration of 'produsage' into common parlance (Bruns, 2007, 2008).

Tapscott and Williams call attention to how industries stand to profit from the new consumer activism:

You can participate in the economy as an equal, co-creating value with your peers and favourite companies to meet your very personal needs, to engage in fulfilling communities, to change the world or just to have fun! Prosumption comes full circle! (2006: 150)

Prosumption and prosumption are presented as manifestations of creative emancipation. As Leadbeater argues:

Consumers turn out to be producers. Demand breeds its own supply. Leisure becomes a form of work. A huge amount of creative work is done in spite or perhaps because, of people not being paid. (2007: 6)

Both the active involvement of the people—formerly-known-as-customers and the formation of communities are celebrated as the best thing since the establishment of worker’s comp and a woman’s right to vote – the long awaited emancipation of the digital citizen who wants to create their own products and be in charge of their own distribution.

The *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ authors proclaim the marriage of former foes’ production and consumption and, consequently, of for-profit and non-profit platforms; the result of the consummation of this marriage is the birth of a new business model, ‘co-creation’. However, the baby turns out to be conjoined twins. In defining the term, management gurus carefully avoid the language of labour economics and consumer markets. They describe co-creating communities as groups of self-selecting individuals who choose to be working on communal projects, whether or not they are mediated by companies (Kozinets, 1999; McWilliam, 2000). Neo-Marxists have countered the myth of co-creation, arguing that customers in the Web 2.0 economy often provide free labour; user-generated content simply means that consumers are taking a lot of work out of the hands of producers (de Peuter and Witheford, 2005; Terranova, 2000). As Terranova observes, the internet ‘does not automatically turn every user into an active producer and every worker into a creative subject’ (2000: 35). Co-creation, she contends, does not yield any power and control over the means of production. On the contrary, user control and power are troubled concepts in the culturally spiced lingo of business experts (see also Prúgl and Schreier, 2006). Indeed, a bit of uneasiness with self-organizing users surfaces in *Wikinomics* when the authors warn companies that the crowds cannot be ‘controlled easily’ but they can be ‘steered’ (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 45).

The hybrid term ‘co-creation’ also rhetorically pre-empt the meaning of ‘consumer markets’. The discourse of business applauds users who provide content for their favourite sites or games not only because they take care of

the process of selection and evaluation but, on top of that, because they help advertising companies by forming groups of like-minded customers with similar tastes and lifestyles who engage in dialogue and exchange responses. Most e-communities are actually thinly disguised entertainment platforms (YouTube, Hyves, The Sims [thesims.ea.com], Last.fm [www.lastfm.com]) or product-exchange markets (eBay [www.ebay.com], Amazon) where people come together to find someone, something or something to do. In so doing, they inadvertently form attractive profiling communities for advertisers who used to spend a lot of money finding out what demographic group covets similar tastes and products. Life has never been easier for marketers. Now that advertising agencies and marketing departments no longer have to look for grass roots groups affiliated with (commercial) products or services, they take the guesswork out of marketing by letting customers create online brand communities which then serve as marketing niches or free service support.

The term 'co-creation' has yet another side to it that is conspicuously absent in business pamphlets, even if most Web 2.0 platforms derive their profits from this added value. Every user who contributes content – and for that matter, every passive spectator who clicks on user-generated content sites (such as YouTube) or social networking sites (such as Facebook) – provides valuable information about themselves and their preferred interests, yet they have no control whatsoever over what information is extracted from their clicking behaviour and how this information is processed and disseminated. For instance, even if we assume that YouTube users have full power over content creation and distribution (which they do not), they have no say over the data and metadata generated and aggregated by platform providers such as YouTube's owner Google. These (meta)data are more valuable than the content itself. To put it bluntly, rather than being in the business of content, Google is in the business of deriving commercially significant data from users and connecting these data to companies which need them for targeted advertising, marketing and sales management.⁸ Google is less interested in co-creation or content than it is in people making connections – connections that yield valuable information about who they are and what they are interested in.

When the authors of *Wikinomics* applaud Google and similar search-media companies for their efforts to provide 'new public squares, vibrant meeting places where your customers come back for the rich and engaging experiences', they significantly add the phrase: 'Relationships, after all, are the one thing you can't commoditize' (Tapscott and Williams, 2006: 44) – a phrase poignantly echoing the advertisement slogans of credit card companies. However, commoditizing connections is exactly what facilitators of user-generated content do: they capitalize on the relationships and social behaviour of people clicking away on their sites. Google is not interested in collectivity

but in *connectivity*; MySpace is not about creativity, it is about detecting related *activity*. Facebook does not want to link friends to friends, it is in the business of linking people to advertisers and products. Not content, but connections and profiled actions are the new commodities. Yet the discourse of commoditization is entirely subjugated to the rhetoric of connectivity. As David Beer contends in his critique of social networking sites, mass creativity is solidly entrenched in information capitalism:

[W]e can see in SNS [social networking sites] consumers producing the commodities that draw people in – frequently taking the form of the profile operating behind it. We can think then of profiles as commodities both produced and consumed by those engaged with SNS – on other sites such as YouTube it might be the video clip that is the draw with the profile operating behind it. We can see here, if we imagine SNS in this context, the active role of the consumer generating information and offering up information about themselves. (2008: 525)

The emphasis on cultural or communicative content as the main product of these sites completely overshadows the tremendous economic value of metadata. Metadata are not merely a by-product of content generation, they are a prime resource for profiling real people with real interests – precious information generated unsuspectingly by users. Manifestos such as *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ typically do not provide any technological details about how various sites render profitable business models. As expected from pamphlets of this nature, they focus on the emancipation of consumers into users and co-creators, rather than on the technical details concerning how these sites turn a profit. Technical protocols constructing these profiles (aggregation sites, linking algorithms, ranking systems) are beyond most ordinary users’ comprehension; the majority of users have no clue or do not care what happens after they upload or download content.

A fundamental assumption on which the ideological treatises of *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ thrive is the unproblematic equation of non-profit and commercial platforms in the Web 2.0 universe. Commercial UGC-enablers such as Google and Amazon and non-profit projects such as Wikipedia are equally applauded for providing software platforms where users can express themselves creatively and share cultural content. In fact, these business guides to the digital galaxy make a point of explaining how the innate benevolence of co-creation and prosumership transforms the ‘old’ capitalist enterprise model into a ‘new’ standard of shared public-private system of value creation. The new values of sharing, peering and openness bring to society a more sustainable model of entrepreneurship in which companies are socially responsible by being open and transparent, and in which users are socially responsible by dedicating part of their energy to ‘common

causes' such as open-source software (Linux) and knowledge infrastructures (Wikipedia). As Tapscott and Williams profess: 'Web companies are realizing that openness fosters trust and that trust and community bring people back to the site' (2006: 44).

There are several disputable tenets implied in this glorification of private-public entrepreneurship and in the uncritical alignment of producer interests with consumer benefits. Most profoundly, *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think' suggest that the distinction between non-profit and for-profit platforms is made irrelevant by the model of peer-production, as if peer-production were some overarching humanist principle of society's organization. Hence, they transpose cultural values onto commercial values, thereby creating a circular argument: what is good for culture, is good for business, is good for culture. Yet the problem with this line of reasoning is that it apparently renders completely irrelevant the very distinction between public and private space. The logic of culture (collaboration, collectivism, user participation) undercuts the logic of economics (shareholders' value, company profits).

MANIFESTOS BEYOND ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS DISCOURSE

Manifestos such as 'We-Think' and *Wikinomics* can be easily dismissed as industry-supporting pamphlets levelled at marketing experts and business managers who are operating mainly within the boundaries of economic discourse. It may be unsurprising to find that economics and business studies echo the collaborative culture and collective intelligence idiom propagated by these manifestos. However, even more noteworthy than the incorporation of countercultural ideals in business manifestos and mainstream economics is the adoption of the same underpinning logic in cultural theory. In the past five years there have been several academic conferences held and a number of popular studies written by media scholars and cultural critics espousing a similar uncritical alignment of producers and users, and of commerce and commons, to the above manifestos (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Reynolds, 2006; Unicom, 2008). Some of these studies adopt a rhetoric similar to the manifestos discussed earlier, including the use of universal claims, inclusive pronouns and the same kind of hybrid terms. Let us look at one example in particular, a book which has not only become one of the most cited sources in Web 2.0 cultural theory, but which is also widely used as a textbook at universities around the globe: *Convergence Culture*, written by MIT Professor of Comparative Media Studies, Henry Jenkins.

Jenkins' book ushers its readers into a brave new world of digital culture in a way that strongly resembles the language of *Wikinomics*:

Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways. (2006: 2)

The book introduces and elaborates upon three defining concepts – media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence – concepts that strongly reverberate the ideas of co-creation and produsage. Jenkins is unequivocally positive about the power of millions of active internet users to provide an alternative source of creativity and information. By the same token, he appeals to industry leaders to accept a cultural paradigm shift as a major driver to change business as usual: ‘More and more, industry leaders are returning to convergence as a way of making sense of a moment of disorienting change’ (2006: 6).

The inescapability of this cultural-cum-economic principle forms a peculiar mirror to the logic promoted in business manifestos. As discussed previously, *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’ assume that all users who contribute content are (equally) creative and articulate the same expressive desire. Jenkins proffers a similar idea, even if his ideas of participatory culture have historical roots in fan culture (Jenkins, 1992). Long before the advent of digital platforms, there was already a rich subculture of fans who actively engaged with their favourite authors, rewrote the endings of their books, discussed their favourable bands, etc. Jenkins (2006) argues that this kind of engagement is finally fulfilled by the current generation of internet tools. While he clearly assumes creative fandom as his guiding principle for hailing Web 2.0, it remains unclear whether he defends a cultural model or a business model; in fact, the distinction between the two is rendered entirely irrelevant because they converge beyond distinction. According to the logic of affective economics, he argues that ‘the ideal consumer is active, emotionally engaged and socially networked’, and that companies invite these ideal consumers or audiences ‘inside the brand community’ (2006: 20).

The nature of participatory culture is rationalized differently in *Convergence Culture* than it is in *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’, and yet there is a remarkable similarity in how economics and cultural theory assign equal motivational and creative drives to users. Jenkins duly acknowledges the fact that not all users are equally active when he perfunctorily points out how ‘some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging culture than others’ (2006: 3). However, much as Tapscott and Williams, Jenkins disregards the significance of a large contingent of passive spectators vis-à-vis a relatively small percentage of active creators – a disregard that warrants the definition of all users as contributors to (or participants of) culture. *Convergence Culture* trumpets the virtues of active users as creative fans, ‘spoilors’, citizen journalists and grass roots political organizers without ever discussing the different (economic or ideological) interests of various kinds of users. Five core chapters in the book describe how citizen-consumers use their newly acquired power to tinker and intervene in commercially produced content (such as television shows or major Hollywood films) via electronic platforms.

This process, which is both ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’, leads to rich ‘knowledge communities’ which share their intelligence to subvert established powers and provide alternative cultural contents (Jenkins, 2006: 18). Even if these examples are interesting and convincing, the fact that the large majority of users are passive consumers rather than active producers is not entirely irrelevant in a theory of culture. ‘Participatory culture’ is presented as the new hegemony, a cultural mentality that drives everyone and from which everyone profits.

In contrast to the manifestos *Wikinomics* and ‘We-Think’, *Convergence Culture* does acknowledge the need to make a distinction between producers and consumers, or for that matter, between commercial and communal platforms. At various points in the book, Jenkins points at their diverging interests; however, often in the very same paragraph, he redirects both parties towards a mutually profitable idea of convergence:

What we need to keep in mind here and throughout the book is that the interests of producers and consumers are not the same. Sometimes they overlap, sometimes they conflict ... In this way, we will come to understand how entertainment companies are reappraising the economic value of fan participation. (2006: 58)

Much as Tapscott, Williams and Leadbeater, Jenkins’ belief in communal action and collective intelligence overrides every argument rooted in political economy. In the interplay between two kinds of media power, the new digital environment of Web 2.0 assumedly renders the ‘old rhetoric of opposition and co-optation’ (2006: 215) irrelevant because consumers are given more power to shape media content. Examples to back up these claims are the Abu Ghraib photographs, bloggers who promote campaigns of minority candidates (Move on; www.moveon.org) and many other grass roots media which mobilize mainstream media to include their views. However, the proven ‘success’ of these instances of participatory culture does not warrant their extension to culture in general and neither does it excuse cultural theorists from exploring the profound socioeconomic consequences of this presumed paradigm shift towards an all-encompassing idea of culture. As Bassett subtly points out, Jenkins assumes

different kinds of cultural producers – the market, the public sector, activists for instance – to work with corporations to shape and forge agendas for forms of participation that satisfy perceived social and cultural needs. (Bassett, 2008)

In an interesting twist of the cultural rhetoric introduced by economists and businesspeople, Jenkins adopts the terms ‘synergy’ ‘franchise’ and ‘extensions’ (2006: 19) to explain how media industries are pushed to embrace convergence because corporately and collectively produced and distributed culture now operates equally within the same Web 2.0 realm.

Convergence Culture thus advocates the smooth alliance of old and new media, producers and consumers, commerce and commons in much the same way as they are promoted in *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think'. While Jenkins' cultural theory includes statements acknowledging the relevance of economic and ideological diverging interests, he hardly allows political economy to get in the way of claiming the universal hegemony of convergence culture. In more than one way, his theory peculiarly mirrors the rhetoric of contemporary Web 2.0 business manifestos.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued how Web 2.0 manifestos promote the combined cultural and economic significance of business models, both in terms of their rhetorical influence as well as in terms of their impact on social and cultural theory. *Cluetrain*, *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think' extend a line of thinking, historically analyzed by Fred Turner (2005), which is markedly rooted in a capitalist individualist model while eloquently tapping into the spirit of communalization – a hybrid line of reasoning that has dominated grass roots virtual communities from the very beginning. Behind the abrasive lingo of these manifestos lie some important basic assumptions about how a new digital infrastructure has come to govern our mediascape as well as our social lives. We particularly questioned these authors' undifferentiated concept of users and platforms; we have also interrogated the introduction of new concepts such as produsage and co-creation into mainstream economic discourse.

In addition, we have shown how some of the basic manifestos' persuasive claims and rhetoric have been adopted uncritically by cultural theory; books such as *Convergence Culture* tend to efface concerns of political economy in their unilateral acclaim of participatory culture. *Convergence Culture* hinges on the same ideals and deploys similar celebratory rhetoric to *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think'. Whereas Jenkins derives his evidence mostly from virtual grass roots communities subverting mainstream media and Tapscott, Williams and Leadbeater indiscriminately juxtapose online brand communities to non-profit virtual collectives, both argue the mutual benefits of producers and consumers operating in the same electronic realm. The hidden 'magic' of Web 2.0 technologies remains conspicuously unquestioned by all promoters, whether business gurus or cultural experts. They all claim a brave new world where the spirits of commonality are finally merged with the interests of capitalism.

We think that new models of convergence culture demand new modes of divergent criticism, unravelling the strategies of cooptation. Rather than defending or attacking the cult(ure) of participation, mass creativity or co-creation, we urge a more critical awareness of the socioeconomic implications

of these emerging trends. Despite the convergence of companies, business interests, technological platforms, cultural actors and other agents, it remains essential to untangle the succinct positions and interests of various players. Technological systems, such as labour relations and consumer positions, are implied increasingly rather than manifest (Schaefer and Durham, 2007). This is the power of technologies and regulatory systems governing our everyday lives and defining individual identities vis-à-vis collective identities. We need to carefully dismantle the claims of *Wikinomics*, 'We-Think' and *Convergence Culture* in order to better understand the kind of brave new worlds to which we are being welcomed.

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Notes

- 1 Leadbeater (2007) and Tapscott and Williams (2006) deploy slightly different notions of peer production, but with similar outcomes. When Leadbeater talks about 'self-organising peer-to-peer commons-based production', he refers to the social process of people collaborating; when Tapscott and Williams talk about 'peer production communities', they basically refer to economic processes. However, both books contend sociocultural principles to bolster an economic paradigm shift.
- 2 There are several other books, besides *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think', that illustrate this widespread trend of business books and articles heralding collaborative culture and co-creation. See, for example, Brafman and Beckstrom (2006), Reynolds (2006) and Surowiecki (2004).
- 3 These numbers are based on the 'Social Technographics Report' by Li (2007). The results found by Li were later reworked into Li and Bernoff (2008), a study which is based on similar assumptions than *Wikinomics* and 'We-Think'. Active creators are defined as 'online consumers who at least once a month publish a blog or article online, maintain a Web page or upload videos or audio to sites such as YouTube' (Li and Bernoff, 2008: 41). Of course, these numbers correlate to different age segments and differ across different nations, websites and user platforms. While these correlations show some differentiation, the point remains clear that 'creators' are always a relatively small percentage of all users. Jakob Nielsen (2006) introduces the '90-9-1 rule':

A theory explains the percentage of a wiki's participation, breaking it down as readers being the highest percent, with minor contributors composing the 9 percent and enthusiastic and active contributors composing 1 percent of the total participants in a wiki.

- 4 Various reports on user-generated content yield differentiated results which are not always comparable. A Pew Internet study (Lenhart and Madden, 2005) reveals that 57 percent of online US teens, 12 million youths, create, share or remix content; almost 20 percent of online teens keep a blog and 38 percent read them. This trend resurfaces in a more recent Pew study (Horrigan, 2006), which shows that older users are less likely to contribute than younger users. Fully 51 percent of 'under 30'

broadband users have posted some content at some time on the internet, compared to 36 percent of broadband users older than 30. Dutch social scientists (Duimel and De Haan, 2007) report that in the Netherlands, most youngsters use the internet to download music (71%), surf the internet for information (76%) and watch videos (79%), but in the terminology of the Forrester survey, most of these activities would qualify as 'passive spectators' rather than as 'active creators'.

- 5 Of course, the statistics on average income should be interpreted in relation to the figure representing types of users in various age groups. Li (2007) found that young users are more likely to contribute than older generations and the highest level of active contributors (37%) can be found among people aged 18–21 years. Even if the age factor is taken into account, the average household income of all social media users surveyed for this report is approximately \$62,000 annually.
- 6 A recent OECD report points out that one of the social consequences of user-generated content may be cultural fragmentation, not just as a result of the digital divide and of intergenerational gaps, but because the dispersal among many user-generated content-sites leads to 'greater individualisation of the cultural environment, exacerbating the already existing trend towards the multiplicity of media channels' (2007: 39).
- 7 Seventeen-year-old Dutch teenager Esmee Denters uploaded a video of herself performing as a singer on YouTube in September 2006. Nine months later, she signed a contract with Justin Timberlake's record company – a Web 2.0 fairy tale that allegedly proves the democratic structure of stardom via YouTube. However, stardom was heavily steered by social networking sites and conventional mass media: Denters put in a major public relations effort via the Dutch Hyves network (a social network site similar to MySpace) and appeared on popular TV shows. Basically, user-generated content sites were used to achieve stardom through conventional channels.
- 8 Google's acquisition of digital advertising company DoubleClick in April 2007 deserved a lot more scrutiny and yet ignited far less debate than its acquisition of YouTube in October 2006. DoubleClick's takeover revealed that connecting user profiles to advertisers is at the core of all Google's business, and from this core many other metadata industries are nourished. For more background reading on how Google's business model is built on the cores of connectivity and activity profiling, see Batelle (2005) and Vaidhyanathan (2007).

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