

"Networks of Innovation: Change and Meaning in the Age of the Internet"

Written by Ilkka Tuomi

Reviewed by Graham Stewart



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- "Networks of Innovation: Change and Meaning in the Age of the Internet" ISBN 019926905X published by Oxford University Press

The hardback version of this book appeared in 2002 and the paperback now appears from Oxford unchanged. There is not even a new foreword that seeks to justify the lack of updates. The assumption must be, therefore, that the book's contents have aged at a slower rate than the "dog years" at which Tuomi tells us life is lived on the Net. To be fair to Tuomi, however, many of his main arguments have been proved correct in the intervening years.

It's worth stating immediately that this is not a book for the general reader. Although Tuomi presents a coherent and telling history of the development of many of the Internet's major components, there are more lay-accessible books covering the same ground. (Where Wizards Stay Up Late by Katie Hafner, for instance.) The book contains ideas and information that would appeal to readers interested in the Internet's history and future, but this information tends to be buried within what is first and foremost an academic thesis on the socio-economic forces at work in technological innovation.

What, then, are the major claims contained in Tuomi's text? Firstly, Tuomi believes that "the traditional models of innovation are often misleading, and that they will become increasingly misleading in the future." He is keen to avoid looking at innovation in abstract terms and wishes to place innovative events within a clear social and economic context. This leads to his second main argument, which is that "innovation occurs when social practice changes." By this, Tuomi means specifically events which offer new opportunities for collaboration. Mobility – both technological and of people and resources – is key here. The book's final thesis is that, despite a seeming contradiction that sees innovation stemming from communities duplicating existing social practice, "there are two distinctive ways that new

communities and new technological practices can emerge. One is based on increasing specialization, and the other on combination of existing resources." The bulk of the book concerns itself with examining many of the collaborative successes of the Internet and especially those applications, such as email and the World Wide Web, where collaboration produced results very different from the original intentions encapsulated in the initial creative work. Tuomi concentrates on the development of Linux, which is predictable, given the year of the book's first publication. Linux is an important example of open source collaboration, of course, but the Internet continues to throw up a slew of mash-ups and disruptively innovative applications in ways which underscore the accuracy of Tuomi's thinking. Again, some sort of updated analysis would have served both author and reader well. The book contains many tables and diagrams, for instance, with data presented for periods ending in the late 90s. However relevant this data is to his argument, it would be more helpful to have data brought up-to-date.

Ilkka Tuomi trained as a theoretical physicist but is best known for his work on knowledge management and technological innovation. He has written many essays and articles on technology, the most famous of which is probably The Lives and Deaths of Moore's Law, in which he argued that Moore's Law was a sloppily applied example of technological determinism. Tuomi is currently the CEO of an independent research institute in his native Finland. He lists one of his hobbies as phenomenological epistemology. You may be surprised to learn that the book contains very few jokes.

