Book Review

Delia Dumitrica

Robin Mansell:
Imagining the Internet.
Communication, Innovation and Governance.
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From its very beginnings, the Internet's development has been marked by competing visions of its social function and business potential. Whereas some (mostly early computer experts and users) saw in the Internet the materialization of an open, freely accessible information and communication network with democratizing effects, others wondered about the business value of this technology. In her overview of the history of the Internet, Janet Abbate (2001) reminds us that "the priorities, re-sources, constraints, and beliefs of the academic researchers who created nonprofit networks in the 1960s were different from—and, in some respects, explicitly opposed to—those of the commercial computing and communications industries" (p. 149). *Imagining the Internet* takes up these competing visions today, examining the way in which they are framing Internet debates in the realm of policy-making.

A respected political economist of communication, LSE Professor Robin Mansell's approach to thinking about Internet policy debates by drawing from the literature on "social imaginaries" and from systems theory promises to bring a much needed attention to both discourses and complexity in tackling policy-making. For Mansell, contemporary social imaginaries of the Internet are framed by two conflicting visions: information scarcity and complexity paradoxes. The paradox of information scarcity refers to the high reproduction/low distribution cost of digital information. As the abundance of digital information threatens the profit of the digital information production and distribution sectors, companies in this line of business seek to impose a regime of information scarcity via copy-

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right regimes. The complexity paradox refers to the vision of the Internet as a complex technological system with self-adaptation mechanisms that appear to make it impossible for humans to control and change the development of this system. Yet, as Mansell points out, humans are in fact actively intervening in the shaping of the Internet. These paradoxes, she argues, need to be taken into account in policy-making. She concludes by recommending three areas of discussion for policy-makers in the hope of fostering new social imaginaries of the information society: the dismantling of existing monopolies of knowledge, the facilitation of online creativity, and the careful governing of technological solutions seeking to augment the human mind.

The book is structured into seven chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. In Chapter 2, Mansell promises to review the social imaginary of the Information Society as constructed by science fiction writers, futurologists and policy-makers. The choice of genres is a bit puzzling, requiring some further explanation. The chapter is also unclear in terms of the selection of texts that will be examined for the social imaginaries they advance. As it turns out, the book does not engage in a thorough analysis of specific texts, and the chapter ultimately turns into a rather broad critique of the prevailing technological deterministic accounts of the Information Society. Chapter 3 moves the review of social imaginaries to the field of scholarly work, as Mansell discusses instrumental and critical research on information and communication technologies. Economic studies of the Information Society are introduced to the reader as form of instrumental research. Mansell criticizes such studies for conceptualizing knowledge as merely an economic good. Critical research, on the other hand, is praised for developing alternative social imaginaries in which the focus is on how factors exogenous to technology (e.g. politics, economic relations, culture) shape technology's development. The book's lack of frontal engagement with the social shaping of technology is surprising since this theoretical umbrella has been central to both the deconstruction of technological determinism and to the empirical examination of the processes of technological development and adoption (e.g. Thomas and Wyatt, 1999; Wyatt, 2007).

If these two chapters rehearse ideas and conclusions that are by no means new, Chapter 4 promises to advance a new theoretical framework for understanding and intervening in Information Society governance. Drawing from systems theory in order to explain and propose a way out of the conflicting social imaginaries of the Internet, Mansell first outlines the paradoxes of the Information Society: information scarcity and complexity. Acknowledging these paradoxes in policy-making, she argues, would somehow improve our relationship with and input into technological development. Sadly, the discussion of paradoxes does not really clarify much; the theoretical discussion remains marred by jargon (a consequence of the author becoming too immersed in systems theory terminology). The rest of the chapter engages with the core notions of systems theory: autopoiesis, complexity, cybernetic feedback. A bit of Foucault is thrown into the mix, further confusing the matters (see p. 82). Mansell tries to advance a twofold point here: first, contemporary

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social imaginaries of the Information Society are influenced by complexity theory. While this claim is certainly interesting, it remains precisely a claim, as the book does not provide convincing empirical support for it. Second, systems theory appears to provide a suitable vocabulary for thinking about the Information Society. Unfortunately, it remains unclear: a) how this vocabulary can be operationalized; b) how systems theory articulate with social imaginaries and what this articulation has to offer in terms of advancing our understanding of either technology or policy-making. Mansell calls for "an interdisciplinary approach, combining concepts from the systems perspective elaborated by Bateson and others, with those from endogenous theories such as those highlighted in Chapter 3, [that can provide] the basis for an evaluation of paradoxes common to the Internet Age" (p. 85). This reviewer would have very much liked to hear exactly *how* this combination can work in practice.

Chapter 5 returns to the study of social imaginaries of the Information Society, this time by focusing on the ways in which designers and users come to think of the Internet. For those involved in technological design, computers and the Internet are understood primarily as technologies amplifying the mind. Unfortunately, the discussion seems to focus on a few well-known technological enthusiasts, failing to engage in a systematic review of the discourses espoused by designers in their practices. The chapter then takes a turn to the scholarly notion of mediation. Such work, Mansell argues, fails to consider the constraints embedded within software. To further shed light on these constraints, Chapter 6 reviews the social imaginary of computer scientists. Mansell argues that this imaginary has shifted from seeing computers as thinking machines to seeing them as software making choices on behalf of users. This new imaginary is also imbued with democratic goals, producing a vision of software as an enabler of democracy. Yet, she points out that the same software is often infused by commercial goals, and placed in the service of profit-making. The chapter concludes with a brief case study – the only original empirical case brought up by the book. The case presents the struggles experienced by an online platform for small and medium-sized enterprises. While systems designers imagined the platform as an ecosystem meant to enable collaboration, the commercial partners who were supposed to use it were interested in the control of information and proprietary tools. This created tensions that subsequently shaped the development of the platform. Unfortunately, this reviewer remains unclear on the lesson to take away from this discussion: Mansell cryptically recommends that when faced with paradoxes, the alternative is "to consider the possibility that progress towards an information society, consistent with a good society, requires a different reading of the paradoxes of information society" (p. 147). Exactly what these different readings are — and what to do with them — remains unclear.

The last chapter of the book shifts the discussion to communication policy initiatives. After summing up the contradictory visions of the Information Society (the information-as-commodity view versus the information-as-public-good view), Mansell reviews the general Internet governance structures and the current debates around network neutrality. This reviewer did not find that any new ideas or arguments were advanced here. The

reviews were also quite broad, summing up in only a few pages the discussions on network neutrality in the European Union and the United States.

The conclusion reminds the reader that the governance of the Information Society is permeated by contradictory social imaginaries of new media. Proposed policy solutions aimed at reconciling these clashes, she argues, "are often blind to the implications of the paradoxes of information scarcity and complexity" (p. 175). Yet, the problem of Internet governance is not the failure to recognize such paradoxes. One needs to look no further than to the recent mass protests in Hungary against the proposed tax law to understand that such paradoxes are very much present in our understanding of new technologies—and very much disputed. In policy-making, unequal power structures pressure governance mechanisms. What we lack is not more awareness of paradoxes (though of course this is important), but an awareness of the tools at our disposal to redress power inequalities in policy-making and governance structures. For Mansell, the answer lies in creating room for "adaptive action" that is "aimed ultimately at empowering all those with partisan interests to give birth to a new social imaginary of the information society" (p. 184). Unfortunately, exactly what this empowerment consists of remains a mystery.

References

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Delia Dumitrica, PhD
Visiting Professor
Saint Louis University, Madrid
dumitricad@slu.edu