Book Review

Reimagining How to Govern the Internet

Indra de Lanerolle

University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

Are we facing the danger of the Internet running out of all human control or, rather, are we facing the threat of an Internet panopticon? In **Imagining the Internet,** Robin Mansell argues that what we actually face is a "complexity paradox" (p. 3) where both dangers may be true. We are trapped, she argues, by an imaginative failure that is undermining our ability to mitigate either risk.

Mansell's priority is to address a political policy question: What can and what should we do to manage the Internet to enable its development in ways which will foster a "good society"? (Who exactly the "we" is or should be and where we should act is something to which I will return.) *Imagining the Internet* is a book about communications policy, although it expends little effort on examining actual policies. One could call it an investigation of metapolicy: a discussion about how we think and talk about directing and governing the Internet. Her approach begins by investigating how those who have shaped the Internet (as well as those who study it) *imagine* it to be. She continues by developing a critique of those *imaginaries* and proposing an alternative that could guide the Internet's future direction. She believes this is a matter of some urgency: "There is a risk that the communication system is running out of control" (p. 27).

Mansell posits that the dominant ways in which we imagine the Internet and the information society act as barriers to setting both the scope and the content of communication policies that could serve the public interest. The "imagining" of the title is not a psychological state. She adopts the specific meaning of the term *social imaginaries* from the Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor, referring not to a set of ideas but to the sensemaking process of understanding—the ways of seeing—the social processes around us. The imaginaries she explores describe "the taken-for-granted notions, images and visions" (p. 6) of those engaged with the information society. As her book demonstrates, discussions of and debates about the Internet and the information society comprise a rich ground on which to apply the concept of the social imaginary. It is difficult to think of any major innovation in communications over the last half-century that has not been accompanied by vociferous and contested sense-making, often highly utopian or dystopian.

Mansell's investigation starts by searching for social imaginaries in an eclectic range of sources, from poetry and science fiction to UN reports, although she soon focuses on the social sciences. She identifies the network of mathematicians, engineers, and economists who developed the fields of cybernetics and information processing, starting in the 1940s, as the originators of what she argues is the dominant prevailing imaginary of the information society. She then identifies sources of critical thought—primarily in political economy studies that have focused on power relationships in the communication system and in sociological accounts of online practices. She goes on to explore the development and roles of imaginaries among software system developers, governments, and civil society organizations and how these imaginaries play out in international policies and governance forums.
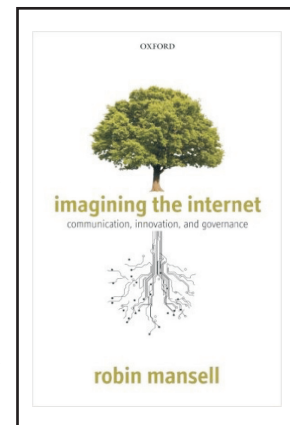
From this investigation she identifies two prominent contemporary imaginaries of the information society. One is grounded in the relationship between technological change and economic growth; the other, in the relationship between technological change and human agency. In her examination of global and regional policy and regulatory debates, she finds that the proponents of the dominant and alternative imaginaries are locked in a zero-sum conflict. In the dominant way of seeing, technological change is an "emergent and unpredictable process within a complex adaptive system" (p. 178). Intervention in such a complex adaptive system is perceived as likely to have unintended (negative) consequences and to stifle innovation and economic development. This imaginary guides a stance of non-intervention or, at most, a "light touch" that leaves market mechanisms to produce optimal outcomes. The alternative imaginary also casts technological change as emergent but gives prominence to (defending) the power of decentralized actors to create, use, and reuse digital content. She characterizes those operating within this imaginary as wanting governance to be left to software elites who operate "behind the screen" and to self-organizing civil society "in front of the screen."

Mansell presents the proponents of these two imaginaries, who appear to be in conflict, as, in fact, complicit in denying the potential harms of the information society. Each, for different reasons, leads protagonists to resist new regulatory and policy interventions. While those who adopt and reproduce these imaginaries believe themselves be to aiming at outcomes consistent with "the good society," both imaginaries, she claims, are a product of "false learning" (p. 176). This she attributes to their failure to acknowledge paradoxes that lie at the heart of the communication system. The first—the "information scarcity paradox"—refers to the idea that, in the Internet Age, information is costly to produce but virtually cost-free to distribute. The second—the "complexity paradox"—refers to the idea that complexity leads both to loss of and increases in control.

She applies her characterization of these prominent imaginaries to the history of Internet governance, beginning with the World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) that followed from it. Her analysis offers productive insights into how the actors who have participated in these global forums may have become trapped by their "habits of thought." In her analysis of the debate on network neutrality, her models of the dominant and alternative social imaginaries capture some of the arguments about the Internet and its future and also highlight some of the problems in those arguments.[1]

Having challenged these existing imaginaries, Mansell moves on to her deeper objective: to develop the basis for a new social imaginary of the information society capable of producing interventions that will lead to an Internet that both meets the needs of and fosters a "good society." This is an imaginary that accommodates the intrinsic complexity—and paradoxes—of the Internet and acknowledges differing and competing interests while allowing for the possibility of interventions that would lead to adaptations that can meet human needs. For the conceptual tools to build this new imaginary, she looks to the history of systems theory and work on complex adaptive systems in biology and psychology. She draws especially on the work of anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972) and his concepts of communication "double-binds" originally developed in his research on schizophrenia. Bateson and his colleagues (1956) developed a concept of double-binds to describe situations where paradoxical information is communicated. These often chronic communication patterns can only be changed, they argued, by metacommunication, that is, communication about the communication. Mansell suggests that, like the communication patterns of people with schizophrenia that Bateson studied, those adopting the dominant and alternative social imaginaries of the information society are paralyzed in a communication loop which they cannot escape without a new paradigm. Her goal is "to rupture persistent habits of thought" by

> encouraging a new social imaginary with more diverse choices involving neither the excesses of hegemonic governance from above with its neoliberal ideology of the market nor naive trust in the generative power of dispersed online communities as a means of governance from below. (2012, p. 184)

Many of those concerned with ICT policy and regulation in the Global South might agree with this goal. They might also agree that without intervention there are clear risks of harms the information society may bring, not least in its potential to increase inequality. But the dominant imaginaries they face at present may

---

1. For a detailed account of these arguments and the actors that have been involved in making them in the Internet Governance Forum, see Mueller (2010).

not fit easily into the binary opposition as Mansell presents. State actors in the Global South, whether in Iran, China, Egypt or South Africa, may imagine the Internet to be more like, say, broadcast media, where access, speech, and content are often controlled in their particular versions of the public interest. In South Africa, for example, the agency responsible for film censorship recently attempted to extend its control to Internet content, explicitly guided by an Internet imaginary not substantially different from their imaginaries of television or cinema. At the same time, in the Global South, it is not difficult to find weak regulators and state actors, but powerful (often global) private sector actors in conflict with each other over the Internet's future direction. In India and Africa these conflicts have arisen in recent years in relation to net neutrality and zero-rating of Internet services. On the one side, global telecommunications operators—those who control the infrastructure, the "dumb pipes"[2] of the Internet—and on the other, those who control some of the most powerful services that run over them, in particular Facebook. Both sides in these particular disputes share, according to Mansell's account, the same dominant social imaginary. In understanding how civil society organizations, researchers, and others in the Global South have responded to such events, we must acknowledge that their actions may not be the result of an endorsement of the libertarian "alternative social imaginary" that Mansell critiques. Their imaginary may, rather, be informed by a historically well-founded skepticism as to the likely results of extending state power or by tactical views of which group of private-sector actor agendas will support outcomes that the poor would find more affordable. In other words, there may already be more supporters than Mansell acknowledges, at least in the Global South, for her new social imaginary, who are already committed to an agenda of the "adaptive actions" and "policy corrections" she argues for and who recognize that "state and corporate practices are already well down the path to a *non-neutral network*" (p. 190, italics in original).

This leads to questions that Mansell does not explore sufficiently. Where can and should these adaptive actions and policy corrections be made and by whom in order to protect and promote "the good society"? Mansell rightly rejects the idea that the Internet is ungovernable. The increasing number of laws, regulatory actions, and court interventions across the world should surely have disabused most of that idea. But where in the hierarchical and heterarchical relationships of power that govern the Internet should we intervene? This is an increasingly complex issue and one that should be examined in a global context. The Internet Governance Forum, which she uses as a case study, is a misnomer; it does not govern the Internet. As Mansell acknowledges, it has no decision-making powers. She is skeptical of the technical elites who meet in institutions such as the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers and ICANN to set rules and standards for some aspects of Internet communications. Mansell states that we have "a communication system that is, in practice, largely ungoverned." This is true, if we take it to mean that some of the most important aspects of its development are left ungoverned by the institutions that claim responsibility for Internet governance. However, as the information society extends to transforming more aspects of social relations from financial services and transport to sexual relationships, we should recognize that city transport regulators, central banks, tax authorities and consumer protection agencies are all involved in Internet governance. These are locations of power rarely visited by communications policy advocates or communications scholars. There may be more possibilities for effective adaptive action in some of these arenas than in global forums that continue to fail to give sufficient voice to the Global South.

Mansell is not the first writer to explore the social imaginaries of the Internet Age. Arjun Appadurai (1996) and Armand Mattelart (2003) are two prominent scholars who have utilized this concept previously. As early as the 1980s, while the modern Internet was still being formed, Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983), focusing on the history of communications regulation in the United States, pointed out how conflicts over how to regulate the Internet were grounded in ways of seeing based on old models from print, broadcasting, and the mail service. Mansell's book adds to these perspectives and suggests how they could be applied in the realm of global

---

2. The term "dumb pipe," or dumb network, refers to an operator's network being used simply to transfer bytes between the customer's device and the https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet. The use of the term "dumb" refers to the inability of the operator to restrict services and applications to its own portal and primarily just provide simple bandwidth and network speed. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dumb_pipe.

Internet policy. It may be too much to expect Mansell's book to accomplish a synthesis of the diverse histories of ideas that she touches on. Inevitably she raises more questions than she can answer, and a deeper exploration of developments behind the screen might generate new and different paradoxes. To cite one example, the "scarcity paradox" she proposes can be critiqued for failing to capture the transformations that changes in the communication system are bringing to the production costs of knowledge, not only its distribution. Billions of people across the planet now have, through their mobile phones, the ability to affordably produce photographs as well as share them. But her deeper point stands as a call to action to those engaging in ICT policy: We must look at where the decisions are made that guide which innovations are developed and which are not and we must find ways to hold such decision makers to account.

While this book starts and ends with policy, the core of Mansell's analysis focuses on the various traditions of communications research within economics, sociology, media, and cultural studies. In this analysis she identifies significant gaps. It may be here that the book makes its most important contribution. Summarizing Roger Silverstone (2002), she states that "social theory struggles when applied to developments at the interfaces of social and technical systems" (p. 64). In challenging the chasm between traditions that focus on the material and those that focus on the symbolic, Mansell succeeds in making a new case for metacommunication on communication research. Her use of systems theory and of Bateson's (1972) investigation of communication double-binds is a bold step in challenging these longstanding divides, which she powerfully argues are "undermining our capacity to examine the relationships between the cultural and symbolic worlds and the economic or material aspects of life in the information society" (p. 100). If research is to play a meaningful role in informing ICT policy, then researchers would do well to think about how to bridge that divide. ∎

Indra de Lanerolle, Visiting Researcher, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. indra.delanerolle@wits.ac.za

References

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution and epistemology.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bateson, G., Jackson, D. D., Haley, J., & Weakland, J. (1956). Toward a theory of schizophrenia. *Behavioural Sciences, 1*(4), 251–264.

de Sola Pool, I. (1983). *Technologies of freedom: On free speech in an electronic age.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mattelart, A. (2003). *The information society: An introduction* (S. G. Taponier & J. A. Cohen, Trans.). London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Mueller, M. L. (2010). *Networks and States: The global politics of Internet governance.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Silverstone, R. (2002). Complicity and collusion in the mediation of everyday life. *New Literary History, 33*(4), 761–780.