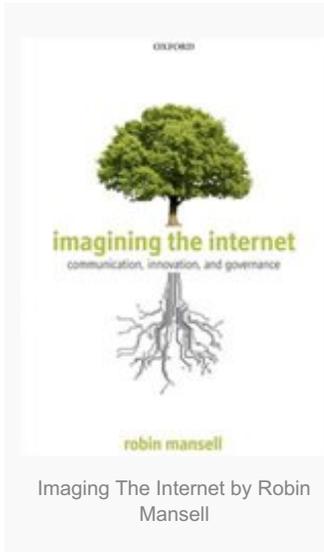


“Imagining The Internet: communication, innovation and governance” by Robin Mansell (book review)

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Just before the beginning of the 21st century when I was working in a state of the art TV newsroom I remember having to ask to use the Internet. There were only a few terminals so we had to take turns to cruise the few websites then available. Now it is, as the [late Professor Roger Silverstone said](#), 'environmental'. We can carry the Internet around in our pockets and yet it's powerful enough to catalyse Revolutions. Yet, what do you imagine it is?

Imagining The Internet by [Robin Mansell](#) is both a distillation of the many debates around the nature and future of the Internet and a critical intervention that makes us think more rigorously about the reality of digital and online communications. From it, [Mansell](#) hopes, will flow a more informed and progressive debate about the policy choices that will shape the Internet and its impact on our world.

Mansell insists that there is nothing 'natural' or inevitable about the Internet. If it achieves nothing else, this book will surely crush any lingering Internet idealism that suggests it is somehow technologically determined or a free space of libertarian

creativity.

What's New About New Media?

But first I should declare an interest. In the seven years I have been at the LSE Professor Robin Mansell has been a champion of my think-tank Polis and a valued colleague. She's not naturally sympathetic to journalists, but that means she has been a wonderful corrective to my journalistic tendency to stress the short-term, the novel, and the particular. In her distinguished career as a leading scholar of communications she has never been afraid to ask the big, historic and awkward questions: What is new about new media? Who has the power?

It is important to ask those tough questions because much writing about communications, and the Internet in particular, is littered with what Mansell calls 'imaginaries'. So, for Amazon.com the Internet is conceived as a remarkably free market place with extraordinary efficiencies generated by its virtual (and real) distribution systems. For Wael Ghonim it was a place that allowed oppressed Egyptians to catalyse and organise an uprising. For Clay Shirky it's a place where people collaborate and that is innately resistant to top-down control. Mansell does not say these are necessarily false ways of looking at the Internet, but she is clear about their partialness.

Mansell charts these different versions of the Internet as a history of ideas, but ideas grounded in material or ideological contexts: 'social imaginaries'. Even before the Internet people were imagining something similar. From 1930s Belgium I particularly enjoyed the idea of Paul Otlet's 15 million card index of all the world's information compiled into a Mundaneum – visualised in what looks uncannily like a data visualisation of a computer programme.

Imaging The Internet is very much a theoretical survey and one that strays beyond the usual communications pundits into political economy, economics and philosophy. Cybernetics, science fiction and even poetry play their parts.

Two Paradoxes

At its heart are two paradoxes that Mansell insists we must acknowledge before we can claim any full sense of what the Internet means for us as individuals or societies.

Here's the first, the paradox of information scarcity:

Information is initially costly to produce and intellectual property rights create the optimal incentives for creativity, diversity and growth;

Information is virtually costless to reproduce and the optimal incentives for creativity, diversity and growth occur when it is freely distributed.

And here's the second, the paradox of complexity in the Internet Age:

There are intrinsic benefits from the emergent complexity in the technological system behind the screen, which are leading to loss of control;

There are intrinsic benefits from the emergent complexity in the technological system behind the screen, which are leading to greater control achieved through programming within a decentralized system.

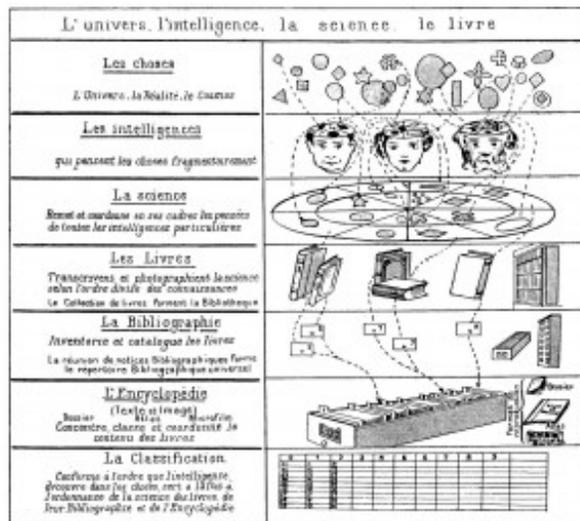
These are just two of the many other contradictions, tensions and problematics regarding the Internet that Mansell tackles in this book. Of course, the point is not to do the impossible and resolve them but to get us to see them as starting points for a discussion of the policies or actions that we might need to protect the value of the Internet and its potential for economic and human growth.

Contested Future

The future of the Internet, indeed, its very nature is always going to be contested according to Mansell. That's actually quite a good thing because it means that its potential contribution to creating a 'good society' is still something we can develop and realise in different ways.

This book is not a light read. But it does make a refreshing change from books that are 'for' or 'against' the Internet or reduce it to simple instrumental effects such as 'making us stupid'. Mansell is certainly no sunny optimist, but she takes the power of the Internet seriously enough to make the case that it is a vital battlefield for the struggle for human improvement and happiness.

This is essential reading for any serious media and communications scholar or analyst, but also a work that I hope is read by anyone interested in the Internet and certainly by anyone making a decision that will impact on its future.



Paul Otlet, *Traité de Documentation* (1934), p.41

Robin Mansell will be giving [a free LSE public lecture](#) based on the book on Tuesday October 16th in the Sheikh Zayed Theatre, New Academic Building, Lincolns' Inn Fields, LSE starting at 6.30pm.

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