

## Book Reviews

**Patrice Flichy:**

**The Internet Imaginaire**

**MIT Press: Cambridge Massachusetts 2007 (translation of *L'Imaginaire d'Internet*, 2001). 255 pages.**

Technologies and speculations about their ability to revolutionize societies, economies and politics seem to go hand in hand. For a long time, historians of technology have shown that we can learn much about the relationship between technology and society by examining the visions and discourses surrounding the rise of new technologies. Recently, the emergence of the Internet has spurred a number of books on the societal meanings and consequences of this technological innovation. Some of these have taken the shape of historical accounts, such as Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon's *Where Wizards Stay up Late* and Janet Abbate's *Inventing the Internet*. These seek to capture the relationship between the military origins of the Internet and its later uses. *Internet Dreams – Archetypes, Myths and Metaphors*, edited by Mark Stefik, draws on a combination of literary theory and Jungian psychology in an attempt to capture the significance of the different metaphorical representations of the Internet. More recently, Vincent Mosco's *The Digital Sublime – Myth, Power and Cyberspace* uses insights from political economy and cultural analysis to situate the myths about cyberspace in relation to myths about earlier technologies and in relation to other social myths, such as the 'end of history' and the 'end of politics'. In different ways, these books seek to establish discourses and visions about

technology as important objects of analysis for research on the technology-society nexus.

*The Internet Imaginaire*, written by the French media sociologist Patrice Flichy, is an important addition to this literature. In line with other historians of technology, Flichy urges us to think of discourses—or what he terms *imaginaires*—as an “integral part of the development of a technical system” and “to study them as such” (p. 2). From this vantage point, discourses shape social practices, and accordingly it matters whether the Internet is referred to as an ‘information superhighway’, a ‘virtual reality’ or an ‘electronic community’. Engaging seriously with such representations can help us shed light on the relationship between technology, discourses and social transformations.

Flichy positions himself in between diffusionist and translationist approaches to the study of technology. He accepts neither the traditional view that technologies and the intentions of their creators are simply diffused in a linear manner, nor the Latourian position that technologies do not have origins or destinations, but rather translations through which they are given meaning. Flichy does not seek to reconcile these two largely incompatible positions, but claims to draw on insights from history of technology, management and interactionist sociology in his dual focus on the original intentions

and the social discourses shaping a given technology. In the analyses, however, Flichy draws primarily on Paul Ricœur's articulation of the concepts of ideology and utopia as a way to capture the transformations and implications of discourses about the Internet.

The book traces the collective visions surrounding the Internet as they play out in different spheres, with a primary focus on the U.S. context. The first part of the book builds on early historical accounts of the invention and early use of the Internet, including many of those mentioned above. The chapters in this part focus on the *imaginaires* at play when the Internet came into existence, and maps how its inventors and promoters talked and thought about this innovation. For instance, Flichy describes how U.S. politicians first constructed the Internet as part of the idea of an 'information highway', and then managed to mobilize corporations and civil society groups around this vision. The consolidation around this collective vision paved the way for a widespread acceptance of liberalization in the telecommunications sector. In Flichy's Ricœur-inspired terminology, the information superhighway had been transformed from a technical utopia into a political ideology. The chapters in part one trace the development of collective visions about the Internet first among the computer scientists and programmers who developed it, then in the wider scientific community, and, finally, among the first ordinary users. Flichy shows how the original visions surrounding the Internet were transposed from the 'academic world' to the 'ordinary world' (p. 98), through social forms of regulation such as *netiquette*.

Drawing primarily on articles published in Wired magazine, the second part of the book captures how the Internet

*imaginaire* was transformed from a technological vision to a vision of large-scale social transformations. These chapters explore how the Internet affects our way of thinking about the age we live in, our body, politics, and the economy – and in turn, how our way of thinking about the Internet affects these areas of social life. By bringing together the collective visions about a technological innovation and its societal ramifications, the book captures the crazy quilt of visions underpinning the Internet and the digital age – anti-statist, free market and democratic ideals, mixed with community romanticism, hi-tech libertarianism, hippie anarchism and technological determinism.

Flichy's book draws heavily on existing historical accounts of the Internet, such as those mentioned above. However, the book uses these histories of the Internet primarily as source material, and does not engage much in their theoretical and analytical findings. Flichy's choice of data also sets limits to what can be inferred from the findings. By relying on early accounts and articles from Wired magazine, the book collects and analyses the most techno-utopian visions of the Internet one can imagine. The gloomier representations of the digital age, such as the existence of a global, digital divide or privacy-infringing control mechanisms are absent. Furthermore, the data does not allow Flichy to say very much about the ramifications of discursive constructions. At times, Flichy explains how the *imaginaire* changes shape from a free-floating utopia to an institutionalized political ideology, but ultimately the book sketches the collective visions surrounding the Internet, rather than spells out their implications. While the Ricœur-inspired framework allows for such linkages, the book is more historical and descriptive than analytical and conceptual. For in-

stance, the five-page conclusion consists of a scattered mixture of reflections and it does not offer a theoretical examination of the key findings, implications and limitations of the study. Also, if the analytical framework had played a more central role, we would have gained more insights about the societal role of discourses, and we would be able to reflect on whether any framework broadly concerned with discourses and representations would yield similar results.

*The Internet Imaginaire* paves the way for exciting new research. Flichy convincingly shows how the Internet spread beyond technical and scientific communities and entered into a phase where the rules of the marketplace set the course. However, the Internet *imaginaire* is still under construction. Recent events, such as the struggles over ICANN, the U.S.-based body regulating core technical aspects of the Internet, and the UN-funded World Summit on the Information Society, show that many governments and international organizations wish to turn the Internet into an object of global governance (Chadwick, 2006; Flyverbom & Bislev, 2008). The work of Flichy and others help us to connect the study of technology with that of discourses and societal transformations. Furthermore, they also help us to better understand the significance of new 'laboratories' where

collective visions about the Internet and its consequences are constructed and fought over.

## References

- Abbate, Janet (1999) *Inventing the Internet* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press).
- Chadwick, Andrew (2006) *Internet Politics: States, citizens, and new communication technologies* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Flyverbom, Mikkel & Sven Bislev (2008) 'Internet regulation – Multi-stakeholder participation and authority', in H. K. Hansen & D. Salskov-Iversen (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Private Authority in Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Hafner, Katie & Matthew Lyon (eds) (1998) *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The origins of the internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster)
- Mosco, Vincent (2004) *The Digital Sublime: Myth, power, and cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Stefik, Mark (ed) (1996) *Internet Dreams: Archetypes, Myths and Metaphors* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Mikkel Flyverbom  
University of Southern Denmark  
flyverbom@language.sdu.dk