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## Introduction: imagining the internet: open, closed or in between

### Book section

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# Imagining the Internet: Open, closed or in between?

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The policies and practices aimed at facilitating inclusive information societies in the Latin American and Caribbean region, as in all regions of the world, are underpinned by the assumptions people make about how change happens. In the present era nearly all stakeholders are aware of changes in society that are accompanying rapid innovation and investment in digital information and communication technologies. This awareness may stem from their active use of digital applications and services or it may be the result of their exclusion from closed networks and services or even from those that are open for reasons of lack of access, financial resources or skills. Many cultural, social, political and economic factors influence the particular ways in which stakeholders envisage how change in information societies happens, how best to shape these changes towards desirable goals, and the consequences of different pathways in particular locales, countries and regions. These visions and assumptions about the future of information societies are underpinned by deeply embedded imaginaries which inform the decisions of all the stakeholders involved in these changes.

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Social imaginaries can be understood as the way people imagine their social existence or as the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor put it, “how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations”.<sup>2</sup> How do today’s social imaginaries inform the way stakeholders think about the present and future of information societies and the consequences for development? Very simply, there are two prevailing social imaginaries about digital technologies, the Internet, mobile phones and their applications, both of which involve a deep commitment to the idea that these technologies provide opportunities for building ‘good’ or just and equitable societies. The prevailing dominant imaginary in today’s information societies is market-led. In contrast, alternative imaginaries are best described as ‘open’ or commons-led. Progress towards the realization of one of these imaginaries is typically seen as being damaging to the realization of the other. It is this conflict that leads to major problems for stakeholders in deciding which policies and strategies, or mix of policies and strategies, is most likely to facilitate progress towards more just and equitable information societies.

The dominant imaginary is one of a universal ‘information society’ in which digital technologies and their applications are directly associated with ‘digital enlightenment’ or knowledge which can be applied with relatively little investment, apart from that required to achieve connectivity and access to digital information. It assumes that competition among technology and service suppliers is the best way to achieve widespread access to information (and knowledge) and that state security is a very high priority even if this involves surveillance, privacy intrusions and secrecy. Commercial expansion is assumed to be the optimal pathway towards inclusive participation in the information society, achieved through the increasing personalization of

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2 Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge MA: Belknap Press.

digital services and the extension and enforcement of existing copyright legislation to create incentives for the production and consumption of digital products and services.

The 'open' or commons-led alternative imaginaries are characterized by some form of 'digital resistance' to the universal model of the information society. This usually involves some form of countervailing power, a privileging of co-operation and collaboration over competition, and innovative forms of networked collaboration often by dispersed communities. These imaginaries assume that trusting relationships can be fostered in information societies by maximizing information and decision making transparency through open access to information and by encouraging information sharing, encouraged by new approaches to information ownership.

The dominant imaginary of the information society gives a priority to technological innovation, often focusing on the benefits of technological convergence and opportunities created by the increasing modularity, miniaturization, and interoperability of digital services based on multiple platforms and intense market competition. In this imaginary, the principle focus, for example, is often on the diffusion of mobile phones or smart phones and on connectivity and access to information.

Policy often focuses principally on the spread of access to broadband networks and on the growth of commercial markets for digital content creation and aggregation. Debates tend to be concentrated on the rate of investment in network infrastructures and the implications of leadership in this area for the development of web browsing, peer-2-peer, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), apps and user contributed video, but in terms of Internet traffic growth and revenues. The public policy debate focuses much less on developments in the 'private' or closed Internet for the managed digital services which increasingly supports digital television, Internet Protocol television (IPTV) and Internet Protocol telephony, nearly all of which are led by the commercial market strategies of private

companies. These developments have major implications for the way citizens will experience their information societies in the future and whether they are able to access digital services that are open and available for collaborative sharing or closed and restricted to those who are able to participate in the market. This has implications for whether future digital environments are consistent with the values of freedom of expression and inclusive citizen participation which are aligned with the alternative imaginaries of information societies.

In the dominant imaginary of the information society, information is deemed to have economic value and the policy priority is to ensure that intellectual property rights legislation is designed and enforced to enable the exploitation of this value. In contrast, in the alternative imaginaries, digital information is assumed to 'want to be free'. There are differences among stakeholders who align with this view, but the main priority for policy is to maximize opportunities for open access to information. Conflicts arise between those seeking to enforce copyright protections and social movements that seek to set information 'free', for example, through copyright infringing file sharing of music and other digital content or through collaborative online contributions that are open for use and reuse by all.

In the dominant social imaginary of the information society with its emphasis on technological innovation, a key priority is to promote the increasing sophistication of the automated collection and processing of digital information. Automation is giving rise to new potentials for the surveillance of all online activities by both the State and the private sector. Increasingly, citizens can 'click' but they cannot 'hide'. In alternative imaginaries, these developments are seen as having substantial implications for human rights and for whether or not future information societies are consistent with the values of transparency and democratic participation in society.

Proponents of alternative imaginaries of information

societies are well-aware that digital platforms can be used for malicious attacks against both individuals and the State. In some cases, States are using digital network capabilities to respond with force and companies are using these automated surveillance capabilities to develop sophisticated targeted advertising and marketing techniques. These automation techniques for information processing are also giving rise to major new initiatives to take advantage of vast repositories of digital information or ‘big data’ for an increasing variety of mapping and visualization applications, many with beneficial development implications in fields such as health and the environment. However, here too there are contests between the dominant and alternative imaginaries of information societies. In the former, ‘big data’ may be closed and exclusive to its owners; in the latter, such data are seen as a public resource that can be mined and applied when it is managed in an open way.

The dominant and alternative imaginaries of information societies are deeply contested. The specific form of contestation is expressed in different ways in various regions of the world depending on their histories, cultural contexts, social, economic and political characteristics, and institutional environments. In the case of each of the key issue areas discussed so far, the central question that needs to be asked is who is benefiting from information societies now and who will benefit in the future? Are those benefits fairly and equitably distributed? If they are not, what measures should be taken by the State, companies, and other actors, including NGOs and citizens, to redress imbalances where they persist?

These imaginaries of information societies matter because the present bias is toward the dominant model favouring market-led developments and focusing on information exchange, information scarcity secured through copyright, and rapid technological innovation and mastery. This contrasts with alternative models which favour a widening of the information commons to foster information sharing, information abundance,

and generative innovation from the bottom up. The challenge for policy and practice is how to achieve a better balance between these contending approaches.

The contests between the two models will persist and continue to challenge policy makers and practitioners for two major reasons. These are related to two key paradoxes which are present in all of today's information societies regardless of their position in the rankings for broadband, Internet and mobile penetration or access to information.

The first is the 'paradox of information': information is costly to produce and intellectual property rights create incentives for creativity, diversity and growth; and, information is virtually costless to reproduce and incentives are created for creativity, diversity and growth when it is freely distributed. The second is the 'paradox of complexity': the intrinsic benefits of complexity (mainly non-transparent automation of information processing) in the digital system are leading to decreasing control through traditional means of governance; and, the intrinsic benefits of complexity in the digital system are leading to enhanced control and new modes of governance within a decentralized network system.

The result of these paradoxes is that there are frictions and resistance among oppositional groups whose principal interests lie mainly with one or the other features of these paradoxes. With respect to the information paradox, there are many new ways to legitimize the open circulation of information and so contestations in this area, though likely to persist, may become less trenchant as policy makers and the private sector introduce new hybrid approaches that balance interests in open and closed information environments. In the case of the second paradox, however, strong advocacy for market-led development of information societies without regulation because of the perceived risks of intervening in a complex technological system with uncertain outcomes is likely to persist. It will be accompanied by strong advocacy for policy, which promotes

transparency and accountability of State and private companies in order to ensure that human rights to privacy are protected and expectations for citizen safety and security are met.

Regardless of which imaginary of information societies is privileged, measures that accommodate conflicting interests are unlikely to be effective when the main focus of policy is on technology, e.g. ICT hardware, software, networks and services, instead of on human relationships within information societies. Technologies are not proxies for the knowledge people draw upon in order to make sense of their world. They are not proxies for ‘how things go on between them and their fellows’. In the face of paradoxes such as these that infuse information societies with contradictions and conflict among stakeholders, the best way forward is to consider the interlinked policy corrections that are needed to counter monopolies of knowledge wherever they appear.

For example, the claim that there is a universal information society is one such monopolistic argument. Countering this ‘imaginary’ means addressing how best to foster multiple approaches within and outside the commercial marketplace. It requires initiatives to roll back expansionist intellectual property legislation, giving attention to the specific needs, resources and strengths of particular markets and collaborative cultures in the different countries and regions. It also requires deliberation on the appropriate limits of intrusive online surveillance and privacy invasions, consistent with human rights and freedom of expression and acknowledge that the complexity of today’s digital networks and applications means that the surveillance (State and corporate) which is possible today may become more excessive in the future, if it is not governed effectively.

Policy corrections are needed to effectively institutionalize procedures for holding states and companies accountable through legislation, policy and regulation, and for holding dispersed online communities accountable as well. In practice, this means that policy for information societies needs



to shift from the present situation in which the majority of interventions are top down and strongly driven by technological innovation, towards policy that gives greater emphasis to bottom-up accountable interventions that are responsive to local circumstances. To take just one example, the enthusiasm for 'big data' and crowdsourcing is being driven by top down policy in the name of acquiring new information resources that are scientifically validated and curated, consistent with the dominant imaginary which seeks to maintain, preserve and add value to digital research data throughout its life cycle, the goal being the accumulation of knowledge for formal science and technological innovation. In contrast, there are increasing examples of 'big data' leading to knowledge that is useful for local actors which rely on voluntary contributions of distributed groups using open methods for validated information that can be applied in social problem solving. This alternative is supported by an imaginary, which values informal norms for openly sharing information with the goal of generating useful knowledge for immediate application to social problems.

In conclusion, in the light of the paradoxes of information and complexity in today's information societies, a key issue is whether the future is likely to bring continuing and deeper conflicts among stakeholders with different interests or whether there is potential for temporary reconciliation of the goals of market led economic growth and open development in future information societies. The hope for reconciliation rests on the capacity of all stakeholders to reject the hegemonic universal vision of *the* information society while also resisting reactionary forms of bottom up localism that ignores the larger context of power relations in society. Policies and strategies for future information societies must devise accountability measures that avoid the excesses of governance from above (top down interventions and exclusively market led development) and the excesses of naïve trust in commons-led developments (bottom up initiatives and exclusively open developments). The

outcomes, which will take different shapes in various countries and regions, will be determined by the balance which is struck between open, closed and hybrid imaginaries, policies and practices in future information societies.