Robin Mansell

Governing knowledge societies: competing models and norms

Book section

Governing Knowledge Societies:
Competing Models and Norms

by

Professor Robin Mansell [1]
Deputy Director and Provost and Department of Media and Communications
London School of Economics and Political Science

10 October 2015

Forthcoming in Proceedings of PANAM 2015 Colloquium, Governance and Public Service Media in Knowledge Societies, Montreal, July.

Governing Knowledge Societies: Competing Models and Norms

1. Introduction

Competing models and norms that underpin academic and policy discussions about the challenges of governing information or knowledge societies are discussed in this paper. These discussions have intensified since the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in 2003 and Tunis in 2005. During the WSIS there was a consensus around the idea that societies which become increasingly reliant on digital technologies and their applications should be people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented. The WSIS Declaration of Principles envisaged societies in which:

> 'everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (UN/ITU, 2003: 1).

It was and remains relatively easy to claim that there is agreement about these principles. It is far more difficult to understand why it is very challenging to ensure that policy and practice adhere to these principles. Adherence to these principles means that developments in information or knowledge societies should be respectful of human rights, and consistent with economic growth as well as with reducing inequality within societies around the world. The next section (section 2) of this paper highlights persistent asymmetrical power relations that make it extraordinarily difficult to ensure that developments in knowledge societies are aligned with the aspirations of the WSIS Declaration of Principles. This discussion is followed in section 3 by a concise review of the normative foundations and value preferences that inform contending instrumental and critical models of knowledge societies development. A

discussion of why it is so difficult to align policy and practice with the norms and values embraced by proponents of critical alternative models follows in section 4. The paper concludes (section 5) with an assessment of the role of scholarly research in devising strategies to guide policy and practice in ways that are aligned with the goals of achieving greater equity in knowledge societies.

2. Persistent Asymmetries of Power in Policy and Practice

With the passage of time since the WSIS it is clear from discussions within most of the post-WSIS follow-up forums that the development of knowledge societies must enhance opportunities for all people, be consistent with improving their quality of life, and facilitate sustainable development (UNCTAD, 2015). On the highest level of abstraction, there is little disagreement. The 'devil is in the detail'; as always, problems arise in negotiating the politics of implementation. On the level of practice, there is evidence that the principles agreed as appropriately underpinning knowledge societies developments are not being extensively adhered to (Mansell, 2015; Marcelle, 2013). In my report on knowledge societies in 1997 for the United Nations Commission for Science, Technology and Development (CSTD), we insisted that 'assembling the "tools" is only part of the task **...** Measures must be taken to assemble the human capabilities and related technologies to make the best use of the new opportunities offered by ICTs' (Mansell & Wehn, 1998: 261). This was not a particularly new insight then, but it continues to evade many of those who are promoting knowledge societies. The tendency in policy debate is to default to discussions about financing digital infrastructure and services – promoting broadband or mobile phones - without sufficient regard for the livelihoods of those who are affected by the presence or absence of digitally mediated communication.

In many policy forums when inequality and instances of injustice in knowledge societies are discussed, lists of priorities for action and of threats are typical. Digital priorities might, for example, include broadband access, inclusiveness, internet governance, education, cybersecurity, the cloud economy, social and economic value and regulatory issues, sustainability (e-waste), and the need for

forward looking and more easily measureable targets. Digital threats might include cybercrime, online pornography, online violence against women and girls, monopolies in the digital sector, corporate invasion of individual privacy and tax avoidance. These lists come from a WSIS + 10 meeting and were presented at the 18th Session of the UN Commission for Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) which received a comprehensive report on progress towards the WSIS goals (UNCTAD, 2015). In spite of lists like these pointing to areas where action is needed to achieve a better distribution of the benefits of digital technologies and their application, when it comes to practice, hierarchies of knowledge are repeatedly found to be entrenched and capacity building for achieving the potential benefits of knowledge societies is often biased in favour of the needs of market-based commercial ventures.

This consequence of asymmetrical power will not surprise critical scholars. But in the policy making discourse it is frequently asserted that 'open' or non-market, non-proprietary knowledge society projects are being developed in response to local communities and their priorities; that is, that they are participatory and inclusive in both theory and practice. Research often shows however that local participants frequently cannot access digital information, that the information is decontextualized, or that it makes no sense to them. As one knowledge and information project officer puts it:

> 'When groups are already marginalized it seems to be increasingly that tools like technology become proprietary to certain people. So unless you set things up so the more likely to be marginalized group has access with intent, without that intent you are more likely to increase the fact that they become marginalized' (Kleine et al., 2015: 19).

As this project officer suggests, local people are often conceived as homogeneous 'users' or as anonymous 'beneficiaries' of donor financing. Proprietary ownership of digital information takes precedence over open access and information sharing, and capacity building is often biased in favour of the needs of commercial ventures. Policy interventions intended to foster knowledge

societies are frequently more likely to increase marginalisation, than to diminish it. In practice, governance from the top is present even when civil society groups use open source software or open digital platforms like Ushahidi or OpenStreetMap. Projects may be initiated to privilege collective action and to value local participants, but a commercial market, instrumental technology diffusion model is all too often at the heart of the way a project is governed in practice. This may be because of the interests of financers, the rules of donor organisations, or the lack of understanding of the local context by non-governmental organisations working as intermediaries.

An enormous challenge in the coming years is to explore effective ways of systematically researching and drawing attention to the contradictions between the WSIS Principles which are intended to guide knowledge societies and the practices of stakeholders that arise out of power asymmetries. One approach is to consider the contradictory models of governance that inform knowledge societies developments and to examine how these inform initiatives aimed at achieving greater inclusion in knowledge societies on equitable terms.

3. Contested Norms and Values in Knowledge Societies Models

What are the normative foundations and the value preferences that underpin the way governance models treat the challenge of building knowledge societies? How do contradictory values and commitments on the part of different stakeholders play themselves out as a basis for action aimed at mobilising resources in knowledge societies? This section provides a schematic account of these values and commitments (set out in much greater detail in *Imagining the Internet* (Mansell, 2012)). The persistence of contradictory models accounts in major part for the enormous gaps between policy aspiration and practice. On the one hand, there are empowering discourses calling for knowledge societies that bring advantage to the most socially and economically disadvantaged. On the other hand, there is evidence that in practice governance arrangements give rise to practical decisions and actions that are geared towards exclusion and to disadvantaging those who are not already advantaged by their position in the socio-economic order.

A dominant instrumental model of knowledge society developments can be contrasted with critical alternative models. These models constitute oppositional ways of seeing the emergence of knowledge societies and they are especially evident in the contemporary neoliberal capitalist order. The basic dimensions of these models are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

At a most basic level, the dominant instrumental model for addressing the problems, opportunities and risks associated with societal change in knowledge societies focuses on how much information is being produced or on how many people have access to it. The main focus is on the diffusion of tools – infrastructure, handsets, or datasets. In contrast, critical alternative models are more likely to be reflexive. The primary concern is with how access to, or the ability to make use of, information relative to others. It is about context and the relevance of information in a specific place and cultural milieu. Alternative models are people centred, not thing or hardware or software, centred.

The dominant instrumental model privileges the familiar information transmission model – the linear, sender-receiver model. This model gives some the comfort that comes with mathematical rigour. Invest in A such as mobile phones for e-money or for mapping environmental waste and pollution and then measure its impact on B, for instance, the citizen's happiness score in a low income country. Policy makers adhering to this model tend to support a governance regime that looks for strong correlations between investment in hardware and software and measurable changes in some aspect of society. At an aggregate level it yields apparently predictable outcomes. Investment is then allocated to replicate measureable gains in income or well-being. Critical alternative models are, in contrast, more concerned with the ritual or symbolic meaning of information, digital, or otherwise. In these models it is usually

recognised that digital content circulating in any medium requires contextualisation and that it is always interpreted in multiple ways subject to cultural and other factors.

Moving down the list in Table 1, in the instrumental model knowledge societies are first and foremost about maximising individual aspiration. The governance of markets, other institutions and stakeholder actions is mainly aimed at ensuring that it is the individual agent who is enabled to choose by rationally maximising his or her own outcomes in the light of time and money scarcity. Digital services from information search to entertainment or for any other purpose (that is not illegal) should be responsive to individual aspiration. This contrasts with alternative critical models that are based on a normative foundation that values a dialectic or interactive relationship between individual and collective aspirations. The values in these models often privilege collaboration. These values are not new to contemporary knowledge societies, but they are being articulated in new ways online.

In the dominant instrumental model**,** control and mastery, or master-slave relations, such as online gateways preventing access to information, copyright and ownership restrictions on information, profitable business models for the owners of capital, privileging commercial over citizen interests, and maximising efficiencies in top down management, are among the primary goals. In contrast, the values and norms of mediated processes emphasise bottom up, or at least the potential for bottom up, arrangements for the production and consumption of digital information. Contestations over asymmetrical power relations and negotiation are core to these critical alternative models.

The instrumental model is based on a pluralist conception of power which is often functionalist and descriptive and this is applied to human agency and, on occasion, to technological agency such that technologies are understood to have direct impacts on people that are uniform and often assessed without regard to local context. In contrast, critical alternative models generally begin from the premise that unequal power relations are persistent, that they are continuously

being replicated, that hierarchical relations are never fixed or pre-given, and that they can be resisted, whether through policy reform (the liberal variation of alternative models) or through social movement uprisings and even revolution. Governance arrangements that empower civil society in these models are deemed to be essential to benefit the vulnerable, whomever and wherever, they are. These models are often associated with commons-based peer production in a non-market context through open development, open source software and open hardware (Mansell, 2013). They may be less focused on 'information' itself and more on the symbolic meaning of a complex mix of mediated communication and information sharing through various means such as crowdsourcing or offline means of collaborative organisation. Those who align with this model are more likely to be interested in how knowledge is acquired through education and learning, rather than in quantities of information (or data) and quantitatively measured outcomes.

The dominant instrumental model is predicated on a set of ideas suggesting that if financial resources are targeted at an issue and market forces are given free reign, then productivity gains and economic growth eventually will trickle down to the disadvantaged and the excluded in knowledge societies. Modernisation in the knowledge society is assumed to happen along a single uniform pathway. This pathway relies on finance to provide stability, a claim that has been robust over the past decade notwithstanding financial crises in which digital information circulated by banks and hedge fund managers has created instability and immiseration.

The critical alternative models, in contrast, tend to rely on finance from voluntary sources or finance offered on terms that are presumed to be fairer than the costs of money in the commercial market, such as from donor organisations. These models privilege collaborative initiative, mobilizing citizens from the bottom up as in the case of various forms of citizen mobilisation and activism. It is assumed typically that constant disruptive technological change will not enable fair outcomes unless there is policy intervention to address asymmetrical power. Mobilisations of citizens arising from within these models come into conflict with

those who seek control from the top down. In the critical alternative models values may be articulated, for example, through principled stances against copyright restrictions, an intrusive state and commercial surveillance, the export of educational content from the global North to South without considering local cultures, and restrictions on online freedom of expression.

4. Models in Discourse and Practice

The contradictory norms and values that underpin these contending models result in struggles between stakeholders in knowledge societies and they influence governance in the form of explicit legislation and regulation as well as the informal norms and rules that influence ideas about how best to foster knowledge societies. While these contradictory norms and values are not new to societies operating under capitalism, it is important to consider how these fundamental contradictions are playing themselves out in knowledge societies policy debates. Specifically, these contested norms and values influence stakeholder actions in numerous project and programme areas that are often idealised as being consistent with the WSIS aspiration for people-centred knowledge societies.

The persistent ascendance (and re-emergence) of values consistent with the dominant instrumental model is what gives rise to governance that favours commercial markets for the exchange of individually (or corporately) owned digital information. This is so despite the fact that the diffusion of new digital technologies often challenges conventional corporate models and puts company profits at risk. It is so, additionally, despite the fact that governments are finding it difficult to control the circulation of digital information which they claim they have a right to achieve.

Differences in the policy discourse can be detected between those favouring the instrumental model of knowledge societies and those favouring critical alternative models that envisage diversity, privilege local context and seek governance arrangements that favour collective action. In the policy discourse on knowledge societies, we often find a mixture of discourses so that the values and

norms guiding governance are blurred or hidden and, therefore, far from transparent (Mansell, 2014). For example, the priorities for WSIS-related knowledge societies actions often read as follows: capacity building – enabling people to choose their own pathways, education and building digital literacies including through vocational training, transforming access to information into useful knowledge, and mainstreaming digital technology and service policies and interventions.

Such priorities refer to capacity building – enabling people to choose their own pathways. But 'people' may refer to the instrumental rational actor of the individualistic instrumental model, or to people in the sense of collective action aimed at achieving equitable outcomes. On a high level of policy, there are references to education and building digital literacies in nearly every WSIS document and, in some, to the need not only for formal and informal training, but also for vocational training (Mansell & Tremblay, 2013). At this level of abstraction, however, actions could embrace educational curricula that are imported bringing with them values and norms supporting commercial development and competition or curricula aimed at inculcating commons-based actions that are devised by and with local stakeholders.

In some cases, and this was apparent in WSIS+10 documents in 2015 (CSTD, 2015), there is reference to the need to transform access to information into useful knowledge. But note the ambiguity of the terms 'information' and 'useful'. This could be translated into an instrumental conception of quantities of ostensibly value free information and, for instance, algorithmic big data and pattern recognition initiatives to detect 'persons of interest'. There is no basis for understanding for whom the information that is accessed is meant to be useful – owners of capital or workers? Alternatively, this could refer to an acknowledgement that the transformation of any information into knowledge is never related only to digital information – any such transformation occurs within a complex environment of existing norms, values and practices if it is to have a chance of providing a basis for problem solving that is meaningful to local stakeholders. Highly abstract priorities for knowledge societies conflate and hide

the norms and values that guide the governance arrangements that are shaping and facilitating change in practice.

A further priority that frequently appears in discussions of policy for knowledge societies is the need to mainstream digital technology and services. There is, from one point of view, a good reason for this – stakeholders who understand the crucial role of the mediated information and knowledge environment in every aspect of life – culture, sociality, economic and political endeavor, are trying to ensure that knowledge societies issues are on the agendas of others, not least, the sustainable development goals agreed in 2015. But this also signals a problem. As soon as an effort is made to 'mainstream' knowledge societies actions, the potential for clashes in the normative understandings of how change can and should be mobilised and organised is even greater.

If digital technologies in mediated knowledge societies are to play an enabling or empowering role and be inclusive, for instance, by empowering women, by protecting children's rights, by being participatory in practice, not just in name, and by playing a role in enhancing people's livelihoods in ways that are inclusive and equitable, then the contradictions between the norms and values embedded in the competing models discussed above must be brought to the forefront and their consequences evaluated. Mainstreaming comes with a big risk because it is likely to diminish the possibilities for deliberation and debate about contradictions in values and their consequences. This is because mainstreaming of digital technology and services debates means that investment in them, and the processes associated with their diffusion and appropriation by users, becomes buried under the weight of sector concerns in the energy, health, or environment sectors, for instance. In these sectors, the instrumental dominant model is even more entrenched than it is in the digital services sector. The result of mainstreaming could be that the disempowering features of WSIS action implementation strategies become increasingly less visible as success in the diffusion of smart phones or access to databases in the Global north accumulates.

It is typically claimed that policy makers and other stakeholders should work towards *a better balance* between the competing models of how to foster knowledge societies. I have argued this in policy forums and reports (Mansell & Tremblay, 2013). Since the models are based on fundamentally contested values, however, it is likely that balance, as such, will not be achieved and it should not therefore be presented as an aspiration. Some may argue that the discourse of balance should be used because it is one that policy makers are familiar with and there is some merit in that observation. It is also the case that critical scholars cannot draw policy makers' and other stakeholders' attention to underlying contradictions in the values in these models if they do not engage with proponents of the instrumental model. Fundamental contradictions cannot, and should not, be brushed away and they may be able to cohabit in a way that takes advantage of opportunities for advances in directions envisaged by proponents of critical alternative models.

Laclau and Mouffe's (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) depiction of an agonistic set of relationships between stakeholders and their contested values is helpful in this respect. Their perspective on power relations suggests that struggles will be punctuated by temporary 'cease-fires' and that momentary consensus on actions can restrain the excesses of the dominant instrumental model. This approach will not be radical enough for some, but it acknowledges the possibility that such moments open up spaces within the neoliberal order where shifts towards values, norms and practices consistent with critical alternative models of governance can be advanced.

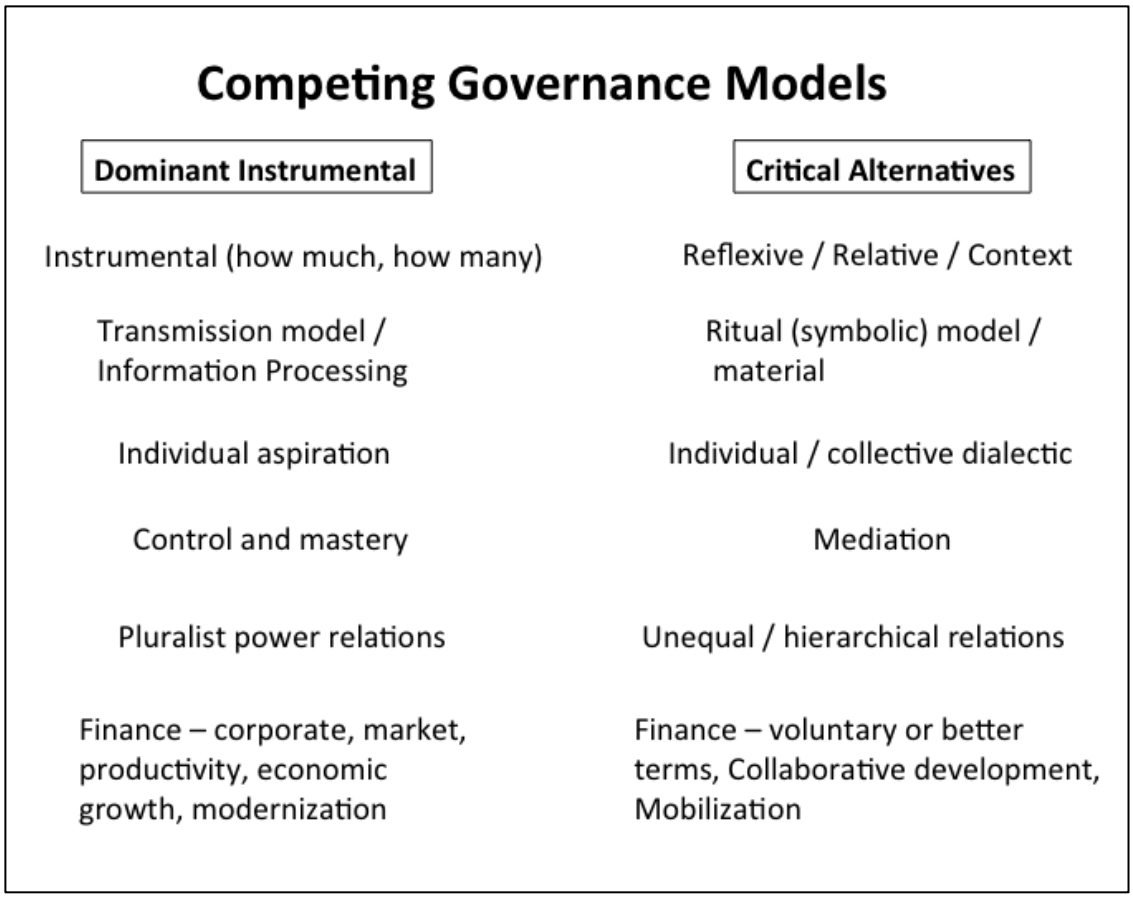
Stakeholder groups need to be informed about the contradictory norms and values embraced by different models. This means building capacities for critically evaluating options or strategies for action, in this instance, in relation to the WSIS+10 follow-up actions. Destabilization in the wake of financial crises, alongside global social instability visible in migrations and dislocations of peoples and in regional conflicts, creates agonistic opportunities to recalibrate knowledge societies governance so that there is greater potential to pursue norms and

values consistent with the critical models, that is, with equality and fairness as the principal goals.

Conclusion

Scholars need to give greater attention to the interdependencies between dominant and alternative models of change in governance arrangements for knowledge societies at all levels – from the very abstract high-level policy principles to practice-based initiatives sponsored by different stakeholders. Critical analysis needs to be complemented by pragmatic consideration of what is feasible within a given constellation of governance institutions. This is because when critique is offered without suggestions for practical action, there is little likelihood of enabling digital technologies and information to play a positive role in 'enlarging people's choices' (Sen, 1999). Practitioners also need to become more explicitly aware of the asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in digital technology innovation and its governance. There is an important role for critical researchers to explain *how* power asymmetries re-emerge in knowledge societies. It is necessary to engage with incommensurate values so as to foster better strategies for making the distinctions between models of knowledge societies more visible. Failure to develop such strategies will mean that the dominant instrumental model goes largely unchallenged in practice.

Table 1: Comparing Competing Models of Knowledge Societies Governance



Source: Author

References

CSTD. (2015) *Digital Development*. UN Commission for Science and Technology for Development, E/CN.16/2015/2, 23 Feb. Geneva.

Kleine, D., Hollow, D., and Poveda, S. (2015) *Children, ICT and Development: Capturing the Potential, Meeting the Challenges*. Report prepared for UNICEF Office of Research. Geneva. Retrieved from http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/unicef_royalholloway_ict4dreport_final.pdf

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Mansell, R. (2012) *Imagining the Internet: Communication, Innovation and Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mansell, R. (2013) 'Employing Crowdsourced Information Resources: Managing the Information Commons'. *International Journal of the Commons, 7*(2): 255-277.

Mansell, R. (2014) 'Empowerment and/or Disempowerment: The Politics of Digital Media'. *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture, 12*(4): 223-236.

Mansell, R. (2015) 'Futures of Knowledge Societies: Destabilisation in Whose Interest?'. *Information, Communication & Society, 18*(6): 627-643.

Mansell, R. and Tremblay, G. (2013) *Renewing the Knowledge Societies Vision for Peace and Sustainable Development*. UNESCO, Paris. Retrieved from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/ulis/cgi-bin/ulis.pl?catno=224531&gp=1&mode=e&lin=1.

Mansell, R. and Wehn, U. (Eds) (1998) *Knowledge Societies: Information Technology for Sustainable Development*. Oxford: Published for the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development by Oxford University Press.

Marcelle, G. (2013) *ICT for Development: Unfinished Business, New Challenges and Rays of Hope*. Discussion Paper for Panel 64 'Knowledge Societies, Stakeholder Accountabiity for Sustainable Development, UNESCO WSIS+10, 25-27 Feb. Paris.

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

UN/ITU. (2003) *Declaration of Principles: Building the Information Society: A Global Challenge in the New Millennium*. United Nations and International Telecommunication Union, WSIS-03/Geneva/Doc/4-E, 12 December. Geneva.

UNCTAD. (2015) *Implementing the WSIS Outcomes: A Ten-Year Review*. UNCTAD and CSTD, UNCTAD/DTL/STICT/2015/3. Geneva and New York. Retrieved from http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/dtlstict2015d3_en.pdf

Note:

[1] This is an extended version of a presentation in Plenary Session No. 1 – the Governance of Communications Systems in Knowledge Societies: Issues and Challenges at the Workshop on Governance and Public Service Media in Knowledge Societies, PANAM, Montreal, 16 July 2015.