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Book Review

Paolo Bory, 2020, *The Internet Myth: From the Internet Imaginary to Network Ideologies*, London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book48>. Open Access with license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. 169 p.

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Notions such as imaginary, myth, ideology, utopia... have been mobilized with notable success in the social sciences throughout the past years and decades, as they are useful to incorporate in an anthropological perspective the forms of doing-together and being-together, the discourses and the objects of contemporary societies. These notions – oftentimes interchangeably, and oftentimes wrongly so – have been frequently used, in particular, in the studies of relations between technology and society. As Françoise Massit-Folléa pointed out in 2008 (critically assessing a body of work on Internet imaginaries which originated in France with Patrice Flichy’s 2001 seminal volume), such words allow for “a kind of ‘re-enchantment’ of a world which is uncertain, complex and sometimes anxiety-filled, that of technology,” and even more so when it comes to the Internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) – an ensemble of artifacts that have long been supposed to provide a limitless horizon of progress for human societies.

Yet, these concepts have also been questioned at their core and in their relation to the Internet as a research subject, with critics pondering whether using such terms as “imaginary” or “myth” as an analytical framework is not, most often, an *a priori* assumption about ongoing fieldwork dynamics rather than a problematization tool. In this regard, Laurence Monnoyer-Smith (2008) points out that these notions could be a “bad response to a good question,” as they appear insufficient to capture the ways in which social constructs are configured by a variety of mediations and intermediations, or to understand how actors actually appropriate technologies to foster their arguments and values, and what is revealed by the forms of communication established between them.

While Paolo Bory’s volume re-mobilizes the terms of both myth and imaginary in its title and subtitle, his enterprise is actually mostly one of ‘de-mythization’ and ‘de-imaginarization’, with an interdisciplinary approach, spearheaded by media history, in its toolbox. What the author is most interested in in this volume is to examine in a very concrete way how networks were imagined, designed and promoted in specific socio-cultural contexts, so as to unveil the foundations of what he calls “network ideologies,” i.e. “the idea that networks, by themselves, are the main agents of social, economic, political and cultural change” (p. 1). In Paolo Bory’s work – informed in particular by Cornelius Castoriadis’ and Paul Ricoeur’s dialogue (2016) on imaginaries as ways to define and institutionalize the integration of the experiences of the past and the vision of the future – imaginations, imaginaries and mythologies are re-configured and understood as key elements in the social construction of reality, and in particular, in the very practical, and infrastructure-embedded, struggles for control that permeated the Internet since its very early days.

The Internet Myth is one of the most recent and notable additions to a field of study, that of Internet history, that – as *préfacier* Gabriele Balbi, former supervisor of the PhD dissertation the book is based on, points out – is acquiring increased importance and nuance around the work of a growing community of researchers, exemplified by the recent creation of the journal that publishes this book review. However, there are important touches of interdisciplinarity in the book, including elements of sociology, science and technology studies, political economy and media archaeology, and this interdisciplinary glance is applied to a variety of sources including the more classical semi-structured interviews and archival documents, but also more “discipline-specific” materials belonging to digital-born heritage.

As the Internet is now several decades old, scholars can start interrogating its historical dimension in all its complexity – and geographical diversity, and this book provides a contribution towards this endeavor (Gabriele Balbi refers to it in his preface quite explicitly as a “de-Americanization” of the field, referring to a dominant narrative and mythological apparatus that has long been focused primarily on the United States). Paolo Bory tackles this challenge by putting together two case studies, at first glance vastly different in scope, aims and nature: one of the most successful technologies of recent history, the World Wide Web, is immediately followed by two “failed” networking projects in Italy, Socrate and Iperbole. While this pairing could bring some perplexity to several readers’ minds (it did to mine initially), credit should go to the author for boldly using it to serve a demonstration of the vast differences – often embedded in national realities, infrastructures and economies – subtending networking projects, and the expectations, imaginations and design choices that made them what they are (or were). Furthermore, the two empirical chapters of the book are linked in other subtle ways, including a focus on the European dimension of Internet history and an exploration of the 1990s as a crucial period in this history, one when the Internet increasingly came to be understood as a *need* – as put by the author; other discussions that come to mind are those on the Internet as a (human) right (Best, 2004) or as a global facility (Musiani, 2009).

The book has a simple structure that includes four chapters. The first chapter makes a case – quite familiar to this journal’s readers – for a theoretical perspective on Internet history able to move beyond the linear, deterministic, US-dominated perspective on the evolution of networking technologies, and for the need to highlight a series of alternative and competing histories. The different sections of this chapter examine the consequences of this pluralistic vision for the very concept of Internet imaginary – which in the author’s view entails a shift towards *network imaginaries* – and establishes the link between network imaginaries, the political economy of media and the emergence of “network ideologies” (p. 31).

The second chapter, the first of two empirical ones, examines the narratives and the imaginary constructed around the birth of the World Wide Web. It is an examination of the ensemble of narratives constructed and disseminated to promote the Web during and after its invention. This chapter interestingly shows the extent to which the enormous success of the Web does not only, and perhaps not primarily, rely on its technical qualities, but on its framing as a “good, egalitarian and revolutionary invention” (p. 41), strongly supported by the story of its creator, Tim Berners-Lee, as a quiet and unique hero – in the long tradition of media history heroes such as Edison, Marconi and Jobs who are well accounted for by Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth” (Campbell, 2004). As the author argues, “to overcome the

monolithic and linear path of the Web, and the ideological consequences of such a partial history, is essential to recognize how this story has been recounted as part of the dominant narrative of Internet history” (p. 66); a narrative that can and should be countered, or at least complemented, with “other” case studies and interpretive lenses.

The third chapter intends to show how to do just that – and to do so, picks two examples of “lost networks,” the institutions-driven Socrate and the grassroots Iperbole projects in Italy: two European histories of networking linked to particular political and infrastructural visions, and aimed at demonstrating how “national and local cultures, political and economic traditions, and media landscapes impacted on the current state of digitization far beyond the Web’s invention” (p. 70). Despite the previous chapter’s ingenious take on Web history, this is the chapter I enjoyed the most, thoroughly original in its choice of case study in a vastly understudied country from the standpoint of technological and networking development, well-written and engaging. The author weaves together seamlessly visions, narratives and documental evidence to make a case for the power of the “hidden sides” of the history of networking.

The final Chapter 4 brings together insights from previous chapters, the case studies in particular, to refine the theoretical perspective of the book. In particular, it makes a case for exploring the *limits* of networks and of the imaginaries founded on networking models, as a means to “accept the constant tension between the past and the future, between the dreams of a networked society and those socio-technical, cultural, economic and political constraints that are able to regulate, shape and control networked societies” (p. 6).

This book is an interesting and timely reading, of which I particularly appreciated the interdisciplinary perspective and mastery of different sources and materials. A part of me wonders whether its transition from a PhD thesis to a book should have entailed the hardest thing to do for a scholar – leaving behind part of his work to concentrate on the other. While, as previously mentioned, the author’s Chapter 2 take on the Web is interesting and well-presented, I am not sure that the Italian case studies – which are indeed the “hidden treasure” of this study, covering completely new territory and unveiling private archives well-deserving to be unveiled – actually needed it as a prelude to convey the book’s core message and make a case for looking beyond dominant technologies, their narratives and imaginaries. I would perhaps have been a more satisfied reader if the two central chapters had been dedicated one to Socrate, one to Iperbole (it seems to me that the author had largely the material and depth to do so), and more time and space had been dedicated to compare their “network ideologies”, including their consequences for Italian Internet governance, and to the implications of this comparison for the book’s underlying thesis. Perhaps, this would also have allowed for a more detailed discussion not only about the power of limits, but about the power of failures – an incredibly fascinating subtopic of media history and media archeology to which the author has contributed elsewhere (Bory, 2018) and, so it appears to this reviewer, is one of the most innovative recent contributions to the ‘pluralistic history’ this book is part of. That being said, I would like to reiterate my appreciation and admiration for this volume, and my pleasure in reading it as one of the most important recent contributions to the plural, non-deterministic, alternative Internet history this journal is also a testament to.

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