A Manifesto for Inclusive Digital Futures: Global Conversations and Action on the 4th Industrial Revolution, LKAS, University of Glasgow, 26-27 May 2021

Towards a Different Datafied World – Challenges, Constraints and Potentials
Roundtable Session 2, Thursday, 27 May 2021

Professor Robin Mansell, Department of Media and Communications, LSE
Email: r.e.mansell@lse.ac.uk

Online services are permeating people's lives even if many are still excluded. AI-enabled algorithms are presenting multiple societal problems. These include erosion of our capacities to govern digital operations and sustain individuals' autonomy and control over their lives. The Fourth Industrial Revolution with its focus on AI, robotics and bioengineering comes with a digital imperative. This is that 'catching up' with the pattern of development in the global North will have a direct and beneficial impact on all societies. The main drivers of AI-supported datafication are the private sector's interest in profit and the promise of economic growth flowing from investment in AI, connectivity such as 5G and numerous Internet of Things applications.

Many would agree that technology 'is never innocent' (Escobar, 1995) and that alternative approaches are needed to address the injustices of digital 'disruption'. Yet, it is difficult to destabilise the Fourth Industrial Revolution expectations as investment in AI and digital technologies progresses because of the dominance of key sets of ideas about the 'rights and obligations we have as individuals in regard to each other' (Taylor, 2007; Mansell, 2012). The ideas dominant in the West are about privileging a market-led tech diffusion model. In the East (China), they are about a state/market led tech diffusion model. In both of these, the key ideas are 1) that tech innovation results in mastery of information processing and powerful, cheap, applications allowing us to control our environment; 2) that everyone can produce and/or consume information he/she values; 3) that impediments to commercial markets should be removed (neoliberalism); and 4) that all this is consistent with democratic goals and fundamental rights protection (privacy, freedom of expression, safety and security) (Mansell and Steinmueller, 2020). These ideas are coupled with two premises.

> **Premise 1:** a global competitive digital market is consistent with maximizing individual *and* collective welfare.
>
> **Premise 2:** Regulatory measures to balance economic and public values in market-led digital tech development will lead to an equitable, rights respecting, and inclusive digital world.

In the face of growing disquiet about exclusions and harms accompanying the spread of AI-enabled commercial datafication it makes sense to ask, 'can we know better?'.

> Can we know better how to organise change processes so that ICTs are not treated as a rag-bag of factors that impact on societies in ways that are assumed to lead to more or less similar outcomes for the human beings who encounter them in various parts of the world? (Chambers, 2017)

There is a far less privileged imaginary or set of expectations about the development of a technologically mediated future. This is one in which collaborative or commons-based approaches receive much greater attention. This imaginary is of a digitised world without the excesses of control from above and with protections from the 'automation of inequality'. Collective action of course brings no guarantee of more equitable outcomes. As Hess and Ostrom (2007) demonstrate, the outcome 'may be positive or negative or somewhere in between'. But alternative futures of

digitalisation and datafication may help to avert some of the evident as well as the 'hidden injuries' (Honneth, 1996) arising with the current Fourth Industrial Revolution prevailing imaginary and its practice. Dialogue embracing alternative approaches in moments and places 'where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it' (Shor and Freire, 1987) have historical precedent and resistance to the dominant imaginary of a technology mediated future is central to any remaking process.

Alternative imaginaries must embrace wider concerns about the enlargement of precariate workforces due to labour market insecurity and persistent underinvestment in education, health and housing. Broader debate at least stands a chance of tipping decisions about digital investment towards public values. It stands a chance of denaturalising prevailing approaches to AI innovation and datafication. Alternative digital future approaches require financial sustainability, potentially through public provision, some collective (not for profit) provision and some voluntary provision. Fundamental to collective action inspired alternatives is the idea is that **people must be able to exit commercial datafication and that they can do so only if they have somewhere to exit to.**

Is it possible to do digitalization and datafication differently? Can alternative choices be made that are not 'indifferent to the lives that people can actually live' (Sen, 1999)? Central to the answers is an emphasis on:

- Treating public/collective supply of digital services as a desirable alternative to the commercial digital/AI marketplace.
- Emphasizing initiatives to develop AI and other digital technologies in ways that respect individual autonomy and offer people effective choices.
- Enabling national/local decision making about whether certain datafication techniques should be restricted or subject to outright bans.
- Acknowledging diverse standards and ensuring that judgements are taken in accordance with the rule of law.
- Changing the norms and rules of data ownership.

The urgency of developing alternative digital futures may be clear, but the project of doing so is politically contested. In all countries in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, we are witness to the ratcheting up of intrusive datafication and compromises with privacy protections, justified in name of health and safety. The logic of dominant digital imaginaries is ever present. For example, in the slum areas of India, people are being required to connect to the Internet using a smartphone to register their eligibility for vaccination. This excludes the poor and elderly from this social service as well as many others, yet the digital system is presented as providing an appropriate response to a health crisis.

In summary, proposals regionally and nationally to deliver AI-enabled digital services typically assume that private supply of digital services is optimal. The challenge is to develop sustainable alternative imaginaries or expectations about tech change that operate ***adjacent*** to commercial digital services. This requires a shift away from debates about managing 'trade-offs' between commercial and public values. It requires deliberation on pathways towards future data-enabled digital spaces designed for inclusivity, for transparency, and for mitigating the effects of racial, gender, age and other biases. Fundamentally, it requires a growing realization that 'technological progress is not a force of nature but reflects social and economic decisions' (Atkinson, 2015).

References:

Atkinson, A. B. (2015). *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* Harvard University Press.

Chambers, R. (2017) *Can We Know Better? Reflections on Development*. Practical Action Publishing.
Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the third world*. Princeton University Press.
Hess, C., & Ostrom, E (Eds) (2007) *Understanding knowledge as a commons: From theory to practice*. MIT Press.
Honneth, A. (1996) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. MIT Press.
Mansell, R. (2012). *Imagining the Internet: Communication, Innovation and Governance*. Oxford University Press.
Mansell, R., & Steinmueller, W. E. (2020) *Advanced Introduction to Platform Economics*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
Shor, I., & Freire, P. (1987) *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. Bergin & Garvey.
Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Belknap Press.