

# Introduction

## *Histories, Narratives, Networks and the Internet*

The network is the unfulfilled dream of the digital age. By the end of the last century, the Internet and the Web seemed to be the bearers of a new era in which the integration of connectivity and digital devices would bring ‘the workings of society closer to the workings of our minds’ (Berners-Lee 2000: 6). According to this narrative, especially starting from the mid-1990s, a new horizontal, coordinated, and interdependent organization of knowledge, work and social life would be realized thanks to the distributed model of communication. However, two decades later, what was once forecast to be the *golden age* of networks has instead turned out to be an age in which networks have become a *gold mine*, especially for a few actors who have taken advantage of the collective enthusiasm for networked systems. In the last decade, many critical scholars have stressed that the Western ideal of a ‘technology of freedom’ (Aouragh and Chakravartty 2016) embedded in the Internet and the Web has become a powerful model for social, economic and political control (Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Zuboff 2019). Notably, this profound change has taken place not only at the technical, economic and political levels, but also at the discursive level. The spreading narratives of the so-called ‘Internet revolution’ professed by intellectuals, politicians and countercultural movements (Turner 2006) have been subsumed by corporate players that centralize information and economic power while promoting the very same values on which ‘the network of networks’ was built. However, not only corporate actors, but also governments, cultural and political movements, and even social scientists have long professed this narrative.

This book is an attempt to retrace and challenge the ‘Internet myth’ that lies at the foundation of the longstanding network ideologies, i.e. the idea that networks, by themselves, are the main agents of social, economic, political and cultural change. In particular, this work will decode, analyse and challenge the

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foundations of these network ideologies, looking at how networks were imagined, designed and promoted during the crucial phase of the 1990s in two different socio-cultural contexts. To achieve this goal, three case studies will be scrutinized so as to unveil the complexity of the narratives and imaginaries of networking: the birth of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s and the mythization of the new medium and its inventor Tim Berners-Lee; and two networking projects, the national infrastructural plan named *Socrate*, led by the monopolist Telecom Italia, and the Bolognese civic network *Iperbole*, which was the first to give free Internet access to citizens in Europe.

At first glance these stories can look too diverse. National and local histories of networking – and especially the way in which a single country or local community domesticates, interprets and forecasts future networks – contrast sharply with a unique global vision embedded in the Web idea. Nevertheless, by studying the history of failures and situated projects, scholars can unveil the plurality of actors who took part in technological change. Furthermore, such stories emphasize the different expectations for the future of society, the way in which global narratives of networks were integrated in national and local contexts and, last but not least, they show how different networking projects embedded different forms of network ideologies that still permeate contemporary political, cultural and techno-enthusiast movements.

In order to unveil the complexity and the ideological dimension of the cases at the heart of this work, a media history perspective focused on the role of ‘old media’ will serve as an interpretative lens to de-construct and ‘de-mythicize’ the Internet myth and the myths surrounding networking technologies in general. The aim of this media history perspective is twofold. Firstly, the way in which ‘old’ media were seen as a reference for the construction of digital networks helps us to de-mythicize the idea of the Internet as a fully disruptive and self-fulfilling technology. Secondly, a source-based analysis of the impact of old media on networks provides scholars with a strong historical background to support a critical perspective on contemporary networks and their advocates.

Indeed, critical media studies have rarely intersected the history and imaginaries of new media with old media imaginaries. In this regard, the new media scholar Geert Lovink claimed that, in order to be effective, a critical approach towards networking technologies and networked cultures should keep its distance from the obsolete term ‘media’, including the outdated meanings embedded in this concept:

In times of budget cuts, creative industries, and intellectual poverty, we must push aside wishy-washy convergence approaches and go for specialized in-depth studies of networks and digital culture. The presumed panoramic overview and historicity depth suggested in the term ‘media’ no longer provide us with critical concepts. It is time for new media to claim autonomy and resources in order to leave the institutional margins and finally catch up with society. (Lovink 2011: 76–77)

Lovink is right to reclaim in-depth studies of networks. However, rather than keep a distance from the term ‘media,’ this book aims to show how past, present and future networking technologies have always maintained a stable and necessary bond with the so called ‘old.’ As some technological artefacts persist and endure – symbolically and physically – within our social life, and are in dialogue with new ones (Edgerton 2011; Marvin 1988), so also narratives of the past and narratives of the future shape the social imaginary and, in turn, forge social and individual perceptions of reality. In this regard, the conflict and the dialogue between history and narrative<sup>1</sup> represent the conceptual arena in which reality is socially constructed, and where monuments, institutions and founding myths such as the digital revolution or the so-called birth of the Web, are alternatively erected and torn down. Narratives and history are thus the building blocks of the social imaginary, and the imaginary is one of the most powerful instruments to weave, promote and disseminate ideological stances and power (Jasanoff and Kim 2015).<sup>2</sup>

In the last century, sociologists and philosophers have addressed the key role of the imaginary within societies. In an interesting debate around the possible meaning of this term, two leading scholars, Cornelius Castoriadis and Paul Ricoeur, tried to summarize their theoretical views on this subject. During the debate Ricoeur claimed that ‘we are always immersed in a dialectic relationship between a horizon of expectations and a space made of experience’ (Castoriadis and Ricoeur 2016: 58). Castoriadis replied, ‘It’s because of the change of horizons that we constantly need to interrogate our origins’ (66). In Castoriadis’ view, the imaginary defines and institutionalizes cultural processes integrating the experiences of the past and the vision of the future; hence the imaginary should not be seen as a static dimension, since it creates new realities and is constantly changing (it is like ‘magma,’ in Castoriadis’ term). From this perspective the imaginary is constantly stretched between the two forces of the past and the future; stories and narratives are the expressions of this tension between our institutionalized reality and desires for change, hence the imaginary projections of individuals, communities and societies. To question, to retrace and to analyse past imaginaries of networking means to interrogate both the origins of networking technologies and the way in which their life-paths have been narrated over time. Today, the institutionalization of the Internet myth has contributed to lay the foundations of the conceptual shift from a technical object (the network as infrastructure) to an ideological reference (the network as the elective model for the organization of societies). However, as this book aims to show, ideological visions of networks are older than the Internet, and network ideologies are much older than digitalization.

In broad terms, the theoretical frame adopted in this work relies on three main assumptions. Firstly, there is more than one Internet, thus there are several histories of networking which are expressions of a complex system of technical, cultural and historical trajectories, most of which are still uncharted. Secondly, the development of any computer network depends also on the past,

on the media and the socio-cultural environment in which every networking project was realized and conceived. Finally, the imaginary, coupled with socio-economic forces, influences and shapes the way in which innovation is used and framed, and in some cases exploited, at the pragmatic and discursive levels. Media and technologies, from this perspective, are not mere instruments or channels for human communication. Rather, technical objects such as networks, the Internet and the Web both convey and *are themselves* narratives; they communicate something to us.

Applying to these insights a perspective that is critical and informed by media history may help to unveil and scrutinize the tension between different network imaginaries, while also highlighting key aspects such as the influence of broadcasting media, the material dimension of networks and the rhetorical constructs lying at the core of the dominant narrative of Internet history. To look historically at the multiple dimensions of ‘network imaginaries’ is thus an essential step to challenge and de-construct network ideologies. Notably, digging into *network imaginaries* means examining how narratives, and the history that they carry, are able to shape technological and cultural change by acting as metaphors for ideological visions, as contemporary myths and, most importantly, as powerful means of cultural and social action or control. As stressed in the Castoriadis-Ricoeur dialogue, the category of the imaginary is not interpreted here as an independent or transcending dimension of social life; rather it is a key element for the social construction of reality, but also for the symbolic struggle for control which is still taking place in the digital media landscape.

Again, history is essential to the analysis of the imaginary. In order to stretch the possible angles of analysis of network imaginaries, historical research is not only useful, it is necessary. Acknowledging and taking the risk inherent in such a multidisciplinary approach, this book takes into account the need for new forms of integration between media history, Internet studies and critical theories; it is for this reason that the epistemological premise of this work is in line with Peter Burke, according to whom ‘without the combination of history and theory we are unlikely to understand either the past or the present’ (Burke 1993: 19).

The book is organized into four sections. The first section highlights the presence of a dominant narrative of Internet history. In particular, this narrative constructs a linear, progressive and US-oriented perspective on the evolution of networking technologies, disregarding a series of alternative and competing histories. Narratives regarding the birth of the World Wide Web and its spread during the 1990s are here interpreted as the culmination of this evolutionary process, which interested networking technologies in Western societies for at least five decades (1950s–1990s). Challenging this deterministic vision, paragraph 1.2 underlines the different projects that co-existed or competed with the Internet before the 1990s. The section 1.3 highlights the importance of studying the more complex subject of *network imaginaries* rather than confining

historical and social analyses only to the Internet imaginary. This terminological shift about the very subject of the field is justified through some key examples that demonstrate the plural and multifaceted identity of network histories (Sections 1.4–1.5), the networking models (centralized, decentralized and distributed) that guided different projects and other media histories, and the importance of materiality and networking infrastructures for the construction and the conceptualization of computer networks. Finally, section 1.6 establishes the link between network imaginaries, the political economy of media and the emergence of network ideologies. This discussion also looks at how critical media studies and the political economy of media and communication can profit from network histories and engage in dialogue with the case studies at the heart of this book.

Chapter 2 focuses in depth on the first case study: the narratives and the imaginary constructed around the birth of the World Wide Web. By examining the narratives constructed and disseminated to promote the Web during and after its invention, the chapter stresses two main theoretical aspects. Firstly, it highlights how the Web's invention and the figure of its inventor Tim Berners-Lee have penetrated the social imaginary by means of an old and well-known narratological structure: Joseph Campbell's monomyth (2.1.1–2.1.2). Secondly, the chapter highlights the undisclosed continuity and the direct relationship between the Web imaginary and a series of longstanding narratives and imaginaries related to media and communication technologies such as broadcasting, transportation and digital networking systems (2.2). Finally (2.3), a critical stance towards the monothematic and deterministic vision of Web history is advanced in order to downsize its cultural dominance. In this regard, to assume a critical distance from the Web's myth is here considered an essential action to expand the view on the wider and complex media landscape characterizing both the past and the present stage of networking systems in order to challenge one of the strongest narratives supporting the network ideology.

Chapter 3 focuses on two alternative and unknown histories of networking: the failed Italian project for a national infrastructure named *Socrate*, and the Bolognese civic network *Iperbole*. *Socrate* was a fibre-optic national infrastructure aimed at connecting the main cities of the Italian territory during the mid-1990s, whereas *Iperbole* was the first attempt to use the Internet for direct and participative democracy in Italy. After a brief introduction that stresses the relevance of national and local histories in relation to network imaginaries (3.1), section 3.2 introduces the Italian networking landscape at the time. Then, sections 3.3 and 3.4 deal with the different network imaginaries that co-existed in Italy, focusing in depth on specific aspects such as the technical development of the *Socrate* project, the networking model on which it was designed and promoted, the different vision of networking entailed in the concurrent project of the civic network *Iperbole* in Bologna and the different reasons behind the decline of the two projects. Sections 3.5 and 3.6 deal with two theoretical

aspects emerging from these histories: the first concerns the conflicting imaginaries entailed in the *Socrate* and *Iperbole* projects, while the second highlights the persistence of these networks, the importance of their material traces and the communicative function they serve. The last paragraph of the section (3.7) focuses on the relevance of alternative network histories for the analyses of the different imaginaries of networking that have co-existed, dialogued and competed over time. It stresses how these projects left both an imaginary and pragmatic legacy in terms of digital infrastructures, literacy, and even in terms of political and economic strategies today.

Chapter 4, drawing on the previous analyses of the case studies, proposes a theoretical perspective that looks beyond network ideologies, thus overcoming a vision of networks as determining and autonomous structures/models for the organization of societies. In order to relate the perverse effects and the power structures that took advantage of the Internet myth to the legacy of its underlying narratives, this section highlights the long-term permeability of network imaginaries, arguing that contemporary networks should be seen as limited technologies, and thus as models that rely on a structural and discursive continuity with older media and imaginaries. A critical move within this theoretical framework is here considered a strategic step towards a deeper understanding of technological and social change in contemporary societies. To be aware of the *limits* of networks and of the imaginaries founded on networking models, means in fact 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. Questioning the dominant narrative of Internet history is in fact a first essential step in order to re-position human imagination at the core of the social imaginary, challenging at the same time the idea of a future left in the hands of an immutable techno-cultural system under the control of a few powerful actors.<sup>3</sup>