

# Research impact: making a difference

## Preserving citizens' interests on the Internet

Research by LSE Media Professor Robin Mansell influenced public policies aimed at protecting citizens' rights to internet access and privacy

### What was the problem?

National and international authorities assumed that the rapid growth of internet technology would democratise access to information networks and enable previously disenfranchised citizens to participate fully in contemporary debates and marketplaces.

Government policy was based on this assumption, whereas in reality corporate interests, the commercial value of digital information and the state's interest in monitoring citizens' online activities all began to take priority over 'open' access to the internet. This was inexorably leading to a gradual marginalisation of citizens' rights in the online world.

### What did we do?

The work of Robin Mansell, LSE Professor of New Media and the Internet, focused on three specific areas relevant to this problem: policies for digital technology, copyright infringement, and network security and online privacy.

Her research on *policies for digital technology* examined the proliferation of digital media and information applications. She demonstrated that the dominant claim – diffusion of technology will lead to more equitable civic participation – is informed by a one-dimensional model of technological change. Policies developed as a consequence of the model lead to curtailment of citizens' open access to the Internet in favour of corporate exploitation of digital information and state monitoring of citizens' online activities.

Mansell analysed information society policies aimed at creating incentives for network infrastructure development, expanding creative output and protecting data. She established that digital innovations are not technologically inevitable but rather the result of complex interactions between cultural, social and economic factors.

She also examined justifications for public and private investment in faster broadband in the United States and Europe and showed that government policy overemphasises the need for faster broadband and neglects to foster online participation, leading to insufficient digital inclusivity.

Mansell's research on *copyright infringement* has challenged received opinion about the effect of digital 'piracy' on the creative industries. Industry claims that Internet users who openly flout legislation damaging their markets ignore the fact that users have adapted to the online world,

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often by creating a sharing culture. Legislation aimed at suppressing this trend might be counterproductive and could inhibit citizen participation.

The third strand of Mansell's research has been on the technical capability of the internet to influence *network security* and the social consequences that threaten citizens' *online privacy*. Mansell highlights the differences between policymakers' assumptions about the use of technology for state security and its actual use by corporate concerns. Policymakers often place undue trust in the ability of technology to protect citizens' democratic rights when there is real danger that it could be used to curtail privacy.

## What happened?

Mansell's work led to acknowledgements by policymakers of the complexity of change in the digital world and the legitimate claims of all stakeholders to Internet access. In 2005, UNESCO drew on Mansell's research to signal a major shift towards a knowledge society policy with a focus on people and fairness. This was reflected in UNESCO's 2008-2013 medium-term strategy, following which Mansell was commissioned to write UNESCO's report on *Renewing the Knowledge Societies Vision* (2013).

Many of her recommendations were repeated in UNESCO's recommendations for the United Nations review of the Millennium Goals (2013). In addition, the *Vision* report was slated for distribution in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Russian in 2014, timing that was expected to influence the final deliberations on the Millennium Goals.

Mansell was invited to present her recommendations on increasing investment in broadband networks at the *Fourth Ministerial Meeting on the Information Society for Latin American and the Caribbean Region* in Uruguay in 2013. Her work contributed to the incorporation of the idea of 'open' (i.e. non-proprietary) digital services development in that region.

Mansell's research also helped to moderate measures aimed at curtailing copyright infringement. The UK's *Digital Economy Act 2010* was designed to monitor the activities of internet users suspected of infringing copyright. Internet Service Providers challenged the Act in the Administrative High Court, fearing that it would oblige them to provide data about their customers.

'Mansell's report on *Cyber Trust and Crime Prevention* (2004) concluded that strategies to improve security must minimise breaches of citizen privacy. A year-long enquiry was held, involving stakeholders from the Home Office, MI6 and service providers, with Mansell as lead expert representing all of the social sciences.'

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Mansell served as expert witness on behalf of 'British Telecom' and 'Talk Talk'. Her evidence was used to challenge claims by the creative industries about the costs of copyright infringement to their businesses and to support the argument that copyright enforcement must be proportional and take into account current online cultural norms. Her evidence was quoted and found to be balanced and fair. A one-year implementation of the Act was proposed in order to assess whether it would have the government's claimed impact on copyright infringement, and implementation was delayed until at least 2015.

Post 9/11, police authorities advocated the use of the internet to counteract terrorism. Mansell's report on *Cyber Trust and Crime Prevention* (2004) concluded that strategies to improve security must minimise breaches of citizen privacy. A year-long enquiry was held, involving stakeholders from the Home Office, MI6 and service providers, with Mansell as lead expert representing all of the social sciences. Her finding that intrusive technical solutions to security risks might compromise citizens' rights was acknowledged and, when the *Communications Data Bill 2013* was proposed, it was defeated by objections drawing on Mansell's report. Mansell's emphasis on a citizen-centred, empirically-based policy when creating new legal powers to inspect emails was part of her ongoing efforts to ensure appropriate consideration and protection of democratic rights in the internet age.

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Robin Mansell is Professor of New Media and the Internet in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work examines the social, economic, and political issues arising from new information and communication technologies. She was President of the International Association for Media and Communication Research, 2004-2008, and Scientific Chair of the annual European Communications Policy Research Conference, 2008-2014. She is author of many academic papers and books including *Imagining the Internet: Communication, Innovation and Governance*, Oxford University Press 2012.

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