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HOW TO ACTIVATE THE POTENTIAL OF IMAGINARY NETWORKS

Lori Emerson
University of Colorado Boulder
lori.emerson@colorado.edu

Abstract: I explore how imaginary networks provide us with meaningful models for alternative future networks outside of or beyond the internet. This essay mostly looks first at how media archaeology's interest in uncovering media from the past to reimagine media in the future could lay the initial groundwork for seeing imaginary networks as alternatives to the contemporary internet. However, I find that media archaeology has a limited ability to understand imaginary networks; instead, complimenting it with Black radical thinkers such as Franz Fanon and Marxist thinkers such as Franco 'Bifo' Berardi gives us tools to imagine networks beyond the reach of global financial capitalism.

Keywords: black radical tradition, history of technology, imaginary media, Marxism, media archaeology, wireless radio

1. Introduction

In 1996, Siegfried Zielinski introduced the term 'media archaeology' to describe a turn already underway toward digging out 'secret paths in history, which might help us to find our way into the future.'[1] Zielinksi and other early proponents of media archaeology were seeking to move away from what they saw as conventional practices of historiography that overly favoured both linear narratives (that, in turn, reinforced the idea of technological progress) and aesthetic or narrative representations of technology and, instead, delved into technologies that were dead ends and failures as well as into their material underpinnings. Participating in the momentum of media archaeology as an alternative approach to the history of technology, between 1998 and 1999 Erkki Huhtamo and Eric Kluitenberg initiated discussions around a collective project called 'An Archaeology of Imaginary Media' that ultimately led to the addition of 'imaginary media' to the range of forgotten, lesser-known, and failed past media of interest for media archaeology. In the wake of a mini-festival in Amsterdam in 2004 and the publication of a reader on imaginary media published in the same year, Kluitenberg edited *The Book of Imaginary Media* (2007), in which he defined imaginary media as 'potential or possible media; dreamed media, fantasised media; visions of how human communication can be reshaped.' Crucially, he added that, like Benedict Anderson's imagined communities,[2] 'all media are partly real and partly imagined' – implying that, while we may be in the habit of treating 'imaginary' media as separate from supposedly 'real' ones, they are no less real than tangible, fully realised, established media.[3] In 2011, Kluitenberg elaborated yet more on the concept of imaginary media, underscoring even more directly how

> the transition between imaginary and actual media machines, in terms of their signification, can be almost seamless. Thus the imaginaries of imaginary media tend to weave in and out of the purely imagined and the actually realised media machineries…They articulate a highly complex field of signification and determination that tends to blur the boundaries between technological imaginaries and actual technological development.[4]

Thus, in contrast to their place in most histories of technology, positioning dreams, fantasies, and visions of media as part of media archaeology transforms imaginary media into real and consequential entities that are likewise almost always in service of envisioning a better future.[5] But Kluitenberg's useful addendum from 2011 still begs the question: how do we activate this vision of the future especially when, as Mark Fisher devastatingly put it a few years earlier in 2009, 'capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable…the fact that capitalism has colonised the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment'?[6] If imaginary media are not just entertaining fictions about alternative futures that we interpret as symptoms of larger cultural preoccupations, or if they are not just merely quaint remnants from a distant past with limitless stores of optimism for a future that was supposed to be better than the present, then what is their role today in an era that seems to have lost the ability to imagine a better future at all? Even more to the point: if we agree that networks in particular, especially what is now called 'the internet' to refer to the largest network of networks, are both the most powerful media of our time (shaping and determining our interactions with each other along with the nature and extent of our access to knowledge) and the most powerful tools for consolidating the power of multinational corporations, how do we set about imagining the future of networks when these corporate entities seem to have unassailable control over every aspect of networking and, again, unassailable control over our ability to imagine a future outside of or beyond this internet?

As an initial attempt to answer the foregoing questions, in this essay I explore how extending Kluitenberg's delineation of imaginary media to include imaginary networks shows how they can provide us with meaningful models for alternative future networks outside or beyond the internet. My definition of 'network' is therefore expansive insofar as I use it to refer to a material infrastructure that facilitates communication between two nodes at some (undefined) distance. Instead of analysing networks in terms of topology – an approach which lends itself to thinking of networks in abstract terms and one that almost certainly was cemented by early writings on the internet such as Paul Baran's 1962 'On Distributed Communications Networks' – understanding them as both material and as only needing two nodes reminds us that, long before the internet existed, postal systems, drum communication, whistling, and flag semaphore (to name just a few examples) were and still are all relevant communication networks.[7] More, my use of 'imaginary' in relation to networks is also expansive as it refers to never-, partly-, or even fully realised communication networks.

While media archaeology has explored some examples of imaginary media, even with 'communication' embedded in the definition I cite above, the vast array of imaginary networks that have been proposed, depicted, and described since the 19th century has barely been accounted for as networks as such. As I touch on in the next section, much has been written, for example, on depictions of wireless radio as imaginary insofar as it was often seen as a portal to the spiritual realm or even buoyed by 'ether' as much as by the electromagnetic spectrum. But imaginary networks themselves have largely been overlooked, possibly because it's all too easy to reduce networks I discuss in the interludes below such as Jacques-Toussaint Benoît's 1850 pasilalanic-sympathetic compass to just another (more cruel) expression of a longstanding, popular fascination with spiritualism, occultism, telepathy, ether, etc. – thereby relegating them to irrelevance. Given that imaginary networks have been so thoroughly overlooked as potentially meaningful, it is also not surprising that scholars have not yet thoroughly delved into the possible significance of the fact that other, seemingly more serious but unrealised imaginary networks I describe – such as Paul Otlet's Mundaneum and Hugo Gernsback's radio-controlled television plane from the early twentieth century – are depicted as wireless. Further, we have yet to explore how short-lived networks such as the Voice of Free Algeria or Radio Alice – wireless radio networks that played a profoundly important role in numerous liberation movements throughout the world between the 1950s and the 1980s – (still) exemplify the possibility of new beginnings in the future.

While I do acknowledge the centrality of wirelessness to imaginary networks, drawing on well-established scholarship around what F.T. Marinetti called in 1912 the 'wireless imagination' (alternatively translated as 'imagination without strings'), my approach is mostly informed by media archaeology as I try to account for the materiality of these wireless imaginary networks via a handful of nonlinear interludes interspersed throughout.[8] I also look at how media archaeology's interest in uncovering media from the past to reimagine media in the future could lay the groundwork for seeing imaginary networks as meaningful and perhaps even as examples of alternatives to the contemporary internet. However, even with all that this approach provides, I find that media archaeology's silence about the role that global financial capitalism plays in predetermining the future means that in order to fully appreciate the potential of imaginary networks we need to supplement it with Marxist thinkers such as Fisher and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and writers from the Black radical tradition such as Franz Fanon. While this conjunction of thinkers might appear too disparate, they are all invested in using political and/or economic theory to illuminate a path beyond a future that too often seems always already predetermined (whether by capitalism or by colonialism and imperialism).[9] In short, reading imaginary networks by way of multiple approaches and thinkers reveals that, far from being merely quirky thought experiments, these networks have the potential to guide us toward genuine, possible, future alternatives to the present internet.

2. Other Networks, Media Archaeology, and Past Futures

My interest in imaginary networks comes out of my longstanding interest in media archaeology that has been fed over the years just as much by writing on the field itself as by any number of artefacts that have found their way to the Media Archaeology Lab (MAL) that I have directed since 2009. From cameras and magic lanterns from the 1890s, to telephones and radios from the 1920s; from home computers from the 1970s (with names ranging from the dry-sounding 'DEC PDP 8/e' to the poetic 'Imagination Machine') to game consoles from the 1980s and 1990s; from countless pieces of printed matter on networks and networking, including books on time-sharing networks, Bulletin Board Systems, and network protocols, to software for the first Graphical User Interface for browsing the World Wide Web; and even ephemera such as a bright red pin that invites people to 'Ask Me About INTERnet': these artefacts now living in the lab serve both as ghostly reminders of forgotten media pasts and as invocations to imagine alternative futures.

Combined with my growing sense that media archaeology is useful for understanding self-contained technologies (whose layers can be opened up, scrutinised, and experimented with) and less useful for understanding media, especially networks built on wired or wireless infrastructures and whose messages travel on pulses of electricity or electromagnetic waves, these artefacts in the MAL gave rise to a larger, ongoing project I have been working on since 2016 called *Other Networks*. Across books, articles, pamphlets, events, and workshops dedicated to uncovering the nearly impossibly complex array of networks that preceded the internet, the goal is not only to unearth these networks for the sake of a full historical record but to examine how they did and still could offer profoundly different experiences of communicating at a distance. One part of the project, *Other Networks: A Radical Technology Sourcebook*, includes sections cataloguing examples of wireless, wired, hybrid, and, indeed, imaginary networks.[10] However, by the time most of the manuscript had been written according to this seemingly reasonable taxonomy, I found that early experiments with wireless networking in particular demonstrated the lack of a clear boundary between thought experiments, proposals, and visual or narrative depictions of networks and those that were/are functional or 'real'. Before even knowing about Kluitenberg's definition of imaginary media, I found that all networks seemed to exist on a spectrum of materiality. Even if they were never realised, or only partially realised, or fully realised but short-lived, the designs for these networks all appeared to bear material traces of their time, and sometimes they even seemed to find material expression in future networks.

The lack of a clear distinction between imaginary networks and existing wireless networks also points to why so many of the former are depicted as the latter (or at least feature wirelessness in conjunction with wired technologies), for, as Marinetti reminds us, the imaginary has always been 'without strings'.[11] In fact, for some, radio waves might as well be imaginary. As Kimberley Peters puts it, they '…do not require a medium to move through. They travel, buoyed by their own energy, through a vacuum of space. Radio waves are both nowhere and yet everywhere.'[12] Building on Susan Douglas's work on radio as part of the American imagination, David Hendy adds that

> Radio involves tuning in to signals that are otherwise invisible and inaudible. It allows a voice to become untethered from the human body and travel freely across the open air to be heard—at the very same moment—hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles away. "As if by magic," one is tempted to add.[13]

Indeed, as Hendy explains, the seeming magic of wireless communication in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reignited public interest in ether as the ultimate, all-pervasive imaginary network – one that could telepathically connect listeners with the spirit world via radio. Taking a slightly different approach than John Durham Peters or Jeffrey Sconce, both of whom compellingly explore the links between spiritualism, psychical research, and communication media, Simone Natale pointedly explains the coincidence of wireless experiments and psychical research:

> If it were technologically possible to send a message at a distance, so the argument went, then the human brain should be able to perform a similar effect. As an 1892 article in the *Spectator* put it, "why, in fact, if one wire can talk to another without connections, save through ether…should not mind talk to mind without any wire at all?'[14]

Finally, since radio waves are a ubiquitous (if limited) 'natural' resource, they do not require massive financial investment in a global infrastructure of wires (think, for example, of the thousands of miles of undersea cables that make possible the global internet) and thus, for anyone who wishes to imagine accessible, affordable networks that are also outside or beyond corporate control, what better option is there than wirelessness?

2.1 Interlude: Pasilalanic-Sympathetic Compass (1850)

The pasilalanic-sympathetic compass was never a functioning network, but it likewise did not live purely in the realm of abstract thought as it both materially (and painfully) impacted snails and expressed a mid-nineteenth century cultural desire for a means to communicate at a distance that did not require specialised knowledge or expensive materials. In 1850, French occultist Jacques-Toussaint Benoît sought to demonstrate that snails are capable of instantaneously and wirelessly transmitting messages to each other across any distance. Benoît's theory was that in the course of mating, snails exchange so-called 'sympathetic fluids', which create a lifelong telepathic bond and enable them to communicate with each other. He believed he could induce snails to transmit messages faster and more reliably than by wired telegraph by placing a snail on top of a letter and then prodding it with an electric charge, after which the snail would transmit the letter to another snail placed at some distance. The pasilalinic-sympathetic compass itself consisted of twenty-four different wooden structures containing a zinc bowl, cloth that had been soaked in copper sulphate, and a snail glued to the bottom of the bowl. Benoît tried, unsuccessfully, to demonstrate the snail telegraph to a journalist from La Presse *in October 1850.*[15]

While Benoît's experiments with telepathic telegraphy between snails predated James Clerk Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism (1867) and Heinrich Hertz's demonstration of radio waves (1887), the existence of some forty-eight different wired telegraph methods developed in the roughly one hundred years prior meant that the idea of a wirelessly harnessed electrical power for simple, inexpensive, and accessible communication at a distance must have been very appealing. Benoît's experiment also serves as an important reminder that between the 1840s and

1880s, 'wireless telegraphy' did not necessarily mean no wires were involved or that electromagnetic waves were used; instead, it referred to a wide range of manually operated optical signalling devices as well as early systems using the conductive capacities of water, land, or air. In short, as funny, strange, and cruel as the pasilalinic-sympathetic compass sounds, there are many ways in which the material lives of earlier and later telegraphic networks clearly run through it.

In addition to the influence of the MAL's collection of artefacts, printed matter, and ephemera on my growing interest in imaginary networks, hands-on experiments I have been undertaking in the lab with 'other networks' have also played a significant role in shaping my thinking. Particularly when I involve young people in these experiments with networks ranging from barbed wire fence telephones to intercoms, infrared telephones, and mini FM transmitters, it's clear that for teenagers these might as well be imaginary given the overwhelming dominance of the internet that touches nearly every aspect of their lives and has done since they were toddlers.[16] Rather than producing yet more discourse on the possibilities of alternative networks (discourse which may do little to pierce the veneer of natural inevitability that surrounds the internet), direct demonstrations of how past networks provide different and sometimes better experiences of networked communication also provide freedom, if only for a few minutes, from online tracking, surveillance, and advertising.

Other Networks and my work in the MAL also reflect my longstanding interest in surfacing a refrain running through media archaeology about how uncovering past media that never, almost, or only partially existed allows us to speculate about the potential impact these media could have had or still could have on the present and the future.[17] This refrain partly originates in the work of C. W. Ceram. While he is not particularly concerned with the future, Ceram's *Archaeology of the Cinema* (1965) anticipates later media archaeological investigations into never- or partially realised media as it includes discussions about 'dubious' and partial contributions to the amalgam of apparatuses and techniques that eventually coalesced into cinema. Refusing to write yet another narrative of technological progress, Ceram asserts: 'What matters in history is not whether certain chance discoveries take place, but whether they take effect.'[18] Instead of producing yet more narratives about when and how certain technologies were invented by whom, media historians should trace how past techniques/technologies may have materially impacted present media. Thus, Ceram implies, we need not only concern ourselves with dominant or 'successful media'; we can expand our scope to include past media that may not have been realised. As Erkki Huhtamo pointed out a little over thirty years later in 1997, Ceram's approach allows us to see that 'unrealised "dream machines," or discursive inventions (inventions that exist only as discourses), can be just as revealing as realised artefacts.'[19] Further – recalling the quote from Siegfried Zielinski that opened this essay – it is clear that past media (whether real or imagined) not only help us better understand the past itself, but they also 'might help us to find our way into the future.'[20] Picking up on this idea of the potential for past media to help us imagine the future, Thomas Elsaesser adds to the media archaeology discourse by declaring that the challenge is 'to try and give back to a particular past – say, the 1890s or the 1910s – its own future: not the one that history subsequently conferred on it.'[21]

2.2 Interlude: The Mundaneum (1910)

The Mundaneum was initially called Le Palais Mondial and was co-conceived by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine in 1910. Le Palais Mondial took the form of numerous rooms in a government building in Brussels filled with index cards and vertical filing cabinets that provided an 'encyclopedic survey of human knowledge, as an enormous intellectual warehouse of books, documents, catalogues and scientific objects.'[22] By 1934, after the project had been renamed the Mundaneum, Otlet moved on to envisioning a 'réseau mondial' *(or worldwide network) of 'electric telescopes' or wirelessly linked workstations that would allow people to access information in numerous Mundaneums as well as millions of other linked documents, images, audio, and film via workstations. For Otlet, these workstations*

> *...no longer [carry] any books. Instead there is a screen connected to a Telephone. Over there, in a great building, are all the books and related material, with all the space necessary for cataloguing and registering them… From there one could call up a page on screen to read the answer to questions posed by telephone. The screen could be double, quadruple or [decuple] if there are multiple texts to show simultaneously; there would be an audio speaker if needed for additional material to complement the text.*[23]

Each station would also allow individuals to upload files, communicate with others wirelessly, and even attend 'tele-lectures' via television screens. In Otlet's words,

> *Everything in the universe, and everything of man, would be registered at a distance as it was produced. In this way a moving image of the world will be established, a true mirror of his memory…everyone from his armchair will be able to contemplate, in whole or in certain parts.*[24]

Otlet depicted the final version of his imaginary Mundaneum in a drawing from 1934, showing it as 'a giant radio tower, beaming out information drawn from documents and transformed into radio and television signals that could be received by end users anywhere in the world.'[25] *Thus, from its origins as Le Palais Mondial to its final iteration as the Mundaneum, Otlet and his collaborators conceived of the project as existing entirely outside of corporations and the pursuit of profit; instead, it was simply about supporting the worldwide flow of ideas and information.*

The brief summary above of media archaeology's interest in uncovering imaginary media and in exploring how they might have opened up and still might open up alternative futures reminds us, once again: once we shift our attention from accounting for inventions to tracing the material impact of a wide range of media that may or may not have ever been realised, it becomes clear that imaginary media are in fact material in the sense that they influence, shape, or become incorporated in future technologies. Furthermore, no doubt because media archaeology is heavily indebted to Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* and its method of analysing the history of discourse rather than the history of objects (as if they could be understood outside of discourse), this approach to imaginary media also makes it possible to treat the imaginary itself as part of discursive regimes. In the course of excavating what certain past cultures imagined as future media, we may find that what was imaginable in the past is often unimaginable for us today.[26] However, while one might be prompted to say the reverse is also true – that what we presently imagine as the future would have been unimaginable for the past – the truth may be that our present future is no longer as open, indeterminate, and full of potential as the future was in the past. More pointedly, if we focus on imaginary networks as a subset of imaginary media, can we imagine alternatives to the current internet that aren't merely continuations of the status quo?

While media archaeology has paved the way to excavating past imaginary media to explore alternative futures, it has been notably silent on the politics of the future itself. This approach still leaves us asking: how do we activate the power of imaginary networks so that they too aren't immediately subsumed by financial capitalism and its relentless drive to ensure its own continuity by monetising every aspect of the internet (and thus every aspect of our attempts to communicate and/or share information at a distance)? Or, to put it in more direct terms, how do we prevent the 'precorporation' of imaginary networks? As Fisher declared fifteen years ago,

> What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their precorporation: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.[27]

For Fisher, it is next to impossible to think outside of capitalism, and thus, according to this logic, if anyone took the time to notice them at all, imaginary networks would also be doomed to become part of more of the same in the future.

3. Imaginary Networks and Acting As If

Hugo Gernsback was an early twentieth-century electronics entrepreneur and magazine publisher who coined the term 'scientifictions' to describe writings by himself and others that weave 'together functional and fictional devices in a manner that served for them as a form of scientific discovery in itself.'[28] In fact, the level of minute technical detail involved in describing the technologies featured in these scientifictions meant that, for Gernsback, imagination itself 'was a form of invention. In this sense, Luis Senarens literally "invented" the submarine when he described it in a nineteenth-century story.'[29] These scientifictions also do away with a clear boundary between real and imagined or science and fiction, viewing the imagination as endlessly generative. Nonetheless, how much can we really make use of this approach when one can also read Gernsback's statements on the importance of the imagination in relation to the future as creating the conditions for the present state of the future which, again, seems to have been dismally narrowed into just one future entirely delimited by financial capitalism? For example, in response to questions from readers of his magazine *The Electrical Experimenter* about why it 'lends so much space to the exploitation of the future, or in other words, why we make so much of things which as yet exist but in the imagination,' Gernsback wrote in 1916:

> A world without imagination is a poor place to live in. No real electrical experimenter, worthy of the name, will every amount to much if he has no imagination. He must be visionary to a certain extent, he must be able to look into the future and if he wants fame he must anticipate the humans wants… There can be no progress where imagination is lacking.[30]

Gernsback's unapologetic explanation of how his publication 'exploits the future' in pursuit of fame and in the name of progress certainly seems to anticipate the way in which predicting and ideally predetermining the future is now part and parcel of any long-term corporate strategy. To name just one of countless contemporary examples of this predetermination of the future, Kara Keeling opens her 2019 book *Queer Times, Black Futures* by quoting from the multinational gas and oil company Shell's 'energy scenarios' which at first glance could be mistaken for a modern-day version of Gernsback's early twentieth-century discourse on the future:

> The future is "terra incognita": although we may be able to guess the outcome of events that lie close to us, as we project beyond this we enter an unmapped zone full of uncertainty. Paradoxically, the range of options this reveals can seem paralysing.
>
> No one can definitively map the future, but we can explore the possibilities in ways that are specifically intended to support decision-making. At Shell we use scenario building to help us wrestle with the developments and behaviours that shape what the future may hold and prepare ourselves more effectively. We also believe it can inspire individuals and organisations to play a more active role in shaping a better future—for themselves, or even on a global scale.[31]

Keeling also sees the clear connection between corporate ownership of the future and the imagination: 'The imagination is among the weapons on offer in societies of control. "Invention," "innovation," and "creativity" are buzzwords in many of today's corporate cultures, in large part because they are thought to be living, human engines of capitalist growth and expansion.'[32]

'Science fiction prototyping' is yet another example of capitalism's precorporation of the imagined future and a practice that also looks disturbingly similar to Gernsback's scientifications. One of the more well-known leaders in sci-fi prototyping Ari Popper created the company SciFutures after taking a science fiction writing class at UCLA. As a CNET reporter wrote in 2018, 'His idea? Use sci-fi to help big corporations get a better sense of where their businesses could go in the future and then plan accordingly. In other words, future-proof their businesses.'[33] In Popper's own words, his business is about

> ...actively leveraging custom sci-fi narratives to generate self-fulfilling prophecies… Great SF writers take ideas and turn them into plausible, compelling and exciting visions of the future. This aspect of the futures and the foresight industry is under leveraged and what we feel provides our clients with a significant competitive advantage.[34]

3.1 Interlude: Radio-Controlled Television Plane (1924)

In 1924, Hugo Gernsback changed the name of the magazine he had published since 1920 from Practical Electrics *to* The Experimenter *in which he gradually began to publish 'scientifictions,' culminating in the latter being renamed once more in 1926 as* Amazing Stories *– arguably the venue that gave birth to what is now known as science fiction. One of the earliest issues of* The Experimenter *includes Gernsback's speculations about how the future of radio-broadcast television might include 'radio-controlled television planes': 'Tomorrow we shall find a new order of things if a war should occur. Pilot-less Radio-controlled planes fitted with 'Television' eyes will flash back what they see to headquarters.'[35] Gernsback then proceeds to elaborate how exactly this 'radio-controlled pilot-less airplane which is also equipped with electrical eyes' could work, from take-off to landing, whether in war-time or peace-time.[36] It's undeniable that this piece of writing on radio-controlled planes engages in predicting a future which one could also say eventually came to fruition in the form of drones. But, if we keep in mind Gernsback's assertions about how the act of imagining is an act of invention, one that can and ought to continually produce 'as if' scenarios, then the importance of his imaginary network is not whether or not it came to fruition.*

Instead, we could move away from the habit of producing yet more linear narratives of technological progress (i.e. early twentieth-century radio-controlled television planes produced today's drones whose primary function is surveillance) and return to the original imagining as a site of radical possibility and openness toward the future. If the act of imagining is an act of invention, it can and ought to continually produce 'as if' scenarios. Rather than merely asking 'what if' questions that may never necessitate action and that perpetuate the illusion of a dividing line between the real and the imaginary, instead act as if the line between material reality and the imaginary does not exist, as if 'television eyes' are just like biological eyes, 'the most marvelous television apparatus ever invented.'[37]

The thriving existence of a futures industry that uses the tools of science fiction (and perhaps even scientifictions) for corporate scenario planning inevitably raises the question posed by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi: is there no way to hijack 'the criminal train of capitalism?' If most proposals for imaginary networks sooner or later participate in 'the slow cancellation of the future,' a future that should have been full of promise and instead has been reduced to only one possible outcome, what is the alternative? As I suggest in the interlude above, taking Berardi's lead once again, the alternative is to see the imagination as a tool that allows us to act 'as if.'

> As if the forces of labour and knowledge may overcome the forces of greed and of proprietary obsession. As if the cognitive workers may overcome the fractalisation of their life and intelligence, and give birth to a process of the self-organisation of collective knowledge… I cannot know what will happen after the future, and I must preserve the consciousness and sensibility of social solidarity, of human empathy, of gratuitous activity, of freedom, equality and fraternity. Just in case, right? Just because we don't know what is going to happen next, in the empty space that comes after the future of modernity.[38]

Imagine an alternative future, and then act as if it is possible.

But, despite Berardi's passionate and persuasive discourse on acting 'as if', I am still left feeling stranded in discourse and without a clear path for action. In relation to imaginary networks in particular, is it that, even though Otlet and Gernsback belong to the beginnings of modernity and the 'century that trusted in the future,' we may still return to their imaginary networks and act as if they are possible?[39] Is that we should act as if we don't live in a world in which every innovation in networked communication must include an account of how it will eventually be monetised? Or should we act as if Gernsback's assertions about using the imagination for fame and profit (the latter often used interchangeably with 'progress') could somehow be reinterpreted to mean renown for creating fresh, new ways to connect, communicate, and share information? Perhaps an even more convincing approach to using 'as if' thinking to activate the potential of imaginary networks comes from supplementing Berardi with thinkers and activists from the Black radical tradition who documented or undertook short-lived wireless experiments as a result of a transformation that first took place in the imagination and then produced real, material change. In this light, the Voice of Free Algeria, the unlicensed radio station Radio Alice, and the many different iterations of 'free radio' and/or pirate radio that subsequently emerged around the world in the name of liberation (from colonial power, state power, corporate power, etc.) all remind us of the ever-present possibility that acting as if an alternative future is possible actually creates alternative futures.

3.2 Interlude: Liberation Radio(s)

In 1959, Franz Fanon published A Dying Colonialism, *a first-hand account of the fight for independence from French rule that took place in Algeria in the 1950s. Fanon's account also includes his assessment of how radio was transformed from an instrument mostly used to reassure Europeans living in Algeria that coloniality would continue indefinitely (and thus radio was largely ignored by colonised Algerians) into an instrument of mass struggle. While he does not specifically mention imagination per se, for Fanon a shift in attitudes or 'an inner mutation' began in 1951 mostly in the minds of farmers as word spread via wireless radio about anti-colonial uprisings first in Tunisia and then in Morocco.[40] Suddenly, what had seemed impossible – in this case, life beyond oppression under colonial rule – was becoming possible:*

> *In the small colonisation centers the settlers could not always understand the fellah's fierce and sudden assurance, and there were times when they would telephone to the nearest city, only to have it confirmed that nothing unusual had happened in the country. The European became aware of the fact that the life he had built on the agony of the colonised people was losing its assurance… Individuals in a fit of aberration would lose control of themselves. They would be seen dashing down a street or into an isolated farm, unarmed, or waving a miserable jagged knife, shouting, "Long live independent Algeria! We've won!"[41]*

The new-found ability to imagine otherwise led Algerians to acquire radio sets that, as if out of thin air, materialised the announcement of the existence of a Voice of Free Algeria in 1956. Along with the appearance of portable battery sets in areas that lacked access to electricity,

> *the technical instrument of the radio receiver lost its identity as an enemy object. The radio set was no longer a part of the occupier's arsenal of cultural oppression… Algerian society made an autonomous decision to embrace the new technique and thus tune itself in on the new signalling systems brought into being by the Revolution.[42]*

Even when settlers jammed the signal of the Voice of Algeria and even when they prohibited the sale of radios and battery sets, the mere existence of this clandestine radio station, no matter how 'phantom-like,' only served to bring into being 'the first words of the nation.'[43] Algerians began imagining themselves and their world as radically otherwise in the wake of radio broadcasts of liberation movements elsewhere.

Another example of the use of radio for liberation from oppressive structures of power emerges in 1976 as Berardi himself co-founded (alongside activists Maurizio Torrealta, Filippo Scòzzari, Paolo Ricci, and Carlo Rovelli) the unlicensed radio station Radio Alice in Bologna, Italy. This was likely the first instance of what would later be called 'microbroadcasting'. Given the low power (as much as 100 watts but often as low as 1 watt) and *short distances involved (as much as five kilometres from the transmitter but often much shorter), even today, microbroadcasting can be both unlicensed and legal. However, regulations determining the legal status and power of microbroadcasting vary significantly over time and from country to country; if national regulatory bodies prohibit individuals from transmitting to their local community, microbroadcasting may turn into pirate radio. The fact that regulatory bodies determine whether and how microbroadcasting is legal means it is not a practice determined strictly by the constraints of one's transmitter. Rather, as Tetsuo Kogawa writes in* 'A Micro Radio Manifesto',

> *micro means diverse, multiple, and polymorphous. If micro does not mean small in physical size, then even physically bigger radio station [sic] could become micro. Micro radio is an alternative to mass medium and global communications that could cover the globe with the qualitatively same and patterned information.*[44]

Microbroadcasting is, therefore, primarily about providing diverse points of view while also resisting the commodification of these points of view.

Originally dubbed 'free radio', Radio Alice's founders envisioned it as a conscious attempt to distribute control of the airwaves across many small transmitters to flatten hierarchies between sender and receiver, embrace localism, and use art to unsettle if not unseat capitalism. As the editors of the Toronto-based magazine, The Red Menace *described it in 1978,*

> *Radio Alice broadcast news of the events as they occurred, often by airing telephone calls from militants who described events, called for assistance in a given sector, and reported police movements. The station was twice raided and closed down by police, but resumed broadcasting by switching locations and resorting to a transmitter powered by a car battery.*[45]

It stayed on the air until 1981.

A few years later, in the early 1980s, Tetsuo Kogawa introduced free radio to Japan, calling it 'miniFM' as he led the way to hand-building tiny FM transmitters that used less than a hundred milliwatts and only had a half-mile radius. The term 'micro-radio' or 'micro-broadcasting' then emerged in the U.S. in 1983 in the wake of the police beating of African American Dewayne Readus in a public housing development in Springfield, Illinois. Readus, a blind man who changed his name to Mbanna Kantako, first created the Tenants Rights Association (TRA) and, to make sure the TRA could reach as many residents of the development as possible, he created radio station WTRA using a one-watt transmitter and broadcast from his living room. In 1988, WTRA became Zoom Black Magic Liberation Radio, then Black Liberation Radio, followed by Human Rights Radio. Kantako's activism also inspired the short-lived emergence of Radio Free Detroit, Free Radio Berkeley, San Francisco Liberation Radio, and no doubt many more.[46] *Microbroadcasting via mini-FM transmitters continues today and may even currently be experiencing a surge of popularity in the wake of widespread concern about government and corporate surveillance of both citizens and non-citizens' internet usage, especially internet-based social media platforms, and the recognition that small, ad hoc, local, non-corporate networks may now be preferable to global networks whose size and scope seem to necessitate (mostly corporate-owned) infrastructures over which individuals have no control.*

4. Conclusion

This essay began with a straightforward account of the emergence of the term 'imaginary media' and how media archaeology views forgotten, lesser-known, and failed past media both as important means for sidestepping narratives of technological progress and as oddities from the past we can use to reimagine the future. But, as I point out, not only does it appear that media archaeology has little capacity for understanding networks, but it also does not acknowledge that a vast futures industry has turned 'reimagining the future' into a slogan that obscures its work to predetermine the future. While Marxist thinkers such as Mark Fisher and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi give us tools to probe more deeply into whether it is even possible to imagine an alternative future outside of capitalism, once we look at the internet in particular as a network that is inextricably part of global financial capitalism, it becomes clear we need more than yet more critique of our current situation. We need the additional insights of Black radical thinkers who not only critique power structures but also labour to create tools for liberation. Even though this group of thinkers spans different time periods, nations, and disciplines, together they bring to light how imaginary networks (both past and present) show us genuine alternatives to the internet that could also help create the conditions for alternative futures. May 1000 imaginary networks bloom!

Notes

1. Siegfried Zielinski, "Media Archaeology", *CTHEORY* (11 July 1996), **https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14321**.
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
3. Eric Kluitenberg, ed., *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2007), 8.
4. Eric Kluitenberg, "On the Archaeology of Imaginary Media", in *Media Archeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, eds. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (University of California Press, 2011), 48. While I do not quote from it, Parikka also includes a chapter reflecting on imaginary media in his book *What is Media Archaeology?* (London: Polity Press, 2012). My thanks to the anonymous reader who helped make development of the notion of imaginary media more precise.
5. Admittedly, it's debatable whether there is a significant difference in historiography and media archaeology; elaborating these differences is beyond the scope of this essay. I elaborate on some of the perceived differences between the history of technology and media archaeology in an essay, "Media Archaeology's Methodologies for Hands-On Experimentation", in the forthcoming *Routledge Companion to Media Archaeology* edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Doron Galili.
6. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009), 8–9.
7. Paul Baran, *On Distributed Communications Networks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1962).
8. F T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without strings—Words in Freedom". **https://www.unknown.nu/futurism/destruction.html**.
9. 'Decolonising the future' and variations such as 'decolonial futures' are common phrases now used across many areas of study (including indigenous studies, sustainability, archaeology, science fiction, and Afrofuturism) to describe a wide range of approaches to reclaiming the future.
10. Lori Emerson, *Other Networks: A Radical Technology Sourcebook* (New York: Anthology Editions, 2025).
11. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without strings—Words in Freedom".
12. Kimberley Peters, *SOUND, SPACE AND SOCIETY: Rebel Radio* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), xv.
13. David Hendy, "Oliver Lodge's Ether and the Birth of British Broadcasting", in *A Pioneer of Connection: Recovering the Life and Work of Oliver Lodge*, eds. James Mussell and Graeme Gooday (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 222.
14. Simone Natale, "A Cosmology of Invisible Fluids: Wireless, X-Rays, and Pyschical Research around 1900", *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36 (2011), 267.
15. Jules Allix, "Communication Universelle", *La Presse* (26 October 1850), 1–3.
16. The Managing Director of the MAL, libi striegl, and I document these experiments with other networks via a pamphlet series called "Other Networks for Everyone" and also on our website **http://othernetworks.net**.
17. See, for example, Jay Kirby's "As If, or, Using Media Archaeology to Reimagine Past, Present, and Future: An Interview with Lori Emerson", *International Journal of Communication* 10 (June 2016).
18. C.W. Ceram, *Archaeology of the Cinema* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965), 16.
19. Erkki Huhtamo, "From Kaleidosomaniac to Cybernerd: Notes Toward an Archaeology of the Media", *Leonardo* 30:3 (June 1997), 222.
20. Siegfried Zielinski, "Media Archaeology", CTheory (July 11, 1996). Emphasis my own.
21. Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 55.
22. Quoted in Boyd Rayward, "From the index card to the World City: knowledge organization and visualization in the work and ideas of Paul Otlet", in Aida Slavic, Almila Akdag Salah and Sylvie Davies (Eds) *Classification & Visualization-Interfaces to Knowledge: Proceedings of the International UDC Seminar 24-25, October 2013* (Wurzbürg: Ergon Verlag, 2013), 15.
23. Quoted in Alex Wright, *Cataloging the World: Paul Otlet and the Birth of the Information Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 234–235.
24. Ibid, 8.

25. Ibid, 242.
26. The latter is certainly supported by other more Anglo-American approaches to the study of media history. In Carolyn Marvin's *When Old Technologies Were New*, she points out that fantasies and dreams 'are important human products that define limits for imagination. Fantasies help us determine what 'consciousness' was in a particular age, what thoughts were possible, and what thoughts could not be entertained yet or anymore.' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.
27. Fisher, 9.
28. Grant Wythoff, "Introduction", *The Perversity of Things: Hugo Gernsback on Media, Tinkering, and Scientifiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 10.
29. Ibid, 54.
30. Ibid, 161–162.
31. Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 1.
32. Ibid, 13.
33. Nicholas Tufnell, "Imagining a science-fiction future", CNET (March 9, 2018).
34. Leonard Murphy, "Interview with Ari Popper, CEO of the Coolest Company in the World–SciFutures", **Greenbook.com** (October 14, 2012).
35. Ibid, 278.
36. Ibid, 280–281.
37. Ibid, quoted by Wythoff, 280.
38. Berardi, "Precariousness, Catastrophe and Challenging the Blackmail of the Imagination", *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4:2 (Fall 2010), 127–128.
39. Berardi, *After the Future*, eds. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2011), 8.
40. Franz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 91.
41. Ibid, 41.
42. Ibid, 44.
43. Ibid, 48.
44. Tetsuo Kogawa, "A Micro Radio Manifesto", Polymorphous Space website (2002, 2006).
45. "Radio Alice: Radio in Action in Italy", *The Red Menace* 2:2 (Spring 1978).
46. Steven O. Shields and Robert Ogles, "Black Liberation Radio: A Case Study of Free Radio Micro-broadcasting", *Howard Journal of Communications* 5 (1995), 173–183.

Biography

Lori Emerson is Full Professor of Media Studies; Director of the Intermedia Arts, Writing, and Performance Program; and Associate Chair of Graduate Studies. She is also Founding Director of the Media Archaeology Lab. Emerson is author of *Other Networks: A Radical Technology Sourcebook* (Anthology Editions, 2025), co-author with Darren Wershler and Jussi Parikka of *THE LAB BOOK: Situated Practices in Media Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), author of *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (University of Minnesota Press June, 2014), and editor of numerous collections.

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