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Edited by Norah Campbell, John Desmond, James Fitchett, Donncha Kavanagh, Pierre McDonagh, Aidan O'Driscoll, Andrea Prothero
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Myth, management of the unknown

Gianluca Miscione

University College Dublin

Since centuries, myth, progress and technology are interwoven in ways that explain the past and anticipate the future. The relevance of myths is not in being true or false, but in contributing in orienting social praxes, thus in acting as a regulator of human behaviour in front of unknown consequences of today’s decisions and actions. This is particularly evident beyond Western settings, where the thirst for progress is imported with technologies.

Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them

Albert Camus

How come that new markets, whole industries and even social and technological revolutions start wrapped in some kind of myth of how better the world would be if they succeeded? In the nineteenth century it was predicted that the railroad would bring peace to Europe, even though shortly afterwards the Spaniards built their own railway system out-of-standard to impede the French from using trains to invade their territory. Steam power would have eliminated the need for manual labour, but the first industrial revolution has not entered history books for liberating humankind from physical work. In the Soviet view, nuclear power could have melted Siberian ice and made its vast land cultivable;¹ instead it became the main war deterrent during the decades of the Cold War. History is full of similar mythical visions of progress and unanticipated consequences. Myth as a bridge between vanguard aspirations and common praxis is the focus of this paper.

This paper is organised in sections as follows: an extended cross disciplinary literature review is articulated in three steps, each one with its own focus: (1) myth, (2) progress, and (3) technology. Then, the research approach is introduced in section 4. It is divided in two parts: where to study myths as defined in the first paragraphs, and how. Two cases studies of mine are described, also referring to previous publications, in sections 5 and 6. Finally, the discussion in section 7 distils the contribution about myths as modes of coping with the unknown.

Myth, a Western narrative

Myth has many and quite diverse definitions. Here, I do not consider those which tend to go into sacred domains. According to Lévi-Strauss (2001), myths are manifestations of people’s mental structures, especially in relation to regulations of behaviour. In particular, myths help people to deal with contradictions they face in their lives (like individual/community) by offering possible mediations. Lincoln defines myth as:

[…] ideology in narrative form. More precisely, mythic discourse deals in master categories that have multiple referents: levels of the cosmos, terrestrial geogra-

¹ Kom somolskaya Pravda, main Russian newspaper, published this and similar ideas on 31 December 1959 envisioning how Russia would have been 50 years later, on 1 January 2010.
Following Emmet and McIntyre (1970), myths are neither true nor false, but dead or alive, i.e. believed or not. Myths are alive as long as they can give meaning to the diversity of human situations, resolve inevitable contradictions and paradoxes of the human condition, alleviate the fear of uncertainty. Simple illustrations that I propose here are: ‘The US leads the world’ and ‘Greece is the cradle of civilization’. Their relevance in disparate sorts of communication does not derive from their truth/falseness but by transcending daily nitty-gritty and legitimising quite diverse courses of action, say ‘exporting democracy’ (also with arms) and ‘maintaining the integrity of the Eurozone’, staying with these two illustrations.

According to Barthes (1972), myth is a sign (image, word …) which acquires the values of the society at large and makes them perceived as natural. In semiotic terms, myths connote (hint at) while appear to denote (stand for). For instance often a red rose does not stand for itself but signifies romance, in many cultures. Myths evoke what is desired and hide incoherence and difficulties. In essence, myth distils a desired object and puts it above the multiple entanglements of social praxis. In this respect, myths simplify the complexity of experience and help in shaping orientations. Indeed, myths are not conceived as opposite to reality, but as a way to look at it, to provide explanations and justifications. Similarly, according to Mosco (2004), myths are seductive tales containing unfulfilled and even unfulfillable promises; like the horizon, myths back up when approached but do not disappear. Myths are performative in legitimising something to the extent they make it believed as real. So, myths can engender a ‘suspension of disbelief’. In other words, myths leverage the Thomas theorem: ‘If someone believes that something is real, it will be in its consequences’. A contemporary example comes from Bitcoin: we do not know how this crypto-currency may affect global financial transactions cutting middle-men (central and private banks). But as long as a growing mass of users believes in its libertarian myth enough to convert their money, its chances of bootstrapping beyond small circles of tech-savvies are real.2

Needless to say, the power of myths has political relevance: by constituting and re-enforcing a shared frame of reference that enables actors to deal with contradictions that can never be fully resolved (Lévi-Strauss, 2001; March & Olsen, 1989), myths play a defining role in framing sense-making thus shaping collective action while at the same time leaving out alternative views. Closer to common experience, Pollitt and Hupe (2011) refer to governance, networks, accountability, innovation and management as examples of ‘magic concepts’. Magic concepts, although more concrete, share with myths a widely agreed normative bias. Because of that, they can dissolve dichotomies and overcome impasses due to antagonistic or paradoxical situations, the same as myths do. Basically, in a decision making setting, no one would disagree with the need of governance, accountability, innovation, etc. Magic concepts are intended here as the ‘petty cash’ of myths: items of the toolkit to keep myths alive. If myths imply their own cosmologies, magic concepts operate in the same way on finer grained decision making, especially when there is lack of empirical support.

This view on myth frames my use of the concept in relation to technological change. When a paradigmatic change takes place, like with an industrial revolution, uncertainty about the

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2 Professor Zittrain (Harvard Law School), echoing Gibson’s definition of the cyberspace as a ‘consensual hallucination’, defined Bitcoin a ‘collective hallucination’.
future is particularly prominent because existing understandings may not help in making sense of what is next. In those situations, it is argued here, myths play a central role in framing our (lack of) knowledge about the future by creating consensus and bracketing out dissent. In short, myths can contain and counteract anomie (Durkheim) due to lack of knowledge.

As technology, modernity and progress are assumed to be tightly interwoven, my argument might be seen as a criticism of Modernism as a myth. A digression into philosophy can clarify my stance and introduce the rest of the argument.

Vattimo (1992) introduces three ways of looking at myth that emerged throughout the centuries: archaist, relativist and narrative. Archaism can be seen as apocalyptic. It originated and grew as a reaction against techno-scientific (Western) culture that broke the authentic relation between humankind and nature. Often, archaist stances criticise capitalism as the engine of contemporary societies and advocate for a return to a mythicised Golden Age. Through the centuries, without considering religious thoughts here, several movements that rejected Western Rationalism can be grouped under the archaism label, from Luddism to environmentalism. Vattimo recognises that the contemporary popularity of critical philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger finds its roots in archaism.

A second strand of approaches to myth can be seen as a collection of cultural relativisms. The common understanding is that any knowledge is based on myths, which have a foundational role for each knowledge. Therefore, in this view all forms of knowledge stand equal, there is no one Golden Age or principle superior to others. Rationalism is neither above nor below mythical knowledge. It is a myth among many. Kuhn’s original epistemology and mainstream contemporary Hermeneutics lean towards this cultural milieu.

The third approach to myth addressed by Vattimo is called ‘tempered irrationalism’ or bounded rationality. This view goes back to the etymology of the word myth: legend, narrative. From this perspective, myth is not against scientific objectivity, but is a form of knowledge that is more adequate to some kinds of experience than positivism. Psychoanalysis, especially Jungian archetypes, studies on historiographies and media studies are proposed as examples of this third approach to myth. As supporting evidence, Vattimo refers to the multiplicity of histories of cultures and societies that have taken the stage on mass media since the 1950s and 1960s. The plurality of perspectives that gained social visibility through the media questioned any unique telos of history. Vattimo seems not to adhere to any of the three, and later states that ‘de-mythizing is the passage from modern to post-modern’ (Vattimo 1992: 61).

Progress, utopism as symmetric of archaism

What I think that Vattimo overlooked in his threefold view on myth is somewhat symmetric to archaism: utopism. To approach them, I start from Nisbet (1980) history of the idea of progress. According to Nisbet the idea of progress permeated the whole history of the West since the ancient Greek civilisation, it consolidated with Puritanism through the alliance of religious morality and secular capital economy (Weber read it as an age of faith rather than reason) and reached its zenith with philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rationalist conceptualisation of progress dominated over two centuries of Western and world history, and has been challenged and weakened since the 1950s.

Comte (positive philosophy and law of progress), Spencer (evolutionism), Hegel (rational unity) and Marx (communism as the end of history), in spite of radical differences of their thoughts, share a sense of a desirable – and to some extend inevitable – future that is the cul-

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3 Certainly myths can also provide stability to and sustain cultures and societies that do not undergo much change. This aspect, usually the domain of traditional anthropology, is not considered here, as my aim is not to develop a comprehensive conceptualisation of myths, but more modestly to see how they mobilise actions and resources.
ministration of the social and technological changes they were witnessing through their lives. The same tension towards a better future yet to come is expressed by utopians like Saint-Simon and Fourier. The myth of progress reverberates in their utopias, as they sound like secular millenarian aspirations. The teleology of utopia has survived the criticisms of its Western ethnocentrism especially in the production of the Frankfurt School and in particular in the Ideal Speech Situation theorised by Habermas (1989). He develops a ‘procedural utopia’ according to which societies have to create and maintain a plain field of open communication where all instances can be brought in and discussed rather than only those of hegemonic groups.

The strong influence of the idea of progress echoes in the usual polarisation of apocalyptic vs. integrated and utopia vs. dystopia. The whole history of the West (Hertzler, 1923) is full of utopic/dystopic visions. Through the last century, then-new technological possibilities inspired and permeated utopias/dystopias. Some of them, like the hypertext as a mode of organising knowledge (Bush, 1945; Nelson, 1965), participatory design (Bannon, 2009; Simonsen & Robertson, 2012), and the global panopticon (Miscione, 2014), materialised to some extent. Other utopias failed, like the cyberspace ‘radical difference’ (Barlow, 1996) and Allende’s cybernetic socialist Chile (Medina, 2006). I do not intend to lean towards either apocalyptic or integrated views, the point here is that myths of progress are real in the Thomas sense and their influence manifests in originating both utopias and dystopias.

Classic utopians are characterised by similar teleology of contemporary believers in technology, well characterised by Bell, quoted in Mosco (1998): ‘One hears that new adventures in technology mixed media, computer-generated images, radical juxtapositions of materials, virtual reality will open up new horizons. It reminds one of the radical agitators who proclaimed that Communism was on the horizon, until he was told that the horizon is an imaginary line that recedes as you approach it.’

In case it is needed to make clearer that these attitudes are not a matter of the past, here are some common rhetorical tricks used to deride dissenters and confirm that progress is inevitable: it was believed that arable land is an inescapable limit of economic growth; Lord Kelvin in 1895 declared that ‘heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible’; Ken Olson (head of Digital Equipment Corporation) in 1977 stated that ‘there is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home’; Sir William Preece declared ‘the Americans have need of the telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys’; Thomas Edison thought that the phonograph was of no commercial value because no one wants to listen to music at home.

Kavanagh, Lightfoot, and Lilley (2007) provocatively put into perspective hyperbolic acceleration, which allegedly characterises our age, by taking a long-term perspective on key indicators like life expectancy, death rate, prevalence of diseases, suicide rate. Their argument, based on data from the USA, is that not much acceleration seems to have happened in recent decades. Rather, Western societies have plateaued. So, while probably the acceleration is a magic concept for the maintenance of the myth of progress, the same basic indicators are remarkably changing in emerging and developing economies, where the Western myth of progress is largely exogenous.

**The Brave New World of information technologies**

Technologies often come wrapped in stories about politics. These stories may not explain the motives of the technologists, but they do often explain the social energy that propels the technology into the larger world. (Agre, 2003)

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4 In response to some criticisms of irrationalism, Rorty (1989) advocates for a similar position.
As hinted in previous passages, technological development is certainly not alien to myths and their role of promising an (ever retreating) promised land of a better future. Myth of technological progress keeps mobilising distributed collective action: private and public companies offer new products and services of incalculable value, customers buy what is perceived as trendy, investors pour money into start-ups of all sorts but all with a common trait: little to no evidence of being able to achieve what they promise.

The myth of a previously unconceivable revolution originating from garages in California and university dorms is widely assumed throughout the IT industry that continuously refers back to the origins of the likes of Apple, Microsoft and Facebook. This foundational – and ‘so sixties’ – myth goes hand in hand with the utopic assumption that the US, and California in particular, is ‘where the future happens first’. 5 Walsham (2001b) and Avgerou (2002) pushed research beyond these assumptions and put information systems in the broader global context by discussing cases from all over the world. Recent studies on innovations (Govindarajan & Trimble, 2012; Radjou, Prabhu, & Ahuja, 2012) show the limitations of this Silicon Valley ethnocentrism in an increasingly multi-polar world. From a different standpoint, Mazzucato (2011) debunks aspects of public/private mythology in technological innovation by demonstrating the key role of state actors, that can be both visionary and patient, in long-term innovation.

Still, the outreach and omnipervasiveness of the IT myth is such that I would say that in many settings IT is a totem without taboos: in spite of decades of failed promises and unexpected developments, IT is believed to transform governments and businesses as much as religion or gender relations.

Technology as myth has not been studied extensively. The main works on IT and myths that are considered here are Mosco (2004), Bekkers and Homburg (2007), Noir and Walsham (2007). In different ways, all of them concur in arguing that IT acts as a legitimiser to facilitate courses of action that would not take place otherwise.

Mosco (2004) offers the most articulate, and enjoyable, analysis of contemporary IT as a seductive myth and the politics of hype it brings about. Mosco starts his book showing how the conceptualisation of the cyberspace as a myth explains the level of transcendence it achieved and benefitted from for many years. Manufacturing the digital sublime today, Mosco writes, ‘is not done by having Moses climb a mountain to receive the Word and bring it to the people. Rather it takes the banal but powerful forces of political economy to promote the cultural discourse’ (2004: 42). Because the myth of cyberspace was (and is) widely believed, those involved in building the cyberspace were granted very large payments in advance in forms of investments with little to no strings attached and loose regulations. One could say that myth fostered a sort of stock-market Keynesianism to bootstrap cyberspace. From his perspective, the 1990s dot com bubble is a perfect example of how myth is an integral part of the boom-and-bust cycle.

Thus, myths can distance a plethora of actors from the status quo of any historical contingency (transcendence) and legitimise something new by making it believed. Similar processes can be identified at the beginning of flight and electricity. So, myths can be a step towards ‘powerful banality’, i.e. when a set of technologies moved from their vanguard stage to seamless embeddedness into common societal praxes. It is noteworthy that what sticks in the collective memory is the mythical period. Indeed, if one hears ‘age of electricity’, its pioneer period comes to mind – although it has long passed – rather than today, although we have never been so dependent on electricity.

Bekkers and Homburg (2007) identify, analyse and reflect on the myths underlying the e-government programmes of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark and the

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5 Donncha Kavanagh, personal communication: ‘The American Dream is, in many ways, a reworking of the biblical story of the search for the Promised Land, which, in turn, is a version of Heaven (or utopia) on earth’.
Netherlands. They found that in all those national policies myths of technological inevitability, a new and better government, rational information planning, and empowerment of the citizen can be discerned. They continue stating that, even if mobilising powers of these myths are acknowledged, existing studies have generated little justification for the high expectations of these myths about e-government. Nonetheless, large IT systems for public and private organisations (e-government, e-health services, spatial data infrastructures, broadband internet access …) are commonly believed to be inevitable steps towards national development. All these systems constitute the telos of the myth of technological and socio-economic progress nearly everywhere on earth, including remote places (Medina, 2006, 2011; Miscione, 2005). The case of IT policies of Kerala, a Southern Indian state with ancient cultural heritage, is quite representative of IT hype’s outreach:

ICT has opened up the possibility of radically different information exchange patterns by facilitating faster and more efficient dissemination of information. It can play a vital role in sustaining the democratic ethos of the Indian society and ensuring a high level of transparency and accountability in governance […] The Government has a comprehensive view of ICT as a vehicle for transforming Kerala into a knowledge-based, economically vibrant, democratic and inclusive society. (Government of Kerala, quoted in Miscione (2012)

Following Meyer and Rowan (1991), Noir and Walsham (2007) analyse the implementation of IT for the healthcare sector in India and argue that IT and data collection may end up being ceremonial to comply with social and organisational norms, therefore of use to reinforce existing social relations (as with a rain dance) but not to improve health service.

The difference between the points of these works and the present argument is that I emphasise the consequences of myth on future courses of actions. Of course it is impossible to falsify today’s beliefs on the base of future outcomes, and perhaps it is not the most interesting approach to conceive. Rather than debunking myths, my aim here is to show their might in shaping organising processes in the face of unknown consequences. In more concrete organisational terms, the focus is on how myths help in organising and aligning behaviours in recognisable and acceptable ways by inspiring and guiding actors (decision makers, experts, stakeholders, consultants, etc.), on how myths organise meaning and sense-making by providing shared, meaningful ways of connecting events. In smart-pants business parlance, one might say that myths are knowledge management devices to explain and order experience in the face of the unknown.

Research approach
‘It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future’ the saying goes. But of course natural sciences are quite good at predicting the speed and acceleration of falling objects and similar phenomena. The situation becomes more complex when the objects of study are people, with their own will and who ‘talk back’, i.e. respond to the theories about them. This has been labelled ‘double hermeneutic’ by Giddens (1982). An illustrative example is Marxism: it is a theory of evolution of societies; people who adopted this view started understanding and modifying their own behaviours according to the class-based worldviews that Marxism assigns them.

Now, a problem with technologies in society is that engineers use to borrow natural science (positivist) methodologies and apply them to artefacts to be used by people, who are less predictable than rolling stones. The outcomes are often unanticipated, as a considerable part

6 Another example is provided by Faik and Walsham (2012) about modernisation of Morocco judiciary system.
of information systems research demonstrated. The encounter of highly promising IT projects and use in actual social settings is introduced with two case studies, approached with interpretative research methodologies.

Knowledge, unplugged

Now, where to study empirically myth as a knowledge (or ignorance) management device? Wittgenstein once observed, ‘How hard I find it to see what is right in front of my eyes!’

Nisbet (1980) expresses concern about the declining legitimation of the sacred and related concepts, including progress. What is missing in his analysis are the consequences of the idea of progress on non-Western civilisations, which are only peripherally considered in Western philosophy as exotic, (nobly) savage, not rarely primitive. So, if there is an element of ethnocentrism in the Western idea of progress, I find reasonable that the seductive and mobilising power of technology-related myths is more evident in social settings where the Western thirst for progress in not endogenous. In other words, the myth of progress and modernisation as exogenous force is peculiarly evident, therefore interesting to study, in societies organised differently. From here, it is a short step to see anthropology as empirical philosophy (Latour, 2010).

Using an analogy from music, unplugged usually refers to acoustic execution of music popular in its electric or electronic version. Unplugged music is perceived as essential and pure because its qualities are not buried under the bells and whistles of electronics. 7 Similarly, an unconventional way to study information systems is to look at them under conditions where little can be assumed, therefore essence is more evident. This suggests why the myth of IT progress is discussed here by presenting a case study of telemedicine in the Amazon and another one on spatial data infrastructures (SDI) in India. In both cases, it is like unplugging a rock band’s Marshall amplifiers and making them perform in front of an audience comprising listeners of classical music or jazz of the 1920s.

This is why it can be relevant to study telemedicine in the Amazon rain forest, and SDI in India, where IT is certainly not an epiphenomenon of local praxes. Indeed, telemedicine – the provision of health care at a distance – and SDI assume the possibility of sharing knowledge as information across electronic networks. As presented below, both telemedicine and SDI carry the sense of inevitable need of modernisation. Both case studies took years of research, it not possible to report the variety of methodological approaches and tools used. References to published works are provided below. Suffice here to say that those works were informed by an interpretative approach (Silverman, 1993; Silverman, 1998; Silverman, 2005; Walsham, 1993; Walsham, 1995; Walsham, 2006).

Classifying problems, defining risk

How to remain coherent with a framework that does not favour rationalist standpoints over others? The problem with non-industrialised societies is that their variety makes comparison troublesome: ‘If anthropologists want to compare two types of ancestor worship, for example, or two kinds of belief in witchcraft, the cultural differences will often be so vast as to render vain the effort of comparison. Cultural Theory is a kind of solution to this problem’ (Douglas, 2007). Cultural theory (CT) proposed a two-by-two scheme for classifying different types of cultures. On one axis one can put the level of group pressure on individuals, on the other the level of behavioural regulation. This is why it is also known as grid-group theory.

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7 Music savvies may argue that there are types of music that cannot exist without electronics, so cannot be unplugged. This is a limit of the metaphor proposed that, I hope, does not obfuscate its meaning.
The four types so defined correspond to some extent to Fiske (1991) four elementary relational models, the difference I see is that Fiske is more articulated in discerning community relations in sharing and matching and leaves the a-social fatalist out of his focus. For this reason, his may be an appropriate lens to look at the following cases. On the other hand, CT has been extended to study risk and governance.

So, how to study the way people approach the uncertainties of the future? Risk has attracted much researchers’ and practitioners’ attention. Beyond traditional organisational and Western empirical settings, Douglas (2013) work on risk and blame is probably one of the most authoritative. Mary Douglas, the leading figure in the development of cultural theory, uses it to understand how uncertainty about the future is handled by different groups and societies depending on their grid-group position. According to CT, each group has an own way to perceive risk (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983), therefore to respond to problems. Fittingly for this research, (Hoppe, 2010) applied and developed CT for governance, more precisely the governance of problems (of which IT in society is squarely a subset) and the way they are structured. The following graph adapted from Hoppe (2010) classifies the types of problems depending on if there is agreement on values, norms and goals, and on the other axis on knowledge certainty.

### Table 1 CT classification of types of social groups. Fiske’s (1991) relational models in brackets

<table>
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<tr>
<th>+ grid</th>
<th>- grid</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fatalist</td>
<td>Market individualist (Market pricing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enclavist (Equality matching and communal sharing are not differentiated)</td>
<td>Hierarchist (Authority ranking)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 Types of problems, adapted from Hoppe (2010)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>+ Knowledge certainty</th>
<th>- Knowledge certainty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured problems</td>
<td>Problems of competing knowledges (example: improving health care)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems of different values (example: global warming, planning)</td>
<td>Structured problems</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Agreement on values, norms and goals +
As illustration, the adoption of traffic lights can be seen as a structured problem: it is known it reduces risks at crossroads and everyone agrees on related values (all drivers are the same), norms (Highway Code) and goals (road safety). Improving global health can be seen as a problem of competing knowledges: even though there is agreement on the value of people’s health, different forms of knowledge may make problems complex, as the following case shows. Global warming is a problem of different values: there is overwhelming agreement on its causes, but countries with strong interests in the status quo of energy industry, including emerging economies, have other priorities. Finally, the unstructured problems cell is where ‘wicked problems’ are.

I now move to present two case studies. As they are extensive, produced several publications, and this is not intended as an empirical contribution, I will delineate them to the extent they are relevant for the present argument. References to publications are provided for those who would like to know more details about them.

**Trespassing the border of the knowledge society**

The case of telemedicine in the Amazon is described by first introducing the expectations related to it, then co-existing medical knowledges are discussed to the extend they affect telemedicine use. Finally, the more complex situation than the IT myth allowed to foresee is presented.

According to a standard definition, telemedicine is the use of medical information exchanged from one site to another via electronic communications to improve a patient’s clinical health status. Telemedicine assumes the possibility of sharing medical knowledge as information across an electronic network. This can be achieved by accessing remote databases, facilitating remote diagnosis and monitoring, and/or asking for second opinions also to more specialised doctors. All these and other enhancements of medical practice are intended for better informed decisions and better accountability.

Knowledge management has been one of the recent re-incarnations of technology-related means of progress. In spite of balanced stances like Blackler, Crump, and McDonald (1998) and Walsham (2001a), a basic assumption is that knowledge in digital form can travel seamlessly via IT.

Knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere. Yet billions of people still live in the darkness of poverty – unnecessarily … Poor countries – and poor people – differ from rich ones not only because they have less capital, but because they have less knowledge … This World Development Report proposes that we look at the problems of development in a new way – from the perspective of knowledge. (World Bank, 1999)

For decades now, information technologies have been holding the promise to diffuse knowledge and enable progress everywhere. Is IT fulfilling this promise?

The liminality of a case of telemedicine in the Amazon offers an original story. How information translated into health care practice where on-site health care knowledge is not necessarily informed to biomedical assumptions was a research question whose answer can help put the myth of progress into perspective. Indeed, studying telemedicine in the Amazon highlights the assumption that health care knowledge existing on-site matches with what IT designers assumed (Miscione, 2005, 2006).

Main partners of the telemedicine project referred to here are Spanish and Peruvian universities, a Spanish non-governmental organisation, the upper Amazon branch of the Peruvian health care system and international funding agencies. According to them, the purpose of this project is to design, implement, evaluate and formalise a model of telemedicine systems to
improve health care in rural areas of developing countries. The declared background motivation behind the project is to reduce the gap between First and Third World, where most people are unable to meet their basic needs. On the other hand, promoters declare that ‘society is advancing towards information and knowledge driven structures, where communications and information technologies play a crucial role in development, and may be key to effectively improve living conditions of broad sectors of left out population’. Within this general framework, a ‘tremendous potential exists for improving health matters through the use of telecommunications and information technologies’ (Miscione, 2005)

This transnational effort requires mobilising a hybrid network made up of actors, norms, agreements, expectations – and to ‘align’ them. The point is how telemedicine gets legitimised to orient agencies and becomes central for organised actions involving so many different actors. From the documental analysis of the online interorganisational communications and the main publications by this project’s promoters, the key concepts legitimising telemedicine within and beyond the partnership are: equality, cost effectiveness, timeliness (Miscione, 2006). They can be seen as the magic concepts for their strong positive bias and mobilising capacity. They are trusted to be achievable, relying on scientific medicine and leveraging IT capacity to diffuse medical knowledge. This means that the telemedicine system’s designed and expected use reflects the routines implied by a scientific conception of illnesses and treatments: abstraction of symptoms, exams by a physician, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring. Elements of those routines can be carried out remotely through an information system. Beyond the organisational level, those magic concepts contribute to wrap telemedicine with a sense of modernity, which was clearly perceived by all the people involved, including medical doctors and even populations of remote areas of the jungle (Miscione, 2004).

Referring back to the CT table, one sees that the problems that telemedicine aims at solving are assumed to be structured (bottom right quadrant): medical knowledge is certain, involved actors agree on values, norms and goals, providing information is what is needed; nothing that would place them elsewhere is mentioned.

Table 3 CT table representing the way telemedicine promoters approach health problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge certainty</th>
<th>Unstructured problems (deadlock)</th>
<th>Problems of competing knowledges (agreement on ends like improving health care)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ Knowledge certainty</td>
<td>Problems of different values (agreement on means like IT)</td>
<td>Structured problems (telemedicine solves problem, ‘just do it’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Agreement on values, norms and goals +</td>
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In spite of widely held expectations, telemedicine has been tried with mixed success in a variety of settings (Schwamm et al., 2009). Here is a case about how telemedicine was used in 2003/2004 in the Peruvian Amazon.
A jungle of treatments

During fieldwork, what became apparent is the difference between the information system’s claimed and actual uses. In the Amazon there are as many risks for health as alleged cures. Those health care practices help in explaining a divergence between planned and observed use of the telemedicine system, the former being accountable to the context of origin of the project and to the funding agencies, the latter being indirectly affected by unexpected health-seeking behaviours of the target population.

The purposes of the telemedicine system were remote consulting, distance learning and sending epidemiological and activity reports. Participant observation revealed that it was used to provide logistical support for medical activities, to coordinate and track transportation along rivers of documents, blood samples, patients, gasoline, medicines, and to send reports. Expectations reflect principles of knowledge management, whereas practices reveal coping strategies with a different set of contextual issues (Miscione, 2007).

A first empirical illustration can help here in setting the scene. Before the introduction of electronic communication channels, all messages had to travel along rivers, so information could be lost or it might not have been sent, it was difficult to request reports and their absence was always justifiable. The electronic communication network had not increased the quantity of information officially required (about epidemiological vigilance, reporting and control, tracking of people and goods), but it reduced the excuses for not sending or receiving information. As a result, coordination within the health care system was tightened, and a closer shared understanding about what had to be done was produced (Miscione, 2007).

More poignantly for knowledge management is that different kinds of medical knowledge co-exist in the Amazon and biomedicine is just one among them. People hop from one to another. Tellingly, an interviewee stated that ‘A physician is someone who studies medicine through the university’. From the ethnography it emerged that public health care is associated with quick recovery and electronic communication channels strengthened this aspect. But different and incommensurable forms of medical knowledge continue to co-exist side by side.

Here is an illustration of how scientific medicine evidence may not work in the Amazon, as in any social context where scientific rationality is not hegemonic: a health worker was trying to show mosquito larvae that he found in a dark house as evidence of inappropriate water management. The empirical evidence was not visible in that family’s actual material environment, and not significant in their cultural environment. They would continue to attribute disease and death to sorcerers. This example clarifies that the spread of scientific medicine is not simply a matter of medical information transmission (Miscione, 2007).

A conception of telemedicine as moderniser sees traditional healing practices as obstacles to enhanced health care delivery. Medical anthropology notes that Western medicine is informed by the triad: 1) data collection, 2) illness cause retrieval and 3) treatment. However, the distinction between health and illness may vary in different contexts and historical periods. Good (1994) work about illness in different cultures shows that the understanding of illness does not arise from a direct access to patients’ state but from their perceptions. Accordingly, telemedicine in the Amazon accentuates what people already expect from Western medicine: quick recovery. Other perceptions and expectations are met by other medical practices that push people outside of the health care system (Miscione, 2007).

Diagnosis as an outcome of recovery

The diagnosis process is of particular interest. In scientific medicine’s pattern of action, patients express their symptoms, the necessary clinical data are produced, and then this information is associated with a disease to make sense of it. This model encounters little obstacles where scientific medicine is hegemonic. In the Upper Amazon, most of the public health personnel com-
plained that patients frequently attended a health facility at quite late stages of disease. Indeed, they often arrived to the public health system two or three weeks after the first symptoms because they tried herbal remedies first. Treatment was difficult because there was a limited range of medicines available and there was no medical literature on how pharmaceuticals might interact with the herbal medicines that patients might have taken earlier. The public health care system is associated with quick recovery, which implies that diseases requiring long treatments cannot be completed because patients move on to the next level: traditional healers, who cure evil eye. Evil eye is an illness that appears not to be treatable by plants and public health care. It does not correspond to any scientifically categorised disease, indeed – from a biomedical standpoint – it is not a disease itself, it can be any serious illness that could not be cured so far, hence no diagnosis is possible a priori. Several accounts and statements by patients and doctors, and some patients’ apparently ‘irrational’ behaviours, confirmed that the understanding of the disease is a process co-extensive to patient’s trajectory between different kinds of treatment: the diagnosis is the product of the trajectory. More properly, the recovery says that the medicine used was right.

The most important point here is that different medical knowledges see the same patient’s condition differently, therefore move the problems that telemedicine aims at solving up, to the upper right quadrant of the CT table.

**Table 4** CT table representing the kind of problems surfaced by an ethnographic study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge certainty -</th>
<th>Unstructured problems (deadlock)</th>
<th>Problems of competing knowledges (diverse health seeking behaviours pertain to different medical knowledges)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ Knowledge certainty +</td>
<td>Problems of different values (agreement on means like IT)</td>
<td>Structured problems (Telemedicine solves it all, ‘just do it’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Agreement on values, norms and goals +

So, in a nutshell, diverse medical knowledges make the IT supported progress a moderately structured problem while the IT myth of progress bracket out our lack of knowledge about the local accommodation of diverse medicines and keeps stakeholders confident that problems are structured.

**The all-embracing view of spatial data for governance**

Spatial data infrastructures reflect in the geography and planning world what has been happening through other domains heavily affected by IT: the move from stand-alone and task-oriented information systems, to open-ended and widely interconnected information infrastructures. Similar to the previous case, this second case is introduced by presenting the perspective of the SDI promoters. Then, empirical material from the implementation of SDI in India shows how practices tend to exceed the neat expectations of progress that propel IT projects.
An unrestricted view from the sky

Let me start with an image of an electricity pole built in the middle of a road.

Figure 1 Available on many websites (original source is impossible to trace back).

Were the builders wrong? Probably not, the mismatch is so evident to immediate perception that it is more likely that they were executing a wrong plan obsequiously, which was probably based on poorly geo-referenced spatial data. This provides a vivid example of organisational errors derived from not sharing data, and introduces adequately the SDI motto: ‘produce data once, use it many times’. This would eventually result in an all-embracing view based on consistent integrated datasets.\(^8\)

Spatial data infrastructures commenced at the beginning of the 1990s, drawing on studies of Multi-Purpose Land Information Systems and similar developments in North America. Already then, it was clear that rather than addressing individual organisations, spatial data had to be considered in the context of inter-organisational relations, along which geodata was expected to be shared and used (Calkins et al., 1991; NCGIA, 1989; NCR, 1990, 1993, 1994). At the close of that pioneering decade for geographic information systems (GIS) and SDI, Groot and McLaughlin (2000) proposed a widely accepted definition of SDI, stressing its socio-technical character:

The networked spatial databases and data handling facilities, the complex of institutional, organizational, technological, human, and economic resources which interact with one another and underpin the design, implementation and maintenance of mechanisms facilitating the sharing, access to and responsible use of spatial data at an affordable cost for a specific application domain or enterprise.

The ultimate objectives of SDI are to promote economic development, stimulate better cooperation and government, foster environmental sustainability and social wellbeing by means of

\(^8\) This vision reminds of Scott’s (1998) *Seeing Like a State* even though at that point in time data were not as prominent as today.
more integrated and efficient government (Nedovic-Budic, Crompvoets, & Georgiadou, 2011). Traditionally aligned with the premises of e-government, SDI is the continuation of ‘public authorities’ natural inclination to gather information in order to govern society on the basis of that information’ (Prins, Broeders, & Griffioen, 2012). So, SDI are designed and implemented in countries all around the world to provide new tools for better governance.

Homburg and Georgiadou (2009), in line with previous work on e-government myth by Bekkers and Homburg (2007) and Czarniawska and Sevón (2005), read the translation of SDI from North America to Africa, highlighting its mythical dimension. In doing this, they detail how the SDI myth was reinterpreted and domesticated in the African SDI discourse and pushed decision makers to ‘enact reality’ (i.e. develop SDI) even if there was a lack of hard facts corroborating the positive outcomes of SDI deployments.

Here I present the case of the Indian National SDI. As in most domains of activities that IT expands to, these technologies are always portrayed as a panacea to solve a variety of problems: decision making, planning, disaster management, natural resources management, climate change, property mapping, taxation and monitoring are the main activities that are expected to benefit from digitalisation of spatial data.

The most comprehensive reference of the expectations from the Indian SDI is certainly Kumar (2009) edited volume published by the Government of India. In this policy document it is stated that the National SDI is the culmination of integration of surveying, geographic information systems, global positioning system (GPS) and earth observation capabilities. So, this document prospects how SDI make a difference for governance:

The fact that data sets from diverse sources with diverse formats need to be mixed and meaningful inferences are to be extracted to enable the stakeholders to connect to their decision support systems, clearly point out the need for the NSDI concept. Current issues like global climate change, disaster management, location-based services, energy production and distribution are some of the areas that will stand to benefit from NSDI. (Kumar 2009: xiv)

Spatial data is vital to sound decision-making at the local, regional, state and central planning levels. It also plays a crucial role in the implementation of action plans, infrastructure development, disaster management support, and business development. (Kumar 2009: 29)

Analysing this and other SDI related policy documents (Department of Science & Technology, 2009; Ministry of Urban Development, 2006; NNRMS standards committee, 2005) it emerges that some key concepts are recurrent (Richter, 2014): alignment, coordination, better decision making, development, governance are magic concepts reinforcing each other to attract consensus and make policy documents difficult to disagree with. When SDI documents and workshops focus on more concrete actions, those general concepts are echoed into more mundane ones like: standards, data accuracy, comprehensiveness, integration. Even though these are more concrete than the previous ones, they maintain a normative positive bias that allures people into coordinated action towards common goals. So, acting according to them would pave the way to achieve the SDI grand vision.

Applying the CT table to this case, one can see that the myth that propels SDI pushes the problems it promises to solve to the lower right quadrant. More precisely, tying undoubtedly SDI to decision making, accountability, etc. keeps the problems on the right side of the graph. Reducing SDI to standardisation, data accuracy, integration assumes certainty of knowledge (lower part of the graph) about how to achieve goals.
From 2008 to 2013 I was contributing to a research project focused on SDI in India. More details than can be provided here are in (Richter, 2011, 2014; Richter, Miscione, & Georgiadou, 2010; Richter, Miscione, Pfeffer, & De’, 2011; Richter, Miscione, Pfeffer, & Georgiadou, 2008). The research context spanned different levels, from districts to city and state administrations and up to national ministries and international collaborations.

Warned by Walsham and Sahay (1999), Barrett, Sahay, and Walsham (2001) and Sahay and Walsham (2006), we were sceptical about the correspondence between IT related expectations and the actual situation on the ground. On a similar line, Silva (2007) reported faltering institutionalisation of SDI in Guatemala, and explained it criticising the assumption that SDI would trigger necessary institutional transformations whereas his case suggests that a fitting institutional context is a pre-requisite for successful SDI deployment and use. Harvey (2006) analysed conflicting interests in SDI development in Poland focusing on the different practices of establishing, registering and maintaining land property rights. In particular, he stressed the mismatch between top-down SDI implementation and local practices. By criticising an excessive focus on data and standards, Davis and Fonseca (2006) showed the importance of emancipatory knowledge in the successful implementation of SDI in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. They rely especially on Gadamer and Habermas to understand the problem of how SDI can succeed.

**Down to a urban and bureaucratic jungle**

The beginning of the millennium saw the first efforts of starting an Indian National SDI. They were initiated by academics, top ranking administrators and practitioners who start meeting at conferences in North America, Europe and India. Those diverse people were kept together by the aim of integrating data from many task-oriented systems to create a multi-purpose scalable system to support planning at all levels.

Besides the obvious technical obstacles that arise when diverse systems are connected, organisational and social issues proved prominent. First, two ministries were jointly responsible for the SDI initiative: the Ministry of Space with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), which has always been very powerful in India and the Ministry of Science and Technology, which comprises also the Survey of India that was funded by the English during

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9 A few years ago this ministry landed an unmanned mission on the moon and is now looking at Mars.
the colonial period. The former envisioned SDI as a highly technological endeavour relying on satellite and advanced earth observation machinery. The latter, especially for what concerns the Survey of India, operates on the basis of a large labour force of surveyors. The former was capable of producing large amounts of up-to-date data, while the latter maintained that data previously collected should be used. On the top of this divergence, only the Survey of India has the sealing power of accepting geo-data for the purposes of government activities. For these and possibly other reasons, the SDI initiative reached a stalemate.

The institutional entrepreneurs pushing the initiative realised that at the state level the tensions between ministries were more tenuous and state administrations had a strong interest in embracing the SDI vision of improving governance. So, SDI action at the state level took the shape of geoportals that collect and redistribute geo-data to different organisations.

Our empirical observations led to a departure from the formal requirements of SDI development towards a better appreciation of the actual organising processes. Since my first two-month fieldwork in a southern Indian city it became apparent that local players had little understanding of SDI, and limited practice of the GIS that SDI is intended to integrate. Much more prominent were large scale programmes of urban development and renewal, and deeply entrenched problems related to rapid urbanisation, especially informal settlements that covered more than a third of the city area (there is no agreement on this proportion). Informal settlements proved quite difficult to survey uniquely, classify formally, thus to include in databases. For instance, the slum declaration process is characterised by a multiplicity of inconsistent lists, some of which are carried out by non-administrative actors (Richter, 2011). As a simple illustration, the signs on the door in the picture below show how the same household is classified again and again according to different schemes.

**Figure 2** Picture taken during fieldwork (Richter et al., 2011)
Noteworthy is stressing that the introduction of new survey schemes and new technologies do not seem to help standardisation and accuracy of data collection. Rather, any new initiative adds complexity as the previous ones are not dropped; at least to the extent some actors have interest in maintaining them (Richter et al., 2011).

In sum, this research found that the supposedly universal concept of SDI is so stretched and dispersed across a multiplicity of independent and often conflicting activities that SDI has moved from an expected foundational role, i.e. shaping how other (downstream) organisations would have formatted and shared geospatial data, to a post-hoc function of coping with a variety of ongoing SDI related (upstream) activities.

**Universal visions and unclassifiable practices**

Referring back to the CT table, one can see that even if most actors could see the point of classifying space also in digital format, there were unsolvable disagreements about what these classifications should be used for. Therefore everyone was pushing their own classifications suited to their views and interests. So, the quadrant that best frames this case is the lower left one.

**Table 6** CT table representing the kind of problems surfaced through mixed method and multi-site research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge certainty -</th>
<th>Problems of competing knowledges (agreement on ends)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured problems (deadlock)</td>
<td>Problems are structured (SDI offer viable solutions for main governance problems)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems of different values (agreement on means)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Agreement on values, norms and goals +

It has to be stressed that the drift from the SDI expectations is not a failure in itself, but a usual phenomenon affecting large technical systems (Ciborra et al., 2000). Indeed, the flexibility of SDI and of what is associated with the term is one of the reasons for its longevity and successes (Miscione & Vandenbroucke, 2011). It is because of both SDI vagueness and common agreement about its usefulness across academics and practitioners that SDI could travel from North America to many countries, including India. Dismissing the grand SDI vision as naïve would be reductionist. Possibly, being more precise about what SDI would have entailed would have deprived key stakeholders of the necessary vision to transcend their day-to-day conditions.

Noteworthy is that when Indian National SDI was initiated, it would have been difficult to foresee the outcomes, therefore to mobilise the necessary actions and resources. Obliterating the uncertainty about the SDI consequences and risks was achieved by implying agreement on values and goals and by assuming certainty of knowledge, derived from experiences and experts in developed economies, sometimes even having them directly in project consortia.
Myth or might?

Over more than two decades telemedicine and SDI travelled across the world by mobilising actions of plenty of public and private organisations. Usage is where myth of technology-based progress and praxes collide, and where different methodologies clash (see section 4). As designers fail in predicting social transformations, the future remains largely unknown and people remain anomic, unsure about what is next. Flyvbjerg (2001) and Flyvbjerg, Landman, and Schram (2012) argue that social sciences should not be aspiring at predictive knowledge like natural sciences. Rather, they have to recognise the inescapable double hermeneutics of social research, as much as of the human condition, and orient themselves to phronetic research, practical wisdom. Although I agree that double hermeneutics is unescapable, I see good reasons not to think that it would fall back to a refurbished sort of never-ending relativism in which the difficulty of finding solid foundations translates into everything has the same level of legitimacy (Eco, 1994).

Referring back to the CT table, both Rottenburg (2005) and Hoppe (2010) discuss how actors in search of solutions move across the quadrants. There is a kind of law of gravity according to which people prefer to deal with ‘structured problems’. The issue here is that in front of paradigmatic changes there is no certainty of knowledge or agreements on values. This may induce a paralysis that cyclically renewed myths of progress help in overcoming. Mosco (2004), Bekkers and Homburg (2007), and Noir and Walsham (2007) argued convincingly that IT operates as a legitimiser. Here I extend their point to consider the always unknown future and myths’ role for ‘ignorance management’: by aggregating consensus, they reduce the variety of courses of action that actors would pursue, therefore reduce uncertainty about the future.

‘Ironing’ the double hermeneutics

At the beginning, myth has been defined as ideology in narrative form that serves to make sense and organise experience. As such, myths are not relevant for being true or false but to the extent they are believed or not. To the extent they are, the cosmology they imply gives order to the diversity of human situations by resolving contradictions and paradoxes, ultimately alleviating the sense of uncertainty about the future.

Deriving from that, conceiving myth and might as a dichotomy is probably wrong because myths are mighty in mobilising coordinated actions in the face of unknown long-term consequences of today’s decisions. From this perspective, the evidence of myth’s might is not the factual verification of impacts but their persuasive power: whether stakeholders of all sorts believe in the myth of IT progress, and use it as an inspiration for action.

So, myths transcend the day-to-day impasse by providing shared cosmologies on the base of which people interpret and act in going about the unknown future. Myths fill the gaps of the unknown by making people believe that something is real, which therefore becomes real in its consequences (the Thomas theorem). As long as they are believed, myths keep alive and act as a compass of praxis in the face of the unpredictable future. This is how I frame the influence of myths on managing the double hermeneutic.

Although a punctual counterfactual proof is not possible, myths are suggested to have a function in bracketing out doubts and cementing alliances to keep action going also in front of unknown consequences. In more colourful terms, myth helps in ‘ironing the double hermeneutics’: making future human behaviour more streamlined, regulated and thus less unpredictable. Going back to the Marxist example, it is possible that societies are not evolving towards communism; whether this is true or false, we can reasonably expect that proclaimed proletariats are not advocating a reduction of state taxation on capital.

Therefore, a corollary of the Thomas theorem may be proposed: ‘Myths, by suspending normal reality checks, make the future less mundane, therefore more amenable’. Myths suspend
judgement and act as a compass of praxes. Whether this facilitates self-fulfilling prophecies or not is beyond the scope of this paper.

**Engineering the other by alluring**

The corollary offers a way to recognise assumptions which are increasingly challenged by contemporary cross-cultural, globally dispersed contexts of activity, providing a view on contemporary post-colonial science and technologies (Anderson, 2002). Indeed, although it is a reasonable statement that technology and science are not teleological, both of them promise a better future. On the other hand, diversity of forms of knowledge, otherness of cultures have been a long-term concern for anthropology and a pressing issue for contemporary societies. Countless have been the works addressing the issue of globalisation as homogenisation, spread of an allegedly world monoculture, etc. Through the 1990s, critical scholars like Ferguson (1994) and Escobar (1995) argued that development is the latest re-incarnation of concepts like progress and civilisation, and that it provides the framework according to which to make sense and act in relation to the unknowns of different world societies. In this sense, progress provide lenses through which people became problematised as illiterate, rural, lacking of knowledge and capacity, and so on. Following that line, it is possible to argue that myth or progress may prevent ‘alternative modernities’. This criticism of post-colonialism is possible but beyond the scope of the present discussion. Works like Berger and Huntington (2002) distance themselves from simplistic views on globalisation as homogenisation. Rather, they take diversity empirically and describe through several cases how many globalisations are taking place at the same time, in different settings and according to a variety of dynamics, originating diverse hybrids.

Both telemedicine and SDI efforts rely on widely dispersed hybrid networks that are mobilised and kept aligned in face of unknown outcomes by an alluring future spelled out by means of non-contentious magic concepts, which are useful to set agendas and provide a fit-for-purpose vocabulary to discuss and act. The shared cosmology that myths provide is particularly important when coordinated action spans different cultures, and little can be assumed as common. This is the case for telemedicine in the Amazon and SDI in India. To argue that, cultural theory has been used as a sensitising lens to show how problems are consistently framed in ways that bracket out lack of knowledge, diverse value systems and ultimately uncertainty about future outcomes.

Utopians active in developing contexts have another strong point in alluring stakeholders and propagating technologies: they can claim that the same technologies are already working in developed economies. As before, my point here is not to contest if this is true or false – suffice here it say that anywhere it is difficult to pinpoint clear causation – but to foreground how myths operate. Indeed, telemedicine and SDI are framed as ineludible steps towards modernisation, as in developed economies. But Bekkers and Homburg (2007) argued that IT is a myth in developed economies as well.

In sum, my view on the technology myth is not that of Prometheus stealing fire from gods to give it to humans, i.e. taking from the haves to give it to the have nots. Rather, myths operate indirectly by alluring stakeholders and actors to engage in action coherent to a common vision of the future. Empirical cases where the myth of IT progress is not endogenous expose the reality of myths in seducing people and alluring them. Myths can iron the double hermeneutic, thus break inertia and help in bootstrapping artefacts that would have few chances of growing otherwise. On a similar line of reasoning, Czarniawska (2004) – referring to the legend of a baron who could lift himself by the hair – argues that reforms may fail their goals but creating a distance from daily (autopoietic) routines can open up chances for unintended consequences.

So, perhaps the West is not so much about exporting technologies and engineering societies with efficient command and control programmes. Rather, the IT myth irons the double
hermeneutic and makes the future more amenable across societies on the global scale. Recognising this dimension of IT in the world stage is necessary, although not sufficient, to answer the question of whether we are making a better world with IT (Walsham, 2012).

Final remarks

In conclusion, I would like to voice scepticism for some kind of future all-encompassing Western myth of progress. Generally speaking, especially since the turn of the millennium, societies seem to be adjusting to an increasingly multi-polar world. At the same time, contemporary crisis has been questioning the West as a source of societal models. This doubt has been voiced by a blunt reverse racial comment by the ex-Brazilian president Lula who declared that the ongoing crisis has blue eyes, hinting at Western experts (carriers of modernisation) who had no clue of the consequences of what they were doing with financial markets. Recently, Moyo (2013) expressed increasingly spread doubts about Western models. So, the crisis has revealed a huge gap between what was thought to be known and what was known. Myths of progress may to have blinded many about what we do not know. Perhaps this is a chance for other myths from other cultures to gain the stage, and even allure the West. Who knows about how the future unfolds before it is ironed.

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Myth, management of the unknown


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