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IMAGINEERING
‘MISSION-ORIENTED BRANDING’

When shifting from fragmentation to integration seems mission impossible

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‘We will not march back to what was,
but move to what shall be:
a country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free.’

Amanda Gorman on January 20th, 2021
during President Joe Biden’s swearing-in ceremony in Washington

We can no longer ‘fix’ today’s problems, with yesterday’s toolbox. The complex challenges we face today, such as climate change, rapid urbanization, the obesity epidemic, the many failing organizations and systems in healthcare, finance, and education, cannot be solved or fixed with the conventional top-down, problem-solving logic which feeds fragmentation. It is increasingly recognized that complex innovation challenges require integrative, bottom-up ‘whole systems approaches’ (WSAs) to meet the Sustainable Development Goals on a global level, but also, to meet organizational and human well-being on a regional and local level. But, so far, evidence on how to operationalize an integrative WSA to address complex innovation challenges in practice, is still in its infancy (Bai et al., 2016).

This chapter presents ‘mission-oriented branding’ as an approach to shift from fragmented value creation to integrated value co-production by ‘inducing indeterminacy’ with a clear aspirational direction. This practice is developed to help organizations and systems, such as cities, that are often so entangled in conventional value-creating logic that transformation seems like mission impossible. Based on our two decades of Imagineering-practice of ‘reframing the brand to reframe value creation’, we evaluate our practice on its potential as a WSA to innovation. In doing so, this chapter positions itself within the recent literature exploring the fundamental contribution that social sciences and the creative industries can bring to innovation. It also intends to enrich the field of branding by showing how, in fact, all organizations and cities, can unlock creative futures for the betterment of society. We hope this invitation appeals to the imagination of as well CEOs and policymakers as researchers and scholars.

Due to the rapidly growing number of complex challenges, several fields of study, such as innovation studies and governance studies, are in a state of flux, a clear signal that science
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is nurturing practice. In the field of innovation, new concepts such as social innovation, bottom-up innovation, and system innovation take the field far beyond its conventional techno-centricity. In the field of public administration and governance too, new concepts emerge such as ‘integrative governance’ (Stout & Love, 2018) and a surprising, new stream of attention goes in the direction of branding as governance strategy, ‘a field of study that was largely overlooked in the literature about collaboration, network governance and co-production’ (Klijn & Stevens, 2021, p. 156). In both fields of study, one thing is generally accepted: complex innovation challenges require WSAs that draw on understanding of complexity science.

In societal, complex innovation practice today, mission-oriented innovation is the new mantra. To quote the Italian American economist and EU-advisor Mazzucato (2018): Today, ‘innovation gets a direction’. ‘Mission’, as in mission-oriented innovation then, is something else than the conventional idea that organizations operate ‘mission-driven’. Missions here are concrete targets to achieve the 17 SDGs that the UN recently articulated. Examples of missions are: ‘Ending Poverty Everywhere’, ‘Plastic Free Oceans’, but also the EU ‘Green Deal’. Missions are instruments for WSAs to innovation. Missions are ‘frames’ that set the direction for whole system innovation, ‘they do not specify how to achieve success. In mission-oriented innovation, the right answers are not known in advance’ (UCL-IIPP, 2019: Missions, A Beginner’s Guide).

For those readers new to the concept of Imagineering, Imagineering is a blend-word of imagination and engineering, signifying a design approach to source a new future by igniting the imagination of all agents involved in the eco-system in a specific direction. It ‘frames’ a practice of ‘creating together’ that is core to the creative industries. Around the turn of the century, we were invited by a branding agency to experiment with this unconventional approach in ‘regular’ industries. While the agency no longer believed in the traditional marketing approaches to help some of their failing accounts, we were invited to explore the potential of the ‘unconventional’ design approach to ‘source’ a new (desired) direction of value creation for these accounts (Nijs, 2014, 2019).

Working now for two decades with Imagineering in the context of branding, we’ve found our ‘integrative’ work very effective but also very challenging so far. Like all other WSAs, Imagineering struggles with ‘working-with-intentions-of-integration’ in a world that is structured to ‘fragment-ever-further’, but also, the word Imagineering is not easily digestible in the board room. And that room is an important room to start with, when aiming for an integrative approach. Knowing that an effective generative frame can source a new, much-needed field of collective thinking and acting, we decided to call our Imagineering-in-branding ‘mission-oriented branding’.

We choose to illustrate the Imagineering-practice, with the case of the city of Antwerp in which we were both involved from 2004 to 2012. We use this case of city branding for three reasons. First, because, apart from innovation in healthcare, cities are our major field of experience. Second, because the sustainable development of cities is increasingly recognized as crucial to reaching the UN SDGs (Bai et al., 2016). And third, because according to Mazzucato (2018), we must re-imagine governments as creative agents as we cannot make our future depend on the creativity of start-ups such as Uber, Airbnb, Buurtzorg in healthcare, or whatever start-up. Because these commercial start-ups will never see the vitality of society as their primary goal, cities will play a major role for the future of society. Succeeding to become effective whole system innovators on this level in society is of major importance for the future of society.
In this chapter, we focus on the ‘landscape’ and the ‘lens’—the shift in value creation in society that enables WSAs to innovation and we look at this shift through the lens of complexity science. Further on, we focus on the ‘logic’—we articulate core working principles of Imagineering and illustrate it with the case of Antwerp. We then reflect on the potential of ‘mission-oriented branding’ as an Imagineering concept to source a new, direction-giving (transformative) dimension in branding, followed by concluding thoughts.

The shift in value creation in society

According to Ramirez (1999), people always have access to two modes of value creation: the sequential mode (in value chains) and the simultaneous mode (in value networks). Even though the sequential mode has been dominant until now, technical and social breakthroughs today are rendering the simultaneous mode more relevant. In the connected society, the roles and responsibilities of marketers and (co-producing) consumers can be rethought in a broader way. Ramirez (1999, p. 61) considers ‘the (sequential) industrial view as still applicable to a limited set of value creation situations, but (simultaneous) “value co-production” goes well beyond these’.

New types of organizations emerged in the landscape of value creation with ‘ambiguous’ names and brands such as Wikipedia, Facebook, and Google. Instead of following the conventional ‘founder-oriented’ naming as illustrated by Philips, Unilever, Johnson & Johnson, and most other organizations with an industrial origin, they choose names and brands that create a flexible context for dynamic, evolving value co-production rather than a clear, specific, and static content for value creation the latter did a century ago. But what is even more in this emerging co-producing perspective, is that every social opportunity can become a business opportunity and vice versa for all value-creating agents. The real challenge now is how longer existing organizations can take advantage of this new emerging value co-producing potential that goes well beyond their traditional logic.

Paradigm shifts that transform scientific disciplines and the value-creating logic in society do not occur frequently and they are not welcomed unanimously. It is even the case that they are not easily seen by scientists and practitioners (Ramirez, 1999). The co-production mode of value creation has been there all the time as, for example, whole cathedrals have been built without a formal plan. But it was the enormous power of industrial-based conceptual frameworks that made us (in the Western world) think that we should study production and consumption separately and statically instead of studying them as dynamic relational processes. This limited view underlies many of today’s complex challenges.

According to Ramirez (1999), the shift in value creation from the sequential mode with its supply-demand dichotomy to the simultaneous mode of value co-production, has implications in at least four fields of practice and research:

1. The business definition: co-production as a focus leads us to rethink relevance, roles, relationships, and responsibilities.
2. The way we organize work: a co-production framework is of ‘a higher logical type’ than the industrial framework and it makes the industrial one only applicable inscribed in a wider typology of possible forms of value-creating networks (value co-production systems should be as under-designed as possible).
3. The way we manage: managing complex systems requires managing ignorance, it asks for coordination skills to ‘enhance auto-organizational processes’ in line with insights from complexity science, allowing people to co-design and to learn and it asks for
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challenging ‘dynamic conservatism’ and ‘institutionalized inertia’ to bridge ever greater incompatibility.

4. The transition toward a co-productive economy: The transformation of the enterprise logic from the industrial, sequential exchange logic toward the networked logic of simultaneous value co-production is a complex innovation challenge that needs a WSA. But this is a field in which more research is needed as to prevent change-leaders from becoming cheer-leaders. This asks for cracking the code of the ‘demand-supply dichotomy’.

This chapter zooms in on this fourth field of implications, the need for a WSA to make the transition toward co-production, but we emphasize the four fields being intrinsically related.

**A whole systems approach**

Recently, innovation scholars have argued that in coping effectively with complex challenges, in whatever industry or sector, or on whatever level of society, conventional research, business and policy approaches are too narrow and often misleading because they rely on the ‘demand-supply dichotomy’: they rely on the assumption that supply and demand can be addressed exogenously and separately. This conventional dichotomy, however, creates a ‘blind spot’ for ‘a broader type of innovation potential (a co-production potential) that is associated with the social practices through which people’s daily lives are organized and accomplished’ (Labanca et al., 2020). It leads to a negligence of bottom-up, positive, and integrative co-production innovation opportunities.

This ‘blind spot’, ‘which is still not well covered in existing literature and not widely recognized by researchers and policy makers’ (Labanca et al., 2020), is not only hindering the full deployment of existing innovation potential, it also leads to the continuation of the conventional siloed approaches and the associated bureaucracy. It harms whole systems by neglecting the co-evolution between demand and supply (as, for example, creating an extra lane because of traffic congestion and not realizing that this will make more people return to car-driving instead of taking the whole systems to turn to rethink mobility). In short, WSAs are needed to enable the shift ‘from the reality of fragmentation to the need for integration’.

Scholars that are well acquainted with the dilemma between fragmentation and integration, are the ones in public administration (Edelenbos & Teisman, 2011): governments are departmentalized, they ‘are organized into divided layers and, like national governments, regional government and municipalities have segments of partial responsibility such as finance, the economy, social welfare, infrastructure and urban and landscape planning, which makes it very challenging to cope with complex challenges that require approaches that cross boundaries of individual departments’.

According to Edelenbos and Teisman (2011), fragmentation is as much a problem as a cherished solution in modern times as fragmentation enables the division of unmanageable governmental challenges. So, the real challenge is to find a new balance between fragmentation and integration, even as both will always co-exist, one way or another. What can be changed and should be changed for the better is the balance between both with a stronger emphasis on integration and bottom-up innovation activities.

To shift the balance from fragmentation to integration in policy, or from fragmented, sequential value creation to integrated, simultaneous value co-production, WSAs are needed. In practice, they are often popularly described as ‘big picture approaches’ that try to link
together actions in a coordinated and integrated way, across multiple organizational actors and even industries, to bring about change. Key elements of a WSA in general are values, principles, and practices that involve, strengthen, sustain, enable, and empower bottom-up processes of innovation in an integrated way.

For the theoretical underpinnings, all fields are now turning to the complementary scientific framework of complexity science which enables WSAs with the appealing concepts of generating new ‘order through fluctuation’ (often popularly translated as self-organization) and ‘emergence’.

Taking advantage of emergence

In the dynamic framework of complexity, innovation is not the province of any one department, nor does it lie in any strategic competence, but it is ‘the outcome of a system-wide process of interactions’ called ‘emergence’ (Lichtenstein, 2014). Emergence, the coming-into-being of a sustainable dynamic state, is a property of all living systems that happens in co-evolution with the environment. In nature, emergence happens spontaneously, for instance, in the weather or in the transition from caterpillar to butterfly. Different from the Newtonian world where systems run down and are subject to deterioration, non-linear dynamic, living systems can transform themselves into emerging new states of being.

In human organizations and systems, this type of emergence does not happen spontaneously. It must be designed for. It is the existence of hierarchical structures that stifles that spontaneous process, but the good thing is that hierarchies also prevent the emergence of unwanted chaos. Under the right conditions, however, human organizations can also take advantage of emergence. Emergence in human systems is a matter of generating momentum in a new direction by inspiring and enabling the agents in the eco-system to act and interact all together, differently. Emergence can occur and occurs (so far, mostly unconsciously) through an integration of ‘bottom-up’ organizing and ‘top-down’ influences. The challenge at stake is to become conscious designers for emergence (Nijs, 2014, 2019).

As we see the disequilibrium in value creation in society as a condition that enables a system to generate momentum in a new, more desired direction, that of co-production, Imagineering is a conscious design-intention to do so.

The complexity-inspired design approach of Imagineering

Because co-production does not come about by itself spontaneously in organizations that are trapped in the conventional logic of value creation, the transition or transformation must be consciously facilitated, fostered, and organized (Klijn & Stevens, 2021). To do so, Imagineering follows the conventional sequence of all design approaches: inspiration–ideation–implementation. Every phase of the design cycle is implemented through the lens of complexity science. We illustrate the Imagineering design process in detail with the case of Antwerp.

Inspiration

In the inspiration phase, Imagineering makes use of insights from the practice of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2017) to discover the generative power of an organization. An ‘appreciative approach’ deduced from the change-management approach of appreciative inquiry, not only prevents the emergence of resistance but it also enables a ‘generative

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turn’: the turn from a limited and fragmented share-holder orientation toward a broad stake-
holder orientation as meaning making for society.

Questions answered in this phase include: What gives life to this system? What meaning
can this organization create with and for the broader eco-system, or even society at large, as
no one other organization can do as effectively and efficiently? How could all people in the
eco-system co-produce this more desired future? What small shift in everyone’s behavior
could make a better, more desired world come true?

Concrete in the case of the city of Antwerp in 2004: Although we now use participatory
practices in our work, the young, new major (having himself a background as a strategic
director in a branding agency) came immediately with a clear question: While our city is
so fragmented today and the extreme right is growing so fast, how can we regain a sense of
belonging, a sense of ‘this is us’ to help it embrace diversity?

Ideation

In conventional design, ideation is the creative process of generating, developing, and com-
municating new ideas for solving the challenge at stake. In the complexity-inspired design
approach of Imagineering, ideation is the creative phase to design for emergence. It is the
phase to design a meta-design that enables all other agents in the eco-system to become
designers of solutions themselves.

Based on the generative power of the system that is discovered in the inspiration phase, a
‘High Concept’ (in complexity language, this is called ‘an attractor’) is designed that ‘induces
indeterminacy’ to source newness in a fresh, aspirational direction in the whole of the eco-
system. To do so, Imagineering makes use of the brand. It reframes the brand to reframe value
creation, a practice we suggest calling mission-oriented branding. Because there are several
new concepts, we clarify them here, illustrate them, and relate them to one another.

‘Inducing indeterminacy’

According to Hutter and Farías (2017) who study ‘Cultural Sources of newness’, making the
shift from fixing-the-past to shaping-the-future, is first and foremost a matter of ‘disentan-
gling the issue of the new from the issue of improvement’. ‘Improving’ is an evolution in the
same direction, while ‘the new’ is an evolution in a new direction. Taking their cue from
John Dewey, Hutter and Farías argue that ‘the new’ is a consequence of indeterminacy which
needs conscious induction to ‘source’ the new. Configuring frames and creating objects are,
for example, instruments to do so.

According to these scholars, innovation studies so far have not interpreted indeterminacy
and the resulting uncertainty as a source of newness. The great bulk of research on innov-
ation, as driven by economists, assumes technological change to be the driver of innovation
or, innovation being simply an unexpected variation. In that context, indeterminacy was
interpreted either as an obstacle to the formation of robust innovation communities or as a
resource for the individual entrepreneur.

In the fixing-paradigm, imaginaries are seen and used as instruments to decrease indeter-
mminacy, not to induce and sustain indeterminacy. Indeterminacy was formerly ‘not studied
as a condition to be deliberately induced, maintained or cared for’. All cases studied in
their research (Hutter and Farías, 2017), however, affirm that ‘the new’ needs to be actively
produced. This active inducing of indeterminacy, however, can be done on several levels in
an ecosystem.

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We distinguish at least two ways of inducing indeterminacy to source newness: The use of an ‘adaptive space’ within an organization and the use of ‘mission-oriented branding’ on the level of the ecosystem. An example of the former is given by General Motors Co. with ‘GM2020’ that sparked innovation with Co-Labs, Summits and Tipping Forward events (Arena et al., 2017). An example of the latter is given by the rebranding of the listed company Statoil to ‘Equi-nor’ (an abbreviation of equilibrium for Norway) in 2018, to enable the oil company to evolve into a broad energy company (including wind and solar energy). Note that the former example gives no direction to the kind of innovation initiatives that are expected to take shape, while the latter gives a clear direction and can emerge into whole system innovation assuming that the process is also adequately implemented and managed.

‘High Concept’ as generative image

High Concepts are poetic frames such as ‘Beauty and the Beast’. These poetic frames have a dual intention by nature (which is rather unique). They are created to deliberately induce indeterminacy, or wonder, for the creative business developers internally, and for the (external) publics. Some frames induce too much indeterminacy, others induce no indeterminacy at all, but some frames generate rich associations in a desired direction. At the Disney Company, the generation of an effective frame can take years and is worth an enormous amount of money. As simple, it may seem in retrospect (to create something as ‘Beauty and the Beast’), designing effective frames that can source a new, relevant future, is not easy at all. Imagineering can be considered an artistic strategic skill.

Even more than in the creative industries, this is the case when trying to become more ‘consciously’ competent in designing for emergence in society. Integrated in the brand, a high concept can work as a generative image for shifting mental models of value creation; ‘it can provide an ambiguous, conceptual and metaphoric landscape and thereby can change our current ways of speaking, our implicit assumptions, and our ideas of what is possible and desirable’ (Bushe & Storch, 2015). Becoming more competent designers to source emerging processes, is a matter of understanding concepts such as emergence, publics, wording, and many more aspects. Integrated in the brand, an ambiguous ‘high concept’ can tap into the imagination of all involved agents (creators, marketeers as well as ‘visitors’), this ‘systemic’ instrument can enable the creation of a new world of value co-production.

Concrete in the case of the city of Antwerp: We decided to graphically design a sparkling A and add to that the dialectical sentence of ‘t Stad is van iedereen’, in English: ‘Our city belongs to everyone’. Because it was a Dutch phrase, it was not perceived as a marketing action, which some sectors, such as tourism, even rated as a negative point of the rebranding. But it clearly made people wonder what was going on and it also gave constructive people in the city and in the city administration, a ‘high concept/meme’ to source new initiatives for collective creative action.

The measurable results: The satisfaction rate of the city augmented in both local and national statistics. In 2011, the city won the Financial Times award for the fastest growing city in terms of foreign direct investment and, also, the branding agency won several awards with this creation.

Less ‘measurable’ but informative for understanding how a poetically framed brand can orchestrate the co-evolution of demand and supply toward co-production, are the following quotes from the doctoral research of Nijs (2014, p. 273): One interviewee articulated the meaning of the reframed brand as follows: From now on, we speak with one voice of hope. We are together in this, and we are all as responsible for what we make out of it.’ And further: ‘The message is
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a starting point for all that happens in our city and in all assessment interviews it is now a starting point, asking from every employee to take the message as a point of reference for their own functioning.

If there had not been a fertile soil in administration, one could never have realized such a transformation. In that case the mayor could have thought of changing things but other people in the organization should have taken things slowly. Now there was a mayor aiming to change things for the better and there was an administration willing to make change come true.

But as another interviewee mentioned: I don’t think that the transformation could have happen without the great ‘A’ but it couldn’t have happened without the sentence in it either. On its own the icon is seen as a kind of Warhol-thing and with the sentence next to it, everything is clear. It needs no further explanation. The direction is obvious for all stakeholders. Both are needed to effectuate the transformation. The logo catalyzed us away from negativism and bureaucracy into positivism and openness. Gone are the stories of us and them, the bad guys, and the good guys. From now on, it is all about us. There was a significant growth of proudness and an even bigger decline of negativity. The new logo really worked as a catalyzer.

Implementation

Instead of ‘solving’ problems in a linear way, complex challenges require first ‘sourcing’ and then ‘sustaining’ the emergence of a new order through bottom-up processes of collective action. Implementation focuses on how to sustain these processes so as to evolve to a more competent situation to deal with complexity.

Theoretically emergence is underpinned by ‘the four dynamics of dissipative structures’ (Nijs, 2014): Fluctuation dynamics as ‘inducing indeterminacy’ should be further ‘fed’ in the long run to keep the movement of collective action going, positive feedback dynamics such as putting the ‘spot-light’ on ‘great, new interpretations’, recombination dynamics as emerging new order asks for new combinations, and stabilization dynamics such as articulating corporate values to help maintain a system’s integrity.

In practice, these dynamics are a matter of leading and managing differently, in line with the value-creating logic of co-production. But while this phase goes beyond the focus of branding, we limit ourselves here to referencing to Nijs (2019).

‘Mission-oriented branding’ to source-creative futures

Working now for two decades with Imagineering in practice, we’ve found our ‘integrative’ work very challenging so far. Besides the fact that the word ‘imagineering’ is not easily digestible in the board room, we met other barriers for the adoption of Imagineering in practice, of which the limited understanding of systemic approaches, is surely the most important one. Managers, administrators, and politicians, most often, do not know that they do not know. And this seems to be the case for all WSAs, as reported by Bai et al. (2016) on cities:

- The conventional, evolutionary pressures in society generate evermore siloed behavior of governmental institutions and restructuring governance is insufficiently understood as is the potential role of non-governmental actors.
- The inadequacy of conventional mental models in combination with the ‘needs for immediate actions and simple narratives’ are unhelpful and it perpetuates the limited understanding of systemic approaches.
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• The lack of incentives and institutional support to the use of WSAs and, consequently, also the lack of training among politicians, civil servants, and managers to bridge the gap.
• And, finally, concerning the city: failure to recognize the systemic nature of cities.

While we see cities as the most relevant field for ‘turning the tide’ toward integration and the use of WSAs in society, we cite Bai et al. (2016, p. 73) to articulate this barrier as an important eye-opener for the reader of this chapter:

*The traditional view of cities, in primarily geographic terms, is inadequate. While the concept of ‘place’ in terms of the unique character, context, and capacities of specific localities is a critical corollary to the systems approach, cities are too often conceptualized as places like any other. […] As long as such characterizations prevail, it is difficult to demonstrate the need for systems approaches.*

But the field of city branding seems to be in flux too in today’s co-production context. Illustrative in this regard is the emergence of the concept ‘transformative city branding’, a concept that adds a new ‘transformative enhancing’ dimension to the existing ‘external-internal’ dimension. To get around the limited understanding of systemic approaches and to facilitate digestion in the boardroom and in policy rooms too, based on our own Imagineering-experiences, we recommend using the term mission-oriented branding instead of transformative branding.

**Conclusions**

In coping with growing complexity in society, a problem-solving, fixing perspective is limiting. The toolbox can be expanded with future sourcing perspectives such as Imagineering, a ‘whole systems’ approach of ‘inducing indeterminacy’ to source newness in a clear aspirational direction of co-production. Imagineering applied to branding as ‘reframing the brand to reframe value creation’ and can be said to be an interesting extension of the toolbox.

We have argued and illustrated that even while the shift in value creation in society is today experienced by longer existing organizations as an almost insurmountable challenge, seen from a complexity perspective, it creates a ‘disequilibrium’ that enables taking advantage of emergence. The shift creates an ideal context for designing an attractor to generate new order in the desired direction of simultaneous value co-production for the betterment of our ecosystems.

As cities, communities and towns are systems that demonstrate a high level of complexity and interdependences, we have argued they are the best places to start with to raise awareness of the practice of ‘mission-oriented branding’. In addition, ‘mission-oriented branding’ also meets Mazzucato’s concern that in complex times we need whole systems approaches (WSA’s) and therefore ‘we must re-imagine governments as creative agents’ (2018).

We conclude that Imagineering can enrich the WSA debate by:

• First, by putting a finger on the crucial importance of ‘inducing indeterminacy’ to source creative futures for the betterment of a system and society at large, Imagineering offers a fresh perspective on designing for emergence or on designing for social innovation in general.
• Second, by applying ‘inducing indeterminacy’ to the field of branding, Imagineering shows a concrete way how individual organizations can turn the tide from a reality of fragmentation to a need for integration, in a structural way. As a boundary object, the brand enables co-evolution, adaptation, recombination, and integration both at the supply,
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demand, and whatever side in the ecosystem. It also offers organizations a structural way to join the recent (European) movement of mission-oriented innovation.

On how the WSA debate can enrich Imagineering, we conclude that:

- WSA offers an interesting framework to join the academic debate in a very concrete way as to help bridge the gap between academia and practice.
- Second, WSA gives Imagineering words that are easier to digest in the boardroom and in policy environments than words from the design scene and the scene of the creative industries. But we should take care, not to lose the so crucial competence of ‘inducing indeterminacy’ with a clear, aspirational direction, in trying to ‘fit’ in these ‘rational’ environments with their limited understanding of systemic approaches.

Finally, we hope that the concept of ‘mission-oriented branding’ will catalyze the use of WSAs in society.

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References


