

**Review of Manuel Castells (2009), *Communication Power*.  
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The book *Communication Power* can be seen as a successor of Volume II of Castells' major trilogy about the Information Age, called *The Power of Identity* (1997). In his new book Castells focuses on the role of communication networks in power-making in society, with an emphasis on political power making. He defines power as 'the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favour the empowered actor's will, interest and values' (p. 10). Power is not an attribute of individuals and groups but a relationship. This definition clearly is appropriate for networks and the network society, the main topics of this book.

Castells' main claims are that 1) communication networks are central to the implementation of power-making of any network, such as corporate, financial, cultural-industrial, technology or political networks and 2) that the programming of single networks and switching of different networks are the fundamental sources of power. He even states that network programmers (media companies, public institutions, publishers, editors, technicians) and switchers –such as Rupert Murdoch who links media, cultural, political and financial networks- are the holders of power in the network society (p. 429). The example of Murdoch should not be misunderstood. According to Castells programmers and switchers are not individuals; they are network positions embodied by social actors. 'Murdoch is a node, albeit a key node' (idem).

### **Forms of power in networks**

Castells distinguishes four forms of power in networks. Unfortunately, he has given them labels that are rather confusing:

- 1) *Networking power* is the power over who and what is included in the network. Programmers have the capacity of letting a person, a medium or a message enter the network or not through gate-keeping practices. One of Castells' main statements in this book is that the rise of so-called 'mass self-communication', the use of new media for private messages that are able to reach masses – more about this concept below- next to traditional mass communication reduces the gate-keeping capacity of programmers. Networks can be reprogrammed.
- 2) *Network power* is the power of the protocols of network communication. This communication must adapt to the standards embodied in the structure and management of networks. Castells does not specify these standards sufficiently, though he asserts that in mass self-communication the diversity of formats is the rule and that this amplifies the diffusion of messages beyond control, at least as compared to traditional mass communication.
- 3) *Networked power* is the power of certain nodes over other nodes inside the network. This is the managerial, agenda-setting, editorial and decision making power in the organizations that own or operate networks. The programmers concerned constitute (decision-making) networks themselves.
- 4) *Network-making power* is the capacity to set-up and program a network – of multimedia or traditional mass communication- by their owners and controllers: media corporations, be they businesses or the state. This is the most important form of power in Castells' analysis. This refers to the statement, called above, that network programmers and switchers are the power holders in the network society. They may be contested by the reprogramming work of mass self-communication.

## Mass self-communication

An important concept for the readers of this journal is mass self-communication. According to Castells this is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience and he refers to posting a video on You Tube, issuing a blog with RSS links and sending a message to a massive e-mail list. It is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated (by more or less professional individual users), it is self-directed (particular addresses) and self-selected (in using Internet sources). The three forms of communication (interpersonal, mass and mass self-communication) coexist, interact and complement each other. 'What is historically novel ( ) is the articulation of all forms of communication into a composite, interactive, digital hypertext' (p. 55).

Undeniably, this concept refers to important new forms of communication produced by digital media that should be located between interpersonal and traditional mass communication. However, referring to a mix and convergence of forms Castells lumps all new media concerned together and makes insufficient analytical distinctions. Both senders and receivers may be public and private and this gives a four-fold table of new communication forms<sup>1</sup>. Mass self-communication refers to private senders and public or semi-public and private receivers. New media such as the *public* video end music exchange sites, blogs, Twitters and profiling sites or pages are different from *semi-private and public* chat, instant messaging, video-conferencing and social-networking sites. They have different user intentions and strategic opportunities and risks. Among them are the opportunities of reprogramming communication networks, opportunities Castells rates very high (see below).

## Conceptual changes

This book makes the same arguments as the 12 year older book *The Power of Identity*. In two respects Castells has made considerable progress. The former book was taking about human selves and identities. Now the author has really discovered psychology. Meaning has become a core concept in the analysis of this structural thinker. He borrows from the currently popular work of neuropsychologists such as Antonio Damasio that have made the turn from cognition and reasoned action to biology and emotions. This enables him to make splendid analyses of media politics and political campaigns, mainly in the United States as a combination of rationality and emotions. For example, he describes the systematic campaign of misinformation in the mass media of the Bush administration dragging the American population into the Iraq war and tries to explain why this was successful. Here he develops frame theory on the basis of Robert Entman's work.

The second advance is more attention to the struggle over networks: they are programmed and reprogrammed. In a 1999 review of the trilogy *The Information Age* I accused Castells of completely neglecting the design dimension and the social struggle over networks<sup>2</sup>. At that time, his view was that with networks we have created a machine that is dynamic, full of opportunities but controlled by no one. Castells keeps paying more attention to relations between networks (both cooperation and competition) and to the exclusionary aspect of networks than to relations within networks. He still is inclined to reify networks and the network society as clearly demarcated units or actors that overwhelm the rest of social reality instead of analysing them as constantly changing relations of human actors that expand and shrink and overlap with other social structures in a mutual shaping of structure and action. However, now he clearly argues that the 'logic' of networks could be transformed (p. 36). He

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<sup>1</sup> Jan van Dijk (2006) *The Network Society, Second Edition*. London: Sage Publications, p. 170

<sup>2</sup> Jan A.G.M. van Dijk (1999). The One-Dimensional Network Society of Manuel Castells. *New Media & Society, Vol 1, Nr. 1*, 139-147.

tries to show this in a number of case studies in which communication networks are reprogrammed.

### **Reprogramming networks**

The first study is about the environmental movement and the ‘new culture of nature’ (environmental consciousness). ‘It was the networking between the scientific community, environmental activists and celebrities that brought the issue to the media, and communicated it to the public at large via multimedia networks’ (p. 321). The second study describes the global movement against corporate globalization that is predominantly organized via the Internet (e.g. Indymedia) and mobile telephony. The third study reports the use of mobile telephony (SMS) to launch a public outcry against the deliberate manipulation of the Aznar government after the 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid that accused the ETA in stead of Al Qaeda. The final study analyses the Obama presidential primary campaign amply using the Internet. All these cases are used to demonstrate the potential of the media of mass self communication and the Internet generally to organize counter power or change power relationships.

In my view these studies do not convincingly prove Castells’ point despite all descriptive evidence supplied. He gives no detailed information about the *networks* of scientists, activists and celebrities that are supposed to have brought the issue to the media. Public pressure and the own initiative of the traditional mass media played a role at least as important, and the Internet’s role was not more relevant than that of the mass media. The organization of anti- or other globalization movement certainly depends on counter-networking via the new media. However it has proved to be relatively powerless as is testified by the fact that when its ‘finest’ hour came with the bankruptcy of neo-liberalism and the discredit of global capitalism in the credit crisis, it was virtually absent in public opinion and on the streets. A particular SMS call for a demonstration against the Spanish government’s misinformation certainly contributed to the mobilization that stirred a part of the electorate to vote against Aznar. However, a number of old media (newspapers and radio-stations) also played an important role in the public outcry, and they had a larger audience. The role of the Internet in the Obama campaign also is exaggerated<sup>3</sup>. Reading about the superiority of the use of the Internet in this campaign on Castells’ account one wonders why Obama did not win with a landslide of 10 to 15 percent. In fact Obama did not win the presidency by means of the Internet but by his personal quality as a candidate attracting many new voters. He was saved by his reaction to the credit crisis at the start of September 2008, just two months before the election when he was at the losing end according to the polls. Despite all Internet use.

Clearly, the Internet and other digital media are getting more important in these, and many other cases. Certainly, they have a liberating potential as was recently demonstrated by the oppositional movement in Iran. However, this case also proves the opposite: the remaining control of the far more important mass media by the regime and the attempts to censor the new media. So, my biggest problem with Castells’ analysis is that he is very one-sided in highlighting the liberating potential instead of opposite tendencies. For me it is unacceptable to talk about communication power in networks without any treatment of privacy, security and surveillance issues (with the partial exception of Internet censorship in China). Unfortunately, central registration and control also are important potentials of power in networks. Further, Castells completely ignores the problems of the digital divide and the lack

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<sup>3</sup> See Matthew Hindman (2008). *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press

of digital skills among at least half of Internet users, even in high-access countries<sup>4</sup>. The liberating potential of mass self-communication will be seen in another light when Internet use in practice would lead to a reinforcement of the 'information elite' and big problems to catch up for large parts of the population.

### **Toward a communication theory of power?**

In his conclusions Castells claims to present the beginnings of a general communication theory of power. However, it is utterly disappointing that he does so by only presenting a 'methodological approach' and a number of very general hypotheses for others to investigate (p. 430). One wonders why he did not do this himself in the 500 plus pages at his disposal. His hypotheses lack sufficient specification for empirical test as he admits himself: 'I am not identifying the concrete social actors who are power-holders' (p. 430). This book contains many well-documented and sharply analysed case studies as we are used to read in Castells' work marked by a very high level of expertise. However, the gap between these cases and a real theory of communication power remains large.

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<sup>4</sup> See a.o. A. van Deursen & J. van Dijk(2009). Improving digital skills for the use of online public information and services. *Government Information Quarterly* 26, 333-340 and A. van Deursen and J. van Dijk (*in press*). Using the Internet: Skill related problems in users' online behaviour. *Interacting with Computers*, 2009.