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## Book Review

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Castells, Manuel (2009) *Communication Power*. Oxford University Press. ISBN - 978-0-19-956704-1

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Based on the working hypothesis 'that the most fundamental form of power lies in the ability to shape the human mind' (3), Castells' latest book investigates the workings of power in the network society. Although a welcome addition to the *Information Age* trilogy, the analytical framework of the book includes some flaws and blind spots that derive mainly from Castells' view of communication.

Castells begins by placing his analysis of power within the framework of the network society. His discussion in Chapter 1 is an improvement on the *Information Age* trilogy where Castells tended to focus more on powerful processes rather than the actors involved in them (Stalder 2006). In this book, he addresses this limitation by identifying two types of powerful actors: 'programmers' and 'switchers'. 'Programmers' are those who design the program of the network, a set of 'codes that include valuation of performance and criteria for success or failure' (20). 'Switchers' are those who connect different networks by possessing the codes of translation and protocols of communication necessary for this function.

Castells then turns his attention to the media which, as the sources of 'societal communication' (communication that can reach the whole of society), have the power to shape the public mind. In Chapter 2, he offers a comprehensive survey of the

communication system in the digital age, tracing four distinct transformations that led the way to the current system. Castells outlines the rise of 'mass self-communication' that is facilitated by technologies such as blogging and web 2.0 platforms, allowing anyone to disseminate messages to a global audience. In contrast to traditional mass communication, this is 'self-communication' because 'the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from the World Wide Web and electronic communication networks is self-selected' (55).

To forge an understanding of how media messages shape the mind, Castells delves into the field of neuroscience. In Chapter 3 he discusses the power of frames, 'the structures of the narrative that correspond to the structures of the brain' (142). His analysis of how emotions influence political decision-making is a much needed corrective to the conception of citizens as rational and instrumental beings, a view that has dominated academic political analysis since the 1970s (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2004). Castells further investigates the role of the media in framing the public mind by focusing on the news and on processes of agenda-setting and framing, illustrating his discussion with the case study of the Iraq War.

Castells complements his analysis of communication power with rich empirical studies of media politics. In Chapter 4 he examines mainstream politics, showing how the centrality of media leads to a further de-legitimation of political institutions and to a decline in public trust that together deepen the crisis of democracy. An interesting aspect of this chapter refers to the rise of scandal politics, a trend exacerbated by digital communication. In Chapter 5 Castells looks at insurgent politics and social movements arguing that the capacity for mass self-communication has allowed such actors to diffuse their own messages to the public. He illustrates this argument with a wide range of case studies, including the climate change movement, the global justice movement, and the Obama presidential campaign. However, Castells' analytical distinction between social movements (social actors aiming for a change in values) and insurgent politics (processes aiming at institutional change) is problematic. A variety of social

movements, including the global justice, consist of actors pursuing both institutional change and the transformation of values.

Yet, the most important flaws in Castells' framework concern his understanding of media and communication. Despite his emphasis on new communication technologies, Castells' analysis of the media remains rather old-fashioned. This is because his focus rests on the two types of communication that he terms 'societal': mass communication and 'mass self-communication'. This ignores the capacity of digital communication networks to magnify the scope and social impact of interpersonal communication and provides an incomplete account of how information is diffused within such networks. Furthermore, in his discussion of framing and agenda setting, Castells fails to take into account how these processes are being transformed in the digital communication environment. For instance, current research shows that the proliferation of media messages and the fragmentation of the audience are limiting the role of the media in framing and agenda-setting (Bennett and Iyengar 2008).

Moreover, Castells does not provide a clear framework of how the audience makes sense of media messages. In Chapter 2 he briefly outlines a model of the communication process that befits the multi-directional nature of digital interactive communication. Within this environment audiences are 'creative' since they are both senders and addressees of messages. The message is encoded according to the codes of specific channels and modes of communication and interpreted by its receivers according to their own codes. These derive from the experience of every member as a sender of messages, as well as from the interaction between audience members. However, Castells is rather vague when it comes to the codes used by the audience. The absence of culture or ideology as filters for the interpretation of messages is curious here. So is the

lack of references to research on the active work of media audiences which would have helped him to develop this model in more detail.<sup>1</sup>

What is more, Castells' claim that audience members are interpreting messages through interaction seems to be forgotten when he analyzes the power of frames. His preoccupation with neuroscience in this section confines his attention to how individuals make sense of information, leading him to disregard the interactive aspects of this process. The emphasis on neuroscience also undermines Castells' engagement with studies of public opinion and of the media as a public sphere which would have helped him to better conceptualize the role of debate and discussion. The terms used in this analysis are indicative of the problem. Castells is continually referring to the 'public mind' (a nod to neuroscience) rather than 'public opinion' even though his empirical results mainly derive from opinion polls.

Finally, Castells' emphasis on the power of communication to shape the public mind leads him to investigate politics as a symbolic war that takes place in the media. His focus rests primarily on the content of media messages and less on how communication practices affect the organizing processes and the structure of political action. This is evident in his discussion of case studies. For instance, in his overview of the Obama campaign, he mentions only in passing how the internet helped to coordinate grassroots activists. Although Castells does refer to how the use of mobile phones leads to the construction of new activist networks, his framework does not aid in conceptualizing the role of media and communication in this process.

This constitutes a more general blind spot in Castells' theoretical framework, a problem that becomes apparent in the Conclusion. There, Castells' argument hits a dead end when he attempts to account for network-making power, the power of creating

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<sup>1</sup> The most obvious one is the 'Encoding/Decoding' model developed by Stuart Hall in the 1970s (see, for instance, Hall 1980).

networks. Networks are organizing structures constructed through the coming together of different actors and through the design of a program that defines their operation, rules of association and criteria of performance. This process takes place in and through communication between network creators. Castells' focus on frames and symbolic power does not allow him to provide a comprehensive explanatory framework of how this occurs. He attempts to sidestep this theoretical limitation by suggesting that it is the owners and controllers of media corporations that can set up networks, actors who are in turn entangled in other networks. Yet, this implies that network-making concerns only multimedia and mass communication networks and not the variety of sociotechnical networks (financial networks, state networks etc.) that constitute the network society. While media networks are a necessary infrastructure, they are only one way in which communication – mass and interpersonal, mediated and unmediated – is involved in the construction of network structures. A deeper engagement with organizational communication, and particularly with strands investigating how communication constitutes organization (see, for example, Putnam and Nicotera 2009) would have enriched this framework.

*Communication Power* investigates one of the most compelling questions in current academic enquiry: the functioning of communication power within the context of the network society. While it offers rich empirical detail and some useful theoretical concepts, Castells' account is undercut by a rather old-fashioned analysis of the media and a confusing framework of how audiences make sense of media messages. It is also limited by Castells' focus on communication power as the 'shaping of the public mind'. This weakens his analysis of the most important form of power in the network society: the power to construct sociotechnical networks.

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