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Communication Power, by Manuel Castells

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Book Reviews

Communication Power, by Manuel Castells. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 571 pp. $34.95 paper.

Reviewed by STEVEN LIVINGSTON

It would be an exaggeration to say that Manuel Castells produces books at a rate greater than the ability of most mortals to read them with the care and concentration they require, but not by much. The information society trilogy (*The Rise of Network Society, The Power of Identity, The End of the Millennium*) was first published in 1996, and then reissued with substantial revision in 2000; the three-volume set totals about 1,600 pages. *Communication Power* is almost as weighty, both in its girth—571 pages including index—and intellectual ambition and complexity. When one considers that *Communication Power*, along with other books published since the trilogy,[1] constitutes a sustained inquiry into the nature of political and economic power in the modern world, attempting to capture the complexity and richness of his argument in a short review seems almost Quixotesque.[2] Instead, a fair summary offers a more reasonable objective.

Following a brief autobiographical opening concerning his practical and intellectual introduction to politics and media as a young man in Franco-era Spain, Castells offers a recapitulation of his theory of networked society. He argues that the industrial economy and other aspects of spatially organized human affairs have given way to an organization of human society that is rooted in networked information flows, what he calls the Information Age (his capitalization), or informationalism. Information flows are enabled by the microelectronics revolution that has brought much, though not all, of the world into non-spatially defined networked relationships. Because information and communication are the most fundamental dimensions of human activity and organization, a revolutionary change in the material conditions of their performance affects the entire realm of human activity.

According to Castells, global networks are characterized by the advantages of flexibility, scalability, and survivability. *Flexibility* is the ability to reconfigure networks according to changing environments without abandoning original goals. Should encumbrances impede established network information flows, new connections and alternative routes are enabled. *Scalability* is the ability to expand or shrink networks with little disruption. *Survivability* is the ability of networks to continue operation by reconfiguration of data packet routes in the face of even the most catastrophic disruptions, such as nuclear war, as was the original intent of the research leading to the creation of ARPANET, the embryonic internet consisting of 15 nodes among American universities and research institutes in 1971.

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While not drawing from them, his thesis resonates with a variety of arguments and analytical constructs found across the social sciences, including but not limited to Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, and Douglas McAdam's (2001) notion of scale shifting as an element of contentious politics; James Rosenau's (2003) notion of distant proximities as a way of capturing the collapse of time and space and the formation of new identities and social relations; Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's (1998) boomerang model of transnational advocacy; and the spiral model of advocacy and norms socialization offered by Sikkink, Thomas Risse, and Stephen C. Ropp (1999).

What, then, is communication power? Power is the *relational* capacity that enables a social actor to influence *asymmetrically* the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor's will, interests, and values. It is exercised by coercion, or the threat of coercion, and by the construction of meaning on the basis of the discourses through which social actors guide their action. Although there is always the possibility of resistance, power relationships remain asymmetrical; there is always a greater degree of influence in one actor relative to others.

In the emphasis on coercion as an element of power, Castells draws on Max Weber; on legitimacy he points to Jurgen Habermas. First quoting Weber, Castells writes that power resides in "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." Power is found in the threat of violence. Again, quoting Weber, power is "a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported *by means of legitimate* (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence. If the state is to exist the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be. . . . The decisive means for politics is violence" (p. 12).

Supporting the use or threatened use of violence is legitimacy. Turning to Habermas, Castells posits that legitimacy relies on "consent elicited by the construction of shared meaning" (p. 12). *Power in networks, therefore, is found in the ability to construct legitimizing meaning through global communication networks*.

Power in global networks comes in four expressions: networking power, network power, networked power, and network-making power. Only two will be discussed in this limited space. Networking power concerns the relations between people and organizations that are a part of the core elements of global networked society—and those who are not. The benefits and disadvantages associated with both inclusion and exclusion accrue exponentially, underscoring the benefits of inclusion. Power is exercised not by exclusion from the networks, but by the "imposition of the rules of inclusion" (p. 45).

Network-making power is the "paramount form of power in the network society" (p. 47). It is held and exercised by what Castells metaphorically calls programmers and switchers. Throughout the book, Castells relies on terms drawn from the world of computer science and engineering, not because he thinks the analysis of society is reducible to a direct analog to electronic networks, but rather because of the sympathetic congruity between the organization of human society and communication networks in the modern era. Programmers have the power "to constitute network(s), and to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network" (p. 45). Switchers have the power "to connect and ensure the cooperation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources, while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation" (p. 45). It would be an oversimplification to think of switchers as individuals, or even individual organizations. Rather, they are networks of actors engaging in dynamic interface within networks.

How a network is programmed is specific to each. Yet regardless of the specific content, networks share cultural material, and the "ability to create an effective process of

communication and persuasion along the lines that favor the projects of the would-be programmers . . . are the key assets in the ability to program each network." In other words, communication and networks are the "fields of power in networked society" (p. 46). It is from this that meaning is created and communicated. He illuminates how power and "resistance to power [are] achieved through the same two mechanisms that constitute power in the network society: the programs of the networks and the switches between networks" (p. 47).

Drawing in part from Robert Entman's work on framing and cognitive activation, Milton Lodge and Charles Taber's work on motivated reasoning, and on George Lakoff more generally, Chapter 3 offers an extended discussion of mental processes as a foundation to a subsequent discussion of communication production processes. "Communication happens by activating minds to share meaning" (p. 138).

Communications research has identified three major processes involved in the relationship between media and the mind: agenda setting, priming, and framing. Nearly all of the discussion in this chapter derives from standard political communication texts. For example, when he argues that the critical issue is that news frames are not external to the mind because "frames are effective by finding resonance and increasing the magnitude of their repetition" (p. 158), he is drawing from Entman's emphasis on cultural congruence as a key factor in the effectiveness of frames.

Chapter 4, "Programming Communication Networks: Media Politics, Scandal Politics and the Crisis of Democracy," provides case studies that examine the relationships between mass media and politics in Spain, Russia, the United States, and China. In a summary statement, Castells says, "State power, in its most traditional manifestation, that is manipulation and control, is pervasive in the media and the Internet throughout the world" (p. 285). Despite variation in specific manifestations of media politics, all involve shaping the public mind, often with an emphasis on scandal, a move that deepens contempt for public institutions. The resulting crisis in democracy emerges when "the majority of the citizens in the world do not trust their governments or their parliaments, and an even larger group of citizens despise politicians and political parties, and think that their government does not represent the will of the people" (p. 286). This is a rather ironic outcome to a process said to stem from efforts to legitimize the use of force, as discussed in the opening pages of the book.

The book closes with a consideration of the ways citizen movements seek to reprogram communications. Environmental activists and others make use of "mass self-communication," that is, the ability of consumers of media content to repackage and create their own content in the space afforded by new media. "By using both horizontal communication networks and mainstream media to convey their images and messages, they increase their chances of enacting social and political change—even if they start from a subordinate position in institutional power, financial resources, or symbolic legitimacy" (p. 302). Celebrities who attach themselves to causes and what the policy literature calls focusing events or triggering events help disrupt programmed communication. In a world marked by the rise of mass self-communication, social movements and insurgent politics have a chance to enter the public space from multiple sources.

Castells is a synthesizer and meta-theoretician. He reaches far and wide to bring together disparate elements to his arguments. This is his amazing strength as a seminal figure in modern scholarship. But this demands a patient and attentive reader. Reading *Communication Power* is rather like taking a great birding dog out for a walk: every nook and cranny must be sniffed and explored with endearing enthusiasm before moving on in a bound to the next point of discovery. This leaves the reader both exhilarated and exhausted.

Notes

1. Manuel Castells (2001), *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press); Manuel Castells and Pekka Himanen (2002), *The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press); Manuel Castells (Ed.) (2004), *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar); Manuel Castells and Gustavo Cardoso (Eds.) (2006), *The Network Society: From Knowledge to Policy* (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations); and Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernandez-Ardevol, Jack Linchuan Qiu, and Araba Sey (2007), *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

2. For a sustained and insightful discussion of Castells's work, see Felix Stalder (2006), *Manuel Castells: The Theory of Network Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press).

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Risse, T., Ropp, S., & Sikkink, K. (1999). *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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Political Branding in Cities: The Decline of Machine Politics in Bogotá, Naples, and Chicago, by Eleonora Pasotti. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 282 pp. $90.00 cloth.

Reviewed by MELISSA ARONCZYK

Eleonora Pasotti's new book is a detailed and innovative account of the phenomenon of urban "brand politics": a form of political exchange whereby influence matters more than affiliation, social values more than material benefits, and broad spectrum communication more than clientelistic particularism. Given the current image-obsessed and hypermediated public stage on which modern political communication takes place, the notion of politics-as-brand-management has received considerable attention. In addition to the tidal wave of popular literature on related subjects (e.g., Lakoff, 2008; Westen, 2007; Nunberg, 2006), a number of recent academic books (e.g., Greenberg, 2008; Sennett, 2006; Corner & Pels, 2003) have examined the increasingly inextricable relationship between voting and buying in an era of extreme convergence of politics and markets. But Pasotti's is the only study I am aware of that specifically defines the terms and conditions of this phenomenon using a direct comparative approach. Through a fine-grained analysis of the campaign strategies of mayors in three major cities—Chicago, Naples, and Bogotá—in the latter decades of the 20th century, Pasotti elaborates a model by which brand politics are enacted. The study

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