Global Media and Communication

Book review: Manuel Castells, Communication Power. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 592 pp. ISBN: 9780199567041 (hbk)

Victor Pickard

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It speaks the language of the industry and the *business* of transnational television. To this reviewer's mind, this feature of the book makes it suitable for classroom use because it prepares students for joining the industry. That is a noteworthy accomplishment by itself. It must be noted, however, viewed from the same pedagogical perspective, the book has some shortcomings. The book does not give students a critical perspective from which they could assess the role this business plays in their social and cultural lives. There is little room for discussing normative claims or questions of valuation. In considering 'when the local meets the global', for example, the book addresses how channels within a network can differentiate themselves. The Turner Classic Movies network, the book argues, can offer a film such as *Casablanca* across its channels but never at the same time or the same day or even season. The film can be aired as a part of the focus on its director on one channel and aired on another as a part of the focus on its stars. This makes sense as a business strategy. However, some questions the book does not prepare students for include: is such a differentiation meaningful? Is it desirable? Who stands to benefit from it? The book does not give students a sense of an alternative perspective or a rich critical literature that would address such questions. Having said that, I admit that it might be unfair to expect a single volume to address all of these issues, especially one that has made a significant contribution to our understanding of a complex industry.

Manuel Castells, *Communication Power*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 592 pp. ISBN: 9780199567041 (hbk)

Reviewed by: Victor Pickard, *New York University, USA*

In his latest book, *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells refines some of his earlier theories and breaks new ground with others, especially concerning the role of power within networks. Castells' book delivers on what we have come to expect from his magisterial work: a wide-ranging synthesis that theorizes relationships between new communication technologies, network formations and social change. Returning to his central concept of the 'network society', Castells sees networks as 'communicative structures' that are not unique to contemporary times (nor to humans, for that matter), but with the aid of digital technologies and their inherent 'flexibility, scalability, and survivability' have come to figure prominently in contemporary organizational forms (p. 23). Castells covered much of this before in his *Information Society* trilogy, but with a theoretical sweep that defies synopsis, he extends his analysis to other key areas of social life, including media ownership, political psychology, and, in particular, power relationships. In understanding how power operates within and between networks, how control is managed within the network society, and the implications for social change, he turns to media. 'In the network society', he states, 'politics is fundamentally media politics' (p. 8).

Castells opens the book with an anecdote that traces his interest in the relationship between power and communication processes to his experiences as a youth disseminating radical leaflets during the Franco dictatorship in Spain. He notes that 'power is based on the control of communication and information, be it the macro-power of the state and media corporations or the micro-power of organizations of all sorts' (p. 3). Castells sees these relationships as 'constructed in the human mind through communication processes'

(p. 9). From these observations arises his central question: 'Where does power lie in the global network society?' (p. 42). On his way to an answer, Castells marches through disciplines, in short order summarizing many of the key findings in the political economy of media, political communication, neuroscience, and other disparate areas, to track the projection of power through media production and cognitive processes.

According to Castells, networks are constantly reconfiguring around new issues and shifting coalitions. They are 'programmed' by the powerful, but if certain conditions are met, networks are susceptible to being 'reprogrammed' in a process of 'counter-power' by individuals and groups with alternative interests and values. Castells illustrates this power struggle with a number of case studies, including the environmental movement's use of media and celebrities, the global justice movement's use of digital media networks like Indymedia, the text message campaigns in Spain that helped bring down the Aznar government, and the Obama campaign's use of digital communications to organize and amplify his grassroots support. Through these examples he shows a dialectical process of resistance confronting power within a corporate media regime (the 'meta-programmers'). In their logic of domination, these powerful interests create the conditions necessary for new network forms to manifest themselves that, in turn, undermine those corporate and statist powers aiming to control networks. Castells observes that actors of social change are able to exert decisive influence by using mechanisms of power-making that correspond to the forms and processes of power in the network society. By engaging in the cultural production of the mass media, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication, citizens of the Information Age become able to invent new programmes for their lives with the materials of their suffering, fears, dreams and hopes (p. 431).

Castells understands this process as one involving messages framed in ways that appeal to people's emotions through both traditional and new media. An example of the latter is the use of 'mass self-communication' – for example, YouTube and blogs – that serve as a countervailing force against the gatekeeping authority of mass communication programmers. However, Castells also acknowledges formidable structural constraints: 'the stable operation of the system, and the reproduction of power relationships in every network, ultimately depend on the coordinating and regulatory functions of the state and political system' (p. 427). Castells devotes significant attention to corporations' continuing dominance of traditional mass media – bolstered by the capture of prime regulatory processes – even as they are increasingly subject to activist interventions.

Refreshingly, Castells' overall assessment falls in neither the dystopian nor utopian camps. However, from today's perspective – when much of the visible activism in the US appears to be driven by the reactionary right and President Obama has seemingly abandoned much of the grassroots energy that animated his campaign – it is tempting to see Castells as erring on the side of undue optimism. However, his careful scholarship sheds light on agency *and* structure as well as the promise and perils of new digital technologies. At times the proliferation of theoretical typologies – such as the differences between networking power, network power, networked power and network-making power (p. 42) – can make this book a challenging read. And there are areas upon which Castells could have shone his considerable analytical light, such as right-wing social movements (the libertarian Tea Party movement in the US emerged after the book was completed, but it could serve as a prime case study in future work). Nonetheless,

Communication Power holds plenty of useful material, making the slog through 500-plus pages more than worth it. Indeed, Castells' methodical, clearly written discussions around his theory-building are matched with entertaining narratives.

Generating new theoretical formulations throughout the book, Castells approaches this undertaking with humility, describing his analyses as offering 'tentative empirical support for a number of hypotheses concerning the nature of power in the network society' (p. 416). He offers his contribution as an approach that can 'be used in research, rectified, and transformed in ways that allow the gradual construction of a theory of power that can be disproved by observation.' Although he states that he is not 'identifying the concrete social actors who are power-holders', one of his hypotheses suggests that 'they are networks of actors exercising power in their respective areas of influence through the networks that they construct around their interests'. For Castells, this formulation is less abstract than assuming the 'power of the capitalist class, of the military-industrial complex, or of the power elite' (p. 430). In underscoring the existence of power-holders within networks, he is careful to point out that he is 'not resurrecting the idea of a power elite' whose 'analytical value is limited to some extreme cases'. Castells sees power in networks as being more diffuse, reliant on 'more subtle, complex, and negotiated systems' of control (p. 47).

Although he provides us with tools to understand not only how networks operate but how their driving logic can be changed by social movements, Castells is the first to admit that his project for establishing a 'communication theory of power' is unfinished. Yet more theoretical tools are required to understand who controls the networks and how they can be supplanted. It is with this call for grounded theory (and subsequent action) that Castells ends his book:

> if we do not know the forms of power in the network society, we cannot neutralize the unjust exercise of power. And if we do not know who exactly the power-holders are and where to find them, we cannot challenge their hidden, yet decisive domination. (p. 431)

He concludes with some clues to where the power-holders lie: 'Look for them in the connections between communication networks, financial networks, cultural industrial networks, technology networks, and political networks'. He also calls for identifying 'the frames in the networks that frame your mind' and the need for 'preserving the commons of communication networks made possible by the internet' (p. 431).

Castells' vast synthesis deepens our understanding about how power operates within networks, and how that power can be challenged. It is for future researchers (or perhaps his next book) to carry the project onward.

Reviewed by: Edward Comor, *University of Western Ontario, Canada*

Branding Democracy is a critical analysis of US democracy promotion in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The primary agent of these efforts has been the American state