

## Review

# Too much power to the networks

**Alessandro Delfanti**

*Manuel Castells, Communication power, Oxford University Press (2009)*

*ABSTRACT: In his latest book titled “Communication power”, the famous sociologist of information society Manuel Castells focuses on the way in which power takes shape and acts in information societies, and the role of communication in defining, structuring, and changing it. From the rise of “mass self-communication” to the role of environmental movements and neuropolitics, the network is the key structure at play and the main lens used to analyse the transformations we are witnessing. To support his thesis Castells links media studies, power theory and brain science, but his insistence on networks puts in danger his ability to give to his readers a comprehensive and coherent interpretative framework.*

The new book of the Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells takes up again, after several years, some of the issues he tackled in some of his most famous works: the internet, the network society, the role of information and communication technologies in shaping the social and economical organisation, and the spaces social movements open up in societal dynamics. The roots of “Communication power” are in Castells' previous works, yet the main focus is slightly different: how does power take shape and act in information societies? What is the role of communication in defining, structuring, changing it? These ambitious questions need the building of a whole theory of power, and Castells answers them with radical proposals and combining media studies, power theory and brain science. Communication is the key node of the formation and maintenance of power. Furthermore, “in the network society, politics is fundamentally media politics” and “whoever has enough money, including political leaders, will have a better chance of operating the switch in its favor.”

Even if we stay at a superficial level, avoiding the author's fine-grained analysis of the characteristics of power, we can note that some of the issues tackled by Castells are interesting for those who study the dynamics of science communication. First of all, he analyses the role of the new information and communication technologies that have changed the mass media, namely the explosion of web 2.0, social media and so on. Castells refers to the tools that enable everybody to produce and publish content, and to then make it available to people with access to the internet, by introducing the concept of “mass self-communication”. This form of communication is a new and powerful source of social power, broadly diffused and easily accessible for individuals and social groups.

Another two sections are more directly related to science communication. Environmentalist social movements fighting against climate change are one of the main examples in the chapter dedicated to the “reprogramming” of communication networks. In author's view reprogramming is one of the key forms of intervention in power dynamics, and it is the attempt to act on the mediatic environment by spreading new meanings, new frames, new images exploiting both “the rise of mass-self communication and the autonomous capacity of civil societies around the world to shape the process of social change”. In fact eco-social movements base an important part of their action upon communication practices and taking advantage of the versatility of digital communication networks.

Furthermore, in building his theory of the relation between communication and power, Castells refers to the stream of research dedicated to the unveiling of the links between the human brain and political action: from Damasio to Lakoff, and even to the studies about mirror neurons and their role in human behavior. Building upon these studies, Castells depicts the human mind as a network neural structure that reacts to (and is structured and shaped by) the presentation of political communication messages it can recognize and frame. Political communication directly shapes the configuration of neural networks that –

together – form the social mind, the network of minds that produces society's cognitive, power and organisation structures. “We are networks connected to a world of networks” is Castells' fascinating assertion that synthesizes just how powerful the lens he uses to observe society is.

It would be easy to attack Castells' use of the studies on the human brain to understand a phenomenon as complex as power. And the attacks will come, as they did against the too easy use of the studies on neuroeconomics, neuropolitics, and so on. Yet I think another important question emerges by reading “Communication power”: is the network metaphor still useful and productive when it is taken to its extreme? Neuron networks influenced by communication networks structured and enacted by power and counterpower networks, for example social movement (organised, *ça va sans dire*, in a network form), that contribute to the production of the network structure of society as a whole. And is the network only a metaphor or really the key organisational structure of our times, societies, minds, communication organisations and so on? Is its normative element taking over its value as a heuristic tool? In this book Castells doesn't provide an answer to this question, and he leaves the reader the feeling of being captured inside its once productive metaphor. Obviously, I don't want to deny that the economic and political structures of information societies are different from more linear and monolithic forms that dominated social organisation during other historical periods. But Castells seems to argue that the network can be used to interpret almost every aspect of the relation between power and communication.

To conclude, I think this is the main epistemological fault of this work. The obsessive search for networks puts in danger the overall structures of the book. It can be interesting for those who study information societies and the role of science within them to confront themselves with some of the ideas Castells has gathered in “Communication power”. But his work can not be taken as a comprehensive, trustworthy and coherent interpretative framework.

HOW TO CITE: A. Delfanti, *Too much power to the networks*, *Jcom* **08**(04) (2009) R01.