Most people understand that communication networks are important to the constitution of contemporary global industrial society. The pertinent question at this moment in time is: Just how important are networks to the order of things? And what is a network? Whether you agree with Manuel Castells probably rests on whether you believe that networks are an important configuration of power in global capitalism or that they are the most important configuration of power in global capitalism. “We are networks connected to a world of networks,” writes Castells (p. 139, italics in original). In Communication Power, he argues that “the process of formation and exercise of power relationships is decisively transformed in the new organizational and technological context derived from the rise of global digital networks of communication as the fundamental symbol-processing system of our time” (p. 4). He attempts to articulate a methodology for assessing the power of networks from the macro (“mass self-communication”) to the micro (“the ability to shape the human mind”). As a result he argues that “the key strategic question for the social movements of our age” is “how to reach the global from the local, through networking with other localities—how to ‘grassroot’ the space of flows” (p. 52).

Scholars of digital media, mass communications, interpersonal communications, and cognitive science will find much to discuss here, so broad is the synthesis. Castells attempts to map the flow of symbols from mass media to the individual mind by incorporating a taxonomy of networking tropes that combine research from a wide range of fields in communication studies. One of Castells’ central theoretical terms is “mass self-communication,” a term that describes the “historically novel” communicative characteristics of social media, Web 2.0, and Web 3.0 (p. 55). Perhaps because mass self-communication is relatively new, as such techno-social assemblages go, the potential of this “new medium” is less articulated here than the description of how mass communication became this new hybrid.

The basic premise for Castells is that “power relationships are largely based on the shaping of the human mind by the construction of meaning through image-making” (p. 193). The foundation for his theory of communication power, then, lies in the research of neuroscience and cognitive science—in the works of Antonio Damasio, Hanna Damasio, George Lakoff, and Jerry Feldman (p. 7)—and Castells devotes an entire chapter (pp. 137-192) to the summary of such theories. He connects human cognition to the “crisis of democracy” via the power of “media politics” (p. 298). His definition of communication power, though it often places too much emphasis on institutional forms of power, contains potent methodological tools. However, his conclusion in this instance borders on redundancy: Democracy can only be saved if civil society “can break through the corporate, bureaucratic, and technological barriers of societal image-making” (p. 298). In addition, that conclusion seems to belie a liberal simplicity about what “civil society” will produce once the “barriers” are removed.

Some of the case studies presented in Communication Power contain contradictions and questionable analyses, which problematizes our appreciation for Castells’ method-
ology. One example will have to suffice in this short space: that of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential-primary candidacy, which Castells claims “epitomizes the rise of a new form of insurgent politics with the potential of transforming the practice of politics altogether” (p. 303). Castells believes the “surge of citizen participation and political enthusiasm” in the Obama primary campaign “signaled a revival of the American democracy” (p. 364). At times Castells sounds like an Obama campaign manager or a prospective political consultant, so effusive is his praise (p. 406). Eventually, however, Castells begins cataloguing the reasons Obama is not really all of the things Castells just called him: “But Obama is no revolutionary; he never was, and he never will be” (p. 375); “Granted, no one, not even Obama, is going to challenge capitalism in the U.S., as well as, for the time being, in the world at large” (p. 381); “his triumph in the general presidential election was decisively helped by other factors” (p. 408). Finally, Castells admits that “any serious Democratic candidate … would have won this election in the economic context in which it took place” (p. 410). “If we can still characterize the Obama election as a major instance of insurgent politics,” Castells concludes, apparently admitting the defeat of his own hypothesis, “it is because he was the improbable nominee of the Democratic Party” (pp. 410-411). While the election of an African-American president is a notable milestone in American electoral politics, Obama’s election changed nothing of the plutocratic nature of power in America or the corporate duopoly that dominates the electoral process. He was, after all, a Harvard lawyer who taught at the University of Chicago and raised more campaign contributions than any candidate in history. That is not exactly the profile of “insurgent politics,” no matter how generously defined to accommodate Castells’ theories. Castells’ fumbling attempt to analyze the Obama candidacy diminishes one’s confidence in his methodology.

Castells closes the book by insisting he is “not dissolving power relationships in an endless deployment of networks,” but instead is calling for “specificity in the analysis of power relationships” (p. 430). Then he calls “the power of the capitalist class, of the military-industrial complex, or of the power elite” a “truly abstract, unverifiable proposition” (p. 430). It is an aggressive challenge, and network-centric social theory has its share of critics. Adrian Mackenzie, for example, charges that “while it exhorts attention to relations, network theorizing can deanimate relations in favor of a purified form of networked stasis” (Mackenzie, 2010, p. 9). Mackenzie argues for a concept of “wirelessness,” since network flows “are actually quite difficult to manage and to theorize” (p. 9) and are typified by “constant inconsistencies and interruptions” (p. 10). Critics such as Anna Munster, Geert Lovink, and Andrew Barry have also problematized the network as a theoretical apparatus. If communication scholars wish to work with the ideas of Manuel Castells, they should begin with a question posed by Mackenzie: “What properly constitutes a network when its edges and nodes tend to blur into a patch or a field of connections?” (p. 12).

References

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