

## Mediapolis Workshop 9th - 10th June 2008

### Reflections on Power Topologies, Media and Communication

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In a recent piece published by Manuel Castells in the *International Journal of Communication* (2007, 1) entitled 'Communication, Power and Counterpower in the Network Society', he foregrounds the importance of communications media as it extends its reach into all domains of public life through networks that are simultaneously local and global. The scenario of the network society, in which the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power, is a familiar one since Castells first expounded it in the late 1990s, where the power of connection trumps that of institutional power and its entrenched hierarchies. Now, it would seem, the power of circulating codes and information has been reconfigured as a *new space of communications* in which the power to influence, to shape collective minds, is played out between political actors in this new media space.

In terms of power plays, there is, according to Castells, an ongoing struggle for social domination and counter-domination in this communications space in which new forms of mass self communication – horizontally networked rather than hierarchical – unsettle the interests of institutional elites and reach more effectively into mainstream, everyday life. In doing so, the likes of NGOs, social movements and grassroots activists aim to create a new form of 'public space' which challenges and undermines the dominant media elites.

Versions of this top-down bottom-up view of the exercise of power are not particularly novel, as much of the social movement literature testifies, but what struck me was how surprisingly conventional the analysis of *power* and *space* was, given Castells' explicit aim to open up questions of *media power* and its *reach* into urban 'publics'.

Whilst he argues that the networked space of communications now constitutes the arena through which power relations are contested and shaped, the only significant actors engaged in this contestation of power are the dominant political and corporate elites and those who oppose them; that is, individual and collective actors of all different political hues and colours. Institutional power and counterpower, domination and counter domination, are the only significant practices involved in this play of forces as each side battles to win minds and influence outcomes.

On this account, there is little sense that those opposing the dominant media elites are powerful in their own way, capable of mobilizing quite different assets and resources from those with economic muscle to press their respective claims and interests. More power, in the shape of economic dominance, does not necessarily prevail over what is

perceived as less: the resources of NGOs, for instance, to press their information-advantage by turning far-away tragedies into immediate concerns through targeted connections to ‘publics’ closer to home. Pragmatic and expedient, the ability of NGOs and campaign groups to gauge what works best to tailor specific media campaigns to their advantage is a way of doing politics differently to that of the institutional elites. What such practices and tactics lack in terms of political sustainability, they gain in terms of their experimental ways of mobilizing pluralized and dispersed publics on the basis of ‘connected’ experience.

Nor do grassroots activists simply ‘oppose’ or resist the dominant media politics through some mirror practice of counter domination’; rather, they themselves are more than capable of manipulation, persuasion and the deployment of authority to achieve their political objectives. Likewise, in the new media spaces, the corporate media may attempt to dominate channels of communication by closing down choices and constraining possibilities, but they also engage in manipulation, authority and inducement every bit as much as NGOs do. In that respect, a simple domination/resistance framework trivializes the interplay of forces that characterises much of what is taken to be media power.

Much the same trivialization appears to be evident in Castells’ understanding of networked space, and the sense that the more or less extensive reach of powerful media is something that can be measured in a straightforward topographical manner. The more pervasive the network, the greater is the assumed reach, as if distance itself were a barrier to contact. That Castells knows otherwise is plainly evident through his understanding of the role of simultaneity and real-time connections in the networks, yet there is little sense in his work that the power of networked connections amounts to more than just lines on a map or a series of conduits through which power ‘flows’.

In fact, Castells’ sense that public space is largely defined in the contested spaces of communication pushes up against a *topological* world which calls into question the very idea that power can be simply distributed or extended through the networks. The loosening of defined times and distances that topological accounts suggest draw attention to the cross-cutting mix of distanced and real-time connections that social movements in particular engage in to make ‘publics’ present across a range of global political issues.

The ability, for instance, of NGOs and campaigning groups to link the actions of governments or corporations *directly* to abuse elsewhere in the world or to issues faced collectively such as climate change, ecological disasters, food risks or sweatshop exploitation, is, in practice, a topological tactic. In a number of media campaigns, activists have been able to *draw within reach* events such as sweatshop exploitation in far off locations by fixing directly on company logos and linking the actions of branded retailers in the high street to abuse overseas. In doing so, they establish an immediate connection between exploitation ‘over there’ and corporate decisions taken ‘back home’. More pointedly, the ability to manipulate ‘publics’ by erasing from view the majority of global supply chain connections – buyers and suppliers, trading companies and sourcing agents, subcontractors and subassembly firms – which separate factory workers from consumers, effectively dissolved the gap between ‘near’ and ‘far’ and re-embedded the exploitation among those affluent consumers who benefit most from it.

The relative success of this *mediated* exercise of power, whereby NGOs enrolled consumers to confront retail corporations directly with the consequences of their (indirect) actions, has however less to do with solidarities produced through the new communication spaces and rather more to do with the ability of social movements to persuade, manipulate and influence action at-a-distance. Moreover, what can be drawn within reach can also be put *out of reach* as those actors targeted, corporations in the main in this instance, use the networked media to distance themselves from abuses elsewhere. The displacement of responsibility onto others, as economic liabilities are offset or labour obligations contracted out, can have the effect of extending events in time and space, pushing them further away rather than drawing them closer. Again, there is little here that speaks of network domination and much that foregrounds the different registers of power that topological shifts in media architecture have increasingly made possible.

The powers of reach, which arguably the new media spaces have enabled, has given rise to the possibility of political demands being more or less present in the here and now. If that is so, then on this view a simple zero-sum game of media power misses much of the *mediated* nature of power today and how it exercises us.