

# Communication, Power and Counterpower in the Network Society (I)

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Power and politics are decided in the process of shaping the human mind through the communication process. In our society, the mass media have been traditionally critical sources in the formation of the public opinion underlying political decision-making. Thus, politics is primarily media politics. This has considerable consequences on the practice of politics, as it leads to the personalization of politics and to the politics of scandal. These are major sources of the worldwide crisis of political legitimacy. However, mass communication is being transformed in its technology by the diffusion of Internet, of the social spaces of the Web 2.0 and wireless communication.

The rise of mass self-communication disintermediates the role of traditional mass media in the formation of public opinion and opens up the possibility of a much greater diversity of messages and senders in the field of local-global communication. New social movements and insurgent politics are the main beneficiaries on this enhanced capacity for mass self-communication. Yet, both mass media and the new media built around the Internet are the object of conflicting strategies from corporations, governments, political actors, and citizens vying for positioning in the realm of communication. It follows that the communication space, in its multimodality, is the space where power is decided. In our society, power is communication power.



## ***Introduction: Power making by mind framing***

Throughout history communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and counterpower, of domination and social change. This is because the fundamental battle being fought in society is the battle over the minds of the people. The way people think determines the fate of norms and values on which societies are constructed. While coercion and fear are critical sources for imposing the will of the dominants over the dominated, few institutional systems can last long if they are predominantly based on sheer repression. Torturing bodies is less effective than shaping minds. If a majority of people think in ways that are contradictory to the values and norms institutionalized in the state and enshrined in the law and regulations, ultimately the system will change, although not necessarily to fulfill the hopes of the agents of social change. But change will happen. It will just take time, and suffering, much suffering. Because communication, and particularly socialized communication, the one that exists in the public realm, provides the support for the social production of meaning, the battle of the human mind is largely played out in the processes of communication. And this is more so in the network society, characterized by the pervasiveness of communication networks in a multimodal hypertext. Indeed, the ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age extends the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customized in an ever-changing pattern. As a result, power relations, that is the relations that constitute the foundation of all societies, as well as the processes challenging institutionalized power relations are increasingly shaped and decided in the communication field.

I understand power to be the structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actor(s). All institutional systems reflect power relations, as well as the limits to these power relations as negotiated by a historical process of domination and counterdomination. Thus, I will also analyze the process of formation of counter-power, which I understand to be the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized. Indeed, power relations are by nature conflictive, as societies are diverse and contradictory. Therefore, the relationship between technology, communication, and power reflects opposing values and interests, and engages a plurality of social actors in conflict.

Both the powers that be and the subjects of counterpower projects operate nowadays in a new technological framework; and this has consequences for the ways, means, and goals of their conflictive practice. In this article I will present some hypotheses on the transformation of this relationship, as a result of several trends that are connected but independent:

- . the predominant role of media politics and its interaction with the crisis of political legitimacy in most countries around the world;
- . the key role of segmented, customized mass media in the production of culture;
- . the emergence of a new form of communication related to the culture and technology of the network society, and based on horizontal networks of communication: what I call mass self-communication;

. and the uses of both one-directional mass communication and mass self-communication in the relationship between power and counterpower, in formal politics, in insurgent politics, and in the new manifestations of social movements.

The understanding of this transformation between communication and power must be placed in a social context characterized by several major trends:

a) The state, traditionally the main site of power, is being challenged all over the world by:

- . globalization that limits its sovereign decision making
- . market pressures towards deregulation that diminish its capacity to intervene
- . a crisis of political legitimacy that weakens its influence over its citizens ( 1)

b) Cultural industries and business media are characterized at the same time by business concentration and market segmentation, leading towards heightened oligopolistic competition, customized delivery of messages, and vertical networking of the multimedia industry ( 2)

c) Around the world, the opposition between communalism and individualism defines the culture of societies as identity construction works at the same time with materials inherited from history and geography and from the projects of human subjects. The culture of communalism roots itself in religion, nation, territoriality, ethnicity, gender, and environment ( 3). The culture of individualism spreads in different forms ( 4):

- . as market-driven consumerism,
- . as a new pattern of sociability based on networked individualism, and
- . as the desire for individual autonomy based on self-defined projects of life.

In spite of this complex, multidimensional social evolution, the decisive process shaping society, both individually and collectively, is the dynamics of power relations. And power relations, in our social and technological context, are largely dependent on the process of socialized communication in ways that I will now analyze sequentially.

## ***Mass Communication and Media Politics***

Politics is based on socialized communication, on the capacity to influence people's minds. The main channel of communication between the political system and citizens is the mass media system, first of all television. Until recently, and even nowadays to a large extent, the media constitute an articulated system, in which, usually, the print press produces original information, TV diffuses to a mass audience, and radio customizes the interaction ( 5). In our society, politics

is primarily media politics. The workings of the political system are staged for the media so as to obtain the support, or at least the lesser hostility, of citizens who become the consumers in the political market ( 6).

Of course, this does not mean that power is in the hands of the media. Political actors exercise considerable influence over the media ( 7). In fact, the current 24-hours news cycle increases the importance of politicians for the media, as media have to feed content relentlessly.

Neither that the audience simply follows what the media say. The concept of the active audience is now well established in communication research. And media have their own internal controls in terms of their capacity to influence the audience, because they are primarily a business, and they must win the audience; they are usually plural and competitive; they must keep their credibility in front of their competitors; and they have some internal limits to the management of information coming from the professionalism of journalists ( 8). On the other hand, we should remember the current rise of ideological, militant journalism in all countries (actually a good business model in the US, e.g. Fox news or in Spain, e.g. El Mundo), as well as the diminishing autonomy of journalists vis-à-vis their companies, and the intertwining between media corporations and governments ( 9).

The practice of what Bennett (1990) has named 'indexing,' in which journalists and editors limit the range of political viewpoints and issues that they report upon to those expressed within the mainstream political establishment, weighs heavily on the process of events-driven reporting.

Yet, the main issue is not the shaping of the minds by explicit messages in the media, but the absence of a given content in the media. What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds (10). Therefore, a political message is necessarily a media message. And whenever a politically related message is conveyed through the media, it must be couched in the specific language of the media. This means television language in many cases (11). The need to format the message in its media form has considerable implications, as it has been established by a long tradition in communication research (12). It is not entirely true that the medium is the message, empirically speaking, but it certainly has substantial influence on the form and effect of the message.

So, in sum: the media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided. In our society, politics is dependent on media politics. The language of media has its rules. It is largely built around images, not necessarily visual, but images. The most powerful message is a simple message attached to an image. The simplest message in politics is a human face. Media politics leads to the personalization of politics around leaders that can be adequately sold in the political market. This should not be trivialized as the color of the tie or the looks of a face. It is the symbolic embodiment of a message of trust around a person, around the character of the person, and then in terms of the image projection of this character (13).

The importance of personality politics is related to the evolution of electoral politics, usually determined by independent or undecided voters that switch the balance, in every country, between the right or center-right and the center-left. Thus, although there are substantial

differences between parties and candidates in most countries, programs and promises are tailored towards the center and the undecided, often by the same political advertising companies and political marketing consultants working across party lines in alternating years (14). However, more critical than political marketing techniques and the tailoring of political platforms, is the values associated with and drawn upon by different candidates. As George Lakoff writes, 'issues are real, as are the facts of the matter. But issues are also symbolic of values and of trustworthiness. Effective campaigns must communicate the candidates values and use issues symbolically, as indicative of their moral values and their trustworthiness.' (15) Citizens do not read candidate platforms. They rely on media reports of the candidates' positions; and ultimately their voting decision is a function of the trust they deposit in a given candidate. Therefore, character, as portrayed in the media, becomes essential; because values—what matters the most for the majority of people—are embodied in the persons of the candidates. Politicians are the faces of politics.

If credibility, trust, and character become critical issues in deciding the political outcome, the destruction of credibility and character assassination become the most potent political weapons. Because all parties resort to it, all parties need to stockpile ammunition in this battle. As a consequence a market of intermediaries proliferates, finding damaging information about the opponent, manipulating information, or simply fabricating information for that purpose. Furthermore, media politics is expensive, and legal means of party financing are insufficient to pay for all advertising, pollsters, phone banks, consultants, and the like. Thus, regardless of the morality of individual politicians, political agents are on sale for lobbyists with different degrees of morality. This is so even in European countries in which the finance of politics is public and regulated, because parties find ways to circumvent the controls by receiving donations from undisclosed donors. These funds are used for discrete forms of political campaigning, such as paying informants and producers of information. So, more often than not, it is not difficult to find wrongdoing and damaging material for most parties and candidates. Since it is rare that personal lives are without shadows, and given the tendency of many people, particularly men, to brag and be indiscrete, personal sins and political corruption brew a powerful cocktail of intrigues and gossip that become the daily staple of media politics. Thus, media politics, and personality politics lead to scandal politics, as analyzed by scholars and researchers, such as Thompson (2000), Tumber and Waisboard (2004), Esser and Hartung (2004), Liebes and Blum-Kulka (2004), Lawrence and Bennett (2001), and Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) to mention a few. Scandal politics is credited with bringing down a large number of politicians, governments, and even regimes around the world, as shown in the global account of scandal politics and political crises compiled by Amelia Arsenault (forthcoming).

### ***Media Politics, Scandal Politics, and the Crisis of Political Legitimacy***

Scandal politics has two kinds of effects on the political system. First, it may affect the process of election and decision-making by weakening the credibility of those subjected to scandal. However, this kind of effect varies in its impact. Some times, it is the saturation of dirty politics in the public mind that provokes reaction or indifference among the public. In other instances, the public becomes so cynical that it includes all politicians in their low level of appreciation, thus they choose among all the immorals the kind of immoral that they find more akin or closer to

their interests. Furthermore people some times consider the exposure of inappropriate behavior as good entertainment, while not drawing political implications from it. This seems to be the process that explains the high level of popularity of Clinton at the end of his presidency, based on his policy record, in spite of his televised lying act to the country (16). However, some interesting research by Renshon (2002) seems to indicate that the second order effect of this low morality had the consequence of bringing additional votes in the 2000 election to George W. Bush, the candidate that appeared to be, at that time, more principled than the incumbent administration.

There is a second kind of effect of scandal politics, one that may have lasting consequences on the practice of democracy. Because everybody does something wrong, and there is generalized mudslinging, citizens end up putting all politicians in the same bag, as they distrust electoral promises, parties, and political leaders (17). The crisis of political legitimacy in most of the world cannot be attributed exclusively, by any means, to scandal politics and to media politics. Yet, scandals are most likely at the very least a precipitating factor in triggering political change in the short term and in rooting skepticism vis-à-vis formal politics in the long term (18). It would seem that the pace and shape of media politics stimulate the disbelief in the democratic process (19). This is not to blame the media, since in fact political actors and their consultants are more often than not the source of the leaks and damaging information. Again, media are the space of power making, not the source of power holding.

At any rate, we do observe a widespread crisis of political legitimacy in practically all countries with the partial exception of Scandinavia. Two thirds of citizens in the world, according to the polls commissioned in 2000 and 2002 by the UN secretariat and by the World Economic Forum, believed that their country was not governed by the will of the people, the percentage for the US being 59% and for the EU 61%. In recent years, the Eurobarometer, the UNDP Study on Democracy in Latin America, the World Values Survey, and various polls from Gallup, the Field Institute, and the Pew Institute in the United States, all point towards a significant level of distrust of citizens vis-à-vis politicians, political parties, parliaments, and to a lesser extent, governments (20). This partially explains why everywhere a majority of the people tend to vote against rather than for, electing the lesser of two evils, or switch to third party or protest candidates who are often propelled by a colorful presence in the media that makes for good footage or noteworthy news, opening the way to demagogic politics (21). At the same time, distrust of the system does not equate depoliticization (22). A number of studies, including the World Values Survey, indicate that many citizens believe they can influence the world with their mobilization (23). They just do not think that they can do it through politics as usual. Thus, at this point in the analysis, I will consider turn to the emergence of processes of counterpower linked to social movements and social mobilization.

However, any political intervention in the public space requires presence in the media space. And since the media space is largely shaped by business and governments that set the political parameters in terms of the formal political system, albeit in its plurality, the rise of insurgent politics cannot be separated from the emergence of a new kind of media space: the space created around the process of mass self-communication.

## ***The rise of mass self-communication***

The diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time. The communication system of the industrial society was centered around the mass media, characterized by the mass distribution of a one-way message from one to many. The communication foundation of the network society is the global web of horizontal communication networks that include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous. Of course, the Internet is an old technology, first deployed in 1969. But it is only in the last decade that reached out throughout the world to exceed now 1 billion users (24). Mobile communication has exploded reaching over 2 billion mobile phone subscribers in 2006 in contrast to 16 million in 1991 (25). So, even accounting for the differential diffusion in developing countries and poor regions, a very high proportion of the population of the planet has access to mobile communication, some times in areas where there is no electricity but there is some form of coverage and mobile chargers of mobile batteries in the form of merchant bicycles. Wifi and wimax networks are helping to set up networked communities. With the convergence between Internet and mobile communication and the gradual diffusion of broadband capacity, the communicating power of the Internet is being distributed in all realms of social life, as the electrical grid and the electrical engine distributed energy in the industrial society (26). Appropriating the new forms of communication, people have built their own system of mass communication, via SMS, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, wikis, and the like (27). File sharing and p2p (i.e. peer-to-peer) networks make possible the circulation and reformatting of any digitally formatted content. As of October 2006, Technorati was tracking 57.3 million blogs, up from 26 million in January. On average 75,000 new blogs are created every day. There are about 1.2 million posts daily, or about 50,000 blog updates an hour. Many bloggers update their blogs regularly: against a usual belief, 55% of bloggers are still posting 3 months after their blogs are created (28). Again, according to Technorati, the blogosphere in 2006 was 60 times bigger than in 2003, and doubles every six months. It is a multilingual and international communication space, where English, dominant in the early stages of blog development, accounted in March 2006 for less than a third of blog posts, with Japanese representing 37% of blogs, followed by English (31%) and Chinese (15%). Spanish, Italian, Russian, French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, and most likely Korean are the languages that follow in numbers of posts (29).

Most blogs are of personal character. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 52% of bloggers say that they blog mostly for themselves, while 32% blog for their audience (30). Thus, to some extent, a good share of this form of mass self-communication is closer to ?electronic autism? than to actual communication. Yet, any post in the Internet, regardless of the intention of its author, becomes a bottle drifting in the ocean of global communication, a message susceptible of being received and reprocessed in unexpected ways. Furthermore, RSS feeds allow the integration and linking of content everywhere. Some version of the Nelsonian Xanadu has now been constituted in the form of a global multimodal hypertext. This includes: low power FM radio stations; TV street networks; an explosion of mobile phones; the low cost, production and distribution capacity of digital video and audio; and nonlinear computer based video editing systems that take advantage of the declining cost of memory space. Key developments are: the growing diffusion of IPTV, p2p video streaming, vlogs (i.e. a blog that includes video), and a flurry of social software programs that have made possible the blossoming of online communities and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). There is a growing use of these horizontal networks of communication in the field of mass

communication. Certainly, mainstream media are using blogs and interactive networks to distribute their content and interact with their audience, mixing vertical and horizontal communication modes. But there are also a wealth of examples in which the traditional media, such as cable TV, are fed by autonomous production of content using the digital capacity to produce and distribute. In the US, one of the best-known examples of this kind is Al Gore's Current TV, in which content originated by the users, and professionally edited, already accounts for about one-third of the content of the station (31). Internet-based news media, such as Jinbonet and Ohmy News in Korea or Vilaweb in Barcelona, are becoming reliable and innovative sources of information on a mass scale (32). Thus, the growing interaction between horizontal and vertical networks of communication does not mean that the mainstream media are taking over the new, autonomous forms of content generation and distribution. It means that there is a contradictory process that gives birth to a new media reality whose contours and effects will ultimately be decided through a series of political and business power struggles, as the owners of the telecommunication networks are already positioning themselves to control access and traffic in favor of their business partners, and preferred customers.

The growing interest of corporate media for Internet-based forms of communication is in fact the reflection of the rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication. It is mass communication because it reaches potentially a global audience through the p2p networks and Internet connection. It is multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source that can be downloaded free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many. We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive. True, the medium, even a medium as revolutionary as this one, does not determine the content and effect of its messages. But it makes possible the unlimited diversity and the largely autonomous origin of most of the communication flows that construct, and reconstruct every second the global and local production of meaning in the public mind.

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