Communication, Power and Counterpower in the Network Society (II)

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Mass self-communication and counterpower

By counterpower I understand the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society. In all known societies, counterpower exists under different forms and with variable intensity, as one of the few natural laws of society, verified throughout history, asserts that wherever is domination, there is resistance to domination, be it political, cultural, economic, psychological, or otherwise. In recent years, in parallel with the growing crisis of political legitimacy, we have witnessed in most of the world the growth of social movements, coming in very different forms and with sharply contrasted systems of values and beliefs, yet opposed to what they often define as global capitalism. (1) Many also challenge patriarchalism on behalf of the rights of women, children and sexual minorities, and oppose to productivism in defense of a holistic vision of the natural environment and an alternative way of life. In much of the world, identity, be it religious, ethnic, territorial, or national, has become source of meaning and inspiration for alternative projects of social organization and institution building. Very often, social movements and insurgent politics reaffirm traditional values and forms, e.g. religion, the patriarchal family or the nation, that they feel betrayed in practice in spite of being inscripted in the forefront of the institutions. In other words, social movements

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may be progressive or reactionary or just alternative without adjectives. But in all cases they are purposive collective actions aimed at changing the values and interests institutionalized in society, what is tantamount to modify the power relations. (2)

Social movements are a permanent feature of society. But they adopt values and take up organizational forms that are specific to the kind of society where they take place. So, there is a great deal of cultural and political diversity around the world. At the same time, because power relations are structured nowadays in a global network and played out in the realm of socialized communication, social movements also act on this global network structure and enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process. They think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are, in the global networks of power and in the communication sphere. (3)

The emergence of mass self-communication offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects. Naturally, social movements are not originated by technology, they use technology. But technology is not simply a tool, it is a medium, it is a social construction, with its own implications. Furthermore, the development of the technology of self-communication is also the product of our culture, a culture that emphasizes individual autonomy, and the self-construction of the project of the social actor. In fact, my own empirical studies on the uses of the Internet in the Catalan society show that the more an individual has a project of autonomy (personal, professional, socio-political, communicative), the more she uses the Internet. And in a time sequence, the more he/she uses the Internet, the more autonomous she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions. (4)

Under this cultural and technological paradigm, the social movements of the information age, and the new forms of political mobilization are widely using the means of mass self-communication, although they also intervene in the mainstream mass media as they try to influence public opinion at large. From the survey of communication practices of social movements around the world that we have carried out with Sasha Costanza-Chock, it appears that without the means and ways of mass self-communication, the new movements and new forms of insurgent politics could not be conceive. Of course, there is a long history of communication activism, and social movements have not waited for Internet connection in order to struggle for their goals using every available communication medium. (5) Yet, currently the new means of digital communication constitute their most decisive organizational form, in a clear break with the traditional forms of organization of parties, unions and associations of the industrial society, albeit these social actors are now evolving towards the new organizational model built around networked communication. For new social movements, the Internet provides the essential platform for debate, their means of acting on people?s mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon. But social movements do not exist only in the Internet. Local radio and TV stations, autonomous groups of video production and distribution, p2p networks, blogs, and podcasts constitute a variegated interactive network that connects the movement with itself, connects social actors with society at large, and acts on the entire realm of cultural manifestations. Furthermore, movements, in their wide diversity, also root themselves in their local lives, and in face-to-face interaction. And when they act, they mobilize in specific places, often mirroring the places of the power institutions, as when they challenge meetings of WTO, the IMF or the G8 group in the localities of the meetings. (6) Thus, the space of the new

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social movements of the digital age is not a virtual space, it is a composite of the space of flows and of the space of places, as I tried to argue time ago in my general analysis of the network society. (7) Social movements escaped their confinement in the fragmented space of places and seized the global space of flows, while not virtualizing themselves to death, keeping their local experience and the landing sites of their struggle as the material foundation of their ultimate goal: the restoration of meaning in the new space/time of our existence, made of both flows, places and their interaction. That is building networks of meaning in opposition to networks of instrumentality.

This analysis is supported by a number of recent social trends such as:

. The existence of the global movement against corporate globalization in the Internet, in the network of communication built around Indymedia and its affiliated networks, as forms of information, organization, debate, and action planning. (8) But also the use of symbolic, direct action against the sites of power to impact the mainstream media and through them the mainstream public opinion.

. The building of autonomous communication networks to challenge the power of the globalized media industry and of government and business controlled media. As it has been the case in Italy with pirate radio stations and street television (e.g. Tele Orfeo), fed by audiovisual material via p2p networks and RSS feeds, to counter the monopoly of Berlusconi over both private and public television networks. Or the spread of activist neighborhood TVs such as Zalea TV in Paris, Okupem les Ones in Barcelona, TV Piquetera in Buenos Aires, and numerous similar experiences around the world. (9)

. The development of autonomous forms of political organizing in political campaigns, including fund raising and mobilization of volunteers to get out the vote, as exemplified in the US presidential primaries by the Howard Dean Campaign in 2003-2004 following the analysis we conducted with Araba Sey. (10) Initiatives such as Dean supporters? use of MeetUp exemplified the ability of networks of affinity to leverage the Internet and to translate virtual affinity into physical vicinity, and community action. (11) True, the defeat of Howard Dean in the primaries showed the strength of traditional media politics vis-à-vis the fragile forms of Internet-based mobilization. But we should not extrapolate too much from a limited experience in which other variables, such as the limitations of the candidate himself, as well as the concern about terrorism in a country at war, also weigh heavily in the voters decision.

. The spread of instant political mobilizations by using mobile phones, supported by the Internet, is changing the landscape of politics. It becomes increasingly difficult for governments to hide or manipulate information. The manipulation plots are immediately picked up and challenged by a myriad of «eye balls,» as debate and mobilization are called upon by thousands of people, without central coordination, but with a shared purpose, often focusing on asking or forcing the resignation of governments or government officials. With Mireia Fernandez, Jack Qiu, and Araba Sey, we have analyzed recent experiences of mobilization around the world, from Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Nepal to Ecuador, Ukraine, or France, with results as dramatic as the prompting of the electoral defeat of Prime Minister Aznar in Spain on March 14th, 2004, after his attempt to manipulate the public opinion lying about the authors of something as tragic

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as the Madrid massacre on March 11th backfired at the last minute, thanks to the spontaneous mobilization of Spanish youth armed with their cell phones. But this is not a technological effect, but the ability of network technology to distribute horizontally messages that resonate with the public consciousness in ways that are trustworthy. (12) In December 2005 the first Mobile Active conference met in Canada, bringing activist from around the world to share experience, skills, tools, and tactics on the new landscape of socio-political activism. (13) Action research networks are being formed, such as Our Media/Nuestr@s Medios, to diffuse tools, research, and ideas being produced by the new social movements of the information age. (14)

The grand convergence: power relations in the new communication space

The distinction between mass media and mass self-communication has analytical value, but only on the condition to add that the two modes of communication are interacting in the practice of communication, as communication technologies converge. Media businesses aim at positioning themselves in the Internet-mediated communication realm; mainstream media set up direct links to the horizontal network of communication and to their users, so becoming less one-directional in their communication flows, as they relentlessly scan the blogosphere to select themes and issues of potential interest for their audience; actors striving for social change often use the Internet platform as a way to influence the information agenda of mainstream media; and political elites, across the entire political spectrum, increasingly use the ways and means of mass self-communication, because their flexibility, instantaneity, and unfettered capacity to diffuse any kind of material are particularly relevant for the practice of media politics in real time. Therefore, the study of the transformation of power relations in the new communication space must consider the interaction between political actors, social actors, and media business in both the mass media and networked media, as well as in the interconnection between different media that are quickly becoming articulated in a reconfigured media system. I will illustrate these new developments with some examples, while trying to make analytical sense of observed trends with the support of contributions from communication scholars.

Business Media Strategies

The clearest evidence that corporate media are redirecting their strategies towards the Internet is via their investments. For instance, in 2006 NewsCorp (the media conglomerate headed by Rupert Murdoch) acquired MySpace, a network of virtual communities and personal pages that by mid-2006 counted with over 100 million pages and 77 million subscribers. At a NewsCorp shareholders meeting on October 20, 2006, Murdoch heralded the company?s move into the Internet: ?to some in the traditional media business, these are the most stressful of times. But to us, these are great times. Technology is liberating us from old constraints, lowering key costs, easing access to new customers and markets, and multiplying the choices we can offer.? (15) However, NewsCorp?s strategy includes an understanding of the new rules of the game. The key to successfully integrating MySpace into the overall NewsCorp strategy, is to allow MySpace communities to remain free, and set up their own rules, indeed inventing new forms of expression and communication. By attracting millions of people to MySpace, NewsCorp amasses a huge potential advertising market. But this potential has to be used with prudence so that users feel as at home as their parents feel while consuming advertising from television

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networks in the privacy of their living room. As long as NewsCorp does not inhibit the already established pattern of customizability that made MySpace popular in the first place, users may accept the commercialization of their online space. (16)

Other instances of major business deals that merge old and new media for either purchasing or content provision include Google?s acquisition of YouTube in October 2006 for 1.6 billion dollars. While at the time of purchase, YouTube, generated little if any revenue, its potential as an advertising venue provided a key source of attraction for Google. In the weeks following the purchase corporations have flocked to YouTube. For example, Burger King launched its own channel on YouTube; Warner Music recently signed a deal to provide music videos via YouTube with embedded advertising; and NBC, who formerly led the charge in forcing YouTube to remove copyrighted content, recently signed a major cross-promotional deal with YouTube. Other media giants are planning to launch similar sites to YouTube. Microsoft is developing its own version; and Kazaa and EBay are developing the Venice Project, a video sharing service built upon p2p technology rather than streaming video. (17)

Corporate investment into YouTube and attempts to control these networks financially also help to ensure the continued success of mainstream media. Now that YouTube has the financial backing of Google, media conglomerates can pressure it to remove copyrighted content (previously YouTube had very little assets so there was nothing to sue). Similarly, MySpace is now a place where NewsCorp can provide and market its movies, television programs, and other content. Moreover, ABC and other mainstream stations are now adapting to the trend towards convergence by providing streaming their televised content free online with embedded advertising.

However, this process of consolidation of networking sites around a few major corporations is not inevitable. There is evidence that smaller less commercial networking sites are becoming increasingly popular and that young people are migrating from larger networks like MySpace (where amassing the largest number of friends/acquaintances was previously the trend) to smaller more elitist networks not readily accessible or locatable by all, (most importantly the parents trying to monitor them). (18)

What we are observing is the coexistence and interconnection of mainstream media, corporately owned new media, and autonomous Internet sites. Here again, the autonomy of networking sites does not imply competition against mainstream media. In fact, networking services can boost the power of traditional media outlets. For example, Digg (now the 24th most popular site on the web) can help articles posted on FoxNews.com or the New York Times website move up in the search engine rankings. Because the Digg´s demographic is almost entirely upwardly mobile and male (a key advertising target) several major companies were trying to buy it at the time of this writing. (19) Similarly, Facebook just brokered a deal with mainstream news providers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to provide a new service for users that allows them to easily link and feature articles and photos from these sites on their personal pages.

A major reason for the persistence of relatively autonomous social networking sites, regardless of their connections for new media corporate strategies is that the *authentic* nature of these

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social networking services seems to be critical. For example, AOL tried to launch a rival to Digg by offering the 50 top contributors $1,000 to start participating in their version. It failed. Users want to trust their spaces of sociability, and feel a personal connection to their sites. Furthermore, the ?cool factor,? that is the cultural construction of the social space to the taste of its users, is of essence. Companies trying to position themselves into this new media market brand the websites they acquire very discretely, or not at all, so that users while exposed to new ads will not be fully aware they are using a corporate product and are less likely to migrate elsewhere. Therefore, it seems to be a better business strategy for old media companies to buy innovative networking services than to initiate them. The result is that rather than separation between old and new media, or absorption of the latter by the former, we observe their networking.

Electoral Politics in the Age of the Multimodal Internet

In the traditional theory of political communication political influence through the media is largely determined by the interaction between the political elites (in their plurality) and professional journalists. Media act as gatekeepers of the information flows that shape public opinion. (20) Elihu Katz (1997) emphasized the transformation of the media environment through the fragmentation of the audience, and the increasing control that new communication technologies give to the consumers of the media. The growing role of on-line, multimodal social networking accelerates this transformation. According to Williams and Delli Carpini (2004), the new media environment disrupts the traditional ?single axis system? of political influence and creates a fluid ?multiaxity? of power in three ways: (1) The expansion of politically relevant media and the blurring of news and entertainment has led to a struggle within the media itself for the role of authoritative gatekeeper of scandals. (2) The expansion of media outlets and the move to a 24-hour news cycle have created new opportunities for non-mainstream political actors to influence the setting and framing of the political agenda (as in the case of Matt Drudge bypassing the mainstream media via his Drudge Report on-line, to start the Monica Lewinsky scandal that CBS and other media suppressed for about two weeks). Twenty-four hour cable news outlets now not only gather news as fast as possible but also broadcast it rapidly as well, effectively eliminating the role of editors in the news production process. And (3) this changed media environment has created new opportunities and pitfalls for the public to enter and interpret the political world. According to Williams and Delli Carpini, the rise of cell phones, videogames, ipods, and other new technologies has broken down the binary between media and the rest of everyday life on which most of political communication used to rest.

In line with this analysis, observation of recent trends shows that the political uses of the Internet have substantially increased with the diffusion of broadband, and the increasing pervasiveness of social networking in the Internet. (21) Some times the aim of political actors in using the Internet is to bypass the media and quickly distribute a message. In the majority of cases the purpose is to provoke media exposure by posting a message or an image in the hope that the media will pick it up. The 2006 US Congressional election was marked by a sudden explosion of new media uses by candidates, parties, and pressure groups across the entire political spectrum. The sharp polarization of the country around the Iraq war and around issues of social values coincided with the generalization of mass self-communication networks. Thus,

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the campaign marked a turning point in the forms of media politics in the United States and probably in the world at large. Countless politicians (most notably, Congressman Nancy Pelosi) posted videos on Youtube and set up pages on Myspace. (22) Moreover, there is increasing use by the political agency of these networks?using them as a tool?particularly for scandal politics. A common practice consists in sending trackers to shadow the opponents? public appearances, recording his words and gestures, in the hope to produce a damaging video that is immediately posted on a popular website. It has become customary to post either on Youtube or similar sites embarrassing clips of opponent, some times recording a direct hit on the targeted candidate. (23)

The new media politics shows remarkable capacity to innovate, following the steps of the culture of social networking reinvented every day by web users. For instance, in October 2006, political strategists in the U.S. launched HotSoup.com an online community that allows users to create profiles, publish messages, and post images. Its first homepage featured five panelists sharing their viewpoints on a single issue. HotSoup.com´s founders include former Clinton press secretary Joe Lockhart, and Matthew Dowd, chief strategist for the 2004 Bush presidential campaign, in a significant attempt by political professionals to ride the tiger of ?youtube politics.? MSNBC recently signed a partnership deal with HotSoup involving the creation of a cross-linked political forum where users can debate issues and the regular appearance of HotSoup panelists on MSNBC programs. In another expression of the migration of media politics into the Internet? social space, MySpace.com set up a voter registration drive in the weeks preceding the 2006 election. (24)

Overall, electoral campaigns have become, using Philip Howard?s (2006) term, ?hypermedia campaigns?, thus changing the dynamics, forms, and content of media politics.

GrassRoots Politics and the New Media

Bennett (2003) has identified the changes facilitated by new media technologies in the realm of political communication. As he wrote ,?mass media news outlets are struggling mightily with changing gatekeeping standards due to demands for interactive content produced by audiences themselves. As consumer-driven content progresses beyond chats and click polls, new possibilities arise for high-quality political information governed by more democratic and less elite standards. Technologically savvy activists are writing software that enables automated and democratic publishing and editing. Ordinary people are empowered to report on their political experiences while being held to high standards of information quality and community values. In the long run, these trends maybe the most revolutionary aspects of the new media environment.? (25)

However, if there is such a revolution it may come in unexpected formats, not necessarily abiding to high standards of information quality. New media politics creates new political tricks. Thus, according to the Pew Internet and American Life project, the most frequent political use of the Internet by citizens is to search for information about candidates they have little knowledge. Bloggers and campaign staffers have responded to this trend by using Google Bombing ? meaning that bloggers have launched frequent attempts to alter search term results by linking

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political issues to damning key words. For example, in 2002, bloggers posted numerous links between George W. Bush?s biography and the search term ?miserable failure? and Tony Blair is now indexed to the word ?liar.? In the U.S, in 2006, a sex columnist also launched a Google bomb against the publicly homophobic Senator Rick Santorum by urging other bloggers to use a new definition for the word Santorum that related to homosexual sex. A search for santorum will now result in the appearance of several highly ranked websites about homosexuality and sexual deviance. In France, groups opposed to the DADVSI copyright bill, proposed by minister Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, mounted a Google bombing campaign linking the bill to *ministre blanchisseur* («laundering minister») and an article chronicling Donnedieu de Vabres´ conviction for money laundering. While survey data shows that mainstream and corporate websites tend to be the most visited ? this ?Google bombing? in effect combats this trend by altering the perception, if not the reality of the most important news and views available to web users. Other expressions of this new form of alternative info-politics is the use of spoof websites: for example whitehouse.org is a anti-Bush humor website. Whitehouse.com was a pornography site until the Clinton?s White House brought legal challenges. (26)

In broader terms, a number of studies, including Shah et. al (2005) find strong evidence that Internet usage facilitates civic engagement.

The Interplay Between Political Actors in the New Communication Realm

The observations presented above illustrate the interplay of business, political actors, and grassroots activists in the new forms of communication, increasingly articulated to the traditional mass media. Thus, there is double process of convergence: technological and political. All political actors are present in both the mass media and in the networks of mass self-communication, and all aim at finding bridges between the two media systems to maximize their influence on the public opinion. In this new context, Williams and Delli Carpini sum up the ongoing debate in the field of political communication when they write, ?optimistically we believe that the erosion of gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities for citizens to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically we are skeptical of the ability of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power.? (27)

Indeed, in this article I have shown that corporate media are fully present in the horizontal networks of communication, and that grassroots activists and social movements are not alone in the effective use of these networks to communicate among themselves and with society. Furthermore, the structures of power are rooted in the structure of society. However, these power structures are reproduced and challenged by cultural battles that are fought to a large extent in the communication realm. And it is plausible to think that the capacity of social actors to set up autonomously their political agenda is greater in the networks of mass self-communication than in the corporate world of the mass media. While the old struggle for social domination and counter-domination continues in the new media space, the structural bias of this space towards the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication.

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Conclusion: communication as the public space of the network society

Societies evolve and change by deconstructing their institutions under the pressure of new power relationships and constructing new sets of institutions that allow people to live side by side without self-destroying, in spite of their contradictory interests and values. Societies exist as societies by constructing a public space in which private interests and projects can be negotiated to reach an always unstable point of shared decision making towards a common good, within a historically given social boundary. In the industrial society, this public space was built around the institutions of the nation-state that, under the pressure of democratic movements and class struggle, constructed an institutional public space based on the articulation between a democratic political system, an independent judiciary, and a civil society connected to the state. (28) The twin processes of globalization and the rise communal identities have challenged the boundaries of the nation state as the relevant unit to define a public space. Not that the nation-state disappears (quite the opposite), but its legitimacy has dwindled as governance is global and governments remain national. And the principle of citizenship conflicts with the principle of self-identification. The result is the observed crisis of political legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy of the nation-state involves the crisis of the traditional forms of civil society, in the Gramscian sense, largely dependent upon the institutions of the state. But there is no social and political vacuum. Our societies continue to perform socially and politically by shifting the process of formation of the public mind from political institutions to the realm of communication, largely organized around the mass media. Ingrid Volkmer (2003) has theorized the emergence of communication as the public sphere in our kind of society and has investigated the emergence of global communication networks, built around mass media, as the incipient global public sphere. To a large extent, political legitimacy has been replaced by communication framing of the public mind in the network society, as Amelia Arsenault and myself have tried to argue empirically in an article on the communication strategy of the Bush Administration concerning the Iraq war. (29)

I am extending this analytical perspective to the historical dynamics of counterpower, as new forms of social change and alternative politics emerge, by using the opportunity offered by new horizontal communication networks of the digital age that is the technical and organizational infrastructure that is specific of the network society. Therefore, not only public space becomes largely defined in the space of communication, but this space is an increasingly contested terrain, as it expresses the new historical stage in which a new form of society is being given birth, as all previous societies, through conflict, struggle, pain, and often violence. New institutions will eventually develop, creating a new form of public space, still unknown to us, but they are not there yet. What scholarly research can observe is the attempt by the holders of power to reassert their domination into the communication realm, once they acknowledged the decreasing capacity of institutions to channel the projects and demands from people around the world. This attempt at new forms of control uses primarily the mass media. On the other hand, dominant elites are confronted by the social movements, individual autonomy projects, and insurgent politics that find a more favorable terrain in the emerging realm of mass self-communication. Under such circumstances, a new round of power making in the communication space is taking place, as power holders have understood the need to enter the battle in the horizontal communication networks. This means surveilling the Internet as in the US, using

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manual control of email messages when robots cannot do the job, as in the latest developments in China, treating Internet users as pirates and cheaters, as in much of the legislation of the European Union, buying social networking web sites to tame their communities, owning the network infrastructure to differentiate access rights, and endless other means of policing and framing the newest form of communication space.

Thus, as in previous historical periods, the emerging public space, rooted in communication, is not predetermined in its form by any kind of historical fate or technological necessity. It will be the result of the new stage of the oldest struggle in humankind: the struggle to free our minds.

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