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Castells, Manuel - *Networks of outrage and hope. Social movements in the internet age*, Polity Press: Cambridge and Malden, 2012. ISBN-13:978-0-7456-6284-8

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The book looks at two topics which currently occupy the minds of academics, activists, politicians and citizens: the nature of recent social movements which spread across the Arab countries and Europe and the role of online communication in those movements. Given that both topics invoke a lot of debate, the work by such a famous figure in sociology as Manuel Castells is timely contribution to the topic. It has been developed on the basis of lectures Castells presented in Cambridge, for CRASSH program. In his own words the book was quick in the making and is “less academic than usual” (xi).

From the beginning Castells states that the work does not aspire to create a comprehensive theory of recent social movements. It is rather “a window into the nascent world” (4), an attempt to offer some hypotheses on the nature of those movements, their dynamics and implications. He makes it clear that the book is going to provide neither the proof of the proposed arguments nor the detailed analysis of data used to describe the movements.

The opening of the book is quite emotional. Castells creates somewhat romantic image of the movements which “no one expected”, the movements in which a humanity “had to be reconstructed from scratch, escaping the multiple ideological and institutional traps”, movements which started on the internet “by few, who were joined by hundreds, then networked by thousands, then supported by millions”(3).

The book consists of eight chapters. The “Opening” chapter introduces the theoretical underpinning of the book. A chapter on Tunisia and Iceland looks at the ‘prelude to revolution’ while separate chapters are dedicated to each of the following movements: Egyptian revolution, Indignados movements in Spain and Occupy Wall Street movement. The chapter titled “Changing the World in the Network Society” summarises the key features of the movements which the author claims to be the characteristics of new type of movements arising in the internet era. The concluding part discusses the future potential of the movements, their relationships with public policy and their role in changing power relations.

In the “Opening”, Castells notes that the theoretical base of the book is his previous work *Communication Power* (Castells, 2009). In this book, he applies the key arguments of *Communication Power* to analyse social movements which emerged in the Arab countries and

Europe.

The main premise of *Networks of outrage and hope* is that if the communication environment goes through a transformation then it directly affects the ways power and counter-power is constructed and exercised. When applied to the social movements in question, he states that “the characteristics of communication processes between individuals engaged in the social movement determine the organizational characteristics of the social movement itself” (15).

The spread of internet and wireless networks allowed, according to Castells, new forms of communication to emerge: horizontal, many-to-many, and importantly not controlled by those who hold institutional power. The social movements which utilise digital networks would to some extent mirror the characteristics of communication channels. Castells call these networked movements “a new species of social movement” (15). The book seeks to investigate the qualities of these new types of movements.

In each of the following chapters he gives a brief account of the movement and then discusses selected issues of the various movements he examines. Castells touches on such questions as: how the movements started, who were the participants, what they wanted. He also looks at how the issue of violence had been negotiated and how the movements originated themselves in the public space, how they understood and exercised the principles of direct democracy. He demonstrates that in each case emotions were one of the driving forces of the uprisings. Social movements start with the transformation of emotions into action. And here again, communication channels play a crucial role in spreading initial emotions of anger and outrage which through common action can be transformed into hope – the concept from which the book took its name. He does not give too many details when analysing the demographics of the movements or the political and ideological components which constituted them. Rather he paints the picture of the uprisings with rather wide brush strokes, just pointing at issues which he considers to be important.

The narrative of each chapter is constructed in a way which underlines commonalities between the described movements. They all started with a spark, an event which caused outrage, then the message were spread rapidly via the internet, then people who by that time had been already involved in various online discussions went on the streets and occupied physical spaces. In all cases the uprisings were spontaneous and leaderless. At the beginning none of the described uprisings were reported by or received support from the mainstream media. They happened without any guidance or support from any major political parties or movements. They resulted from the fact that people had access to the free space of the Internet that allowed them to become autonomous subjects and act “independently of the institutions of society, according to the values and interests of the social actor” (231).

In the chapter “Changing the World in the Network Society”, the commonalities mapped out throughout the book are conceptualised in what Castells calls the emerging pattern of new movements: the movements were networked in multiple forms they had a de-centred structure; they usually started on the internet but evolved into a ‘movement’ by occupying the urban space; they started in specific contexts but they became connected throughout the world and learned from each other experiences (223); they exercised particular type of decision making – leaderless; they experienced viral spread from country to country “following the logic of internet networks” (224); they were self-reflective; they were programmatic movements aimed at changing values rather than changing specific policies.

The picture of social movements presented in the book raises a number of questions. Castells’ interpretation of the relationships between the internet and social movements technology is problematic in many ways and here I would outline only a few. For a start, Castells claims that he wants to depart from the debates on whether social media was solely responsible for the uprisings of 2011. He sees this debate as being too narrow, mentioning several times that digital networks are only one component of the communicative process through which social movements emerge and function (10), and stating that digital networks do not determine social movements or social behavior (103).

He proposes more a complex model to describe relationships between social movements and the internet. In his view, even though digital networks did not cause the movements, they were not just a tool either – the internet created an opportunity for people to connect in the space free of gatekeepers and those who controls networks of institutional power. Digital networks are “organizational forms, cultural expressions and specific platforms for political autonomy” (103) which allowed for autonomous subjects to emerge and evolve.

The internet is seen as “a culture of freedom” (231) and social movements that utilise the internet soak up this culture. So even though Castells mentions that communication before and during the uprisings had a hybrid nature (i.e. combined online and offline communication), his model still creates a linear dependency between technology and social uprisings and moreover between technology and democracy. For example Castells quotes a research done by Philip Howard to state that “spread of ITC favored democratization and increased civic movements” (104).

The idea of the internet being a space free from any kind of struggle for power between different interests groups belongs to key arguments of techno-optimists or technological determinism. This approach received a lot of criticism before and after the uprisings of 2011 (Ansari, 2012; Hirst, 2012; Comunello & Anzera, 2012). Morozov (2012) emphasised the ability of governments to use the internet for surveillance, control, disseminating their agendas and tracking down activists using the examples of China and Iran. In regards to the Arab uprisings, several works (Eko, 2012; Youmans & York, 2012) showed that the internet was a place of negotiation and struggle between political, social and corporate actors rather than “free uncontrollable space” (Eko, 2012:138). The dynamics of communication on social digital networks depended on decisions made not just by pro-democracy online activists, but also by governments, major internet service providers and online communities who supported the existent political regimes. Castells himself briefly mentions the dangers which online activists of the Occupy movement faced, but he somehow fails to recognise those dangers and constrains when describing movements elsewhere.

Another problematic point which concerns the use and the role of the internet in the social movements, is that the data on internet usage during the uprisings can be interpreted in different ways. Comunello and Anzera (2012) when analysing the empirical research on the role of digital networks in the Arab Spring, conclude that so far it produced controversial results (466). A number of studies point out the importance of face-to-face and mobile phone communications for the movements. For example, the quantitative analysis of Tahrir data sets conducted by Wilson and Dunn (2011) shows the protesters relied more on face-to-face and mobile phone communication than on social media. It also indicates that the proportion of the tweets about January 25 from Egypt was much smaller than the tweets from outside Egypt. The authors claim that while tweeting still had its influence and effect in creating international awareness and pressure, it played minor role in communicating the messages within Egypt.

One more point of critique concerns Castells’ argument that the characteristics of new movements were largely consequences of the open structure of the internet. On the premise of uniqueness of the autonomous subject formed via the internet, Castells then tries to identify features distinct to new type of movements. However, it is unclear whether these characteristics are unique if compared to other social movements: previous and other contemporary uprisings are not mentioned. History can show many spontaneous uprisings which initially started without political guidance by existing political forces. For example, the English Luddites, the riots preceding the French revolution such as the storming of the Bastille, the February Revolution in Russia to name a few.

It is also unclear whether characteristics of new type of social movements outlined by Castells apply to such movements as the London riots of 2011 and a variety of radical and nationalist groups emerging in online and offline spaces. Later events in Tunisia, Egypt, let alone Libya, showed that it was perhaps premature to consider the movements as being free from ideology. It seems rather that they were spaces where different ideologies and interests could co-exist for a certain amount of time but they did not merge in one ideology-less place or identity.

The issues mentioned above imply that more detailed case by case data analysis is needed when analysing social movements and digital networks. Comparative analysis which would identify the key difference and similarities with the social movements of the past and present is also needed to make sure that the movements' characteristics described by Castells are truly specific to the internet age. Castells excuses himself – at the beginning of the book – by saying that he did not have time and opportunity to do a detailed analysis of the data and that the book is based mainly on observations. However, the book could have asked more critical questions, instead of leaving the reader with the feeling that the presented narrative serves mainly to show how data fits in the author's theory. Castells does not point towards the potential complexities which need to be researched and analysed but rather steers away from them in an attempt to create a sense of commonality between the movements and sense of unproblematic role of the internet as a free space. At the same time the book is one of the early accounts that tries to draw a bigger picture of the 2011 movements. It does provide insights and hypotheses on the nature of the movements which wait to be analysed and contested.

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About the reviewer

Ekaterina Tokareva holds a history degree (from Russia), Masters degree in Media and Communication from RMIT University. Her current research interests include transformation of ideologies, representation of identity in online spaces, knowledge production and co-creation. She has co-authored on the topics of managerial regimes and policies of knowledge production in universities (currently in print).
