Communication Power

Christian Fuchs

BOOK REVIEWS

As the presence of digital media in the everyday patterns of life becomes increasingly normalized in many parts of the world the consideration of 'citizen initiated' political action is becoming an increasingly significant and empirical question. In this edited collection Häyhtiö and Rinne use the organizing principle of *administrative* versus *actionist* political participation to divide the case studies and essays into two parts. The first part of this book focuses on the relationship between political action, technology and institutional opportunity structures, while the second centres on the way in which political action is framed and articulated by individuals and from within different communities.

The book manages to take this approach without becoming trapped by 'top-down/bottom-up' distinctions and becoming over-determined, which reflects the range of case material employed by the various contributors, as well as Häyhtiö and Rinne's solid introduction which highlights both the changing relationship between the citizen and the state, but more importantly the increasingly complex notion of citizenship and agency that emerge in media societies.

The cases given considerable attention in the volume tend to be drawn from European and US experiences (with the exceptions of Australia and China), but are otherwise diverse in terms of their key attributes: movements (global justice, anti-war, consumer activism), organizations (public interest and issue groups, parties), initiatives (e-consultation, online agora, collaborative system design and content development), and distributed anti-system actions (hacktivism, protest-mobilization).

The non-case specific chapters include a comparative study of youth participation and perceptions based on survey data, and two essay-style chapters: one on multiple 'styles' of internet-enabled internet activities and another on blogs (with the former acting as a *de facto* introduction to the second part of the book). The book is similarly methodologically diverse, reflecting the different foci and literatures that drive individual authors.

If there is any criticism of this book to be made it lies in the lack of an editor's conclusion. While the introduction provides a very brief summary of key themes

that emerge in the following chapters, it is focused only on technical-structural concerns: the nature of the internet as a resource (organizational and personal), the nature of the internet as a platform of action, the nature of computer-mediated communications as personalized connections, and the hybrid public-private nature of internet fora. What is left to the reader is examining what the plethora of perspectives provided in the volume tell us about the nature of the citizen within this reflexive, individualized, dynamic, and creative medium.

This is highlighted, however, only because of the wealth of interesting findings and arguments made by the contributors on this subject, from a citizen-centric point of view (a wide typology is presented by a number of authors), a user/interface-design view, a mobilization view (state-centric, organizational, or spontaneously), and a human capacity view.

Given the value of this volume, however, this may not be a significant concern to the intended audience of academics and advanced level students.

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Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), vii+248 pp., ISBN 978-0-8166-4613-5, (pbk) $19.50.

Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet is a continuation of Lisa Nakamura's consistent and insistent critique of online race formations and an important tonic to the scarcity of scholarly attention to race in digital media. The book also provides a rich history of visual culture studies, its evolution to address the digital, and major works thus far, while serving as a valuable contribution to and comment on future directions.

Nakamura traces how the Internet, American politics and cultural studies converged in the mid-1990s as a political agenda in the US to promote 'colour-blindness' coincided with guiding legislation for Internet development (p. 4). Meanwhile, cyberculture scholarship was in its initial heyday, lauding the Internet for erasing and transcending embodied markers. Nakamura

reminds us that, of course, race and other markers of difference were simply ignored and 'default' users presumed white and male.

We are living now in a 'post-Internet age' (p. 2), in which the Internet and its communicative possibilities are assumed, Nakamura contends, and a highly graphical web has replaced the previous text-based incarnation. However, scholarship has not yet caught up. Communications scholars have addressed the way race, ethnicity, class and gender are negotiated in online text inter-actions, but not how they are visually rendered. Conversely, digital visual culture's focus has been trained on the visual without paying due attention to the formation of identity through images (p. 10). Nakamura bridges this gap by theorizing the digital formation of race and ethnicity, and to a lesser degree, gender and class, in specific visual cultures of the Internet, including studies of instant messaging buddies, avatar signatures on pregnancy boards, a 'guess my race' quiz site, online petitions that protest racial representations and the intertwining of digital culture tropes with race in various films, adver-tisements, music videos and magazines.

She calls for and exemplifies digital visual culture studies that take up pre-vious blindspots: popular, low-fidelity representations created online by ordinary users. She advocates for smaller case studies and close readings that are more anthropological in nature and more material in focus than the many 'distressingly abstract' critiques (p. 6) of the virtual. She also argues that we must engage hybrid and intersectional critical methods to provide the flexibility and rigor needed to study an interactive object such as the Internet.

The specificity of Nakamura's methodology provides not only the book's greatest strengths, but also its inevitable weakness. Any monograph that addresses current new media will quickly become out of date, and much has already changed since Nakamura's research for this book vis-à-vis popular social media use. The subsequent boom in self-representation via Facebook, Twitter and other virtual venues would provide rich examples for extending and updating Nakamura's digital racial formation theory. Although it has in many ways sparked hype reminiscent of early cyberspace studies, the evolution of Web 2.0 provides fruitful ground for her call to pay more attention to 'previously new and previously unexpressive groups of users who are using the Internet to actively visualize themselves' (p. 206).

Another example of this challenge is Nakamura's statement that 'Users no longer speak of VR and RL because they no longer feel as closely connected to their overtly fictional identities online. They just don't identify with, or care about their avatars as much as they once did' (p. 205). The recent surge of interest in Second Life certainly contradicts this claim and would have pro-vided an interesting cache of user-crafted avatars to examine. Nakamura likewise states in her chapter on pregnant avatars that 'while internet users are fond of taking on different sorts of identities in the context of computer-mediated com-munication, identity tourism as a pregnant versus nonpregnant woman is rare'

(p. 134), but Second Life and other online worlds that demonstrate just such reproductive play have since flourished.

Nonetheless, Nakamura's core theorizations travel very well, securing *Digitizing Race*'s status as an essential read for media scholars and an excellent volume for graduate-level syllabi as well. She persuasively argues for the radical possibilities inherent in avatars for enabling both hegemonic and counterhegemonic digital racial formations. Despite the continuing rhetoric that states race does not matter, Nakamura reminds us that user-created representations online 'say it does, and it does' (p. 209).

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Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 592 pp., 234 × 156 mm, ISBN 978-0-19-956704-1 (hardback), $34.95/£20.00/€24.99.

In *Communication Power*, Manuel Castells continues the analysis of what he has termed the network society, from a specific perspective – the one of power. He argues that communication is the fundamental source of power and counter-power in contemporary society. Castells illuminates how power and 'resistance to power is achieved through the same two mechanisms that constitute power in the network society: the programs of the networks and the switches between networks' (p. 47). The basic analysis is applied to power struggles between the global corporate multimedia networks and the creative audience (Chapter 2), the development of media policies in the USA (Chapter 2), framing and counter-framing in political campaigns, especially the framing of the US public mind before, during, and after the Iraq war (Chapter 3); to scandal politics in Spain in the 1990s (chapter 4), media control and censorship in the USA, Russia, and China (Chapter 4); and the environmental movement, the global movement against corporate globalization, the spontaneous citizens' movement that emerged in Spain after the al-Qaeda attacks in 2004, and the Barack Obama presidential primary campaign (Chapter 5).

The rise of integrative information, communication, and community-building Internet platforms such as blogs, wikis, or social networking sites has not only prompted the development of new concepts – web 2.0, social software, social media, etc. – but also a new techno-deterministic optimism that resembles the Californian ideology that accompanied the commercial rise of the Internet in the 1990s. Castells discusses the recent developments of the web and the Internet, but in contrast to the new web 2.0 ideology he does so by introducing his concept of mass self-communication in a techno-dialectical way that avoids the deterministic pitfalls of techno-optimism and techno-pessimism. For Castells, the contemporary Internet is shaped by a conflict between the global multimedia business networks that try to commodify the Internet and the 'creative audience' that tries to establish a degree of citizen control of the Internet and to assert its right of communicative freedom without corporate control. He employs in this context a notion of autonomy that remains largely undefined.

Castells shows the importance of inter- and transdisciplinary research for analysing the contemporary world by combining cognitive science and the analysis of communication power in order to understand how misinformation and the creation of misperception work as forms of communication power. He analyses the politics of misinformation with respect to the Iraq war as well as the political censorship and control of the media with the help of three case studies that cover the USA, Russia, and China. Four further case studies show how social movements try to reprogramme communication networks. Various methods of media counter-power are discussed in this context.

Manuel Castells' *Communication Power* is a powerful narrative about the connection of communication and power in contemporary society that presents rich empirical details, illuminating case studies, and represents an original and insightful approach. It will shape the disciplinary and transdisciplinary discussions about communication and power in the coming years. The central new category that the book introduces is the one of mass self-communication. Good books bring up many new questions, so I do have questions and also doubts about Castells' notion of power, the use of computer science terms for analysing society, the assessment and categorical description of the power distribution between global multimedia corporations and the creative audience, the feasibility of the notion of web 2.0, his notion of social movements, the role of the movement for democratic globalization in contemporary society, and the centrality of informationalism and communication power. When all this is being said, it remains no doubt that this book empowers the academic discourse about communication power.

Contemporary society is a society of global economic crisis. This has resulted in a return of the importance of economic questions, which are also questions about class, in social theory and has shown which huge power the global financial and economic networks have over our lives. The central political task might now be to develop counter-power against the commodification of

everything. The task for social theory in the contemporary situation is to develop analyses of power and potential counter-power. Manuel Castells reminds us that the role of communication certainly should not be neglected in such endeavours.

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Peter Ludlow & Mark Wallace, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), ISBN 978-0-262-12294-8, Hardcover, US$29.95, Paperback, US$15.95.

The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse is written by Peter Ludlow, a philosophy professor at University of Michigan, and Mark Wallace, a freelance journalist, but the former is perhaps better known to virtual words users as Urizenus Sklar (or simply 'Uri'), the muckraking virtual journalist who created the blogs *Alphaville Herald* and *Second Life Herald*.

The book – published in 2007 – focuses on the early days of two among the most influential Multi User Virtual Environments (MUVEs) or virtual worlds: *The Sims Online* (TSO) by Electronic Arts and *Second Life* (SL) by Linden Lab, offering to the reader a very detailed and farseeing immersion into those 3D environments and the communities that flourished there or, in the case of SL, still flourish. It enlightens the philosophical and social underpinnings of the 'metaverse', digging in depth into how the relation existing between users and the community management policies developed by the two companies influenced the in-world communities' evolutionary paths.

It traces the way followed by Uri as a journalist, explaining how he was banned – for supposed violation of terms of service – from TSO due to his critical coverage of Electronic Arts behaviour when facing several in-world issues, and how traditional media worldwide picked up the story. This event led him to move to SL, where he founded the SL Herald, which soon became one

among the most prominent sources of information about what was going on in the virtual world.

In spite of the title, the book is mainly about TSO, and it dives into SL only after the first two-thirds. In my opinion this is a bit unsatisfying: understanding how the 'whole thing began' is relevant and the importance of TSO in the virtual worlds evolutionary chain undeniable, but the book was published in 2007, when people and media attention and interest were already focused on SL, that could be considered in many ways the epitome of the web2.0, thus reading so much about TSO may sound a bit 'obsolete'. Moreover, a little more space dedicated to SL early history could have been interesting. Anyway it may be quite difficult to conceal the time necessary for writing a book with the fluidity and speed of dynamics in online context.

Nevertheless, this book is a suggested reading for whoever (such as psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers, game designers, etc.) may be interested in understanding how community and relations among people emerge and evolve in social 3D virtual environment, and how and why they impact also on larger 'actual' society. It supplies sound answers to several criticisms to MUVEs, demonstrating how much and why the idea 'in such worlds there is nothing to do' is untrue.

These aspects are of crucial importance also for managers of online communities and for people involved in the development of technical solution and infrastructures aimed at supporting virtual worlds (being or not games), since social interaction is affected (and affects) by technical features of the environment into which it takes place.

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