

# The message is the medium

An interview with Manuel Castells

## ■ Terhi Rantanen

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Manuel Castells Oliván is widely considered the leading analyst of the information age. He is thus in high demand by universities, international organizations, governments, colleagues, students, journalists, biographers, and, of course, by *Global Media and Communication*. Castells receives about 1000 invitations per year (Ince, 2003: 20), accepts in fact only about 20 of them, gives on average one media interview per month, usually online, and one keynote speech a month somewhere in the world (*Annenberg Agenda*, 2003: 12). He has given more than 300 papers in 43 countries (Webster and Dimitriou, 2004). When not globetrotting he now divides his time primarily between two cities in two continents. In Los Angeles he holds the Wallis Annenberg Chair in Communication Technology and Society at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, and in Barcelona the Research Professorship at the Open University of Catalonia [<http://www.ascweb.usc.edu/>].

Castells is sole author of 23 books and editor or co-author of 15 more, as well as over 100 articles in academic journals. His magnum opus, the trilogy, *The Information Age* (1996–8), has been compared to the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber and took him 15 years to research, from 1983 to 1998, the last five years in a race against cancer. Castells is now recovered and the book is in its second edition and has been translated into 20 languages. His most recent books are *The Internet Galaxy* (Castells, 2001), which has now been translated into 15 languages; *The Information Society and the Welfare State: The Finnish Model* (Castells and Himanen, 2002); *La societat xarxa a Catalunya* (Castells, 2003) and *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective* (Castells, 2004). Castells has received more honorary doctorates from universities around the world than he has time to accept in person. Apart from his scholarly activities he has a weekly column in Barcelona's leading daily *La Vanguardia*.

Castells and Emma Kiselyova, his co-author and spouse, travel 'at home with each other' around the world, and between themselves speak English when in California and Spanish when in Catalonia. Kiselyova, an academic in her own right (see, e.g., Kiselyova, 2003), is Senior Fellow at the Center for Public Diplomacy, at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California and Head of International Relations at the Open University of Catalonia. Emma and Manuel are *khoroshye liudi* (good people), *con corazón* (big-hearted), whose generosity extends to strangers. Kiselyova declined to be interviewed but her contribution is often present in this interview.

Emma Kiselyova and Manuel Castells both have cosmopolitan qualities that make their truly transnational research possible. They speak several languages and are thus able to cross cultural and national boundaries. But it is their interest and enthusiasm that seem to be the primary force, together with the willingness to go and explore the world even further. In a dominantly Anglo-American academic world of media and communications where much of the research only speaks about, and to, the West, Castells and Kiselyova are a rare species. Their success gives hope that interest beyond the Anglo-American world is gradually entering even mainstream research.



Emma Kiselyova and Manuel Castells attending the first mass political demonstration for democracy in Moscow, 21 March 1991. Published courtesy of Emma Kiselyova and Manuel Castells.

### **An anarchist on leave?**

This interview takes place in Castells's office at the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona in February. It has a wonderful view over the magnificent city and the Mediterranean. Castells was born in 1942 to a Spanish-speaking family from Valencia and the family later moved to Barcelona. He is now back in one of his hometowns where he learned to speak Catalan as a student, mainly for political reasons (Ince, 2003: 8). He first studied law and economics at the University of Barcelona. However, at the age of 20, as an opponent of the Franco regime, he had to escape into exile in France. He received a doctorate in sociology and a doctorate in human sciences from the University of Paris-Sorbonne in 1967. This time it was the French authorities that expelled him because of his active participation in the May 1968 movement, but he was later allowed to return. Castells moved in 1979 to the University of California at Berkeley, accepting an appointment as Professor of City and Regional Planning and Professor of Sociology.

**TR:** Did you leave academic Marxism when you ceased to be politically active and emigrated to the United States?

**MC:** One could say almost the opposite. I actually ceased to be a Marxist when I was politically most active, between 1975 and 1979, and involved in the Spanish political transition. It was not that I rejected the whole theory. I ceased to be a Marxist when I realized that most of the questions I was interested in could not be understood by using Marxism. I could not understand, for example, gender, urban social movements, the differences between nationalities and languages by using class as my sole analytical tool.

When I left Spain again to go to Berkeley, I was no longer interested in correct answers but in relevant questions. I became more political when I left Marxism. I left the Parisian salons with wonderful categories that had nothing to do with reality and started relying more on my own observations.

**TR:** Could you still describe yourself as a 'Marxist on leave' (Rogers, 1994: 263), as Paul Lazarsfeld used to define himself after his emigration to the USA?

**MC:** No, I grew out of Marxism. I am not a Marxist any more. For me class is the least fruitful way to look at social change nowadays. My research on the gay liberation movement in the San Francisco Bay area (Castells, 1983) made me question whether class can be the most

important concept for understanding society. When I was trying to understand the power relations between sadomasochist, mainstream gay and lesbian groups in San Francisco, Marxism was the least useful tool. But I am still interested in social change, power relations and technology, which are all Marxist concerns. In the early 1960s we were anarchists. If I had to choose now which to oppose, capital or the state, I would still say the state.

### **Power relations and communications**

Castells does not want to locate himself in relation to other scholars working on similar issues; this, he says, is not his style. He learned to dislike it in French academia where one was constantly compared to other academics' intellectual positions in everlasting feudal wars and sees himself much more as an individual artisan, working 10 hours every day (Ince, 2003: 20). Although he has worked with many globalization theorists, such as Anthony Giddens, and is on friendly terms with them, he does not want to define his position in relation to them. However, since he made the shift from the Department of Sociology to the Department of Communication, when he moved from Berkeley to USC, I cannot resist the temptation of asking him whether he agrees with Giddens, who described Castells as obsessed with communications.

**MC:** No, I don't. I have been obsessed, and still am, with the same things from the very beginning of my career: social change and power relations. I always look first at the power relations that exist and second at the resources for fundamental social change. It does not have to be a progressive social change, but any social change. The reason I am deeply interested in communication is that in modern times power is played out in media and communication. I see modern communications as an excellent way to explore power relations because that is where the power lies.

**TR:** Now, since you have confessed your obsession with the power of media and communications, would it be fair to say that you are more interested in communications than in media? In your book, *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), you make a couple of references to the media, but mainly use the concept of communications.

**MC:** Definitely, because media are only a subspecies of communications which includes all forms of communication. For example, at first people did not call the internet a medium, but now it has clearly become one.

We have these new words, such as new media, multimedia, to explain the changes that have taken place. We can no longer understand any medium without language and interaction – without multimodal processing. Even if television is television and radio is radio, there is an increasing connection, a real-time interactivity, between different kinds of communications. We are now clearly moving towards an integration of all kinds of media and communications, which are deeply interconnected.

**TR:** Should we then have a new word to describe the new situation?

**MC:** I prefer to use simple words, such as communications, in order not to make it too complicated. Let's call it *multimodal* communication, communication of all kinds.

**TR:** However, when we research media and communications, there seems to be a break between the two. We are interested either in communications technology or in media content, and it seems to be hard to combine the two. Have you found this problematic?

**MC:** It is problematic. The answer is in interdisciplinary, interactive and cooperative research. It is impossible to write about any form of communications without a reference to technology. Without understanding how paper was used in China or in the Middle Ages in Europe, one cannot understand other forms of communications. It is a factor of linguistics, of language, of political knowledge, of technological knowledge.

It is not only interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity still accepts boundaries between disciplines. It is interthematicity, to use French philosophical jargon. I mean different themes. The theme of technology has its very specific logic. The theme of the control by media conglomerates has its own specialist knowledge. You cannot understand what is going on in today's world of business convergence if you don't understand the technology. If you don't understand business, if you don't understand that people and other technologies love the possibility of by-passing the advertising industry as a source of funding for television and that television therefore changes because the industry changes. Ultimately, changes in technology lead to the fact that you have to move advertising to the actual content of the programmes.

## **Early influences**

**TR:** How and when did you become interested in communications?

**MC:** It started, originally, with my interest in technology. My PhD dissertation in Paris had already to do with industrial locations of high-technology companies in that city (Castells, 1972a). The communication theme came much later and with the new computer technology that was developing rapidly – from software to the internet and telecommunications. The new technological changes that were taking place in the 1980s in Silicon Valley gave me an opportunity to elaborate on my former research into the location strategies of high technology. My next interest was the internet, but also the transformation of politics in the late 1980s – the realization of media in politics and also the politics of media. A quite significant revolution took place. Everything was image politics, media politics – it was the society of spectacle. It was then that I started to study more systematically the relationship between media, politics and technology.

**TR:** Did you feel intellectually isolated with your interest in communications?

**MC:** In the Department of Sociology at Berkeley, nobody was interested in technology, except one of my colleagues. But for 24 years I learned hugely from my colleagues even if their interests were different. At that time in the academic world there was more interest in theory, but little interest in communications – and if there was, it was often in a very fragmented way. Media, technology, communications were considered to be in different fields. People whose work did not comply with the departmental boundaries did not get the jobs.

I have found that communication departments have been much more open to intellectual stimuli from outside. For example, in the late 1990s, I realized that the people who were really studying the internet were in the library schools (computers were already in the libraries), or information systems departments as they are now called, with their study of the social use of new technology; they were also in the media and communications studies departments, which were much more concerned with the development of communications technology, including the internet, than people in the social sciences, who frankly were not very interested – or there was only a low level interest, an abstract interest.

The disciplinary boundaries are extremely damaging. That's why I always found myself more comfortable in interdisciplinary departments. And in the end you really need to invent new analytical tools for yourself.

**TR:** Perhaps media and communications research was hard to find. Many Ivy League universities in the USA still have no media and communications departments.

**MC:** Communication technology, media, television, the internet are the most important part of our life. They build our imaginary. The connection between communications and the academic world has been absolutely neglected. Many universities in European countries have not acknowledged this either and it has been relegated to a sub-field of journalism.

### **The influence of Eco, Innis and McLuhan**

**TR:** You acknowledged the influence of Marshall McLuhan, whom you refer to for his insight that television announced the end of print (Webster, 2004: p. xxv). The title of your book the *Internet Galaxy* (2001) is a homage to McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). When you became interested in communications, were there other books apart from McLuhan's that inspired you? Could you mention a couple of authors and titles?

**MC:** The most interesting person, even before McLuhan, was Umberto Eco [<http://www.themodernword.com/eco>] and his early work in the 1960s and 1970s on semiotics. His work was one of the first that brought together in a provocative way all the empirical knowledge and showed how texts consist of meanings and are understood as open. My early article, from 1972, on urban movements (Castells, 1972b) was influenced by Eco's work. But my interest in the literature on media and communications became more serious when I migrated to the USA, where I tried to read everything. I read Harold Innis (see, e.g. Innis, 1950, 1951) but Marshall McLuhan almost failed me because of his epistemology. He really forced me to find the jewels, semi-coherent sentences, new words. As you know, McLuhan never paid too much attention to his famous sentence 'The medium is the message'. It is not true that he never wrote it. But he wrote many other things and produced fundamental concepts. Yet, nowadays the only thing that everybody knows about him is some catchy phrases, such as 'The medium is the message' or 'Cool and hot medium'.

**TR:** Apart from the 'Global Village'?

**MC:** The global village was a strong theme and interesting at the time he

said it, but a completely wrong prediction. It is not a village, but a global network of individual cottages, which is a very different thing.

**TR:** Do you agree with McLuhan that 'The medium is the message'?

**MC:** McLuhan's 'The medium is the message' is extremely perceptive, although it corresponds to the mass media. But it is perceptive in the sense that it pays attention to the technological aspects of media cultures. It pays attention to the fact that when you use a certain technology there is always something you can do, there is always something you cannot do, and there is always something you can do better. For instance, there are things you cannot do without the internet. But this does not mean that the internet is the determining factor. The internet builds from the local to the global in real time, by connecting to endless search engines, to hypertextual information with many different consequences. 'The medium is the message' emphasizes the inner dynamics of technology in creating a field of constraints and possibilities.

McLuhan was a genius. The fact that he was not an empirical researcher, but a theorist, has allowed people to think that they can dismiss his insights. He opened new windows and did not close them. A closed concept is the end of science. The medium is also the internet. The basic electronic media are interrelated to form multimodal hypertexts. I would say that today 'The message is the medium' because it is the kind of message that we want to put forward, with the range of possibilities and the interoperativity of all this intermedia, that determines the way we actually process the message to a medium or a communication. For this you have to reach the moment of hypertextuality, interactivity, interoperativity in different forms of communications.

**TR:** You said earlier that media is a subspecies of communications. Should we then revise McLuhan's 'The medium is the message' even more profoundly and say that 'The communication is the message' or following your idea that 'The message is the communication'?

**MC:** 'The medium is the message' means that the materiality of organizing the communication process fundamentally shapes the ways the message is going to be received. If we say that 'The message is the medium' it means that the content of the message organizes the process of communication. As you suggest, and I agree with you, communication is also the message. To take an example, there are all kinds of studies that show that there is little correlation between advertising and consumers' actual behaviour. Yet, billions are spent on advertising.



Why? Because the other guy also does it, everybody does it. In the context in which everybody does it, if you don't advertise then you go into different logics, into the binary logics of communication and non-communication. If you don't exist in the communication field, then you have a problem. In fact everybody exists in the communication field, so the actual benefit, the marginal benefit to each advertiser is very small. Non-communication, rather than communication, becomes more important.

### **The influences of network models on communications models**

Castells's framework of analysis is his concept of a network society. Although in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) globalization and a network society go hand in hand, his position is different from that of 'pure' globalization theorists. His point of departure is not globalization, but the network society and its globalizing effect. The network society has profoundly changed the ways in which organizations and individuals interact with each other. For Castells, globalization is not an analytical concept as such, but one of the consequences of a global network society.

One of Castells's influences on communication studies is precisely his network model. Instead of having one-way chains starting with the sender and ending with the receiver, his model suggests multiple nodes with multiple roles and no clear distinction between senders and receivers. When I suggest that this is a radical suggestion and overturns earlier models in communication research, and has not been properly acknowledged in media and communication studies, Castells does not agree, but says that it has been done, for example, by his colleague Peter Monge in his work on communication networks (Monge and Contractor, 2003).

**MC:** There is a whole development of network theories, especially in the USA, that challenge the earlier linear models. I don't think you can have a serious theory in communication nowadays without a network theory. I think network theory is the heart of communication theory, because it opens up the possibility of seeing, for instance, convergence, multi-modality, interactivity. For example, why do newsrooms depend continuously on the internet? And how does a signal to global television and to local television combine? All these things are results of the networking of communication processes.

**TR:** But isn't the implication of your theory of a network society even more radical? Doesn't it imply that the difference between a sender and a receiver becomes obsolete?

**MC:** There are two things that have fundamentally affected our thinking. The first is the field of television studies, and the theories of the interactive audience. The theory of the interactive audience fundamentally challenged impact theories, with all kinds of political consequences. This theory can also be applied to new media. For example, there is one common language – the language of the hypertext. Any assigned meaning becomes instantly obsolete, reprocessed by a myriad of different views and alternative codes. The fragmentation of culture and the recurrent circularity of the hypertext lead to the individualization of cultural meaning in communication networks. The networking of production, the differentiation of consumption, the decentring of power and the individualization of experience are reflected, amplified and codified by the fragmentation of meaning in the broken mirror of the electronic hypertext, where the only shared meaning is the meaning of sharing the network [<http://www.chet.org.za/networksoc.html>].

On the other hand, the analysis of the internet produced the observation that users of technology are also its producers. We can show that the vast majority of the communications software technology that constituted the internet was developed by users, often young people. The constant network of interaction between the world of producers and of users was all mixed up and networks were being set up. Thus empirical research or simply observation are the most important ways, when used wisely and intellectually, to challenge existing models of thinking.

### **Many models of network societies: non-Western cases**

Unlike many Western academics, Castells has always been interested in non-Western societies. He has been a visiting professor in over 20 universities in different cities around the world, including Tokyo, Taipei, Moscow, Singapore, Hong Kong, Mexico City, Caracas, São Paulo and Santiago de Chile, and has done field work in all of those countries as well as in Nicaragua and China. His original interest in Russia, in the 1980s, was two-fold. On the one hand, he wanted to see for himself why the Soviet Union was failing. On the other hand, he did not want to join the army of Kremlinologists in repeating what had already been said, but to do his own field work, not only in Moscow but among ordinary people in far-away provinces. He was lucky in two respects: the timing was right, since the Soviet Union was about to collapse, and he was assisted by several Russian colleagues and academics, including Emma Kiselyova. Castells and Kiselyova, then Assistant Director for

International Relations at the Institute of Economics and Engineering, met in 1984 when he attended a conference, which she organized in Novosibirsk, the capital of western Siberia [<http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/1995/1004/minds.html>]. They have since published extensive research together and separately on post-Communist Russia.

**TR:** How are network societies, such as that in Russia, different from Western societies?

**MC:** The network society is a particular form of social structure. As was the case with the industrial society, a network society can have a very different kind of political structure. The network society in Russia, or some segments of that society, are connected to other segments of society. One of the features of the network society is that it can exist in a country that has internally disintegrated. The space of the nation-state, as defined historically, and that of the network society do not necessarily coincide. You can have extremely concentrated and connected network societies and also less concentrated network societies. For example, some extremely powerful components of Russian society are more, or even completely, globally connected, while at the same time most of Russia is completely disconnected. One of the characteristics of the network society everywhere is connectivity and disconnectivity. Countries like Russia are characterized by the predominance of disconnectivity over connectivity.

**TR:** Can different societies, especially non-Western societies and more specifically developing countries, formulate their own informational economies, or are they bound to follow the Western model because of the global network society?

**MC:** I repeat, there is no one model for network societies.

**TR:** What do you think of the concept of the digital divide? Do you use it yourself?

**MC:** The digital divide is about access to the global. More important, for me, is what to do when there *is* access, where to find things and how to find them, and what to do with the information you find to produce knowledge and to perform tasks. This is the fundamental issue. I don't use the concept of digital divide analytically, but I do talk about a lack of access, a lack of qualitative access. Individuals look for connections; political parties look for connections and try to keep them secure. In this sense the whole world is connected, but the notion of globalization is very different in different countries. Even nowadays large parts of the world are not connected.

**TR:** Did the tsunami in Asia teach us anything about global connectivity?

**MC:** That our lives are connected, that our planet is a common home, and that the best communication technology in the world cannot help if the institutions of the state do not care about their people and if the deployment of technology does not take into consideration human values but only commercial values.

**TR:** What kind of research would you like to see, and use? What would be useful for your purposes, concerning media and communications, that you haven't seen, but would like to see and use?

**MC:** First, methodologically sound, old-fashioned, empirically grounded research. I think that the now fading mania of deconstructing and reconstructing, in fact playing with words, has seriously damaged our understanding of the world at a critical time. Now that we seem to have survived this fashion, it is time to get back to serious work, hoping that one generation of students has not been lost. As for the themes, I would say that the transformation of the media system by the combined forces of digitalization, globalization, and media business concentration, in the context of an increasingly independent-minded audience, offers multiple possibilities to explore in a new way the old issue of power, the central issue of society. The struggle for power is a struggle for our minds, and our minds function in a communication environment. Communication, because of the kind of society we are in, has become the core field of social sciences at large.

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