

Castells in the air

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 There are not many professors who can get hundreds of young people to a lecture on a Friday night, but [Manuel Castells](#) is box office.

Castells is the best-selling new media thinker who preaches the power of networked communications in journalism, business, politics and our social lives. His [books](#) on the information age have defined the impact of the Internet and wireless technology on our global and local culture.

Manuel is a kind of Californian hispanic Frodo of new media: charming, persuasive and wise. I can't remember hearing so much laughter at an LSE event. He is convinced that the world is changing, but despite his obvious enthusiasm for new media, he tries hard to avoid making moral judgements about its effects or its essential nature.

He insists that, despite a continued digital divide, we are all living IN not just with the Internet. He talks of a new 'networked individualism' and a 'hybrid world' mixing online and offline lives.

He says that the Internet does not isolate people. Instead it 'amplifies sociability'. His new book will be about the politics of new technology. He says that the Internet is a "platform for the construction of autonomy" and 'mass self-communication' as many-to-many communication replaces old top down models.

Castells insists that it fosters 'insurgent' political forces. These are not necessarily revolutionary but they do challenge the system from within. He cites the anti-globalisation movements. They are 'hyperlinked' and 'horizontal'. He also quotes the way that young people in Spain used mobile phones to mobilize massive demonstrations in the wake of the Madrid bombings to protest at the way that the right-wing government falsely blamed it on ETA.

He also claims ([as I have done](#)) that Obama could not have come this far without new media grass roots networks.

But he is even more interesting, I think, when he talks about the way that successful business has become more networked, not just by using the technology but adapting the networked culture.

He rightly points out that the public sector has been hopeless at adopting networked processes even when it buys into the new technology. This is, he explains, because bureaucrats' 'micro power' is created by their control over the machine. So they are reluctant to adopt the open and participatory procedures of networked communications.

Some academics are eager to criticise Castells. He is typecast as a starry-eyed optimist about new media. But in fact his arguments are very much based on imperial evidence gathered from substantial real world research programmes. He does not make moral claims for any innate virtues of the Internet.

This means he is much more open-minded and creative in his understanding of the possibilities and evolving nature of our networked worlds.

I am very sympathetic to this. As I keep saying in my book, [SuperMedia](#), the world certainly is changing, but there is nothing inevitable about the outcomes. It is up to us all to forge the kind of communications world we want. It will be more networked, and Castells is a compelling and convincing guide to the new landscape.

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