Manuel Castells

Democracy in the age of the Internet

Throughout history, the practice of politics and its institutions have in great measure depended on the processes of information and communication for the simple reason that, in all spheres of their lives, people make decisions in keeping with the stimuli and kinds of information that enter their minds from their communication environments.

The way of operating of these milieus is as a feeder stream from the technology and organisation of the information process. Whether one is talking about the sacro-political ceremonies of antiquity, sermons from the pulpit, written communication since the invention of the printing press, radio, television or the Internet, the mass media, in the broadest sense, constitute public space, the space where views are contrasted, opinions are formed, behaviour is influenced and, in the end, where the future of the elites who aspire to govern is decided and, hence, the destiny of the governed. Although this close relationship between communication and politics is forged in all systems of government, it has an

even more decisive role in democracy inasmuch as, in principle, the citizens freely decide who will govern them, and how and why, on the basis of an informed judgement on what is best for them and the country. This is why the *fourth power* is sometimes spoken of, referring to the power of the media in their influence on public opinion. In fact, this characterisation is inexact. The politicians are the ones that retain political power. The financiers are the ones that exercise economic power. The intellectual and religious ministries have arrogated moral and cultural power. Alongside all of this, many other dimensions of power establish their own elites in such a way that the

Bovedilla simi negra (Black monkey vault), Miquel Barceló (2009)
Ceramic, 20 x 23,5 x 63 cm

totality of power in society is constructed around networks of relations among the dominating elites in each of the parcels of power. There is no one unified power elite but a network of local, national, international and global elites in differentiated dimensions, which, in their alliances and conflicts arising from a basis of shared and divergent interests, comprise the shifting mesh of asymmetrical relations that, in the last instance, constitutes the framework of the everyday life of citizens. However, all the processes of power formation take place in one and the same space: the space of socialised communication, which is to say, of the communication that eventually reaches society as a whole. This means that the media are not the holders of power but something rather more important: they make up the space in which power is constituted since only the personal or programmatic options that accede to this space come to be the knowledge of citizens. And the way in which they enter, their intensity in doing so, their format and the story they tell are all decisive in people's perceptions and, at the end of the day, in their participation and decision-making in the political process. Yet this is not a neutral space. It is conditioned by the economic and political interests of the media companies and governments, and by the mediation of media professionals, their options and their preferences.

Rules of access to the mass media have therefore been made with the aim, in principle, of guaranteeing a certain equality of opportunity vis-à-vis the different options at election time. A comparative analysis of legislation in this area leads one to doubt the democratic efficacy of these rules. In the context of the Spanish state, the essential norm is access to the public media for a time that is proportional to the support obtained in the past elections, which tends to prioritise the inertia of the past over the possibility of a different future. Moreover, bearing in mind that audience interest in electoral propaganda is minimal, the media has scant impact on public opinion. Subliminal campaigns of political promotion, including commissioned opinion pieces and tendentious journalistic reports, are more effective. Since media politicking is expensive, its generalised practice encourages the illegal financing of almost all the political campaigns practically throughout the world. Regulation of financial contributions is no solution because, once the law is approved, the fiddle appears. The alternative solution, which has just been dictated by the Supreme Court of the United States, namely no limits to the financing of political activities, obviously favours the options that are most kindly viewed in the business world. Hence, the practice of media politics skews and undermines the democratic process. Again, it warps political debate because it wields as a priority weapon the politics of scandal or the production (more or less accurate) of information that casts aspersions on the adversary. Negative messages are engraved much more intensely in the mind than positive ones. Even though scandal does not always work (due to the fatigue effect on public opinion), when it is used, directly or indirectly, by all the political forces, it decisively contributes towards discrediting the political class as a whole and aggravates the crisis of legitimacy of the democratic institutions, especially political parties. Surveys, both national and international, reveal growing mistrust among citizens, almost around

the globe, for parties, politicians and, to a lesser extent, the governing class. In our societies, then, politics is media politics carried out through a space of communication, and it is generally biased and effected by resorting to the politics of scandal. The spectacle of the politics of *ad hominem* attack and messages reduced to advertising jingles has a large part to play in prompting a generalised disaffection among citizens regarding their representatives and in undermining the foundations of support for the tasks of government, which is a particularly serious matter in a context of crisis.

Herein lies the importance of the transformation of the space of communication through the development of the Internet and mobile communication networks. In our milieu, almost three quarters of the population have access to the Internet, while propagation of the mobile phone is well nigh universal. The rapid diffusion of broadband constitutes the multimodal platform of communication in which we live. We don't "watch" the Internet as we watch television. We live with the Internet and in the Internet, in all the spheres of our everyday lives. The new generations continue to watch television selectively, but via the Internet. They keep reading newspapers (more than ever), but different ones (and in fragments) through the Internet. They have constructed their own spaces of relationship, information, interaction and debate in the so-called *social media* –the multimodal social networks of the Internet– while accessing the most diverse assortment of contents through mobile technologies. Recall that, in mobile communication, the important thing is not mobility (most calls are made from fixed places such as the home, workplace or school) but

the permanent state of being connected. It is connectivity and not mobility that is fundamentally changing the social model of communication.

We are at the threshold of an essential transformation of the communication system, characterised by the development of what I call *mass self-communication*: "mass" because it is able to reach the whole of society, even global communication networks, and "self" because the messages are produced, received, selected and combined by individuals or collectives that interrelate together as well as with databases in the network as a whole.

Communication by the Internet is free in general terms. It is monitored, it is true, and privacy has ceased to exist on the Web. However, there is so much information to be processed and so many imprecise search engines that the only victims are the usual suspects. For the immense majority of people, the Internet is a vast ocean of communication ploughed through by the return-trip sailing ships of their messages *en route* to ports that are yet to be discovered. Questions about whether this situation is good or bad are alien to the inquiry of the researcher, who is trying to analyse in order to understand rather than to judge. Let us say that the fundamental point is that freedom does not guarantee the uses of freedom. The freer a society, the more it depends on the ethical quality of its members and institutions. The Internet reflects what we are, individually and collectively.

Nevertheless, what we do know is that the Internet is transforming the political process because it has already transformed the space of communication. The information-based mass-media monopoly controlled by business and

governments is over because, even while the infrastructure of the Internet also has its proprietors, they cannot prohibit access to the circulation of its messages since the Internet is a global network of computers and their servers can by replaced in other countries in case of authoritarian closure, as happened with the Iranian protests of 2010 when communication through Twitter kept the revolt alive along with its relationship with the outside world.

The social media of communication include blogs, hundreds of millions of which are continually appearing all over the planet –for each person a blog, if need be– and in sites like YouTube and many others that become the repository, permanently updated, of the images and sounds of all societies. Citizen journalism reaches where the professional journalists do not go while, for professionals, there is a clear interest in alliance with non-professionals so as to defend themselves against the impediments that the communication industry puts in the way of their independence. How is it possible to censor what has already gone on-line? As for the credibility of information, it all depends on the ability of the person thus informed to separate the chaff from the grain or, in other words, it all depends on the educational and cultural quality of citizens. Credibility no longer resides only in the emitter of the information but also in the receiver's ability to filter.

The most immediate effect of this explosion of horizontal networks of communication in the domain of politics is that governments and politicians have to be very careful about what they do. There are no secrets any more unless they lead a monastic existence. Everything they do can end up on YouTube because everyone has a mobile phone with a camera and knows how to put the images on line. Lying as a way of governing has a very high price. Just ask Aznar about the bombing attacks in Madrid on 14 March 2004. Things don't look good for the Machiavellis skulking in the shadows. Transparency is no longer just a desirable virtue in politics but an imperative tactic if the aim is to stay clear of disrepute.

Citizens increasingly use the Internet and mobile phones to get information, to discuss, to organise themselves and, if necessary, to mobilise. Yet, in general, the powers-that-be have still not grasped the potential of the Internet. They confine themselves to symbolic gestures with little practical content. All politicians have a web page, all of them use YouTube, all of them write blogs but they tend to confuse it all with an electronic notice board. Hence, governments provide information by the Internet but few take the step of giving transparency to their management with user-friendly, interactive systems that enable the full participation of citizens on the basis of restriction-free access to all the databases containing information that we have the right to know about. There are exceptions. The Brown Government [at the time of writing], advised by Tim Berners-Lee (inventor of the World Wide Web) and Nigel Shadbolt, is creating a Semantic Web system to give generalised access to government databases along with elements of interactivity. Again, awareness of the potential of the Internet by Obama and his advisers was the decisive factor that enabled him to become president of the most powerful country in the world, at the head of a

Capo 14 Dan (Capo 14 Dan), Miquel Barceló (2009)
Ceramic, 16 x 25 x 24 cm

citizens' movement that organised itself around his charismatic candidature. This is the key: self-organisation. Politicians who really want to squeeze all the potential out of the Internet must dare to engage in a new kind of politics. This is a form of politics in which electors –and not political apparatuses– take the initiative; politics in which politicians keep learning by means of mass-based consultations whereby they venture to enter into debate with society, not just with activist minorities but with the citizenry as a whole. If politicians do not engage in Internet politics, citizens will use it against the politicians. In fact, they are already doing so. It is clear there are dangers. Ask Obama. After the vacillations of his first year of mandate, the far-right populist tea-party movement that opposes his reforms has been taking shape in large part thanks to the Internet. When the floodgates of citizen participation are opened and access to the networks of communication is freed, all the winds in society are emboldened to blow and one must navigate with and against them. It requires political courage, leadership and, above all, democratic conviction. What has come to an end is entrenchment in party apparatuses and media manipulation, taking advantage of the notion that the next one is even worse. This is how one comes to power or stays in power, but one also loses touch with a citizenry that is ever better informed and self-organised and that will want accountability at every point along the way until it comes to fracture or reform of the democratic institutions. Democracy in the age of the Internet is not the democracy of parties. It is the democracy of citizens, by citizens and for citizens. With or against the parties, it is a by-product of the ability of parties to regenerate themselves ‖

■ **Bibliographical References**

CASTELLS, Manuel, *Communication Power*, Oxford University Press, 2009 (in Catalan as *Comunicació i poder*, Editorial UOC, and in Spanish as *Comunicación y poder*, Alianza Editorial).

CASTELLS, Manuel, et al., *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*, MIT Press, 2006 (in Spanish as *Comunicación móvil y sociedad: una perspective global*, Ariel, 2007).

CHESTER, Jeff, *Digital Destiny: New Media and the Future of Democracy*, The New Press, 2007

THOMPSON, John B., *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000.

Manuel Castells is professor of Sociology and director of the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Barcelona).