

Scott Lash

Hit the right buttons to reach new spaces

This book, a global survey of mobile communications, is a further development of Manuel Castells's highly influential theory of the "network society". The first two decades of Castells's career were very much in urbanism and social geography. Subsequently, he has analysed the global information society with his seminal *Informational City* (1989) and hugely influential three-volume work on *The Network Society* (1996).

Castells's global information theory is cast in a spatio-temporal prism, and the reader should begin this book with the conclusion and a middle chapter titled "Space of flows, timeless time". These chapters set out the general framework.

Wireless communication had its origins in the 1970s, with the US easily the global leader. The cellular phone system was introduced in 1983, and by 1990 there were 5 million cellphones in the US. Yet the US could not decide on a single standard, it was using receiver charging and did not adapt to SMS. So Europe, Japan and Korea shot ahead of the US. In 2004, mobile phone penetration was 66 per cent in the US, 86 per cent in the European Union and about 75 per cent in Korea and Japan.

What mobile phones (and wireless in general) have done is to bring about the diffusion and deepening of the global network

society. This has taken place especially in developing countries and among the young and poor in developed countries. With prepaid cards and the relative low price of handsets, neither a desktop computer nor a landline is required for connection. You do not need a credit history, a permanent address or a stable source of income.

Local loop strategies in China and India, which have built a wireless "final mile" from fixed-line exchanges and enabled half-price handsets, have drawn tens of millions of extra subscribers. China had 33 per cent penetration in 2006, India 13 per cent by February 2007. Penetration in Sub-Saharan Africa, while significantly lower than Asian countries, is developing quickly, aided by the innovative use of village phone-sharing.

Castells et al. argue that first the web and now the spread of mobile telephony has "induced" a different kind of space — "a space of flows that is made up of networked places". This is paralleled by a transformation of time into a "timeless time — formed from a compression of time and a desequencing of practices", which is hugely increased with mobile communications. This is a combination of the individual

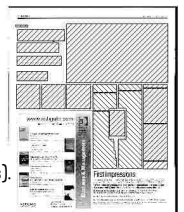
and mass, of, as it were, Fordism and post-Fordism. It is an extension of the network society, which is "organised" via "micro-electronic-based networks of information and communication".

Individualisation is at the very heart of Castells's thesis. Phones are important not as lifestyle accoutrements, because there

are plenty of these all working rather similarly. Nor are they in the first instance primarily about movement. In developing countries, mobile phones are often substitutes for fixed lines. There, and in the West, they increasingly serve for fixed or localised communication. But what they do is lift the individual out from institu-

tional or formal organisational norms into a different networked space. You are lifted out from your family, formal place of work, indeed from, say, waiting for the train or in the bus and relocated into these networks of communication. The individual gains "autonomy", but a "safe autonomy" — because the phones are often used to bring your network, including your family, with you. Such individualisation can neither be separated from the network nor the microelectronic network from the individualisation.

Castells was more interested



in information in his work in the late 1980s. Now it is communication, "the fundamental human activity", that is centre stage. Communications technologies, this "space of flows", is "the organisation of simultaneous social interaction at a distance". And it is the "content" of the flows — friendship, love, politics, football, fashion, work — that "defines the network". This is a "generic space", one in which a Skype phone conference linking London, Shanghai and Kansas City desequences institutional time, in which telework from home can take place in the wee small hours.

This is a new materiality: a materiality not of physical place but of the information and communication network. This is one of the most powerful theories of social change around. It is married with a global survey — assembled by a team working in Los Angeles, Barcelona and Hong Kong — from many hundreds of hours of online searches, government reports and comprehensive knowledge of the journal literature. The book should be required reading for researchers in all aspects of communications and information and students in sociology, media studies, geography and politics.

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Mobile Communication and Society

By Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernandez-Ardevol, Jack Linchuan Qiu and Araba Sey

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The magical keypad: mobile phones have brought about the diffusion and deepening of the global network society