

NETWORK SOCIETIES: NEOLIBERAL MATERIALS FOR AN EXPLORATORY THEORY

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***Summary:** The paper examines different notions of knowledge in an information society and argues that Manuel Castells' theory of the network society should be positioned between the concepts of postindustrial and knowledge society. Castells explicitly relies on Daniel Bell's conservative definition and discards Fritz Machlup's understanding of knowledge. This puts Castells in a difficult position when it comes to evaluation of the network society's social structure. Neoliberal anti-scientific and anti-Enlightenment definition of knowledge questions the fundamental split between the Net and the Self, the tension between information and social networks. Mundane, ephemeral knowledge of the common people is at the center of neoliberal perspective of market and culture, in contrast with the concept of the network society. The neoliberal knowledge problem is examined on three levels of Castells' proposed struggle between information and social networks: power of identity vs communication power, mass self-communication vs hypertext meta-language; and culture of real virtuality vs the public mind.*

***Keywords:** network society, information society, Manuel Castells, media, knowledge.*

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*All knowledge... leads to the ultimate knowledge of Truth:
all knowledge is sanctified and sanctifies.
Are we about to abandon this,
the foundation on which the modern West has been built?*
Peter Drucker (1969: 346)

1. Introduction

People say we live in an information society. Everything can be translated into data, processed and applied for the society's wellbeing. All problems are caused by the lack of knowledge. The usual view is that this technocratic perspective started in the United States. This paper suggests it came from Central Europe. The three types of information society that were developed (postindustrial, network and knowledge society) have many similarities, but it is the differences that we need to focus on in order to reevaluate Manuel Castells' contribution. It is "the most persuasive analysis of the world today" (Webster, 2014: 344) and even critiques cannot take this away. Criticizing the network society theory usually means upgrading it, finding new potentials, but never fundamentally challenging it.

I will propose an evolution of Castells' thought that, though simplified, shows its strengths and possibilities. The Information Age trilogy charted the global transition from the industrial to the network society. It showed interconnections between social fields and introduced the media as an influential factor within a macrosociological project. This Network Society 1.0 relied on Daniel Bell's postindustrial concepts of information and knowledge, now networked by information technology that organized relationships of production/consumption, experience and power within a new social morphology. Bell's theory was useful for the analysis of the production realm, but Castells' focus on symbolic communication among humans, elaborated in his *Communication Power*, brought us an upgrade that we could call the Network Society 2.0.

Castells (2009: 7) was concerned with the "bridge between social structuration and the individual processing of power relationships", but Bell's understanding of information and knowledge was becoming unhelpful. The notion that "knowledge derives from verified theory" (Bell, 1999: lxiii) was already contrasted by Castells' *Power of Identity* (Volume II of *The Information Age*), where the knowledge of particular cultures (ethnic, modern or postmodern)

was not theoretical nor scientific. Later, in *Communication Power*, Castells (2009: 137) introduced the concepts of mass self-communication and affective intelligence in order to grasp how communication is “activating minds to share meaning”. This meaning could not be Bell’s codified knowledge. Today, “a whole galaxy of communications dominated by lies now known as post-truth” commercialized “our demons” (Castells, 2019: 3). It is far from any verified theory which led to the postindustrial idea of intellectual institutions as “axial structures of the emergent society” (Bell, 1999: 26). A lot of people do not trust scientific nor intellectual knowledge today.

The Network Society 3.0, for now a mere spectre, should reconstruct the notions of information and knowledge, and find its axial structures. In his trilogy, Castells discussed the differences between Bell’s and Fritz Machlup’s views on knowledge. He found Machlup’s definition “excessively broad” (Castells, 2010a: 17). This has brought Castells to the third, critical view of information society marked by networks, opposed by identities and organized by communication power. I will argue Castells’ rupture with the knowledge society paradigm should be patched up. My standpoint is one of multiperspectival critique (Kellner, 1995), and it is also reconstructionist in the sense of reinterpreting and rebuilding the knowledge system behind the network society. If we want to describe how this society functions as an information society, we have to examine the conditions and power relations shaping its knowledge. Although Bell is still useful for the examination of production/consumption realm, the neoliberal definitions of information and knowledge seem to be more suited for analysing human-human relationships within other dimensions of Castells’ social morphology, primarily that of experience and power.

This is where Central European scholars step in. The destruction of empires and World Wars brought the majority of them to the American academia. This academic group formed Mont Pelerin Society near Geneva, and created what Michel Foucault (2008) labelled neoliberalism. Neoliberal doctrine redefined what we mean by information and knowledge. I will show that Castells’ exploratory theory is in need of the neoliberal materials, which could upgrade it to the Network Society 3.0. Webster (2014: 11) maintains “theoretical knowledge/information is at the core of how we conduct ourselves these days”, and that this is the only appropriate way to discuss the information society. Neoliberals, on the other hand, do not agree at all. Their understanding of knowledge is

economic and cultural. “Such studies tend to treat data, information, knowledge and wisdom as a singular thing and as a mere commodity” (Preston, 2001: 59). A belief is not differentiated from knowledge because it is used as one in a knowledge society paradigm. But that means there is a whole dimension related to neoliberal concept of knowledge that has to be examined within the network society paradigm.

In the next section I will deal with fundamental differences between Bell’s and neoliberal understanding of knowledge. Then I will argue that Castells’ reliance on Bell created problems for him in the analysis of the fundamental split between Net and the Self, or information and social networks. I will deal with three analytical levels of this tension: power of identity vs communication power (3.1), mass self-communication vs hypertext meta-language (3.2) and culture of real virtuality vs the public mind (3.3). These are the concepts Castells uses but does not examine them as connected, even though they deal with the same problems within realms of power, digital platforms, and public and cultural life as such.

2. Knowledge in an Information Society

The postindustrial society has “codification of theoretical knowledge and the new relation of science to technology” as its central features (Bell, 1999: xiv). Intellectual knowledge should re-order, re-arrange, re-design economy and society, manage organized complexity and introduce “social planning in order to meet the onrush of social change” (Bell, 1976: 203). Bell was familiar with Machlup’s work on the knowledge society, but could not agree with Machlup that subjective meaning that a knower attaches to objects, persons and situations could maintain the direction of society that needed more regulation and control. This knower as a populist criterion would be a defence of “street smarts” and parochial intelligence of the masses, rather than expert driven, computerized society (Bell, 1983: 459).

Knowledge was “a set of organized statements of fact or ideas, presenting a reasoned judgement or an experimental result” (Bell, 1999: 175). It could not be news, entertainment, sensibility and imagination within the cultural realm. That is not knowledge of the postindustrial society. Populism is a political approach that appeals to ordinary people, but in terms of knowledge it is anti-elitist when it comes to academic elite and scientific criteria. Therefore, populist

definition of knowledge is related to an anti-elitist and “common sense” view, against the established truths related to many phenomena, such as vaccination, the Earth’s shape, or any other forms of expert knowledge, because there are “alternative knowledge systems” that people relate to (Nawrocki, 2024).

On the other hand, for post-industrialist scholars, information is a collective good, it establishes a context for data and shows relationships between them, but it is knowledge as a reasoned judgement that groups data into a connected experience (Bell, 1999: lxiii). While information is understood as data processing that orders events and objects, knowledge is focused on purposes of different actions and it has to be codified into symbolic systems, that explain relationships between categories. Bell was against liberalism that constantly discards the past, because he considered this a “failure of knowledge”, that could not be the driver of civilization (Bell, 1976: 203). Codified knowledge has to connect experience and meaning, and within economics of information it has to be spread cooperatively. It could not be an individual perception of facts and relations but a “correct sequence between factual order and logical order” (Bell, 1999: 9).

Castells at first confined his research within Bell’s notion of information and knowledge and disregarded Machlup’s definition. But his work in general shows that knowledge was more than just a theoretical relationship between categories linked to productive sources. “Spirit and matter” (Castells, 2010a: 18) was not just embodied by informational paradigm. Identities were also a source of meaning and experience, based on cultural attributes that are always collective. Machlup’s view of knowledge was not just too broad but it neglected social projects different identities could arrange. Therefore, Castells was a bit stuck between postindustrial “toyotism”, on the one hand, and Machlup’s populism on the other, which led him to produce the theory of society made up of relentless networked modification.

The neoliberal view of knowledge was indeed populist: it is “what people think they know” (Machlup, 1980: 150). It included unwholesome, inflammatory or explosive knowledge, biased, hate-inspiring, dangerous knowledge. Alternative, erroneous knowledge was still knowledge, whether it is astrology or alternative medicine. All this is “purchased by people who believe in their power” (Machlup, 1980: 149). The Austrian School opposed the Cartesian World-view focused on causality, geometry and calculation (Drucker, 1996). The Reason

of French Enlightenment was “pretentious” illusion of a scientific mastermind that can summarize all knowledge (Hayek, 1990). Knowledge is always local, dispersed, imperfect and could never concentrate in the form of the “goddess of the Revolution” (Hayek, 2010: 93). Knowledge synthesis of Socrates or Thomas Aquinas “no longer suffices” (Drucker, 1969: 346). It is always mundane, “everyday knowledge of the common people” (Machlup, 1980: 59), picked-up here and there, usually through the media. It is ephemeral knowledge of feelings and mental states that later became big data, that makes up the majority of all knowledge, leaving so-called science at less than 10 per cent (Machlup, 1980: 81).

For Milton Friedman it might as well be the trade of gossip (Friedman & Friedman, 1980: 25). Unlike the postindustrial society, individual perception and irrational beliefs are not irrelevant, but what society and economy are all about. This is entirely different from the left populist perspectives, as it is not really a bottom-up approach, nor is it concerned with the political organization of the common people within an empty but unifying signifier. For Laclau (2005: 245) political philosophy reduces the politics to the police, but populism sets the people free. However, for neoliberals, that are not really democratically oriented (Bonfeld, 2017), populism is a top-down tool for market consumerism and acclamative right-wing politics. Their economically appropriated populist knowledge poses a problem for the network society theory.

While Castells (2010a: 17) understood informationalism as “action of knowledge upon knowledge”, he mostly meant knowledge of Bell’s intellectual class. Neoliberals mostly mean consumers’ curiosity and desire for entertainment (Machlup, 1980: 33). It is not experts but the market that should reconcile different, conflictual knowledges (Hayek, 2011: 73). While neoliberals state that humans have limited, bounded rationalities and decreased computation capabilities (Simon, 1997: 20), they do not believe just that experts should “improve” people’s judgement. The neoliberals believe that small-talk, pastime, spiritual and practical knowledge is what the World is made of, and this “people power” is at the center of contemporary digital economy. No one can possess all the relevant information, no one has the complete knowledge. It is only market as a “communication system” that can be an “efficient mechanism for digesting dispersed information” (Hayek, 1990: 34). Market will be “a site and mechanism of the formation of truth” (Foucault, 2008: 30). Digital platforms embody the knowledge society paradigm.

Michel Foucault's examination of neoliberalism still stands. The only thing missing was the neoliberal understanding of markets not just as cybernetic orders but also as networks. While Castells (2000: 5) acknowledged that networks are old forms of social organization and that he examined merely its technological upgrade, it is the neoliberals that talked about networks as prehistoric constructions, evolved through the millennia of different knowledge formations. The end result is an incomprehensive embodiment of countless ramifications and relays: "a network wholly outside the perception and understanding of ordinary people" (Hayek, 1992: 90). The goddess of the Revolution cannot acquire this market knowledge because "there is no Queen of Knowledges" (Drucker, 1989: 198). Post-truth, populism, antivaxers, FlatEarthers are merely derivatives of the neoliberal notions of knowledge and market. This is what we have to tackle in order to reconstruct the Network Society 3.0.

3. Information and Social Networks

Castells is aware that postindustrial expert knowledge is not all there is. The culture of real virtuality integrated all kinds of knowledge "where make-believe is belief in the making" (Castells, 2010a: 406). However, Castells never discussed how this affects the notion of knowledge. In his examination of internet galaxy it was still science and technological world on the top of its cultural construct. "This techno-meritocracy was enlisted on a mission of world domination (or counter-domination) by the power of knowledge" (Castells, 2001: 60). It was a continuation with modernity and the Enlightenment (Castells, 2001, 39). Techno-meritocracy was followed by hackers, virtual communitarian and entrepreneurial cultures as four layers of internet galaxy. It was through their mutual interplay and tension that we got to the information age, but technocracy and expert knowledge was considered as crucial.

Yet, where one layer ends and another one begins was not so clear. For Fred Turner (2006), counterculture and cyberculture pretty much found a common ground. It was always hippie and hi-tech at the same time. Our focus should be on the techno-meritocracy that is not a continuation of Enlightenment. Neoliberal vision of society is not in stark contrast with Castell's network society, though. The problem is deeper than that: "we have much in common with the neoliberals, in fact virtually everything— save the essentials!" (Jameson, 1992: 265). It is that neoliberals also see networks, but not conflicts and lack of co-

operation. A network is seen as “cooperation” within the system of competition (Mises, 1996). Where Castells sees a structural tension and power struggles, neoliberals see eternal market articulations that always function.

Every critical theory is a theory of conflicts and power. The difference is where this power lies. Most critical theories are focused on power in non-economic realms of culture, psyche and media, whether it is history of sexuality, media industry or gender. The pessimists, such as Frankfurt school, would concentrate on manipulation within onedimensional society. Optimists, such as Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, would try to find a way to transcend regimes of alienation and reification. The question is how Castells and the neoliberals view the problems of power, conflict and resistance. We know that Castells believes that people are not powerless against communication power and that conflicts do not have to result in mere domination. Conflicts bring change, new values and norms, new battles and new networks. In the network society socio-cultural tensions are grouped within a “fundamental split between abstract, universal instrumentalism, and historically rooted, particularistic identities. Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self” (Castells, 2010a: 3), between information and social networks (Castells, 2000: 21).

There are two problems that neoliberalism introduces to Castells’ network society theory. First, Castells did not clearly explain how information and social networks relate to the structure of network society. At one time, “information networks affect social structure” (Castells, 2000: 6). At another time, “networks adapt to supportive environments and market structures” (Castells, 2010a: 214). But markets should be the embodiment of abstract, universal instrumentalism of the Net. For neoliberals, markets are information networks themselves and the oldest form of social organization. They are also social structures. Markets could now be empowered by information and communication technologies. It is the place of markets within Castells’ network society that seems to be a mystery. The second important thing is that neoliberal knowledge society is not only the embodiment of abstract universal instrumentalism, therefore an information network, but deeply connected to the knowledge of social networks. There are no digital platforms without its users. A market is a method of aggregating information, a mechanism for pooling this knowledge (Becker & Posner, 2009: 1). This definition of market would mean that information

networks cannot work without social networks, or that the Net cannot function without the Self.

The Self as such is an object of fundamental split itself: between power and counterpower. Every social network is infiltrated by information networks and their political and economic imperatives to some extent. And vice versa, many information networks could be used by social networks, such as social movements and other alternative actors using corporate platforms to protest against those same corporations or political actors. This is the case when mass self-communication contributes to the development of the civil society and serves as a potential counterpower within information networks. Castells showed different cases as well, such as President Bush's Iraq war agenda, where the citizens accepted the military intervention as "patriotic", or Trump astroturfing the libertarian right, where libertarian social network was overwhelmed by the neoliberal information network.

The point is the Self is not always in a bipolar opposition towards the global financial and political networks (the Net), but is a "supportive environment" for those networks. Only some particularistic identities are really opposed to the global power networks. However, due to the neoliberal definition of knowledge, all the levels of Castell's fundamental split could be deconstructed. In all cases the problem Castells found in his urban sociology persists: "This conflict-ridden reality was mystified under the tricky notion of 'community'" (Castells, 2021: 261). I will deal with the neoliberal mystifications to show that neoliberal meritocracy is a bit different than postindustrial experts and their information networks. I want to show the moments where social networks cannot keep up with the Net imperatives, and are appropriated by abstract instrumentalism.

Social networks consist of many identities, some legitimizing towards the powerful institution of the society, some resistant or even future project oriented (such as environmentalist or feminist). Social networks are also concerned with freedom of users on the platforms to express themselves through mass self-communication. Finally, social networks put their trust in the public mind (and media as its possible embodiment) as the only force capable of preserving and upgrading our democracies. On the other hand information networks are structures of economic and political power. In the case of media technology we can register three manifestations within Manuel Castells' network society, concepts that he uses but does not examine together. Communication power is opposed

to the power of identity, but Castells is unclear how they relate to each other. Communication power is the embodiment of the abstract instrumentalism of the Net, while identities are related to social networks that Castells labeled the Self. How exactly does the power of identity deals with communication power (chapter 3.1)? Second, Hypertext meta-language deals with the phenomenon of mass self-communication on the digital platforms, that are build around algorithms and people. Therefore, one cannot talk about digitally mediated communication only as hypertext or users, but both, which creates conceptual problems (3.2). Finally, culture of real virtuality stands across the notion of public mind primarily in terms of knowledge. Public mind is related to “critical thinking” of networked individuals (Castells, 2009: 431), while culture of real virtuality is far from it (3.3). I will deal with the three oppositions in the following sections.

3.1. Power of Identity vs Communication Power

Communication power is seen as based on theoretical, scientific knowledge. Information networks embody the communication power and social networks oppose it through the counterpower of identity. This “opposition between globalization and identification and the cleavage between individualism and communalism” (Castells, 2009: 117) is also understood as “power of identity [that] stands up to the power of networks” (Castells, 2019: 85). But what kind of knowledge formation is “identity”? Is it really different from information networks? Castells seems to be ambivalent. Identity is at the same time in opposition to networks, but “networks process the cultural materials that are constructed in the variegated discursive realm” (Castells, 2009: 51). Neoliberalism is not against cultural identities but maintains that “cultural diversity of the world has to be overlaid”, that global networks have “to assert a disciplinary discourse capable of framing specific cultures” (Castells, 2009: 52)

Not all identities are inclined toward resistance or projects. Some identities are legitimizing and all are marked by power relationships. They all participate in the generation of Gramscian civil society. But this battle of people’s minds and cultural codes could “may well be characterized by informed bewilderment” (Castells, 2010a: 394). Social change should be a state in which a project or resistance identity becomes a legitimizing one. And vice versa, the “rupture” and crisis of democracy that Castells examines implies the interplay between

identities. The populist wave is “introduced by the dominant institutions” that seek to legitimize domination, and at the same time it is produced by actors “stigmatized by the logic of domination” (Castells, 2010b: 8). This legitimizing-resistance binary is substantially blurred by Trump, embodying working class male’s outrage and ruling elite’s profitable hope. Trump relies on or misuses both resistance and legitimizing aspects of American libertarian identity. It is equally expected that project identities, such as environmental and feminist, could be instrumentalized in the near future in a sort of fake-fight against productivism and patriarchy.

Castells demonstrated the ability of communication power to conquer the minds. In the struggle for definitions and application of norms in a society, priming, agenda-setting and framing are the media mechanisms that support the construction and sharing of meaning. Meaning is a mental representation, an image that incorporates emotions, feelings and reasoning (Castells, 2009: 140), which is the point where Castells abandons Bell most clearly. Agenda-setting assigns special relevance to certain narratives. Framing links narrative structures to the brain’s neural networks. The power of identity is simultaneously the power of “conquering Iraq” (legitimizing) and the power of women’s emancipation (project identity). Identities are sources of meaning for many actors, but this meaning is always constructed through power relationships.

Meaning appears through processing cultural materials from collective memory, personal fantasies, geography, even biology, but it also stems from social projects and power apparatuses. Castells (2000: 7) is at pains to explain how the “meaning is produced, reproduced, and fought over in all layers of social structure”. That would mean that there is a construction of meaning in production/consumption, experience, power and technological layer of the network society. Many of those layers are unreachable by the counterpower due to “the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action” (Castells, 2010a: 500). Power is a “template” or “DNA of social life” (Castells, 2021: 260), and there are “meta-programmers” of this template (Castells, 2009: 421). Can counterpower based on identities (within the layer of experience) actually change the social morphology (production, technology, power) through social action?

This is where the neoliberals step in. There are two false assumptions that have to be tackled. First, that neoliberals are *laissez-faire* – not really (Friedman, 1951). They propose the competitive order that is cybernetically controlled,

so that the market functions like “a logical machine, which presents itself as a chain of constraints impelling the economic agents” (Bourdieu, 2000: 96). But that would mean the market is only an information processor (Mirowski & Nik-Khah, 2017: 72). The market is also a culture, society’s values and conventions, everything that developed through some “spontaneous evolution” (Friedman & Friedman 1980: 26). Civilization for neoliberals was created through the application of non-rational customs, even magic (Hayek, 1998: 161), all kinds of cultural phenomena that were not natural nor artificial. Culture comes from pre-historic times as incomprehensible tradition, set of irrational rules and evolutionary networks.

Consequently, the knowledge society and the market are “weasel words” that appear behind both social and information networks and do not distinguish them. Market is both a social and an information network. Pre-historic networks accommodated technological networks. Terms such as capital, property or trade are very well hidden behind concepts of human capital, trade of gossip and mundane knowledge or cultural evolution. Communication power is not just the application of verified theories. It does not just prime or frame the meaning. In the world of ephemeral neoliberal knowledge, there is no Queen of knowledges, therefore, there is no Queen of meaning. There is only the plurality of meanings on the market of ideas, “a complex structure of heterogeneous thoughts” (Machlup, 1982: 10). The neoliberals are not either vaccinated or antivaxers. They are not exclusively the power of identity or power of networks. They are both. Neoliberalism is a “system of variable geometry” (Castells, 2010a: 1) and a “meta-social disorder” (Castells, 2010a: 508) characterized by “informed bewilderment” (Castells, 2010c, 394). It is the market that reconciles these contradicting knowledges, identities, structures and powers.

Castells understands the conflict within the network society as a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self. Therefore, he primarily sees populism as mostly autonomous and spontaneous reaction of the people to the conditions, exclusion and stigmatization in network society, against corrupted elites that brought the social and economic, even biological crisis today. Due to the “condition of structural schizophrenia between function and meaning” identities are under increasing stress (Castells, 2010a: 3). But Castells seems to stay too close to Bell’s disjunction of social structure and culture, where realms of society function under different principles (Bell, 1999: 478). On the other

side, holistic critical theories focus on the conflicts and relationships between economy, culture and society. The neoliberals went a step further and re-made identities into market entities within an information society. This meant less differentiation, if any, between the power of identity and the communication power. It meant identities could be manipulated.

3.2. Mass Self-communication vs Hypertext Meta-language

For Castells, the communication power is grounded in the system of mass media. It is thoroughly shaped by commercialization, globalization and convergence of media business. The “industrial logic” was based on one-way communication with minimum interaction and followed by the notion of passive audience (Castells, 2010a: 370). With the advance of digital technology the relationship between senders and receivers changed. The multiplication of channels and platforms diversified and segmented the audience, but kept the industrial logic intact. There were still global multimedia business networks that were controlling the realm of social communication. The new phenomenon, that Castells labeled mass self-communication, advanced the idea of the autonomy of communicating subjects that could form horizontal networks against the vertical corporate ones (Castells, 2009: 4). Social networks may have a chance against information networks. Castells was already sceptical towards critical thinkers, such as Herbert Marcuse, that advocated social change and at the same time viewed people as “passive receptacles of ideological manipulation” (Castells, 2010a: 363). This was not the human nature he believed in but a consequence of social conditions at work and home, that Raymond Williams (2003) called mobile privatization, another instance of industrial logic of the mass media.

However, Castells did not reach for the findings of British cultural studies. Instead, he relied on medium theory, specifically Marshall McLuhan, to explain communicative change. McLuhan’s idea that medium is the message implied that media shape the communication process by creating the environment in which communicative subjects act. Castells’ media ecology was not embodied by the idea of a global village but “customized cottages globally produced and locally distributed” (Castells, 2010a: 370). In his view, digital technology deconstructed McLuhan’s mantra and empowered the audience as interactive and creative actors. The message was now the message and its characteristics would

shape the medium. Even though he also stated that “network is the message” (Castells, 2001: 1), and never proposed naïve cultural populism as part of his theory, Castells nevertheless introduced the mass self-communication not just as the new media tendency but as a potential counterpower. The question is what is the neoliberal message?

The mass self-communication is understood as follows: “production of messages is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content... is self-selected” (Castells, 2010a: 55). We should agree that not many things fit into this definition. Most of communication happening on digital platforms is not self-selected because algorithms control recommendation systems; not self-directed because choosing your receivers is not a rule; maybe even not self-generated because platforms use many technics to make the users produce more content (van Dijck, 2013). The hypertext shapes the digital framework where mass self-communication can occur. Castells (2010a: 72) is aware that platforms “support a variety of content and media expressions” and their business is based on the complementarity between horizontal and vertical communication networks. Castells’ focus on the process of commodification of mass self-communication, and his fear of the closing of the digital commons, may have influenced him to partially lose sight of mass self-communication as the production of mundane knowledge intended for the market in the first place.

The mass self-communication was envisioned as the structural element of social, horizontal networks, but for the neoliberals it was always seen as the content of vertical, information networks. “We have not (yet) discovered how to take inventory of the cognitive contents of our brains” (Machlup, 1980: 61). The neoliberals “care about telling anything, directing or advising anybody, arousing anybody’s interest, or inducing any decisions or emotions” (Machlup, 1983: 661). Therefore, the neoliberals were interested in the content of mass self-communication from the start. The market was always a communication system that is digesting dispersed information (Hayek, 1990), reconciles different knowledges and processes them. Markets were social bodies that were doing the calculation long before information networks became interested in processing the bodily and psychological features of people (Mises, 1996). “Order persists and can develop only because millions of minds constantly absorb and modify parts of it” (Hayek, 1998: 157). With the introduction of information

networks Hayek just added that he would substitute the term knowledge with the term information, now that information could be cybernetically managed. The mass self-communication was therefore not a neoliberal opponent but the embodiment of ephemeral mundane knowledge, now theorized as something we could call a “mass-self” made of millions of minds. This “mass-self” was now technologically enhanced and shaped.

Just like the neoliberals are not exclusively on the side of the power of identity or the power of networks, they are not either for the mass self-communication (users) or instrumentalized hypertext (platforms). It is never either/or but always “and”. The possible explanation of Castells’ problem with the neoliberals is not within the network society theory but not enough of it. “Growing up in fascist Spain” (Castells, 2021: 260) focused his view of communication power through authoritarian censorship or hegemonic discourse. Following Nicos Poulantzas, Castells saw knowledge as controlled by the state apparatus that in the network society moved out of the nation state (Carnoy & Castells, 2001). The scientific knowledge belonged to the global Net in a bipolar opposition with a particular, mundane Self-knowledge. The problem was the Net is not just Franco’s regime on a planetary level. It was never information networks subduing social networks but using the products of social networks as algorithmically selected data.

The digital platforms do not produce content like mass media. They offer infrastructure for the mass self-communication. They produce information flows and the content is provided by the users. The so-called “big data” is a social networks’ knowledge processed by information networks. The platforms’ goals are to focus attention, generate alternatives (Simon, 1983: 21), ease discoverability, reduce cognitive bias, improve judgement of bounded human creatures (Mayer-Schönberger & Range, 2018), or, in other words, to design choice architecture for better governance (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). It is not a direct intervention in the social networks but cybernetic treatment through an “aggregate behaviour” (Schelling, 1978: 22). The nobelists such as Thomas Schelling and Herbert Simon (1996: 53) explicitly treat humans as ant colonies, because insect behaviour is “full of patterns and regularities and balanced proportions among different activities” (Schelling, 1978: 21). For neoliberals, hegemony is less a construction and imposition of concrete ideology and more the generation of what Bernard Stiegler (2015) called “systemic stupidity”, that is now networked.

The French Post-structuralists understood this perfectly. In societies of control, computer “tracks each person’s position – licit or illicit – and effects a universal modulation” like “coils of a serpent” (Deleuze, 1992: 7). It is not the culture industry of Horkheimer and Adorno or some massive totalitarian propaganda. The computer is a “dream instrument” for the regulation of knowledge without special ideological purpose but governed by performativity principle (Lyotard, 1984: 67). The most important thing is how aggregates perform within a “logical machine” (Bourdieu, 2000: 96) and then whether “categories of perception and appreciation” can be digitally moulded into the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984: 483). Castells seems aware of this but never ready to acknowledge the role of the digital hypertext. The goal of network management is to “constitute the programmed” (Castells, 2009: 419). Programs “determine the range of possible interfaces... frame the options of what networks can or cannot do” (Castells, 2009: 53). Programs, therefore, frame user experiences. Whether it is market design (Roth, 2015) or social physics (Pentland, 2015), for the neoliberals it is always social networks that work for information networks. In the era of mass media, customized cottages were globally produced and locally distributed. In the information age, cottages are locally produced mass self-communication and globally distributed big data, all controlled by the hypertext meta-language in an ongoing battle between the medium and the message.

3.3. Culture of Real Virtuality vs Public Mind

Following McLuhan, Castells saw the old media as conceptual technologies that embodied a “mental infrastructure for cumulative knowledge-based communication” (Castells, 2010a: 356). Alphabet introduced the social hierarchy between the rational and the illiterate that prevented the full expression of the human mind. This tension between noble and sensorial was resolved by a triumph of the mass media. The symbolic environment was now more interactive, audiovisual, less distanced from reality. Its “flexible, inclusive hypertext” captured most cultural expressions, unified them but allowed for individual symbolic interpretations (Castells, 2000). It was the meta-language that integrated all modalities of communication (Castells, 2010a: 356). But this meta-language followed the meta-social disorder. It was dissolving “a meaningful social system” (Castells, 2010b: 420) into a state of “informed bewilderment”

(Castells, 2010c: 394). The self-centered people, with basic instincts and power drives, created the cultural code of the network society (Castells, 2010b: 420). Their culture should be seen as far from the enlightened, progressive, even sane society.

The culture of real virtuality is a “grand fusion” of multimedia: “it is a system in which reality itself is entirely captured, fully immersed in a virtual image setting, in the world of make believe” (Castells, 2010a: 404). The diversity of messages are integrated into a common cognitive pattern that excluded the traditional holders of symbolic power, such as religion, tradition, morality, even political ideology. This grand fusion called for “grand refus”, the rejection of the Net and reconstruction of new social forms (Castells, 2010b: 167). Social movements and other actors were fighting the dehumanizing process of real virtualization. They believe in the power of mass self-communication and autonomous construction of meaning that will shape the public mind opposed to the postmodern fusion of the media universe. While the culture of real virtuality was bringing the extremes together, trying to commodify the impossible diversity of transcendental and pornographic (Castells, 2010a: 406), ethical and depraved, the public was expected to deliberate in a rational, high quality fashion. The public mind, made of networking individual minds, should build or re-functionalize the contemporary communication networks so they could operate differently (Castells, 2009: 432).

Until then, it was the hegemony of real virtuality that had to be resolved. “Power rules, counterpowers fight. Networks process their contradictory programs” (Castells, 2009: 50). Castells did not explain in detail how networks process all the contradictory cultural materials in order to produce hegemony. For the neoliberals, though, it is a question whether this processing should have a resolution of contradictions as a result? Knowledge, afterall, can be negative, erroneous, biased, unwholesome, explosive, “anything that people think they know” (Machlup, 1980: xiii). This “anything” could be conspiracy theories, all kind of populist post-truth, definitely every crippled epistemology there is (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Neoliberals never intend to find “the optimum optimum, the very best of all possible alternative actions” (Machlup, 1982: 10). They oppose usable knowledge to scientific knowledge. Therefore, the crisis of liberal democracy is the crisis of its knowledge: “the only reliable truth: ‘my truth’, each individual’s truth. The fragmentation...” (Castells, 2019: 21).

The neoliberal background of the culture of real virtuality was based on a deliberate fragmentation and deterioration of the public mind.

We could call it just an entertainment industry and its profit-oriented ideology. Yet, Castells seeks to find more elements that construct the culture of real virtuality. This culture is opposed to the usual view of public media organizations and quality content that represent most of the social groups, hopefully all of them, within a society. The market liberal approach is proposing to do the same – represent all members of the community. By treating them like consumers, their experience is individualized, or customized to a large degree and immersed in a virtual setting. This part of degrading the digital commons and the idea of public mind within a democracy is expected. What is less obvious is how this mixture of contradictory cultural elements, violent, obscene, conservative and sometimes a bit rational, can contribute to the real use of public mind and not just the usual – entertaining ourselves to customized death.

For the neoliberals, culture of real virtuality is not just the coexistence of symbols “without reference to experience” (Castells, 2000: 21). It is the fragmentation of culture and its circularity that is in need of knowledge “reconciliation” by the market that never comes. Deeply opposed to the normative theories that seek to find ways to bring the public opinion to a rational consensus (Habermas, 1989), neoliberals are happy with errors that potentially contain a grain of truth. “In the words of Solomon, ‘To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven’. That which is ordinarily folly, may by exception be wisdom, and vice versa” (Röpke, 1956, pp. 19-20). It is the coexistence of vaxers and antivaxers, heliocentric and geocentric galaxies, and tomorrow maybe humans and dinosaurs. Castells (2009:140) knows that emotions influence human decision-making, but he did not know how to tackle this neoliberal Solomon. This “merging of virtual and real spaces into a new kind of social reality” can be called “deterritorialization” (Penezić & Vasiljević, 2022: 123). It is the market, not the public, that entirely captures the cultural reality and immerses it in a virtual setting.

4. Concluding remarks

The network society is a form of social structure defined as “organizational arrangements of humans in relationships of production/consumption, experience, and power, as expressed in meaningful interaction framed by culture”

(Castells, 2000: 5). Castells' magnificent empirical work explained most of these elements. What is lacking is Castells' explanation what he means by "framed by culture"? In the network society theory it is not always clear what is the role of markets and cultures and what is their mutual relationship to other components of the social structure. In this paper showed that neoliberals use the notions of market and culture within their populist theory of knowledge, and that this creates problems for Castells' theoretical framework. The market is a communication system, an information processor, its evolution is cultural and it integrates the sum of all knowledge, which includes identities, prosumers and technology. In The Information age, Network Society 1.0 focused on the production realm, while in the Communication power it moved to the human symbolic communication of the Network Society 2.0.

Castells finished two of his books in a contradictory fashion. In the Communication Power, the dominant actors wanted to "close the public mind by programming the connection between communication and power" (Castells, 2009: 431). If networking individual minds think differently the networks could operate differently. Castells (2000: 16) lost the sight of "the predominance of social morphology over social action", but more importantly that the notion of networking minds is a fruitful field for neoliberal manipulation. In the Rupture, Castells (2019: 134) envisioned a possibility of "a creative chaos in which we learn to flow with life's current" rather than "conforming to the discipline of yet another order". Whether it is the public mind, power of identity or mass self-communication, it would be a creative chaos within the culture of real virtuality and within neoliberalism. It is the Network Society 3.0 theory that has to tackle the neoliberal doctrine and its notion of knowledge in order to "bury the liars and live among the truth-tellers" (Castells, 2010c: 396).

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**UMREŽENA DRUŠTVA: NEOLIBERALNI MATERIJALI
ZA JEDNU ISTRAŽIVAČKU TEORIJU**

Sažetak: Rad istražuje različito poimanje znanja u informacionom društvu i argumentuje da teorija umreženog društva Manuela Kastelsa treba da bude pozicionirana između koncepata postindustrijskog društva i društva znanja. Kastels se eksplicitno oslanja na konzervativnu definiciju znanja Danijela Bela i odbacuje viđenje Frica Mahlupa. Ovo Kastelsa dovodi u težu situaciju onda kada vrednuje samu socijalnu strukturu umreženog društva. Neoliberalna antinaučna i antiprosvetiteljska definicija znanja dovodi u pitanje fundamentalni sukob Mreže i Sopstva u Kastelsovoj teoriji, odnosno tenziju društvenih i informacionih mreža. Mundano, efemerno znanje običnih ljudi u središtu je neoliberalnog posmatranja tržišta i kulture i u kontrastu je sa poimanjem umreženog društva. Neoliberalna problematika znanja u radu će se analizirati na tri nivoa na kojima Kastels nalazi konflikt informacionih i društvenih mreža: moć identiteta naspram moći komunikacija; masovne samokomunikacije protiv hiperteksta novog metajezika; konačno, kulture stvarne virtualnosti u tenziji sa idejom javnog uma.

Ključne reči: umreženo društvo, informaciono društvo, Manuel Kastels, mediji, znanje.