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Power Relations
in the Network Society.
A Sociological Approach

The concepts of network, networkingness, connectivity, and the network society are nowadays frequently invoked in alternative theoretical approaches.[1] It seems a difficult task to outline a precise theoretical horizon that could provide indisputable epistemological tools to break the civilizational code belonging to the network order. The operational field of the network society is very broad and difficult to operationalize, especially in the social sciences. Information and communication technology does invade the human body, not only in remotely steered spaces. Contemporary societies have been turning into an

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[1] Janusz Golinowski, "Społeczeństwa sieci w warunkach erozji dotychczasowego ładu politycznego i gospodarczego," [Network societies in the conditions of the erosion of current political and economic order], *Transformacje* [Transformations] 1–2, 96–97 (2018), 68–88; Magdalena Szpunar, "Narcystyczna kultura. O kondycji człowieka ponowoczesnego w kulturze zdominowanej przez narcyzm," [A narcissistic culture. On the condition of postmodern man in a culture dominated by narcissism] *Zarządzanie mediami* [Media management] 3 (2020), 183–199; Lech W. Zacher, "Reconfigurations in the World System—Between the Old Driving Forces and New Networks," *Transformacje* [Transformations] 3–4, 78–79 (2013): 182–198.

interactive net of relations reenacted in hybrid realities. The process of networking is defined in universal terms.[2] Networking is becoming a characteristic feature of modern civilization, whose distinguishing mark is the indisputable and multidimensional interconnection of the social and technological worlds. The greatest visionaries of the past decade believed in the power of information and communication technologies, as well as social networks. The practical implications and the theoretical consequences of the scenarios grounded in that belief was the ambition of creating a sustainable and interconnected society driven by technological innovation.

Rapid technological development has also led to the widespread fear of losing control over structures responsible for maintaining social order or natural order of societies.[3] Disruption of the longue durée structures, axiological micro-revolutions, the increased importance of technological principles in social life, the collapse of previously recognized authorities and hierarchies are but a few consequences of the network revolution. There looms a threat of the onset of a mega-cyberpanopticon.[4] Assessing the positives and negatives of the future development of network technologies entails methodological confusion. The semantic key to understanding ongoing social transformations seems to be the notion of multifaceted power relations, which take different forms: social, economic, political, cultural, ecological, and axiological. The concept appears to

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[2] Filipe Wiltgen, "Challenge of Balancing Analog Human (Real Life) with Digital Human (Artificial Life)," *Transformacje* [Transformations] 3, 110 (2021): 17–33.

[3] Shoshana Zuboff, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power." (New York 2019); Evgeny Morozov, "To save everything, click here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism." (New York 2013); J. Hughes, "Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond To The Redesigned Human Of The Future," (Basic Books, 2004).

[4] Alina Betlej, "Peril and Promise of Internet Technology for Future Social Order," *Technology, Society and Sustainability*, ed. Lech W. Zacher (Springer: Cham, Switzerland 2017).

play a special role in disenchanting technically mediated and controlled transformations.[5] This thread of problematic issues is also controversial as it refers to the most elusive and immeasurable plane of studying influences, pressures, domination, surveillance and control.[6] Social analysis does not have adequate tools for cognitive control of the sphere of feedback between non-material powers, which are raised by intuitive argumentation to the role of factors and products of social change.

Questions arise about the role of the humanistic element in the network society and the power of the impact of the technicalized structures on the social world. What potential does the network hold? How do certain power relations emerge and disappear in a network society? Finding the answers is of fundamental importance, as it should facilitate the unmasking of key networked power fields affecting important civilizational processes related to the production of technological and social rules, social patterns, institutionalization of certain standards and procedures of action, and areas of inclusion and exclusion from the dominant networked order. Understanding the essence of these transformations taking place under the influence of powerful hidden forces related to the dynamics of the development of network society will also lead to the foundations of the overarching concept of networkingness.

Network perspective

The concept of the network society, despite its numerous weak points and shortcomings, provides interesting tools for analyzing the social

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[5] Janusz Golinowski, "Polityczność mainstreamowej ekonomii," [The politicality of mainstream economy] *Studia politologiczne* [Politological studies] vol. 37 (2019): 146–173.

[6] Shoshana Zuboff, "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization," *Journal of Information Technology* 30 (2015): 75–89.

world. It is an exceptionally extensive template showing the relations between various types of theoretic reflections. Thinking about the future requires constant references to the categories of the potential for change. Jan van Dijk and Manuel Castells were the first to develop methodologically coherent concepts of a new social formation.[7] Manuel Castells is better known as a sociologist for his famous trilogy on network society theory.[8] His concept includes references to technological, network, digital and media indicators intervening in structural transformations. Castells makes the case for beginning a new historical epoch, characterized by a specific form of network.[9] A society defined as a network can be analyzed by two essential features. The first of these is the ability to reproduce and institutionalize networks.[10] The second feature is its technological mediation and dependence on the operation of network-creating technologies applied in the process of information and knowledge production.[11] In the network society, traditionally understood causality and continuity disappear. The greatest value and at the same time the source of the most significant values is the network itself. Among the main pillars of the network society, Castells mentions production, experience and power.[12]

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[7] Manuel Castells, "Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society," *British Journal of Sociology* no. 1, vol. 51 (2000): 5–24; J. van Dijk, "Network Society. Social Aspects of the New Media." Second edition (London 2006).

[8] Manuel Castells, *Społeczeństwo sieci* [Network Society] (Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN: Warszawa 2010).

[9] Felix Stalder, *Manuel Castells and the Theory of the Network Society* (Polity Press: Oxford 2006).

[10] Manuel Castells, "Introduction to the Workshop: The Promise of Network Theory," *International Journal of Communication* no. 5 (2011): 794–795.

[11] Manuel Castells, *Communication power* (Oxford University Press: Oxford/New York 2009).

[12] Castells, *Społeczeństwo sieci.*

Technology is the element that most strongly influences the dynamism of growth and the productivity of the economy in a translocal dimension. Network technology affects a number of elementary processes such as temporal-spatial compression, deterritorialization, decentralization and control, and social interactivity. The space of flows is crucial for socio-economic development. Deliberate collective action within a specific cultural and biological framework creates new social movements (they seem to be examples of ideal types) which, within the second pillar of experience, influence the transformation of society's values and institutions. In the network society, there is a transformation of power relations.[13] Labelling societies and setting development trends based on the observation of trends in technical progress is not a *novelty* in social thought. Castells, however, happened to capture important perspectives on social changes. In a sense, it must be acknowledged that no other contemporary perspective referring to technical categories is so epistemologically extensive. Considering changes with classes of subjectified processes (digitization, virtualization, networking, hyperconnectivity) opens up space for the analysis of universal, typically human and humanistic issues.

The changes accompanying the network breakthrough are not obvious. Formalized categorization of all intermediary variables and assigning gradual pressure forces to them would resemble classical utopias.[14] The network concept finds its empirical translation into a research strategy for selected, operationalized factors of change. Therefore, limiting the analysis to an arbitrarily limited set of relationships between the performative powers of technology and man operat-

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[13] Alina Betlej, "Non-Knowledge, Risk and Technology in Networked World—towards the Future," *Transformacje* [Transformations] 3–4, 82–83 (2014): 2–17.

[14] Alina Betlej, *Społeczeństwo sieciowe – potencjały zmian i ambiwalentne efekty* [Network society—the potential for changes and ambivalent effects] (Wydawnictwo KUL: Lublin 2019).

ing in the network seems legitimate. Researchers display a somewhat understandable view that the freedom of access to information and online resources is the highest benefit that must be defended.[15] The adopted theoretical point of view will be of key importance in exposing previously undescribed dependencies. Contextual references to the issues of power, control and supervision in social communities occurred during exploration, displaying properties emphasized in the concept under consideration.[16] Pure determinism certainly does not apply to the network analytical grid. The potentials for change are built into morphology, *techne* being at the same time key resources for the entities involved. Network development leads to many structural, hybrid, design, and ideological forms.

Power relations

The effects of the impact exerted by structural, communication, cultural, symbolic and knowledge systems cause changes in the system of local, regional, national, and global powers. This perspective is close to the understanding of power, control, and coercion.[17] Power is much less visible and not always associated with the argument of strength or classic persuasion. The social engineering of these connections is more

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[15] John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* (New York 2017); Marek Chlebuś, "Świat bez władz," [The world without authorities] *Transformacje* [Transformations] no. 1, vol. 108 (2021): 42–85.

[16] Viktorija Aleksejeva et. al., "Analysis of Disparities in the Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the EU countries," *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues* 9 no. 2 (2021), 332–345.

[17] Janusy Golinowski, "Neoliberalny panoptykon biopolityki – pomiędzy ekspansją i społeczną terapią," [The neoliberal panoptikon of biopolitics—between expansion and social therapy] *Teoria polityki* [Theory of politics] No. 5 (2021): 103–126.

subtle and focused on the symbolic transfer.[18] Assigning meanings, constructing and disseminating interpretation schemes, coding communication, and producing new semiotics are inseparable elements of the logical map of the network world. The concept of power is synonymous with the definition of government and is sometimes translated through it. This is particularly visible in the political arena, where old conflicts acquire new meanings. The issues of influence are involuntarily shifted to the considerations of softer areas of impact, which, however, bring severe global consequences. The network perspective has set a certain trend of thinking about the power of the network, which in practice manifests itself differently in individual economic systems.[19] Network technologies should be considered as significant causative factors of change in the general balance of power, which influence the structure of new fields of governing resources.

These areas of influence were previously analyzed by, among others, Michel Foucault.[20] The author did not formulate a systematic theory of power, but he did describe its essential mechanisms. Strategic knowledge about selected fields of power will have a more relational and interpretative character in this concept.[21] There are various kinds of forces in social relations. They result in narrative and ideological social conflicts. Therefore, power is not axiologically neutral. These explorations allow for exposing the civilization forces which destabi-

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[18] Alina Betlej, "Designing Robots for Elderly from the Perspective of Potential End-Users: A Sociological Approach." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (2022), no. 6: 3630.

[19] Brian Alleyne, *Narrative Networks: Storied Approaches in a Digital Age (*Goldsmiths, University of London 2015, SAGE Publications Ltd.); Jamie Bartlett, *The Dark Net: Inside the Digital Underworld* (Brooklyn NY 2016).

[20] Michel Foucault. *Porządek dyskursu* [The order of discourse], transl. M. Kozłowski (Gdańsk 2002).

[21] Michel Foucault, *Nadzorować i karać. Narodziny więzienia* [To oversee and punish. The birth of prison], translated by T. Komendant (Warszawa 1993).

lize the existing social order, leading to its change. Social networks and ties should be treated as special cases of power fields.[22] Invisible forces may be revealed in the process of deconstructing these areas. The subjects and actors of influence are not only people, but also the products of their activities. The area of knowledge is an intriguing example.[23] If rationality is treated as a product of the domination of certain power structures, power relations will become both a powerful source and a controllable net effect. The accusation of tyranny against global discourses also affects technicized spaces.

This relational dimension of power and the manners of its operation seem to prove themselves especially in the network model. Interpreting the process of defining social realities as an example of domination manifesting themselves with different strengths appears in many studies.[24] Social relations are increasingly often cited as examples of new laboratories for the causative forces of change. Their omnipresence and multifaceted nature cause this power to acquire the features of heterogeneity. The synaptic regime of the new power is maximized in fluid structures. How can this area of influence be explored? An analysis of specific social practices should reveal the process of generating power relations in networks. Treating power as a dependency is of key methodological importance because it allows for assuming the importance of the position occupied by actors in a

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[22] Jan van Dijk, *The Deepening Divide: Inequality in the Information Society* (London–New Delhi 2005).

[23] Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope. Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Polity Press: Cambridge MA 2012 b); Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System. Politics and Power* (Oxford 2013).

[24] Włodzimierz Chojnacki, "Elity polityczne w perspektywie logosu, etosu i profesjonalizacji," [Political elites in the perspective of logos, ethos and professionalization] *Transformacje* [Transformations] no. 1, vol. 108 (2021): 116–137; Pavol Dancák, "The Fundamental Issue in Education and the Problem of Responsibility," *Journal of Critical Realism* (2021).

particular balance of power. The key mechanism of the power of relationship will be exclusion.

Potentials for change

So, what is the "regime of truth" like in the network society? Power relations become the fields of generating and constituting the narratives of everyday life. It is in their framework and through their intermediary that social practices, relations and activities are institutionalized. Social exclusion mechanisms are based on creating knowledge about an individual, recording their activity and also on controlling.[25] The multiplicity of the prevailing balance of power and power relations in society makes the task of isolating the center of superior power impossible. Analysis can be only reduced to examining indicated strategic situations. Power cannot be treated as a phenomenon detached from reality *a priori*.[26] In the network approach, the structure (layout, pressure forces, communication) seems to play a special role in the configuration of influences.

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[25] Olga Lavrinenko et al., "Mobile Internet in the EU: Problems and Perspectives," *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues* no. 9, vol. 3 (2022), 369–383; Anna Maj, "Powłoka, ciało i kod jako przedmiot hackingu. Nowe oblicza wyobraźni i kreatywności w dobie UBICOMP," [A covering, the body and code as a subject of hacking. New faces of imagination and creativity in the era of the UBICOMP] *Transformacje* [Transformations] no. 1–2, vol. 104–105 (2020): 188–205; Jan van Dijk, "Digital Divide Research, Achievements and Shortcomings," *Poetics* no. 34 (2006): 221–235.

[26] Natalia Gondek, "Methodological Foundations of the Language of Metaphysics," *Filozofija. Socjologija* no. 33, vol. 3 (2020), 242–249; Pavol Dancák, "Concreteness of Life as the Context of Thinking in the Philosophy of Józef Tischner," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 12 (2016), 2: 213–221; Paweł Gondek, "Subjective Basis for Elucidating Communication in the Personalistic Perspective," *Res Rhetorica* no. 7 vol. 1 (2020): 72–85.

Structural determinisms continue to present themselves as important factors of social change. However, the findings so far lead to the conclusion that the relational dimension (influence) of network systems is an underestimated field of exploration. The explanations of such complex connections are of a metatheoretical character. A systemic-mechanistic strategy is often impossible to implement, and the only thing left is metaphorical reference to the sociological imagination and transferring the research to a sphere located somewhere beyond the limits of current scientific cognition. Regardless of the controversy, intuition suggests that the relations of power accompanying social changes in the hyperconnective era co-format almost every social form. Do technical powers produce new algorithmic codes for the—after all—performative society?

The observed pace of techno-social changes has its social origins. New technologies are provided by technoscience, which has its own creators, researchers, ideologists and entrepreneurs. *Techne* has at its disposal its own knowledge elite functioning in particular political, economic and social contexts. The common production of technology and values associated therewith is a subject to multiple determinisms. The ideology of technical efficiency can be treated as a factor of social change comparable to the creation of a new machine (a computer, a telephone). There are plenty of examples that require a redefinition of the issues of knowledge, awareness and, first of all, education in a society interpreted in such a way. If power is embedded into the essence of modern technology and has the potential to transform the world with every act of its use, social security considerations would speak in favor of technological desertion from an autonomous balance of power. It can be argued that in the network society, the logic of power changes dramatically.[27]

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[27] Jeremy Heimans, Henry Timms, *New Power. Why outsiders are winning, institutions are failing, and how the rest of us can keep up in the age of mass participation* (London 2019).

The conjunctions of influences co-format the processes constituting the symbolic shift of increasingly numerous borders: local, state and national.[28] The research into communication provides interpretative codes. Its impact on the process of imposing the network rules of the game should be subjected to an in-depth consideration. Conversational forms of social activity have an impact on the form of the balance of power. The ability to create particular visions of reality is an essential competence (a human factor, a social factor). In social sciences, an interesting example of the power of interpretation defined in this way is the discourse about technological risk.

According to Castells:

Power is something more than communication and communication is something more than power. However, power is based on the control of communication, just as the foundation of counter-power is to overthrow this control. Mass communication, which potentially reaches all society members, is shaped and governed by power relations rooted in media business and state politics. The power of communication is at the centre of social structures and social dynamics.[29]

The geopolitics of network technologies also covers areas of the world that are often overlooked. Structural gaps begin to function as new sub-group in a hyper-connected worldwide order. The global influence of capitalism is not stable, as demonstrated by the systematically emerging crises.[30] In this technical substrate (treated in a strongly reductionist manner in this analysis), the processes of interaction

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[28] Jan van Dijk, *The Network Society* (third edition, University of Twenty, 2012, SAGE Publication Ltd, 2012).

[29] Castells, *Communication power*, 15.

[30] Marlen Komorowski et al., "Joining the Dots—Understanding the Value Generation of Creative Networks for Sustainability in Local Creative Ecosystems,"

between various factors of social change, which, however, are significant in the framework of global development trends, actually take place. A frequently cited example is the transformation of the nation-state institution. Modifications of state power and business in Castells' concept are treated as the main fields of transformations of the causative power.[31] Networks have the greatest impact on power relations when they decentralize power. The outcome of such impacts is new forms of *dominum*, a sophisticated symbolic violence, the expression of which is the imposition of the semantics of the narrative through privileged networks of knowledge. Technological rules already described are also products of inter-structural friction. A distinguishing feature of the transformation of power relations seems to be the increasing role of flexible structures imposing the rules of the game upon the formal power hierarchies. In new systems, old functions lose the recognized factors of influence, such as state institutions. Exchange processes in the space of flows (information, knowledge, symbolic codes) also transform power potentials.

Manuel Castells states that:

The new power lies in information codes and images of representations around which societies organise their institutions and around which people build their lives and decide about their behaviour. The location of such power is in human minds.[32]

Sustainability 13 (2021): 12352; Alina Betlej, Tomas Kačerauskas, "Urban Creative Sustainability: The Case of Lublin," *Sustainability* 13 (2021): 4072.

[31] Philip N. Howard, *Castells and the Media* (Cambridge 2011); Manuel Castells, *Aftermath: the Cultures of the Economic Crisis* (Oxford University Press: Oxford UK 2012 a).

[32] Manuel Castells, *Siła tożsamości* [The power of identity], trans. by Sebastian Szymański (Warszawa 2008), 384.

The construction of boundaries and the scope of power is therefore of a social nature and takes place within a network. Its features will determine the negotiating form of power, which will take the form of rivalry, conflict, agreeing on interests or cooperation under a symbolic contract. Cultural bridges allow for negotiating meanings between different axionormative orders of networked spaces. "Becoming a society" is possible thanks to the permanent reproduction, reconstruction and confirmation of meanings. Communicative dissonance becomes a source of social conflicts.[33] A change in the power balance results in the breakdown of communication structures, their degradation, as well as potential exclusion. The logic of communication is related to symbolic power. The lack of a sharing culture poses the threat of the domination of global networks devoid of social control. The causative powers have their communication source. New technologies act as information and knowledge agents. The networks of mind and power are in this sense personalized. The ability to shape the human mind is an example of the influence field of performative factors in the network society. This process has a global reach. Communication programming comprises the entirety of human activities.

Conclusions

Media, such as the Internet, play an important role in structuring variable power relations as a source of information. Network power relies to an even greater extent on the control of access to the news and the possibility of creating and distributing messages. Mass communication is shaped by power relations. The network space is subject to control,

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[33] Taylor Owen, *Disruptive power. The Crisis of the State in the Digital Era* (Oxford 2015); Eugenia Siapera, *Understanding New Media* (Dublin 2012).

manipulation, propaganda, and indoctrination. The freedom of the social process of imparting meaning becomes more and more limited. The instrument of communication power is the media which, by means of framing, create narratives of reality. The attribute of power in the network is not only coercion, but also covert symbolic manipulation. The relationships between power and communication are also programmable. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that power relations are of extra-social character. The processes of technological influence, taking into account network properties, are not rooted in objective points of reference. These driving forces have their own non-political meaning. There are no universal, unquestionable centers and sources of power in the network society.

The performativity of new technologies has its functional limitations. Defining technological tools, techno-science, social elites (and so on) as fields of mobilizing the resources of causative forces, leads again to the question of the purposefulness of the development interpreted in such a way, which to an even greater extent begins to resemble the design of society (social, marketing, social engineering, market, organizational) rather than real collectivity. Coordination and organization of social activities in network concepts is "exercised" through defined mechanisms. The normative, narrative and cultural conditions for reproducing the social order are network-mediated. The technologically acquired power relations will therefore cause specific effects in the reconfiguration of the social order. The currently dominant trends are of ambivalent character. They lead to the dispersion of power being at the disposal of various social actors, making the connected world an environment suitable for revealing the causative forces in action. At the opposite extreme, there are deepening tendencies for further centralization and control of network structures. The permanent foundations of the changes which took place in the 20th and 21st centuries are currently under discussion. Power relations still remain an undiscovered field in the exploration of network programs for social development. This theoretical model has

not yet been implemented into an empirical strategy for sociological research. It can be assumed that in the near future, technology valuation will be extended to this area of issues.

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Power Relations in the Network Society. A Sociological Approach

SUMMARY

This paper focuses on the sociological analysis of power relations in terms of the concept of the network society. It starts with a discussion on the network approach and its understanding in social sciences. The author analyzes several mediating notions such as social network, power, structure, language, and collectivity grounded in the sociological approach. Further analysis leads to the discussion of power relations in technologically developed societies. The author searches for answers to many fundamental questions to open up avenues for building a coherent network theory. To achieve these goals, she uses a sociological approach that is based mainly on the criticism of writing and the analytical and synthetic methods.

Keywords: network society, power relations, social network, new technologies

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