
Book Review: New Power: How Power Works in our Hyperconnected World – and How to Make It Work for You

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New Power: How Power Works in our Hyperconnected World – and How to Make It Work for You, by Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms. Toronto, Ontario, 2018, ISBN 978-0345816443

New Power, by co-authors Australian Jeremy Heimans and British/American Henry Timms, is a timely and optimistic book about the possibilities for social and economic transformation offered through digital technologies. The book's focus, though, is not on the technology but on the people and organizations that are using it. *New Power* asserts a boldly-stated belief that human mindsets and behaviours are themselves being transformed by what the authors call "ubiquitous connectivity" or hyperconnectedness. This arises from the ever-widening adoption of the digital technologies that link us: hardware and software that enable us to communicate broadly, rapidly, and yet intimately.

Heimans and Timms argue that this new connectivity creates "new" power: power that is in the hands of the many, not just the few, and that is accessible, participatory, and peer-driven. *New Power* draws out the implications for us. Technology gives us all (or all of us who can access it) ways to participate, to collaborate, to create, and to engage in new forms of community, which can be not only virtual but evolve into actual human connectivity. In a sense, Heimans and Timms are countering the trends foreseen by Robert Putnam, who suggested a long-term erosion of social capital and weaker social cohesion in the United States in his famous study *Bowling Alone* (2000).

Unlike Putnam, Heimans and Timms are practitioners and skilled storytellers, not researchers. Both come out of the non-profit world and draw on their experiences in that world. Timms is the CEO of the 92nd Street Y, a well-known cultural and community centre in New York City. Heimans is the CEO of Purpose, a New York-based organization that builds together social movements around the world. Their combined track record and connections enable them to identify and capture in vivid anecdotes the stories of digitally-driven organizations and movements that have been featured in recent news headlines: Uber and Lyft, Airbnb, Reddit, Kickstarter, BlackLivesMatter, MeToo. Timms himself is the creator (but not the owner as he points out) of Giving Tuesday, the widely copied effort to boost charitable giving. Heimans created GetUp, a new popular movement for progressive politics in Australia. Both authors have direct knowledge of the possibilities for transformation of what they describe as the “new power.”

Essentially, Heimans and Timms are attempting to frame and make sense of what they see as a surge in individual participation or participatory energy, fueled by new tools and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the many other forms of digital connection, service provision, and fundraising for that matter (think of GoFundMe). They are careful to point out that new power is about much more than new tools and technologies. Their book is about “a different approach to the exercise of power, and a different mindset, which can be deployed even as particular tools and platforms go in and out of fashion” (p. 11). They also emphasize that “new” power should not be interpreted normatively; it is not necessarily good, or better than “old” power. Closed and hierarchical old power systems based on expertise are useful in many situations; as Heimans and Timms note, you would not want to have your root canal done by a crowd of amateurs who have crowdsourced their drills and picked up their skills from a post on Reddit. And while Facebook, for example, as a new power platform has many benefits, it can also be seen more truly as a form of “participation farm,” which has fenced and harvested for gain the daily activities of billions.

This being said, Heimans and Timms are optimistic that the rise of new power is shifting people’s norms and beliefs about how the world should work and where they should fit in. In their view, “what is emerging – most visibly among people under thirty . . . – is a new expectation: an inalienable right to participate” (p. 19). They translate this into a propensity to affiliate, although not as Putnam described in the form of signed-up membership in a community group. The affiliation is more individualistic and can be triggered by opportunities for personal action. Heimans and Timms discuss how some organizations built on so-called “old” power models are trying to adapt to these new expectations from their consumers and employees. They focus on the design of participatory opportunities, using examples of long-established organizations. These range from the toy brick company Lego, which saved its business by focusing on Adult Fans of Lego who were engaged as “super participants” in designing new products, to the National Health Service (NHS) of the UK, which is transforming itself using internal change agents to create opportunities for NHS frontline staff to act as opportunistic agents in making change from within.

The book is practice-focused, consistent with the orientation of its authors. Having described the elements of new power, likening it to a current that can be uploaded, distributed and surged, they focus on the ways in which it can be used to spread ideas, build a crowd, and spend, raise, and invest money. The latter is a particularly interesting analysis for the purposes of philanthropy. They suggest that in the new power model, funding skills (whether for business or charity) call on storytelling, personal narrative, crowd mobilization, engaging a community of

affiliated participants, and providing a value to the act of participation itself (not simply an economic transaction). Kickstarter and GoFundMe are examples of new power platforms that engage with people and draw their (transitory) participation very successfully. The response to the Humboldt Broncos tragedy, for example, was a GoFundMe campaign that raised \$15 million. Heimans and Timms acknowledge the risks of these fundraising platforms – how can one be sure that the money raised will be used well or even go to the cause for which it was raised? As they note, “crowdfunding has opened access greatly for people to run their own initiatives and put them to market, it currently lacks any mechanism to ensure that its benefits are evenly shared or efficiently allocated” (p. 136). In many cases, new power is not the answer to the challenge of funding public or community projects. Heimans and Timms quote a law professor whose acid response to the question: what if public infrastructure was funded by the crowd? was “they call it taxes.”

Still, new power can be the right choice in certain circumstances, and Heimans and Timms provide a concise decision tree to help any organization thinking about when and how to use new power. Is it useful to your strategy? How can the involvement of a crowd get you to a better outcome? Do you have legitimacy with the people you are trying to engage? Are you willing to cede some control to the crowd and accept unexpected outcomes? Are you able to sustain the engagement of the crowd and feed its agency over the long term? These are all good questions; Heimans and Timms provide stories and case studies to illustrate how organizations have tried to answer them.

Their discussion of the importance of rapid feedback and opportunities for personal agency to millennials brought up in a world of new power could be applied in the context of philanthropy and grantmaking in interesting ways. Indeed, new power models and thinking are certainly affecting and transforming philanthropy as much as any other domain. Participatory grantmaking is gaining more currency, and this approach is surely an aspect of new power. The possibility of building rapid feedback loops with beneficiaries and grantees; giving agency to the beneficiaries and to the non-profits who support them; bringing multiple voices to the table; designing data collection directly with the owners of the data; and designing projects together rather than at arms length, are all instances of new power thinking and practice, and *New Power* helps us to understand this trend in a broader context.

Heimans and Timms could be criticized for using too many consultant-style charts, favouring anecdotes over analysis and dealing too superficially with the complexities of how social change happens. Nevertheless, these faults are minor. They have produced an innovative, wide-ranging, and entertainingly-written overview of the forces changing our thinking and behaviour in fundamental ways. This is a provocative and informative snapshot of a world in evolution, and a practical guide to navigating successfully through it.