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# ‘New Power is responding to a very natural human impulse’

Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms are entrepreneurs and activists, and authors of the 2018 bestseller *New Power: How Anyone Can Persuade, Mobilize and Succeed in our Chaotic, Connected Age*. Our editor Jon Sutton posed them some questions.

## What is ‘new power’ in a nutshell?

New power is made by many, it is open, participatory and peer-driven. It operates like a current and, like water or electricity, it is most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is to channel it. New power values include a belief in informal governance, opt-in decision making, collaboration, radical transparency, maker culture and short-term affiliation.

Old power is held by few. It is closed, inaccessible, and leader-driven. It operates like a currency. Once gained, it is hoarded and the powerful have a lot of it to spend. Old power values include a belief in formal governance, competition, confidentiality, long-term affiliation and expertise.

**We operate in an arena, in terms of psychology and in particular mental health, which is perhaps all about the acquisition and application of appropriate expertise. What would you say to readers who are wary of new power ideas, perhaps equating it with the Michael Gove sentiment ‘This country has had enough of experts’?**

One of our biggest worries is that forces of misinformation – often propagated using new power tactics – will undermine science, reason and expertise. We’re seeing this on vaccines and climate science, for example. But that’s why we argue that experts can’t rest on their old power laurels – they too must build new power communities and learn how to spread their ideas, not just declare them.

**Interestingly, it’s only in the last couple of years that I’ve started to come across examples of psychologists being much less precious and possessive over their years of training: using it instead to empower others in a broadly ‘psychological approach’, grounded in shared values.**

J: In the context of new power; expertise that creates a distance between the patient and the psychologist potentially inhibits the sort of change and personal development that psychologists are trying to instill in their patients and clients in the first place. So certainly, the goal would be to both hang on to expertise in the sense that evidence-based knowledge remains very

important to this field – but clinging to expertise less and giving agency to others becomes pretty critical.

## **Can you give examples of that, where new power ideas have given agency in order to tackle psychological issues in our society?**

J: The #EndPJParalysis campaign is a good one. UK health workers understood that elderly patients were sedentary and stayed in bed and the less they moved around, the worse their health prospects. To change this, there was a need to create a peer to peer movement. It was tough to dictate a solution from the top down and so a movement that allowed people to creatively develop tactics under this new power movement banner of End PJ Paralysis led to many new ways of keeping those patients out of bed and active. Creating competitive and peer-to-peer dynamics proved far more successful than any of the NHS mandates.

This is a good psychological example of giving people a sense of agency. If people feel like they own it, it’s much more likely to stick. Critically, if the dynamics are spreading sideways and people are embedded in communities, people are more likely to feel like they have the safety, strength and support to change.

Another example might be the Me Too movement, where one person’s testimony made it safer and more possible for the next person to testify. So psychologically, that opened up the ability of similar women who had been in the shadows, who had not been able to publicly discuss their assaults, to have the confidence to come out and tell people just how they were treated.

## **Has new tech and our hyperconnected world been an essential part of that?**

H: New technology is incredibly important, of course. But I think the greater emphasis needs to be on a new set of values and norms. If you think about a 16-year-old growing up today, they have a very different set of expectations about how the world works, about how institutions should behave, around how they engage with the world. A generation or two ago, we used to have very limited role in the wider

society. We could write a letter to a local newspaper; we could try to get our song played on the radio station or we could join a club. Participation was somewhat limited.

Think about a young person today who, from her phone, can become an investor or funder, a creator, a critic, an artist, a student. The tools of participation are literally in our hands. And what institutions often fail to recognise is that they need to design ways for people to have more meaningful experiences. It's not enough to wish the world back to the times when a small number of experts controlled all of the information and all of the pipes. We now need to enter the new power world in a thoughtful way.

You mentioned values and norms there, and it's clear you see New Power as value-neutral in essence... you write that 'The future will be a battle over mobilization. The everyday people, leaders, and organizations who flourish will be those best able to channel the participatory energy of those around them – for the good, for the bad, and for the trivial.' So there are some lovely positive examples of new power at play in the book – LEGO, TED etc. But you also talk about the 'platform strongman', mastering new power techniques to achieve authoritarian ends. On balance, do you still see new power as a force for good?

H: We definitely think new power is a force for good, in the sense that, in general terms, more participation could be a very positive thing. But it's also fair to say that so far, too many bad apples have got their hands on new power – often mastering it before the good apples do.

Partly that 'mastering' is a story about the brain and what sticks in terms of messages – Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional, Stories. You say that 'darker forces often start at an advantage' in those terms?

H: The great advantage is not having to rely upon fact. If you want to spread a message, the more viral, wild, and provocative it is, the better opportunity you have to get heard and get engagement. The nuanced peer-reviewed study that showed that there are two sides to a story and that the jury's out on what might happen next is not something that often goes viral. The response to this, of course, isn't for those on the side of the angels to replicate those tactics – but it does require that we tell stories and build communities around our values, not just expect that the truth will prevail.

How can science/scientists harness these ideas around message appeal to ensure their own messages stick?

J: I think the key thing is that it's not enough just to be right and it's not enough just to have the evidence. You've got to find a way to spread it. I think about vaccines being a great example of this. A leaflet in the doctor's office about the importance of vaccinating

your children won't address both the underlying psychological concerns or fears that might inform the anti-vaccine movement, nor will they be able to compete with the kind of viral person-to-person methods of that movement in the communities they are treating.

The key thing is if you're trying to create and spread messages around science, you've got to be willing to use those principles. So, what's that going to mean in practice? You've got to make an actionable, connected, and extensible campaign.

**Rachel Botsman says we are witnessing one of the biggest trust shifts in history: from the monolithic to the individualized. ... more with the people than with top down elites, experts and authorities. Could 'new power' equally be called 'new trust'?**

J: First thing I'd say is that we love Rachel Botsman's work and it's helped inform our own. The idea that people lack faith in institutions and have increasing faith in each other as sources of expertise and authority is undoubtedly true, but there's another dimension also.

People's psychology in terms of their own expectations about participation is changing. We give the analogy in the book of Minecraft, that kids play Minecraft instead of Tetris. A kid who is learning that they get to shape their own world with others, and they don't have to wait around for an institution to give them orders, do not feel constrained by an institution. That's another key psychological shift because it means that when people are stepping into these situations and relationships with their institutions, they come in with much higher expectations around, 'I get to shape my own world. I'm not going to be relying on institutions and if an institution is going to stifle me, I'm going to look for ways to disintermediate that institution.'

**To what extent is this a generational shift, mobilised by the empathic Gen Z?**

J: I don't think it's helpful to think about this purely in generational terms. I do think that the more familiarity you have and the more immersed you are in these new power models, the more your values are going to be shaped by them. But we see all the new power values show up psychographically and at all ages.

**What key piece of advice would you offer professional societies such as the British Psychological Society, if we're to immerse ourselves in the new power model?**

J: Embrace new power as a means of maintaining the relevance of this profession in a very rapidly changing era. In other words, if there isn't any understanding of the key role that psychologists play in healthy societies and if there aren't psychologists who are actively communicating that, then it will be difficult for psychologists to spread that message within those assignments and build communities of practice among their patients and those they impact. I think you would

likely see a declining relevance of the profession, and I think that would be a real shame.

I think the work here is really spreading the ideas of psychology and building communities around it so that, for example, more people are able to access those services than not.

**I was struck by your example of Dutch news website De Correspondent and its founder Rob Wijnberg. I think that for many years The Psychologist has appreciated that its readers can't just be passive consumers of expert content... we will only thrive if they are active participants in the journalistic process. Our readers are The Psychologist. But putting that theory into practice on a relentless monthly cycle can be a grind for all involved.**

**Why does new power feel so hard?**

J: I think some of it is absolutely true, in that new power involves much more continuous engagement than the kind of intermittent spikes of the old power methods of engagement and communication. What I would say is if it feels hard, it probably means you're not sharing the work and sharing the power. So how can the community of readers really do some of the work of the publication on its behalf? How can you give the reins to them in a way that actually distributes the work, the value, and the content creation in a way that might make that kind of work feel less laborious?

**But can you foresee a backlash against that, against what you call the 'increasing thirst to participate'? As the book progressed I was struck by the extent to which this is about when, and even whether, to turn to new power.**

J: I don't think that the thirst to participate is going to change. I think that this is responding to a very natural human impulse. I think what's going to happen is that everybody is going to have the ability to participate (even if unequally). Everybody will have the means of participation in their hands. When this happens, you're going to get this kind of cacophonous dynamic. You're going to get a kind of environment where everybody has a soapbox, everybody is a preacher, everybody has a following and so it's going to be harder and harder to cut through. And for that reason, you're going to get more extreme voices, more provocative voices, and louder voices who are going to be the only ones that rise above that cacophony. So, the dark side of this ubiquitous participation is that because everybody will have the ability to project their own ideas out into the world, it's going to be harder and harder for universal human values to prevail in a world that may be dominated by loud extremes.

**Presumably this will be bad news for minorities. The section of your book on Obama to Trump is absolutely fascinating, and I hadn't seen Obama's largely wasted legacy set out in such clear terms before.**

J: Donald Trump is an excellent example of someone

who has thrived on these dynamics. His 2016 campaign relied on a decentralised social media army and he has governed with and for that army as president.

This is in stark contrast to Obama who used new power techniques to get elected, but then governed as a traditional president and saw the movement energy he generated dissipate when it came time to elect his successor.

**In the workplace, how would you encourage people to retain faith in new power when all around them they might see old power being rewarded, and new power achievements minimised as other people's successes?**

J: I think we need to change the incentives at the workplace level. I think that the work is to reward the collaborative behaviour rather than the individualistic behaviours in a systematic way. If you think about that example in the book of NASA... what happened in NASA among the people who embraced new power was that the stories of triumph moved from being the story of great individual insight, that story of being alone in the lab

and the apple falls on your head, the Newton dynamic, to the story of someone who figured out some amazing answer to a complex problem by going out to a community of people. That needs to be intentionally celebrated and then I think if that happens, incentives will shift and what you described will happen less often.

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**Which of your own ideas have had the biggest impact on how you live your own lives? For me, I think it's that if you hold power and you are not using that power to empower others around you, you need to take a look at yourself...**

J: I think for me it's the motto that we use in the book, 'It's not a movement unless it moves without you'. I think Henry and I are most proud of the things we've done in that we may have played a role in instigating something that which now moves entirely without us in ways we never expected, and that has multiplied because other people can carry the work forward. That to me is the sign of a movement that has really spread and stuck.



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