

Elad Segev, **Information and Power: Popular and Personal Storytelling in the Digital Age**, New York, NY: Routledge, 2025, 157 pp., \$57.99 (paperback).

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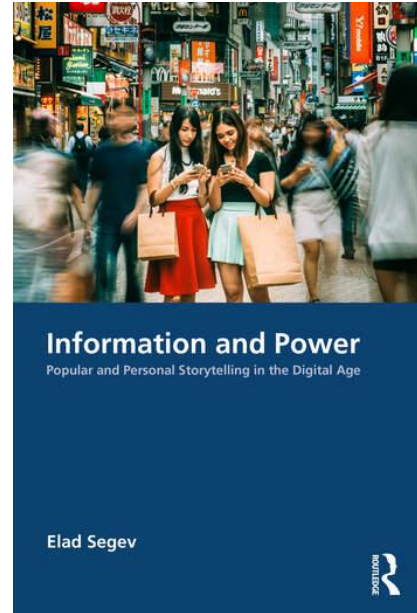
What is power in the digital age? How does it operate, get distributed, and shape our daily lives? How does it produce the problems that define our digital world, and can it be used to solve them?

Elad Segev's **Information and Power: Popular and Personal Storytelling in the Digital Age** addresses these major questions through the lens of storytelling. Segev defines power as the ability to fulfill one's needs and desires, and argues that storytelling is what transforms information into power. The book's central contribution is the novel popular and personal storytelling framework, which interprets how power operates across levels, from the personal and local to the national and global, and reexamines the relationship between information and power by running through the hot-button issues we care about today.

The framework has two components. At the popular level, storytelling is the collective force that binds people into a shared story; at the personal level, it is the individuating force that lets each of us be unique and distinct. Segev's view of popular-level power aligns with Harari (2024), for whom the flow of information is the power that builds large human networks and shapes history. What Segev adds is convertibility: Storytelling is powerful because it can change one form of power into another. For example, influencers can turn stories into followers, followers into money, and money into political influence. Similarly, a single story can be scaled into a national history that imprints itself on every citizen's memory, identity, and even ideology.

The two components complete and compete with each other; neither can stand alone, and the balance between them determines social outcomes. When popularization dominates, it produces homogeneity and conformity; when personalization dominates, it produces heterogeneity; when the two are roughly balanced, distinctive social groups emerge. Currently, both the stories that bind us and the ones through which we express ourselves have been overtaken by the same commercial logic. It is this dominance of commercial logic, and the resulting imbalance between the popular and the personal, that underlies much of the inequality, polarization, and conflict the book sets out to explain.

One of the most interesting parts of the book is that, in chapter 2, the author borrows the biblical "Ten Commandments" to coin a new term, the "Tech Commandments," to examine how the rules and practices of people living in mediated spaces differ from those of earlier eras. The biblical commandments



embody popularization, one universal God whom everyone must believe in, and so place God at the absolute center while downplaying the individual “you.” The Tech Commandments invert this: They elevate personalization, putting “You” at the center so that everything technological seems to revolve around “You.”

Technology appears to make us more powerful by offering so many affordances. It personalizes our experience so that we mostly encounter what we like or agree with; it encourages self-expression so that we constantly broadcast our private lives and inner thoughts. However, Segev notes that the “power” we are granted is the “free labor” for these technologies to generate the “big data” they can monetize. The more “power” technology promises us, the more popularizing power it quietly accumulates by pushing a dominant narrative—a capitalist narrative. Millions of personal stories converge into the hands of a few. That “few” includes the tech companies that formulate and enforce the rules, and the influential users who have mastered the rules of the game to win large followings.

Chapter 3 dives deeper into how the capitalist narrative operates as the power that influences us at both the personal and the popular levels. At the personal level, we are almost transparent before these technologies, as the “Big Brothers” are always watching: We have no privacy, and we are now even asked to pay to get our privacy back. At the popular level, the web promises to democratize the online world, yet the algorithm prioritizes the most-linked pages and buries the rest. As the capitalist narrative is embedded in these algorithms, whether intentionally or not, the values it carries are reinforced both by the technology and by the millions who use it; in turn, people’s own values are influenced or replaced by these commercial ones (Mager, 2012; Winner, 2017). Everything posted online becomes commodified, including our beauty and our happiness.

Segev argues that the capitalist narrative spreads worldwide due to the global dominance of American technology and soft power. To resist American influence, some countries, such as China, Russia, and North Korea, preserve their own narratives through strict censorship, sharing a common outline: an external threat and a call for unity within. This “us versus them” narrative, Segev notes, is also favored by populist leaders, who split the world into a virtuous “us” and a malicious “them.” But the tension between popular and personal power is hard to manage: Popularization breeds conformity yet also authoritarian control, while personalization cultivates diversity yet also fragmentation.

How should we respond to a world driven by the capitalist narrative? The author proposes two values, both centered on decentering the self: modesty and trust. Cultivating modesty means resisting the culture of excessive consumption and the habit of being preoccupied with ourselves. We need to recognize that our personal stories and identities are not one-dimensional, defined only by the products we can afford, but multilayered, drawn from the different collective popular stories we belong to. Leaders, too, can be made more modest by limiting their salaries and their power. And at the macrolevel, countries should be modest about portraying themselves as the heroes of history and should welcome other nations’ perspectives on the past. When we become modest, we can begin to care for others—listening to other people’s stories and trusting them, becoming less self-interested and more committed to rebuilding a healthier shared environment.

If modesty repairs our personal stories, trust is what restores the popular ones we share. Meaningful popular stories need leaders and role models we can believe in, yet the author argues that most of today's leaders are self-interested opportunists, part of why our information environment has grown so toxic and rife with mistrust. Restoring it calls for working in two directions at once: education from the bottom up, which teaches reliability, truth, and mutual respect as core values, and regulation, institutions, and algorithm design from the top down.

Segev's popular and personal storytelling framework works so well that it neatly encapsulates how power operates and is distributed in today's technology-driven world. It elegantly explains, from the bottom up, how individual storytelling can grow into broad influence, and, from the top down, how popular storytelling trickles down into each person's decisions. Yet the very efficiency of the framework as a tool for *examining and interpreting* problems at the micro and macro levels does not carry over to *solving* them. These solutions, that we should be more modest, that leaders should cap their salaries, and that nations should be humbler about their history, amount to asking the few in power to voluntarily relinquish the very advantages they have spent decades accumulating.

The root problem with this solution is that Segev's remedy ultimately asks people, companies, and nations to regulate themselves to resist not only their own self-interest but, probably, their entire incentive environment. Modesty amounts to unilateral disarmament: If I post and self-promote less while others do not, I lose status and visibility while arrogance is rewarded. The same logic scales up: If my company refrains from lobbying politicians for an advantage while competitors keep doing so, the resources flow to them, and in the end, my company goes bankrupt. Segev does anticipate part of this, which is why he pairs bottom-up modesty with top-down regulation, capping the salaries of the powerful, separating economic from political power, and tightening laws on lobbying and data. Regulation is, in principle, the mechanism that imposes restraint on everyone at once. Yet the regulatory half runs into the same wall, because it is written and enforced by the same powerful actors, and it tends to preserve the existing order rather than change it. His own network theory points the same way: Scale-free networks with a few dominant hubs are more stable than flat ones, implying that concentrated power is a durable equilibrium rather than a vice that either modesty or lagging regulation can dissolve.

For these reasons, a regulated or mixed capitalism may be the least-bad feasible arrangement rather than a just one, which is close to where Segev himself lands when he calls for combining socialist and capitalist principles "in a certain balance" (p. 137). This does not make his solution useless: At the individual level, cultivating more modesty and trust remains worthwhile. But it is best understood as a personal ethic, not a mechanism capable of redistributing power.

References

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