Text Messaging in Social Protests

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ABSTRACT

This entry gives a general overview of the roles of mobile phone in initiating and mobilizing social protests. It is argued that text messaging had been used to mobilize civil engagement and protests ever before the prevalence of modern social media. Drawing from different social and political contexts, this entry also shows that text messaging has been used by protesters alongside Twitter and Facebook to achieve significant political change. It further chronicles major research literature in political protests and social media studies. The entry proposes further research directions on how true it is that texting and social media do indeed achieve realistic political change, giving different sociopolitical contexts and unique situations of protesters. It examines the argument against cyber utopianism that contends that the assumed emancipatory roles of social media and text messaging can be misleading.

INTRODUCTION

Text Messaging (or Texting) refers to the common practice of typing messages on mobile phone key pads, and the sending of such messages between mobile phones using the Short Message Service (SMS). The term, ‘SMS’ is often used to describe both the medium and the message. Text messaging has become one of the most preferred digital media platforms, not only for the exchange of information and social interaction/networking by users but also for larger socio-economic and political uses such as commerce, political campaigning and banking among others. According to Informa, about 5.9 trillion text messages were sent worldwide in 2011 and it was projected that this number would increase to about 9.4 trillion in 2016. Pew Research Center in a 2011 survey shows that 83% American adults own cell phones and about 73% of them send and receive text messages. Also in the U.K, 92% of adults personally own and use mobile phones. And given the prevalence of mobile telephony in the world today it is not surprising therefore that very high number of users rely on their mobile phones for all forms of communication and information, including information that relates to planned protests, whether for peaceful demonstrations or criminal activities (Sheid, 2013).

Social protest is defined here, as the expression of radical opinions through (strong) language and other forms of social behaviour that rejects or resists certain government policies, or the existing sociopolitical structures by mass protesters, individual activists, civil rights organization or protest movements. Protest behaviours vary depending on the motive and the
degree of participation. Hence, there is a peaceful protest that involves group/mass protesters in a protest march. In this case, protesters generally carry placards with protest messages. Protest movements also sometimes wear T-shirts with protest messages inscribed on them (see Chiluwa & Ajiboye, forthcoming). Protest behaviours also include industrial actions involving labour/trade unions, where members deliberately stay away from work. Hunger strikes have also been engaged by individual protesters. Other forms of protests include ‘occupying’ some particular city spots or centres such as those carried out by ‘occupy movements.’ Sometimes, protests turn violent, such as deliberate civil disobedience and riots involving direct confrontations with security agents and vandalism of public property. Such collective actions and social movements participating at the same time are triggered by the need to achieve change, or ‘revolution’ that is believed to be desperately needed either gradually or immediately or spontaneously (see Chiluwa, 2012). In recent times mass protests have enabled protesters to express their grievances over perceived deprivation, frustration, injustice or violation of fundamental human rights by governments or constituted authorities (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010).

OVERVIEW

The spread of social/political protests around the world in recent times has been attributed to the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). People who are concerned about political events and developments in their countries are radically responding and mobilizing against the erstwhile oppressive regimes and demanding for sociopolitical change (Smith 2010). According to Garret (2010) social media and ICTs such as Twitter and Facebook are currently changing the ways in which activists communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate. And text messaging has played important roles alongside these other social media, sometime earning government ban. Though these protests respond to very different socio-political and economic circumstances, they share the same social features (Gonzalez-Bailon et al, 2011).

Social media use in protests is a modern (new) development; this also suggests that research literature in this field is still emerging. Studies on social media roles in contemporary mass protests have centered on Facebook and Twitter, while mobile phone use has not been explicitly documented. However, before the current overwhelming popularity of Facebook and Twitter in the organization and implementation of offline protests, text messaging via mobile phones had been used to champion revolutionary actions (Hong, 2006). For instance, Ahrens (2001) had observed that cell-phone was used to coordinate the protest against the World Bank, by American University activists in 2000, and concluded that mobile phone is a weapon in the hands of the mobilizing people seeking social justice. Obadare (2005) also documented the GSM boycott in Nigeria in 2005 that forced mobile phone operators to ‘vigorously renew their commitment to corporate social responsibility’ (p.24).

The story of mobile phones in protest planning and implementation by activists ranges from the success of coordinated ‘flash mobbing’ to ‘txtmobbing’ and ‘swarming.’ A ‘flash mob’ is defined in terms of a group of people brought together often by text messages or social media to a designated location at a particular time to perform an indicated action before dispersing;
thus, texting and media technology enable flash mobbers/protesters to instantaneously communicate with one other and are empowered to immediately change venue such as train stations, parks, town squares, and in some cases challenge or evade authorities (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Similarly, a TXTmob, which was developed in collaboration with protest organizers, and has been applied by widespread adoption of SMS-enabled cell phones among activists and by evolutions in protest tactics, facilitated new social formations and modes of participation (Hirsch & Henry, 2005:1455). Texting has also been instrumental for coordinating ‘smart mobs’ (Rheingold, 2002) or swarming. The latter, which is recognized as a tactic of mobilizing actions by decentralized groups, is used in military parlance to describe a ‘dispersion of command among many small, autonomous units that are able to collectively attack an enemy from all directions’ (Hirsch & Henry, ibid). This method was used to describe the June 18 (J18) actions that occurred around the world, which also paralyzed central London in 1999, as well as the demonstrations that shut down a World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle in the same year (see Hirsch & Henry, 2005). Text messaging appeared as an ideal medium to coordinate these types of protests since cell phones are common and users would not immediately be identified as members of protest movements. Widespread cell phone use also meant that the protest networks could be expanded by thousands of activities without requiring the purchase of expensive radio technology. SMS is a technology that is widely adopted by many social sectors and relies on vibrant networks that are controlled by large companies (ibid).

In addition to texting, few studies have documented the use of Blackberry Instant Messaging (an extended system of mobile phone technology) in protests. Reporting the north London riots of 2011, Halliday (2011) notes that Blackberry handsets was used by about 37% of British teenagers. Blackberry Messenger (BBM) enables users to send one-to-many messages to their network contacts, who are connected by ‘BBM PINS.’ Unlike Facebook or Twitter, many BBM messages are not traceable by the authorities making BBM the most preferable by teens to spread gossip and mobilize for civil unrests. In the London protests for example, protesters had first gathered on Facebook with more than 7,500 fans to mourn and vow to avenge the murder of a Tottenham resident (Mark Duggan) and by 10.30 pm on Saturday (August 6), protesters had thronged the Tottenham High Road in a first public show of protest; this turned into a full blown uprising with widespread rioting and looting. Sheid (2013) further adds that BBM allows users to send free messages to individuals and to all their contacts simultaneously; the belief remained that individuals were using the BlackBerry as a tool for coordinating activity, allowing rioters and looters to stay one step ahead of the police. This had warranted the call for the suspension of BBM by a Member of Parliament for Tottenham who identified BBM as ‘the reason that criminals were outfoxing the police force, noting that encryption prevented access for the police’ (p.176).

OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO SMS IN SOCIAL PROTESTS

Recognizing the importance of information sharing during protests and the danger inherent in some actions considered as unlawful, some governments, the police and security agents have attempted to disrupt communication networks by interfering with activist mobile technology based media and by arresting activist group members. Two men, for instance were arrested
and charged for sending mobile text messages and using social media sites to recruit people for ‘violent’ demonstrations in Sidney in September, 2012. The man was accused of planning an anti-Islamic protest and had sent texts and online messages to incite members of the public to participate in a Sidney protest and commit acts of violence (Ralston, 2012). Chittum (2013) similarly reports the case of the ‘temporal’ interruption of mobile wireless service at train stations in San Francisco in 2011 by the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) after they suspected a flash mob protest following the killing of a man by the BART police. The action was intended to prevent protesters from taking advantage of mobile communication devices to coordinate surprise demonstrations. This tactics drew criticisms from several commentators who compared BART actions to what was typical of Middle East despots. Most people wondered whether interference with cell phone service does not amount to an unconstitutional infringement on citizens’ rights to free speech. Lackert (2013) agreed that while the BART station shutdown was proper to protect public order, the unilateral action raised significant legal questions as to whether this was authorized under the US telecommunications law relating to passengers’ right to access telephone networks and the legality of a shutdown by a quasi-governmental authority (p. 577).

Hence, smartphones and social networking platforms have been recognized globally as having heightened the provision of greater capability of people to organize and implement protests quickly via text, Twitter, and Facebook and non-Internet based cell phones. Countries where the Internet was shut down, as in Egypt, the only means of communication was through the existing telephone systems; this service was not easily or centrally controlled by Internet servers. This is why governments and institutions across the political spectrum have become alarmed at this development, and have struggled to give varying weights to public expression in relation to public order.

**CURRENT SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE**

The first major work that articulates mobile phone’s collective actions is by Dr. Howard Rheingold, an expert and leading researcher in digital media at the University of California, Berkeley. His book: *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002) is an important and comprehensive account of mobile phone use in contemporary activism. Rheingold explores the growing importance of ‘smart mobs’ (also referred to as ‘mobile ad hoc networks’) in collective action. Citing the cases of the WTO (anti-globalization) protests in Seattle in 1999, and the ‘people power 11’ protests in the Philippines that ousted Joseph Estrada in 2011, he suggests that the prevalence of smart phone and its influence is indeed responding to peoples’ need of cooperation amplified by ICTs (see also Mater, 2004; Monterde and Postill, 2013). Similarly, Dr. Clay Shirky, another expert in New Media at the New York University has in his landmark publication: *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (2008), establishes the potentials of mobile technologies for collective action arguing that they promote the rise of new forms of mass action by reducing the users’ investment in time and money (see also Garret, 2006).

Monterde & Postill (2013) gives interesting insights to the uses of mobile phones for social protests by Spain’s indignados, where text messages gave the Spaniards an ‘an alternative
information channel’ to the mainstream media, and like in Philippines, protesters ‘passed on’
text messages that resulted in ‘unstoppable snowball effect,’ (p.3). Jan H. Pierskalla at the
German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and Florian M. Hollenback at Duke
University (2013) examine the roles of technology and collective action and the effect of cell
phone coverage on political violence in Africa and argue that the spread of cell phone
technology across Africa has transforming effects on the economic and political sphere of the
continent; and that the availability of cell phones allows political groups to overcome
collective action problems more easily and improve in-group cooperation and coordination
(p.1). A recent research has also tested the possible impact of mobile phones on voter
information and participation, as well as its possible impact on fighting electoral fraud and
corruption (Aker, Collier, and Vincente 2011; Bailard 2009).

As social protests multiply with the current upsurge of demonstrations in the Arab world and
western liberal democracies following financial crises and changes in welfare policies, more
interesting studies are emerging with important findings on the effective roles of mobile
telephony and web 2.0 in the protests. Kavanaugh et al (2011) for instance, give important
insights to the functions of text messages in the Iran, Tunisian and Egyptian revolutionary
protests, where SMS messages were not completely shut down (as in Iran 2006), because
subscribers could easily be identified and possibly arrested. In Egypt, it was not technically
difficult to disrupt mobile phone service as the Egyptian government did in one of the days
of the protests; they simply ordered the Egyptian operator (ECMS) to shut off service, especially
in the main demonstration areas of Cairo and Alexandria. Mobile phone signals were patchy
and text messages inoperative (p.9). Tufekci & Wilson (2012) further provide quantitative
documentation of the role of texting in information gathering and discussions of the Egyptian
protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak. According to the study, about 82% of respondents used
mobile phones to communicate about the protests in Egypt, with 62% texting; while 51% used
Facebook. It further demonstrates that events in North Africa and the Arab world are being
shaped by a new system of political communication which sets into sharp relief the
importance of digitally mediated interpersonal communication, characterized by the
increasingly interrelated use of satellite television, social media platforms and the widespread
use of Internet-enabled cellphones capable of transmitting photos and video (p.375). This
study further illustrates how elements of this system contributed to lowering the costs of
initiating and coordinating collective action to topple longstanding repressive regimes. It
concludes that the high degree of adoption of digital communication in digital activism,
illustrates how citizens overcome the potential risks of online activism in authoritarian
regimes (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

Ever before the Egyptian uprising, Sean Jacobs and Diana Duarte writing for Afronline news
had reported the ‘bread riots,’ in Mozambique chronicling the power of SMS. According to
the report, residents of the capital, Maputo, took to the streets having been prompted by text
messages that told them to ‘enjoy the great day of the strike’ and to ‘protest the increase in
energy, water, mini-bus taxi and bread prices.’ The government had insisted that the increases
in price were not reversible. But days later, under pressure from rapidly SMS-organized
protests, the government reconsidered their position and the old bread prices returned. And as
a sign of its impact, the government, allegedly ordered cell phone service providers to briefly suspend text messaging for its users. Journalists that covered the protests as well as comments on social media were surprised at the power of SMS in a small African country where twice as many Mozambicans have cell phones as they have access to electricity. Opinion speculated about expanded opportunities for political engagement in developing countries (Jacobs & Duarte (2010:1).

Similarly the ‘occupy Nigeria’ protests of January, 2012 was organized and implemented largely by the adoption of social media and text-messaging. The study concludes that with the growing Internet literacy and common use of mobile phones in Nigeria, many youths have also been increasingly aggressive in the use of social media and mobile telephony to engage in sociopolitical debates and critique government actions. Moreover, there is no ruling out the possibility that many Nigerian online activists are gradually more in touch with their counterparts in North Africa or elsewhere (Chiluwa, forthcoming).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas in their very popular and insightful book: Open Networks, Closed Regimes (2003) re-examine the use of the Internet and ICT-based communications in social protests, and argue that the impact of social media and mobile phones towards effecting political change has actually been exaggerated. Based on an empirical assessment of evidence from China, Cuba, Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, they contend that the Internet is indeed not a threat to authoritarian regimes. According to Morodov (2011) the assumed emancipator potential of new media technologies in social protests, actually strengthens the surveillance capabilities of repressive regimes. Shirky (2011) also doubts the effectiveness of information technology in organizing protests and argues that repressive governments are becoming better users of electronic tools to suppress dissents. These and a few other studies have brought to the fore the question: ‘does the internet and mobile telephony really achieve any significant political change?’ In my opinion, this question should further provide future directions in research on the role of modern ICTs in sociopolitical change.

In his epoch-making work: The Net Delusion: the Dark Side of Internet Freedom (2011), Evgeny Morodov – a visiting scholar at Stanford University, and a Schwartz fellow at the New America Foundation, argues that ‘cyber utopia’ (i.e. the assumption that the Internet is liberator of the masses), is erroneous, because it leads to a conclusion that texting and social media can be used to bring down authoritarian governments and advance democracy. He advises that rather, the American people should shun their belief in cyber utopianism and acknowledge the downsie of online communications. He believes that the public should come to terms with ‘net delusions’ and implement a policy of cyber realism in order to achieve their political goals. While acknowledging the positive impact of social media in facilitating mobilization by reducing barriers to collective action, Bridwell (2013) further argues that online-based actions and mobilizations can work in non-democratic regimes. Hence, the advantages of social media and ICTs are especially suited to mobilizing in non-
democracies. ‘In a democracy, the particular advantages of social media are more redundant, even if its tools offer improvements for mobilizers. Moreover, the negative qualities of social media cited by skeptics are more likely to hold in a democratic context’ (p.3). Factors such as how gender and economics can affect access to new technologies should also be taken into consideration in assessing the utility of social media in protests (Christensen, 2011).

Arguably, texting and social media have been instrumental in mobilizing protesters and effecting political change in places like Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. But the results are different in Bahrain, Syria, Turkey and Ukraine. In the Nigerian fuel subsidy protests, the protests failed to achieve their purpose because demonstrators were divided along ethnic lines. Some protesters also pledged their loyalty to different political parties; thus, while protesters were mobilized by the new ICTs, the offline protesters were not united in purpose. Citing the uprisings in Iran and Bangkok, Shirky (2011) also notes that the June 2009 protests by the Green Movement in Iran were a failure because, while the activists used every possible technology available to them to coordinate the protest against electoral misconduct, they were dispersed by a violent government crackdown. The Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010 was similarly dealt with by the Thai government although protesters were well mobilized with the help of the social media. Many of the protesters even lost their lives.

It is important therefore that researchers should take a more cursory look at different political contexts and some unique nature of protests in order to properly assess the impact of the Internet and mobile telephone in social change.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


**KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS**

**Texting:** The act of composing and sending a short electronic message (maximum of 160 words) between two or more mobile phones. A sender of a text message is referred to as a **texter.**

**Protest:** The expression of objection by protesters through words or actions or other forms of social behaviour that rejects or resists certain government policies, or the existing sociopolitical structures.

**Protester:** Someone engaged in a protest.

**Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC):** Communication that takes place through the use of electronic devices, usually by individuals who are connected either online or a network connection using social software and interact with each other via separate computers.

**Mobile Technology:** Technology used for cellular communications.

**Mobile phone (or cell phone):** A device that can make and receive telephone calls over a radio link, while moving around a wide geographical area. This is possible by connecting to a cellular network provided by a mobile phone operator, allowing access to the public telephone network (see *Wikipedia, 2013*)

**Social Media:** The interaction among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (see Ahlqvist et al 2008); or ‘a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of *Web 2.0* and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (see Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).