

## **Politics and Social Change**



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The use of mobile media to incite and organize collective action is only in its infancy. The following unsystematic survey of published reports and personal communication is intended to suggest how broadly today's earliest forms of mobile phone-assisted collective action are enabling people to effect significant political changes. As both the enabling technologies and the literacies that grow around their use in the political sphere evolve further, the first manifestations noted here might portend more radical phenomena to come. I call this survey unsystematic because of the way I have collected various news reports of political smart-mobbing tactics. As far as I know, no exhaustive inventory of such events has been compiled. Such an inventory would be useful. I offer little political context—commentators such as Rafael have noted that the Philippine People Power II, with its much-remarked use of SMS organizing, did not result in revolutionary political change; what is notable is the way in which the Philippine protests were organized. And of course an inventory of news reports is at best a good pointer to an emergent social phenomenon that requires more systematic data collection and analysis to yield supportable assertions.

Communication media, literacies, and political governance have coevolved for millennia. Much has been written about the role of print and literacy in the emergence of the democratic public sphere. A rich literature has grown around the role of the printing press in the Protestant Reformation and the emergence of constitutional democracies. Communication technologies and literacies possess a power that has, on many occasions, proven mightier than physical weaponry—the potential to amplify, leverage, transform, and shift political power by enabling people to persuade and inform the thoughts and beliefs of others.

The same technologies and literacies can also organize, plan, and coordinate direct political actions—elections, demonstrations, insurrections. It may also be the case that they can be used to stifle, misdirect, and demoralize those who would otherwise be involved in these activities. The power to persuade and communicate, joined with the power to organize and coordinate, multiplied by the two billion mobile telephones in the world today poses a disruptive political potential that could equal or surpass that

of the printing press, landline telephone, television, or the Internet. But the possibility of neutralizing this potential is also evident from the countermeasures that political and law enforcement authorities have deployed in response to smart-mob tactics.

Just as people have used alphabets and computers in both socially beneficial and socially destructive ways, mobile devices are being used to keep elections honest, to self-organize peaceful political demonstrations, and to provide disaster relief services—and the same technologies and practices are also used to commit crimes, coordinate terrorist attacks, and summon people to riots. This survey concentrates on forms of collective action in the political sphere that have been instigated and abetted via mobile telephone—elections, demonstrations, and riots. While the uses of mobile communication to foster governmental political objectives or to blunt or counter the actions of opposition or nongovernmental groups are also an important topic, they largely fall outside the scope of the phenomena I analyze in this chapter, which focuses on collective action by citizens.

### **Electoral Smart Mobbing**

The rapid diffusion of mobile telephones since the 1990s, the sudden emergence of SMS as a ubiquitous form of messaging, and the increasing interconnection between mobile phones and the Internet have made it possible for people to coordinate and organize political collective action with people they were not able to organize before, in places they weren't able to organize before, and at a speed they weren't able to muster before. This coordinating function has affected daily life in the form of what Ling calls "hyper-coordination" and what I call "smart mobs" (Ling and Yttri 2001; Rheingold 2002).

The role of mobile media in organizing political collective action has manifested worldwide in coordinating street demonstrations (which, in the Philippines and Spain some have asserted contributed directly to the downfall of regimes), monitoring elections, and augmenting get-out-the vote campaigns in Ghana and Korea. The use of mobile telephony and SMS, both by themselves and in coordination with Internet tools such as Listservs, blogs, meetup.com, and online fund-raising, is still young, but has had significant impacts in (at least) Ghana, Hungary, Italy, Kenya, Korea, Kuwait, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Spain, and the United States.

In Africa, cell phones have been used in two notable recent instances to combat election fraud, and as political organizing tools. During a panel discussion I attended at the 2004 O'Reilly Emerging Technologies conference, Ethan Zuckerman, founder of Geekcorps, claimed (perhaps sarcastically) that the last Ghana election "went considerably more smoothly than the last US national election due to the use of cellphones and radio to report voting fraud" (Zuckerman 2004). This was because people at polling places used their mobiles to report fraud accusations to local radio stations, which

would then air the accusation. Zuckerman said the police were then forced by the pressure of public opinion to investigate since they no longer had the excuse that they had not received reports (Zuckerman 2004).

Fear of fraud was a motivation for the use of mobile phones in other African elections. One commentator, Bill Kagai, said just after the 2002 Kenyan elections that mobile phones contributed not only to high voter turnout but also to the legitimacy of results. Mobile phones gave enhanced transparency of process, campaign effectiveness, and reduction of fraud (Kagai 2002).

Political groups developed cell phone number databases allowing people to contact each other and those at the polling stations to call for support when needed. Campaigns made use of short messaging services and election results were disseminated as soon as they were counted, even in the most remote areas. (Kagai 2002)

Ebba Kalondo (2005) describes how mobile phones also played a role in Kenya's 2004 elections. He notes that SMS was used by Kenya's electoral commission as well as local media to distribute news about polling. He also notes that voters used mobile phones to monitor the voting in more remote areas. Local radio stations even fielded callers who alerted the listening audience to "the level of traffic at polling stations" (Kalondo 2005).

In Hungary, SMS became a political propaganda tool during recent elections. Miklós Sükösd, associate professor at the Department of Political Science at Central European University, and Endre Dányi, sociologist, editor in chief of eDemocracy Newsletter, and member of the eDemocracy Association in Hungary, documented the wide-scale use of SMS and e-mail in the 2002 Hungarian election campaign:

In a country of 10 million, where ca. 53% of the population has mobile phones and 15% are Internet users, millions of political mobile text messages . . . and e-mails were exchanged by party supporters. (Daily SMS traffic has increased 20–30%, i.e., by ca. 1 million messages between the two rounds of the elections.) (Dányi and Sükösd 2003)

In Italy, the 2004 election was complicated by the fact that the incumbent prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, was also the country's largest media owner. One reader of the Smart Mobs blog, David Ture, wrote me about a horizontal SMS campaign for Berlusconi's party: "The 'SMS' (Sostieni Molto Silvio) campaign asks people to send one (or more) of eleven prepared SMS messages containing promotional sentences to five friends." Another Italian reader of the Smart Mobs blog, Bernardo Parella, commented that the night before the election,

many users of major carriers (such as tim and Vodafone) received an SMS inviting them to go to vote. . . . no slogans or other stuff, but it was an indirect support campaign for Berlusconi, since the messages were officially signed by the prime minister office, making them appear as a sort of "public service."

Yet another Smart Mobs blog reader living in Rome, Sepp Hasselberger, reported that shortly after the election results came in, and Berlusconi's side had suffered a reversal, a "grass root" mocking SMS appeared: "Hello, I am Silvio Berlusconi, next time no way that I will tell you when you should go and vote."

The Korean presidential election of 2002 was a watershed for smart-mob tactics in an electoral campaign; many have claimed that the use of Internet and SMS technology enabled an underdog candidate's followers to tip the election in his favor. Jean K. Min, an editor for the Korean citizen-journalism site OhMyNews, wrote me an e-mail in response to a query about the election. Min explained that the traditional Korean newspapers, three of which dominate more than 70 percent of the Korean news market, exhibit a strong conservative bent. As a progressive candidate, Roh Moo-Hyun was "ferociously" opposed by the establishment media. Younger Koreans, however, favored OhMyNews—an online newspaper with professional editors and an army of thousands of volunteer citizen reporters. Roh, already trailing in the polls, suffered a shocking political blow when his campaign partner withdrew support on the eve of election day. Min wrote, "The sudden news got circulated quickly throughout the thousands of internet cafes, bulletin boards and other political webzines such as seoprise.com, where hundreds of thousands of anxious netizens were staying overnight watching the developing situation." Another storm of SMS and e-mails from Roh's supporters followed news that Roh was trailing his opponent in the early exit polls by 1 to 2 percent. While Min admitted it was impossible to determine how much of an effect the SMS and e-mail campaigns had, an exit poll later that day showed Roh leading by 2 to 3.

Teddy Casino, one of the organizers of the SMS-organized EDSA-2 demonstrations that helped bring down the Estrada regime, was quoted by Shakuntala Shantiran in *Focus Asia* about the continuing importance of text messaging in Philippines politics: "[For n]ext year in the 2004 elections, I've already seen software that integrates text messaging into a database in computers, so you could instantly have a quick count of the number of votes which are cast in a certain precinct. The maker of the software says his product is selling like hotcakes" (Shantiran 2003).

Reports concerning Sierra Leone elections parallel reports from Ghana and Kenya regarding the use of phones as a weapon against electoral corruption. During the election that was held in 2002, a U.S.-based organization called Search for Common Ground distributed messages to journalists' cell phones. This allowed the journalists to report hourly the results of local polls. These were then announced publicly on radio stations. According to Search for Common Ground, "regular updates calmed fears of corruption and vote rigging...permitting the vote to take place without outbreaks of violence" (Black 2003).

When the Spanish government attempted to blame the terrorist bombings at Madrid's Atocha train station on Basque separatists, thousands of citizens began circu-

lating SMS messages that questioned the government's version of events and summoned people to mass demonstrations across Spain. Ultimately, the opposition party won the elections (Adelman 2004). According to Spanish journalist Eva Dominguez,

If there is a medium that has contributed most to make news run like hell during the last days of this strange and difficult Spanish campaign, it is text messaging (SMS) through mobile phones. It has been used to spread news among citizens as well as political parties. But the most impressive use happened the night before the elections. The spread of text messaging congregated some thousands of people in front of the political party running the country, Partido Popular, in just a couple of hours. Any protest with political meaning is forbidden in Spain on that day. Any organization behind such public demonstrations could be punished. But, what if it is just the result of a spontaneous crush of SMS messages? The use of big media, which have been greatly tendentious in some cases, has not been as powerful as text messaging to spread the news and ask for the truth in the most intensive days of democracy in Spain. (Dominguez 2004)

Scottish screenwriter Paul Laverty published his eyewitness account of a spontaneous protest that convened outside PP party headquarters. He received a message calling for a *cacerolada*, a protest by banging of pots and pans. Laverty writes:

By the time I arrived at the PP headquarters at 7 p.m. there were hundreds streaming from the metro and the road was already closed off. The police moved in and demanded identification papers but backed off as hundreds more arrived. Now there were around five thousand, chanting, "We want the truth before we vote. Our Dead—Your War." There was a continuous chant of "Liars! Liars! Liars!" followed by "Don't play with the Dead." More mobiles flashing—there were demonstrations outside the PP offices in all the big cities. Spirits rose. (Laverty 2004)

Laverty reported that when he got home his neighborhood was "a cacophony of unbelievable noise," with entire families assembled on their balconies, and the neighborhood square filled with young and old Africans, Moroccans, Latin Americans, and Spaniards banging on kitchen implements.

The most effective U.S. electoral smart mobs weren't organized at the grass roots but from the very top of the political hierarchy. Collective action can be mobilized and directed from above: The Republican Party's chief strategist, Karl Rove, coordinated the 2002 Republican Congressional victories via his BlackBerry communicator. He used his BlackBerry to send messages even during meetings with President Bush, according to *Time* magazine (Carney and Dickinson 2002). *Time* reports that one of Rove's colleagues said, "Sometimes we're in a meeting talking to each other and BlackBerrying each other at the same time."

Democratic Party campaigners seem to be BlackBerrying, too, according to a *Washington Post* article shortly before the U.S. 2004 elections. Dan Manatt, director of a Democratic political action committee aimed at candidates under forty, notes that the Internet and mobile phones are not instruments of persuasion aimed at converting voters to a cause, but are better used to "preach to the choir" and help coordinate

electoral campaigns, especially on Election Day. In particular, Manatt's group plans to equip their volunteers with mobile messaging devices such as BlackBerries for get-out-the-vote campaigns in Congressional elections, allowing the volunteers to coordinate political activity at polling stations where otherwise they could not openly support a candidate (Krebs 2002). John Collias, the field director of a Congressional candidate in Kentucky, noted, "Everyone is bouncing around so much on Election Day that it's not uncommon for the phone lines to be jammed. We think the BlackBerry is the ultimate firewall against that problem, and it has the potential to be very effective for us" (Krebs 2002).

The *Post* reporter, Brian Krebs, hypothesized that the BlackBerry preference might have started on Capitol Hill. After 9/11, all members of Congress were equipped with BlackBerries so they could communicate in an emergency. The Howard Dean campaign used the UPOC service as a kind of texting Listserv—campaigners could subscribe and broadcast SMS messages to other subscribers of specific campaign-related groups (Teachout 2003).

### **Street Demonstrations, Riots, and Swarms**

If elections are the formal, socially contracted, legally controlled exercises of political power, street demonstrations are the informal, ad hoc, uncontrolled outbursts that can tilt elections, as they did in Spain, or unseat an elected leader, as they did in the Philippines. The street demonstrations that brought mobile communications and swarming tactics to the world's attention were the protests against the 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Washington, famous as "The Battle of Seattle" (Armond 2000). Organizers used mobile phones and Web sites to coordinate swarming—clusters of demonstrators who emerged from the general crowd to shut down traffic at specific locations at agreed times, then melt back into the crowd. Seattle police, unable to respond effectively to the new tactic, responded inappropriately—attacking innocent citizens while failing to achieve their objective of clearing out demonstrators (Reynolds 1999). The Seattle chief of police resigned after the incident. It appears obvious that the New York police closely studied the incident in preparing for their far more successful containment of demonstrators during the Republican National Convention in the summer of 2004.

Texting is famously popular in the Philippines. EDSA-2, the popular "people power" demonstrations that brought down the Joseph Estrada regime in 2001, was instantly and broadly recognized to have been self-organized via SMS. The president was under impeachment. When the impeachment trial was suddenly aborted by senators regarded to be Estrada supporters, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators began to assemble at Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (known as "Edsa")—the same place demonstrators had assembled in 1986 to protest the Marcos regime in the famous "People



Power” revolt. The role of demonstrations at that location in the fall of the Marcos regime lent power to the assemblies. Between January 16 and 20, 2001, more than a million people gathered at Edsa to demand Estrada’s resignation:

Aside from TV and radio, another communication medium was given credit for spurring the coup: the cell phone. Nearly all accounts of People Power II available to us come from middle class writers or by way of middle class controlled media with strong nationalist sentiments. And nearly all point to the crucial importance of the cell phone in the rapid mobilization of people. “The phone is our weapon now,” one unemployed construction worker is quoted in a newspaper article. “The power of our cell phones and computers were among the things that lit the fuse which set off the second uprising, or People Power Revolution II, according to a college student in Manila. And a newspaper columnist relayed this advice to “would-be foot-soldiers in any future revolution: As long as you[r cell phone] is not low on battery, you are in the groove, in a fighting mood.” A technological thing was thus idealized as an agent of change, invested with the power to bring forth new forms of sociality. (Rafael 2003)

In China, where political demonstrations are risky for participants, the *New York Times* reported that twelve thousand workers went on strike in Shenzhen at the factory of a supplier of Wal-Mart. The article mentions that while “few of [the young, migrant workers] are unionized, communication and coordination among them is growing, often through the sending of coded messages to each other by cellphone” (French 2004).

In early 2003, when the Chinese government was trying to keep the lid on news of the epidemic that was breaking out in rural areas, news of “a fatal flu in Guangdong” reached 120 million people within a few days via SMS messages that spread like an epidemic of their own (Hoenig 2003). The Chinese government reacted by admitting that there was, indeed, an outbreak—and by making it illegal to spread SARS rumor via SMS.

In April, 2005, anti-Japanese demonstrations broke out in several Chinese cities. The *New York Times* reported that mobile phones and Web sites, once again, played a central role:

For several weeks as the protests grew larger and more unruly, China banned almost all coverage in the state media. It hardly mattered. An underground conversation was raging via e-mail, text message and instant online messaging that inflamed public opinion and served as an organizing tool for protesters.

The underground noise grew so loud that last Friday the Chinese government moved to silence it by banning the use of text messages or e-mail to organize protests. It was part of a broader curb on the anti-Japanese movement but it also seemed the Communist Party had self-interest in mind.

“They are afraid the Chinese people will think, O.K., today we protest Japan; tomorrow, Japan,” said an Asian diplomat who has watched the protests closely. “But the day after tomorrow, how about we protest against the government?” (Yardley 2005).

The Chinese government has good reason to fear the power of phone-mobilized political action—with more than 350 million phones in private hands. The same *New York Times* article that covered the anti-Japanese demonstrations also noted that the authoritarian Chinese government employs as many as fifty thousand people to censor the Internet, and the Shanghai broadcast SMS messages to citizens during the protests, advising them to obey the law. Web sites, online community discussions, and private e-mail is monitored for keywords, and individual SMS messages are monitored.

Xiao Qiang, exiled Chinese human rights activist, now at UC Berkeley's School of Journalism, sees the ad hoc organization of the anti-Japanese protests as a kind of watershed. Although anti-Japanese Web sites had been officially tolerated, and in the early days of the demonstrations the police were supportive of the protestors, Qiang noted the grassroots nature of the political organizing—outside official Communist Party channels—in an editorial for the *Asian Wall Street Journal*:

It's no coincidence that the largest of China's recent anti-Japanese protests occurred in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, where the use of the Internet, cell phones and online chatting is among the highest in China. That's because a notable feature of the recent protests was that they were almost exclusively organized through such modern communication technologies. . . . Right after the first public demonstration in Beijing on April 9, eyewitness accounts, photos and video clips from the protests spread rapidly through Chinese cyberspace despite a complete blackout of coverage in the official media. At the same time, demands for a boycott of Japanese products, online petitions, and calls for street demonstrations in many cities throughout China were widely distributed by the Internet and cell phones. Many of these messages were extraordinarily detailed, giving logistical information such as the route of the protest march and even what slogans to chant. (Qiang 2005).

Qiang noted that the messages were sent out in chain letter form via e-mail and text messages, and were posted on BBSs. The April 16 protest was organized primarily this way, "defying calls from Shanghai authorities for students to stay within campus." At the same time, Qiang acknowledged, in response to a query from me, that he suspected "the extraordinarily detailed" messages were planted by Chinese government agents.

Ironically, considering the ideological origins of the ruling Communist Party, more and more incidents of urban unrest appear to be outbreaks of class-based conflict. In July 2005, according to the *Washington Post*, a wealthy businessman's expensive automobile collided with a bicycle rider in Chizhou, China. The businessman's bodyguards beat the bicyclist bloody. Onlookers used their mobile telephones to summon others, resulting eventually in a full-blown riot of an estimated ten thousand people (Cody 2005). When police took the businessman down to their station, motorcycle drivers and vegetable merchants who had witnessed the accident followed. The *Washington Post* article reports, "Members of the crowd pulled out their cell phones to call friends and relatives, swelling their numbers further. By 3:30, witnesses recalled, several thousand people were gathered around the station" (Cody 2005).

The *New York Times* reported in 2005 that Chinese paramilitary police killed as many as twenty people in rural China who had been protesting a power company's plans to build a coal-fueled generator, which they feared would be a source of dangerous pollution. The *Times* cited one of the reasons why such incidents are becoming more common as

cellphones have made it easier for people in rural China to organize, communicating news to one another by text messages, and increasingly allowing them to stay in touch with members of non-governmental organizations in big cities who have been eager to advise them or to provide legal help. (French 2005)

In the United States, organizers of protests against the Republican National Convention in New York City telegraphed their intention to use SMS to organize swarming, and one politically sympathetic enterprise created TXTmob, which enables Web-organized groups to send and receive text messages via mobile phone. However, protestors ran into a technical glitch. Although many of the dissidents suspected that T-Mobile had shut them down for political reasons, it was later discovered that the operator's spam filter had always been set to block sites that broadcast hundreds of text messages to subscribers (Rojas 2004).

John Henry, of the Institute for Applied Autonomy, which created the TXTmob application, together with Tad Hirsch, of MIT's Media Lab, pointed out a significant difference between the RNC protest and previous demonstrations around the world in which text messaging had played a part in spontaneous self-organization:

Unlike the protests in Manila and Madrid, the mass mobilizations against the DNC and RNC were neither spontaneous nor unexpected. Activists and law enforcement officials alike had planned and trained for months in anticipation of open conflict in the streets of Boston and New York. Accordingly, text messaging was part of a broader communications strategy developed by organizers, and was put to a wider variety of uses than simply getting bodies into the street. (Henry and Hirsch 2005)

Henry and Hirsch point out that law enforcement authorities appear to have learned key tactical lessons from previous instances of mobile phone-enabled street-swarming:

After the J18 and Seattle protests, law enforcement has adopted a more aggressive approach to crowd control during large-scale demonstrations. Independent observers have come to call the current strategy "The Miami Model," named for its use during protests against the 2003 Free Trade Areas of the Americas (FTAA) summit. The Miami Model has been described as "the criminalization of dissent," and is characterized by restricting public access to large parts of the city, preemptive arrests of activist "leaders," widespread use of nonlethal weapons including tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets, and the use of mass arrests or "sweeps" that often includes the detention of law-abiding citizens who are later released without charge. (Henry and Hirsch 2005)

TXTmob was created as a tool to support the counter-counterreaction of demonstration organizers, who recognized that even more radical decentralization of protest was

called for—requiring more effective mobile, ad hoc communications infrastructure. Individual demonstrators, affinity groups, and organizers could create their own mobile message distribution lists, populate them with their own members, and determine whether membership would be open or closed. The Institute for Applied Autonomy was able to collect statistics on the use of the tool: 5,459 people registered with TXTmob during the conventions, exchanging 1,757 messages among 322 “mobs.” Henry and Hirsch analyzed message content, mob descriptions, and timestamp data. Remote users who were not on the scene were able to monitor activities as they happened. The authors noted the uniqueness of this situation in the annals of street protest:

Remote users consistently expressed solidarity with protesters, and used the phrase “it felt like being there” to describe their experience. This raises several questions:

1. Does this form of participation constitute a collective identity (a sense of “we-ness” among participants)?
2. If so, is it reciprocated by activists in the street?
3. How does remote identification contribute to the ongoing work of movement-building by activist groups?
4. Is there something unique about mobile devices that enhances such identification (in a way that, say, email or websites don’t). (Henry and Hirsch 2005)

Blogger Jeff Vail (2005) writes about the essentials of swarming tactics in his blog. He argues that the anarchists at the Republican National Convention lost their advantage by planning their actions ahead of time around convention events:

In particular, the NYC police were able to deny the protesters their principle strength of elusiveness/mobility. Borrowing directly from the playbook of Alexander the Great, police rolled out mobile plastic-mesh fences to quickly create artificial terrain obstacles, trapping large groups of more violent protesters before they could blend away into the city masses. (Vail 2005)

That anarchists failed to successfully execute swarming tactics at the Republican National Convention should probably not be regarded as proof that the tactic is obsolete. RAND Corporation analysts Arquilla and Ronfeldt write incisively and ominously about the intersection of smart mobs and organized violence, either state-sponsored (military) or “non state actors” (peaceful activists or armed terrorists):

Swarming is seemingly amorphous, but it is a deliberately structured, coordinated, strategic way to strike from all directions, by means of a sustainable pulsing of force and/or fire, close-in as well as from stand-off positions. It will work best—perhaps it will only work—if it is designed mainly around the deployment of myriad, small, dispersed, networked maneuver units (what we call “pods” organized in “clusters”). (Arquilla and Ronfeldt 2005)

Arquilla and Ronfeldt point out that while swarming has existed for a long time, it has now emerged as a power in its own right, one that can be directed and coordinated on the fly. The authors argue, “That is largely because swarming depends on a devolu-

tion of power to small units and a capacity to interconnect those units that has only recently become feasible, due to the information revolution" (2005).

Another violent form of political collective action is the riot. Time magazine reported on the riots in Nigeria triggered by the Miss World pageant (Taylor 2003). Because riots appear to require a critical mass of people who are willing to go beyond social and legal bounds, it is possible that the Nigerian riots might not have happened if text messages had not been used to summon people to the scene (Granovetter 1978).

In November 2005, disaffected Muslim immigrant youth in Paris suburbs, reacting to the deaths of two adolescents who were electrocuted when hiding from police in an electrical substation, began riots that spread through France, abetted by both Internet and text message communications. Patrick Hamon, the national police spokesman noticed that "bands of youths are, little by little, getting more organized" and sending attack messages by mobile phone (Smith 2005). The *Belfast Telegraph* reported in September 2005 on a growing phenomenon in North Belfast—recreational rioting by teenagers and children, some as young as five, recruited in the playground by text messaging. The police discovered one particular text message being distributed on school playgrounds: "R U up for a riot 2 nite?" (McCambridge 2005).

### Action Alerts and Boycotts

Nonviolent direct action ranges from lobbying to boycotts. Amnesty International uses SMS to broadcast action alerts and mobilize political pressure, according to blogger Emily Turrettini:

Participants in their campaigns, opt-in by signing up online and giving their mobile number. They will then receive an "action" SMS every two weeks, which is then invoiced directly to their phone bill at a premium rate of \$0,28 (25 eurocents). The latest one sent out for instance, was concerning the plight of a 16 year old boy who has been abducted in Guatemala. The recipient replies to this "action" SMS with a simple "yes," which will serve as a digital signature, his name then added to a petition which Amnesty International will send off to the Guatemala government to pressure them into releasing the boy.

To date, 7102 people have signed up. The campaign not only pays for itself but is also a clever and personalized way of keeping its members informed of their efforts and allows them to be active participants in a cause. (Turrettini 2003)

Anneke Bosman reported on a Web site about "New Tactics in Human Rights" that Amnesty International's SMS action alerts have also been successful in the case of a political prisoner in Africa. She also reports on a high success rate at inducing people to make calls and write letters, and mentions an interesting angle—the young people who are the most avid users of SMS are an audience that political activists want to reach:

With these messages, protests can be gathered faster than ever, enabling Amnesty International to take action against torture and other abuses more quickly. About 39 percent of the cell-phone

campaigns conducted by Amnesty in 2002 were successful. Prisoners of conscience were released, people who had “disappeared” were found and death sentences were not carried out. Cell-phone campaigning also has a special appeal for youth, and we found this campaign attracted new younger members into Amnesty in a way that other outreach and activities had not. (Bosman 2004)

Young Moroccans in the Netherlands are turned away from clubs, because of—they claim—racial profiling. A few of them started an initiative to address this issue, the Web site *Geweigerd.nl*—*geweigerd* is Dutch for “refused.” The site has a forum that can be reached by i-mode. People who are refused at a certain club are encouraged to immediately send a message with their mobile phone to *Geweigerd.nl*. They hope that the collective action of reporting small incidents helps the public get a grasp on the problem, and will eventually lead to a solution.

One boycott in Nigeria, which was not extensively reported outside Africa, was the subject of a scholarly paper by Ebenezer Obadare:

On September 19, 2003, following weeks of concerted mobilisation, mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria took the unprecedented step of switching off their handsets en masse. The consumers took this symbolic measure in protest against perceived exploitation by the existing GSM phone companies—Zimbabwean-owned Econet Wireless Nigeria Limited, the South-African-owned MTN Limited, and the Nigerian state-owned NITEL. (Obadare 2004)

The Nigeria boycott paper further explains that the use of mobile phones as political tools ought to be seen in the context of the customer and citizen’s mistrust of the transnational corporations and state. That the power of the protest came from turning the mobile phones off is support for the paper’s conclusion:

Thus, for Nigeria, while mobile telephony has no doubt come to be seen as a veritable instrument of political struggle, its potential effectiveness is bound to be determined by the way in which it is used. And while it is definitely a welcome addition to civil society’s arsenal, it may not necessarily fulfill the fondest telecommunicative fantasies about securing total victory in the contest for social and economic justice. (Obadare 2004)

### **Conclusion: Something Significant Is Happening**

The rapid adoption of sophisticated multimedia communication media by a significant portion of the world’s population already is giving rise to spontaneous social experiments of varied forms. In the political sphere, the power of persuasion, organization, and coordination have been democratized worldwide by the availability of mobile telephones and text messaging. The examples cited here are neither exhaustive nor analytical. There are no guarantees that future smart mobs will be peaceful, or that democratization of the power to organize collective action will lead to stronger democracies.

The reasons political smart mobs could lead to stronger democracies include the empowerment of citizens to self-organize popular demonstrations in protest of events

such as the Estrada impeachment, the capability of inexpensive and publicly visible monitoring of elections for fraud, the increased ability for volunteers to coordinate get-out-the-vote activities, and the power to disseminate information that is suppressed by authoritarian regimes and controlled mass media. The reasons political smart mobs may weaken democracies include the speeding up of political decision making that would benefit from more slowly paced deliberation, the manipulation of populations by planted provocations and misdirection, the potential for violent outbursts at spontaneous gatherings, and the potential for rapidly disseminating misinformation and disinformation. Finally, it is possible that these technologies will strengthen the hand of centralized authorities, the views of Henry and Hirsch (2005) and Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2005) notwithstanding, if such authorities succeed in automating surveillance, jamming, and countermeasures such as “the Miami model,” and/or introducing political “noise” in oppositional communications.

Perhaps the most important question about the future of augmenting collective action through the use of the Internet and mobile communications is the degree to which trustworthy and accurate information can be distinguished and screened from misleading, false, missourced information. The technosocial capability of increasing the trustworthiness of information through many-to-many media could magnify the positive potential of populations using these technologies to achieve their ends in democratic, cooperative, or at least nonviolent ways. To the extent that accuracy of information cannot be determined, the positive potential of these powerful technologies may be blunted if not turned against itself.

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