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Mobile phones and protest

Cats, mice and handsets

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Protesters and governments are mastering the tricks of the mobile trade

BACK in September, protesters from many parts of the United States poured into the small town of Jena, Louisiana, to express their anger over the over-zealous prosecution (as they saw it) of six young African-Americans on charges of assault. Mobile-phone text messages played an important role in pulling in the crowd.

AFP

Summoned by cells: the Louisiana march

But for pioneers of mobile telephony and texts as tools of protest and dissent, simply summoning people to demonstrations—a technique first deployed in the Philippines as long ago as 2001—is old hat. The search is on for ever more creative ways to use this ubiquitous device.

At a recent conference in São Paulo on “mobile activism”—a term that embraces humanitarian work as well as protest—there was much talk about how to “go beyond text” when using mobile phones. And it became clear that exuberant practice was galloping ahead of theory. One recent craze has been the use of political ringtones. Once again, Filipinos are in the vanguard. Since 2005 that country's best-known tone, especially among youngsters exasperated by corruption, has been “Hello Garci”—a snatch of taped conversation in which President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo seems to be chatting with Virgilio Garcillano, her election organiser, ahead of the 2004 poll that confirmed her in office. In Hispanic countries, meanwhile, the latest fashion is a royal voice saying “Why don't you shut up?”—the recent outburst of Spain's King Juan Carlos to President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela at a summit in Santiago, Chile.

Mobiles are also being used in more sophisticated ways, to capture and disseminate images that were never supposed to see the light of day. Witness, a non-governmental organisation that aims to record and denounce human-rights abuses, is one pioneer. Instead of merely posting verbal reports, it invites visitors to its website to the “Hub”—a collection of harrowing video clips, often uploaded from mobiles, which depict cruelty in action. On the “Egypt” country page, there are grainy images showing torture in a prison.

For now at least, expense and technological problems make it hard to organise any international

mobile-based protest. The lack of full interoperability between mobile systems means that borders are still difficult to cross. But efforts are under way to get round that problem. For example, FrontlineSMS, a laptop-based (and thus portable) technology has been designed for use almost anywhere. Early this year it was deployed in the monitoring of elections in Nigeria. Voters texted complaints to a computer where they could be processed and cross-checked by monitors from international bodies such as the European Union.

More recently FrontlineSMS was used in Pakistan to get round curbs on information flowing in and out of the country. Both there and in Myanmar (Burma) recent disturbances have produced some interesting insights into the cat-and-mouse games of protesters and political masters.

In Pakistan the equipment used by local authorities was too cheap to block the flow of text messages. This helped Pakistani protesters to stay informed about sympathetic rallies taking place in America and Britain—and to give the outside world a glimpse of ordinary people's reactions to the state of emergency.

During the recent protests in Myanmar, the authorities temporarily suspended text messaging altogether. That did not stop activists from using expensive satellite phones, which are harder to shut down. The political, and above all, economic cost of blocking text messages was relatively low in Myanmar, because not many people use mobiles. But in many other developing countries, shutting mobile systems would be economically disastrous and politically costly, because so many small businesses depend on them.

In some places, like Belarus, the authorities have refined the art of blocking mobile coverage in specific places—such as protest venues. They have also turned text messages to their own uses: by using the state-owned network to spread warnings that a rally is likely to end in bloodshed.

For hard-pressed activists in search of new techniques, help may come from an unlikely quarter. Google, the internet giant, has offered $10m for the most innovative new application for mobile phones. The offer extends to ideas that bring humanitarian benefits or contribute to economic development. Mobile activists have never lacked imagination, and many of them are already hard at work, thinking of clever new uses for those little devices—mostly rather crude, five-year-old models—that have become part of daily life in the poorest parts of the world.

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