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POLITICAL ECONOMY

By Calixto V. Chikiamco

Politics and the new media



IT'S generally recognized that the media have "powerful effects" on politics. How and how many the effects are, are pretty much hard to tell beforehand, especially if the medium is new.

Television's impact on electoral politics, for example, wasn't recognized until the famous Nixon-Kennedy debates in the United States in 1960. Former US Vice President Richard Nixon came to the debate looking surly and unshaven. On the other hand, the handsome John F. Kennedy projected coolness and youthful vigor. The television debates probably made the difference in Kennedy's close victory. Ever since the Nixon-Kennedy debates, no politician running for public office dared faced the cameras without having makeup.

Satellite television helped former Moscow Mayor and Russian President Boris Yeltsin defeat an attempted military coup by helping him quickly mobilize international support. In the subsequent election, Yeltsin, although reportedly in poor health and suffering from drinking problems, projected himself healthy enough on television to be elected president.

We Filipinos have also made media and political history by using mobile SMS (short messaging system) technology or texting in helping bring down former President Estrada. The power of communication networks was demonstrated when people massed at EDSA after the Senate voted not to open the envelope that would supposedly prove that former President Estrada was "Jose Velarde." True to the nature of networks, the mass action had no centralized guidance, but was the product of diffused, but connected people. An American media and technological philosopher has called this phenomenon of groups of people undertaking common political activity with the use of communication networks, "the intelligent swarm."

It's possible that Filipinos will make media and political history again with the coming presidential election in 2004. The Philippines is the texting capital of the world and when it comes to mobile data usage, the country is far advanced, even more so than in the United States where they use mobile phones for nothing more than voice calls.

The mobile phone, rather than the Internet, would again probably be at the center of any significant impact on electoral politics in 2004. With less than a million Filipinos enjoying Internet connection but with many Filipinos abroad keeping abreast through the Internet, the Internet's role would be more significant for the OFWs who have regained the right to vote.

On the other hand, there are at least 20 million Filipinos who have mobile phones. It is projected that the mobile-phone-carrying population

would soon hit 25 million. With reloads now possible for as low as P30 and the price of handsets continually falling, even the C and D classes are joining the "texting generation."

It will be fun to speculate how mobile phones will be used in the presidential campaigns. Will the candidates spam mobile users with their names and their campaign slogans? Will sample ballots go the way of vinyl records, to be replaced by texted sample ballots? Will the black-propaganda team of each candidate text juicy details of a candidate to selected "superspreaders" and hope their black propaganda reaches the masses?

The growing number of MMS (multimedia messaging system) and GPRS-enabled mobile phones make for interesting speculations on how they will be used in the campaign. For example, a candidate can send his picture, which would be like an electronic campaign poster, via MMS to all those MMS-enabled phones.

A candidate could have his campaign jingle formatted into a ringtone to be downloaded free by his followers. A more media-savvy politician should have his own wapsite (wap stands for wireless application protocol), which is a form of the mobile Internet, and let GPRS-connected mobile-phone users download pictures, ringtones and data about him or her.

Although the new media like mobile telephony will have an impact, the old media like television and film still can't be ignored. The fact that TV and movie personalities like Noli de Castro, Loren Legarda and Fernando Poe Jr. are high in the polls attests to the power of television and film. So powerful has the impact of the media on politics become that old political families like the Macapagals, the Aquinos and the Cojuangcos have allowed members of their clan to enter show business.

Even in the United States, film celebrity status represents a political advantage. In the California recall elections, polls show that the "Terminator," Arnold Schwarzenegger, is the most popular choice to replace California Governor Gary Davis.

The 2004 presidential election would be a most interesting laboratory for the creative use of the old and new media in politics♦

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