

Texting as an activist tool

MONG PALATINO

Published: January 21, 2008

MANILA, Philippines, Texting first became popular in the Philippines during the late 1990s when Joseph Estrada was the president of the country. Filipino cell phone users, maximizing the free texting service offered by phone companies, began sending text jokes about the incompetence of Estrada. This proved effective in undermining the credibility of the former president.

Text jokes were subsequently used as a creative form of protest against other notorious public figures, especially politicians. People continued to use texting to express their disenchantment with the policies of the government.

Seven years ago, the historic uprising in EDSA Street which came to be known as People Power II eventually led to the downfall of Estrada. For the first time in Philippine history, texting was recognized as a vital tool for political mobilization. Four days of gatherings, both spontaneous and organized, brought hundreds of thousands of people to EDSA, facilitated by texting.

A few months after People Power II, phone companies announced a plan to charge a fee for every text message sent by cell phone users. This angered Filipino texters. The consumer group Txtpower called for a one-day text boycott in protest to the decision of phone companies. The boycott campaign forced the mobile phone firms to delay their plan.

On August 2004, the government wanted to impose a tax on texting to increase revenues. This could have meant an additional cost for mobile phone subscribers. The group Txtpower enjoined Filipino texters to bombard the Speaker of the House of Representatives with a text message opposing the proposed tax on texting. After a few days, Congress was forced to abandon the proposed measure.

Recently, a government minister revived this proposal to solve the country's fiscal deficit. A texters' revolt was launched to defeat the new tax measure. Like in 2004, the government backtracked on its plan after consumers sent angry text messages to government officials.

In June 2005, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was accused of rigging the presidential election results. An audio recording which allegedly contained conversations between the president and an election officer was released to the public. Txtpower transformed the recording into a cell phone ringtone and uploaded it on the Internet. Hundreds of thousands of cell phone owners and Internet users downloaded the ringtone and made it one of the most popular hits in the Philippines that year. For the first time, a cell phone ringtone was recognized as a protest tool.

The threat of a texters' revolt is forcing cell phone companies to lower text service fees. They have been offering unlimited texting services in response to the clamor for a more affordable and reasonable texting rate. They have not been increasing text rates since government regulators are reluctant to approve higher rates which could enrage the 55 million cell phone subscribers in the Philippines.

Why are cell phones and texting effective and popular tools for social and political mobilization in the Philippines?

The majority of Filipino mobile phone users are familiar with the texting service. There are more cell phone users in the Philippines than landline owners. Texting is convenient to use since it is accessible, less expensive and it can instantly reach an audience of more than 50 million cell phone subscribers.

Texting is already the standard mode of communication among Filipinos. It is widely used even in the remote countryside to connect and reconnect with family and friends. Overseas Filipino workers, now numbering more than 8 million, use texting to maintain close relationships with their loved ones back home.

Political parties, civil society organizations and other non-state actors are using cell phones to spread political messages and sometimes even to organize protest assemblies. Texting facilitates quick dissemination of political activities. Texting is used to improve coordination among political groups.

Political forces seek to mobilize millions of subscribers through virtual campaigns which could range from the sending of text messages, downloading of political ringtones, and forwarding of subversive text quotes. It may be impossible to gather more than 50 million cell phone users in the streets but it is easy to persuade ordinary citizens to send political text messages to their friends.

The great number of anonymous prepaid cell phone users is emboldening citizens to express their true political sentiments. A majority of cell phone owners in the country are availing themselves of the prepaid service since this is cheaper. This also allows political groups and disgruntled citizens, fearful of government reprisals, to send daring political

messages through texting, without the risk of revealing their identities.

Another important factor which contributes to the popularity of texting is the relative absence of censorship governing Internet usage and mobile communications in the Philippines. The cheap mobile technology and the freedom enjoyed by Filipino cell phone users enhance the opportunities to use the phones for political activities.

A drawback to the immense popularity of texting as a viable political tool is the persistent recommendation of the government for a mandatory registration of all mobile phone users. Consumer groups believe the proposed registration may hamper the freedom of expression and the right to organize in the country. So far, this proposal is not yet implemented but it remains one of the anti-crime and anti-terror solutions of the government.

Fortunately, the Philippine government is impotent in countering the organizing possibilities of new media tools. Politicians have threatened to arrest malicious texters who send subversive jokes but political text messaging remains acerbic and effective in the country. No texter has been jailed for insulting the president.

Filipino activist groups insist that cell phones are tools to be maximized to deliver messages to the people. Political mobilization will be successful if it is pursued through painstaking grassroots-building and person-to-person interaction. People who use the technology, not the technology alone, are the most important factor in developing political campaigns.

--

(Mong Palatino is a Filipino youth activist, news editor of Yehey!, a Philippine-based web portal, and a Global Voices correspondent. His Web site is www.mongpalatino.motime.com, and he can be reached at mongpalatino@gmail.com.
©Copyright Mong Palatino.)