

Chapter 9

Mobile Communication and Bottom-Up Movements in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

At Hong Lim Park in February 2013, the “No to 6.9 Million Population” protest saw 5,000 Singaporeans expressing their unhappiness with the government’s Population White Paper. Touted to be the largest demonstration since Singapore’s independence, it bore witness to digital technologies’ mobilization effects. Personal and organization websites, discussion forums, blogs, and social media provide viable spaces for individuals and marginalized groups to circumvent offline media regulations and participate in counter-hegemonic discourse. Surveys indicate that Singaporeans are increasingly leveraging mobile communication for utility purposes—seeking and sharing information—and for networking. This chapter identifies digital bottom-up movements that took place in recent years, the anatomy of these movements, and how digital technologies were used. What is evident is that groups championing different causes are using a wide range of digital platforms to galvanize support and mobilize action for political and social issues. However, the link between that and mobile communication remains unclear. This chapter concludes by presenting recommendations for future studies on mobile communication and bottom-up movements.

INTRODUCTION

On 16 February 2013, a few thousand Singaporeans gathered at the Speakers’ Corner. They were taking part in the “No to 6.9 Million People” protest - expressing their unhappiness with the

government’s population policy. Touted to be the largest demonstration since Singapore’s independence in 1965, the protest showcased digital technologies’ mobilization qualities as protest organizers relied on social media for information dissemination and mobilization. Post-General

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6166-0.ch009

Elections 2011, Singapore appears to have arrived at a new dawn of politics with the emergence of frequent collective criticisms of policies and calls for change. In other parts of the world, the Occupy Wall Street movement, uprisings in the Middle East and Jasmine Revolution in China are proof of how ordinary citizens use digital technologies to challenge the incumbent leadership and establish a new social order.

Although cautioning against technological determinism, social movement scholars Diani (2000), Tarrow (1998) and Tilly (2004) acknowledged that information communication technologies are fast becoming an integral part of the social movement repertoire. The rhetoric surrounding technology's impact on civic engagement is not new. Analyses pertaining to its democratizing effects have assumed a dominant focus from the 1990s till now, particularly in the fields of political science, sociology and media studies (see for example, Bimber, 1999; Ibrahim, 2009; Johnson, 2003; Schumate & Lipp, 2007; Soon & Kluver, forthcoming). Mattoni's (2013) study on the mobilizations against precarity in Italy established that activists and social movement groups developed their own communication repertoires and were adept at using a variety of media for different purposes.

A large body of work scrutinizes the contributions of mobile communication to political participation and collective action. Although revolutions have been part and parcel of the Arab world's tumultuous history, the uprisings in 2011 have been linked to mobile communication. Mobile devices catalysed the organization of mass demonstrations by allowing organizers and participants to circumvent traditional media that are compliant with despotic rulers, share "sticky" information (in the form of text, images and videos) and establish alliances with one another (Abdelhay, 2012; Hussain & Howard, 2013; Khondker, 2011; Paradiso, 2013). In 2005, mobile videos uploaded to YouTube and other video-sharing sites disseminated actual footage of vote counting

and rigging during the Egyptian elections where Mubarak's party won 89% of the vote, fuelling protests against acts of injustice by the ruling elites and repression by the military (Hussain & Howard, 2013). Paradiso (2013) advocated that "technologies such as cell phones, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and satellite television clearly enhanced the diffusion of indignation and anger, and facilitated the coordination of demonstrations" (p.180).

In Castells's "mobile civil society", mobile phones create "a powerful platform for political autonomy on the basis of independent channels of autonomous communication, from person to person, and from group to group" (Castells, 2005/2006, p.112). According to Castells, the distributed network of mobile communication provides the foundation for the formation of new public spaces. Such a distributed network facilitates high-volume communication, personalization and interactivity, and allows users to circumvent traditional media. In developing countries where access issues, low literacy and high costs pose as barriers to the adoption of computing devices (such as personal computers, laptops and tablets), mobile devices provide a viable alternative to the populace in communicating with many others almost instantaneously (Latham, 2007; Skuse & Cousins, 2008).

While there has been burgeoning scholarship concerning how Internet technologies enhance civic engagement and political participation in Singapore, little is known about the role of mobile communication in the broader picture of collective action. During the campaigning period leading to the general election on 7 May 2011, social media catalysed the exchange of political quips, photographs and videos of election rallies, with online discourse largely dominated by those opposing the ruling elite (George, 2011; Ng, 2011).

However, research on citizen-driven movements, in particular their deployment of digital platforms, is at a nascent stage. We examine current scholarship on mobile communication

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