Chapter 81
SMS and Civil Unrest

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the roles of text messaging in organizing and mobilizing protests and social unrest. It gives a general overview of the various forms of protest behaviors, showing how and why social media and ICTs have enhanced protest planning and implementation by activists around the world. The chapter reviews current knowledge in research literature and describes and gives examples of types of responses to ICT communication networks by national governments during crises. It concludes with a hope that ICT-based initiatives and movements can achieve impactful social change despite skepticism among scholars on the contrary.

INTRODUCTION

According to Epstein (e.d.) (2015), "the whole world is texting…" in virtually all communication contexts of human endeavor. And studies show that a high number of telecommunication users rely on the Short Message Service (SMS) or texting via Smartphone to send and receive messages on different topics related to the society (Ahn, 2011); politics (Shirky, 2011); education (Aziz et al, 2013); business (Torres & Conaway, 2014); and religion (Bell, 2006; Campbell, 2005; 2006a; Chiluwa & Uba, 2015), among others. According to *Pew Research Center*, over 6 billion messages are sent everyday in the United States (*Forester.com*) and about 8.3 trillion text messages were sent globally in 2015 alone, which is almost 23 billion messages per day or almost 16 million messages per minute (*Portio Research*). On the average, 8 trillion text messages are sent every year world-wide (*Bloomberg*). With this amazing prevalence of texting in our daily living, it is clear that SMS plays a significant role in influencing behavior, which includes initiating; implementing and championing civil unrests (see Chiluwa, 2016), which unfortunately have become part of our everyday experience.

This entry is an updated version of my previous paper published in the *Encyclopedia of Mobile Phone Behavior,* (vol.2) entitled "Text messaging in social protests," published by IGI Global (pages 1024-1031, 2015), edited by Zheng Yan. The current version contains new information on texting behaviors

of protesters at different socio-cultural and economic contexts. Hence, the literature section has been expanded to include latest research findings.

"Civil unrest" in the current study is broadly used to include all forms of civil disorder, especially those associated with or organized by social groups, trade unions, civil rights groups, occupy movements, or university students. This will include mass protests (violent or "peaceful"); social or political unrests, street demonstrations; sit-ins and occupy protests, or industrial actions and strikes. In "text messaging in social protests," (2015), I highlighted the fact that protest behaviors vary depending on the social and political contexts, as well the motives and the degree of participation. Hence, there is a peaceful protest that involves mass protesters in a protest march. In this case, protesters generally carry placards with protest messages. Protesters also sometimes wear T-shirts with protest messages inscribed on them (see Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2016). Sometimes, some peaceful protests have turned violent, when protesters began to engage security agents in direct confrontations through open fights and other criminal activities such as vandalism of public property, looting and raping. In this case what started as "peace" protests and rallies have ended up resulting in loss of lives and property. In most cases, security agents have had to resort to the use of tear gas or water canon to disperse protesters. An example was the Ferguson unrest that involved peaceful protests and riots that began a day after the shooting of a black American teenager (Michael Brown) by a white police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. The riots led to the imposition of curfews in the area and the deployment of the riot squad to maintain order. The protests continued until November 24, 2014 after a grand jury did not indict police officer Wilson.

As highlighted above, protest behaviors also include industrial actions involving labour/trade unions, where members deliberately stay away from work. In some peculiar circumstances, hunger strikes have also been engaged by individual protesters or activists. Extreme cases have been the deliberate self-immolations of activists in protest of institutional injustice. An example is that of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor, who set himself ablaze on December 10, 2010 in protest of the confiscation of his goods, and constant harassment and humiliation by municipal council officials. His death triggered off the Tunisian revolution. Collective actions and social movements participating at the same time have been caused by the need to achieve change, or "revolution" that is believed to be desperately needed either gradually or immediately or spontaneously (see Chiluwa, 2012). In recent times mass protests have enabled protesters to express their grievances over perceived deprivation, frustration, injustice or violation of fundamental human rights by governments or constituted authorities (Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010). The Ferguson riots for example raised questions and debates in the United States about the relationship between law enforcement officers and African Americans, the militarization of the police and the use of force doctrine in America.

BACKGROUND

The spread of social/political protests around the world has been attributed to the impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). People who are concerned about political events and developments in their countries are radically responding and mobilizing against oppressive regimes and systems and demanding for change (Smith 2010). According to Garret (2010) social media and ICTs such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* are currently changing the ways in which activists communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate. And text messaging has played important roles alongside these other social media,

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