

Text Messaging in Social Protests



Innocent Chilwa

Covenant University OTA, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Text Messaging (or *Texting*) refers to the common practice of typing messages on mobile phone key pads, and the sending of such messages between mobile phones using the Short Message Service (SMS). The term, 'SMS' is often used to describe both the medium and the message. Text messaging has become one of the most preferred digital media platforms, not only for the exchange of information and social interaction/networking by users but also for larger socio-economic and political uses such as commerce, political campaigning and banking among others. According to *Informa*, about 5.9 trillion text messages were sent worldwide in 2011 and it was projected that this number would increase to about 9.4 trillion in 2016. *Pew Research Center* in a 2011 survey shows that 83% American adults own cell phones and about 73% of them send and receive text messages. Also in the U.K, 92% of adults personally own and use mobile phones. And given the prevalence of mobile telephony in the world today it is not surprising therefore that very high number of users rely on their mobile phones for all forms of communication and information, including information that relates to planned protests, whether for peaceful demonstrations or criminal activities (Sheid, 2013).

Social protest is defined here, as the expression of radical opinions through (strong) language and other forms of social behaviour that rejects or resists certain government policies, or the existing sociopolitical structures by mass protesters, individual activists, civil rights organization or protest movements. Protest behaviours vary depending on the motive and the degree of participation. Hence, there is a peaceful protest that involves group/

mass protesters in a protest march. In this case, protesters generally carry placards with protest messages. Protest movements also sometimes wear T-shirts with protest messages inscribed on them (see Chilwa & Ajiboye, forthcoming). Protest behaviours also include industrial actions involving labour/trade unions, where members deliberately stay away from work. Hunger strikes have also been engaged by individual protesters. Other forms of protests include 'occupying' some particular city spots or centres such as those carried out by 'occupy movements.' Sometimes, protests turn violent, such as deliberate civil disobedience and riots involving direct confrontations with security agents and vandalism of public property. Such collective actions and social movements participating at the same time are triggered by the need to achieve change, or 'revolution' that is believed to be desperately needed either gradually or immediately or spontaneously (see Chilwa, 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).

OVERVIEW

The spread of social/political protests around the world in recent times 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 the erstwhile oppressive regimes and demanding for sociopolitical change (Smith 2010).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8239-9.ch083

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, sometimes earning government ban. Though these protests respond to very different socio-political and economic circumstances, they share the same social features (Gonzalez-Bailon et al, 2011).

Social media use in protests is a modern (new) development; this also suggests that research literature in this field is still emerging. Studies on social media roles in contemporary mass protests have centered on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, while mobile phone use has not been explicitly documented. However, before the current overwhelming popularity of *Facebook* and *Twitter* in the organization and implementation of offline protests, text messaging via mobile phones had been used to champion revolutionary actions (Hong, 2006). For instance, Ahrens (2001) had observed that cell-phone was used to coordinate the protest against the World Bank, by American University activists in 2000, and concluded that mobile phone is a weapon in the hands of the mobilizing people seeking social justice. Obadare (2005) also documented the GSM boycott in Nigeria in 2005 that forced mobile phone operators to 'vigorously renew their commitment to corporate social responsibility' (p.24).

The story of mobile phones in protest planning and implementation by activists ranges from the success of coordinated 'flash mobbing' to 'txtmobbing' and 'swarming.' A 'flash mob' is defined in terms of a group of people brought together often by text messages or social media to a designated location at a particular time to perform an indicated action before dispersing; thus, texting and media technology enable flash mobbers/protesters to instantaneously communicate with one other and are empowered to immediately change venue such as train stations, parks, town squares, and in some cases challenge or evade authorities (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Similarly, a *TXTmob*, which was

developed in collaboration with protest organizers, and has been applied by widespread adoption of SMS-enabled cell phones among activists and by evolutions in protest tactics, facilitated new social formations and modes of participation (Hirsch & Henry, 2005:1455). Texting has also been instrumental for coordinating 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2002) or swarming. The latter, which is recognized as a tactic of mobilizing actions by decentralized groups, is used in military parlance to describe a 'dispersion of command among many small, autonomous units that are able to collectively attack an enemy from all directions' (Hirsch & Henry, *ibid*). This method was used to describe the June 18 (J18) actions that occurred around the world, which also paralyzed central London in 1999, as well as the demonstrations that shut down a World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle in the same year (see Hirsch & Henry, 2005). Text messaging appeared as an ideal medium to coordinate these types of protests since cell phones are common and users would not immediately be identified as members of protest movements. Widespread cell phone use also meant that the protest networks could be expanded by thousands of activities without requiring the purchase of expensive radio technology. SMS is a technology that is widely adopted by many social sectors and relies on vibrant networks that are controlled by large companies (*ibid*).

In addition to texting, few studies have documented the use of Blackberry Instant Messaging (an extended system of mobile phone technology) in protests. Reporting the north London riots of 2011, Halliday (2011) notes that Blackberry handsets was used by about 37% of British teenagers. Blackberry Messenger (BBM) enables users to send one-to-many messages to their network contacts, who are connected by 'BBM PINS.' Unlike Facebook or Twitter, many BBM messages are not traceable by the authorities making BBM the most preferable by teens to spread gossip and mobilize for civil unrests. In the London protests for example, protesters had first gathered on Facebook with more than 7,500 fans to mourn and vow to

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