

Chapter 77

The Opportunities and Challenges of using Email for Political Communication in Authoritarian States: A Case of Zimbabwe's Media Monitoring Project

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses Illich's (1973) concept of conviviality for analysing the challenges and opportunities of using email for political communication in authoritarian states. Based on evidence from a case study of Zimbabwe's Media Monitoring Project (MMPZ), it contends that while conviviality allows the use of ICTs for political mobilisation, it also enables a counterproductive "big brother" effect. In addition to constant censorship and overt operations, covert strategies are often used for disrupting communication platforms. This calls for a framework for harnessing ICTs for political mobilisation. This chapter is a case study on how perceived state surveillance disrupted a vibrant communicative space in Zimbabwe. Based on evidence from the volumes of email traffic transacted over two weeks of panic, anger, and heroism, the chapter discusses the challenges and opportunities of using email for political mobilisation and warns against uncritical celebration of the role of ICTs in political mobilisation. It concludes by suggesting how the adaption of e-strategies from email marketing to political communication is among the skills that could break the tie between political opponents armed with the same convivial tools for political communication in the information age.

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INTRODUCTION

The role of ICTs in promoting political change in autocratic states has attracted the attention of a growing number of scholars in the information age (Delany 2009; Eltantawy and Wiest 2011; Joseph 2011; Lynch 2011; Shirky 2011). This interest was also fuelled by a phenomenal use of ICTs for political change in authoritarian states like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring which commenced in the year 2011. The same period also saw the birth of ongoing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) enabled revolutions in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. In all of these cases, the use of ICTs marked a departure from earlier springs (e.g. in Central Europe and popular movements that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines or Suharto in Indonesia) to the emerging practice of ICT enabled political activism in the information age.

Optimism about the power of internet as articulated by Utopians (Joseph 2011, Shirky 2011) has been challenged by techno-pessimistic voices in burgeoning literature that view the internet as a tool of surveillance used by totalising states to thwart democracy in developing countries. This is supported by a growing body of literature articulating how governments can counter the use of the internet by terrorists (Jacobson 2010). Other sceptics dismiss online activism as mere 'slacktivism' which requires no sacrifice on the part of participants (Gladwell 2010) and yield no tangible results.

This ambiguity begs a question whether ICTs are the boon or the bane of politics in the information age? It also creates a fertile ground for philosophical exegesis on the transformative effect of ICTs by invoking a contest between the utopian and dystopian views. Without supporting the utopian thesis or its dystopian antithesis, this paper adopts Illich's (1973) tools of conviviality theory for demonstrating the opportunities that ICTs grant social movements as well as the challenges associated with ICT-enhanced state

surveillance and repression (lynch 2011). The concept of conviviality of electronic communication tools posits that ICTs can empower whoever is using them. In comparison with Illich's (1973) telephone, Ameripour et al (2010) present the internet as an ideal example of convivial tools for political mobilisation in the information age.

A debate on the role of ICTs in political mobilisation would seem shallow to the uncritical reader due to a perceived given-ness of the pros and cons that lie on the surface of the discourse. However, mining deeper into the discourse reveals the translucent issues that may redefine our expectations of the nature of politics in the information age. For instance, while ICTs have altered the contours of political opportunities, it is not clear whether they will abate the authoritarian state by undermining its pillars or whether they will entrench it by taking traditional imbalances to a new frontier. Against this background, a case study of how Zimbabwe's Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe (MMPZ) was allegedly infiltrated by Zimbabwe's dreaded state agency is used as field evidence for articulating the synthesis of the utopian thesis and its dystopian antithesis. In this study as in other ICT enabled applications, we deny technological determinism (McLuhan 1964) by hypothesising that ICTs can only achieve results when championed by appropriate skills under a conducive socio-political environment but not on their own.

Our unit of analysis MMPZ is based in Zimbabwe, a Sub-Saharan country with 88.9% tele-density and 12% internet penetration which is overseen by repressive laws that allow government to monitor and intercept electronic communication. We refer to it as an authoritarian state because of its repression of opposition parties and civil society which has led to international isolation and intervention by regional block. As information assumed a more central and convivial role in information age politics, Zimbabwe passed the Interception of Communications Act of 2007 (ICA [2007]) to buttress a raft of other restrictive

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