

Revolutionary Text: Social Psychology of Cellphone Texting during People Power II

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In January 2001, Filipinos toppled a corrupt president through People Power II, using one technological tool to maximum advantage—the mobile phone. The short messaging service (SMS) or text messaging provided opportunities to pass on messages rapidly to large groups of people. A content analysis of the text messages revealed three themes, namely: political information and persuasion, protest humor, and political emotions. Political information included rumors and beliefs, persuasive messages to join mass actions, and practical instructions about mobilizing huge protest rallies. Political jokes passed around permitted Filipinos to derogate President Estrada and his allies, and provided opportunities to ventilate pent-up social angers. Texting during People Power II demonstrated the mobile phone's capacity to disseminate political messages in a rapid, multiplicative, yet discreet fashion, resulting in a massive and peaceful social force.

Keywords: Cellphone Texting, MobilePhones, Social Change, People Power

In the past two decades, active nonviolent (ANV) democratic transitions have jolted the political terrain of nation-states that lay at the peripheries of Cold War superpowers. ANV democratic transitions transformed political structures in Eastern Europe (Bennett, 1997; Clemens, 1997), Southeast and East Asia (Dong,

1997; Macapagal & Nario-Galace, 2003), Latin America (Chuchryk, 1997; Rojas, 1997) and South Africa (Mulholland, 1997). The Philippines' People Power I in 1986 and People Power II in 2001 likewise demonstrated how large-scale protest movements can effect nonviolent power shifts away from dictatorial and corrupt state leaders.

In the analysis of global people power, Ackerman and Krueger (1994) underscored the importance of communication devices when engaged in nonviolent conflict. They stressed that communication devices were important tools for executing political plans, especially during situations when information-dissemination had to be swift, accurate, and constant. This research studied the pivotal role of cellphone texting during the Philippines' People Power II in 2001.

Communication Technology and Nonviolent Resistance

Martin (2001) outlined traditional technologies instrumental in nonviolent action against authoritarian regimes. He described how information recorded in cassette and video tapes influenced third party interventions, how radio communicated plans of action, and how television broadcasted repression and pleas for peaceful conflict resolutions. Recent studies likewise illustrated the growing importance of newer information communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet in political struggles (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000).

The use of the internet to battle undemocratic regimes began in the late 1990s (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000). As cases in point, we describe the role of communication technology in nonviolent resistance movements in Burma, China, and Serbia. In Burma, internet technology allowed activists to communicate with others through email, chats, and conferences as well as post human rights violations on the web. Despite restrictions by the military government requiring license for use of fax machines, mobile phones, and internet, prodemocracy groups still gained access through porous cyber-borders (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000).

Chinese dissidents, members of the Falungong, Tibetan activists, and other groups that the Chinese government considered subversive, likewise used the internet for political networking. The internet allowed activists from China and other countries to communicate by email, bulletin board systems, and discussion groups. The same technology facilitated information-dissemination on sensitive issues such as human rights violation and international political affairs. An internet guerilla warfare successfully launched an unannounced protest in Beijing (Chase & Mulvenon, 2002).

In another part of the globe, Serbian student activists used technology to protest Milosevic's refusal to acknowledge electoral results in 1996. Despite restrictions on traditional broadcast media like radio, prodemocracy advocates turned to internet-radio technology to promote their causes. Aside from videotaping marches to document any violent attacks, students utilized fax machines and mobile phones to direct marches. Prodemocracy websites were created to convene seminars, discussions, and emails, with messages reaching 15,000 people within 36 hours. With information readily available on the internet, third party alliances were able to support the movement by providing funds for nonviolent action (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000).

Aside from the internet, another new technology used in prodemocracy movements was the mobile phone. Cellphone hardware and usage was relatively cheaper than the computer-hardware requirements of the internet. Hence the mobile phone was more affordable and accessible to a larger group of people, especially in poorer societies. The mobile phone made communication possible regardless of time and space barriers, increasing its utility in political mobilizations and mass persuasions. It also provided more safety, because rapid two-way communication between political operators could take place without much risk of arrest by state intelligence agents. In the Philippines, for example, optimal use of the mobile phone's texting capability helped topple a corrupt president through People Power II in 2001.

The Mobile Phone in the Philippines

Two years after the cellphone's introduction to the Philippines in the mid-1990s, the number of mobile phones surpassed the number of fixed telephone lines. We surmise that the mobile phone's popularity in the Philippines arose because of its affordability, availability, and texting feature. We first explain the affordability-availability features, and next discuss the texting phenomenon in the Philippines.

When the new generation of mobile phones which had texting capabilities were first marketed in the Philippines, handsets were sold for as low as Php2,000.00 (approximately US\$40). The prepaid feature also made the mobile phone available to everybody. With the limited availability of landlines, Filipinos turned to the mobile phone for their communication needs. Only 3 years after the mobile service became available to the market in 1994, the two major mobile phone service providers claimed 1.3 million subscribers, compared to 6.5 million landline subscribers since the sole fixed line provider began its operations in 1967. By mid-2002, a survey done by Digital Filipino showed an estimated 12 million Filipino mobile phone users.

We attribute the wide acceptance of mobile phones in the Philippines to the texting feature available in handsets, which allows cheap communication by sending shortened messages (SMS). The texting feature, rather than the expensive phoning capability of the cellphone was the basis for the mobile phones wide popularity. Filipinos texted so frequently that the Philippines was sometimes referred to as the texting capital of the world. Pertierra, Ugarte, Pingal, Hernandez and Dacanay (2002) wrote a comprehensive account of the social consequences of prevalence in mobile phone use in the Philippines, with the conclusion that "cellphones have become a major icon in Philippine life, in that it has extended the scope of social relationships" (p.149) and from 1994 to 2002, "cellphones in the Philippines were mainly used for texting" (p.150).

People Power II and Cellphone Texting

In 2001, Filipinos engaged in a relatively spontaneous nonviolent struggle that led to the quick and successful toppling of a corrupt president. Though Joseph Estrada won the 1998 Philippine presidential elections and looked forward to exercising 6 years of power at his country's top post, scandal rocked his government as his trusted ally publicly denounced the direct involvement of Estrada in government corruption. Street protests built up, demanding Estrada's resignation. By November 2000, Congress impeached Estrada, and the case went to the Senate. Media coverage of the Senate trial mesmerized Filipinos, drawing in an audience size that surpassed the most popular radio and television soap operas. The trial reached a turning point when Clarissa Ocampo, then senior vice-president of Equitable Bank, testified that "it was in her very presence that Estrada signed the fictitious name" used to cover a questionable P500 million peso investment (Palabrica, 2001). After 35 witnesses and 24 days of trial (Palabrica, 2001), on January 16, 2001, the Senate voted against opening a crucial bank envelope that allegedly contained hard evidence against Estrada. This political act, watched on television by millions, sparked massive protests. Filipinos took to the streets pressing for Estrada's resignation in a powerful show of force. Five days later, Estrada stepped down as president, and Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo took her oath as the new Philippine president. People Power II had successfully and peacefully removed a corrupt president, when legitimate state institutions failed to do so.

In People Power II, it was not the hi-tech mobile phone technology that paved the way for peaceful political transformation in the Philippines. Rather, political operators used the short message system (SMS) technology, more commonly called texting, to mobilize a huge number of people for street protests against a corrupt leader (Beja, 2001). Text messages rapidly spread the call to go out to the streets (Coronel, 2001); in a sense, Estrada was texted out of power (Ricafrente, 2001). By using text messages,

rally organizers mobilized crowds in front of the historic EDSA shrine barely an hour after the Senate vetoed the opening of bank evidence against President Estrada (Villamor, 2001).

To communicate with many people simultaneously, one just needed to press <Send> and then <Distribution list>. In a split second, the political message reached friends, who in turn passed the same text to their <Distribution list>, in a rapid multiplicative fashion. Since both fact and fiction could be spread through texting, civil society set up desks in strategic places to verify crucial (dis)information. For example, in our university, the Ateneo de Manila University, we organized a verification center in front of our library, with a direct cellphone line to allies within the political elite. Our friends from within upper political circles verified facts with us, through cellular phone voice contact.

Texting provided a secure shelter for the message sender. It was safer than oral communication because the sender and receiver did not meet face-to-face, nor did they have to know each other personally. Because of the anonymity and physical distance that texting provided, there was almost no risk of getting caught by police/military agents when one passed on a political message against President Estrada. Protected by the safety of physical distance, the text senders challenged a corrupt and militarized regime without much risk to one's life.

Our research examined the psycho-political content of text messages during People Power II. We asked the following questions: (a) What was the thematic content of the text messages during People Power II?, and (b) What was the social psychological impact of texting on the nonviolent nature of People Power II?

METHOD

We collected text messages from three sources: reports from activists at People Power II, websites, and newspaper listings of text messages during People Power II. Verbatim text messages

were transcribed and then clustered according to shared themes. An initial scan of all the text messages indicated at least two general classes of political messages—ideas and feelings. We then proceeded to divide the types of messages into these two broad clusters. During the coding stage, we noted that most of the items classified under feelings were political jokes. Hence, we distinguished political humor from feelings such as anger during the impeachment trial, and elation after the triumph of People Power II. A review of the messages classified under “ideas” showed two types of messages, political information about the unfolding events within government and military circles, and persuasions to join the massive mobilization.

The text messages were then counted and recorded according to categories. Each category was composed of text messages with similar contents. After determining the different categories, the data were divided according to the time period when the messages were sent. These time periods were: Estrada’s Impeachment Trial (before January 16, 2001), People Power II or EDSA vigil (January 16-20, 2001), and Post-EDSA. We compared the frequencies of categories in order to examine any change in the number and content of categories across stages of the political transition.

Note that it was not technically possible to count how many times a certain message was sent, because text messages are stored only for a very short time in a central server before these are overwritten by new texts. Hence we counted text categories, or number of message types, rather than the raw number of times a message was sent. We assumed approximately equal sending-frequency rates for each unique text message.

RESULTS

According to a confidential source from one of the two competing mobile phone companies, the number of estimated text messages markedly increased during People Power II. “Barely an hour after the 11 senators vetoed the unsealing of bank

documents against Estrada, protest crowd started to gather at the historic ESDA shrine” (Villamor, 2001). Table 1 presents the approximate number of mobile texts sent before, during, and after People Power II. A one-way chi-square test shows that the number of text messages was significantly different before, during, and after People Power II (chi-square = 37.03; $p < 0.01$).

Table 1. Total Number of Text Messages Sent per Day

| Time Period | Number of Text Messages per Day |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Before EDSA 2 | 30 million |
| During EDSA 2 | 100 million |
| After EDSA 2 | 70 million |

Three general categories explain a significant amount of the political content of text messages: information and persuasion, humor, and other emotions. Political information covered news about events unfolding in the upper echelons of power, among conniving government, military, and progovernment media people. Persuasive and operations messages for political mobilization of civil society likewise comprised a large portion of text messages. Table 2 shows samples of political information and persuasive scripts.

Text messages also contained derogatory humor about the mental, moral, and sexual abilities of politicians associated with Former President Estrada, as well as jokes ridiculing the rigged impeachment trial. Political emotions included anger at corruption, disgust toward the 11 senators who voted against the opening of the bank envelope, hope, and triumphant feelings after a successful People Power II. Table 3 shows examples of political jokes while Table 4 lists some texts conveying other emotions.

Table 2. Political Information/Persuasion Text Messages during People Power II

| Political Information | Topic | Sample Text Messages |
|---|---|---|
| News and information —fact, fiction, or a combination of fact and fiction | About the impeachment trial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Hey, they didn't want to open the 2nd envelope. √ (TV newscasters) Korina Sanchez, Ted Failon, Noli de Castro are getting money from the gov't to sugar-coat the news. Don't believe them, they're not credible. |
| | About People Power II rallies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ A deep source says that tomorrow there'll be a fake assassination attempt on Erap/ Enrile to justify martial law! Maceda prepares TV announcement. Pass so they know we know. √ Confirmed military intelligence report over radio: Possible Luzon-wide blackout tonight due to sabotage. Please be prepared. Please pass. √ There's something happening this p.m. (Chief-of-Staff) Reyes defecting. |
| Political Beliefs | Political thoughts and opinions about ongoing events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ I'm just concerned about what's happening now. √ We have witnessed the crumbling of our political system. |
| Calls for Mobilization | | |
| Persuasion to mobilize | Messages urging people to gather at the EDSA Shrine especially during | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ People are going to EDSA. I'm bringing my family. Bring your family too. √ Tell people to go. It's fizzling out. tense political √ I told you! To the streets! moments √ I escaped from my dad! Let's go to the rally. √ Tell your mom you're going to EDSA. Then let's go to the mall and play billiards. |

| Political Information | Topic | Sample Text Messages |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ We have to go. The military has agreed to join us if our number will reach one million. ✓ Hey, it's like a party here. Come over. |
| Mobilization Arrangements | Arrangements for transportation to EDSA Shrine; coordination among friends, relatives, schoolmates | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Just tell me if you wanna go. I'll pick you up. ✓ Senate, at 11 a.m. ✓ I'm here near the La Salle banner. Left of the stage banner. ✓ Go to Katipunan. People are mad. |
| Mobilization for Special Events | Announcements and instructions about special events during People Power II – e.g., call for a protest noise barrage, volunteers for the human chain, schedule of holy mass celebrations at the Shrine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Noise barrage at 11 a.m. in defiance of the NO vote. ✓ Wear black tomorrow. To mourn the death of truth and justice in our country. Please pass this to 10 others for the love of our country. ✓ We will form a human chain from the foot of Ninoy's statue in Makati to EDSA Shrine. We will block traffic for 5 minutes. Honk your horns in protest and go to the prayer vigil at EDSA. |

Figure 1 presents the number of message-categories texted across various historical moments of People Power II. Results show that texting reached its peak at the height of People Power II, as millions of Filipinos

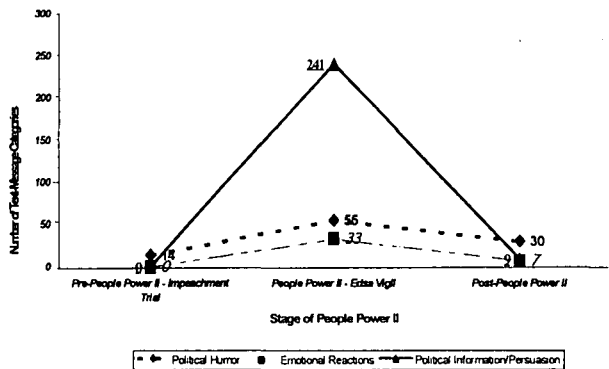


Figure 1. Number of text-message categories across time.

mobilized to produce a nonviolent force against the Estrada administration.

Table 3. Political Humor in Text Messages during People Power II

| Emotion | Description | Example |
|--|---|---|
| Jokes/Humor | | |
| Humor/Satire (most salient emotion) | Jokes that put-down the mental, moral and sexual abilities of President Estrada (Erap) and politicians associated with the President; jokes about the impeachment trial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Erap agrees to step down... the US government has granted him asylum with his family. There will be a delay, cuz Erap doesn't know which family to bring. √ Erap was seen leaving Malacanang drunk and shouting <i>Erap Resign!</i> √ In Vegas, Erap sees a coke machine. He puts coins, can pops out. He puts more coins, more cans pop out. Man behind: Can I cut in? Erap: Back off!! I'm still winning! √ Contents of the 2nd envelope (that senators voted to leave sealed): Erap's grade school report card √ If you saw Sen. Oreta and Sen. Santiago drowning, what would you choose to do – watch a movie or eat at Jolibee? √ Jobs at impeachment trial: Hairstylist for Mendoza, psychiatrist for Miriam, anger management therapist for Enrile, textmate for Oreta and dream analyst for Revilla |

Table 4. Other Emotions in Text Messages during People Power II

| Emotion | Description | Example |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Anger | | |
| Generalized political indignation | Anger at corruption, briberies, unfolding political events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Let the funeral bells toll because Philippine democracy died last night. Let's all pray for our country and never cease trusting the Lord. √ Terrible! This is too much! |
| Disgust | | |
| Person-specific anger | Disgust toward the 11 senators who voted against the envelope-opening | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ <i>A graphic message shows a person pacing back & forth, saying "I can't keep still. I want to kill the 11 senators."</i> √ Express ur disgust over Tessie Oreta's statement. Her mobile no. is ____, her fax no. at home is ____. (This came from her staff.) |
| Hope; Joy | | |
| | Triumphant feelings after a successful People Power II | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ This is the first generation to oust a president through text messaging. Long live text messaging! √ I can't believe we did it! After 3 days of uncertainty, we can all rest relieved that things will be better! |

In a count of number of text messages cybercirculated during People Power II, political information/persuasion ranked first with 250 categories. An example of one such text message is 'Erap resign! Join us in EDSA! *Labas na* (Go out now!)' (Dario, Llamas, & Rojas, 2001). Political humor placed second with 99 types of joke messages. We tabulated 40 messages related to other political emotions like disgust and elation. We further noted that before the crest of People Power II, anti-Estrada text humor was already being passed around ($f=14$), while no other text types circulated

about political information/persuasion ($f = 0$), nor other emotions ($f = 0$). We will return to this point about humor in the Discussion section of our paper.

DISCUSSION

Political Information/Persuasion, Mobile Texting, and Nonviolent Political Transition

Using a politico-psychological lens, we see the significance of mobile texting in the development of a collective action frame. Filipinos were able to negotiate and form shared meanings about the political situation through interactive discourses via texting. These shared meanings, constantly articulated through texting, resulted in the formation and alignment of a collective action frame. Collective action frames are constructed in three ways, beginning with the negotiation of shared meanings on the problematic condition, followed by a discourse on who is the enemy and finally, a push for collective action to effect change (Benford & Snow, 2000). During People Power II, texting technology facilitated the rapid and safe propagation of these three stages of a collective action frame that consolidated the different players of the protest movement.

Firstly, text messages relayed political grievances about the government's widespread corruption, moral and mental ineptitude, and the bankruptcy of procedural justice during the impeachment trial. Secondly, texts pinpointed President Estrada and the 11 senators as enemies of civil society, clearly identifying the antagonists in the power struggle. This new technology permitted the spread of messages about social grievance and collective blame, to anyone in the Philippines who owned a cellphone. At that historical moment, the use of cellphones had permeated Filipinos' everyday life, especially among the youth and Metro Manilans. Hence, it was easy to spread informative and persuasive messages needed to mobilize millions for People Power II. Without

texting, the formation of a politicized collective frame would have proceeded at a slower pace. Cellphone texting as a new technology hence played a vital role in the rapid alignment of political consciousnesses, especially among the throngs of young people.

Political Humor, Mobile Texting, and Nonviolent Political Transition

Politically humorous messages were sent through mobile texting before, during, and after People Power II. In fact, before and after People Power II, the number of humor-related text categories surpassed the number of texts about political information and persuasion. This finding indicates that humor may have set the cultural foundations for nonviolence, as anti-Estrada forces criticized the corrupt leaders, in a manner that was simultaneously courageous but not aggressive.

Past studies have shown that political humor can be a potent tool used to challenge oppressive regimes in Czechoslovakia, Italy (Nilsen, 1990), Occupied France (Rosenberg, 2002), Stalin's Russia (Thurston, 1991), and Franco's Spain (Pi-Sunyer, 1977). Such anti-oppression humor can be expressed in art work like *Mickey Mouse in the Gurs Internment Camp*, a collection of cartoon satiring life in the prison camp (Rosenberg, 2002). Oral jokes were passed rapidly by word of mouth, and comprised much of the political humor that challenged oppressive regimes. In Spain during Franco's rule, the jokes poked fun at the dictator (Pi-Sunyer, 1977). In Stalin's USSR, political humor derogated Stalin, criticized the regime and the Soviet's miserable life, and joked about the brutalities of intelligence and police agents (Thurston, 1991).

The use of humor against an oppressive regime produces psychological and social effects that aid political change in a nonviolent way. Psychologists explain humor in different ways—as an expression of perceived superiority over others, a perception of incongruity in concepts or events, or a release of accumulated

tension and energy (Morreall, 1983). From any of these three angles, humor aids nonviolent political change.

From the superiority-theory view, humor gives oppressed peoples opportunity to create a superior position vis-à-vis an authoritarian leader by making derogatory jokes. The very creation by civil society of a massive derogatory discourse lowers the position of a powerful ruler in the social clash. Further, political humor points out incongruities between what the state publicly claims in its propagandized machinations, on one hand, and what the government actually does to its citizens in everyday political life, on the other hand. Finally, psychology's relief theory clarifies how humor ventilates pent-up angers. During social clashes and political change, humor provides tension relief, making the public mood less angry and tense, yet constantly focused on the social issues of the struggle. Under these circumstances, the chance for political change remains high, while the probability of armed combat and street riots is lowered because the millions in the streets are not hot headed.

Humor can be an instrument for positive influence and social control. Humor increases inbonding (Nilsen, 1990), and makes people less aversive to concessions (O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981). Political jokes shared among civilians disenchanted with a regime increases group cohesion and encourages concessions needed to build an oppositionist united front. In particular, the use of texting to spread humor as a form of political dissent made Filipinos feel that they were part of a larger community thereby encouraging a sense of active participation and empowerment (Pertierra et al., 2002). On the other hand, humor can also be used as a social corrective by ridiculing and embarrassing (Endlich, 1993; Shott, 1979). Embarrassment is an emotion closely linked with the presence of others (Shott, 1979). Political jokes that publicly embarrass a powerful head of state contribute to a political culture that weakens his authoritarian rule.

As street rallies intensified, so too did social tensions and threats of a pending military crackdown. Although the Philippines had by then an established democratic constitution and free elections, President Estrada showed himself on television surrounded by generals. Further, one particular key witness against Estrada had disappeared mysteriously. During these tense moments, mobile texting provided Filipinos the opportunity to spread jokes in a rapid yet politically safe manner.

The significance of this research lies in its demonstration of the psycho-political role of mobile texting in peaceful power shifts, in a newly-democratized country like the Philippines. The texting technology provided safety for the message sender. Because one could send messages from a distance, one was protected from militarized state agents while delivering a 'subversive' message. Further, texting technology provided a cheap and fast way to communicate with other fellow protesters—faster and cheaper than face-to-face communication, telephone lines, or even the internet.

During People Power II, cellphone texting spread political-protest humor that denigrated the Establishment and ventilated pent-up tensions during social confrontations. The humorous relief of political tensions lowered chances of street riots and kept the political crowd focused on the social issues against the corrupt regime. Cellphone texting also contributed to the nonviolent transition of power by aligning the consciousness of the protest movement (a) against one enemy (President Estrada), (b) toward one shared goal (removing President Estrada from power), (c) by using one political strategy (People Power). Texting allowed the rapid multiway relay of political messages needed to mobilize and persuade millions of people to go out to the streets in a forceful yet peaceful way.

FOOTNOTES

*Excel software was used to generate the graph in Figure 1.

¹Digital Filipino is a monthly publication of DigitalFilipino.com, a research site on information technology use in the Philippines, owned and managed by Janette Toral (janette@digitalfilipino.com) in a forceful yet peaceful way.

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