

Politics of Mobile Phones

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Mobile phones are not only changing social behavior. Like the Internet, they have penetrated the realm of politics in increasingly significant ways.

To begin with, mobile phones are now standard issues to government officials, part of operations and expenditures charged to the regular budget of the concerned government agency. As such they are sources of corruption in government. Much like in the case of the official car, the distinction between official and private use of government-issued and subsidized mobile phones may be blurred. In the future, exposés on government corruption may include acquisition of luxurious cellphones, similar to what has become acquired taste for huge luxury four-wheel drives of ranking officials; or rigged biddings in favor of one mobile phone company or another.

Mobile phones have also become handy contraptions for political mobilization of all sorts. We already saw this in EDSA 2 — the mobile phone, Internet and the MRT (metro rail transit) along EDSA were powerful tools for passing updates and statements, and mobilizing forces. During EDSA 1, we were still marveling at what fax machines and cable news like the CNN could do. Well, we already had the beeper, a pretty inconvenient device by today's standards and one contingent on landlines. And EDSA then was a wide stretch of level road that had no "orchestra" or "balcony" sections from where streamers could be hung, or people can position themselves for a better view.

Mobile phones were very much part of the story of the July 2003 mutiny of "Magdalo" junior military officers. Jailed mutiny leader Lt. Sr. Grade Antonio Trillanes condemned himself with his outrageous claim that the massing of troops and arms at Oakwood was spontaneous, a product of SMS going round the networks of select Philippine Military Academy (PMA) alumni. A piece of evidence linking Senator Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan to the apparent coup bid is a digital image taken from the mobile phone of one soldier during the alleged blood compact among them.

The standoff at Oakwood was also mediated by this ubiquitous device. Mediators from all sides sought to reach out for a compromise via furious

calls before finally getting to meet face to face. Government negotiators called their principals, and maybe so did the mutineers, though who these principals are, are still being investigated.

There is a vibrant SMS community of citizens exchanging political jokes on the latest coup bid or the current scandal, or debating on the merits or demerits of the issue of the day. It is suspected however that mobile phone companies also have a hand in crafting some of these political jokes to make a killing on the chain reaction sending one joke would spur. But I know that regular folks like some of my friends with activist backgrounds are responsible for some of these humorous, obviously cynical, tirades on our politicians, their spouses and paramours, cronies and everyone else in the league. US President Bush was not spared the vitriolic attacks at the height of the controversy over the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Not surprisingly, "managing" the infrastructure, liberalizing the industry, ensuring efficient service, protection from undue government interference, safeguarding consumer rights across service providers, and democratizing access in relation to these handsets are emerging as contested political issues. The Internet – as the collection of articles in this issue will show – is already giving us ideas on the kinds of policy concerns relevant to mobile phones that will surface.

In Korea, the opposition party recently accused the government leadership of preventing the production of anti-wiretapping devices for cellphones, and denying and covering up the fact that the tapping of CDMA (code division multiple access) mobile phones is possible.

The opposition claims that this year, state ministers and state secretaries of the Blue House were provided with phones equipped with special chips that block tapping. Some local governments also allocated budget for purchase of these specially protected phones.

And yet, the National Intelligence Service supposedly blocked a cellphone manufacturing company from selling phones with double layers of encryption.

In effect, opposition politicians feel that they are at the risk of being bugged, while those in power are protected from scrutiny, legal or otherwise.

For the former, they would have to rely on multiple handsets to fend off surveillance.

Mobile phones have also emerged as an unintended tool for invasion of privacy, usually through mis-sent messages, as in the case of the Italian parliamentarian who mistakenly sent to his wife a love note intended for the mistress. The wife filed for divorce. Because the man involved is a public official, it created a political scandal involving questions of morality and public office as mediated by the phone.

Of course, intentionally, recordings made on cellphones can be checked and opened by anyone else to confirm or deny whatever suspicion. Tracking down people using GPS services offered by Smart provides security measures and psychological relief to say, parents anxious about the whereabouts of their teen-aged children. But when these mechanisms get into the hands of unscrupulous entities – state or non-state – they can be a big blow to civil rights.

Like the loosening up of bank secrecy laws to put checks on money laundering and of Internet privacy protection as an anti-terrorism measure, states may in the future be wanting to have a freer hand in hacking the mass of information stored in the memory bank of a private citizen's mobile phone or the sound waves that pass through it.

If faxed and e-mailed messages are now considered official documents or transactions, what about SMS? Some interviews of public officials and other informants are now being done through SMS exchanges between the journalist and the official, whose words are quoted and published. In case of libel suits, would these messages stand scrutiny as evidence of either the defense or the prosecution, in the same way that faxed documents are now considered admissible evidence?

Pricing and tax policies on providing and using mobile phone services have already emerged as a terrain for intra-state, state-civil society, and consumer-business engagement. That's why it has not been easy for Smart or Globe to raise SMS fees. Consumer groups would also do well to keep track of the legislative lobby taking place in the drawing up of appropriate taxes. They should watch out for legislators who are lining up their pockets with corporate manna using the usual AC-DC ("attack and collect, defend and collect") techniques.

The political economy of the telecommunications industry is also being increasingly examined in the academe. As a big and growing industry, there is obviously big capital involved. It would be important to find out what chunk of the industry mobile phones in particular partakes, and the specific forms of state-business relations that it assumes.

Crimes involving cellphones and the complicity of people in the security sector is an indicator of the need to cleanse our police and military institutions of scalawags. It would also be worthy to investigate how illegal gambling activities like *jueteng* are increasingly making use of SMS.

As in any practice or technology that has penetrated the lives of people, public or private, the politics of the emergent relations (between technology and people, technology and institutions, and people and institutions mediated through the technology) are sure to follow. After the Internet, this amazing wireless device is next on the line of public discourse and political action. ❁