

IPS Seminar on Mobile Activism: “From Social Swarms to Political Change” Speaker: Dr Madanmohan Rao

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Dr Madanmohan, an author and consultant on new media based in India and Singapore, began his presentation by stating that media historically has been used as an effective tool for political change. Examples include the role of short messaging service (SMS) in the case of the 2001 Philippine uprising which deposed then-President Joseph Estrada. Many have also attributed the 2011 regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt to the role of mobile phones and social media.

However, Dr Rao noted that certain “base and trigger factors” were also required to effect social change apart from media use, which he described as a catalyst rather than a cause. The existence of disenfranchised youth who are dissatisfied with the state of the economy, politics and society is crucial. The degree of urbanisation in a country may also be important, as high urbanisation is typically accompanied by wide broadband Internet access which allows the dissemination of video material. However, what is also

crucial is the way people are utilising various forms of social media, he said.

Dr Rao said that social media has brought about qualitative changes in the connection between people and events. First, there is the opportunity of “real-time” updates and participation in events. He cited the example of a jazz festival he had just attended, where a good number of individuals left at the same time upon receipt of a tweet (a short message that can be sent through a mobile phone to the Twitter platform) stating that a certain musician would not be making an appearance.



Second, the use of social media has also allowed for real-time monitoring of events, such as the elections in Africa. Recently, election monitors on the continent had made use of mobile phone SMS to relay the most up-to-date election information to their peers and co-workers.

Third, social media has been used for information dissemination within a community and for ground-up community initiatives. South Africans have also used

social media for neighbourhood governance. On a publicly accessible portal, members of communities there use SMS, email and Twitter to update each other on the latest crime sightings, thereby raising local crime awareness.

Social media has also been used for community mobilisation and ground-up community initiatives, said Dr Rao. An example is Thaiflood.com, a site set up by irate Bangkok residents to disseminate information about local floods. This site then spurred the Thai government to set up an official website with the same functions. In Indonesia, web cameras have been set up to monitor the Mount Merapi eruptions, and Twitter was used to publicise the plight of those affected by the eruptions and in need of help.

Social media has also allowed activists to “crowdsource” (that is, garner opinions on a certain issue online) and “crowdfund” (that is, raise funds through the canvassing of smaller amounts online). This can be done at a fairly low cost to reach everyone.

Dr Rao said social media could undermine closed political regimes. Twitter and Facebook allows groups of people to form “swarms” that keep members informed, rather than just passively receiving information through mass media. Such movements are difficult for regimes to track. He noted that in the recent case of Egypt’s regime change, there were at least 14 or 15 of such swarms which coordinated movements in and out of Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the protests in Cairo.

Furthermore, technological innovation is always ahead of legislation. Switching off the Internet, – a tactic tried by the Mubarak government in Egypt before they

were forced out of power - may not work as such blocks could be circumvented. One example of this is [Speak2Tweet](http://Speak2Tweet.com), a collaboration between Google, Twitter and SayNow. [Speak2Tweet](http://Speak2Tweet.com) allows prospective tweeters to dial designated phone numbers, record a voice message which would then be translated by SayNow’s technology into text. The text would then be posted on the Twitter website. The Tactical Technology Collective, a non-governmental organisation, also offers its information expertise and tools to support the advocacy work of civil society actors in developing countries and countries in transition.

Dr Rao also predicted a role for mesh-based networks, decentralised networks where devices are connected through a mesh of links rather than through a central node that can be targeted for shutdown. These networks may be a reality in future, making any state action to prevent any inward or outward flow of information even more challenging.

The seminar was attended by over 30 people from government, academia and the media.

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