ACTIVISM 2.0

Activists today are e-mailing, text-messaging, and blogging for a cause. Are these just the newest tools in the same fight for change, or are modern technologies changing the nature of activism as we know it? | BY KATHARINE KENDRICK

F YOU CLICK A BUTTON ONLINE TO ADD YOUR NAME to Amnesty International's Close Guatánamo electronic petition, you are joining more than a single human rights campaign. You are joining an international movement of online activism.

Technology is transforming activism. Increasingly, the hippie activist seeking petition signatures on the street corner is being replaced by the tech-savvy mobilizer. Activists around the world are harnessing the latest technologies to take their campaigns in new directions. In the United States, some representatives of Congress have begun to encourage constituents to e-mail their concerns in lieu of a hand-written letter. In the Philippines, cell phones buzz with text messages advocating one candidate or another for an upcoming election. In Egypt, Internet blogs convey the loudest voices of dissent.

E-mails, text-messages, blogs—all are expanding activism's reach and bringing more people into the fight for change. But sending an e-mail is still far different than holding a rally. To what degree are new media transforming traditional ways of achieving change? Are these new technologies so accessible and inexpensive as to render on-the-ground activism obsolete?

CHANGING THE ACTIVIST'S WORLD

Surprisingly, tech-powered activism first came into its own far removed from Silicon Valley. On January 1, 1994, in the remote state of Chiapas in southern Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation announced a revolutionary campaign against corporate globalization and wealth disparity in response to the enactment of the NAFTA treaty. While the Mexican government quietly tried to suppress the rebellion, the Zapatistas took their message to the world. In a matter of days, supporters circulated the Zapatistas' declaration of war around the world through faxes and e-mails to likely sympathizers, from humanitarian groups, to political forums, to anti-war activists. While the national and global press refused to print the Zapatistas' message in full, the declaration garnered worldwide support over the Internet within weeks.

Technology again proved its potential five years later in Seattle, Washington. When the World Trade Organization (WTO) convened on November 30, 1999, so did over 40,000 protestors in what became known as the five-day-long "Battle for Seattle." These protesters were not part of a single organization but rather a loose coalition of activists from labor unions, religious groups, international NGOs, and universities. In a groundbreaking use of the Internet, they coordinated simultaneous mass demonstrations in Seattle and other major international cities by circulating critical anti-WTO materials and protest plans through websites and e-mail lists. During the protests, this collaboration continued and reached a worldwide audience

through the debut of www.indymedia.org, a pioneering website that enabled volunteer citizen-journalists to report the reality of the protests they felt corporate mainstream journalism obscured. Indymedia is now recognized as one of the most aggressive voices of alternative journalism worldwide.

Could the Zapatista or WTO protestors have organized and spread their message without the Internet? Certainly. But neither would have reached the scale or audience that they did in the short period of time available to them. In both cases, activists used technology to overcome barriers to visibility and organization that usually stymie typical grassroots campaigns. Following suit, grassroots activism is getting a cyberspace and cellular upgrade around the world.

MOBILE ACTIVISM IN THE PHILIPPINES

In countries like the Philippines, where Internet access is limited, activists have their hands on another new technological tool—the cell phone. In January 2001, when it became clear that then-President Joseph Estrada was engaged in acts of political corruption, activists mobilized the nation with text messages. "The text message was something to the effect of 'the Senate has betrayed the people, let's show them that we're not going to take this sitting down. Pass this to all your friends!'" explained John Paredes, SY '07, a student from the Philippines, who cut school with his friends to participate in the protests in Manila. Within days, 2 million people were in the streets demonstrating in what became known as the second Epifanio

de los Santos Avenue protest, or EDSA II. (The first "EDSA" toppled President Ferdinand Marcos' authoritarian regime in 1986.) With no established organization planning the protest, it was the product of citizens working independently to send over 100 million texts each day in order to mobilize their friends. And their efforts succeeded—President Estrada resigned from office, labeling the effort to remove him from office an aggressive "coup de text."

Filipino activists have since moved on to use their cell phones in other innovative ways. "Hello Garci? Am I going to win today?" was one of the world's most popular ringtones in June 2005. Originating in the Philippines, the ringtone contained the voice of current Philippine President Gloria Macapago Arroyo, who was caught on tape talking about rigging her reelection with a member of the National Commission on Elections. When a wire-tapped conversation exposing her corruption was leaked to the press, grassroots activists turned the track into a ringtone to send to their friends. Before long, her voice was ringing all over the country in various forms, cynically remixed with everything from the "Godfather" theme-song to Billy Joel's "Honesty."

Ringtones are not foreign to politics in the Philippines. Popular songs like "Who Let the Dogs Out?" are often reworked by campaign-managers into jingles for elections. "What happens is that those jingles find their way into ringtones, and then it becomes a campaign statement to have so-and-so's ringtone," Paredes explained. Something of a modern-day political bumper-sticker, ringtones in the Philippines are making campaigns cellular.

FREEDOM TO BLOG

In both developed and developing countries today, the most provocative political statements often come in the form of an online posting. The kind of grassroots activist journalism first enabled by Indymedia in Seattle has become a worldwide phenomenon through the rise of the "web log." Known more commonly as a "blog," this format has completely transformed journalism today, allowing new voices and challenging established news sources in different contexts around the world. "It is not inaccurate to say that blogging is a truly revolutionary and disruptive technology," said Allen Gunn, executive director of Aspiration, a leading organization in technology consultation for non-profits. Aspiration educates NGOs and activist organizations around the world about using new technologies in their campaigns, and Gunn encourages all of them to blog about their work. "Blogging has succeeded in fundamentally empowering citizen journalism," he said.

In a country like Egypt, where mainstream media is state-controlled and speaking freely can have dire consequences, the anonymity of blogs protects these citizen journalists. The uncensored, personal, and interactive format appeals to readers and provides a forum for discussion on controversial topics unavailable in any other context. Whereas blogs were virtually non-existent in Egypt a few years ago, today blogs—numbering over 15,000 in Egypt—provide a growing audience of Egyptians with uncensored news and active voices of dissent. The algorithm behind the Google search engine is such that it ranks pages with the most links and recent updates at the top of its search results, thus placing blogs before generic websites and soliciting a wider audience with their prominent place in the search results. "With the fact that blog content gets surfaced at a high level by Google, it makes a noise," Gunn told the *Globalist*.

And this noise quickly reaches beyond the virtual realm, as Ritzy Mabrouk, a famous Egyptian blogger writing under the name of "Miss Mabrouk," can attest. "Bloggers are putting additional pressure on the government and on the traditional media… If you are following the blogs on a regular basis you will see that what they say is usually picked up by regular media a few days

later, and when a certain point or perspective or piece of information has come that far, it will reach the ears of decision makers."

But this influential status can both empower and restrict bloggers. The Egyptian government, realizing the growing menace of this mobilizing opposition, jailed and tortured six bloggers deemed threats to the government in 2006. But rather than accept the crack-down, the Egyptian "blogosphere" sprung into action. When influential blogger Abdul Kareem Soliman was detained in October 2005, Mabrouk was one of the first to post information about his arrest on her blog and launch the on-going Free Kareem Campaign for his release. "My blogging and networking efforts were noticed by many well-known bloggers," Miss Mabrouk explained to the *Globalist*. "They alerted their readers, and eventually it got so big that the most significant media made their own reports."

While these virtual awareness campaigns are already controversial and dangerous in Egypt, bloggers have been noticeably bold, venturing out of the anonymity of cyberspace to organize mass awareness projects and on-the-ground demonstrations against police brutality cases and sexual harassment in Egypt. "I am quite sure that some of the wonderful and well-coordinated initiatives, such as the Free Blogger Kareem campaign, would not have seen daylight so rapidly if it had not been for certain bloggers' contact in the physical world," Miss Mabrouk said. In Egypt, the interlinked web of blogs has created a crucial network online for mobilization on the streets.

But Ezzat Youssef, deputy head of the Political Department of the influential Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, warns that bloggers like Miss Mabrouk may soon face opposition from within the "blogosphere," as well. "My own concern is that if the majority of bloggers are extremists or Islamic fundamentalists, they could hijack the whole idea of blogging in the region. The most active, well-designed, and up-to-date websites are the Islamists' ones. And they have all the money and the resources to spend on it. But the liberals, the leftist and progressive ones, are struggling to survive." Will the momentum of the liberal Egyptian blogging movement be stymied by mounting opposition and a lack of resources? Or can progressive bloggers like Mabrouk set Egypt on a path towards real reform?

UPGRADING AMERICAN POLITICS

In the United States, two average citizens proved that a tech-driven campaign doesn't always need money and resources to become a lasting force for national reform. In 1998 two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, emailed a simple petition to fewer than one hundred of their friends. The one-sentence petition, circulated in the heat of the Clinton impeachment scandal, urged American leadership to turn away from impeachment and to "censure the president and move on to pressing issues fac-

ing the nation." Within one week, 100,000 people had signed the petition. Soon half a million. These results astounded Blades and Boyd. "We really had no idea at all that MoveOn.org would turn into our next eight years. We thought that it was going to be a

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flash campaign," Blades told *The Yale Globalist*. After the surprising success of their informal petition, Boyd and Blades decided to harness the energy of the petition and create an entirely new organization: MoveOn.org.

Today, MoveOn.org has become a significant force for change in American politics. The organization pursues a wide variety of progressive campaigns on issues its 3.3 million members deem important to the nation, including climate change, universal healthcare, and the War in Iraq. Its homepage features ten different campaigns and multiple opportunities to sign petitions, write online letters to the editor, and read progressive stances on different political issues.

MoveOn.org's popularity testifies to the Internet's potential to organize millions, reach previously apolitical citizens, and educate a base of supporters. But has the comparative ease of online activism altered the quality of change that activism can achieve? Allen Gunn of Aspiration warns that this kind of one-click activism might foster what he termed a predominately "armchair-advocacy" society. "A lot of people feel adequately good about themselves because they clicked the link on the MoveOn.org message and hit the submit button on the resulting webpage, and now they think they've changed a little piece of the world."

But Blades explained that MoveOn.org's true power comes from converting that online energy into physical activism like door-to-door campaigning and protests on the National Mall. "It's not about the petition; it's about the fact that a huge group of citizens

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has gathered together and said 'this is important,'" explained Blades. "And what we enable those citizens to do is to keep participating… These are the people who are going to care and are going to go out and vote and support candidates in meaningful ways."

LEFT BEHIND?

If such informal activism can effect powerful change through not just immediate action but also sustained participation, could more traditional activist organizations like Amnesty International and Oxfam International fall behind? But Amnesty International USA, the largest human rights group by membership in the United States, is starting to learn from the tech-driven tactics of the newer, ad-hoc activist movements. Its website includes an Online Action Center with petitions to sign and e-mails to send, and it has recently begun blogs for many of its campaigns, as well. The organization has also tried to encourage its membership to go online through Amnesty groups on social networking websites like Facebook.com and MySpace. Brian Glasscock, who coordinates Amnesty USA's new initiatives on these two websites, describes the online social networking sites as effective outreach tools for college students in particular, who can click on a button to automatically become part of an online forum of self-identified Amnesty members. "We're not really doing anything new, it's just kind of a new way to do organizing, a new way to mobilize," Glasscock said of Amnesty's work online. But regardless of whether Amnesty's strategy is new, it has tapped in to two of the most popular websites of today—Facebook and MySpace—to gain youths' attention to the organizations' causes.

Both Amnesty and Oxfam, both long-recognized as leaders in social justice activism worldwide, have been at the forefront of another kind of tech-powered activism in the United States, as well: the text message petition. Amnesty's America I Believe In campaign has placed ads in the New York Times and in bus shelters in major U.S. cities asking citizens to send a text message to a certain phone number in order to add their name to a petition to Congress. In 2005, Oxfam America launched similar campaigns at Coldplay concerts to generate signatures via text-messaging for their Make Trade Fair petition.

But Judith Beals, director of Campaigns and Outreach at Oxfam America, recognizes the limitations of these text campaigns. "The value is more in the numbers of people who stand up and say something than it is in the capacity to build the longer-term relationships, and that is a real weakness that maybe technology can fix over time." It is too early to see whether these established organizations will successfully harness the immediacy and convenience of this new activism into the long-term involvement they seek.

DIGITAL DEPENDENCE

Oxfam America launched its Make Trade Fair text campaign with an unlikely partner: Sun Microsystems. Increasingly, corporations play an unprecedented role in the effectiveness of activist campaigns today, linking activists to the companies and economic systems they are often so committed to opposing.

Mobbing the Scene:

BY JENNIFER WANG

In May 2003, hundreds of New Yorkers received a mysterious e-mail that read: "You are invited to take part in MOB, the project that creates an inexplicable mob of people in New York City for ten minutes or less…Please forward this to other people you know who might like to join." Confused, readers scrolled down to the e-mail's frequently-asked-questions section only to find a single question: "Why would I want to join an inexplicable mob?" Answer: "Tons of other people are doing it."

Started by journalist Bill Wasik, this chain e-mail marked the birth of what has become known as "flash mobs." Individuals convene in a public place for a brief period of time and perform a strange and contrived act before dispersing as suddenly as they first appeared. While Wasik conceptualized the "MOB project" as a social experiment, it did not take long for flash mobs to become political. By the end of 2003, flash mobs had spread to various parts of Europe, Asia, Latin America and Australia, protesting everything from consumerism, to homophobia, to Philippine President Joseph Estrada. The 2004 Madrid train bombings sparked a spontaneous mobile phone message campaign resulting in public demonstrations against the conservative Spanish government, which was later defeated in the national election. Just last year, Belarusian bloggers used the internet to organize flash mobs in Minsk protesting the arrest of democracy activists after a flawed national election.

The widespread use of telecommunication technology has fueled the global rise of

But the significance of this phenomenon goes beyond its irony. Whereas companies for years have been the *target* of activists, they are now a key determinant in the success of any campaign using a commercially available network, such as a search engine or cell phone network. Cell phone companies can dismantle activist efforts in a second by shutting down cellular service, and they did in Nepal during recent uprisings against King Gyanendra. Often it is with the growing success and press coverage of an activist campaign that a company might step in to avoid being affiliated with controversy.

Bloggers, too, feel the effects of vulnerability to the modern corporation. Google, while inadvertently responsible for bloggers' tremendous impact through its search algorithm, has also cooperated with repressive governments like Mubarak's in censoring blogs. Chinese authorities, who closed 12,575 Internet cafes between October and December 2004, have demanded that MSN, Yahoo, Google and other corporations block web pages in their search results with words such as "human rights," "Taiwan," "Tiananmen," "Falun Gong," and "Tibet." MSN blocked all blogs containing the words "freedom," "democracy" and "demonstration." Many companies have gone along with the requests of the Chinese government and other governments, claiming that they are only abiding by the rules of the country they are operating in.

And company cooperation has gone beyond censorship: Yahoo has been accused of sharing online search records with the Chinese government that have led to bloggers' arrests. Allen Gunn advises activists on how to avoid these risks in their online work. "At every level—whether it's the cell phone, the webhost, the software vendor, whatever—[activists] want to be very savvy about how to maintain maximum control over [their] technological destiny," he explained to the *Globalist*. Beneath the superficial ease and freedom of tech-driven campaigns, activists are becoming increasingly dependent on the very institutions they have so long opposed.

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

But when modern corporations appear to be limiting activist efforts, activists have responded by harnessing those technologies for use in new campaigns. While companies like Google have censored certain blogs from appearing in searches, activists have found their own way to control search results. With their understanding of the Google search algorithm, bloggers have begun clever campaigns to mass-link certain webpages to common keywords that Google users might use to search for a particular topic. One such "Google Bomb" returned George Bush's official whitehouse.gov biography as the first result for "miserable failure." Another yielded John Kerry's 2004 campaign homepage as a response to the search word "waffles."

But this innovation goes across national boundaries. Established international organizations are pairing with these individual activists to defend their freedom. In response to mounting censorship, Amnesty International has launched the Irrepressible.info campaign, which compiles material from censored websites around the world and asks people to re-post it on their own privately-run websites.

In this way, technology is sustaining the activism it has uplifted and redefined. Rather than replacing on-the-ground protests or hand-written letters, technologies are energizing current efforts, enabling new activists, and expanding their impact to a wider audience. As cell phones and computers continue to upgrade, activists will undoubtedly be right behind.

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How technology has helped give birth to the "flash mob"

the flash mob as a tool for activists. "To organize a few hundred people to do something used to require a couple more layers of management and technology," said Sean Savage, a digital systems specialist and the originator of the term "flash mob." Today, organizing a few hundred people requires as little as a few keystrokes on the computer keyboard or cell phone. The implications this carries are, of course, enormous. As Howard Rheingold, an expert on the societal implications of new technologies and author of the book *Smart Mobs*, explains "It is not the phenomenon [of flash mobs] itself that is attractive, but the fact that there is a new way to respond to new situations."

As new technologies are released, young activists will continue to invent new applications for them that were unimagined by their original engineers. No one predicted the cell phone as a tool for organizing a mob. "A generation of digital natives is emerging, people for whom having a telephone on them, having access to the web, being able to use those technologies for their own purposes is just part of life, like running water and electricity," said Rheingold. The increased power to rapidly disseminate information, however, also implies the parallel risk of misinformation. To counter this, Rheingold believes "media literacy training is an essential part of civic education." Savage also recognizes the danger, noting that a flash mob is "a crowd of people that has this huge potential power behind it, power for good as well as bad." And it is up to the people to decide—perhaps through mass text-messaging—how they are going to collectively use that power.