



BIG BROTHER AND EMPOWERED SISTERS

The Role of New Communication Technologies in Democratic Processes

Helen Belcastro



Information and communication technology (ICT) entails both immense possibilities and great challenges. Globally, ICT is an integral part of international development cooperation, with the ultimate goal of poverty reduction –not only economic poverty and lack of physical resources, but also lack of information, possibilities and power. An international conference held in Sweden in April 2008 explored how the use of new technologies could lead to increased participation in democracy at all levels of society.

A Malaysian woman in her 50's campaigns for more female parliamentarians via a self-produced music video published on YouTube.

A student journalist from Yemen publishes a news portal that is blocked by the government repeatedly.

During the ban of live media coverage after the Kenyan elections in December 2007, SMS and web sites are used extensively.

Mobile phones and the Internet are used for advocacy, documentation and dissemination of information of violations of human rights – sousveillance.

In April 2008, the Collegium for Development Studies, based in Uppsala, Sweden, in collaboration with the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (Sida)'s ICT4D Secretariat and Division for Democratic Governance (DESA), held a two-day international conference and workshop about information and communication technologies (ICT) and their role in enhancing democracy.

The event attracted more than 100 participants from civil society, academia and professionals worldwide, and included speakers from Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, Yemen, China, USA and the Philippines. Its

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interactive methodology allowed everyone to participate in group discussions after each presentation, and the level of engagement and discussion was very high.

As the four examples above suggest, the conference focused on empowerment and enhancing participation in democratic processes. It also addressed networking and action among non-state actors, as well as easy and low cost publication independent of traditional channels for communication and power.

The conference's title, *Big Brother and Empowered Sisters*, alludes on the one hand to problematic aspects of ICT such as increased registration and control (which is both potentially positive and negative), surveillance, disinformation and propaganda. On the other hand, it refers to the potential and existing possibilities for individual citizens and civil society in terms of using the new technologies for communication, horizontal networking, protest, sousveillance, mobilization, interaction and banking, among others.

ICTs are of great importance for democracy at three levels:

1. in government administration for increased efficiency and flows on information and communication across the board,
2. for increased interaction between government and citizens, and
3. when used for empowerment, communication and information by citizens and civil society for independent networking, communication and publication, among other uses.

ICTs are deployed globally to a vast extent. But how conscious are we of their democratic potential and of eventual risks?

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT NEW TECHNOLOGIES?

ICTs are used for horizontal networking and communication, independent of traditional channels for communication, media and power. Innovative use of mobile phone, SMS and the Internet in tumultuous situations –e.g. in Kenya and Burma in 2007, and by Sudanese protesters in Cairo in 2005 and 2006, helped guarantee the right to freedom of expression and the right to information.

Other innovative aspects of ICTs include the unprecedented escalation of citizen journalism, the global context entering the local and vice versa, and how the anonymity of the web allows access to sensitive or taboo subjects such as birth control and HIV/AIDS.

On the other hand, the increased use of blogs, wikis and web communities also raises question regarding privacy and personal integrity. Another point is the transient nature of users often around single-issue causes. While ICT movements can be easily established, global endurance and collective action depend on focus, interest and limitations. This raises the question of whether the new social movements are comparable to, or even replacing, the old popular movements.

Discussion during the workshop suggested that social actions in different arenas are complementary and mutually reinforcing, rather than exclusive. Further, the increased speed and flows of information add to fragmentation and indicate a need for information intermediaries, which points to a move from an information society to a “recommendation” society.

In other words, to achieve effective use of ICT, it is people and the context in which we live which should determine factors in the application of technology, and not the other way around. ICT should relate to already existing needs and patterns of communication rather than impose new ones.

"IF I COULD COMMUNICATE I WOULD NOT FEEL SO TRAPPED"

Anriette Esterhuysen, from the [Association for Progressive Communications](#), a global network that focuses the use of ICTs for social justice and development, said that the emphasis should not be on donor-led ideas of quantifying ITC and using it to “fix” poverty, but rather on building bottom up advocacy and empowerment.

Esterhuysen mentioned the example of the Malaysian woman campaigning for increased women participation in the parliament using ICTs, and showed how different projects across the world are specifically focusing on women re-claiming ICTs.

Another interesting example she highlighted was the [Take Back the Tech](#) network, which invites women to harness the technology so often used against them in order to promote non-violence. Through both new and

traditional technologies, *Take Back the Tech* has connected women bloggers, supported digital story telling and encouraged women to send in photographs of digital post cards, one of which reads "If I could communicate I would not feel so trapped".

MOBILE REPORTERS

Alice Munuya, coordinator of [KICTAnet](#), Kenya ICT Action Network, and a member of the country's Parliamentary Communications Committee, gave an insight into the use of SMS and Internet during the post election turmoil, and explained how it was used for both violent and peaceful action. As tensions and violence began to spill into the streets in Kenya in late 2007, the government decided to ban local live broadcast of news.

Whilst this is obviously controversial, there were fears that radio in particular could be used to incite violence, as in Rwanda 1994. The ban of live reporting triggered the use of SMS and web sites as a method for publishing incidents and updating news, and thus "mobile reporters" were born.

According to Munuya, the government countered what they considered instigating messages with their own blanket SMS messages advocating for non-violence and for peace, as did citizens in an attempt to curtail the bloodshed.

About 1.7 million Kenyans are Internet subscribers and 11.5 out of 38 million are mobile phone users. Many more access Internet and mobiles via family, friends and work. In the future and after the Convergence Bill, mobile phones will be even more relevant as platforms for Internet access. They are indeed becoming a new mass medium and a digital bridge in developing countries.

BIG BROTHER AND FLOWS OF INFORMATION

Robert Hårdh, from the [Swedish Helsinki Committee for Human Rights](#), was given the dubious honor of addressing Big Brother, i.e. some problematic aspects of ICT. He discussed how ICTs could be used for very different ends, be it empowering or repressive purposes. This poses questions about caution in developing an information society.

In the past, subversion of information was about smuggling literature into countries or broadcasting across borders. Hårdh explained how the

growth of new technologies has significantly enhanced the possibilities for information flows, and presented innovative material produced and distributed by young people in Belarus. He warned against relying on the younger generation only to take on the challenges of ICTs. In his view, older generations have a vital part to play.

ICTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Sasha Costanza-Chock, from the [Annenberg School of Communication](#) at the University of Southern California, in the US, discussed ways in which new technologies can be used as tools for social movements, and more specifically the ways in which Latin American migrant workers use mobile telephony in the US.

Costanza-Chock further addressed the broad range of technologies - including GPS, gaming and videos- that are being used by social movements and activists to send out messages of collective action.

SUMMING UP

Indeed, as the workshop showed, it is inspiring to see the resourcefulness of people and organizations, which use and adapt technologies to create communication, possibilities for democratic participation and life-changing spaces.

It is important to find concrete strategies to make sure that ICTs are put to use for the attainment of development goals in general, and for the enhancement of democratic processes and empowerment in particular.

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See www.wci2.org for a great example of how ICTs are being used in Malaysia to promote women's participation in the electoral process.

Listen to a pod (portable on demand) radio broadcast of "Big Brothers and Empowered Sisters", including interviews with speakers, by searching for Big Brother at www.sida.se



Visit Eldis' blog on ICT and democracy for résumés from the workshop at

<http://community.eldis.org/.59b585c8>

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