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Banning of SMS services adds fuel to protests

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Today, access to high-tech communications is accepted as integral to modern life. When the ability to communicate using a digital communication channel such as SMS is banned in a country for political reasons, people inside and outside that country take umbrage to the denial of services. Yet, these attempts by governments to limit communications are an indication of the power of mobile and Internet based technologies to help foster revolution.

Recent political events in North Africa bear witness to this, where SMS and social media services were disrupted due to government actions that aimed to create a digital mass communications blackout. Many social activists took these acts as signs of undemocratic governance and lent their voices to calls of regime change.

For the most part, interventions on the part of a state to limit the use of digital communications are seen as infringing on individuals' freedom of expression and the censoring of what filters into civil society and the mainstream international media. When a government turns to sending SMS messages using mobile networks infrastructure, many citizens consider this broadcasting of propaganda as spam.

The denial of public access to SMS by states is not new in the mobile era. Ethiopia instituted a two year ban on SMS services in 2005 to block the opposition political party from using SMS to canvass for support. In September 2010, Mozambique authorities forced a short suspension of SMS services to limit the mobilisation of people during food price protests. The Indian government banned bulk SMS services in September and then again in October 2010 to silence dissenting views relating to the religious use of land addressed in the Ayodhya verdict.

Yet, it is 2011 that will probably be known as the year high-tech social activism came of age. In January, some Egyptian citizens reported blocked SMS services as protests against the Mubarak government escalated. In February, the Egyptian authorities used their telecommunications regulations to send pro-government messages out to citizens via Vodafone's network. In the same month, to the south, Uganda issued mobile operators with instructions to intercept and block a list of keywords in SMS messages that were seen by government officials as fostering election violence. During the Cricket World Cup in March, India again banned bulk SMS services as a precaution to curb possible violence when India played Sri Lanka in the final. The Cameroonian government intervened in March by blocking a MTN SMS-to-Twitter service in the face of fears that North African new media leaks would impact on its politics via an expatriate Cameroon community. Commentators on this latter intervention were taken aback, as not only was this

communication service not widely used in Cameroon, its primary use was in supporting IT and agricultural-related services.

The picture that emerges from all these examples is that high-tech communications have new prominence in the political life of certain countries where civil liberties have been curtailed or politically motivated violence was feared. In the contexts of political turmoil such as Egypt and Tunisia digital communications such as SMS offer a channel of mobilisation and protest unique to the information age. According to Manuel Castells, author of *Communications Power* (2009), "The roots of rebellion lie in exploitation, oppression and humiliation. However, the possibility of rebelling without being quashed immediately depends on the density and speed of mobilisation and that depends on the ability created by the technologies which I have classified as mass self-communication."

This idea of mass self-communications is helpful in understanding how in a networked world the difficulty the modern states have in suppressing information flows from the ground about social and political injustices. One tool that helps visualise this is Ushahidi, a crisis mapping tool that uses the Internet to display aggregated information collected via SMS. This is a valuable tool in contexts where broadcasting of usual news channels is banned due to political reasons by a government.

Yet, there is a catch-22 situation for governments that do institute bans on SMS during times of political turmoil. There is a direct impact on the economy of the country and the ability for key sectors, such as banking, to deliver notification services that are dependent on digital communications. While specific figures for the mobile sector are not available, it was estimated that the Egyptian economy lost \$18 million a day during the government's ban on telecommunications and Internet communications over a five day period. This figure did not include those economic impacts on secondary business sectors such as e-commerce, tourism and call centres reliant on high-tech communications.