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SMS and Social Media – the new canary in a coal mine

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Today the early warning for a government in trouble seems to be when the rulers in question clamp down on electronic communication, especially Social Media and SMS. We've seen it happen across the African continent and further afield, starting with Mozambique and India in 2010, and then this year in Egypt, Tunisia and Cameroon. In fact Ethiopia got the ball rolling back in 2005, with a two-year SMS ban after election violence.

According to the sociologist 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."

Communication evolves

Modern communications allows each individual to broadcast information via a variety of media, in this way routing around any blocks in the system.

We saw this with the birth of Ushahidi during the Kenyan elections in 2008 when the government banned broadcasting. Ushahidi used SMS to collect information from people on the ground, which it then compiled and distributed via the internet to create a coherent picture of events. When internet access was disrupted in Egypt, Google launched a "speak-to-tweet" service that allowed Egyptians to tweet by leaving a voicemail.

So for non-democratic governments, anything short of a total ban on communications is ineffective because information will find a way to flow. But thanks to the extent to which electronic communications underpins both business and society, an outright ban would cripple a country. Banking would fail, orders would not be processed and billing would be impossible. In fact, the entire business environment of any country depends on electronic communication.

Ironically governments often raise awareness of electronic communication as a tool for activism by trying to control it. In Cameroon, the Biya regime banned MTN from offering an SMS-to-Twitter service in March in an attempt to prevent Egypt-style protests it claimed were being incited from abroad. However, according to reports, most Cameroonians were unaware the SMS-to-Twitter service even existed before the ban, and the ones who did were using it for IT or agriculture-related services.

At Davos earlier this year, underlining the significance of the bans on electronic communication, United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, accused the Egyptian government of treading on the democratic principles of freedom of speech and freedom of association when it cut internet access ahead of planned protests.



Electronic communication, in all its shapes and guises, is here to stay. Information continues to be the lifeblood of business, society and government around the world. The fact that undemocratic governments continue in their attempts to control this medium, despite the economic costs, is testimony to the political power of electronic communications, especially SMS and Social Media.