Research Article

Mobile Smartphones as Tools for 'Efficient' and 'Effective' Protesting: A Case Study of Mobile Protesting in Jamaica

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the discourses surrounding the use of mobile smartphones for protesting (M-Protesting) in Jamaica. More specifically, it presents the findings of a qualitative descriptive research project which utilized a fusion of the case study and discourse analysis methodology to illustrate how protestors describe their experiences with mobile smartphones for protesting a cause. The findings suggest that the respondents interviewed for this study regard the mobile smartphones as an 'effective' and efficient' tool for protesting their cause. More specifically, mobile smartphones were described as being more effective and efficient than traditional 'brick and mortar' protesting techniques. Mobile smartphones were more 'effective' because this technology allowed the protestors to engage citizens in 'meaningful' conversations about their cause. Mobile smartphones were described as more 'efficient' because they allowed the protestors to convey their messages to a wide cross section of users over a vast space, simultaneously and in real-time. The findings have wider implications for how civil society groups engage contemporary and future rule of law issues not only in Jamaica but also in other parts of the democratic world.

Keywords: Civil society, Jamaica, protest, mobile-phones.

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Introduction

In the last decade, many online (e-societies) and offline civil society groups have been using information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a means of protest. This is referred to as Electronic-Protesting or E-Protesting (Ghannam 2011. Most recently, the mobile phone, specifically mobile smartphones such as the iPhone, Android, and Blackberry phones have slowly become the new tool of expression for civil society groups. For the purposes of this paper, this activity is referred to as Mobile Protesting or M-Protesting. Cases of M-Protesting have been observed and documented in countries such as the Ukraine, Indonesia, Belarus, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Burma and most recently in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia (Stein, 2006; SIDA, 2009; Fahamu, 2007; Schuler, 2008). Much of what has been discussed in the literature has generally focused the outcomes from the use of mobile smartphones for protesting (Schuler, 2008), the reasons for using mobile devices for protesting (Ghannam 2011; Hussain, and

Howard, 2012), the utility of mobile smartphones (See in Ekine, 2010) and even the types of mobile smartphones that have been used for protesting (Hamamsya, 2011). This paper expands this discussion to include the discursive properties surrounding the use of mobile smartphones to protest a cause – ways of acting, organizing and being. This is done by examining the experiences of a small group of protestors in Jamaica with the use of mobile smartphones for protesting a cause. The discipline of Discourse Analysis has demonstrated the importance of understanding the discursive properties of objects, subjects, processes and phenomenon and the implications for how these properties are connected to outcomes in social and political life, how such properties constructed interdependently of each other and/or mutually exclusive properties, and more importantly, how the configurations of these properties and connections affect outcomes, motivation and the social practices of people (Gee, 2005; Fairclough, 2010; Waller, 2009). The research is therefore guided by the following research question – How do civil society groups in Jamaica describe their experiences (ways of acting, organizing and being – the discursive properties) with mobile smartphones as a means of protesting their cause? The methodology employed was a fusion of Yin's (2008) Case Study Methodology and Discourse Analysis. It is hoped that this paper will expand the global discourse on the emerging use of mobile smartphones as tools of protest.

Protesting Violations of the Rule of Law using Mobile Phones: The Rise of M-Protesting

The events of the 'Arab Spring' (Ghannam 2011) has ushered in a tsunami of discourses regarding the use of mobile phones to protest violations of the rule of law (Fahamu 2007; SIDA 2009; Schuler 2008; Stein 2006; James & Rykert 1998, Johnson 2001; McCaughey & Ayers 2003), and the value of this ICT to the democratic process. Over the years, this instrument has been used to capture actual

acts of extrajudicial killings; increase pressure on members of the judiciary and the executive to uphold the principle of the rule of law; mobilize and canvass citizens to address violations of the rule of law as well as to monitor, highlight (make people aware and to sensitize citizens about such violations), and protest these violations (Ghannam, 2011).

Informally, mobile phones and specifically mobile smartphones such as Android, Apple's iPhones and Research in Motion's Blackberry line of smartphones were used by the youth to circumvent government control and management of information, and to gain support and assistance for resistance to violations of the rule of law in countries such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia during the 'Arab Spring'. For example, these Mobile Protestors (M-Protestors) used these mobile smartphones to capture images which were published on Twitter and Facebook as well as on the front page of major newspapers around the world. They were also used to capture acts of social injustice and several violations of the rule of law on video, which were posted on the popular Online Social Networks (OSNs) including YouTube and various websites of major media houses around the world. Much of this content was subsequently shown on various stations around the world including BBC, CNN and ABC. Beyond sensitizations or protesting violations of the rule of law in these countries, these ICTS (mobile phones) were also used to communicate logistical, tactical and operational activities to correct these violations. Examples included; notifications of secret meetings, the scheduling of protests, advisories about attacks and other forms of dangers, coordinating attacks and information about places or spaces of safety.

Beyond the geographical boundaries of these non-democratic states, these technologies have also been used in democratic countries by structured groups to protest other forms of rule of law violations. Examples of these include, 'The Hub' and 'MobileActive.org'. The

Hub started in 2007 as a project of a global human rights advocacy group. The Hub uses the power of mobile phone technologies as part of its advocacy campaigns, which are aimed at advancing human rights related causes globally. MobileActive.org which started in 2005 is a network of resources which supports the use of mobile technology for protesting social, economic and political issues.

Interestingly, though popularized and constructed by the discourses and social practices surrounding the Arab Spring as a tool that can be used as a means of preserving and/or promoting democracy generally, and specifically to uphold many aspects of the rule of law, the mobile phone has been used in this form for many years. In 2001, for example, text messages were used to demand the resignation of the then President of the Philippines, Joseph Estrada. This action consequently contributed to overthrowing the Philippines government (SIDA 2009). In the last decade, mobile phones have been used by civil society groups to monitor elections in the Ukraine (2004), Indonesia (2005), Belarus (2006) Sierra Leone (2007) as well as in Kenya (December 2007) (Fahamu 2007; SIDA 2009; Schuler 2008). It has also been used to disseminate information in Burma (2007), and for various other purposes associated with preserving the rule of law in many countries around the world (Stein 2006; SIDA 2009; Fahamu 2007). Ostensibly speaking, much of the existing discussion regarding mobile protesting has focused either on the discourses of protestors in non-democratic societies or in larger societies. There has been very little research which attempt to describe the discursive properties surrounding the use of mobile smartphones to protest a cause – ways of acting, organizing and being. Indeed, this makes the knowledge-canvas of M-Protesting incomplete. This research will attempt to address this gap. The next section of the article will present how a small group of protestors in Jamaica have described their experiences (ways of acting, organizing and being) with mobile smartphones as a tool for protesting a cause.

Research Design

The research employed a descriptive case study methodology fused with discourse analysis (Yin 2008; Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2005; Fairclough, 2010). For this particular study, the Case draws on the social processes surrounding the use of mobile smartphones by a small group of Jamaicans to protest the violation of rule of law principle, which states 'everyone is equal under the law'. For this study, the data sources included: documents comprising newspaper articles; blogs; Facebook as well as Twitter posts; analysis of archival records including minutes from various youth group meetings; interviews with digital protestors as well as other traditional civil society groups; observation of advocates, and an examination of physical artifacts - mobile phones and their applications (Yin2008) and how they are used. These multiple sources permitted a measure of data triangulation. Seventeen (17) M-Protestors (the units of observation) were interviewed for this study. Based on the snowballing sampling techniques, these represent more than half of the civil society youth group members who had used mobile phones as a tool for promoting their cause.

'Effective' and 'Efficient' Protesting through Mobile SmartPhone

Although protesting has played a major role in the evolution of Jamaica (Johnson, 2011), Jamaicans experienced their first mobile protest (M-Protest) in 2011. The protesters were a group of mobile smartphone users who were disquiet and fearful that a privileged Jamaican would possibly be given special preferences by many actors of the state because of wealth. Such a practice is commonplace in Jamaica (MSI, 2008; Cooper, 2011) like other parts of the world. Nevertheless it is viewed as a violation of the rule of law, the principle of governance which states that "all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the

State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated" (United Nations, 2004, p. 1).

The intentionality of this mobile protest was 'to let people know what was going on' (witness, awareness and sensitization), 'get people interested' in the cause, 'get the support of as many people as possible'(encouraging interest),'to prevent a [perceived] cover-up' by acts of the state (uncover hidden secrets), and to 'bring [someone] to justice' (justice).And, for the first time in Jamaica this was executed with the use of mobile smartphones rather than the traditional brick and mortar strategies of protesting. These traditional brick and mortar strategies of protesting usually comprise of small sometimes disorganized sometimes mob-type grouping with homemade placards,and chants articulating the purpose of the protest. On too many occasions, these traditional brick and mortar strategies of protesting include the ritualistic blocking the roads with debris in order to get the attention of someone or anyone who is perceived to be able to address the problem.

The M-Protestors took a different approach to protesting in Jamaica, a different type of discourse. They used mobile smartphones. And as will be outlined below, the M-Protestors who were interviewed, described their experiences as being more 'effective' and 'efficient than the traditional brick and mortar strategies of protesting in Jamaica.

Mobile Smartphones as Tools for 'Effective Protesting'

Mobile Smartphones were seen as 'effective' because mobile smartphones allowed M-Protestors to interact with other users in a more substantive way than the traditional brick and mortar technique through 'meaningful' conversations with many other mobile users simultaneously in real time. It was a form of communicative action. Many of the mobile smartphones that were used in the protest facilitated the transfer of information and created an atmosphere of

dialogue. These phones are very effective in reaching and/or accessing multiple other users through the group feature the phone offers. The group feature allows users to group their contacts into specific categories. By this means, a mobile user can interact directly with a specified group by sending messages to multiple users simultaneously in real time. More importantly, many mobile smartphones allow users to communicate not only with each other through various messaging platforms between and among mobile phones but also with online (Internet) users through Websites, Blogs, Online Social Networks (OSNs) such as Facebook and Twitter as well as through electronic mail to name a few. Through this medium, the M-Protesters were able to post substantive narratives and comments regarding the Case and therefore access a wider audience. According to one M-Protestor, this was more effective than simply using placards, blocking roads or screaming at the top of their voices to draw attention to their cause.

When compared with using a mobile smartphone, the brick and mortar discourse of protesting was seen as ineffective for the following reasons. Brick and mortar discourse of protesting provides little or no space for effectively communicating the objectives of the protesters, the history or context behind the protest, the various positions and ideologies of the protesters, the stories of those affected, possible solutions, and how and in what ways citizens can help or provide some form of support. Placards are often designed so that the protester is able to manage this particular protest paraphernalia. In Jamaica, this usually includes makeshift pieces of cardboard boxes that range from a relatively small to medium 100 centimeter wide placard. In most instances, certainly in the history of protest in Jamaica, the space afforded to the protestor to tell a story, to make a point, to effectively provide onlookers with the information necessary to make informed decisions, choose or facilitate some form of action is limited, and has been viewed by the M-Protestors as 'inadequate' and 'ineffective'

in 'getting the message across'. Certainly, there have been protests in other parts of the world that include the use of larger platforms, which have been to a certain extent effective in telling a story about the origins, purpose and objectives of a protest. These demonstrations have both textual and visual forms and have included the use of art on wall surfaces, writing on road surfaces, building surfaces or vehicle surfaces, billboards, leaflets and flyers, connected human bodies, flash mobs, aerial articulations, sit-ins, and so on that provide a space for expressing the objectives of a protest and telling a story. They can also include the audiovisual and auditory interventions such as the use of television, Internet ads or radio promotions. Despite the fact that Jamaica is a society given to protests, such innovations however have never quite caught on in Jamaica as a form of protesting.

It is important to note also that regardless of size or form, traditional brick and mortar strategies of protesting can be limited in their monologic discursive nature and their interpretation, i.e.how meaning is made. They can be limited in how the message is articulated by the sender as without avenues of clarification, meanings can be authoritative or fixed (O'Connor and Michaels, 2007). It can also be limited in how it is interpreted by the receiver especially in instances where surfaces or message deployment techniques are limited in the information that is provided, or there are differences in how persons socially construct the world, articulate or make meaning based on their gender, culture, age, ideology, class, space, place etc. This is greatly exaggerated in instances where there is little or no exchange of information between the sender and receiver through communication. Such an exchange may allow the receiving party to probe and learn, and those sending the messages an opportunity to provide clarification. This form of dialogic discourse can be likened to a two-way communicative action or discursive and linguistic set of practices, which facilities the back-and-forth

between and among participants as part of an activity system where actors deliberate and can present their ideological stance and more importantly, exchange ideas towards a mutual understanding of an issue (Bakhtin, 1981, Habermas, 1984, Fairclough, 2010). Such an environment, the M-Protestors postulate allowed them the opportunity to negotiate support for their cause. Ostensibly, traditional brick and mortar strategies are temporary because they are limited by the capacities of agents to sustain a cause. According to many of the M-Protestors interviewed, these traditional brick and mortar means of protesting such as "standing on the road" in one place accessing those in line of sight of them, and on some occasions enjoy their fifteen minutes of fame (if they are privileged to a 30 second sound bite on the local television stations, a brief article in the newspaper by some sympathetic journalist or mention on a radio talk-show program trying to generate some attention to encourage listeners to call in). Not much time is therefore provided for them to engage citizens towards supporting their cause.

Mobile smartphones were therefore also seen as more efficient because they support real-time interaction and engagement as these technologies are capable of facilitating two way communication and dialogue between and among users. Questions are asked, participants in dialogue get an opportunity to listen and then respond. It is a process that encourages the construction of knowledge and allows the M-Protestors the opportunity, through dialogue, to win support for their arguments. The M-Protestors described their experience with the mobile smartphones as tools of protest in this very same manner. For the M-Protestors, mobile smartphone provided an opportunity for them to have dialogue with citizens on Facebook, Twitter, other mobile devices, email and on Internet Websites which facilitated message boards and blogging. They were able to respond to queries, provide clarification, present 'the full story', follow up on conversations transtemporally

(in real-time and any place and any space). This was discourse of protesting

Mobile Smartphones as Tools for 'Efficient Protesting'

Based on their experiences, M-Protestors also described mobile smartphones as an 'efficient' strategy for protesting. Mobile smartphones were efficient because unlike traditional brick and mortar strategies of protesting, it allowed M-Protestors to convey their messages across (access) a wide cross section of users simultaneously, in a short period of time (time) and over great distances (space). The discourses surrounding traditional brick and mortar strategies for protesting were described as 'time-consuming' and 'inefficient' in terms of their reach and access to Jamaican citizens. It was believed by the M-Protesters, as it is indeed the case (check for Internet access), that many Jamaicans are 'online' – had access to mobile smartphones and the Internet. And therefore, using mobile smartphones were indeed an efficient way of accessing more people than traditional brick and mortar means of protesting.

As it relates to the issue of 'time' (traditional brick and mortar strategies being considered as being too 'time-consuming') and space (being many places at once) one M-Protestor stated that traditional brick and mortar strategies for protesting "was not convenient for working people" because they don't have the 'time' nor the 'energy' to prepare and execute such a project of protest and this strategy did not allow them (the M-Protestors) to access 'Jamaicans everywhere' According to her:

I have been involved in spontaneous and planned protests. On both occasions a lot of time is wasted in trying to bring your point across. Sometime we spend all hours making our voice heard. I have done this three times while I was (at college), back then I had plenty of time for idle activities....I don't have the time for that any more. I have participated in online petitions.... And I did broadcast many

Blackberry messaging associated with this...case and others. It is more convenient that standing up in the hot sun protesting. With the Blackberry it is easy, just scroll, select and send. (M-Protestor)

Another M-Protestor who shared this view stated:

No one has the time to leave their nine to five [job] and go out there and protest. Remember many of those people who you see on the televisions protesting injustices don't actually work. They have nothing better to do. Like many people, I am sure, I sympathize with them. But I can't do that, I would lose my job. I can do the bb messaging, that is easier, that is more convenient. Like Farmville, it is easier than actually farming, and, I get to access many more persons through the phone than on the street through broadcasts because I have a lot of friends on my bb and each [one] of them have other friends that they can rebroadcast to.... It is a very [efficient] means of contacting people because on many occasions, when I did broadcast messages about [the case] to contacts on my bb, within minutes I would get it back the same message as text message from other persons who were not on my bb but who were in my mobile contacts. I even saw repost of messages that I sent on bb on various Facebook and Twitter group pages about (the case). (M-Protestor)

All M-Protestors believed that mobile smartphones more so than the brick and mortar discourse of protesting were a 'less time-consuming' way of getting their message across to the citizens of Jamaica 'quickly'. The general view is best captured in the words of one M-Protestor presented in the text below:

...it is efficient because everyone that we are trying to reach has access to a Blackberry...These phones are everywhere and based on our experiences, and observations, they are the best way to get information to people quickly and make things happen fast (M-Protestor).

In other words, consider the differences between standing for hours to meet the gaze of a small number of individuals occupying a space trans-temporally (shifting across time and space – moving from one location to the other at different times of the day/night) as against directly corresponding with a wide cross-section of the population who occupy many physical and temporal places and spaces (sometimes even simultaneously). When we take these dimensions into consideration it is possible to argue that for the M-Protestors, mobile smartphones ensured maximum output with minimum resources.

Discursive Influencers

Based on the data analyzed, it is reasonable to suggest that the perspectives advanced by the M-Protestors interviewed may have been influenced by wider socio-cultural social practices and discourses projected through various communication channels in Jamaica and around the world, as well as their own successes with the use of this technology. For example, at the global level, the romantic representation of the successful use of these technologies during the Arab Spring projected in the news media was a reoccurring example used by most of the M-Protestors interviewed to justify the use of mobile technologies for their protest. At the local level, M-Protestors also expressed how impressed they were by what they argued was the 'the successful use of mobile smartphones to fight crime in Jamaica' .In Jamaica, like other parts of the world, smartphones such as the Blackberry mobile phone have been successfully used as a crime fighting tool. This tool has been used to publicize missing children, stolen motor vehicles, warn citizens against venturing into spaces where gang-related violence may be occurring or to make citizens aware of strategies used by car hijackers and the presence of criminal elements operating in neighborhoods and communities. Detailed information of this nature is normally sent out by the police or by citizens broadcasting to their Blackberry contacts. Normally, each

Blackberry contact would in turn broadcast it to the contacts on his or her list. This means of communication facilitates communication between sender and receiver thereby allowing each to probe, give witness as well as obtain clarification on critical issues. This technology has proven to be effective as there are many tales of successful outcomes.

Beyond these global and local discursive influences there were also social practices at play. The M-Protestors claimed to have 'successful' experiences with the use of mobile smartphones to engage citizens across Jamaica for social interactions, and business ventures. They claim that their use of this technology in the past had demonstrated that they were both more 'effective' and 'efficient' than the 'old' (traditional) ways of 'doing things'. And, that this was also a motivating force in deciding to use mobile smartphones as a means of protesting.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, and based on the data analyzed, it appears to be a fair conclusion that respondents regard their experiences of protesting with mobile smartphones as positive. The findings do suggest that the experiences the M-Protestors are indeed consistent with the growing trend of protesting globally. This trend, suggests a migration of protesters from the traditional brick and mortar use of physical paraphernalia to a virtual space. Collectively, these findings suggest that there are several critical questions regarding this emerging phenomenon of mobile protesting (M-Protesting), mobile activism (M-Activism) and possibly that of M-Government. They also suggest by extension that the manner in which researchers investigate these phenomena demand closer scrutiny.

These findings raise some interesting questions for future research in the disciplines of protesting, civil society, e-society and social movements. If mobile phones are indeed superseding traditional

means of protesting then: Who has access to these technologies? Who can protest? Who cannot protest? Who will be able to influence change? In whose interest will this change be made? Undoubtedly, this is a problem of the digital divide between those who have access to certain information and communication technologies and those who do not. The question of the digital divide within the space of mobile protesting has wider socio-political discursive implications for how present and future civil society groups engage with issues concerned with the rule of law not only in Jamaica but in other parts of the world. Indeed, researchers exploring this kind of study will need to include these considerations as part of their research agenda.

In addition to these socio-political discursive questions, there are also socio-technological ones as well. This particular study is limited to the discourses of several actors using Blackberry mobile smartphones as a tool of protest. This particular mobile smartphone facilitates specific modes of acting and organizing, which are similar to other types of mobile communication devices and in many other ways, very different. Certainly there is a need for a greater unpacking and deconstruction of how different types of mobile technologies (and the different features/functions of these mobile technologies) are used or can be used within the protest discourse.

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