A CALL FOR NEW MEDIA

Throughout the past decade, new media has been used to strive for peace and to rally against violence, but imperfections in the structure of these campaigns have sometimes fostered adverse effects in achieving these goals. Examples of these flaws can be seen in recent turmoil in the states of Colombia and Iran. These developments show that the liquidity of new media which brings about its utility in social organization is indeed a double-edged sword. The Internet disseminates information to friends and foes alike; its capabilities are beyond the reach of no one. In addition, the flurry of material is too often infused with propaganda and distortion which accentuate the divide between Internet-based social movements and established forms of organization.

The referenced application of new media in Colombia is the continuing use of Facebook to spread awareness about and organize physical protests against the Colombian paramilitary group “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC),” which is labeled by many bodies as a terrorist organization, including by the United States Government (Johnson). Driven by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the FARC was created in 1964 and has since then supported itself largely by illegal drug trade and kidnappings for ransom.

Outrage against the FARC reached a crescendo in early 2008. During the past decade, the organization had kidnapped an estimated 6,778 people and hundreds continued to be held hostage (Lydon). Anger towards the FARC was compounded after the shooting of eleven Colombian lawmakers and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez’s request that the FARC be considered a “real army”-not a terrorist organization. Echoing the sentiments of many of his compatriots, Oscar Morales, a Colombian engineer, created an anti-FARC Facebook page, whose English title reads “One Million Voices Against FARC.” The page attracted 3,000 people in its first 24 hours, 250,000 after a month, and currently
boasts over 600,000 members (Holguín).

The group’s influence quickly extended beyond cyberspace. The page was used to convene rallies; the primary one occurred February 4 of the same year. It involved hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of protesters in Colombia, and smaller sympathetic rallies sprung up in other cities, including New York and Tokyo. Masses of people rallied around the slogan “NO MORE KIDNAPPINGS/ NO MORE LIES/ NO MORE DEATHS/ NO MORE FARC (Graphic).”

“The FARC made themselves into criminals a long time ago,” declared one protester. “We are simply tired of this (Gonzalez, Carolina, and Romero).”

Clearly, the movement’s effectiveness in voicing the emotions of the Colombian people is undeniable. But how successful could the movement be in leveraging peace?

From the outset, there were differing viewpoints of the anti-FARC movement.

Firstly, there was the utilitarian matter of how the FARC themselves would react to the protests. As the organization still possessed hundreds of hostages, some were concerned that the antagonizing of the FARC would lead to harsher treatment of their prisoners. “Maybe neither the hostages nor the humanitarian exchange or peace will benefit,” worried the mother of Ingrid Betancourt, a former Colombian senator who was a FARC hostage at the time of the protests (Colombians in huge Farc protest). There were also suspicions that the Colombian government and paramilitaries opposed to the FARC played larger roles in the movement than was portrayed. The vortex of Facebook, with countless message-threads, made it difficult to interpret the movement’s speech; let alone decipher sources of it or predict reactions to it.

Despite these issues, the anti-FARC campaign was an empirical success. By the end of the year, the FARC faced significant setbacks. Numerous leaders were killed and hostages (including Ingrid Betancourt) were peacefully rescued. The world saw how
unpopular the FARC was, and whether for moral or political reasons, the Colombian government took steps to eradicate it. Anti-FARC sentiment decreased the morale of FARC members and dissuaded potential ones. From his home in Barranquilla, Oscar Morales influenced the history of his country.

However, Internet campaigns such as this are neither invulnerable to criticism nor far-removed from possible improvement. The effortless potency that the Internet offers places tremendous responsibility in the hands of those who wish to utilize it. More care should have been taken to consult with the families of FARC hostage victims. Betancourt’s mother was not alone in her apprehension, nor were her fears unfounded. To say this precaution would be too great an impediment to the progress of the movement is absurd, as hostage victims and their families were precisely the people to whom the movement was dedicated. Individuals who begin such Internet campaigns do not inherently answer to constituents, donors, employers, or soldiers; they must affirm that they are serving their desired cause.

The campaign was also saturated with rhetoric about the evils of the FARC, but it did not adequately describe the FARC’s complex history, which is intertwined with that of Colombia. Despite the informality of the medium of Facebook, leaders should have provided such information or publicized sources of such information. This consideration becomes especially important when one recognizes the disproportionate number of inexperienced young people who are reached by such Internet campaigns. If Colombia is ever to attain peace and stability, it will be by consolidating its national identity, not by eliminating parts of it.

An instance of similar use of new media is commonly referred to as Iran’s “Twitter Revolution.” This conflict began in 2009 after the widely-criticized Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected President of Iran by a surprising majority. There were numerous dubious
aspects of the results, including recorded turnouts of over 100% in some regions (History of the Green Movement in Iran). All three opposing candidates alleged that the elections had been rigged, but the results were not annulled.

Iranians took to the streets in anger. In an effort to prevent civilian rallies, the Iranian government blocked cell phone transmissions and texting. Protesters turned to social media, especially Twitter, to organize their activities. As the nature of the protests changed, so did the role of social media in the protests. Iranian government cracked-down on the protesters, and violence escalated quickly. Soon Twitter was not only being used as an organizational tool, but as a news outlet for an event for which there was no international media coverage. Tweets from Iran resonated internationally, especially a photograph of a man lying in the street, blood pooled around his head (Twitter Revolution – Iran). Twitter users around the world modified their location to display “Tehran” as a display of solidarity with the Iranian protesters (“Iran Elections”).

However, there was a dark side to this use of new media. Twitter’s publicity knows no bounds; what a protester wished to convey to his companions could just as easily have been read by an Iranian official. This obviously has unsettling implications: the facility with which the Iranian government could track down and do away with protests, or worse; protesters themselves. What’s more, with the whirlwind of information streaming through Twitter, it is difficult to recognize accuracy. Consider this Tweet from 2009: “Do get into ambulances - don't answer your doors after 8pm ! People being taken away (Wyatt)!” How can one assure himself that this advice is sound, or even well-intentioned, when he knows nothing about its author? About the complications of a “Twitter Revolution,” an author on new media, lamented, “[I]f the dictator doesn't fall in the end, the benefits of social mobilization afforded by the Internet are probably outweighed by its costs (“What if”).”

The dictator, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has not fallen. To this day, he controls the
nation of Iran.

Sadly, the United States government is partially to blame for this failure. It is true that it was a strong supporter of the revolution; in order to further the protests, the State Department even directly requested Twitter to postpone a scheduled shutdown for maintenance. However, this appears hypocritical when one notes that because Iran is an embargoed state, the U.S. Treasury Department has prevented technology, including the instant messaging software such as MSN Messenger, from reaching Iran (“Iran Elections”). This kind of technology would have alleviated the problems of lack of privacy, secrecy, and anonymity associated with the use of Twitter. While the United States’ strained relationship with Iran is duly noted, Iran’s failed Twitter Revolution should serve as a lesson that a nation’s people must not be punished for the actions of the nation’s leaders.

These movements demonstrate the potency of the Internet and the new media in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, considering the way use of mobile technology and Internet access is constantly on the rise, it seems inevitable that the Internet’s impact will only increase in the future. This places great responsibility on citizens of the world, as the Internet is lauded, as well as feared, for the power it affords individuals. Internet policy makers must also grapple with the question who may govern the Internet and how to distribute its power across the globe. We must realize that the greatest tool in striving for peace is the study of history.


<http://worldnews.about.com/od/eh/g/farc.htm>.  


<http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/blog/5386>.
