

Democracy & Society

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Volume 7, Issue 2

Democrats, Dictators, and Demonstrators Conference Issue

New Media in Closed Societies: The Role of Digital Technologies in Burma's Saffron Revolution

Laura Mottaz

Mottaz | New Media in Closed Societies | *De&S* 7.2

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY | THE CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In recent years, digital technologies have made headlines for their role in democratic movements. Activists around the world have harnessed these technologies to support protest movements, but the political implications of these technologies remain poorly understood. Proponents argue that the decentralization of news production can enhance channels for political engagement in authoritarian countries and create opportunities for democratic gains. While critics contend that the susceptibility of digital technologies to the manipulations of authoritarian governments prevents them from challenging the power base of repressive regimes.

The last decade witnessed a shift in the variety and uses of media. Traditional media's high barriers to entry, including gatekeepers and high production costs, restricted news production to a select few. Centralization allowed autocrats to more easily control and censor media content. New media platforms like the Internet and mobile phones greatly reduce barriers to entry by decreasing the cost of producing and publishing media content. Citizens are transformed from news consumers into news producers, allowing for a more democratic and robust discussion of news and current events than traditional one-way media. Decentralization of news production creates new challenges for authoritarians to control information.

Digital technologies also brought a new dimension to political activism by creating a platform for individuals living under authoritarian rule to share information with the world. Digital technologies allow activists to transcend geographic boundaries and build networks for disseminating information. These technologies have become efficient tools for activists across the globe to communicate and mobilize.

The skeptics argue that in authoritarian regimes, the impact of digital technologies on democracy is more nebulous. Potential benefits are overshadowed by the ability of autocratic governments to retain control over use and access to these technologies. This would suggest that the proliferation of digital technologies would not necessarily create a significant challenge to the power base of authoritarian regimes. Though the technologies provide the world access to events in real-time, critics argue that information does not enhance the ability of international actors to influence outcomes.

Burma's Saffron Revolution provides a compelling case to test these ideas. The 2007 uprising is a unique

example of a technology driven protest in a highly authoritarian state. Images from the protests garnered a great deal of international attention, but ultimately did not lead to political change. The case can thus be used to highlight both the strengths and vulnerabilities of these new technologies.

Digital Technologies in Burma: Censorship vs. Circumvention

The Burmese military regime is highly centralized and grants little power to the individual or private sector. Not surprisingly, regime control extends to the use of digital technologies. Less than .5 percent of the Burmese population has access to new media platforms. Out of Burma's 48 million citizens, only 214,000 have access to a mobile phone and only 31,500 have access to the Internet.

Those that do have access face a variety of regulations meant to maintain government control over information flows. In 1996, the government made the possession of an unregistered telephone, fax machine, or modem illegal and punishable by imprisonment of up to 15 years. The junta has repeatedly made good on this threat, going as far as imprisoning the honorary consul for Norway for "unauthorized use of a fax machine". In 1999, the authorities shut down two independent Internet Service Providers (ISPs), leaving only government controlled ISPs. Continuing this trend, the regime introduced new rules of online conduct under the 2000 Web Regulations, which prohibit any web content that is, "...detrimental to the current policies and secret security affairs of the government..." and prohibits writings that are political in nature. Under these regulations, email communications are subject to strict surveillance and access to content is controlled.

New restrictions also make it difficult to obtain residential Internet connections. An applicant must acquire a signed letter from the relevant 'porter warden' verifying that the applicant is not 'politically dangerous' before the application process can even begin. Consequently, most Burmese citizens access the Internet from a limited number of Internet cafes, which are subject to severe surveillance and often engage in self-censorship. Cafe owners are required to take screenshots of user activity every five minutes and deliver these images to the government on a regular basis.

Despite government restrictions, citizen journalists and digital activists have found innovative ways to circumvent restrictions. Many install foreign-hosted proxy servers, allowing users to access Gmail and other blocked sites. Hyper-encrypted e-mail services are also used to evade government censorship of e-mail

content. According to experts, these circumvention techniques have been very successful and the junta has been unable to control their use. The outbreak of the Saffron Revolution demonstrates this.

The Saffron Revolution: The Role of Digital Dissidents

On August 15, 2007 a series of anti-government protests erupted in response to a decision by the junta to remove fuel subsidies, raising the price by as much as 100 percent. These initial demonstrations were bolstered on September 18, as thousands of Buddhist monks led over 80,000 citizens in a peaceful protest opposing military rule. The subsequent crackdown resulted in the deaths of at least three Buddhist monks and the detention of as many as 300 people. On September 27, the junta security forces raided Buddhist monasteries across the country, arresting an additional 700 monks. The junta also moved against a 50,000-person protest in the streets of Yangon, shooting an estimated 100 people. By the following day the protests were over. Across Burma, eyewitnesses reported that the streets were eerily empty as protestors and citizens kept to their homes for safety.

Despite their eventual defeat, activists utilized new media to aid their cause in two ways. First, access to digital technologies in 2007 enabled activists to stay organized and informed. Mobile phones played a crucial role in keeping protestors connected by reducing communication times from weeks to mere seconds. Mobile phones played an indispensable role in the pro-democracy campaign. They permitted monks and activists to coordinate their protests to generate the most pressure on the regime. Mobile phones also allowed activists to stay in contact during the protests and warn each other about military movements. According to Tun Myint Aung, an activist for the National League for Democracy (NLD), “The phones are very important now. I always take mine wherever I go. It is next to me when I sleep. Through it I stay in touch with my people, and follow news about events in the country.”

Burmese bloggers also played a critical role in the uprising by providing citizens with information about the protests. “It is really important; people want to know what is going on,” states one blogger. “If something happens we can warn people. We can do something, we can keep the people aware.” Even with limited Internet access, bloggers found innovative ways to circumvent government restrictions and to send out updates about the protests. Many relied on foreign proxy servers and encrypted e-mails to keep their blogs updated during the protest.

Due to the lack of broad Internet access in Burma, Internet initiatives found the most success when coupled with traditional forms of mass communication, particularly radio and satellite television. During the uprising, news updates from Internet blog sites were quickly transferred into television and radio broadcasts – most notably those operated by the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). DVB reports were broadcast back into Burma via satellite to counter the regime’s propaganda and misinformation about the protests. With international journalists banned from the country, these updates were the only source of information for protestors during the demonstrations.

Second, these technologies also allowed activists to connect with the international community. Pictures, video footage, and commentary reached international news agencies via the Internet within hours. The speed at which information about Burma’s democracy protests reached the outside world had a significant impact on the movement because the international community was able to quickly react to this information and support protestors by putting pressure on the Burmese regime.

Protestors were able to utilize a variety of digital sources to transfer information. At the start of the protests many dissidents used e-mail to contact Burmese exiles, transnational advocacy networks, and news agencies to relay information about the uprising. However, as the junta tightened its grip over outgoing e-mail, protestors used chat services, Wikipedia, and even Facebook to continue supplying information. Many protestors turned to Internet chat rooms, such as Yahoo Messenger, to recount the events unfolding in Burma.

Traditional media outlets quickly picked up these eyewitness reports and integrated them into their content. These outlets, like the *New York Times* and the BBC, lent international credibility to the reports and amplified their impact. Though new media platforms have significant user bases, their audience is dwarfed by the traffic received by traditional media organizations. By utilizing both the speed of digital technologies and large traditional media audiences, Burmese activists were able to propel their cause into the international spotlight.

The increased global awareness prompted many political leaders to take a more proactive and explicit

stance against the Burmese regime. As information about the uprising in Burma spread, governments around the world quickly responded in support of the protestors. The United States increased financial and travel sanctions on Burmese government officials only a day after the Burmese government began cracking down on protestors. The next day the United Nations followed suit calling for restraint on behalf of the Burmese regime. The European Union announced tighter sanctions on Burma as well, including an embargo on imports of gemstones, timber and metal, and a wider visa ban against members of the Burmese military government in an attempt to compel the Burmese regime to make concrete steps toward democratization. The vivid images provided by activists inside Burma shook the consciousness of the international community and forced a response.

Digital Crackdown

When the crackdown came it incorporated not only physical violence, but also the repression of digital technologies. On September 29, in a desperate attempt to keep the world from knowing about events in Burma, the regime shut down Internet access nationwide and disabled international mobile phone connections in an unprecedented attempt at a total information blockade. As the sole provider of Internet in the country, the government had little trouble cutting off all Internet access to the country. According to opposition spokesman Myint Thein, almost every prominent member of the opposition had all incoming and outgoing calls cut off. Soldiers confiscated digital cameras and mobile phones, and threatened or arrested anyone caught transmitting information.

The junta's crackdown on digital technologies was fast and effective. The effects of this technology blackout were felt around the world. According to Mydans, "Until [the crackdown] television screens and newspapers were flooded with scenes of tens of thousands of red-robed monks in the streets and of chaos and violence as the junta stamped out the biggest popular uprising in two decades. But then, the images, text messages, and [Internet] postings just stopped, shut down by the generals". With no material flowing out of Burma via digital connections, international news agencies moved on to other stories and Burma quickly slipped from the limelight. While some news agencies continued to follow the story in Burma, in the months following the crackdown, the number of articles run about the uprising was reduced by more than half, and Burma slipped from the consciousness of the international community.

The Internet, camera phones, and other digital technologies played a critical role in the protests, particularly through the transmission of news about the protests to the outside world. Ultimately, however, the revolution was a failure and did not lead to political change. While the junta made minimal concessions, including the drafting of a new constitution and agreeing talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, these appear to be primarily symbolic. According to the junta, the constitution is one step on a “road map to democracy.” The next are elections in 2010. The outcome of these elections though is already clear. The military will remain in control of the government.

The case of the Saffron Revolution indicates that digital technologies alone do not have the ability to pose a major threat to the power base of authoritarian regimes. The Burmese government stifled the Saffron Revolution not with policy changes but with the use of force and the protests do not appear to have impaired the military junta’s control of the nation. Nevertheless, digital technologies helped create a more powerful and cohesive uprising. In the absence of these technologies the protests quickly deteriorated.

Burma’s military regime seems prepared to continue to cut its country off from the digital world just as it has from the world at large. However, it is not clear how much longer the junta can hold back the future. As demonstrated by this case, digital technologies are making it much harder for authoritarian regimes to draw a curtain of secrecy and act with impunity. Digital technologies create opportunities for enhanced communication and transparency, but these are just a few of the many factors needed for a democratic transition. As practitioners, we must temper our expectations for these technologies and work to establish realistic goals for their use. In order to more effectively support these technologies in the future, practitioners and activists must develop a greater technical understanding of these tools in order to better adapt them to political contexts.