

Information technologies foster freedom or reinforce repression

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The media may portray text messaging and social networks as powerful new weapons for freedom fighters, but these new communication tools may not be as uniformly beneficial or as robust as suggested, according to Penn State researchers.

People have used new information communication technologies, such as Twitter, Facebook and text messaging, both as tools for freedom and to repress in recent civil strife in Egypt and Kenya, said Brandie Martin, graduate student in mass communications.

"The key word is 'tool,' " said Martin. "The depiction that these revolutions are caused by the technology is an over-generalization."

When anti-government protests exploded in Egypt on Jan. 25, 2011, citizens began to use blogs, text messaging and social networks to spread information critical of the current government. About 56,000 Egyptians became members of a Facebook page about the movement and approximately 15,000 citizens used Twitter accounts to find and spread information about the protests.

However, the government, led by then President Hosni Mubarak, quickly cracked down on bloggers and took over Internet and text messaging services, said Martin, who worked with Anthony Olorunnisola, associate professor of communications.

The researchers, who presented their paper today (Sept. 21) at the New

ICTs + New Media = New Democracy workshop in Washington, D.C., organized by Penn State's Institute for Information Policy and New America Foundation's Open Technology Initiative, said that third-party telecommunication companies responded differently to the Egyptian government's request to take over. Key mobile network operators, such as Vodafone, Mobinil and Etisalat, honored the government request and suspended service.

Pro-government forces continued to send text and Internet messages for their cause.

"President Mubarak used the services to send out pro-Mubarak messages," Martin said. "The messages alerted supporters about the location of pro-Mubarak rallies and called for unity in his name."

However, other telecommunication companies helped the protesters circumvent the ban. Internet service providers outside Egypt, for example, helped Egyptians use the Speak 2 Tweet function, an application created by Google, Twitter and SayNow that turns voice calls into Twitter updates.

Martin said the cause of and reaction to the turmoil in Kenya in 2008 contrasts with the Egyptian response in several ways. Unrest in Kenya was divided along ethnic and tribal lines. Text messaging was used not necessarily to rally unity, but to broadcast "hate speech" messages, inciting violence against members of opposing tribes. Nearly 1,500 Kenyans died in the violence, according to Martin.

One example of a hate speech [text message](#) that was sent by members of the Kikuyu tribe urged people to compile lists of members of the Luos and Kalus tribes and identify where their children go to school.

"We say no more innocent Kikuyu blood will be shed," the message

read. "We will slaughter them right here in the capital city."

When Kenyan authorities moved to stop the messages, telecommunications companies refused to comply with the government order.

"There are real questions now as to what the role of telecommunication companies should be," said Martin. "When should the government go in and block communication when they are used for hate speech?"

Martin analyzed content on major news distribution sites, including the BBC, Washington Post, NPR and Time, as well as regional media sources such as Al Jazeera and Ahram Online. She also reviewed Twitter updates, [Facebook](#) posts and text messages sent during the conflicts.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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