2

democracy

Technology and Democracy

<< Cell phones helped spawn a democratic revolution during People Power II in the Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Building on the theme of 'Democracy and the Media' introduced in Unit 1, this unit focuses on the impact of communications technologies in the political life of societies, particularly in the realm of human rights and democratic participation of citizens. The cell phone is the feature technology for this unit because of the remarkable impact it is having on the way that people mobilize in social movements, and for the creative ways that it is being used in other political contexts. Canada's significant contributions to the promotion of human rights and democracy are explored as well as home-grown innovators in the field of communications technologies.

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Although it will take a decade to ramp up, mobile communications and pervasive computing technologies, together with social contracts that were never possible before, are already beginning to change the way people meet, mate, work fight, buy, sell, govern, and create.

—Howard Reingold, in **Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution**, 2002.

In the last two decades or so, most of the political upheavals had some distinct link to communications technology.

— Sociology professor Alex Magno
in **Seeing is Believing**.

Americans opposed to war in Iraq are conducting a "Virtual March" on Washington today… Tens of thousands of Americans have signed up to participate by sending e-mail, fax and telephone messages to the White House and members of Congress.

— From an article by John Tierney
in **The New York Times**, February 26, 2003.

The beguiling but ultimately mistaken notion that technologies are "merely tools" — things we pick up, use and then easily put away — poses a major barrier for understanding how we live today. Missing in the tool/use perspective is acknowledgment of a basic fact about people's relationship to the technological realm: our utter dependence upon the large, complex, artificial systems that surround us on every side, giving structure to everything we do.
— Langdon Winner in the e-zine **NetFuture**, Issue #137, October, 2002.

1. TECHNOLOGY, POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

The Digital Revolution is creating a network society where new opportunities exist for groups to tell their stories and defend their rights. At the same time, the explosion of communication technologies means that our Digital Revolution risks turning the fight for human rights and democracy into sound bites for evening news human interest stories.

Seeing is Believing showcases some of the hopeful stories of how citizens have used communications technologies to effect change to improve the human rights situation in their societies. A wedding videographer's footage of the massacre of his village helps publicize its plight and convict Serbian war criminals in an international tribunal. In the Philippines, cell phone text messaging brings hundreds of thousands of people into the streets to protest political corruption, resulting in the downfall of President Estrada. And in Mexico, the video recorded on a small hand held camera by a member of Mental Disability Rights International leads to national policy changes to safeguard the rights of people with mental illnesses.

The influence of communications technologies on political life has also been problematic, especially in the realm of visual media. Today, no politician or human rights advocate can hope to have an impact on public debate unless his or her message can be sold through the media. Politicians are trained by media specialists to serve up sound bites for the news each evening, and rely on public relations specialists in their campaigns to get elected. Some commentators suggest that this creates a superficial politics that doesn't allow citizens to fully understand the issues and make informed choices. (In Unit 4, we will explore other controversial or problematic aspects of our contemporary media culture).

Activity 1: One way to think about the relationship of democracy and the Digital Revolution is to ask how politics is practiced in a 'network society' (a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks) that is increasingly global and integrated. Use the following questions for a class discussion or individual assignments:
1. What kinds of politics draw our attention? What and who do we pay attention to? How do we learn about political issues?
2. What do those on the 'outside' of political power have to do to have an impact in the mainstream of political life today?
3. What kind of messages have prompted you to engage in some form of political activity? (Note: This includes activities like student council and school campaigns, demonstrations and marches, letter writing campaigns, et cetera.) What was (were) the cause(s)? In what ways and through what media were those messages transmitted?

Activity 2: Set up a debate in your class about the positive and negative impact that new technology has on the working of democracy today. Divide the class into two sides, and have each side prepare arguments for why they believe the Digital Revolution has either helped in the fight for human rights and citizen engagement in political life or hindered this struggle. (Note: In addition to their own research, students can use examples from the stories featured in the film **Seeing is Believing** or on **seeingisbelieving.ca** in the 'Video' and 'Technology' sections.)

2. TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE CELL PHONE

In the last few years, a combination of the Internet and cell phones have changed the way that social movements organize as citizens have adapted these commercial telecommunications products for new political and social purposes. Information can be shared very rapidly through a decentralized network of groups and individuals around the world or just in one community. Large groups can be mobilized on short notice and with an unprecedented level of flexibility. The transmission of information is no longer subject to geographical boundaries. And cell phones have also had some other very surprising political uses. **(Note: More information about the stories mentioned in this section are available on seeingisbelieving.ca in 'Technology'.)**

Mass Mobilizing

In the Philippines during the 2001 'People Power' revolution, text messaging and the Internet brought 200,000 people into the streets in the time it takes to watch a Hollywood movie, and the result was the overthrow of the Estrada government. In Venezuela the combination of low tech 'cacerolazos' (pot banging) and high tech cell phones and pagers helped return President Hugo Chavez to power when he was deposed in a coup in April 2002. Not all mass mobilizing is political: In England, groups of young women use cell phones to track Prince William's every movement in public, text messaging each other when he is spotted so that the others can converge on the location.

1. If you or your friends have cell phones, do you text message? Have you ever used text messaging to gather a group of people together? Explain how this worked.
2. Have you ever used cell phones in a political context? Can you think of ways in which cell phones and text messaging could help in a campaign or issue that you are currently interested in or working on?
3. What are some of the drawbacks of this new ability to share information so quickly and widely? (Note: Consider, for example, questions of the credibility of unverified information, the possibilities of incitements to violence, et cetera.) Mention any examples you know of where the rapid sharing of information had a negative impact.

Activity 1: We have looked at examples of mass mobilizing via cell phone in other parts of the world. Choose a political demonstration or protest that happened in your area, another Canadian location, or in the US. (Note: some recent high-profile examples are protests at the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City and the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, as well as demonstrations against US plans for war with Iraq.) Research how cell phones and other technologies were used to mobilize people to participate. Visit some of the Web sites of organizations that took part in or helped organize the event and find out how they use technology to mobilize their membership and share information. If possible, talk to a representative of the organization. Write a description of their communications and media strategy, including what larger networks they are part of.

Activity 2: Try a 'mass mobilizing' action of your own! Divide into 5 or 6 groups, making sure that at least one person in each group has a cell phone. Start from different locations in the school (or in the neighbouhood or around the community.) Using only text messaging, try to gather all the groups in one place. See how long it takes, and if all the groups made it. Once you have reassembled, discuss what difficulties you encountered trying to figure out where to meet and how. How would you overcome those problems? What would make it easier to find each other? Try the game again, but this time, decide on some rules and strategies to help co-ordinate your action. For example, you could decide to provide each group with a list of the cell phone numbers of all the groups. See how long it takes you to assemble this time. Discuss what you learned from trying to co-ordinate a 'mass mobilization'.

Social and Cultural Impact of Cell Phone Technology

In North America, we are surrounded by the impact that digital technology has on our daily lives. In some parts of the world, cell phones are more common than computers. 80% of Finns own at least one cell phone, and it's been said that: "every child in Finland learns that there is one name, Nokia, that is somehow very special in Finnish life" (Jukka-Pekka Puro, "Finland: a mobile culture" in Perpetual Contact).

On the other side of the Digital Divide (the gap between people who have access to modern communications technologies and those who don't), Bangladesh is the location of an innovative microcredit program (small loans to rural people to buy items that will help them make a sustainable living) that helps village women become operators of cell phones. Grameen Telecom's Village Phone program is a remarkable example of how countries and regions that do not have access to conventional communications tools like telephones can get around the problem of building expensive technological infrastructures by using digital and satellite technologies.

On a darker note, the manufacture of cell phones has had a devastating impact in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where mining for a material called coltan, required for the manufacture of cell phones, has helped fuel violent civil war.

Activity 1: Of all the new examples of digital technology today, think of which digital object is the most important in your life. Is it a cell phone, a pager, the Internet, a digital camcorder, or something else? In a paragraph or two describe how it has changed the way you conduct your life. Consider how it has changed your day-to-day activity in the way you interact with friends, family, and others; how you spend your free time; the amount of time you spend in face-to-face communication; if/how if affects the way you study or work. Describe the benefits and drawbacks of the impact this technology has had for you.

Alternative Activity 1: During one school week, keep a log of how many times you use digital technologies each day. Describe what object or equipment you used, how many times you used it, for how long, and for what purpose. Reflect on what your life would be like if you did not have easy access to these technologies, and what alternatives you would use instead.

Activity 2: (Note: This activity can be organized as a class project by dividing the questions among groups, or as a larger individual assignment.) Select a technological item in the classroom, for example, a computer screen, projector, TV, VCR, et cetera. Investigate the following questions:

1. Where is the item manufactured and what are labour conditions like in the factories in that country or region? For example, what are factory workers paid there? Are there laws that protect their safety? Their rights? Figure out how many hours a factory worker would have to work in order to buy the item for the price we pay for it.

Social and Cultural Impact of Cell Phone Technology (continued)

2. What impact does the company that makes this technology have on the economy of the country it is manufactured in? (Note: If this information is not available, you could look at the economic importance of, for example, the manufacture of communications equipment for export, or the extent of foreign investment in the high technology sector of the country). Describe the overall economic situation of the country, including poverty statistics.
3. What has been the cultural impact of the technology on the society in which it is made? How has it changed the way people communicate there? Has the culture of that society had an impact on the technology itself?

Activity 3: Many 'microcredit' borrowers are women, and there are more and more programs in developing countries that help women use different kinds of technologies, such as weaving looms and agricultural equipment, to earn money for themselves, their families and their villages. Research the 'Grameen Village Phone' program or another program aimed at improving the situation of women in developing countries.

Describe:
*   what the lives of women are like in the region you have chosen
*   the nature of the program geared toward improving their situation
*   how access to technology affects the lives of these women, their families, and their villages, including both benefits and challenges it presents
 (Note: Information about these issues is widely available on the Web.)

<< Phone Ladies of Bangladesh

>> Softimage helped create *Star Wars'* Yoda

<< Discreet's software "combustion"

3. CANADIAN INNOVATIONS IN COMMUNICATIONS TECH

In the shift from analog to digital technology, Canada has made a number of significant innovative contributions to the realm of wireless communication. Companies like BlackBerry and Sierra Wireless have designed new devices, while Telesat Canada has developed a new method of transmitting information on the Internet via satellite. With the launch of Telesat's Anik A1 satellite in 1972, live television and telephone service were made possible everywhere in the nation, and Canada became the first country in the world to have a satellite in space for non-military communications.

Canadians are also responsible for improving the visual effects you see in blockbuster movies and the latest video games. Two software companies in Montreal, Softimage and Discreet, specialize in creating 3-D animation and visual effects for use in films and video games. In addition, industry think tanks such as the New Media Innovation Centre (New MIC) in Vancouver look for creative ways to expand the applications of wireless and broadband technology.

Activity 1: Choose one of the following Canadian technology companies: BlackBerry, Sierra Wireless, Telesat, Softimage, Discreet. Drawing from information on their Web sites and other research, provide a brief description of the company and the kinds of technologies it produces. Choose one of the company's feature technologies and provide a brief description.

Activity 2: Look at the Web sites of Softimage or Discreet and find out which films or video games have incorporated either Softimage or Discreet effects or animation. Play one or more of the video games that use the company's technology, or watch one of the films that use its special effects. Describe how the technologies were used. Evaluate how effective they were in terms of realism, excitement and innovation.

4. CANADIAN CONTRIBUTIONS
TO DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Canada has been a significant promoter of both human rights and democracy. In fact, communications technologies have played an important role in the work of several prominent Canadians who have each participated in the struggle for democracy and human rights on the world stage. Here are three examples of Canadians leaders in international human rights advocacy:

Louise Arbour A native of Quebec, Louise Arbour is currently a Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. She has acted the Chief Prosecutor of War Crimes at the International Criminal Tribunals for both Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and has been one of the main forces in the move to create an International Criminal Court. In both tribunals, closed circuit television technology allowed journalists to both view and report the proceedings, and it allowed witnesses to provide testimony while keeping their identities hidden through image or voice altering devices in order to protect them from reprisal. 'Amateur' video footage of massacres and the destruction of villages also provided crucial evidence for the prosecutors. (For examples, visit 'The Storyboard' of 'The Film' section at seeingisbelieving.ca.)

Stephen Lewis Veteran diplomat Stephen Lewis is Canada's former ambassador to the United Nations (UN) and a passionate advocate of the rights and needs of children. He was appointed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa in 2001. The goal of his work is to stabilize the AIDS epidemic in Africa by working with donors, private sector leaders, and multilateral agencies to raise consciousness and fight the spread of the disease. Getting the message out about the impact, prevention, and treatment of AIDS locally and internationally is a crucial part of his work. In order to reach as wide an audience as possible, Lewis gives many speeches and interviews on radio and television, including a series of talks broadcast on CBC Radio. He has also published many books and articles about humanitarian issues.

4. CANADIAN CONTRIBUTIONS
TO DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS (CONTINUED)

Michael Ignatieff
Professor Michael Ignatieff, a native of Toronto, is the Director of the Carr Center of Human Rights Policy at Harvard University. He has written extensively on the moral connection created by technological culture with war victims, and the impact of ethnic war abroad on the ways different ethnic groups are treated at home. In his book The Rights Revolution (2000), Ignatieff argues that Canadian democracy differentiates itself from that of other Western countries by allowing for both individual rights and collective group rights (for instance, those of women and Aboriginal peoples). Ignatieff also critically examines television as a political instrument. For example, in The Warrior's Honor, he argues that television influences us to see politics in black and white terms, where the world consists of solely aggressors and victims.

Activity 1: In addition to these examples, many other Canadians are engaged in the struggle for democracy and human rights. Some examples: author **Naomi Klein**; UN peacekeeper **Romeo Dallaire**; environmentalist **David Suzuki**; First Nations leader **Mathew Coon Come**; principal author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights **John Humphrey**; child-labour activist **Craig Kielberger**; and the first president of the International Criminal Court **Philippe Kirsch**. Profile one of the individuals or of another Canadian activist involved in a cause that is important to you. Include a brief 'backgrounder' on the issue he/she is involved with. Describe what forms of communications technologies (e.g. television, radio, Internet, film/video) he/she can be associated with. If possible, interview your subject. Present your profile to the class in the format of your choice. This can be in the form of an oral presentation, video, Web page, PowerPoint presentation, CD-ROM, et cetera. (Note to teachers: This exercise can be adapted for the skill level and access to equipment of the class.)

Activity 2: In Canada, national and international human rights policies and initiatives are closely linked. Choose an area of human rights that interests you (eg. women's rights, rights of Aboriginal peoples, freedom of expression, democratic participation, linguistic freedom) and determine how those rights are enshrined in Canadian and/or international human rights documents. (Note: A good starting point for research is the Web site of Canadian Heritage's Human Rights Program.) Investigate how well Canada is doing in protecting or promoting these rights. If necessary, describe how you would change or improve the current situation. If possible, describe how the use of communications technologies could help.

ADDITIONAL PROJECT AND RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

1. A central theme throughout these assignments is the importance of communicating for social change. As a class, create a 'human rights' newsletter for your school using the assignments you are working on in each of the units. If you prefer, focus on one human rights related issue that you would like to bring more attention to.

 If you have the skills and equipment, present your material in a different format. You could create an e-zine (on-line newsletter), a Web site, a video, a radio programme, a guest speaker series, et cetera. You may want to collaborate with other classes or clubs that can offer needed skills or equipment in areas like video or radio production, graphic design, or Web site development.

2. In South America, Africa, and Asia, a combination of low-tech and high-tech devices has proven instrumental to revolutionary activity. In what other countries has technology led to a drastic change in political power? Find at least two examples, and describe what kind of low or high-tech devices were involved and how.