

PHILIPPINES

**SMS and Democratic Governance in the
Philippines**

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the use of mobile phones, particularly the short messaging system or SMS, in promoting democratic governance - organizing institutional frameworks to achieve democratic ideals. The objective of this paper is to document how mobile phones is being used to promote popular participation in Philippine politics.

The paper looks into the various SMS-based services that enhance citizen participation. Specifically, SMS services that provides the following were examined: 1) Provision of Public Information; 2) Delivery of Public Service; 3) Amplifying Voice; 4) Vigilantism. 5) Elections and 6) Mass Action and 7) Developing Political Accounts.

Previous studies of SMS in government show that over half of Philippine government agencies use SMS-based services. Most of these national government agencies use SMS as a mechanism for providing information and receiving feedback. In a few instances SMS is used to enhance the delivery of public services.

The notable examples of SMS-based services that provide information are the Department of Agriculture's Presyo and Panahon Text and the Department of Trade and Industry's TextDTI. The PAYBIR is an SMS-based service that allows citizens to pay taxes through their cell phones. .The Office of the President's TXTGMA and the office of Marikina Mayor's TXTMCF elicit complaints, comments and suggestions from constituents. These two are examples of SMS-based services that amplify the citizens' voice. On the other hand, the DILG's Patrol 117 is an example of a government service that promotes citizen participation in crime prevention.

The role of SMS in elections as well as its role in mobilizing political action is also discussed. Examples of how text messaging was used as the medium for organizing rallies, spreading information, and stating political positions were given. The discussion on how SMS help develop political account or interpretation of current events was considered through an analysis of political jokes spread through SMS.

While the focus of the paper was on how SMS is being deployed to promote citizen participation, it was noted that SMS is also used in anti or counter-democratic projects.

In sum, this paper documents the role played by SMS in the overall effort at creating an effective set of rules for managing voluntary political exchanges in the Philippines.

SMS AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN THE PHILIPPINES

Emmanuel C. Lallana, PhD*

The advent of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), particularly the internet, has raised hope of the possibility of democracy in its original sense of rule of all citizens.

Of course, technology itself merely provides the conditions for something to happen and technology by itself will not determine desired outcome(s). Nonetheless, because technologies like the internet are general purpose technologies (GPT) they can have major impact on social, economic and political structures.¹ There is also something unique about ICTs that makes citizen rule possible:

... technologies such as the internet are serving to increase the capacity for both reciprocal and non-reciprocal communications. These new conditions challenge individuals and organizations to seek out new possibilities for reciprocal bonding and collaboration, and to create opportunities which were previously only associated with the sharing of a common locale.²

Anthony G. Wilhem identifies four challenges to democracy in the digital age: 1) high barrier to entry into a digitally mediated public sphere; 2) ability of persons to share universally in a virtual public sphere; 3) potential undermining of the methodical pace of democratic decision making due to rhythms and speeds unparalleled in human history; and 4) the disappearance of the public sphere under the pressure of market forces that distort, compress, and even eliminate public right-of-way.³

The objective of this paper is more modest – examining the use of use of mobile phones and SMS in promoting popular rule in a developing country. To goal is to understand if mobile phones (and SMS) can help in democratic governance or organizing institutional frameworks to achieve democratic ideals⁴. Specifically, it will examine the role of SMS in amplifying voice, enhancing citizen participation, developing “political accounts”, and mobilizing for mass action.

* Ms. Kathryn Pauso provided research assistance to the author.

¹ For a discussion on GPT and economic transformation see Kenneth I. Carlaw and Richard G. Lipsey “Externalities versus Technological Complementarities: a model of GPT-driven, sustained growth” in <http://www.sfu.ca/~rlipsey/N&W.pdf>

² James Slevin *The Internet and Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) p. 90

³ Anthony G. Wilhelm *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace* (NY: Routledge, 2000) pp. 6-7

⁴The definition of democratic governance is from James G. March and Johan P. Olsen *Democratic Governance* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) p. 6

This paper looks at mobile phones and SMS because they dramatically lower the cost to entry to technology-mediated political participation in the developing world. As has been noted by many analysts, the mobile phone's spread throughout the developing world has been quicker and deeper than any previous communications technology.⁵ As a result of its rapid global spread, cell phones are dramatically changing lives. As noted by James Katz: "Cell phones are enabling people to create their own micro-cultures; they are changing cultural norms and values, and demonstrating consumers' ability to modify and repurpose technology for their own use."⁶ Howard Rheingold has also examined how mobile phones are enabling people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action were not possible before.⁷

I. SMS and the Filipino

Filipinos claim with pride that the Philippines is the "texting capital of the world." While the country does not send the most number of text messages worldwide, the per capita text output in the country is indeed impressive.

While the predominant use for text messaging is peer to peer communication (up to 80% by one study), Filipinos have also found interesting uses for the Short Message Service (SMS) feature of their mobile phones in their social, economic and political lives.⁸

SMS is the new way that Filipinos strengthen the bonds of friendship and family. It is also being used to start new friendships or to express one's regard even to complete strangers. A news article on Adrian Maronilla Jr., a 4-year old prodigy, led to a flood of text messages to his parents from all over the country expressing admiration for the boy genius, asking the boy's solution to the national problems, and offering support and friendship.⁹

SMS has allowed Filipinos working overseas to keep in touch with their loved ones at home – even those in the remotest barrios. A phone call to a loved one abroad used to require careful planning and traveling to the town center where the phone is located.

⁵ Matthew Bishop "Loose talk saves lives" *Developments: The International Development Magazine* <http://www.developments.org.uk/data/issue31/loose-talk.htm>. In the Philippines it is estimated that half of the population are cell phone subscribers. Regular (wired) telephone penetration is less than 10% of the population, with PC and Internet penetration at about the same level.

⁶Summary of James Katz remarks during the MIT *Communications Forum on Cell Phone Culture* in http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/cell_phone_culture.htm

⁷ Howard Rheingold *SmartMobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Basic Books, 2002)

⁸ For a discussion on the impact of cell phones on the everyday life of Filipinos see Raul Pertiera, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pingol, Joel Hernandez and Nikos Lexis Dakanay, *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine modernity*. (Manila: De La Salle University Press. 2003) and on the use of cell phones in business and government see Emmanuel C. Lallana *SMS in Business and Government in the Philippines: ICT4D Monograph Series No. 1* (Manila: ICT4D.ph, 2004).

⁹ "Wonder Boy flooded with text messages of inspiration, hope" *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 24 July 2005, p.1.

Today relatives who work abroad are a text message away. This ability to keep in constant touch has somewhat mitigated the pain of separation caused by economic difficulties. But as SMS can bring reassuring, even joyful news, from home, it can also bring pain and suffering. A Filipino working as a domestic helper in Hong Kong received news that a relative raped her 5-year old daughter left in the care of relatives back home in Mindanao via a text message.¹⁰

SMS has been drafted in the service of the arts. A number of groups have launched poetry writing contests using SMS. One of the government's cultural arms held a contest aimed at reviving traditional forms of poetry using the SMS. Poets like Frank G. Rivera are publishing (in book format) collection of poems originally sent out to his friends via SMS. In the case of Rivera, the poems were mostly in haiku form with themes varying from the author's disillusionment with Philippine politics to his personal sentiments on unrequited love, death, and nationalism.¹¹

Since religion and politics play an import role in the lives of Filipinos, it is not surprising that SMS has been incorporated in the Filipinos practice of their faith and in the national past time.

The "TEXT MARY" service was launched by The Way of Mary Foundation to bring Filipinos closer to god.¹² For the cost of a text message (in this instance - P2.50) a prayer petition can be sent either to the Carmelite nuns or one of the daily Masses at the four major churches in Manila. Typical petitions ask for financial windfall (like winning the Lotto or paying off debts), for assistance on career endeavors (passing the bar exams or approval of a US visa), and for intervention on personal matters (marriage, family, and friends). The "TEXT MARY" server receives an average of 100 petitions daily.

Jokes circulated via SMS have become an almost daily staple of Filipinos. A number of these jokes are running commentaries on current events. One such joke tells of a Filipino's encounter with St. Peter at the gates of heaven:

St Peter: Where did you come from?
Man: Philippines, sir
St. Peter: You may enter heaven... you've suffered enough from your opposition politicians!

Another comment on the upheavals that country faces:

Pinoy Tourist Guide: This is cockfighting, our no. 1 sport
Tourist: Isn't it revolting?
Guide: No sir, that's our no. 2 sport.

¹⁰ "Text shock from home" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 12 June 2005, p.9.

¹¹ "For the Text Poets Society" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 6 June 2005, p. C1.

¹² "Petition flood 'Text Mary' project server" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 29 August 2005, p. 1

Many poke fun at the country's would-be leaders --- among the favorites are actors turned politicians like the late Fernando Poe Jr.:

Reporter: Mr. Poe, if you knew the time and place of your death, what would you do?

FPJ: You're testing my intelligence *ha?* Ok. Of course, I would not show up!

II. eGovernment and eGovernance in the Philippines

Like its citizens, the Philippine government has not been lagging in the use of technology for its own purposes.

The Philippines ranked no. 41 in the 2005 UN Global eGovernment Readiness Report.¹³ To put this achievement in perspective, this ranking is better than Malaysia (ranked at 43) and Thailand (at 46)—countries that fare better than the Philippines in more general ICT readiness surveys.¹⁴ In fact, in terms of its ranking in South and Eastern Asia, the Philippines only follows global top 20 countries South Korea, Singapore and Japan. The Philippines no. 4 spot in South and Eastern Asia is not only better than Malaysia (no. 5) and Thailand (no. 6) but also China (no. 7) Indonesia (no. 10) and Vietnam (no. 11).¹⁵

The UN report notes that:

The Philippines also developed a solid presence across all stages of e-government. In general, therefore, it has covered most of the basic functions and features while simultaneously developing transactional facilities and venturing into the networked presence stage though it still lacks a formal online consultations mechanism.¹⁶

The UN report also highlighted that the Philippine government website (which it featured as a global 'good practice':

... one of the few national sites that offer a wireless access alternative. Impressively, it does so in three dedicated ways, namely via Short Message Service (SMS), Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) as well as through a Pocket PC section. Perhaps especially noteworthy, however, is the "Issuances for Comments" section on the national site homepage,

¹³ The Index is a composite index comprising Web measure index, the Telecommunication Infrastructure index and the Human Capital index see *UN Global E-government Readiness Report 2005: From E-government to E-inclusion* <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan021888.pdf>, p. 14

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45

which invites the user to partake in the policy-making process by providing feedback.¹⁷

Even more impressive is the country's ranking in the e-Participation index in the same UN survey. The e-Participation index measures the following: *e-Information* – whether government websites offer information on policies and programs, budgets, laws and regulations, and other briefs on key public interest; *e-Consultation* - if government websites offers choice of public policy topics online for discussion with real time and archived access to audio and video of public meetings; and, *e-Decision-making* - if governments indicate whether it will take citizen input into decision-making in their websites.¹⁸

In terms of e-Participation the Philippines is one of the global top 20 countries (tied at the 15th spot with Malta). Only three other East Asian countries are in the Top 25 -- Singapore (2nd spot), Korea (tied for 4th) and Japan (at no. 16 – one notch below the Philippines!)

The UN is unique among global eGovernment surveys in that it focuses on how governments are using technology to enhance citizen participation. This focus is only proper because e-Government is not simply about more effective and efficient delivery of government service. ICT has the potential to improve citizens' ability to ensure that their interests are taken into account in the decision-making process.

A criticism of the UN eGovernment survey is that it puts too much emphasis on websites and not enough on other ICTs that are more prevalent and potentially more useful in transforming governance in the developing world.

One such technology is the (digital) mobile phone and SMS. In most developing countries, the mobile phone is more ubiquitous than the internet. One can argue that if eGovernment is to be meaningful to the majority in the developing world it must focus on how to deliver government services and empower the people using wireless technologies, particularly mobile phones.

In the Philippines, the government uses the mobile phone and the SMS to deliver services (provision of information and tax payment), and to gather public opinion and to promote other forms of citizen participation. On the other hand, citizens use mobile phones and SMS in more expansive ways: to help elect politicians and mobilize political support for particular causes.

III. SMS in Government

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 46

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 94

About half of Philippine government agencies offering e-services have incorporated SMS as a service delivery mechanism and in enhancing political participation.¹⁹ Another study, conducted by the (Philippines') National Computer Center in June 2005, revealed that fifty (50) government agencies have their own SMS-based services. Of these fifty agencies, sixteen (16) are Departments (or Ministries), three (3) are bodies mandated by the constitution (commissions), twelve (12) are government-owned or controlled corporations, and four (4) are agencies under the Office of the President.

The three main purposes of these fifty (50) SMS-based services are to provide information, to set-up feedback mechanisms for stakeholders either in form of complaints or suggestions, and to make service delivery faster and more convenient. Only the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) has taken advantage of electronic cash to ease up the tax paying process. The Department of National Defense (DND) and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) facilities function as hotlines for crime/disaster reporting and requests for assistance. The Department of Foreign Affairs' (DFA) service allow Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) to request for assistance. The rest of the SMS facilities either disseminate information or receive feedback.

SMS and the Revenue Service

Among the promises of “anytime, anywhere” government is greater convenience for citizens. And a more convenient way of paying taxes is what the PAYBIR services hopes to bring to Filipinos.

PAYBIR, which was launched in January 2005, is the Bureau of Internal Revenue's SMS based service that allows for electronic payment of business registration fees and income tax via the cellular phone.

PAYBIR was initially limited to Annual Business Registration Fees and is available only to subscribers of one of the major cellular phone provider - Globe and its G-Cash service.

Under the PAYBIR system, business owners simply need to convert money into G-Cash by registering their mobile phone numbers and other pertinent information in the G-Cash database. Once registered, business owners can pay by typing PAYBIR, the amount to be paid, the mobile PIN, the taxpayer branch code, the revenue district office code, and the registered company name and sending these to 2882. A confirmation message is sent after the transaction is completed. The transaction only costs P1.00.

PAYBIR was eventually extended to micro tax payments that will not exceed ten thousand pesos (P10,000.00). Included in the PAYBIR are income tax returns for individuals earning pure compensation, income tax returns for self-employed, professionals, estates and trusts, payment forms, and documentary stamp tax declaration.

Income tax payers who are also registered G-Cash users can pay their taxes by encoding PAYBIR, then the amount, the mobile pin number, the form type, the tax type, the return

¹⁹ Lallana and Samanodi *State of eGovernment in the Philippines, 2003/4*

period, TIN, the taxpayer's branch code, the revenue district office code, and the taxpayer's registered name. A trace number will be sent for confirmation of the completed transaction. The trace number should be indicated the trace number on the BIR Tax Return Form when it is filed by the taxpayer.²⁰

The BIR is currently negotiating with SMART Communications to extend the service to a wider base.

SMS and the Provision of Public Information

The provision of information, particularly public information is seen as a crucial service of government that technology can help deliver better and faster.

In the Philippines, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Trade have their respective SMS-based services to address their key constituencies – the farmers and consumers, respectively.

The Department of Agriculture launched the *PRESYO & PANAHON* (Price and Weather) TEXT program mid-2005 with the goal of providing information for consumers and producers alike. Farmers and fisher folks benefit from this program through the five-day weather forecast. While the *PRESYO* (Price) TEXT informs consumers on prices of basic commodities in the market and it helps suppliers and traders on determining supply.

PRESYO & PANAHON TEXT was meant to complement the Department's *HUWARANG PALENGKE* project, an initiative to enhance agribusiness activities and encourage retailers to maintain their prices of agricultural products and other prime commodities at affordable levels. Ten "Model Markets" were selected based on the affordability of the prices of the basic commodities they were selling, including rice, sugar, fish, vegetables, pork and chicken, during the search period (November 2004 to January 2005).²¹

The *HUWARANG PALENGKE* (Model Market) project provided the structures needed for the *PRESYO & PANAHON* TEXT program since the personnel for data collection were already set in place. The Bureau of Agricultural Statistics handles data consolidation of the prices. The DA has a tie-up with the weather bureau for the five-day weather update.

PRESYO & PANAHON TEXT average 150 messages a day. This relatively small number is due to the fact that the service is currently available only to the subscriber of a small cellular service provider the prices monitored come from markets within the Metro Manila area only.²²

²⁰ Clavecilla, Grace *Philippines tax collectors try out m-commerce* Computerworld Philippines, 24 January 2005

²¹ "10 Metro marts top Huwarang Palengke search" <http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2005/apr09.htm>

²² Interview, Director Roberto Villas, 18 December 2004

A consumer-focused price information service has been launched by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Launched in 2005, this text based consumer assistance system is called TextDTI. According to the Trade Undersecretary in-charge of consumer welfare “Equipping consumers with the right information keeps them on guard against unfair practices in the market”.²³

TextDTI provides consumers information regarding the prevailing prices of basic goods from 32 wet markets in Metro Manila and several markets in Cebu and Davao. The service covers selected brands of canned fish, corned beef, condensed milk, instant noodles, detergent bar and other DTI-monitored commodities under the price act. Perhaps because it is a new service and is not well advertised, Text DTI has been receiving about 30 complaints or queries daily.

The provision of public information through technology is also seen as enhancing citizens’ control over the bureaucracy. The internet has been seen as a great medium to enhance transparency in government. Perhaps because of the limitations of the screen size and the number of characters that can be transmitted via SMS, there has been no effort to use this technology for enhancing transparency in governance in the Philippines. However, the most widespread use of m-government in the country to increase accountability.

SMS and Amplifying “Voice”

When news that Congress is considering imposing a tax on text messages, legislators – particularly the Speaker of the House of Representatives were barraged with text messages protesting the planned move. The Speaker not only changed his number but also stopped championing the tax proposal.

Among the first government agency to use SMS as a channel to receive citizen complaints, views and other feedback are the Office of the President and the Civil Service Commission.

In the 1950s, Pres. Ramon Magsaysay encouraged Filipinos to send their concerns to him using the telegram. In 2001, the Office of the President inaugurated TXTGMA which allow Filipinos to communicate their concerns to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) via SMS.

A review of the messages received by TXTGMA confirms that Filipinos bring all sorts of issues to the attention of their President. The Chief Executive is expected to intervene in issues like illegal drug trade in a small town, the plight of specific Filipino overseas workers, the worsening traffic in Metro Manila and the performance (or lack thereof) of specific government offices and/or officials. TEXTGMA also acts as a social weathervane for the President. When she announces new initiatives, such as suspension of the implementation of death penalty, messages for and against the move is received from all over the country.

²³ “Texting seen to boost price monitoring efforts” *Phil Daily Inquirer* 2 March 2006, p. B3)

Like President Magsaysay, who used the dominant communications technology of his time, President Arroyo is using SMS to promote 'personalized presidency'. The latter is defined as the use of efforts at enhancing the capacity of the state to govern to enhance the stature of the leader. What Abinales and Amoroso observed about Magsaysay's effort at making the presidency work is likely true for Arroyo's attempt to reach the masses:

“No matter how effective the presidential agencies may have been, their association with Magsaysay *personally* detracted from their ongoing value *institutionally* as instruments of executive power.”²⁴

By using her initials (GMA) in the SMS service of the Office of the President, Pres Arroyo may have weakened the possibility of institutionalizing this mechanism for citizens to express their views to the President.

Local executives (for better or for worse) have followed the President's lead. The Local Government of Marikina City – a component city of Metro Manila-- is an example of how SMS is being deployed to gauge the pulse of the citizens.

The Marikina City government started their SMS-based service called TXTMCF (MCF are the initials of the City Mayor) in 2002. A private firm – Mobile Arts, a mobile value added service provider – proposed the project which was seen by the Mayor as a more convenient avenue for the constituents to voice out their problems and comments regarding the services delivered by the City Government.

The service is run for the city government by Mobile Arts - which hosts the server that receives the messages and uploads them in a portal that only authorized personnel from the Mayor's office can view. The messages are viewed weekly and complaints are either forwarded to the department responsible or in cases of fraud or corruption, an investigation is conducted. Around 70% of the messages are complaints, while the rest are comments (positive or negative). The TXTMCF receives an average of 50 messages weekly.²⁵

An approach that is more geared to building institutions and their capacity to respond to citizens is TextCSC. The Civil Service Commission (CSC) launched this service to make it easier for citizens to complain and to give leads regarding corrupt officials to the agency in charge of all government personnel. TextCSC's vision is to: 1) provide a channel to complain, suggest, or inquire on anything about CSC; 2) to provide channel to complain, suggest, or inquire on anything about government matters; 3) as a mechanism that the citizens can use to combat corrupt and inefficient government service.

SMS, Vigilant Citizens and Public Safety

Combating crime is another form of citizen participation.

²⁴ Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso *State and Society in the Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2005) p. 181

²⁵ Interview Teck de Leon 22 December 2005

People's Action Team Response On Line 177 (PATROL 117) is an electronic public safety system operated by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) in cooperation with the Philippine National Police (PNP), Bureau of Fire Protection, Bureau of Jail Management and Penology and Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT)-the dominant phone company. Originally a 911-style telephone in 1999, it expanded last 2001 to include text messaging service in reporting emergency. PATROL 117 is an attempt to tap the citizens in reporting crime, encouraging voluntarism in public safety, and include the community in crime prevention efforts.

The PATROL 117 server is maintained by PLDT. There is a 5.50 cost per call and 2.50 cost per text message. These funds go to either the Foundation for Crime Prevention, a partner organization of the Department of Interior and Local Government, or it will be used for manpower, training, operations, and maintenance expenses. The standard response time for emergency calls is 7 minutes.

The biggest challenge for PATROL 117 is the massive amount of prank calls it receives in its free service. Since 1999 to 2005, Secretary Angelo Reyes claims that less than two percent of the calls are legitimate. The rest are prank calls from children who usually ask for food delivery. PATROL 117 installed caller IDs and added costs by the end of 2004 to deter prank calling. Representative Eulogio Magsaysay filed House Bill 2682, or the Public Safety Education and Awareness Act of 2004 that sought to include a Public Safety class in the curricula as another preventive measure. Several Local Government Units (e.g. Baguio) already filed public ordinances that penalize prank calling in 117 Hotline and other emergency numbers.²⁶

A systematic comparison between the free service (using landline/wired) phones and the paid service (using mobile phone and SMS) has yet to be undertaken. The example of derailed train shows the distinct advantage of anytime, anywhere service that mobile phones/SMS provides: A passenger on a derailed train bound for Manila called the Patrol 117 from his cellular phone. The train fell into a 12-meter-deep gully in Padre Burgos. Within 34 minutes from the call, a team from the Padre Burgos Police was already on the site.²⁷

An unintended function of Patrol 117 has emerged. It has also become a mechanism for the people to voice their opinion on the quality of service provided by the police. Last June 2005, PNP announced that in the main island of Luzon *jueteng* (an illegal numbers game) has been eradicated. For the next two days, the hotline was swamped with text messages that claimed otherwise. Seventy-seven text messages were sent in two days, before this incident, the average *jueteng*-related messages were just 3-5 messages a day.

²⁶ "Patrol 117 notes 98% prank calls" *Baguio Sun Star* 12 June 2005, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/bag/2005/06/12/news/patrol.117.notes.98.prank.calls.html>

²⁷ "Passenger contacts rescue with cellphone" *Manila Times* 13 November 2004, http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2004/nov/13/yehey/top_stories/maintop.html

IV. SMS and Politics

With the popularity of SMS in the Philippines it is not surprising that it has found its way not only in government but also in politics.

SMS and Elections

The 2004 election was significant for a number of reasons. First, while there were 5 candidates seeking the presidency, in the end the 2004 Presidential election became a contest between the president with command of a political machine and a movie star idolized by millions. Second, the elections “also marked the first time in Philippine history that presidential candidates spent more than half of their total campaign spending on advertising.”²⁸ Finally, the 2004 elections also saw the emergence of SMS as a tool to elect or defeat candidates for political office.

The logic behind using SMS for elections is the same logic that drives viral marketing:

A creative pitch for a candidate can start with a person sending (a text message) to 10 people. Assuming a low pass-on rate of three to five more people down the line, you can already reach a minimum of 90 people at the third level. Imagine if you are equipped to send out SMS to a million (phone) numbers in an hour?²⁹

Among the 5 major candidates in the 2004 race, Raul Roco’s political campaigns were known to be most technology savvy. Roco’s campaign used “text brigades” – groups of volunteers dedicated to sending out text messages -- to organize meetings, rallies, assemblies, and other campaign events. An umbrella group supporting Roco called Volunteers for Roco Global (V4R Global) linked their international networking with local campaign efforts through internet (mailing lists and discussion groups to raise funds and coordinate events) and text messaging using *Chikka* - an instant messenger system that provides free text messaging from a PC to any mobile phone in the world.

A number of mobile value added service (MVAS) providers also developed SMS-based systems to help candidates win.

Mobile Arts – a mobile value added service provider launched POLITXT- a PC based application dedicated to the needs of a political campaign. According to Mobile Arts CEO Ramon Duremdes Jr., POLITXT is a software that functions with a PC, a modem phone (Nokia 30), and a SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) card. POLITXT basic features include broadcast text messaging, two-way interaction with the public, and group texting.

²⁸ Glenda M. Gloria “Selling a Candidate” in Glenda Gloria, Ana Maria Tabunda and Carmel Fonbuena *Spin and Sell: How Political Ads Shaped the 2004 Elections* (Makati City: Foundation for Communications Initiatives, 2004) p. 30

²⁹ Quoted taken from Pabicko, Alecks *Campaigns on the Hi-Tech Road* January-June 2004, pcij.org

A more sophisticated PC-based software using SMS in elections is C3 Locale. This software harnesses the power of SMS for campaign and post-campaign activities. C3 Locale not only allows campaign directors to give voters information about their candidates but also to control their political operatives and coordinate their campaign volunteers. In the post-campaign scenario, this software allows for the monitoring of election results (a quick count mechanism). C3 Locale was used in the successful 2004 mayoralty campaign of Angelito Sarmiento in the City of San Jose del Monte – in the northeast of Metro Manila.

SMS was also used by citizens to campaign against candidate in the 2004 elections. Alumni of the University of the Philippines (UP) used SMS and email to urge fellow alumni and friends not to vote for reelectionist Senator John Osmena who was publicly identified by the then UP President as working against the best interest of the premier state university. Osmena himself acknowledges that the UP alumni campaign contributed to his defeat.³⁰

There is another way that the mobile phones were used to contribute to Osmena's defeat. His most memorable 2004 election advertisement credited him for making cell phones available to Filipinos.³¹ Analysts claim that this P52 million (approximately US\$ 1million) political advertisement worked against Osmena not only because the claim is too grandiose but also because the advertisement asked the electorate to be thankful to the senator.³²

Mobile Phones and Mass Action

If the efficacy of SMS in elections has yet to be clearly established, there seems to be no doubt in the minds of Filipinos regarding the power of cell phone and SMS in mobilizing crowds and unseating unpopular president(s).

The effort to unseat then President Joseph Estrada benefited from the prevalence of mobile phones in the country. Rallies, noise barrages, and street assemblies were all coordinated by the use of SMS and Internet. Wireless media became the efficient and effective agents of information and propaganda. Political jokes - centering on the foibles of the President - circulated by SMS were widely popular during the time of the impeachment proceedings.

On January 16, 2001, text messages rapidly spread calling on the people to assemble in the main artery in Metro Manila known as EDSA³³. For the next five days, SMS became the main tool to rally and sustain the movement that led to the resignation of President Estrada. In the minds of many, the so-called EDSA II was the first popular movement

³⁰ Carmela S. Fonbuena "Bad Ad and Political Baggage" in *Spin and Sell*, p. 89

³¹ This by virtue of him being the lead sponsor of the law the lead to liberalization of the telecommunications industry.

³² Fonbuena "Bad Ad" in *Spin and Sell* pp. 87-88

³³ EDSA is the acronym of the road named Epifanio De los Santos Ave. EDSA was also the epicenter of the 1986 popular uprising that overthrew the Marcos dictatorship.

fueled by SMS. Smart Communications Incorporated reported that the carrier received 70 million text messages per day for that week. Likewise, Globe Telecom estimated that the number of text messages during EDSA II reached more than 30 million a day.³⁴

Since the 2001 discovery of SMS as a political tool, it has become a part of the regular arsenal of Filipino political activists. But in 2005, Filipino activists invented yet another form of political protest – the political ring tone.

The ‘political’ ring tone emerged during the ‘Gloriagate’ scandal that rocked the presidency in 2005. Gloriagate was set off by the leak of alleged wiretapped recordings of the phone conversations between President Arroyo and election commissioner Virgilio Garcilliano (aka Garci). The calls made in May and June 2004 purportedly show the President asking the election official to ensure that her margin of victory over the closest electoral opponent would be at 1 million votes. Instead of a ring or music or a cute phrase from a celebrity, the activists ring tone are the now famous two words that the president allegedly used in greeting the election commissioner -- “Hello Garci.

The ring tone began to propagate among users of newer models of mobile phones using infra-red and bluetooth technologies. The wiretap audio file was disseminated either through the Internet or the CD versions from the black market. KADAMAY, an urban poor group, even went further as to distribute copies of the CD in Redemptorist Church in Baclaran.³⁵ TXTPOWER, a text messaging advocacy group, uploaded two sound files Pres. Arroyo’s supposed conversation with Garcilliano on its website (<http://textpower.org>). Within an hour after uploading the “Hello Garci” sound files, the TXTPOWER site crashed due to the massive amount of hits it received. TXTPOWER reported 48,000 hits within the first 24 hours of uploading the sound files.³⁶ By one count there were two dozen versions of the Hello Garcia ring tone a mere three weeks after the wiretapped conversation was leaked.³⁷

But the mobile phone and SMS are not only used to mobilize crowds or to express their political alignment through their ring tones but they are also used to help define/interpret political events. This is evident in the jokes that proliferated during the height of the gloriagate scandal.

Most of the jokes are centered on the guilt of the President:

Flash: GMA popularity ratings reach an all time high. Her CD reached platinum in less than a week. (The leaked conversation were released in CD format)³⁸

³⁴ Jennifer Bagalawis “How IT helped topple a president” *Computer World*, 30 January 2001

³⁵ “Mobile Phones ring: Hello! Hello! Garci” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 16 June 2005 p.1.

³⁶ “Hello Garci downloads trigger crash of website” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 20 June 2005 p.1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1

³⁸ The jokes quoted in this paper are from those printed in Sheila Coronel “Preface: Joke Only” *Hello, Garci? Hello, Ma’am: Political Humor in the Cellphone Age*. (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 2005)

Some called for the President to step down:

GMA wants her SONA (State of the Nation Address) but the public just wants her GONA (Gone *Na* or Gone Already)

And

GMA news: Goodbye, Mrs. Arroyo. (GMA is not only the President's initial but also the acronym of a television station)

Others took the opportunity to also poke fun at her (publicists?) efforts to link her to US Presidents Clinton -- who was a classmate in Georgetown -- and G. W. Bush -- who like her is a child of a former President:

Similarities btwn Clinton & GMA: Both studied at Georgetown, both became Presidents, both became embroiled in controversies. The one involved his CIGAR and the other her GAR-CI

The issues against Bush were documented in "Fahrenheit 9/11".
Yung kay Gloria are in the Gloriagate tapes as "*Parangheight 4/11*"
(Those of Gloria's are in the Gloriagate tapes as "Like her height 4/11")

And when she apologized publicly for her 'lapse in judgement' in calling the election official, the following circulated via SMS:

G – uilty
M – anipulator
A - pologizes

Humor is often used by Filipinos to subvert authority. But an often overlooked aspect of political humor is their role in developing accounts of political events.

In forwarding text jokes, citizens are also helping build an interpretation of what happened (or is happening). What really happened is never unambiguous. There are always many versions of the same event and part of politics is the constant struggle to get one version accepted by as many people. Making jokes and sending it to friends, or simply forward jokes to others is part of the struggle to 'interpret', to give meaning, and to assign blame for political events. SMS jokes are not the only way that SMS is used to develop accounts. The gossips and half-truths spread through mobile phones all contribute to developing political accounts.

Of course, in developing political accounts protagonists use all forms of mass media. Any discussion of developing accounts must include the role of newspapers and television. Aside from commentaries in newspaper and opinions passed off as analysis is TV talk shows, the speeches given by politicians and the sermons of priests during Sunday mass also contribute to developing political accounts in the Philippines. But the

power of SMS in developing political accounts can be gleaned from the fact that it is not only among the accessible information and communications medium in the Philippines but it is also a medium that allows the people to participate.

March and Olsen explains the importance of developing accounts in a democratic setting:

Democratic governance involves managing those contests over meaning and building institutions that allow citizens to create, sustain and change interpretations of reality in an ambiguous and uncertain world. ... It involves making the process of account-building one that contributes to collective intelligence, institutional learning, and political equality.³⁹

V. Prospects for Democratic Governance

The Philippine government has been using SMS not only to deliver services to citizens but also as a channel for political participation. In terms of government service delivery, we have examined the use of SMS in providing the public with information and its use as a payment mechanism for certain tax payment. SMS has also been harnessed as a tool for political involvement—these includes expressing opinion, working for a campaign, becoming informed about political issues or developing political accounts, and as a tool for political action.

But the efforts to use SMS as a mechanism for political participation, particularly those of government, merely reinforce the existing political system – which can best be described as elite democracy. Another way of characterizing the role of SMS in governance is that they are part of the overall effort at creating an effective set of rules for managing voluntary political exchanges.⁴⁰

But the use of SMS can be deepened. The Filipino activists' use of SMS in developing political accounts and popular mobilization and defeating candidates in election are excellent foundations for enhancing democratic governance in the country. SMS can be used to realize what March and Olsen believes democratic governance ultimately is all about:

...democratic governance involves improving the processes by which a society formulates ends, seeks to achieve them efficiently, elaborates and overturns its conceits, and weaves an understanding of the good life by experiencing its pursuits. It involves encouraging an examination of what constitutes a worthwhile life, how the lives individuals live compare with democratic ideals, what resources and actions are required to bring those

³⁹ March and Olsen, *Democratic Governance*, p. 180

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 242. The four possible agenda are: 1) minimalist; 2) redistributive; 3) developmental; and 4) structuralist.

lives closer to democratic aspirations, and how we are to understand and respond to our failures to achieve those ideals.⁴¹

By no means is SMS being used in the Philippines to promote democracy alone. SMS is also being used as a tool to subvert democratic governance. Political jokes passed on via SMS can also undermine the people's faith in democratic processes. Accounts created by SMS can point to democracy itself as the root cause of the problem. And as we have seen in the recent (March 2005) failed coup attempt, SMS can be used to spread disinformation and to attempt to mobilize crowds to install a military junta. But as Rheingold underscores:

Technologies and methodologies of cooperation are embryonic today, and the emergence of democratic, convivial, intelligent new social forms depends on how people appropriate, adopt, transform, and reshape the new media once they are out of the bands of engineers—as people always do.⁴²

Of course, people make history – whether SMS is used to promote democracy or subvert it in the Philippines depends on Filipinos. But it is also important to note that the technology people use and the conditions they work under provides limits to what is possible.

All those interested in using SMS to promote democratic governance must confront the limits imposed by the technology itself. SMS is great for **short** messages (up to 160 characters per message). There is also the limitations of small screen and the not very user friendly keyboard. To be sure, these technical limits have not hindered the use of SMS for receiving information from government or succinctly (if not colorfully) expressing citizens views on government policy, officials and services. However, these limits will be acutely felt if the technology is used in debating alternative policy options or in detailed discussions of public concerns.

There is also the limit of (what Rheingold calls the) “social algorithms governing the uses of technology”.⁴³ These comprise the social structures that limit and make possible the use of technology in a certain way. Institution, cultural practices, social norms both limit and enable the specific use of technology. Political activists interested in using SMS to promote democratic governance must be able to understand the limits imposed by the social algorithms and develop strategies to create more democratic political institutions.

To date, Filipinos have show that they can use SMS in interesting and creative ways - despite the limitations imposed by technology. To date, SMS has been successfully used to promote democracy. Efforts which used SMS in anti or counter-democratic projects have failed. This may be due to the fact that SMS has helped in developing a political account that reinforced Filipinos belief in democracy.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 246

⁴² Rheingold *SmartMobs* pp. 214-5.

⁴³ Ibid,p. 214.

