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Modern revolutions and the mass media

Karl Marx, the ideologue of communism, did not think that the peasantry could be a force for socialist revolution. There were two reasons. First, since their quest was limited to owning land, peasants tended to be politically conservative. Second – and I think this was the more important point – the peasants in their farms, unlike workers in factories, were typically isolated from one another, and therefore unable to form the class consciousness essential to a revolution.

Since the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* 163 years ago, the conditions for the revolutionary transformation of societies have radically changed. The industrial working class that Marx saw as the leading force of the socialist revolution has dramatically shrunk. The modern work place has itself been transformed. Today's worker would likely be trapped at his or her fully-computerized work station all day, as isolated from fellow workers as the peasantry of agrarian society. Still, Marx's insight on the importance of communication in any revolutionary effort remains as valid as ever.

Digital technology has revolutionized communications and, in so doing, it has completely reconfigured the conditions of possibility of political revolutions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the crucial role that the electronic mass media are playing in the political convulsions now sweeping the despotic regimes of the Arab world. A close look at images of any of the recent demonstrations that have found their way into newspapers and television news programs all over the world would reveal one small but significant detail. In all of them, we would find demonstrators taking snap shots of unfolding events with their camera-equipped mobile phones.

Ageing Arab despots, ensconced in their archaic palaces, will probably never know what those little electronic gadgets in the hands of young people can do. They are likely to think these are nothing but harmless mobile telephones. They do not know that these phones can virally disseminate short messages in the blink of an eye. That they can take photos and videos, upload them on Facebook, or transmit these to other mobile phones and computers all over the world in real time. Marx's original image of revolutions was based on face-to-face interaction, or, at best, communication mediated by pamphlets and manifestos. Today's revolutionary activist is a one-person news bureau with an amazing global reach made possible by the Internet.

The Internet has given world opinion a powerful seat in every nation's political system. It has altered the horizon of revolutionary struggles by conferring global sympathy upon spontaneous, unarmed, and non-violent popular uprisings, while summoning instant condemnation for the naked use of force by rulers. It has led to a re-discovery of the methods of Gandhian non-violent resistance.

Gene Sharp, the theoretician of non-violent struggles who brought Gandhi's strategy of passive resistance up to date, wrote: "The old preconception that violent means always work quickly and nonviolent means always require vast time is clearly not valid. Although much time may be required for changes in the underlying situation and society, the actual fight against a dictatorship sometimes occurs relatively quickly by nonviolent struggle."

But, international pressure alone cannot topple down tyrants. The local resistance has to be strong, persistent, and methodical. "The conclusion is a hard one," says Sharp. "When one wants to bring down a dictatorship most effectively and with the least cost then one has four immediate tasks: (1) One must strengthen the oppressed population themselves in their determination, self-confidence, and resistance skills; (2) One must strengthen the independent social groups and institutions of the oppressed people; (3) One must create a powerful internal resistance force; and (4)

One must develop a wise grand strategic plan for liberation and implement it skillfully.”

But, how does one strengthen the resistance, self-confidence, and determination of the oppressed population? Again, we must re-visit the role of the mass media. Apart from informing and enriching the perspective of global opinion, the mass media perform another vital role. For want of a better word, I call it the “confirmatory” function of the mass media. A mass action or event acquires a different reality the moment it enters the media’s field of vision. By documenting and reporting it, the mass media confirm its facticity, give it authority as it were. This is more than a witnessing function.

I distinctly recall what it meant to us during those four days in February 1986 when the only radio station that managed to remain on the air – the clandestine “Radyo Bandido” – continued to broadcast events as they unfolded. In lieu of mobile phones, we brought transistor radios to Edsa. The broadcasts linked the mass actions in various parts of the country to one another, and the whole protest movement to the rest of the nation. From outside, Filipinos living overseas would record and send betamax copies of the foreign networks’ broadcasts of the dramatic events that we were creating at home. I remember how much it mattered to us to know that we were not alone, that the world was watching, as we were making history.

It is what ultimately sustains courage and builds confidence – the experience of being swept by a historic tide more powerful than any human being.

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