

**CELLPHONES AS A CULTURAL TECHNOLOGY:  
New Ways of Communicating in the Philippines**

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This humble, imperfect thesis is for my dad, George, who would have enjoyed cellphones and text messaging immensely.

*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.*

## ABSTRACT

The cell phone is a fairly recent communication technology that has quickly become part of people's day-to-day lives. Like the television, VCR, and the Internet, the cell phone has found its way into our cultures. In a developing country like the Philippines, the cell phone has made significant inroads in the way people communicate, do their work, and create new forms of entertainment. This thesis, to borrow a phrase from Raymond Williams, will study the cell phone as a cultural technology.

In the last ten years, the cell phone has become part of Philippine culture. It has given rise to new ways of interpersonal communication; has crossed the boundaries of class, gender, religion, and educational attainment; has allowed overseas contract workers to keep maintain daily contact with their families; has changed the way people do their work; has created new forms of media; has become a tool for mass protest; has played an important role in ousting a president; and has produced a new vocabulary.

Unlike the United States, cell phones in the Philippines, like Europe, Asia, and most of the world work on the GSM (global system for mobile communications) platform. This has allowed the Philippines, as well as many other third world countries, to become way ahead of the US in cell phone technology. But more important than this is the way Philippine society has quickly adopted the cell phone as part of daily life. The cell phone, as an object, has come to mean and represent many things. It has become "inscribed in our formal social knowledge—the 'what everybody knows' about the world"<sup>1</sup> This study will examine how the cell phone has become part of Philippine culture, what meanings and practices have evolved from it, and what it is saying about Philippine culture and society.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh McKay and Keith Negus. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997; reprinted, 2001) p. 8.

*The first signs of the next shift began to reveal themselves to me on a spring afternoon in the year 2000. That was when I began to notice people on the streets of Tokyo staring at their mobile phones instead of talking to them. The sight of this behavior, now commonplace in much of the world, triggered a sensation I had experienced a few times before—the instant recognition that technology is going to change my life in ways I can scarcely imagine. Since then the practice of exchanging short text messages via mobile phone has led to the eruption of subcultures in Europe and Asia.*

—Howard Rheingold, **Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution**, 2003<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Raymond Williams opens his book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, by saying, “It has been often said that television has altered our world.”<sup>3</sup> The same can be said for the cellphone in the Philippines. This thesis will examine the cellphone in the Philippines as a cultural technology by studying its history, its uses, its impacts, and what it says about society. It will study how cellphone use has risen exponentially; how it has changed interpersonal communications between families, friends, and co-workers; how it has spawned new ways of communicating (such as text messaging); how it has been used as a tool for mass protests, advertising, and promotions; how it has led to the creation of television channels solely devoted to text messaging; and how images and email can now be sent and received on the cellphone. More importantly, this thesis will examine how these new technologies have altered the way Philippine society operates and why today, the cellphone is an integral part of the day-to-day lives of more than 25% of the population.

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Rheingold. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution: Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access*. (NY: Perseus Publishing, 2003) p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (1974. Reprint, with an introduction by Lynn Spigel, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992) p. 3.

Mobile communication technology has been around for sometime. Policemen, rangers, the military, and truckers have used two-way radios, walkie-talkies, and CB radios for the last 50 years or so. In the last 15 years, however, the technology of mobile communications has grown by leaps and bounds with the cellular or mobile phone. Originally a luxury that only the rich could afford, the cellphone has since then become as common to ordinary folk as the Walkman or the VCR. People of all ages, gender, occupation, and race have embraced this new technology.

While mobile phones were initially developed in the U.S., Western Europe has adopted and embraced this technology most fully.<sup>4</sup> In 1987, European technocrats agreed on a mobile telephony technical standard known as the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM).<sup>5</sup> The first GSM network was launched in Finland in 1991 and the first text message was sent out in December 1992. This is the cellphone technology used by countries in Europe and Asia, and only recently has been adopted by the U.S. Built into the GSM standard was the capability of instantly sending short text messages of 160 characters from one telephone to another, using the telephone keyboard to input the message and the small display screen to read them—the Short Message System (SMS)<sup>6</sup>—more popularly known as text messaging.

The advent of a new technology and the acceptance of a society of that technology has always been an interesting phenomenon to witness. As history has shown

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<sup>4</sup> Raul Perterra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> Howard Rheingold. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution: Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access*. (NY: Perseus Publishing, 2002) p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

us, each time a new technology is introduced—whether it be the printing press, color television, or the Internet—society receives it in two major ways. There are those who embrace the new technologies with open arms, and there are those who look at them with fear and trepidation. But whatever the case may be, change is inevitable. And as long as humans continue to invent things, new technologies will always come up, improving and/or replacing old ones.

In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams was concerned with the relationship of modern communication media to social structures and social change; their evolution as institutional practices; their degradation by social elites, particularly by the intellectuals; their rhetorical forms and textuality; their imbrication in the textures of everyday life; and their potential for creating a better world.<sup>7</sup> Technologies, be it the television, the radio, or personal computers, when newly created and released to the market for consumption, are initially the new playthings of the wealthy and elite. As a technology improves, the product becomes cheaper and is then used and consumed by the larger population. When more and more people begin using a particular technology, it invariably becomes part of daily life, inscribed in our informal social knowledge—the what everybody knows about the world—without consciously knowing where or when they first learned it.<sup>8</sup> For Williams, cultural forms were historical and material practices, a part of the way people make their lives. As such, communication is part of material

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. x.

<sup>8</sup> Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mckay and Keith Negus. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997; reprinted, 2001), p. 8.

lived experience.<sup>9</sup> Any form of media is not simply a reflection of reality and our perceptions of it, but rather, forms of communications are in themselves a major way in which reality is continually formed and changed.<sup>10</sup>

In his study of television, Williams identified two ways in which people see a new technology. The first is technological determinism, an idea that Williams did not share with Marshall McLuhan. Technological determinism centers on the idea that technology shapes the way society functions and thinks. For McLuhan, culture is molded by how we are able to communicate. New innovations in communication cause cultural change, and changes in ways we communicate shape the way we live. This idea bothered Williams because it negated the effects of social relationships and institutional practices. The second idea, less deterministic than the first, is symptomatic technology. Technology becomes available as an element or a medium in the process of change that is in any case occurring or about to occur.<sup>11</sup> These views see technology in isolation from other things such as economics, politics, and society. Williams challenges us to look at technology not as self-acting forces that create new ways of life or provides material for new ways of life, but rather as created and developed for certain purposes and practices in mind, and that these are known social needs.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis takes a cultural studies approach in studying cellphones in the Philippines. As Douglas Kellner say, “cultural studies as a diagnostic critique is

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<sup>9</sup> Lynn Spigel, introduction to Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (1974. Reprint, with an introduction by Lynn Spigel, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. xiv.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (1974. Reprint, with an introduction by Lynn Spigel, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

concerned within what media spectacle tells us about contemporary society and culture, in developing readings that illuminate the present age, and in decoding ‘signs of the times’ that allow us to grasp better the defining characteristics, novelties, and conflicts of the contemporary era.”<sup>13</sup> To do so, it will employ both historical and ethnographic research. Through historical analysis, this thesis hopes to understand the role of technology in a specific society, and how that technology has been absorbed by that society. A brief history of the development of media and communication technology in the Philippines will help in understanding the unique role of media in the formation of the nation. The ethnographic dimension will be composed of interviews with Filipino cellphone users, personal experience, and close observations. Through these, this researcher hopes to understand the impacts cellphones have made on Philippine culture and society.

The cellphone has become part of Philippine day-to-day life, people not quite knowing how it has become, what du Gay, Hall, et al have termed “part of our cultural universe.”<sup>14</sup> Using, owning, and having a cellphone conjures certain meanings that are shared by the culture. We understand what these meanings are and what they represent. The cellphone is “firmly located on those ‘maps of meaning,’ which make up our ‘cultural know-how.’”<sup>15</sup> Even the word cellphone in the Philippines has its own distinct meanings and practices. Not everyone may own one or use one, but everyone knows what it looks like and how it works. In the Philippines, people know that not only can it be

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Kellner. *Media Spectacle*. (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mckay and Keith Negus. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997; reprinted, 2001) p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

used to make calls or send and receive text messages, but also as a tool for joining contests, for making new friends, for being in the know. Studying the cellphone, therefore, gives us an insight into the shared meanings and social practices that are the basis of Philippine culture.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

## CHAPTER I

### MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

#### **A Brief History of Communication and Media in the Philippines**

To understand media technologies in the Philippines, we must first look into its colonial past. The development of communication and media in the Philippines come hand-in-hand with its colonizers. Crispin Maslog's book *Philippine Communication: An Introduction* is one of the few academic texts available that chronicles the history of communication in the Philippines. Information in this section largely comes from this volume.

It is important to take note of active role early forms of media, particularly newspapers, in nation building. While these media were brought into the country by its colonizers, Filipinos used them as a means of protest, self-expression, and creating a national identity. This did not end when the Philippines achieved independence from the Americans in 1946. As more communication technologies were introduced into the country, their role in Philippine history became significant.

Books first came into the country with the Spanish colonizers in 1521. When Ferdinand Magellan sailed to the Philippines for the Spanish crown, it is likely that books, especially the bible, were among the objects that were taken to the new lands. Fr. Antonio Pigafetta, Magellan's chaplain and historian, recorded the journey in his diary, which has since been a major source of early Philippine history.

## The Early Years: Spanish and American Periods

In 1593, just a little over a century after Gutenberg's invention of the movable type, the first book, *Doctrina Christiana* (Christian Doctrine) was printed in the Philippines. The first Philippine newsletter, *Successos Felices* (Glad Tidings) was published in 1637. While there is no record of succeeding issues, the *Successos Felices* is notable for being largely of original work and not merely a compilation or translation of pieces from other countries.

The *Del Superior Gobierno*, began publication in 1811 as the first regularly issued "newspaper." While it was meant to function like a newspaper, it only carried news about the Spanish-American war, the proceedings of the Spanish Cortes (the royal court), and in general, news from the mother country for the benefit of the Spaniards in the Philippines.<sup>17</sup> Because it was intended for the Spanish elite, the *Del Superior*, did not contain news about what was going on in the Philippines. Day-to-day news such as natural calamities, Philippine rebellions, and the like were omitted from the newspaper. After 15 issues, the *Del Superior* ceased to exist.

*La Esperanza*, the first daily newspaper, began publication in 1846. To avoid getting into trouble with the Spanish Cortes, it did not print articles criticizing Spain, thus making the paper colorless and dull.<sup>18</sup> Soon after, more dailies started being published. Among them were *Diario de Manila*, which had its own correspondent in Spain, and *El Comercio*, which had the largest circulation at that time. A notable publication of that period was the *La Opinion*, which began in 1827. It was a political magazine that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

criticized the Spanish friars and campaigned for the ouster of the religious, including an archbishop from the Philippines.<sup>19</sup>

During the Spanish period, weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies, quarterlies, journals, and reviews were published. These were similar to the specialized business magazines and journals of today and were in the fields of commerce, industry, agriculture, religion, etc. Among the notable ones were the *Registro Mercantil de Manila* (1824), which carried products and commerce of the Philippines; the *Percios Corrientos* (1824), which was the first publication to use both Spanish and English; *La Ilustracion Filipinas* (1859), a journal promoting culture; *El Trovador Filipino* (1874), considered the first intellectual journal; *El Bello Sexo* (1891) the first women's magazine; and *Patnubay ng Katoliko* (1890), a Catholic magazine and the first publication entirely in Tagalog.

The print industry, while seemingly rich and flourishing was marked by censorship by the state and the church, as well as plagued with financial instability. Most publications were in Spanish, thus catering to a very small number of people. Only the Spaniards in the Philippines and the Spanish-speaking Filipino elite benefited from these publications. Although this was the case, these publications were not mouthpieces for the Spanish crown. While colonial journalism was marked by censorship by the state and the church, publications such as *El Comercio* and *La Opinion* were crucial in the demise of the Spanish empire in the Philippines.

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<sup>19</sup> Jose Luna Castro, *The Manila Times Journalism Manual* (Manila: The Manila Times Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), p. 6, quoted in Crispin C. Maslog. *Philippine Communication: An Introduction*. (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1988), p. 4.

During the latter part of Spanish rule and during the early part of the American regime, there was an important revolutionary paper published called *La Solidaridad*. Published in Spain by the Filipino elite studying there, the paper was a major rallying point of the Philippine Revolution between 1896 and 1898. While it was banned from the Philippines by Spanish authorities, copies were still smuggled into the country. Filipino revolutionary heroes such as Graciano Lopez Jaena, Jose Rizal, and Marcelo H. Del Pilar were involved in its publication. But since *La Solidaridad* was written in Spanish, it again only catered to a small group of people.

On January 1, 1896, revolutionary hero Andres Bonifacio together with his friend Emilio Jacinto published a revolutionary paper called the *Kalayaan* (Freedom). Both were members of secret revolutionary group called the Katipunan. Before the *Kalayaan* could come out with its second issue, the Spanish government had discovered its press, and Bonifacio had to destroy it before it was seized by the authorities.

Another revolutionary paper, *La Independencia*, was founded in 1898. But because it was anti-Spanish and anti-American, the American authorities suppressed it. Its ideas, however, were continued in the *El Renacimiento*, which continued publication during the American regime, despite its criticisms against the new colonizers.

Most papers founded during the American period were in English, a number of which were published by Americans who came into the country as soldiers, teachers, and missionaries. The first English-language newspaper, the *Manila Times*, was published in 1898. Over the years, the *Manila Times* changed ownership, and while at times publication was halted, it is still in publication today. The *Manila Bulletin*, the oldest continuous newspaper in the Philippines was published in 1900 and is also still very

popular today, especially for its Sunday advertisement section. The first Filipino-owned newspaper published in this period was the *Philippines Herald*. Published in 1920, it was founded by Manuel L. Quezon, who later became the first president of the Philippine Commonwealth.

Radio, the first kind of electronic media that came into the Philippines, was introduced during the American period. An American, Henry Hermann, set up the first radio stations in the cities of Manila and Pasay in 1922. In the ten years following, radio stations were set-up in other cities and towns throughout the country by Americans and Filipinos. In 1931, the Radio Control Board was established to allocate frequencies, examine applications, and conduct inspections.<sup>20</sup> Americans owned majority of these radio stations thus, the language used in broadcasts was English. Programming was composed of newscasts and entertainment, and radio stars were huge celebrities.

During the Japanese period of 1941-45, all but one radio station was closed down. But the war had created a hunger for news and information.<sup>21</sup> When World War II ended, the Philippine Congress enacted Commonwealth Act 729 giving the President the authority to grant temporary permits to establish radio stations. From eight radio stations in 1945, the number grew to 22 by 1954, providing news, information, and entertainment to the nation.

Television first arrived in the Philippines in 1950s when two universities were experimenting with the technology. The first commercial channel began broadcasting in 1953, and in the next decade and a half, 18 privately owned channels were in operation in

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

key cities in the country. Today, there are six major networks and a flourishing cable industry. Programming is a mix of local, international, and regional shows.

### **Media Contrasts: Martial Law and the Rise of the Alternative Media**

The Martial Law period can be described as the Era of Guided Media and the Rise of the Alternative Press.<sup>22</sup> Immediately after President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law in September 21, 1972, tight controls over the media was established. Newspaper editors and journalists were the first to be arrested and incarcerated in military prison camps. Ownership of media companies became concentrated in the hands of people close to the Marcos regime. Journalists feared for their lives, and those who were arrested were harassed, tortured, and even killed. To a degree, Martial Law did manage to silence the Philippine media.

At the end of the 1970s, however, some journalists began testing the waters.<sup>23</sup> Jose Burgos, Jr. started publication of *We Forum*, a weekly magazine targeted to the youth in May 1, 1977. The weekly quickly attracted readership because it published stories that the Marcos crony press did not cover.

Although Martial Law was officially lifted in January 1980, in reality, the country was still under it. It was later discovered that in the eve of the lifting of Martial Law, President Marcos signed two secret decrees that had a provision stating that the penalty for subversion was death. Subversion included “the use of printing, broadcast, or television facilities, or any form of mass communication” for any activity that “tends to

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.comcentrum.ph>

<sup>23</sup> Crispin C. Maslog. *Philippine Communication: An Introduction*. (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1988), p. 32.

destabilize the government or undermine or destroy the faith and loyalty of the citizenry.”<sup>24</sup> From the years 1976 to 1986, 25 Filipino journalists were killed, the highest mortality rate for journalists in the world.<sup>25</sup>

On December 7, 1982, the office of *We Forum* was raided by the military and was shut down. It’s editors and writers were put in jail. When Burgos was released he started a daily newspaper called *Malaya* (Freedom). Campus newspapers, especially the University of the Philippines’ *Philippine Collegian* flourished and was among the alternative press that emerged.

A turning point for the country and the media was the assassination of former senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. upon his return to the country on August 21, 1983, after three years of exile in the United States. In the day after his assassination, crony newspapers, television, and radio ignored the event. One newspaper, the *Times Journal* ran the story of the funeral procession that involved five million people, lasted 11 hours, and caused massive traffic jams in Metro Manila below the fold on the front page and television channel 7 had a ten second story.<sup>26</sup> Only Radio Veritas, the radio station owned by the Catholic Church covered the event.

In September 1983, a month after Aquino’s assassination, Eugenia Apostol, publisher of a weekly women’s magazine called *Mr. & Ms.* decided to publish special editions covering post-assassination events which included almost-daily rallies in the financial district of Makati, the on-going investigation on the assassination, the consolidation of the opposition, and the coming snap presidential elections in February

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

1986. During this period other newspapers such as the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Veritas* were established. The people boycotted the crony or mainstream papers, such as *Bulletin Today*, *Daily Express*, and *Times Journal*.

Radio's shining moment was the role it played in the 1986 People Power Revolution that overthrew the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos. Following a bloody Snap Presidential Election on February 7, 1986, Marcos declared himself a winner against Corazon Aquino, widow of slain Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr., despite the early counts showing otherwise. On February 22, Marcos' Minister of Defense, Juan Ponce Enrile, and Armed Forces Vice Chief of Staff, Fidel Ramos announced that they were resigning from their positions, saying that they could no longer in conscience support a government that did not have the mandate of the people.<sup>27</sup> Over the radio, particularly AM radio, Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin and opposition leaders called on the people to mobilize in the streets surrounding the two military camps that Enrile and Ramos were in. Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos from all walks of life—children, grandparents, the religious, rich and poor—trooped to the Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue (EDSA), camping on the streets, and having face-offs with the military. Armed with rosaries and flowers, these civilians pleaded and convinced their armed countrymen to join them.

As the days went by, Marcos ordered the shutdown of television and radio stations, many of which were destroyed and bombed by military troops loyal to the dictator. Radio Veritas, the station of the Catholic Church was the main source of information for everyone. People brought portable radios to the streets and tuned them to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

Radio Veritas from which they received information, updates, and instructions. On the second day, a military group bombed the facilities of Radio Veritas. Fortunately, those working there got out ahead of time. June Keithly was the main radio announcer at this historical moment and she had a distinct voice that everyone recognized. Luckily she, together with Fr. James Reuter, S.J., was able to negotiate the use of another radio station, one that was close to Veritas' on the dial. Together with two high school boys, she ran the radio station in an undisclosed location for the next three days until Corazon Aquino was sworn into the presidency and democracy was restored in the country.

Without the radio, the outcome of the People Power Revolution would have been different. Not only was the radio used as a tool for delivering the news, but it was also used as a tool for mobilizing people to the streets, for sending out instructions on where to go and what areas needed more people, to give updates on how many of the military had defected, to call for food donations, and to air messages from the opposition and church leaders. It was a shining moment for all Filipino people, and a communication technology called the AM radio played a crucial role.

After Edsa, the media faced a period of transition—from decades of controlled news to that of free and responsible journalism. Broadcast stations held by Marcos cronies were sequestered by the Aquino government and returned to the rightful owners. Today, the Philippines enjoys a flourishing media. Freedom of the press is highly valued. While the country continues its struggle against corruption and political instability, media corporations are growing.

### **The Telephone Industry: The End of a Monopoly**

Telephones were introduced in the Philippines in the 1890s. Initially, a small network composed of 170 clients was set-up in Manila.<sup>28</sup> In 1928, the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) was founded in 1928 by Americans and was owned by an American telecommunications firm until 1967 when a consortium of Filipino businessmen took control of the company. The group's takeover of the firm, during a period of nationalist resurgence, was hailed as a victory for economic nationalism.<sup>29</sup> But the succeeding years of Martial Law and economic decline prevented PLDT from flourishing. By 1980, there were only 1.3 telephones for every 100 Filipinos. In 1991 there were 658,402 pending applications for telephones, and by 1993, the number had increased to 789,259.<sup>30</sup> And since PLDT held a monopoly over the telephone industry, there was no need for the company to improve or speed-up its services. In addition, 76% of all telephones are located in Metro Manila. Only 13% of municipalities and towns throughout the country have telephones.

In 1993, President Fidel Ramos signed Executive Order Number 109, the Philippine Telecommunications Act, providing, among other things, the loosening of PLDT's hold on the telephone industry. The Act allowed other telecommunication carriers into the Philippines and required that all these carriers be interconnected. It also

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<sup>28</sup> Teodoro Agoncillo. *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990) quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> R. Manapat. *Wrong Number: The PLDT Telephone Company*, (N.p.: The Animal Farm, n.d.) quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002), p. 33.

required cellular mobile telecommunications service providers to install at least 400,000 fixed telephone lines over three years; as well, international gateway facility operators had to install at least 300,000 lines within five years.<sup>31</sup> This Act and the opening of the industry to other companies changed Philippine telecommunications and communication in unimaginable ways.

### **Cellphones and Text Messaging**

Cellphones were introduced in the Philippines in the mid-1990s, almost simultaneously as the Internet. Originally only wealthy businessmen, doctors, and government officials had use for them, but by the latter part of the 1990s, it gained popularity with housewives, college students, and young professionals. By 2000, the cellphone had become necessary for people working and living in major cities such as Manila or Cebu. Today, grade school and high school students as well as those from lower income brackets such as housemaids, family chauffeurs, janitors, nannies, security guards, jeepney (a form of public transportation used by the masses) drivers, etc. own cellphones. When pre-paid cellphone cards were introduced into the market, it allowed those without credit history, a permanent address, or a stable source of income to purchase cellphones.

There are two major cellphone companies that dominate the Philippine market. Smart Communications and its sister-company Piltel, which is owned by the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co. (PLDT), controls 55.54%, while Globe Telecom and its

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.arts.monash.edu/au/ausapec/cacphi.htm> quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002), pp. 34-35.

sister-company Islacom, has 43.27%.<sup>32</sup> In the first quarter of 2003, cellphones users were pegged at 16 million for a country of 85 million people. By the first quarter of 2004, the number had reached 22 million—25% of the population.<sup>33</sup> This number is significant because 40% of the country live below the poverty line on less than a \$1 a day.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises in cellphone use is the adoption of text messaging. Telecommunication operators did not anticipate that this add-on service would become a primary way of communicating via cellphone. When text messaging was first introduced in 1993, it was considered a novelty that only techno-geeks and early adopters used as an exclusive channel for communicating with each other.<sup>35</sup> The country's residents send and receive more cellphone text messages than citizens of any other nation.<sup>36</sup> According to the GSM Association, a wireless industry group, from the 24 billion SMS missives sent each month across the world four billion originate in the Philippines.<sup>37</sup> By early 2003, 150 million text messages a day were sent from the Philippines, an estimated 55 billion messages per year.<sup>38</sup>

As its popularity grew, a cap was placed on the number of text messages one sends out depending on the plan subscribed to. Any texts over the allocated minutes are charged. While the cost of sending text messages has increased, it is still much lower than

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<sup>32</sup> Knowledge Institute, "Philippine Telecommunications Industry, 2003" (SGV & Co., 2003)

<sup>33</sup> Francis Huang, email to author, 31 March 2004.

<sup>34</sup> <http://cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/rp/html>

<sup>35</sup> David M. Celdran. "Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments," from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

<sup>36</sup> David Diamond. "One Nation, Overseas," from <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.06/philippines.html>

<sup>37</sup> James Hookway. "Texting the Tube," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, (7 November 2002) pp. 37-38.

<sup>38</sup> Knowledge Institute, "Philippine Telecommunications Industry, 2003" (SGV & Co., 2003.)

voice calls. A survey conducted by Siemens in December 2001, found that 80% of respondents said they prefer keeping touch via mobile phone rather than email because it is faster, more convenient, and relatively cheaper.<sup>39</sup> A text message costs one Philippine peso (Php1.00), less than a penny; whereas a voice call is Php8.00 (about 15 cents) a minute. Incoming text messages and voice calls are not charged. Yet, the major mobile phone companies derive 25% of their revenue from text messaging.<sup>40</sup>

Anyone who encounters a Filipino and his or her cellphone will be amazed at the speed he or she can text. Because this add-on service has been around since the late 1990s, Filipinos have become adept at keying in messages using the telephone keys, some using both hands, some with just one hand and the thumb doing all the punching.

“Sending messages by phone is an irritating skill to master, largely because 26 letters, plus punctuation, have to be created with only 10 buttons. Typing the letter C, for example, requires pressing the No. 2 button three times; an E is the No. 3 button pressed twice; and so on. After the message is composed, it can be sent immediately to the phone number of the recipient, who can respond immediately by the same process.”<sup>41</sup>

Early GSM cellphones only allowed for 160 characters per message, thus users became creative in shortening words. Most vowels are removed, such as in the case of “thanks” which can be shortened to “TNX” and sometimes numbers are used to substitute letters as in the word “late” which can be shortened to “L8.” This new “language” evolved as cellphone use grew. Most Filipinos are bilingual and historically have appropriated English words in their own unique way, thus, text shorthand was simply an

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<sup>39</sup> Vanzi, Sol Jose. “Cellphones Increasingly Play An Important Role In Social Life,” from <http://www.newsfalsh.org/2002/02/si/si001177.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Knowledge Institute, “Philippine Telecommunications Industry, 2003” (SGV & Co., 2003.)

<sup>41</sup> Wayne Arnold, “Manila's Talk of the Town Is Text Messaging,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2000, from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/00/07/biztech/articles/05talk.html>

extension of this practice. As more and more people used the technology, unspoken rules of language and etiquette were created and became inscribed in day-to-day life. Early cellphones were mostly from European countries so Filipinos took advantage of the German letters with umlauts to express emotion. The most common are the “ü” to express a smile and the “ö” to express confusion, shock, or surprise.

Text messages can be sent at anytime, and the sender is assured that he or she has gotten the message across. This is especially helpful when a message needs to be relayed but the sender is not sure whether the receiver is available to take calls. Instead of risking a voice call that can interrupt something, a text message is more silent and can be attended to at a later time. As an Adjunct Instructor at the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, friends and colleagues would send me text messages instead of calling me when they needed to tell me something. The reasons are three-fold: it was cheaper, there was no risk of interrupting me in class, and the messages were waiting for me as soon as I checked my phone.

“These advantages of text were not surprising. Writing has always been more quiet than speaking (except in the early days, when it was chiseled with sharp stones into walls), and more precise. What was surprising was finding the written word in an instrument intended for spoken conversation, the cellphone.”<sup>42</sup>

In recent years, cellphones have become increasingly user-friendly. Among the features an ordinary cellphone has is Predictive Texting, a facility built into many mobile phones that allows the phone to “guess” the word you are trying to type.<sup>43</sup> This feature saves users from having to press their cellphone keys over and over to get the letters and words they want. Instead, users simply press the key they want and then move on to the

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Levinson. *Cellphone: The Story of the World’s Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 106

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.text.it/how/default.asp?intPageID=186>

next letter. The cellphone predicts what word you are trying to spell. If a word you want is not in the dictionary, you have the option to type it in and that word gets saved in the phone's memory. While this feature simplifies text messaging in languages that are built in on the phone, it is a little more tedious for users who are bilingual. Words in a different language need to be typed-in and saved. Thus, most Filipinos still prefer shortcuts when sending texts.

## CHAPTER II

### CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY: TRANSFORMATIONS

#### Building and Nurturing Relationships

It is easy to see how and why text messaging became increasingly popular. Filipinos have large close-knit extended families, where everyone keeps in touch and is involved in each other's lives. This extended family not only includes parents, siblings, and grandparents, but also aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, etc. This large family network also includes godparents, godchildren, and friends of the family that may go far back a couple of generations. Close friends are treated like family and children call their parents' friends "aunt" and "uncle." According to Elena van Tooren, a director at the Manila office of AC Nielsen, "Extended families are a real support system, and we have a higher need to relate (to each other)."<sup>44</sup> While the young in most countries dominate text messaging, it is not unusual to encounter grandmothers expertly using SMS in the Philippines.<sup>45</sup> Families have found that text messaging is a great way to disseminate news (such as a new pregnancy or a child making the honor roll), send birthday or anniversary greetings, or simply keep in touch. As 17-year old Isabel explains: "My mom never fails to text us even just a joke or prayer. I guess it is her private way of saying that she is thinking of us."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Kaihla. "The Philippines' Other Revolution (Think Wireless): The Poor Pacific Nation is the World's Leader in Text Messaging for Cellphones," from <http://www.business2.com>.

<sup>45</sup> Chris Pritchard. "The World's Text-Messaging Capital," *Marketing Magazine*. (2 December 2002.)

<sup>46</sup> David M. Celdran. "Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments," from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

As the number of two-income families increase and both parents spend long hours at work, there is a growing fear that parents are losing touch with the day-to-day lives of their children. It is not unusual for parents to assign cellphones to their maids or nannies. Working mom Mawi de Ocampo uses her cellphone to check-up on her three kids. “I text my *yaya* (nanny) to ask if they have eaten or done their homework. So even if I’m stuck in the middle of a meeting, as long as my phone is on silent mode, I am able to communicate with her. It reassures me a lot.” Text does not replace the dinner-table conversation, but it keeps families connected enough for a few lines each day.<sup>47</sup> Globe Telecom, capitalizing on this new way for parents to keep in touch with their kids ran an ad campaign in 2001 that featured a teenage punk texting thoughtful messages to her more traditional mother. The ad promoted the cellphone as a way to bridge the generation gap.

Filipinos, in general, are uncomfortable in face-to-face conversations, especially when dealing with emotion. Telling a parent or a child that you love them, asking permission from parents to go out, or apologizing can all be done through text messaging. Many people have found this to be liberating and helpful in building and nurturing relationships. Teenagers find avoiding face-to-face conversations with parents easier, especially when they expect disappointment or annoyance. Instead of dealing with an irritated parent on a voice call, teens can simply send a text message saying that they will be home late. Or instead of worrying about what tone to use when asking for money or permission to go to a party, teenagers simply send their parents a text message. According to Meyrowitz, in face-to-face encounters, the significance of the verbal

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

message is inversely related to the amount of available vocal and gesticular information.<sup>48</sup> So when teenagers text their parents instead of facing them, they are able to be in contact yet avoid a potentially emotional conversation. This may not be the best way for families to communicate, but it has, in many cases, facilitated better and more open communication lines.

Despite the fact that Filipino families keep close contact with each other, they have difficulty in expressing themselves, especially when it comes to emotions. A young woman interviewed by Pertierra, et al says it clearly: “What I cannot say, I can text. I text my parents ‘I love you’ but I would never say it to their face. That’s too corny and embarrassing.”<sup>49</sup> Text messages expand people’s discursive worlds by uncoupling traditional constraints between intentions and their represented meanings.<sup>50</sup>

According to Dadi Santos, creative director of the Globe account at Harrison Communications, “our studies show that Filipinos are social creatures and consider texting the next best thing to being there in person.”<sup>51</sup> “I love you’ or ‘*Ingat*’ (‘Take care’) are not normally things my husband would say to me,” says Josephine Paguia, a human resource executive. “But through the cellphone he is able to tell that to me.” A

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<sup>48</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985, reprinted, 1986) p. 101.

<sup>49</sup> Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002), p. 91.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Dadi Santos, quoted in David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

paragraph of sweet nothings punctuated by the ubiquitous smiley face or a “ü” should do the trick.<sup>52</sup> For David Celdran,

“...text does not only give us an opportunity to say things discreetly, it provides a communication bridge over traditional barriers of sex, status, authority, and in the case of the successful ad campaign (of Globe), generations. The implications of text on our personal and social communication patterns are exciting. Men may be from Mars and women from Venus, but texting opens up the intergalactic divide with digital conversations easier expressed on two inch screens than in person.”<sup>53</sup>

Certainly text messaging has been helpful in setting up blind dates and has proven to be a great way to introduce people to each other. Usually, the person setting up the date seeks permission from both parties to introduce them to each other. Once both say okay, then the guy is usually given the cellphone number of the girl he is being set-up with. It is usually best to send a text message saying, “Hello, this is \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ gave me your number. Is this a good time for me to call you?” Then the phone call can be made and traditional blind date etiquette takes over. What text messaging and calling the cellphone does is help the guy get over the “first phone call jitters” and eliminates the possibility of having to speak to parents, siblings, or other household members of the girl. Usually, after the traditional blind date of dinner, drinks, or coffee (or any date for that matter) it is good manners for girls to send a thank you text. Practices such as these have become part of day-to-day life. Rules are not inscribed anywhere and no one quite knows

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<sup>52</sup> Sol Jose Vanzi. “Cellphones Increasingly Play An Important Role In Social Life,” from <http://www.newsfalsh.org/2002/02/si/si001177.htm>

<sup>53</sup> David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

how they began, but they simply become part of what is. This kind of shared, taken-for-granted knowledge is an essential element of what we call ‘culture.’<sup>54</sup>

Texting seems to provide acceptable media for the transmission of normally tabooed topics.<sup>55</sup> In their book, Pertierra, et al tell the story of Jonas Bagas, a 24-year old gay activist who was thrown out of his parents house when he came out to them. While he continued to visit them from time to time, his homosexuality was never discussed again. Upon hearing from the news that Jonas was given a position in an international gay and lesbian organization, his father sent him a text saying “I’m proud of you.” For Jonas this message made him feel that his father finally accepted him as a gay person.

For splintered families of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), especially women nurses and domestic helpers who have left children at home, text messaging allow them to keep in touch daily. Through text messaging, moms in far-away countries are still able to “mother” their kids by asking them how their day was and whether school went okay, reminding them to eat dinner and do their homework, and bidding them goodnight almost as if they were there. Rosario Reyes, the Filipina domestic helper killed by a suicide bombing in Israel, transmitted a message to her son the night before her death: *Matulog ka na* (Go to sleep already).<sup>56</sup> When he needs money, 21-year old Victor Morillo texts his mom, a fabric cutter in Bahrain, to wire some over.<sup>57</sup> For Resty, the cellphone allows him

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<sup>54</sup> Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mckay and Keith Negus. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. (London: Sage Publications, Ltd., 1997; reprinted, 2001) p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002), p. 89.

<sup>56</sup> David Diamond. “One Nation, Overseas,” from <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.06/philippines.html>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

to talk to his wife, a domestic helper HongKong, twice a day, making him feel she is just around.<sup>58</sup> This ability to communicate and bridge the gap has somehow eased the pain and hardship of separation. The value of keeping families together cannot be replaced by or made-up for by the cellphone. But for countless women who make the sacrifice to give their families a better future, this is the best alternative. Technology has allowed them some power and control in keeping the family together, even if it is only through texting.

Just as the Internet has paved the way for virtual relationships, so has the cellphone and text messaging. Cellphone numbers in the Philippines have distinct area codes—0917, 0916, and 0927 for Globe phones and 0918, 0919, 0920 for Smart phones. People looking to make phone pals randomly send text messages to people they do not know by simply adding seven digits to the area codes. Texts often ask: “WL U B MY TXT MTE?” (“Will you be my text mate?”) or “CN I B UR FRND?” (“Can I be your friend?”) These develop into “virtual relationships” that are often kept separate from real ones. In their research, Pertierra, et al encountered a young woman who admitted to having as many as 10 texting boyfriends in addition to her real boyfriend. This has been a worrisome situation, especially for teenagers. Whereas parents can monitor what Internet sites are visited by their children, there is no way of monitoring the textmates their children make.

Not all texting relationships stay in the virtual realm. Just as online dating services such as match.com or eharmony.com and Internet chat rooms have resulted in marriages, so have texting relationships. While the initial getting-to-know you stage of the

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<sup>58</sup> Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002), p. 82.

relationship is done through text, this leads to actual meeting and actual dating, following the traditional Filipino courtship practices.

### **Cellphones and the Workplace**

In the corporate world, where values of authority and position are paramount, texting is also flattening hierarchies of power as employees use their mobile phones to directly access their bosses.<sup>59</sup> The non-confrontational characteristic of the cellphone and text messaging allows subordinates to transmit necessary information to their superiors whenever necessary. Sheila Quieta, assistant to a publishing executive of a leading magazine publishing company, finds that text messaging allows her to send vital information to her boss even while she is still at home or en route to the office. Yet texting between subordinate and superior maintains a respectful tone, often including the tradition “*ho*” and “*po*” which signify respect. Sheila’s texts would typically read: “GUD AM PO. UR 11AM MTG W/ MR. SANTOS S CNCLD.” (“Good morning, *po*. Your 11AM meeting with Mr. Santos is cancelled.”) Had this been sent to a co-worker at the same level, it would read slightly differently: “11AM MTG CNCLD” eliminating the respectful greeting.

According to Meyrowitz, media that support the relationship between physical isolation and social inaccessibility will support hierarchal mystifications; media that undermine that relationship may work to lower many high status roles.<sup>60</sup> In the case of

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<sup>59</sup> David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

<sup>60</sup> Joshua Meyrowitz. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985, reprinted, 1986) p. 67.

cellphones in the Philippines, the traditional gate-keeping functions of secretaries and assistants are broken when bosses give their cellphone numbers to their subordinates. However, this does not diminish the superiority of the boss. When texting a boss, subordinates always maintain respect, adding a formal greeting and continue addressing their bosses as “Sir” or Ma’am” in their text messages. Yet having direct access to a superior anytime and anywhere does give employees a sense of empowerment.

The cellphone has helped free-lancers and people who are on the go conduct their business. For Dedet Reyes, associate editor of a women’s magazine, “texting helps in sending out writing assignments to my freelance writers since I never know where they are. I usually give them the topic and deadline and if they are OK with that, then I tell them that I’ll be sending the assignment sheet via email. Texting them is important because a lot of them aren’t able to check email everyday.” Because they can be reached wherever they are, free-lancers find that the cellphone has resulted in an increase in their workload. For Belen, a manicurist who was laid-off from her job at a salon, the cellphone was an essential investment. Without it, clients would not be able to contact her or set appointments with her since telephone lines are not available in her area. There are some downsides, of course. Ouie Badelles, an artist and children’s book illustrator finds that some clients call or text at ungodly hours; others send nagging texts reminding him of deadlines.

In 2001, cellphone companies had to begin limiting free text messages, depending on what plan people subscribed to. “I’m on the Business Plan of Globe,” says bag designer Yael Buencamino, “and I almost always use up the 1,000 free texts my plan gives me.” Winnie Santos, who owns a cake decoration factory, has a similar story,

“Often, I use up all my text allocations and have to pay for my extra texts, but I never use up my voice calls.” But the Php1.00 per text fee (about a penny in US dollars) is not prohibitive at all.

Most Philippine businesses today have what is called an “office cellphone” strictly used for the purposes of making work more efficient. Propaganda, a salon that caters to a large upscale clientele relies on the cellphone to remind clients of appointments or to locate them when they are running late. Ishq, a bag and clothing boutique uses the cellphone to inform clients of new collections and upcoming sales. “Texting is much more efficient than calling people or sending email. People instantly get the message and sometimes within half an hour of sending a text, our loyal customers are at the store!” says Ishq co-owner Candy Reyes, “In the early days of the store, text was what we relied on.” As Celdran says, in the new economy, the speed by which information travels in an organization is a competitive advantage that makes or breaks business.<sup>61</sup>

For college students it is essential in surviving college life, “I once left my cellphone at home, and that day I was so lost, I couldn’t find any of my *barkada* (gang) on campus,” says college junior Tonette Morada. “Once, I was stuck in traffic and was running late for class, so I texted my professor to tell her,” shares Ana Fernandez. Professors also don’t mind giving out their numbers to their students. “In general, students know that they shouldn’t send you jokes or stupid things via text. My students usually text me when they want to set appointments or to find out if I’ve submitted their

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<sup>61</sup> David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

grades already,” says Mark Escaler, assistant chair of the Department of Communication at the Ateneo de Manila University.

### **Cellphones and Politics: Edsa 2<sup>62</sup> and the Downfall of a President**

The downfall of a president does not come overnight or over a span of four days. For Joseph Estrada, it ironically began in October 2000 when a Catholic nun openly alleged that the president’s family was profiting from public funds. This was not new news. In fact many already believed this to be a fact—there was just no proof. When a crony of Estrada’s, Governor Luis “Chavit” Singson, accused him of huge pay-offs from *jueteng* (a local form of gambling), calls for Estrada’s resignation began. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, the House of Representatives filed an impeachment case against the president on the grounds of bribery, graft, and corruption, betrayal of public trust, and culpable violations of the Constitution.<sup>63</sup> The televised impeachment trial began on December 7<sup>th</sup> with the 22 current members of the Senate as judges and Chief Justice of the Philippines Hilario Davide, Jr. presiding. A survey conducted in early January 2001 by the Social Weather Station and ABS-CBN, showed that 40% of the nation’s population followed the trial

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<sup>62</sup> Edsa is the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, the main high way in Metro Manila that connects the cities and municipalities. Edsa 1, also known as People Power 1, was the four-day non-violent uprising in February 21-25, 1986 led to the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the installation of Corazon Aquino as the country’s new president. Edsa 2, also known People Power 2 and Edsa Dos, was the four-day non-violent uprising that technically began late in the evening of January 16, 2001 and ended in the afternoon of January 20<sup>th</sup> with the oath-taking of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo as the 14<sup>th</sup> president of the Philippines.

<sup>63</sup> <http://members.tripod.com/twist14/edsa2/main.html>

intermittently and “nationwide, the great bulk of the respondents watched the trial on television.”<sup>64</sup>

On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 11 senators (of the 21 present) voted to block the opening of a sealed envelope that contained valuable evidence of Estrada’s corruption and hidden wealth. A survey conducted showed that 86% of Metro Manilans watched the live telecast on televisions, 60% of Filipinos saw it on television, and 12% heard it over the radio.<sup>65</sup> This seemingly obvious move to suppress the truth by the pro-Estrada senators was met with public outrage. “FUL MBLSN 2DAY EDSA” (“Full mobilization today at Edsa”) and “GO 2 EDSA. WEAR BLACK” (“Go to Edsa. Wear black.”) were among the millions of text messages calling upon Manila residents to gather at the Edsa Shrine<sup>66</sup> to rail against a controversial Senate vote that could have cleared Estrada.<sup>67</sup> Opposition

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<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Bautista. “People Power 2: The Revenge of the Elite on the Masses?” In Amando Doronila, ed., *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*. (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2002), pp.11-12. Quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> Jose Abueva. In Amando Doronila, ed., *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*. (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2002), pp. 82. Quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> This was the site of the first Edsa Revolution in 1996. A statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a chapel dedicated to her had been erected in the corner of Edsa and Ortigas Avenues. This was the focal point of the Edsa 2 uprising. In the context of the Edsa 2 mass protest, Edsa and Edsa Shrine generally mean the same place.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Bociurkiw, “Revolution by Cellphone,” *Forbes*, (10 September 2001), p. 28.

leaders broadcast text messages, and within 75 minutes of the abrupt halt of the impeachment proceedings, 20,000 people converged on Edsa.<sup>68</sup>

Although there is no way of verifying where the text messages originated, it would be safe to say that many of these messages originated from KOMPIL (*Kongreso ng Mamayanang Pilipino 2* or Coalition of the Filipino People)—a pluralist coalition comprised of NGO (non-government organizations) networks, issue-based and sectoral coalitions, church-based organizations, left political blocs, party-list groups, and individuals.<sup>69</sup> In the months leading to the impeachment trial, groups like Kompil and the Erap Resign Network, as well as leftist groups like Bayan, had been using various media and communication tools to inform people. Cellphone and email brigades were normal ways to spread news or new information quickly to large numbers. These technologies facilitated the communication and cooperation between groups normally located at opposing ends of the ideological divide but at this historical moment, united in their disgust for Joseph Estrada.<sup>70</sup> It is difficult to get the exact figures of text messages sent out over those four days, but they were so plentiful that Globe Telecom had to set up

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<sup>68</sup> Vicente Rafael. “The Cellphone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines,” from [http://communication.ucsd.edu/people/f\\_rafael\\_cellphonerev\\_files.htm](http://communication.ucsd.edu/people/f_rafael_cellphonerev_files.htm)

<sup>69</sup> Cynthia Bautista. “People Power 2: The Revenge of the Elite on the Masses?” In Amando Doronila, ed., *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*. (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2002). Quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 112.

<sup>70</sup> Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 120.

mobile servers to facilitate the traffic. Over the holidays, Globe had an average of 30 million text messages a day—a number that was exceeded during Edsa 2.<sup>71</sup>

The invention of the cellphone did not cause Edsa 2 to happen. Without this technology, a mass protest would still have removed Joseph Estrada from the presidency. Pertierra, et al in their book say that the mobile phone's real value in Edsa 2 lay, first in the way it helped join people who disapproved of President Estrada in a network of complex connectivity.<sup>72</sup> Jokes, updates on the trial, and other news were easily transmitted and shared, giving people a sense of belonging to a group and being in the know. Secondly, the mobile phone was instrumental as an organizational device.<sup>73</sup> Through the mobile phone, organizers, activists, civil society leaders, the military, and others were able to gather people together and transmit instructions. As political science professor from the University of the Philippines, Alex Magno pointed out, "It's like pizza delivery. You can get a rally in 30 minutes—delivered to you."<sup>74</sup> The cellphone not only drew the crowds but it allowed for updates to be sent out. As the days progressed, messages like "B AT EDSA AT 1PM" or "FULL MOBLSN 2DAY EDSA. IMPT CALLS WL B MADE" ("Full mobilization today at Edsa. Important calls will be made."). On the third day, there was a call for a human chain of peace to be made from Ayala Avenue (the heart of the business district and site of the rallies in 1983-86) to the Edsa Shrine. On the final day, this message was sent out: "PLS B AT EDSA 2DAY,

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<sup>71</sup> Jennifer E. Bagalawis. "How IT Helped Topple A President," *Computer World*, January 30, 2001, from [http://wireless.itworld.com/4273/CW\\_1-31-01\\_it/pfindex.html](http://wireless.itworld.com/4273/CW_1-31-01_it/pfindex.html)

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>74</sup> Alex Magno, quoted in Joel Garreau, "Cell Biology: Like a Bee, This Evolving Species Buzzes and Swarms" *Washington Post*, (31 July 2002), p. C1.

GENERALS HAV IMPT ANNOUNCMNT’ (“Please be at Edsa today. The generals have an important announcement.”)

Yet despite this prominent role made by the cellphone, people still had to physically go to Edsa. Demonstrators still equipped themselves with “all the traditional accoutrements of protesters throughout history—flags, banners bearing wittily offensive slogans, whistles and klaxons.”<sup>75</sup> In an article on their website, the World Socialist Organization eloquently says:

“So much for claims that IT has made traditional forms of struggle outdated. Undoubtedly, as Marx and Engels explained, means of communication become revolutionized by capitalists and utilized by the class they exploit to organize against them. This was as much the case with post, trains, radio or phones as it is with mobiles and the Internet. There are no more than auxiliary tools for organizing collective struggle. What counts in a revolution is the fighting forces on the streets and their programs and strategies for victory.”<sup>76</sup>

Clearly, the cellphone was a tool in the gathering of people and passing of information that allowed Edsa 2 to happen faster and perhaps more efficiently. For journalist Ellen Tordesillas, “If there were no cellphones, we would have invented another medium.”<sup>77</sup> Looking back at the first Edsa revolution in 1986 when cellphones were non-existent, when television channels and radio stations were mostly government or crony owned, and enemy was a 20-year dictator; a larger mass of people assembled on Edsa for four days in February. Only one AM radio station in an undisclosed location managed to stay

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<sup>75</sup> “People Power II” from <http://www.worldsocialist-cwi.org/eng/2001/0124.html>

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ellen Tordesillas, quoted in Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 122.

on-air throughout those four days. Technology may make some paths easier, but only because it is people-powered.<sup>78</sup>

There are those, however, who believe that the cellphone played a larger role than simply information dissemination. For journalist David Celdran, “the role of texting in Edsa 2 has opened our eyes to the power and potential it has in mobilizing public opinion and warm bodies to political action.”<sup>79</sup> One of the things that makes the cellphone an attractive way of distributing alternative information is that the origins of the texts cannot easily be traced. By passing on a text to friends and family, and they in turn send it to their friends and family, news and information gets passed along the line. Gerry Kaimo, spokesman for the Philippine League for Democratic Telecommunications says, “When the impeachment trial began, people used text to share their personal knowledge to fill the gaps in the news and to counter Malacañang (the Presidential Palace, Philippine equivalent to the White House) propaganda.”<sup>80</sup>

Text messaging has broken down the traditional barriers and gatekeepers in the media industry. According to Celdran:

“Broadcast and print media grapple with government regulations and pressure, as well as sometimes, restrictive editorial policies. In contrast, text messaging does away completely with the traditional gatekeepers of news and sends unfiltered political information through the network in a speed faster than it takes for the traditional mass media to reproduce and disseminate.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Alecks P. Pabico, “Hypertext Revolution: Text Messaging and the Internet Are Now the Tools of Protest,” from <http://pcij.org>

<sup>79</sup> David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

<sup>80</sup> Gerry Kaimo, quoted in David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

<sup>81</sup> David M. Celdran. “Texting has changed the way we live, love, and topple governments,” from [http://pldt.com/david\\_celdran.html](http://pldt.com/david_celdran.html)

Through the collaboration and verification of content, information flows freely across a grassroots network, free from corporate or government censorship. Text messaging fills the gaps that traditional media or the government cannot immediately fill. For example during the occasional blackouts that leave the entire Luzon (the largest island in the Philippines) without electricity, the cellphone gives people a chance to call and text friends and figure out how widespread the blackout is. This is very empowering for nervous Filipinos whom after years of experience have begun to equate power failures with political disasters.

Obviously this system of information flow is vulnerable to abuse and deception. Rumors and propaganda can be sent through the network. A text “joke” saying that the Pope had died caused quite a stir in the Philippines—a predominantly Roman Catholic nation. Both Celdran and Pertierra, et al, believe that it is the users themselves who are trying to self-regulate. For the most part, cellphone users make it a point to distinguish between what is junk text and what is not.

### **Cellphones and Everyday Life**

One of the most interesting applications of text messaging has been the upsurge of television channels devoted to text messaging in the Philippines. While Europeans and Americans wait for third-generation technology to let them email and watch video on fancy new handsets, millions of Filipinos, in a country too poor to sustain widespread

Internet access, are already swapping information and creating entertainment by fusing two lower-tech but widely used networks: television and cellular phones.<sup>82</sup>

In early 2001, ABS-CBN, the Philippines' largest media corporation invited viewers of a lunchtime variety show to text in their votes for a beauty contest. Over 100,000 messages were sent within an hour. "It was enough to crash Globe's servers," says Carlo Katigbak, head of interactive development at ABS-CBN, "It really got us thinking."<sup>83</sup> Immediately, ABS-CBN set-up an all-text channel on their cable network and it was an instant hit—enough to get ABS-CBN Interactive out of the red. The television screen is divided into three or four parts, messages scroll down on one, polls and contests usually go on another, auctions or shopping on the third, and a music video on the fourth. The screen is just as busy as the Bloomberg channel. Today, there are four cable television channels devoted to just texting. Crude, but this is interactive TV—Philippine style! And it seems the trend is catching on in other parts of the world, particularly Europe where the number of texters has overtaken the number of Internet users. An article in *The Economist* reports that in France 30% of adults text versus 25% who use the Internet, in Germany, 43% text and 29% use the Internet, and in Britain, 49% text and 39% use the Internet.<sup>84</sup> For reality TV shows in Europe, texting has been the way to vote. The success of TV-related texting is a reminder how easily an elaborate technology can be unexpectedly overtaken by a simpler, lower-tech approach.<sup>85</sup> In 2002, ABS-CBN's Katigbak had this to say, "It's more than just a fad. A new technology will

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<sup>82</sup> James Hookway. "Texting the Tube," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, (7 November 2002) pp. 37-38.

<sup>83</sup> Carlo Katigbak, quoted in James Hookway "Latest Trend in Manila: Text-Messaging the TV," *Wall Street Journal*, (31 October 2002).

<sup>84</sup> "Texting the Television," *The Economist*, (17 October 2002).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

come along but we already have 12 million people using SMS. It will be a long time before they can afford something more advanced.”<sup>86</sup>

Given the prevalent and widespread use of cellphones in the Philippines, it is not surprising that government, non-governmental organizations, and religious groups have begun to use this medium for their purposes.

In 2002, the Philippine National Police launched a text messaging system that allows the general public to report wrongdoings by the police and by criminals. By sending text messages to number 117, offenses made by policemen or by criminals can be reported. According to a study by Erwin Alampay, in the first six months of 2003, over 29,000 messages were received, 33% were requests for assistance, 25% were reports of illegal drug use or gambling, and 13% were reports on corrupt police officers.<sup>87</sup> While this gives the public a sense of empowerment and a venue to report crimes, there is still no evidence whether this has resulted in a decrease of wrongdoing by the police or if this has led to actual investigations. In addition, the anonymous nature of text messaging leaves the system vulnerable to prank texters. Unlike web-based reporting systems where those reporting a complaint are required to give their name and contact details, texters only reveal their phone numbers. Identities of pre-paid cellphone users are impossible to track.

A similar program was introduced by a non-governmental organization called Bantay Kalikasan (Environmental Watchdog). Manila is among the top ten worst polluted cities in Asia and its major cause is automobiles. Anyone who sees a vehicle emitting

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<sup>86</sup> Carlo Katigbak, quoted in James Hookway. “Texting the Tube,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, (7 November 2002), pp. 37-38.

<sup>87</sup> Erwin A. Alampay, “Text 2920/117 Reporting Police Wrongdoing via SMS in the Philippines,” from <http://www.e-devexchange.org/eGov/text2920.htm>.

black smoke is asked to send a text message to Bantay Kalikasan reporting the vehicle's plate number. At the end of each week, the organization sends a list of vehicles that has five or more complaints against them to Land Transportation Office (LTO) who then summons the vehicles for an exhaust test. Those who fail are required to clean their engines or lose their licenses. And the scheme seems to be working. In the first two weeks of the campaign, 123 vehicle owners were called, overwhelming the LTO.

Other public service oriented programs have been set up by community organizations to report uncollected garbage or bad driving. De La Salle University students can get exam schedules and bills from the bursar through text messaging. Subscribers to Globe Telecom send a text reading "AMEN" to the company's Catextism program to receive daily prayers. Similar services are offered to get weather and traffic reports, stock quotes, daily horoscope, and news reports. Sureseats.com, where tickets to movies shown at the Ayala Malls can be purchased has a feature that allows movie tickets to be reserved via text messages. The National Commission for Culture and the Arts in cooperation with the Filipinas Institute of Translation and the University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing launched an SMS poetry writing contest called DionaText in February 2004. The contest aims to popularize one of the oldest forms of poetry, the diona, composed of three versified rhyming lines.<sup>88</sup>

In May 2002, Globe Telecom launched MMS—a multi-media messaging service—where users can send messages with text, graphics, photo images, and audio and video clip using WAP (wire application protocol) and GPRS (general packet radio

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<sup>88</sup> [www.textually.org](http://www.textually.org)

services) technology.<sup>89</sup> While camera phones are currently being promoted and sold in the United States, photographs can only be sent from cellphone to Internet. For over a year, Filipinos have been sending photos from cellphone to cellphone through MMS.

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<sup>89</sup> [www.globe.com.ph](http://www.globe.com.ph)

**CHAPTER III**  
**CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY: IMPLICATIONS**  
**AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**Technology as Empowering**

The cellphone is a deceptively simple gadget that has far reaching implications, especially in the case of the Philippines. Cellphone technology has been empowering for the Filipino from different walks of life, crossing the boundaries of class, age, and gender.

First, cellphone technology has broken through class divisions. Because of pre-paid numbers, people without credit history, reasonable incomes, or permanent addresses have been able to obtain cellphones. For a country that is socially stratified, this is very empowering. Having the capability of owning and using a technology that the rich use is very empowering for the lower and lower-middle classes. As Pertierra says, earlier technologies helped entrench social divisions and inequalities.<sup>90</sup> Cellphone technology changes this trend.

Other forms of media and communication have maintained or promoted the existing class structure, strengthening social and cultural divisions. In the case of film, the act of going to a theater to see a film is the same for all people. Yet the kind of film that people see and the kind of movie theater they go to supports the existing social stratification. For example, a film for the AB class (the upper and upper-middle class comprising the top 10% of society) would be in English, usually from the United States, shown in a clean, well air-conditioned theater. In the newer malls, there are comfortable,

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<sup>90</sup> Raul Pertierra. *Science, Technology, and Everyday Culture in the Philippines*. (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, 2003) p. 66.

reserved seats, chairs that slightly recline, and Dolby and THX sound is available. For the CDE class, films are usually in Filipino or Tagalog, locally made with poor storylines and effects. Theaters are usually air-conditioned as well, but seats are less comfortable. There is no reserved seating, and theaters are often dirty.

The case of television is similar. With the rise of cable television and UHF channels, television networks are able to arrange their programming to more specific target markets. ABS-CBN, the largest media conglomerate in the country owns Channel 2 on network TV and Channel 23 on UHF, as well as many other cable channels and distribution networks. What they have been able to do is narrow the viewership of Channel 2 to the CDE crowd also known as the *masa*, literally meaning the masses. Programming is composed of locally produced shows, Latin American telenovelas, Chinonovellas (soap operas from Taiwan and China), and news broadcasts that do not usually include the business news. The primary language is Filipino mixed with English. The AB class watches cable channels where the news and talks shows are in English and most of the programming consists of shows and movies imported from the U.S. The physical act of watching TV is the same across the board, but the content that is received is different depending on the class of the viewer.

Reading newspapers offers the same class divisions. The AB read the English-language broadsheets while the CDE class relies on tabloids in Filipino that contain sensationalized news. Radio divides the society as well. Unless there is a national disaster, the upper classes listen to FM radio while the CDE listen to AM. Most AM radios use Filipino, while the FM stations stick to English.

As Pertierra says, cellphone technology challenges and subverts former hierarchies and structures.<sup>91</sup> Unlike other forms of media and communication, the cellphone cuts through class divisions. No matter how expensive or what kind of plan one subscribes to, the cellphone is a technology that is shared by the social classes. The same uses and the same functions are available to all. The main use of the technology is the same: voice calls and text messaging. The “content” that is received is the same—to keep in touch with family and friends, to enhance relationships, to make new friends, to delve into the virtual, to boost productivity in the workplace, and to be involved in political and social events of the nation. Whether one belongs to the wealthy and educated AB class or the poor and working-class CDE, the content received from the cellphone is the same.

About four years ago, it was still amusing for the privileged class to give cellphones to their family chauffeurs and maids. Like all new technologies, cellphones were a luxury that only the rich could afford. Yet as the cellphone became part of daily life and essential in being productive, it became accepted that maids, drivers, janitors, and security guards had use for cellphones. Today it is even more surprising if your nanny does not have one or that you haven’t assigned one to your driver. The rich may have fancier phones and make voice calls more often, but the means of communication is just as important and necessary for the poor.

Cellphones in the Philippines are not age-specific nor are they gender-specific. While countries like Japan and Finland attribute text messaging as a phenomenon dominated by the youth, in the Philippines, young and old alike send and receive text messages on a regular basis. The young may tend to use their cellphones more to make

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

friends, for idle chat, or to make plans with friends; and older people tend to use it for work, to keep in touch with family members, and for keeping up with what is going on in the country. The youth may be the quickest to learn a new technology, but in the Philippines, it is not unusual to see grandmothers, society ladies, or priests and nuns tapping away at their cellphones.

While there is no study that measures the cellphone uses between the sexes, Pertierra, et al believe that is neutral about gender.<sup>92</sup> Men may text more sexually explicit messages, and women more gossip, but the frequency seems to be similar. Because the medium has allowed non-confrontational communication, men and women can pursue normally tabooed topics such as sexuality.

### **Participants in the Global Village**

Filipinos today take delight in knowing that in the case of cellphone technology, they are far ahead than their western neighbors, particularly the United States. With glee and incredulity, the reply, “What? Text messaging is new in the U.S.? We’ve been doing it for years!” This smugness and amusement leads to some sort of national pride, a boost Filipinos need especially while living in a country with a failing economy, a circus of a political scene, and where kidnapping is a business.

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<sup>92</sup> Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 151.

According to Arvind Rajogopal, for postcolonial countries, the striving for and the achieving of nationhood is some sort of push towards modernity.<sup>93</sup> The extensive use of text messaging in the Philippines and specific extraordinary uses (i.e. Edsa 2) has put the Philippines in the global map as among the leaders in the industry. Certainly this small Southeast Asian nation has been a major test site for new cellphones. To many, this is a sign of modernity, of being not too far behind the developed nations. The ability to communicate with others across the world in real time through text messaging gives a sense that the Filipino is present in the global stage.

“Developing nations” are awkwardly situated: they are not quite “there” yet, or not comprehensively.... In non-Western societies, the modern is identified with the urban industrial sector, and its presence is acknowledged as partial and uneven.<sup>94</sup> This is certainly true in the Philippines. The major cities, especially Makati and Pasig in Metropolitan Manila, are just like any major city in the world. There are modern high-rise buildings; five-star hotels that offer the great service; malls that feature world-known brands such as Prada, The Body Shop, and Nike; and Starbucks, McDonald’s and Pizza Hut are plentiful. Yet majority of the country is still agricultural, where farmers tend the fields manually, where running water and 24-hours of electricity are non-existent, and where any form of scientific medical treatment is unavailable. According to Michael Hardt, it is not necessary to pass through modernization before informatization.<sup>95</sup> So

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<sup>93</sup> Arvind Rajogopal, “Theorizing reception in a non-Western society” in *De-Westernizing Media Studies* edited by James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 294.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” from [http://io.khm.de/kr\\_www/content/io\\_dencies/io\\_lavoro\\_immateriale/texts\\_by\\_others/Hardt.pdf](http://io.khm.de/kr_www/content/io_dencies/io_lavoro_immateriale/texts_by_others/Hardt.pdf)

while a large portion of the country has not been fully industrialized, the Philippines can still participate in the global village.

### **The Cellphone and Social Change**

Media technologies throughout history have been used and created to make life easier, to be able to communicate despite hindrances of time and space, and to entertain us. Philippine history has shown that media has been a vital factor of implementing social and political change. Through the centuries and different colonizers and governments, Filipinos have used media as a tool for protest and for achieving social change. The links between media technologies and society are undeniable.

For Williams, all questions about cause and effect, as between a technology and a society are intensely practical.<sup>96</sup> If a technology is a cause, we can control its effects, and if a technology is an effect, then we can seek to find what other actions or uses caused this effect. Technology, including communication technology, is at once an intention and an effect of a particular social order.<sup>97</sup> In the case of EDSA 2, to say that text messaging alone ousted a president would be to minimize the importance of the mass protest that led over a million Filipinos to the streets for four days in January 2001. While text messaging played a vital role in gathering that million, and allowed simultaneous protests in other cities in the country, the show of force in EDSA was what led to the end of Estrada. As Williams says, all technologies have been developed and improved to help with known

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<sup>96</sup> Raymond Williams. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (1974. Reprint, with an introduction by Lynn Spigel, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992). p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

human practices or with foreseen and desired practices.<sup>98</sup> Later on, other social groups may adopt and develop these technologies for another purpose or practice. Certainly, gathering a mass of protesters to topple a government was not among the intended uses of cellphones! Yet, the cellphone was an essential tool at Edsa 2.

The widespread use of cellphones has led government and non-governmental groups to generate ways to use it for the betterment of society. Edsa 2 has shown us that cellphones can be used for a purpose beyond the private life. While cellphones are a private technology, its consequences can benefit the public, whether it be as large as overthrowing a president or as small as day-to-day changes. This is clearly seen in the non-government and civic groups that have begun to use the cellphone technology to report wayward policemen or smoke-belching vehicles. Uses for the cellphone such as these are continually being explored and it will be interesting to see what other ways the cellphone can be used in implementing social change.

### **An Open Culture**

One of the paradoxes that characterize the Philippines is its rapid westernization and acceptance of modern technology, implying an open culture that readily adapts to prevailing conditions.<sup>99</sup> New technologies, media, ideas and trends from the west, especially the United States rarely face rejection. This initial acceptance of foreign

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

<sup>99</sup> Raul Pertierra. *Science, Technology, and Everyday Culture in the Philippines*. (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, 2003) p. 53.

influence is quickly indigenized and many of its significant features reshaped to suit pre-existing conditions.<sup>100</sup>

For Williams, there are pre-existing conditions in the culture that allow for technologies to develop and be adopted. The processes of selection, investment, and development are obviously of a general social and economic kind, within existing social and economic relations, and in a specific social order designed for particular uses and advantages.<sup>101</sup> Technologies are developed for an intention, particularly by the power players involved—corporate owners, governments, or the elite. Yet, in the case of the cellphones in the Philippines, the intentionality of the social forces is what causes the technology to develop and flourish. There is a fit between the technology and culture that addresses the needs of the particular society. Certain pre-existing Filipino cultural traits have paved the way for cellphone technology, particularly text messaging, to thrive. These are the importance of family; the concept of “*hiya*,” loosely translated as shyness or embarrassment; and the need to be in the know.

According to Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, among the significant changes have accompanied the widespread adoption of new media forms is that they have greatly expanded the private, personal, and familial spheres.<sup>102</sup> The family has always been the cornerstone of Philippine culture. The cellphone has strengthened the nuclear and

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<sup>100</sup> Jaime Bulatao, S.J. *Phenomena and Their Interpretation*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1992) quoted by Raul Pertierra. *Science, Technology, and Everyday Culture in the Philippines*. (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, 2003) p. 53.

<sup>101</sup> Raymond Williams. *The Year 2000*. published in London as *Towards 2000* (New York: Pantheon, 1983) p. 130.

<sup>102</sup> Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, “Media and Subjectivity in Shanghai” in *Media Words: Anthropology on New Terrain* edited by Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 193.

extended Filipino family, not just those living in the Philippines, but also with the larger Filipino community living abroad. This is especially true for Filipino Overseas Contract Workers (OCW) who are split from their families. The cellphone has allowed for maintaining and fostering closer relationship between parents and children and between siblings. It has also allowed for the extended family to remain connected even when living far away from each other. People are able to maintain relationships with cousins, aunts, and uncles, which is vital in Philippine society. Traditional ties are maintained despite the spatial distances separating overseas workers from their families.<sup>103</sup>

The maintenance of familial relationships that the cellphone brings to Filipino families is real. Although it is true that tucking children into bed via cellphone will never replace the actual presence of a parent, real relationships are still being built by this act. Many can argue that the cellphone and text messaging give a false sense of being there, an unreal involvement in day-to-day activities, and a temporary feeling of being close. However, given the circumstances many Filipino families have to face, this is somehow helps in keeping relationships going. A significance of this new media is that it has brought about increasing transnational connections for ordinary people.<sup>104</sup>

For wives, mothers, grandmothers, and aunts who are vital links in keeping members of the family involved or informed, the cellphone is a technology that has allowed them to fulfill this goal easier and quicker. The cellphone has given them new ways and means to maintain their roles as informants. Wherever they may be, a mother

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<sup>103</sup> Raul Pertierra. *Science, Technology, and Everyday Culture in the Philippines*. (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, 2003) p. 63.

<sup>104</sup> Mayfair Mei-Hui Yang, "Media and Subjectivity in Shanghai" in *Media Words: Anthropology on New Terrain* edited by Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 194.

can send a text message to her children to say hello, send a prayer, or remind them of a family event. Whereas previously the family shared both physical space and communication in the home, and to leave the home was to leave both the physical space and most of the communication, nowadays the cellphone keeps the family's communication intact when the home is left behind.<sup>105</sup>

Before the development of the cellphone, families kept in touch through the regular telephone and through letters. For a while it seemed like the Internet would help splintered families keep in touch. Yet the prohibitive cost of computers and Internet service coupled with the unavailability of telephone lines did not allow this technology to become popular. In addition, the computer itself is daunting to use. On the other hand, the cellphone was a technology that people were familiar with.

The second Filipino cultural trait that has allowed for the cellphone to succeed is the concept of “*hiya*.” As said above, this is loosely translated to shyness or embarrassment. It can be explained in the context of “I’m embarrassed to ask a girl out” or “I’m too shy to ask my boss for a raise” or “I’m too embarrassed to tell my parents that I used up all my allowance.” Cellphones and text messaging have given Filipinos a way to get the message across without having to face the person. Because he or she is avoiding a confrontation by sending a text message, then this obstacle is overcome.

While Filipinos are culturally chatty and like to keep in touch with friends and family, we find difficulty in communicating emotions and feelings. It is also difficult to confront people who are older, such as parents or grandparents; bosses or teachers; or people assumed to be superior, such as the wealthy or foreigners. This hesitation stems

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<sup>105</sup> Paul Levinson. *Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 89.

from a socially and economically stratified society and a culture that is conservative. The ideas and behaviors digested over years of colonization are not easily erased. The rich, the *mestizo* (mix of Spanish and Filipino), the person who speaks perfect English, parents, the religious, etc. are superior and thus it is embarrassing to approach them directly with a request, a message, or worse, a demand. The indirect nature of text messages allows one to arrange “face” before communicating with others.<sup>106</sup> People are able to create identities of the selves they want to project before sending out a message, thus avoiding awkward situations.

Text messaging has also generated new ways to make friends and creating virtual relationships. These virtual relationships sometimes even turn into real ones resulting in marriage. The culturally “shy” Filipino is able to express emotions and thoughts that he or she normally cannot face-to-face through the cellphone. The distinction is clear between what a real relationship is versus a virtual one. Filipinos, in general, classify their virtual relationships as harmless, and certainly not as important as the real ones. The concept of a virtual relationship seems to be a way to escape the rigid, unspoken rules of a largely Catholic and conservative society.

Filipinos, in general, like to be in the know. As a people, we like to gossip and be familiar with what is going on in the world around us. Recent history has shown, especially during the Marcos era, that the media could not be trusted to deliver the news. Filipinos have had to devise other ways of gathering information, especially during tumultuous times such as elections, Edsa 2, or a natural disaster. The cellphone is like the

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<sup>106</sup> Howard Rheingold. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution: Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access*. (NY: Perseus Publishing, 2003), p. 25.

modern-day town crier or evening paper for Filipinos today. It is even better because information, whether it be as serious as breaking news about the government or as whimsical as gossip about a famous actor or a mischievous as spreading the news the pope has died, is received in real time and can be verified through a network of friends.

### **Some Negative Impacts**

As Paul Levinson says, all communication media are trade-offs.<sup>107</sup> While new media technology usually makes our lives easier and more convenient, something is usually lost by the adoption of the new. With the creation of the printing press and books, oral traditions have disappeared. With the Internet, letter writing has dwindled. While the cellphone has certainly made instant communication easier and more efficient, there are also drawbacks negative effects.

Widespread cellphone use has resulted in the blurring of the private and public spheres. While the cellphone is a private technology in that it is communication between two people at a time, it also is a public one because we receive the calls outside the privacy of our offices, our homes, or phone booths. It has become acceptable for Philippine society to take cellphone calls or to check text messages while eating or in a meeting. Visit the Makati nightspots and one will notice the proliferation of cellphones on the tables in restaurants. Or you will notice that not everyone in the table is engaging in conversation. Instead, some are distracted by the constant beeping and ringing of their cellphones. Movie theaters, banks, gas stations, and places of worship have been actively campaigning for the silencing of cellphones in their premises. Countries like Germany

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<sup>107</sup> Paul Levinson. *Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 7.

have banned cellphone use inside restaurants. But in the Philippines, it is part of daily life.

With the popularity of text messaging as the main use of the cellphone, many have become concerned on its effects on language. Already many have begun using text shorthand in their email messages. Paul Anthony Villegas, a teacher at the Ateneo de Manila High School noticed that his students have been using shortcuts in their compositions.<sup>108</sup> In addition, text messaging has become the new way of cheating. Students send questions and answers to each other during exams. To combat these, elementary and high schools have prohibited the use of cellphones during and in-between class hours.

While relationships are nurtured and built with the aid of the cellphone, there is a dependence on the technology that makes real, face-to-face relationships suffer. Instead of learning to communicate feelings, emotions, and information with others, users are able to hide behind the text messaging. Social theorist Erving Goffman wrote about the way people improvise public performances as a way of composing identity in the presenter's own mind as well as the mind of others.<sup>109</sup> Through cellphones and text messaging we are able to create identities for ourselves without actually facing the consequences or reactions of the other person.

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<sup>108</sup> Cabagnot, Ruby Jane L. "Text Messaging: Boon or Bane?" December 12, 2000, from [http://itmatters.com.ph/features/features\\_12122000.html](http://itmatters.com.ph/features/features_12122000.html)

<sup>109</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (NY: Doubleday, 1959) quoted in Howard Rheingold. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution: Transforming Cultures and Communities in the Age of Instant Access*. (NY: Perseus Publishing, 2003), p. 25.

From the point of view of familial communication, the physical home becomes less relevant, less essential.<sup>110</sup> When receiving texts from a parent daily takes the place of the dinner table conversation, can we really say that real interaction between parent and child actually occurs? Indeed for absentee parents who are overseas contract workers, this kind of contact is better than none. But for parents who are physically available to spend time with their children, have the cellphone and text messaging become an excuse for not being there?

Cellphones have become part of daily lives, almost the extension the users body. Because cellphones are small and mobile and can be taken anywhere, mishaps can happen, especially while driving or walking. If driving and talking on the cellphone have caused a rise in accidents, text messaging and driving is even worse. Hands-free sets have made driving and speaking on the cellphone at the same time possible and safer. But keeping an eye on the road, a hand on the steering wheel, another hand on the cellphone, and the other eye on the text message is a much more difficult multitasking activity. Even the most expert texter, and to be sure there are many in the Philippines, needs to glance at his or her phone at least once while texting. New rules and laws have been passed, but enforcement is difficult.

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<sup>110</sup> Paul Levinson. *Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.89.

## CONCLUSION

That cellphones have deeply affected the lives of Filipinos should by now be evident.<sup>111</sup> The Knowledge Institute of SGV & Co, Ernst & Young's Philippine partner, credits the growth of the cellphone industry to its mass-market appeal, its affordability, and the convenience of a pre-paid service.<sup>112</sup> Despite the fact that 40% of the population lives on less than \$1 a day, cellphones have had remarkable market penetration at 25%. This paper has shown that the cellphone has made an enormous impact on Philippine culture and society. But more than that, research has revealed that there are cultural reasons unique to Philippine society that have allowed cellphones to take root in the country. The success of any medium, certainly the enormous success of the cellphone, means it has survived a human test.<sup>113</sup>

One social impact of widespread cellphone use is that the technology has crossed boundaries of class, gender, and age. Filipinos of all sizes, shapes, and background have adopted this technology. Unlike other nations where the youth dominate the text messaging phenomenon, in the Philippines, both young and old, male and female use this technology extensively.

Cellphone technology has also allowed a developing nation like the Philippines to participate in the global village. Not only is the Philippines up to speed in cellphone technology, it is even ahead of some developed nations. The cellphone has also given the

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<sup>111</sup> Raul Pertierra, Eduardo F. Ugarte, Alicia Pinggol, Joel Hernandez, and Nikos Lexis Dacanay. *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*. (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press Inc., 2002) p. 125.

<sup>112</sup> Knowledge Institute, "Philippine Telecommunications Industry, 2003" (SGV & Co., 2003)

<sup>113</sup> Paul Levinson. *Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything*. (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 13.

Filipino a way of keeping in touch with people around the globe. Since Internet use is not as widespread (4 million Internet users versus 22 million cellphone subscribers), the cellphone is the medium that lets the citizens of the nation join the information superhighway.

Since the cellphone is ubiquitous and is used by people from all sectors of society, it has also become a tool for social change. Edsa 2 and the ousting of corrupt President Joseph Estrada is the most impressive outcome of widespread cellphone use. Yet the possibilities of using the cellphone in other ways that can result to the betterment of the community and the nation are being explored. While there is still no way to measure the success of the government and non-government groups' efforts, the opportunities are exciting.

There are traits and characteristics of Philippine culture that have allowed the cellphone, particularly text messaging, to flourish. These are the importance of family, "*hiya*" (meaning shyness or embarrassment) and the need to be in the know. The family is still the center of Philippine society and the cellphone has allowed them to keep in touch and to communicate regularly. Despite the distances of time and space, text messaging holds the family together. When faced with emotions, confrontations, or demands, the Filipino is shy and embarrassed. Text messaging allows the user to hide behind a mask instead of engaging in face-to-face conversation. This is especially true when dealing with the opposite sex or dating, parents, superiors at work, etc.

Filipinos also like to always be in the know. We may be shy about telling a parent we love them or asking the boss for a raise or telling a guy we are attracted to him; but we are definitely curious about the day-to-day lives of the people around us. Years of

colonization and oppressive governments have also created an air of suspicion towards the media and the government. The cellphone has allowed people to verify news and information through a network of friends and family.

While the tremendous impact of the cellphone on Philippine society and culture cannot be denied, there have also been impacts on the economy. Since the deregulation of the telecommunications industry in 1994, the industry has spawned a host of entrepreneurial activity in areas such as application programming for mobile content (ranging from simple ringtones and phone logos to Java-based games for General Packet Radio Service [GPRS]) and new cottage industries devoted to pre-paid call and text card sales, handset and accessory sales, service centers, and others.<sup>114</sup> There is room for growth in creating more content for mobile phones whether it be games, advertising, new features, etc. As prices of cellphones and the cost of making calls and texts go down, combined with growth in the Philippine economy, the cellphone's future looks bright. As more and more people use this technology, more impacts on society and culture can be studied.

This thesis aimed to examine the impact of cellphones on Philippine culture and society. Much further study can be made in this area. An in-depth study of the differences or similarities in the use of cellphones by men and women would be interesting. While currently there is no evidence of a disparity in the amount of cellphone use between the sexes, it would be fascinating to see if there are any differences in the kind of use.

While this thesis briefly touches on the impact of text messaging on language, it would be of value to do a more in depth study on the matter. It would be interesting to see

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<sup>114</sup> Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala, "The Challenges and Opportunities in the Philippine Service Sector," *The SGV Review*, (December 2003), p. 31-32.

conclusive data on how much speech, spelling, and writing has been affected by shorthand text messages. In addition, a study on the texting language and etiquette that have resulted from cellphones and text messaging would be valuable.

Much can indeed be studied and written about cellphone use in the Philippines. This paper only provides a general overview of the impacts and reasons on why the cellphone has been so successful. Good or bad, there is no turning back. The cellphone is here to stay and will continue to be an essential technology for Philippine society and culture.

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