



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

SPECIAL REPORT

2301 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20037 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

On July 28 and 29, 2014, the PeaceTech Lab and the Academy for International Conflict Management and Peacebuilding at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) brought together seventy civic activists, policymakers, technologists, nongovernmental organization leaders, and education professionals for an interactive workshop to identify the key challenges and opportunities in using technologies to support nonviolent civic movements in the twenty-first century. This report presents some of the key points from the workshop discussions about how activists and external actors can use the full range of technologies to support the strategy and tactics of nonviolent civil resistance movements.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kelly McKone is a research consultant for USIP's project mapping research initiative to understand how practice connects to theory in reconciliation programming worldwide. Dr. Maria J. Stephan is a senior policy fellow at USIP and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, where she focuses on the dynamics of civil resistance and their relevance for violent conflict prevention and democratic development. Noel Dickover is a senior program officer for the PeaceTech Lab, heading up the Open Situation Room eXchange (OSRx) project, a collaboration and data-sharing platform for peacebuilders.

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SPECIAL REPORT 357

JANUARY 2015

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Kelly McKone, Maria J. Stephan, and Noel Dickover

Using Technology in Nonviolent Activism against Repression

Summary

- The past two years have been marked by new U.S. commitments to stand by civil society using new and existing technologies that can support the strategy and tactics of nonviolent movements around the world.
- The demand and development of secure digital technologies is largely driven by companies in the developed world. Activists continually struggle to obtain the more tailored technologies required to support their context-specific capabilities and needs.
- Digital security trainers need more support to meet the growing demand for continued training to deliver up-to-date information about security developments that could threaten activists' ability to work safely on- and offline. Digital security trainers would benefit from more training on the conflict context, culture, and civil mobilization to help ensure that their services are appropriate for the specific needs of a given movement.
- External actors often overemphasize the use and potential advantages of new technologies over basic technologies. Online and offline activism and organizing can and should be seen as mutually reinforcing components of movement building. Assistance from external actors should be guided by in-depth assessments of which technologies people are currently using, how they are using them, and what they are capable of using.
- Elicitive training techniques in workshops are a powerful way for trainers to support movement building. These techniques help people feel valued for the skills and knowledge they have to offer and are good at uncovering the less obvious skills that movement members may have. Moreover, the fluidity of this education style helps ensure that people get the information they need from the training.
- The adoption of any technology by a movement must be monitored and evaluated to help ensure that the technology is effectively advancing the movement's tactics and strategy. Movements must have a plan for data collection and analysis. Both digital and nondigital technologies can be useful in supporting these efforts.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote postconflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

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Why Civic Mobilization? Why Technology? And Why Now?

Today's news headlines are filled with stories of governments cracking down on nonviolent activists who have mobilized to protect their rights and demand social and political change. In Tunisia, Brazil, Kenya, and Ukraine, among many other countries, ordinary citizens have demonstrated that they can make positive social change happen when they are organized and disciplined, using tactics ranging from consumer boycotts to public square sit-ins. On the other hand, the situations in Sudan, Syria, and Bahrain, among others, have shown how difficult it can be to build and sustain movements where the options for nonviolently resolving conflicts are diminishing under increased repression. Though nonviolent resistance between 1900 and 2006 was twice as likely to succeed in challenging oppressive regimes than violent movements were,¹ determining how to support people pushing for change is a key challenge for policymakers.

The U.S. commitment to civil society strengthened when President Barack Obama held a high-level roundtable at the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2013.² This meeting accelerated a worldwide discussion about international support to civil society at a time when governments around the world were imposing legal, bureaucratic, and physical restrictions on civil society activity and its ability to receive that support. Obama solidified the U.S. commitment to civil society in a memorandum on September 23, 2014, calling on all government agencies “engaged abroad...to take actions that elevate and strengthen the role of civil society; challenge undue restrictions on civil society; and foster constructive engagement between governments and civil society.”³

Given the increased constraints from governments on civil society and the burgeoning of people power movements around the world, the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) convened activists and practitioners working around the world to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different digital and basic technologies—ranging from advanced data encryption software to a can of spray paint—in bolstering nonviolent movements. Seventy civic activists, policymakers, technologists, nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders, and education professionals came together for a two-day dynamic workshop at USIP to identify knowledge gaps and possible project ideas to fill these gaps to help activists and external actors to more effectively create political change through organized nonviolent action. Now is the time to create a better ecosystem for civil society, to coordinate diplomatic action, and to develop new tools and technologies to support civil society around the world.

Working Securely in Insecure Digital and Nondigital Spaces

Civic activists are confronting new threats to their safety and security, and it is impossible to completely mitigate them, working either on- or offline. Technological advances in surveillance capabilities often create a development response from freedom-of-expression technologists to overcome the new surveillance. Nontechnologists often cannot keep pace with this rapid coevolution, meaning that activists are exposed to the dangers of new surveillance technologies without having access to the new technology that could be protecting them. Moreover, as the demand for and development of secure technologies is largely driven by large companies in developed countries, the secure technology market often does not meet the niche needs of activists.

However, several organizations and technologists have had great success in bridging the digital security gap. One technologist developed the open-source uVirtus Linux software, which can serve as a fully encrypted computer operating system by simply plugging in a thumb drive. This software greatly mitigated the risks to people's safety and a movement's operations in the event of a computer being lost or stolen. Cryptocat is a software application for computer browsers and mobile phones that encrypts chat messages before the

message leaves the device. Similarly, Open Whisper Systems created the RedPhone and Text-Secure applications to encrypt phone calls and text messages for secure communication. Amnesty International also recently developed a panic button app for Android phones that, when pushed, sends a message to the user's network that the user is in danger. These technologies exemplify the types of security developments that could better meet the needs of activists to operate safely online and protect their physical safety.

In addition, activists continually struggle to stay up to date with technology that could benefit—or threaten—their work. Policymakers and civic activists are not always aware of the risks associated with new technologies or significant architectural changes to the existing technologies on which they rely and may push to adopt a technology without properly accounting for security threats. Digital security trainers are needed who understand the local culture and conflict and who ideally have training in civic mobilization, a demand that currently far surpasses trainers' capacities.

Digital security trainers have tried to adapt to limited resources by focusing their workshops on the training of trainers, which both boosts their capacity and allows local technologists to adapt content to their specific needs and capabilities. Unfortunately, the short, reactive nature of trainings makes this model unsustainable and ill-suited to the ongoing needs of activists in rapidly changing environments. As time passes, the relevance of the training decreases. Changes in technology often alter the "right answer" the training provides. International organizations, NGOs, tech firms, and foreign governments could focus more on helping ensure that technologies for which training is given actually meet activists' distinct needs. Some authoritative body should perhaps deliver ongoing information about technological developments and new digital security threats to local and international technologists.

Mobilizing with Appropriate Technologies

Though digital technologies can be effective in building movements, in some places a lack of infrastructure, technical skills, or prohibitively restrictive cyber-repression may make online activism difficult, if not impossible. Through numerous innovations, online and mobile interactions are leading to offline organizing and action. When thinking about the technologies that could advance the tactics and strategy of a civic movement, however, it is easy for external actors to overemphasize the use and advantages of these more advanced technologies. Given that nonviolent movements need unity, expanded participation, and tactical diversity to succeed, in some cases it may be more practical to turn to basic technology approaches, such as leaflets, community radio, graffiti, posters, or face-to-face signature drives. Egyptian activists had a fair amount of success using social media to organize people until divisions between the military and Muslim Brotherhood obstructed the ongoing dialogue with streams of propaganda. Online organizing, when combined with offline activism and organizing, can and should be mutually reinforcing.

A key goal of movement building is to create pathways of engagement to facilitate widespread participation. Connection technologies are often most effective at engaging youth and educated populations. However, without complementary basic technology tools, this narrow approach could unintentionally exclude large portions of the population and undermine the widespread participation needed to effect change. The inability to use advanced connection technologies in low-tech environments does not change activists' ability to mobilize people, but it does limit the technological options. In 2008, Zimbabwean activists created two versions of a radio program on cassette tapes and CDs to circumvent government censorship. They disseminated a twenty-minute version of the tape to urban cab drivers and a sixty-minute version to rural drivers to spread their message to community members. To reach their external audience, they hid the tapes in floral packages that could not be held at the border for long.

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In Vietnam, prodemocracy activists developed sticker ads to post on walls. After several days, a fake top layer would fall off and reveal the true message underneath. In Egypt, people broadcasted their messages at coffee shops and over mosque speaker systems, while in Cameroon, activists soapboxed in community gathering places. In Serbia, people banged pots and pans to disrupt Slobodan Milošević's 7 p.m. nightly news program—a tactic used similarly in Chile during the 1983 campaign against Augusto Pinochet.

At the same time, none of the above means that new technologies cannot be used effectively in developing countries. Innovative approaches with existing technologies can create new pathways for activists in organizing and in action. In West Kalimantan, Indonesia, destructive practices by palm oil companies threatened the livelihoods of local farmers. To combat the industry's harmful activities, farmers partnered with Ruai TV to raise awareness of the issues. The farmers adopted FrontlineSMS, an open-source mobile software that uses short message service (SMS)—that is, text messages—to feed local media information about the companies. Ruai TV then verified and broadcasted the reports to a wider television audience, sparking government involvement and shaming companies into changing their practices.⁴ External actors seeking to help local civic campaigns need to assess which technologies people are currently using, how they are using them, and what they are capable of using. This information should guide assistance decisions.

There are key challenges to donors assisting nonviolent campaigns and movements. Donors are often enticed by technology but fail to adequately connect the technological approach with the expressed needs and contexts of the activists they are looking to support. Outsider expectations about what technologies can or cannot do for a movement are often not aligned with the needs and abilities of activists themselves. Moreover, external actors too often understand digital technologies as part of a transitional process, in which basic technologies are the starting point and advanced technologies—which typically require significant infrastructure investments—are the end goal. The heavy emphasis on technological innovation has created a perception that advanced technologies are superior to basic technology approaches. But innovation can take various forms, such as using carrier pigeons or drones for human rights support. The use of various technologies must be understood as being integral to movement building. Civic action is about building broad coalitions and increasing popular participation by innovating tactically, the specifics of which drive technology choices—not the other way around.

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Elicitive Learning

Incorporating elicitive training techniques that employ a diverse array of technologies could be a particularly powerful way for outside actors to support movement building.⁵ First, elicitive training creates pathways for participation in the training itself and can make people feel valued for the skills and knowledge they have to offer. In this learning environment, everyone can be both a learner and teacher. Facilitation of elicitive trainings can be challenging because there is no set curriculum. However, the fluidity helps ensure that people get the information they need and that education is not a strictly top-down interaction. The facilitator's role is to help create strong networks of peers who can benefit each other, offering a "buffet of skills" from which activists can pick to benefit their needs and to structure the conversation so participants can trust and openly share with one another.

Digital security training in particular is seen as critically valuable for activists working in harsh environments. LevelUp, an organization working to increase the capacity of digital security training worldwide, explains that "the most experienced digital security trainers are often overworked, overbooked, and under-resourced. ... In addition, a number of individuals are being asked to become digital safety trainers with little to no support, guidance, training

experience, or ethical framework.”⁶ Trainers often lack the ability to do sustained follow-up trainings, and the short duration of the trainings they do hold prevents them from delving into the material enough to ensure that it meets the target audience’s needs. Moreover, language barriers, trust, and contextual knowledge greatly limit the number of trainers able to work effectively in a given context. Up-to-date online resources, which includes lessons on strategic nonviolent action and which trainers could then localize in specific countries and cultures, could help address these challenges. In addition, organizations should work closely with local counterparts to identify key workshop participants who could themselves become trainers—ideally, those with experience in both technology and civic mobilization—to encourage greater sustainability and effectiveness.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Movement Building

A crucial question when a movement adopts any technology is whether or not it is effectively advancing their strategic objectives. Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman offer a set of six factors that characterize successful nonviolent movements.⁷

- **Ability to unify people.** Movement building requires that activists unite people around shared goals, methods, and leaders. Movements have used both basic and digital technologies to develop and disseminate mission statements with a clear, inclusive vision. They have coordinated intra- and intergroup actions with varying risk levels to increase movement participation. They have developed mechanisms to pool resources and win endorsement by key stakeholders. Online organizing leading to offline action is a key approach.
- **Capacity to choose and sequence tactics to advance the strategy.** Planning is one of the most difficult aspects of movement building, but also one of the most important. Developing a well-articulated strategic plan—linking means to ends—based on power and stakeholder analyses, incorporating lessons learned from past actions, and alternating between methods of concentration (e.g., protests, rallies, sit-ins) and dispersion (e.g., consumer boycotts, stay-aways, go-slow actions) are hallmarks of good planning. Engaging in online or mobile planning requires giving significant thought to internet security in order to have protected dialogue on organizing. *People Power: The Game of Civil Resistance* is a new computer-based simulation tool that could greatly aid activists around the world (<http://peoplepowergame.com>).
- **Commitment to nonviolent discipline.** Maintaining nonviolent discipline, often in the face of violent provocation, is key to successful civil resistance. Training in methods of discipline, development and enforcement of a code of conduct, use of solidarity language (often seen through humor, satire, music, arts), and devising tasks for would-be armed elements have all contributed to nonviolent discipline in movements. Social media have been very effective at creating swarms of responders hitting at the credibility of regimes restricting nonviolent mobilization.
- **Growing participation in the movement.** Increasing the scope and diversity of participation is perhaps the greatest indicator of a movement’s success. Evidence of progress include increased support from influential leaders, increased participation from worker and professional sectors, increased participation by minority groups (e.g., women or marginalized religious or ethnic groups), increased number and higher quality of social media subscribers, and sympathetic or defensive statements from regime officials.
- **Diminishing effects of repression.** Strong movements can remain resilient against repression and increase the costs to the opponent of using it. Examples of resilience

Online organizing leading to offline action is a key approach.

include the existence of parallel social, political, and economic institutions to support a movement's self-sufficiency, increased capacity to document human rights violations, evidence of solidarity funds or legal aid mechanisms to support imperiled activists, and evidence of growing participation despite repression.

- **Increasing defections from movement's opponent.** Loyalty shifts within key organizations and institutions toward a movement strongly indicate a movement's power and legitimacy. Examples include security force members refusing to obey orders to shoot at protesters, defections by diplomats and ambassadors, increased information leaks, and the flight of foreign businesses and investors.

Evaluating progress on each of these six items requires that activists have the infrastructure to collect and analyze data on the indicators of their progress. Both digital and basic technologies could be useful, and mutually reinforcing, in data collection and analysis. Leaflets, paper petitions, satellite imaging, geographic information system mapping, simulation gaming, social media analytical softwares, and SMS crowdsourcing softwares, among countless other technologies, have all supported the real-time assessment of movements' efforts. USIP PeaceTech Lab's Open Situation Room Exchange (OSRx) offers another platform for local activists to develop and use data to guide their strategic planning and to connect them to outside experts and activists from other struggles. But much more work is required to develop tools and resources to help nonviolent activists navigate restrictive environments and ensure that their on- and offline activities are strategically conceived and mutually reinforcing.

Notes

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3. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Presidential Memorandum—Civil Society,” September 23, 2014, available at www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/presidential-memorandum-civil-society (accessed December 3, 2014).
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eISBN: 978-1-60127-278-2

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