Reflections From and On The Forum

The Mobile and the World

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It was wonderful to attend this special event of the Harvard Forum. For those of us who do not undertake any systematic effort to keep track of the growing world of technology, coming to these forums—this is the second one here—is like attending periodic refresher courses on "what's happening" in the use of technology, especially information technology. And all this comes effortlessly to us, as it is nicely arranged from Canada—a kind of periodic Canadian nudge to wake up sleepy Harvard academics. And for this, we have every reason to be grateful. I particularly thank the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for supporting this event. I am also very glad that my friend, David Malone, who now heads it, is himself here—I take it that this is not merely because David wants to wake up the Harvard academics, but also because he knows that this event has a widespread world audience, which makes me rather nervous!

Perhaps I should also seize this occasion to express my appreciation of the excellent, and far flung, activities of the IDRC, which I have observed and admired over the years across the world—not least in South Asia. It is particularly impressive that the IDRC has been able to provide support for many nonmainstream projects, which are often neglected by the more traditionalist support agencies. Many of these innovative ventures, which do not get the attention of the media, and which are not heralded and greeted—at least not initially—on the front pages of the newspapers, have actually ended up doing a lot of good in our badly organized world. It is not merely the size of the budget, but also the type of projects, that determine the overall effectiveness of supportive activities—and the IDRC has a record here that should surely be a reason for great pride.

I know that a lot of people are particularly interested in the growing reach and impact of mobile telephones. Let me say here that this is a field in which much of the good work has been done by private initiatives—indeed, often enough, by simple business initiatives. This is not invariably the case with many other departures, as help from the state or the nonprofit NGOs is rather necessary. Indeed, many of the supportive activities of the IDRC have been aimed at good nonprofit initiatives that need support. It is interesting to ask this question: When do for-profit business initiatives work out very well—and rather automatically—for the benefit of the public at large?

To give an old-fashioned answer to this question, which is not a bad starting point, for-profit initiatives can be often market-friendly when the impact on others is positive, rather than negative. A telephone owned by a person helps others to call the person up, as well as to receive calls from him or her, and so the increased freedom of the phone owner adds to the freedom of others. In contrast, a gun owned by one can easily reduce the freedom of others, if the gun is pointed at them—or could be. Many goods have little impact on others, as a shirt owned by one does not, typically, have much of an impact on the lives of others. In contrast, a phone

is generally freedom-enhancing for others, rather than being largely neutral (like a shirt) or possibly quite negative in its impact (like a gun). Indeed, a telephone—and particularly one that is readily usable by the owner and others—is generally freedom-enhancing in this important sense.

Of course, all these generalizations demand that we also point to exceptions. A gun could protect as well as it could be used for assault (and when we listen to the National Rifle Association, we tend to hear a lot of that part of the story—and little of the other side that often makes American lives so vulnerable). A shirt can generate envy (I take it that this is not a good thing), and on the other side, it can also generate pleasure in seeing a well-attired person (which must be a good thing). The phone, too, can be used to plot a terrorist activity, to violate privacy, to conspire to commit nasty deeds. And your mother may be calling you up at this very moment—when you are trying to address an audience of smart guys, who, unlike you, have not forgotten to switch off their phones.

Those possibilities exist (and there are few social generalizations for which we cannot find any complicated exception whatever, if we work hard on it), but in general, the impact of more telephones is to make things more agreeable and more enabling for others. And if that is an explanation of why for-profit initiatives in telephone activities tend to be supportive of other activities, it is also something of an explanation of why massive expansion of telephone networks—and they have typically tended to be mobile phone networks—have been, in general, a boon, rather than a curse, for societies. So the telephone is generally freedom-enhancing, and that is an appropriate enough point of departure for the hagiography of the mobile phone.

I take the liberty here of pointing to a relatively ignored aspect of the speed with which the telephone culture in particular, and basic information technologies in general, have grown in countries that were previously out of it all. It is very fashionable these days to praise "local knowledge" and its great importance. I have nothing against that recognition (it can, indeed, be important), but I sometimes wonder whether we place the question in the right way, as a contrast between the local and the global—as if local knowledge must be seen as involved in a pitched battle against global knowledge. The easy way these communicational technologies have been absorbed by people shows that, despite their modernity and, I suppose, "globality," they are not things that are completely alien to the local culture. The important issue is what we can do with all the technologies that are available. The right way of seeing IT is also not to cast it in terms of what we can do on the basis of our own culture, unaided, because we do not have any unaided culture. IT has become an interactive culture across the world, and the important question is how we can make people more functionally efficient, not just with their own things, but with everything—the global, as well as the local.

Let me also make a small political point about mobile phones and their accompanying technologies. Not only can they help communication in the standard way, but they can also help in the political struggle against oppression. This is not just through the obvious routes of aiding communication among protesters—though that is important, too. There are big concerns about dealing with repression in, say, Burma, not to mention North Korea. The mobile phone can be an instrument of liberation even against heavy odds, and this is a subject on which the authorities are, understandably, scared. Communication is snapped in order to keep the population in a state of voice-less and communication-less submission. We know this is an important issue, but we need more understanding of how the mobile phone can be used better against the repression of oppressors. We should see more clearly how mobile information technology can be used to enhance the battles for freedom and against the viability of repressive regimes.

Information technologies can help in many unexpected ways, as well. Let me end by giving an example: Consider the sense of subdued frustration in Pakistan about the takeover of the Swat valley by the Taliban, which imposed its own repressive rules, and against which the Pakistani military was, initially, rather unwilling to act. Despite the barbarity of the Taliban rule in the Swat Valley, it looked rather remote to the mainstream Pakistani civil society, and there was a kind of apathy about the state of affairs in Swat. The mobile phone played a major part in changing this situation—a move from which there was an impact on changing the rather passive position of the Pakistani government, as well as that of the military.

The initiating incident was that of a young girl

being whipped by the Taliban, who were delivering their preferred punishment to a violator—or an alleged violator—of one of their austere rules. A human rights activist video-recorded the event on his mobile telephone, pretending to make a long call while running the video camera. With the help of other human rights activists, the video went on television across the country, and it was watched in horror by the Pakistani civil society. The video also got the newspapers to take a proactive position on the issue of the Taliban—at long last. By the end of the month, public opinion was significantly moved. It was no longer easy to ignore what was happening in remote Swat, because the Swat Valley atrocities came home in Punjab, Sind, and elsewhere—all over the country. The government and the military were able to move against the Pakistani Taliban on the basis of public anger at the activities of the Taliban, of which this case of whipping was a prime exhibit—and a hugely moving one.

The impact on Pakistani public opinion was enormous, partly because a video is so graphic. A basically sympathetic population, which did not want young women to be treated like that, no matter what their religious belief might be in other respects, had the opportunity to react to what it could see right there. The changed perception was all brought about by a mobile phone with the additional capability to photograph and take video. It was the technology that made this exposure possible, and it was another feature of that technology—the combination of a video recorder with a telephone—that made it possible for the courageous human rights activist to catch the picture without being detected by the murderous Taliban. It is hard to think of another case in which one courageous person and one bit of mobile technology have brought about such a radical change in the participatory politics of a country. ■