Introduction

In the online space, minorities from the developing world, previously underrepresented in mainstream media, can rewrite their history and collection of struggles that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture. This possibility for self-production of political expression is relevant for minority groups who have long suffered as objects of others’ image-making and issue-framing practices as it provides them with the platform for strategic mobilization to achieve political goals. However, there is skepticism about the actual value of online spaces in effecting agency in an Internet-mediated environment. Critical perspectives on strategic communication raise this debate on the organization’s ability to resist power, domination and control (Bourdieu, 1977). Techno-utopian promises that online media will empower the voiceless have also been challenged as issues of cultural objectification, commercialism, and state controls shed doubt on whether online media can truly be localized and emancipatory for minorities (Landzelius, 2006; Belausteguigoitia, 2006; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, 2002; McCallum & Franco, 2009; Brooten, 2010). Moreover, unlike businesses, government, or well-resourced transnational organizations, minorities are faced with conditions that complicate their position as activists and as users of technology. Yet, as minorities are often understood as diaspora communities in the West, and given the understudied nature of minorities from developing societies as online activists, the question of whether online media can be strategically used by minority groups to advance their political goals remains devoid of the empirics of social and political mediation.

This chapter explores strategic communication in the context of online political mobilization by minorities from developing Asia. To what extent is the use of online spaces by minority groups “strategic”? What does it mean for minority groups to communicate strategically within a technological discourse? For what purposes do minority groups use online spaces and how do they use them to achieve their purposes? Concerns about minorities’ engagement with online media are critical of over-optimistic views about the benefits of the Internet communication technologies. However, this perspective seems to propagate previous depictions of minorities as helpless, passive actors that are easily harmed by the structures surrounding them. It is important to probe not only the instances where minorities are compromised by the use of technology, but to surface instances where they are able to carve out discursive spaces for expression and control. This includes exploring the conditions that allow them to assimilate media to advance their own political and cultural goals.
This chapter first defines strategic communication and activism in practice and then moves on to present the dialectical tensions as well as the enabling and constraining structures surrounding minorities’ online political mobilization. Using findings from case studies of an indigenous social movement organization and a Muslim minority revolutionary group from the Philippines, I discuss the dominant strategies underlying minority online political mobilization. The chapter seeks to surface new understandings of political formations and strategic communication in the context of minorities, as enabled, constrained, and shaped by the features of online media.

Strategic Communication and Activism in Practice

Strategic communication is defined broadly as “communicating purposefully to advance its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčić & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 2). This definition highlights the purposeful and “intentional” nature of strategic communication, and in the context of organizations, it focuses on how the organization presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, members, and communicators. However, the theory and practice of strategic communication still tend to focus more on profit corporations and governments. In the public relations field, attention to non-profit organizations and the use of online new media is increasing, although most of these explore the effects and outcomes of online interactivity, for example, in building more productive dialogic relationships with stakeholders (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas, 2009) or as an equalizing effect on the PR performance of non-profits that have varying fund capacities (Kang & Norton, 2004; Sriramesh, Rivera & Soriano, 2013). While some studies have explored the role of public relations in activism (e.g., Dutta & Pal, 2007; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001; Kim & Sriramesh, 2009), there remains a broad space for exploration in the field of activism and strategic communication, particularly when these emanate from marginalized communities, and in instances where there is a focus on meaning-making and intention of use. Similarly, much literature on minority media focuses on use and effects, with assumptions that the use of technology will automatically empower minority groups despite uncertainty on whether media enables or challenges the workings of power or the potential of activism. There is also limited understanding of purposes of use and what they seek to achieve with online mediation. Without the activist’s voice, the study of strategic communication would seem to continue to remain as a “parcel of the maintenance of metanarratives and domination of society” (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 100).

Moreover, strategic communication used to be associated with a description of tactics and practice, with little room to contextualize the social, economic, or political circumstances in which organizations operate: circumstances that make such “tactics” possible and meaningful (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 11; Mintzberg, 1988). The use of institutional theory in strategic communication expands the scope of analysis beyond the single organization and stresses the importance of the social and political embeddedness of organizations, including the specific institutional setting and the logic of the media system (or the framing of decisions influenced by the media) it operates in (Sandhu, 2009, p. 18). According to Holtzhausen (2000, p. 109), the context in which strategic communication takes place should be emphasized, and excellence should be measured “against the ability of the practitioner to deal with a particular event, in a particular place, within a just and moral framework.” This is where the exploration of the conditions and contexts that shape communication strategies would be important in determining what it means to communicate strategically—particularly when communicators are in less privileged positions or are engaged in sensitive relations with the state (i.e., minorities). This is important because previous studies on Internet use for activism and social change have shown that the mediation of dissent by one group may be strategic for one, but not strategic for another, and this implies that differential contexts and particular situations of power can influence strategic communication.
Further, “strategic communication comprises of activities that are ‘strategic,’ not random or unintentional—even though unintended consequences of communication can adversely impact the ability of an organization to achieve its strategic goals” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 22). Sandhu (2009) described strategic communication as “intentional” communication that requires a purposeful actor, and rational and deliberate decision-making. For example, an organizational strategy is described in terms of intention and motivation based on certain goals, such as competing in the marketplace and with organizational survival and efficiency as motivating factors, or planning communication with important publics to gain trust (Tench, Verhoeven, & Zerfass, 2009). However, what constitutes “purpose” and how an organization arrives at intention and strategy, should be further explored. Others argued, for example, that the purposes of minority media may not emanate from the grass-roots community being represented, but may be influenced by funders or by the hype to use technology (Latufeku, 2006; Landzelius, 2006; Ginsburg et al., 2002).

Moreover, the term strategic formerly evoked a one-sided “management” approach that was based on asymmetrical or top-down communication to protect the interest of the organization. However, how does the organization’s understanding of its audience and anticipation of the audience’s response and expectations affect strategic communication? To what extent does communicating strategically necessitate an assessment of how the message would be received and what the recipient would do with the message? Or does strategic communication lie solely in expression or execution of a tactic? An organization’s purpose can be complex and have a dynamic evolving character, and the crafting of purpose and intention can result from a confluence of factors in the organization’s environment. King (2009) developed the concept of “emergent communication strategies” that take into consideration “audience-response” and “situated context.” Developing the concept from Mintzberg’s (1988) work on emergent business strategies, King argues that “communication strategies will emerge based on audience response and practitioners design a series of pre-messages . . . establishing a design/test cycle to better achieve communicative goals and inform future message” (2009, p. 35). This implies that strategic communication may in reality entail a more dynamic, iterative approach that probes the response of target audiences and adjusts according to the realities of the political or socio-economic environment.

Philippine Minorities and the Socio-Political Context of Online Political Mobilization

A minority group is “a group of people who, because of physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination” (Wirth, 1945, p. 347). A minority group is not a statistical concept that accounts for less in number count or representation. Instead, its existence in society “implies a corresponding dominant group enjoying higher social status and greater privileges” (Wirth, 1945, p. 348). Minoritization can emanate from race, ethnicity, language, religion (Wirth, 1945; Capotorti, 1991; He & Kymlicka, 2005), gender and sexuality (Hacker, 1951), physical characteristics (Wirth, 1945), as well as other grounds, and the members of minority groups are usually held in lower esteem and may even be objects of contempt, hatred, ridicule, and violence. However, when the sentiments of a disadvantaged group are articulated, when they clamor for emancipation and equality, a minority group can become a political force to be reckoned with.

Across Asia, minority groups have been overlooked by government policies and have also been affected by ongoing processes of economic and social change and development initiatives (Clarke, 2001, p. 419; He & Kymlicka, 2005; Brown & Ganguly, 1997). By virtue of their remote locations or their discriminated identities, they are marginalized from markets and government services and have limited access to mainstream media to articulate their causes. Commonly, they are
underrepresented politically at local, regional and national levels and often stereotyped as backward and inferior others.

With respect to the treatment of minorities, the Philippines may be judged as a relatively bright spot in Southeast Asia. For ethnic (indigenous) and religious minorities (Moro Muslims), the nation has passed legislation addressing the concerns of minority peoples, and the indigenous and Muslim minorities have won significant economic, political and cultural concessions from government (Eder & McKenna, 2004). However, it is important to locate such state response and political openings alongside the long history of unmet grievances and atrocities experienced by minorities that underlie their continued expressions of dissent.

For example, the 1987 constitutional provision of autonomous regions in Muslim Mindanao and the Cordillera region sought to respect the “common and distinctive historical and cultural heritage, economic and social structures, and other relevant characteristics” (Rood, 1989) of these minorities, and a significant departure from centrist and national integration that marked earlier constitutions. After years of lobbying, the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act was also passed in 1997 to protect the rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral domain, and to preserve their culture and institutions. However, indigenous communities have continued to suffer from the illegal encroachment of business such as mining or logging activities in their ancestral lands. Members of an indigenous activist community have also condemned the “sudden disappearances” of some of their members in what they suspect to have been government military-led operations (Cordillera Peoples Alliance members, personal communication, May 2010), and retain in their memories the deaths of some of their past indigenous leaders in their historical fight against large-scale dam and mining projects.

The Muslim struggle in the Philippines, on the other hand, is considered as one of the longest struggles of ethno-religious minorities globally (Jubair, 1999, 2007). Alongside the failure of the autonomous government in Muslim Mindanao to give meaningful autonomy to Muslims, an armed group of Muslim rebels formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and have pursued earlier demands for secession. The term Moro refers to Muslims indigenous to Christian-dominated Philippines. Historically it had a derogatory connotation, originating from the word ‘moors’, although the Moro revolutionary organizations have used the term to define an identity for their struggle. As with the deaths of past indigenous leaders from other ethnic groups, the violent mass killings of Moro intellectuals in 1968, dubbed the “Jabidah Massacre,” has catalyzed modern Moro insurgencies (Jubair, 2007, 1999). The armed conflict and sporadic clashes between the Moro rebels and the military has caused thousands of deaths and millions of displacements. However, there has been some respite during this conflict, as the government has continued to engage the Moro rebels in peace negotiations overseen by the International Monitoring Team and other international actors. In a long-awaited peace agreement signed with the Philippine government in March 2014, the MILF has shifted its demand for secession to a new autonomous government, which would be part of (and not separate from) the Philippine state. Following this peace agreement, the parties are in the process of constructing the implementing mechanisms for the governance, power, and wealth sharing in the contested lands.

Minority online political mobilization also needs to be situated within the reality of simultaneous freedom and restraint underlying conditions for political expression. The Philippines has been widely recognized for having the freest media in Southeast Asia, and the 1986 “People Power Revolution” and post-martial law regime have seemingly created a climate of tolerance toward expressions of dissent. Yet, there is a “militarization of the media” in the country, which involves direct censorship, violence, killings, and other human rights violations against journalists, and the use of libel and defamation laws to silence dissent (Brooten, 2011, p. 244). Thus, the commercial and militarized media in the country are far from exemplary in terms of meeting the communication rights of the most marginalized groups.
Although Internet penetration in the Philippines remains at approximately 29% of the population (International Telecommunications Union, 2012) and is still concentrated in urban areas, minority groups have begun to gain substantial online presence in websites, blogs, and other social media. The call center industry has expanded beyond the capital Metro Manila and into Philippine provinces, and this has created a demand for, and fast-tracked the establishment of, Internet and telecommunications services in some geographically remote areas (R. De Chavez, W. Bolinget & A. Anongos, personal communication, April and May, 2011). This is accompanied by a national community telcenter program, which has made Internet kiosks available in different parts of the country, and a rise in local enterprises such as Internet cafes, which have brought access to the Internet in smaller towns. International and local development organizations have also embarked on projects to assist minority communities in using new media technologies. In terms of surveillance or filtering, the OpenNet Initiative reported that “there is no evidence of national filtering” of the Internet in the Philippines (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). However, these same technologies can be used by the military to monitor the so-called enemies of the state, and use the same information for counter-intelligence operations (Magno, 2009).

These findings show that despite some gains and forms of response from the state and openings for political expression, the overt and covert forms of control and repression as well as the sensitive relations between the state and minorities serve as significant grounds for problematizing the condition of minorities in Philippine society, and provide a significant context for understanding the character of their online political mobilization.

Dialectical Tensions of Online Self-Mediation

A variety of online media platforms are now available for ordinary people to express themselves in public, strategically mobilize, and participate in the forms of meaning-making that constitute them (Bakardjieva, 2003; Ginsburg et al., 2002). The many-to-many reach of communication technologies allows marginalized groups to penetrate the scene of politics by broadening the scope of the “political” beyond the nation state and disrupting structures of normalcy and democracy (Dutta, 2011). The absence of mass-media style editorial control also opens up possibilities for new forms of political engagement, giving minorities the opportunity to create new informational resources about their history of grievances, aspirations, and struggles.

However, concern about whether the global character of online media can be used to articulate minority agendas and allow the meaningful production of culture is tied to views that global technologies can challenge, distort, or undermine locality’s production. The pervasiveness of the neoliberal and capitalist logic in technology (Hassan, 2008; Dean, 2002; Armitage, 1999; Ginsburg et al., 2002), coupled by state controls on Internet-mediated activism (Zhou, 2006; Kelly & Eting, 2008; York, 2011) have raised some very crucial questions on the value of the Internet for social change movements from the margins. For example, Hughes and Dallwitz (2007) warned that allowing important cultural material to be publicly accessible on the Internet could pose challenges in restricting access to local cultural knowledge. Others raised concern over activist organizations’ goals being driven by “media-centered political activism” where organizations treat online mediation as the end in itself (Sobieraj, 2012). Moreover, it is important to explore, while presenting the possibilities generated by online articulations, how participatory elements of performance are shaped and influenced within the agendas of dominant institutions (Dutta, 2011, p. 219).

This relationship between new media technologies and participatory practices is captured in the “democratization of technology” and “technologization of democracy” dialectic (Chouliaraki, 2010). Democratization of technology (Hartley, 2010) focuses on the empowering potential of new media technologies for counter-hegemonic, emancipatory practices. Technologization of democracy, on the other hand, addresses self-mediation from the perspective of the regulative potential of
new media technologies in controlling the discourses and in reproducing existing unequal power relations (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 227). It is important to explore minorities’ intention, meaning-making, and negotiations behind such online mediations within the lens of this dialectical tension.

Case Studies

A component of a larger study, the case studies for this chapter, Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) were selected purposively (Yin, 2009, p. 91) based on the legitimacy of the organization (e.g., not fly-by-night), scope of network based on expert interviews and secondary research, online activity, and agreement to participate in the research. Face to face, online, and telephone interviews with organizations’ leaders, information officers, and members, as well as experts and civil society members significantly involved with the group’s activities, were conducted in April and May 2010 and February and May 2011. To triangulate findings from interviews, the form, content, and style of political mobilization in the online spaces were also reviewed and analyzed at three time periods, January to May 2010 (in preparation for and during field interviews), October to December 2010, and May to July 2011. Thematic categories were generated from recurring topics that appeared in both interviews and online spaces (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The case study inquiry relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data converging in a triangulating fashion and benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2009, pp. 15, 101–114). Following Yin’s (2009) methods for case study analysis, these themes were juxtaposed with theoretical propositions concerning minority media culled from earlier literature that were used as bases for possible interpretations (i.e., “propositions” and “rival propositions”). The quoted messages are excerpts of interviews in their original form, except for those that had to be translated from local language.

The CPA, founded in 1984, is a federation of people’s organizations, most of them grassroots-based among the indigenous communities in the Cordillera region of the Philippines. CPA mobilizes “for the defense of ancestral domain and for self-determination” and promotion of social justice and indigenous people’s rights (www.cpaphils.org). CPA was selected for this study because of its activist roots and its strong linkages with other Cordillera civil society and grassroots organizations, having the historical association of leading the indigenous movement. The CPA launched its website in 2004 with assistance from the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. Aside from its website, CPA also maintains an e-group for internal communication (CPA members, personal communication, May 2010, Feb 2011).

The MILF, on the other hand, is considered the biggest organization leading the Muslim minority struggle for self–determination in the Philippines. The group has been engaged in a violent armed conflict with the Philippine military but at the same time it is a major party in the peace negotiations with government. The Moro struggle is rooted in the failure to recognize the Moro people’s entitlement to land (Mindanao) and livelihood resources that they lost through the transmigration of Christians in Mindanao and the establishment of multinational companies in the region. This resettlement policy led to the Moros’ minoritization in Mindanao, where Muslims were reduced from about 75% of Mindanao’s population in the 1900s to 25% in the late 1960s (Rodil, 2004). Aside from dispossession of land and statistical minoritization in Mindanao, the situation of resentment against the Philippine state is caused by the relative poverty of the Muslim dominated provinces vis-à-vis other provinces in the country (Philippine Human Development Network, 2009). To communicate its struggle to a broader audience, MILF launched its main website (www.uwaran.com) in 1998. Now, it maintains four websites. One of these sites is an Arabic website, http://www.Luwaran.net/arabic/, aimed at attracting the sympathy and support of the larger Islamic community. In addition MILF has two active Facebook accounts, and Twitter and MySpace pages which as of July 2011 have no content.
Findings: Strategic Online Activism from the Margins

It will be recalled that some past studies have perceived minority groups to have a lack of control over technology, and therefore potentially to be further marginalized by its use. Based on findings from the case studies, this section discusses the different strategies that foreground strategic online activism from the margins.

Balancing Relevant Modes of Activist Communication Media

Although CPA has computers and a shared wireless connection in its main office in Baguio City, many of its grassroots organizational partners either have no direct access to the Internet, or have to travel significant distances to get it. Given this reality, CPA has clarified the purposes of its online spaces, and how they maintain other relevant forms of communication to reach grassroots members. As many of the organization’s members do not have access to the Internet or need to travel kilometers to access Internet cafés, they retain their offline modes of organizational management and communicating information. They also balance sophistication of site versus ease of access by members with slow connections.

The Internet is just one medium, equal in importance to other media such as print and radio. But because not all our members in the Cordillera can access the Internet; not all the public in the far-flung mountainous communities whom we want to reach through our advocacies and public information campaigns have Internet . . . so we still release our quarterly publications of magazines and newsletters to our local partners. We know that when they see the magazine or newsletter, they immediately read it. When we send the position papers via email, we are not sure if our members will read it . . . in terms of security, for example, in our provinces, if it is really important we still send a hard copy by bus.

CPA leader, personal communication, May, 2010; some phrases translated from Filipino

Like CPA, MILF is also a grassroots organization with most members without access to the Internet. Thus, MILF also targets the mainstream media and international community as the main audience of its online interventions, seeking to draw their attention to MILF’s own version of Moro history and struggle. Using the websites for internationalization is aimed at making their claims more audible and legitimate, bolstering the struggle, and exerting greater pressure to receive more serious attention from important Philippine and international bodies, while also building financial resources. To reach its grassroots members, offline communication and mobilization strategies, which have been the pervasive strategy for the group, are the norm.

Strategizing amidst the Realities of the Socio-Political Environment

My interviews with both CPA and MILF revealed that they plan their online mediations to negotiate technological, state, and capitalist controls. For example, contrary to concerns in the literature that minorities may be unknowingly threatened by the dangers of online mediation (Landzelius, 2006; Ginsburg et al., 2002), CPA and MILF leaders and members appear to have a clear understanding of the varied threats posed by possible government surveillance of their sites, and therefore control the public discussion of sensitive opinion pieces and tactics.

We always assume that our emails are monitored . . . so that is the danger. So in our website, we don’t put everything there. Especially the internal matters not for public consumption, we don’t put them there. We discuss about what we post or upload. Matters that are delicate, we don’t
normally put there. As a political movement, we always assume that our website and emails are monitored. Our landlines and phones are bugged. Because in our experience for the past 26 years many of our members have been abducted . . . the extra judicial killing . . .

*CPA member, personal communication, May, 2010; some phrases translated from Filipino*

Awareness of the dangers of security threats in the online spaces also pushed the groups to strategize resources to minimize such threats, such as disabling interactive forums or chat facilities in their websites. CPA’s members manage the website internally to maintain control over content. Minorities are also not automatically “objectified” by commercial forces as they engage with the online medium. CPA, which has a leftist orientation related to its historical struggle against large-scale mining and capitalist projects in the Cordillera, shared that conscious efforts to veer away from capitalist pulls such as website advertisements are conducted at the expense of not having interactive chat facilities. They also exercised caution over the publication of indigenous knowledge online and had set rules that ritual-based indigenous knowledge must not be published online (for an extensive discussion, see Soriano, 2012).

The MILF, on the other hand, has experienced more explicit instances of “intrusion” in its website, such as the replacement of their banner with photographs of pigs as an insult to their Muslim faith. This compelled them to invest in more secured website hosting services in the United States. The MILF also strategically uses symbolic forms and creative online strategies to communicate particular messages about their struggle given their sensitive relations with the state. For example, the *Luwaran* website banner carries photographs of its past and present leaders to inspire feelings of support from the broader Islamic community of supporters and to chronicle the long history of its struggle. But MILF also shared that it does not publish the photographs of all its leaders in the website:

> For example, we have there the photograph of Salamat Hashim, our deceased former leader. It is about symbolism, the continuity of what the Chairman has started. And also mysticism. In the sense that we do not expose all of our leaders. If you will look at the photographs on top of the banner, those who(m) we already make accessible to the media are there, but there are others who are not exposed. Because although we are engaged in the Peace Process, which is an open engagement, at the same time we also engage in underground operation. Meaning not all of our leaders can be exposed . . . so we cannot put all of our eggs in one basket, otherwise, all of them may break . . . the MILF has that kind of sophistication, which is still a part of the struggle. We need for more and more members and other people to understand the dynamics, the nuances, of the struggle. It’s part of the learning process and also a struggle for us.

*MILF Web Team, Personal communication, some sentences translated from Filipino & local dialect, May 2010*

A MILF leader explained that this is an important strategy because although they are involved in the peace negotiations, which are open engagements, they also conduct underground operations in the armed struggle with the government. In this sense, identifying all their leaders may be risky for their military operations in times of armed conflict. This also implies that despite the expectations that they can seal a workable peace agreement with the government, they continually suspect a possibility of war.

Quotes from MILF’s deceased leader, Hashim Salamat, are also used in the website to enliven the sentiment of Muslim supporters based in the Philippines and globally. According to the historians interviewed for this case study, Salamat is a well-respected leader of the Moro community and a key actor in the internationalization of the Bangsamoro struggle (R. Pandaliday & R. Rodil, personal communication, May 2011 & Oct 2011). Thus, the use of his writings is a strategic move by the MILF web team to elicit both local and international support.
Defining a Unique Identity to Legitimize Political Claims

The CPA recounted the lengthy process of website planning and how members debated on how best to represent the organization’s indigenous identity in the online space. The process of presenting their struggle online aided the organization into determining “what makes them indigenous” and “how to present themselves and their struggles to the general public.” This might be construed as “objectification of culture,” yet CPA explained that articulating their difference as indigenous people is an important way to justify the historical and political basis of their political claims. For example, demanding the protection of their ancestral lands from certain “development projects” can only be explained using the rituals and cultural meanings attached to such lands. As stated within previous research by the author of this chapter (Soriano, 2012), Philippine indigenous organizations’ online experiences reflect a process different from simply buying into the hype of having an online space, involving as it does a careful rethinking of their indigenous identity in the process of articulating their claims in the online medium. Inasmuch as the website “represents” and “constructs” them as a people, it has aided them to recollect from history and from present struggles what elements would constitute this indigenous identity.

Like CPA, crucial in the internationalization of the Bangsamoro struggle through participants’ online spaces is defining a Moro identity distinct from the rest of the Filipinos. MILF members explained that their own communicative space, the website, allows them to overcome the limitations of their lack of control over mainstream media forms. Luwaran, for them, has become an important platform for communicating their alternative version of history of their struggle, and constructing a unique Moro identity:

Luwaran was formed so that it can help achieve the aims of the Bangsamoro struggle. To do this . . . the international community needs to know that there are people in the South of the Philippines that have a different nationality. It is also important for the people of Mindanao to know that they are Bangsamoro. So you have people of Mindanao, that is us; and the people in Mindanao, the Christian settler. We refused to be assimilated. We refused to be integrated because we have our own identity. Now, I believe we are successful . . . that is the international community’s acceptance that we are native inhabitants of Mindanao, that we have a distinct identity of being a Bangsamoro people.

MILF leader, personal communication, May, 2010

This implies assertion of the difference, first in terms of nationality; and at an individual and collective level, in terms of identity. To make the distinction, the Moros emphasize the difference between “people in Mindanao” and the “people of Mindanao.” The MILF explained that it is an important goal for the organization to get others, as well as their own Bangsamoro people, to recognize this distinction as it provides the basis to their ultimate claim for the right to govern themselves, which is also the fundamental consideration in the ongoing peace negotiations with the Philippine government. Like CPA, this assertion of difference is not to “essentialize one’s culture,” but to establish the foundation for the political claims that they make in terms of protection of their right to self-determination. In Philippine discourses, the Moros are considered as Filipinos despite the prejudice that they receive as minorities. In fact, a recognition of “difference” in identity may exist, but commonly for the purpose of casting Muslims in a negative light (e.g. Muslims as violent, or Muslims as robbers) (Jubair, 1999, 2007). With the use of online media, both CPA and MILF are in a better position to defend what they consider their legitimate rights and patrimony.

Countering Prejudice and Building Credibility

Both CPA and MILF admitted the reality of the need to constantly attract external support as national minorities. However, they argue that their clamor for “external support” is not mainly aimed at
generating funds but more on gaining strength through solidarity with like-minded activists and supporters in other parts of the world. Nonetheless, having a website also allows them to establish their credibility as legitimate organizations and build networks while at the same time challenging existing misconceptions. For example, according to a CPA member:

We saw this as a good opportunity for fast networking, for wider projection of our issues and struggles that we cannot do using local newspaper or radio. This allows us to reach international supporters, partners, and other indigenous organizations. That is what drove us to develop and continue this. In networking, we meet people in conferences but there, you can’t talk thoroughly about your struggles. Sometimes, you just exchange cards, or say, ‘please visit our website.’ In the websites, we can share strategies. We also post all our position papers there. It is the same for funders because not all the funders can come over. And if you have a website which is updated, it adds to your credibility as an organization. Because we also want to debunk, as I joked earlier, that misconception, that indigenous peoples are backward as national minorities. That we cannot defend ourselves. That we are left behind. But CPA as a grassroots alliance has disproven that. So even if our website is not that sophisticated, in terms of substance and content, people who visit our website applaud the content because they learn about our struggle more. And of course because they see the website that is updated with rich content, they see that this organization is alive and existing. So their doubts will be allayed that it is not like other fake NGOs.

CPA leader, personal communication, May 2010

Like CPA, the MILF noted that based on its website statistics, they are aware that the international audience, particularly those from the United States and supporters from the Middle East, are visiting their websites. The MILF also emphasized the effort they make in showing through their online spaces that they veer away from terrorism, as the organization seeks the support and assistance of the United States, which played a role in historical roots of the conflict (Soriano & Sreekumar, 2012; Jubair, 2007) in its political negotiations with the Philippine government. As mentioned in an earlier quote, the organization considers as a benchmark of success the assumption that “the distinction [of Bangsamoro from Filipino identity] is recognized by the international community,” regardless of whether the international community is prepared to challenge Philippine national sovereignty. This is with the expectation that internationalization will highlight and legitimize their claims, attract the notice of important Philippine and international bodies, and boost financial resources. The group also ensures that documentation of their meetings with representatives of international organizations is posted in their website to support this “anti-terrorism” position. Considering that Muslims are often treated as a homogeneous entity in Philippine discourses, this effort is also undertaken, they argue, to differentiate themselves from the extremist organization, the Abu Sayyaf Group.

Assessing the Outcomes of Technological Mediation of Activism

Scholars have contended that those critical of strategic communication view all strategic communication as manipulative, although others view it as purposive of achieving specific goals. According to Holtzhausen (2010, p. 75), strategic communication entails an assessment of which strategy is viewed as most effective. During interviews, both organizations shared their assessment of what they considered to be achievements, in terms of internationalizing their struggle, that have encouraged them to continue investing in their website.

As an organization with limited funds, CPA specifically emphasized the importance for them to rationalize the investment they make in terms of funds and human resources by considering what they have achieved with online mediation. Such assessment of the real outcomes of their online
investment is consonant with King’s (2009) conceptualization of emergent communication strategies based on an assessment of audience-response and the overall consequences of communication interventions:

... for example, our campaign against destructive mining has reached the international community and therefore generated much support. The same for our human rights campaign against extra-judicial killings, we used our website to target the international community’s support: NGOs, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, and multilateral bodies like UN agencies or European Union. They received it quickly and their response was fast. In the past, we would fax, or send by post. It can be very costly and time-consuming. The Internet also allowed us to disseminate our appeals to those we don’t expect to reach. So for that issue on extra-judicial killings, regarding our hit list [‘death list’ of CPA members], the forced disappearance of James Balao [CPA member], they all sent a barrage to Malacanang [seat of Philippine Presidency] about the issue. We were able to call Malacanang’s attention and the issue got popularized in mainstream media.

CPA leader, personal communication, May 2010

As members of a national minority, the group emphasized the limited support afforded by government and other local institutions to indigenous causes, making it necessary for them to seek support from and be in solidarity with indigenous communities from outside the nation-state to help them gain the attention of government and mainstream media. According to Dutta (2011), such interventions are crucial because they can facilitate the disruption of the discourses of normalcy, and vital where inability to challenge such discourses perpetuates the maintenance of the status quo. In this instance, Moro and indigenous performances online “disrupt the status quo symbolically” (Dutta, 2011) by situating the dominant rhetoric of democracy and peace beside the lived experience of conflict, encroachment of ancestral lands, prejudice, hunger and marginalization of Moro and indigenous communities. As some of the issues they advance concern multinational companies or government that have significant control of local mainstream media, they consider their online space as their platform for communicating their causes and claims that can reach a broader international audience. However, over time, CPA has also realized that internal organization and coordination could benefit from the online spaces. This has allowed them to save time in terms of having an archive of their statements, history, and position papers that are available for their members and supporters and that they are able to preserve, given the reality of office movement and calamities. The process of online networking also provides them the opportunity to learn about similar issues and strategies from other minority actors in other parts of the globe, attract understanding and support from the external community, and obtain strength through solidarity and belonging with minorities of similar experiences. At the same time, they facilitate the production of their own resources as well as archives of statements and histories that they intend to pass on to inspire future struggles.

Summary

The Internet is providing opportunities for minority groups such as CPA and MILF to construct public spaces online, an opportunity for expression by groups of people who have experienced colonization and marginalization from various media forms. A privileged knowledge of these organizations’ meaning-making surfaces the rationale of their strategies for using online spaces to advance their particular political goals in light of the realities of their condition as minorities. Although their online spaces can be viewed publicly, these strategies are often invisible to the uninformed. The organizations’ online spaces, as a component of their broader political communication strategy, serve as their platform for narrating their own version of their history, present discourses alternative
to those offered by government, and reach out to a broader, global audience for support. Yet, as online spaces are considered public spaces and are possibly under surveillance, the crafting of purpose, cautious negotiation of the risks and possibilities of technology, assessment of what aspects of information to make public, and embedding of symbolic messages under the blanket of ambiguity, are key to the groups’ strategic communication.

**Discussion and Conclusion: Online Strategic Communication from the Margins**

Many previous studies on the “democratization of technologies” have focused on overt forms of online activism, or Internet-mediated political engagements of prominent activists. Similarly, many studies on strategic communication focus on observable strategies and well-planned and organized action. However, there are subtle nuances in the conditions underlying minority groups’ online political mobilization—particularly those situated in developing country contexts—that help expand the way strategic communication can be understood. These conditions include not only the dialectical tensions involved in Internet-mediated engagements, but also the tension between the political openings and subtle controls of the state and capital. In the midst of these dialectical tensions, it is important to think analytically about how minority groups’ experiences of online media engagement constitute strategic communication. This exploration of the meaning-making of the purposes and strategies of two particular minority groups’ online spaces has surfaced the following foci for thoughts on strategic activism for democratization and social change: (a) balancing relevant modes of activist communications media, (b) defining a unique identity to legitimize political claims, (c) countering prejudice and building credibility, (d) strategizing amidst the realities of the socio-political environment, and (e) assessing the outcomes of technological mediation.

First, the Internet is viewed as most useful for publicity, image-building, and networking with Internet-connected local and international organizations. In interactions with local networks that are highly grassroots-based the minority groups in this study still rely on more relevant media such as face-to-face, print, radio, and telephone communication. This implies that, for minority groups, to communicate strategically is to be adept at engaging tools relevant for reaching particular audiences and using online media to complement traditional, effective modes of communication.

Second, the organizations’ use of online spaces is strongly driven by a need to assert their unique identities, which allows them to emphasize the historical and political basis of their political claims as minorities.

Third, strategic communication entails the re-construction of the organizations’ maligned identities and the articulation of alternative versions of history that work alongside their efforts to build their credibility as legitimate political actors. In the process, they use the online spaces to construct their identities while challenging prejudiced representations and misconceptions about them as minorities. As the groups developed the content for their online space, they realized that having websites also functions to challenge dominant stereotypes of minorities as “backward,” or as “terrorists.”

Fourth, minorities employ symbolic and creative strategies to communicate political messages while circumventing the limits of socio-political conditions of their minoritization. Some of their political acts may be concealed; still minorities communicate important messages to their target audience. Covert political action does not invalidate such articulations, which communicate important meanings concerning minorities’ engagement with technology, their view of the controls and forces surrounding technology, and their use of technology to achieve political goals in light of structures and conditions of use. Such strategies create new dimensions in understanding strategic communication and technological possibilities for actors from the margins.
Finally, the experiences of these minority groups in using online media for activism imply that strategic communication can be rethought from being a purposive form of communication predetermined by organizations in accordance with set goals, towards one that arises out of practice. Here we find strategic communication to be of a more emergent (King, 2009) and dynamic nature, as it develops with a continued engagement and reflection by the actors of the implications of technology use for the group and the struggle. The organizations have pre-set purposes for particular communication strategies, yet such purposes developed over time. The decision of the indigenous and Moro organizations to continue with the use of the online space also developed after these groups learnt how to negotiate technological engagement. The two case studies also show the ways in which both the organizations achieved organizational growth through their online experiences. The online spaces primarily target the broader projection of the organizations’ issues to their international audiences, in order to internationalize their struggle and solicit support. Over time, the spaces have generated archives, ‘screen memories’, to borrow from Ginsburg et al., (2002), which document not only the groups’ histories, but also the development of their political struggle and position statements, and records of their activities over time. Although they remain cautious about its possible dangers, the groups have learnt to manage their use of technology in ways that can help to construct their identity, build solidarity, and strengthen their impact. This shows that online discourse can also shape practice, and that being able to communicate strategically not only works to influence others, but also may change the organization itself. If strategic communication is focused only on well-planned, purposive strategies of business, government, or well-resourced civil society organizations, a range of possibilities for strategic activism and communicative action in light of unique socio-political and technological circumstances can be neglected. An exploration of the experiences in marginalized contexts can inspire a rethinking of what constitutes strategic communication.

Fraser (1990) argued that minorities are important in balancing the views within any rational critical discourse, and that encountering new opinions would encourage people to rethink their views, reconsider their biases and predilections, and foster reflection and understanding. However, the circuits, reach, and interpretations of online messages are unpredictable, and the posts can also be used by antagonists to reinforce prejudices, further segregate minorities, and nullify the seriousness of their demands (Bailey & Harindranath, 2006). Furthermore, uncontrolled exchanges can expose the organizations’ competing ideologies, covert operations, or internal conflicts. Thus, marginal groups will continue to navigate the multiple challenges and possibilities of online media, create their own screen memories, negotiate their political voice, construct their struggles, and define themselves in the online platform. In the context of minority online political mobilization, communicating strategically entails a continuing balancing act between the challenges and opportunities posed by online mediation.

References


