

# 'Smart mobs' everywhere

*The internet, email, text messaging – it's never been easier for groups to gather and communicate. Yet the networking that goes on in organisations is often frowned upon rather than encouraged. Dr Leandro Herrero takes a different view*

**T**he year: 2002. The place: the Philippines. A million Filipinos are in the streets, exhibiting curious behaviour. They are sending text messages to each other by cellphone. It looks like a cellphone addiction epidemic but it's not. In fact they are toppling the government of President Estrada by organising massive demonstrations, moving from one place to another, confusing the police and other government forces as much as they can.

The government succeeded in controlling TV and radio but didn't think of the cellphone network. Estrada was history.

In March of the same year in Mumbai, India, the authorities were more astute and disabled the phone network's SMS (short message system) service to avoid the organisation of illegal demonstrations and reduce social unrest.

When Geneva hosted the G8 summit, the city expected up to 300,000 demonstrators. There were plenty of rumours that the cellphone network would be cut off if demonstrators got out of control. The rumours prompted a pre-emptive response from the

operators, who said they had no intention of disabling the network "unless under direct orders from the police". Anti-globalisation demonstrations in Seattle followed similar patterns. And Japanese teenagers seem to lead the world in the fast organisation and reorganisation of spontaneous meetings at the command of text messages.

This phenomenon of 'spontaneous organisation', relying heavily on communication devices, has been described by

Howard Rheingold as 'smart mobs' ('Smart Mobs', Perseus, 2002, and [www.smartmobs.com](http://www.smartmobs.com)) and the term is rapidly becoming a buzzword.

It used to be that one could predict the progression of 'technology adoption'. Not many of our parents knew what a home computer was, few of them got to send emails, and fewer still understood the internet. Our children think a keyboard is something you have in the house like spoons or toilet paper. Desktop computers and their laptop sisters are part of the furniture, so we assume the next generation will learn to play

with them very quickly. Actually, they may bypass them totally in favour of finger gymnastics with cellphones and small wireless devices like PDAs.

Smart mobs as a concept is a cousin of 'swarming', a term borrowed from biology and now applied to human social behaviour. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, a swarm is a cluster of bees leaving the hive with the queen to establish a new colony. It's also a large number of insects or birds moving in a cluster and a large group of people moving or filling a large area. It's also often synonymous with the words 'crowded' and 'infested' – "The place was swarming with tourists". (The borrowing of concepts is nothing new in social sciences!)

'Swarm' and 'swarming' as explanations of human social phenomena describe the power of 'spontaneous association' by people, from a small group to a crowd, with the effect being easily multiplied. Kevin Kelly of *Wired* magazine, says: "What emerges from the collective is not a series of critical individual actions but a multitude of simultaneous actions whose collective pattern is far more important. This is the swarm model."

The term 'swarming tactics' has been used to describe not only the demonstration activities and social unrest referred to above, but also the collective behaviour of teenagers out clubbing on a Saturday night, and organised crime in Sao Paulo. In other words, people talking to each other in real time, relying heavily on technology – cellphone and other means – grouping, regrouping, multiplying the number of instructions being sent, creating the ability to gather quickly at a meeting-place, even if there was no previous knowledge of where that might be. That's social swarming and they are smart mobs.

There is also a whole new understanding of warfare using this model. The way guerrilla tactics work, a network of enemies moving from one place to another, or a terrorist organisation, can be explained via the biology of bees plus social dynamics theory. The RAND Corporation has a collection of public documents on 'new warfare' and 'theory of conflict' based on these principles. Of course, cellphones get more and more sophisticated. They can send pictures and send and receive information from the internet. Networks of people can therefore use a 'fast-moving' website to log data; to see what's happening in a 'cell territory' ('weblogging'); and to retrieve information. If this is done by a big group ('moblogging'), there are permanent and real-time places in cyberspace to refer to. You've seen it in the news, mainly around anti-globalisation demonstrations, where police monitor specific websites – the content of which changes by the minute – for indications of social unrest.

You don't even have to have your laptop with you to tap into that place in cyberspace. Any internet-enabled device will do, including a cell-

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phone. Also, you'll find more and more wireless places where you can link to a network: coffee shops, schools, hotels, community centres. Accessing the internet from a small hand-held device is not science fiction any more.

Edge ([www.edge.org](http://www.edge.org)), an organisation set up to "promote inquiry into, and discussion of, intellectual, philosophical, artistic and literary issues, as well as to work for the intellectual and social achievement of society", summarises key aspects of the smart mobs phenomenon:

"Communication and computing technologies capable of amplifying human cooperation already appear to be both beneficial and destructive, used by some to support democracy and by others to coordinate terrorist attacks. There are both dangers and opportunities posed by this emerging phenomenon. The people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. Their mobile devices connect them with other information devices as well as with other people's telephones. RAND Corporation analysts have pointed out that the Russian mafia and Colombian narcotics trafficking enterprises use 'netwar' methods combining communication networks, social networks, and networked forms of organisation. Just as medicine only became an effective weapon against illness when science furnished useful knowledge about the nature of diseases, the most effective use of communication and computer technologies could emerge from new scientific understandings of human cooperation. The most powerful opportunities for human progress are rooted not in electronics but in understandings of social practices. Sociologists, political scientists, evolutionary biologists, even nuclear warfare strategists have contributed the first clues that an interdisciplinary science of cooperation might be emerging."

What do teenagers in party mode, anti-globalisation demonstrators, social activists, bees, 21st century terrorism, Colombian cartel-like tactics and the fall of a government in the Philippines have in common, or what can they teach us? The key combination (with the exception of the bees, who only lent us the language) is one of spontaneous association plus the pervasive technology of mobile communications and the internet. There is very little design in the 'structure', other than the call to arms or mobilisation and the reliance on progressive association (grouping and regrouping) via information networks created by possessing a communications device.

The lessons for business organisations are multiple, but we have just begun to understand the extrapolations. For example, business organisations are largely designed. That is, we have organisation charts, people in place who report to somebody, groups, teams and taskforces. The idea is to have a rational distribution of labour, accountabilities, and a maximisation of the chance of success by setting common goals for people who work together. Fine.



We haven't even started to think, let alone uncover and discover the power of the non-designed associations within the firm, those internal smart mobs that get together using internal communication channels. The closest thing we have are 'communities of practices' or 'communities of interests', where a group of people network informally in pursuit of a common goal. Even these are too static and formal: they have a beginning, a semi-official birth, and an end, the common goal. It makes them far more agile and dynamic than many formal teams but, by definition, they are not ephemeral.

At any point in time, networks of people inside the firm are talking to each other. They ask questions, check on data, enquire about who knows what, or share common complaints. In a dynamic view of the organisation, that flow of information and knowledge is moving all the time, changing shape and volume, content and direction, plot and characters. A snapshot of this hidden organisation (or meta-organisation) would tell you more about the real life of the firm than 20 organisation charts. There is technology today that allows you to visualise that network of connections in real life and real time. You could tap into your internal smart mobs at any time if you could have access to that data. Not so long ago, the only way to detect that hidden network of connections (the 'who-is-talking-to-whom-about-what' data) was to do a social network analysis (SNA) study. That would have given you a real map of the real 'knowledge organisation'. It was a great idea (pursued by only a few and largely unknown to management), but still rather static. You needed to ask the questions and do the study. By the time this was done (even if you could do it in hours) the result was already old. Today we have ways to access real time maps of information traffic, and so infer knowledge networks.

If we could master the incredibly powerful internal dynamics of 'emergent' (as opposed to 'by design') knowledge, we would be tapping into a rich vein. But is mastering the wrong word? The trouble with successful 'spontaneous' associations is that the 'designed structure' acts as a shark: it wants to swallow them by converting them into 'a

Ten heads are better than one.

Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

team' or 'a community of practice'. And this is like signing a death warrant. Like the smart mobs in the streets, their internal networks are not interested in being labeled and given a timeframe. The moment spontaneity is compromised, they will hide.

So what's the answer? Strictly speaking: leave them alone. Watch, take note, interpret, but don't interfere. Acknowledge their presence and facilitate the connections by allowing the use of technology already in the firm. This will not satisfy many. In the classical model of a business organisation, there is no room for these 'unmanageable' things that don't add value to the bottom line. Smart mobs concepts would contradict this.

Business thinking needs a major reshuffle and an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the real organisation. On that journey, I can see one big casualty: knowledge management, and 'return on investment on knowledge'. Maybe knowledge, real knowledge, can't be managed. Maybe organisations also follow Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle on sub-atomic particles (the more precisely the position is determined, the less precisely the momentum is known). In other words, if you try to assess something you have already modified it – simplistic translation acknowledged. But that's a topic for another day.

At the end of May, according to the UK press, thousands of employees at a UK insurance company

were informed they had been made redundant via SMS and voicemail. One daily newspaper, *The Independent*, wrote: "Thousands of insurance staff were sacked by text messages today. The bulk of the 2,500 jobs were at the Manchester-based personal injury claims firm, The Accident Group. Today, employees at the firm, which in the past has been accused of aggressive selling methods, were told of their fate by a text message with a number to ring at head office. An answer machine message from administrators PricewaterhouseCoopers said: "All staff who are being retained will be contacted today. If you have not been spoken to you are therefore being made redundant with immediate effect." It added: "Unfortunately there are effectively no funds available to pay the salaries for May."

Death by SMS – or at least the first known case of 'e-firing'. It's all change. You ain't seen nothing yet!

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