

Fear of txt

Hugh Tobin

'Come on down to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge. This Sunday every Aussie in the shire get down to North Cronulla to support the Leb and wog bashing day...'

—SMS circulated before the Cronulla riots

Stranded at sea off the coast of Bali in February 2001, Rebecca Fyfe sent her boyfriend in England a text message asking for help. 'Call Falmouth Coastguard, we need help—SOS'. As her group of 14 bailed water from their sinking vessel, Rebecca's boyfriend contacted the UK Coastguard who organized for an Indonesian gunboat to rescue the tourists. Rebecca and her friends were no doubt more than happy when the gunboat rescued them—even though it was a day late after being held up by bad weather. In 2003, Abdel Salam Mohammad Darwash was not so patient when his wife was late to meet him, sending her a text message that read 'Why are you late? You are divorced.' A Dubai court later ruled that the divorce was valid.

By the end of this year, people around the world will have sent more than 500 billion text messages. Divorce by SMS is just one example of a new wave of 'anti-social' messages and behaviours being facilitated by text messages. Terrorists are using text messages to organize attacks and detonate bombs. Strangers are text messaging each other and then meeting for unprotected sex in public parks. Young hooligans are loitering in streets on Saturday nights waiting for text messages that notify them of parties they can crash. Meanwhile, people are being textually

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harassed and some text message bullying amongst teenagers has been linked to severe depression and, in at least one case, suicide.

In December last year, it even seemed that SMS was to blame for the violence in Cronulla. 'SMS fuels race riots' stated the headline of a Sydney Morning Herald piece. The NSW Government responded to the Cronulla riots by introducing powers for police to search people and confiscate their phones without a warrant, similar to laws allowing police to search for weapons such as knives and guns. This was an unnecessary knee-jerk reaction to events that were fuelled by racism, not by technology. Sure, people circulated text messages in the lead-up to the Cronulla riots which urged racial attacks, but they also used talkback radio, the Internet, telephones and e-mails. It was not SMS which created the strong racist feelings in the community, it merely communicated them.

It might be in the national interest to pass laws allowing police to confiscate mobile phones from at least one member of the Australian cricket team.

It is interesting to look back at history and consider that some of the technologies we now take for granted were initially treated with suspicion. Trains were originally speculated to cause nervous disorders, and Thomas Edison and others spent considerable time trying to conquer the public's initial fear of electricity. Many people originally believed that if a household switch was left on, for example, that electricity would leak out of the empty socket and be dangerous. It will be interesting to see in a hundred years how we look back on a 2004 UK report which



blamed the growth of text messaging for an increase in the divorce rate, because it supposedly made it easier for people to have affairs. Or the claim in the Indian Times earlier this year that the intrusion of the mobile phone into the bedroom is interfering with the frequency with which couples have sex.

Survey results such as these are more often than not the product of technophobia. There seems to be a misguided fear that with every invention we move a step closer to the enslavement of humans to technology, as if freedom and technology cannot co-exist. Technological advances, in themselves, do not result in more dangerous social problems. We should not fear more advanced technologies, but only those who would try to restrain their use.

Although it might be in the national interest to pass laws allowing police to search and confiscate mobile phones from at least one member of the Australian cricket team, for the rest of us we have as much to fear from the text message as the train or the electric switch. From sending patients reminders to take their medication, to police SMS bombing stolen phones, to electronic voting, the possibilities for this technology are only just being realized.

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