

# ON LINE *opinion* - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate

## TXTNG - new language - new literacy

By Dale Spender

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In little more than a decade, mobile phones have transformed our lives. Young people can't live without them: their mobiles are grafted on to their finger-tips: only adults ever "forget" to take their mobiles with them.

Mobile phones have created countless possibilities for instant communication; they have constructed a networked society. And they have brought with them new customs, conventions and criticisms.

This change in communication, in social and language patterns, has happened so quickly that some members of the community have not been able to keep up: some (understandably) want all the noise and interruptions - and pointless contacting and messaging - to just go away. Some think that the mobile phone is ushering in the end of civilisation.

There is probably more antagonism towards the mobile phone and txtng than there is to any other new literacy. This could be because it impacts on the mature generation (particularly teachers and parents). The mobile phone and txtng is an ever present reality - and interruption - in daily life, whereas the internet does not intrude on the street, in public transport, at the movies, or around the dinner table.

### Urban myths

Many are the protests about txtng, and many of the protesters are outraged and angry. And there are protests from all manner of people: parents, teachers, politicians, through to the measured tones of BBC commentators - **such as John Humphrys**:

*... Texters are vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences: raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.*

Urban myths abound to support this stand. In the media, in educational circles in social contexts, the following claims are made.

- txtng fogs your brain like cannabis;
- it replaces speech among teenagers;
- it reduces literacy capacity; and
- it deprives children of sleep

The eminent linguist David Crystal has written a fascinating book on the topic of texting, *txtng - the gr8 db8*, and is somewhat mystified by such extreme responses:

*Has there ever been a linguistic phenomenon which has aroused such curiosity, suspicion, fear, confusion, antagonism, fascination, excitement and enthusiasm, all at once? And in such a short space of time? Less than a decade ago, hardly anyone had heard of it? (p3)*

### Media beat-ups

Many of the language and literacy controversies around the *new* literacies are a media beat-up. Clearly, there are members of the community who are uneasy with *any* changes in language and learning and the media often "fan the flames" of resistance.

Issues about children becoming hyperactive, about cyber bullying, and the growing rate of print illiteracy - all as a result of txtng - have been exploited by various newspapers and TV programs. And much of this information in the media has little substance.

One significant example of this was when the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK reported that a teenage student had handed in her school essay - in txt! And this was causing grave concern among teachers: "I could not believe what I was seeing. The page was riddled with hieroglyphics, many of which I simply could not translate," the teacher said.

But when researchers tried to trace the essay and its author there were more than a few difficulties. The "original" could not be found (David Crystal, p24). When "a text" was finally produced, David Crystal comments that it had more in common with poetry than the usual form of txtng: and was very much a work of art rather than a careless dashed off exercise:

*My summr hols wr CWOT. B4. We used 2go2 NY 2C my bro, his GF &thr 3 :-@ kids FTF.  
ILNY, it's a gr8 plc*

Translated:

*My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girl friend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It's a great place.*

If a student did write such an essay David Crystal would give her top marks for creativity - but not so many marks for a suitable response to a school assignment. In its coverage of the scandalous text message assignment, the *Daily Telegraph* also quoted Judith Gillespie, a member of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council: she told the newspaper that there was a decline in grammar and written English and that it was partly linked to the text messaging craze. "Pupils think orally and write phonetically," she said. Again, without any evidence offered by the newspaper.

Sensationalist stories like these in the media add to the general belief that there is a drop in educational standards, when there is no supporting evidence. According to John Sutherland (in "Cn u txt?" *Guardian Unlimited*, November 11, 2002): "Texting ... masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness, ... it's for illiterates."

It is also supposed to fog your brain, reduce your communication ability, and add to stress levels.

Yet David Crystal, who has undertaken one of the few serious studies of txtng, confidently states that "all the popular beliefs about texting are wrong" (p9).

## Making text messages

Text messaging is a language created by the young. No mobile phone providers predicted the huge take up there would be partly because, to start with, only 20 characters were available, and the screens were small. But these factors were a challenge rather than obstacles to the net generation who worked out it was much cheaper to text than call.

The txt language that young people invented was an "elegant" solution: it was playful, creative, fast and fun. It was also simple: it combined imagination and practicality. In many respects txtng is not unlike the "shorthand" of an earlier period, which of course was regarded as a useful, sophisticated and *payable* skill rather than an assault on the language.

Txtng has helped create the networked society; it is one of the most popular ways of keeping in touch.

Parents think it necessary for children to have phones as a safety measure. Children think elderly parents should have mobiles so they aren't isolated. Bosses think workers need them so they can be contacted.

Sisters going shopping need them to keep track of each other in the store. Anyone in a relationship needs them for reassurance.

In a world where the old communities of neighbourhood, interest and workplace have often disappeared, txtng is at the centre of virtual communities that are very real - particularly to the young.

## The poetry of the text

Rather than discredit this new literacy, the linguist David Crystal is quick to praise it as an excellent means of 21st century communication: he also insists that txtng has great literary merit.

In 2002 at the beginning of the txt revolution the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, held a txtng poetry competition. The rules stated that the poem had to stay within the 160 characters of the mobile phone screen. And the first most amazing thing to happen was that there were 7,500 entries.

The second amazing thing was that so many entries were so good. The judges were all well known poets and they were very impressed. And they didn't need translators to help them decode the poetic contributions.

*txtn iz messin  
mi headn'me englis  
try2rite essays  
they all come out txtis  
gran not plsed w/letters she's getn  
swears i wrote better  
b4 comin2uni  
&she's African*

**Further examples** of the literary potential of txtng are also readily available in Japan where novel reading (and writing) on mobile phones is extremely popular. So successful are these original txt forms that they have been transferred to the page. Japan's best seller list is now dominated by books that were txts on mobile phones! The "chapters" take about three minutes to read - "the typical time between stops on the Japanese subway".

These txt works are not the products of illiterate people who don't know how to use the language - quite the contrary. The poems with their 160 characters are as appropriate and creative for txt messaging as 14-line sonnets were in the leisurely 19th century! The txt novels in Japan are as creative and entertaining as were Dickens' novels in the new industrial society.

So what is it exactly that people get so hot under the collar about?

## Educational objections

### Standards

Gloom and doom educational commentators are among those who want to ban txtng on the grounds that it degrades literature and fosters illiteracy. Kevin Donnelly, for example, routinely speaks out against the new genres that he insists are undermining educational standards

In a discussion on ABC radio with me he was very much against texting on the grounds that you couldn't teach Shakespeare with text messages. This came as a shock as I wondered why on earth you would consider teaching Shakespeare with text messages when there is such a rich amount of material available. But I have since reconsidered.

Schools everywhere are trying to bring Shakespeare to life in contemporary classrooms and there has been a growing interest in him as modern writer: there is the Hip Hop Shakespeare competition (in

conjunction with the BBC) and enthusiasts are asking: “If Shakespeare were alive today - would he be a rapper?”

One excellent response comes in the form of “**Macbeth rap**”: it’s a great video, and there are countless others that are guaranteed to send previously disengaged students off to create rap scripts on their computers (text, music, cut and paste etc).

But maybe we should also ask: would Shakespeare have been a txter?

Even if students concluded that Shakespeare translated more readily into Hip Hop and rap rather than txt messaging they would still be exploring the new literacies and testing their limits. And far from being evidence of their inability to work with the language, such creative uses of the old and the new genres would expand their insights and understandings - and their use of the full range of literacies.

Who knows - they may prove to be as creative with Shakespearean text as they were with the mobile text. 2 b or not 2 b!

### **The end of spelling**

Many critics who argue that txtng undermines or destroys spelling are ignoring the basic patterns of language change. Language has always been modified to make processing simpler and “faster” (a growing pressure in the information age): we don’t get the same media moans over CSIRO, VIP, NY, BBC, UNICEF, and so on, that are part of our everyday world.

There are no headline stories about the way the use of ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) or Mrs (Mistress) is impacting on spelling. It cannot be said that those who txt can’t spell any more than it could be said that those who use shorthand can’t spell. Formal spelling is one code, txtng is another! Both are based on symbols standing for words. And while formal spelling may have been an asset in a print-based society, shortened versions are perfectly suitable in a digital one.

Besides spelling errors are much more likely to be present in handwriting than txt messages as most modern phones have spell check.

And as for the claims that txtng makes it impossible to understand the message - the txt can speak for itself:

*f u cn rd ths thn wats the prblm*

### **Abbreviations, initials, acronyms**

This is another source of irritation to those who find it difficult to appreciate the value of txtng or to decode txt messages. They themselves may be able to write their own traditional abbreviations - Mrs, Mr, Dr (to name but a few) - but they object in principle to any new forms.

Likewise they may each day use GFC (Girls Friendly Society?) CBA, ABC, am or pm - or even VIP or RIP without even noticing the abbreviation. These contracted forms become the symbol or the code - just as txt does.

Txtng is an advantage in today’s world; it lends itself enormously to this established practice of using the first letter of a word or phrase as an abbreviation, particularly at the professional level.

*DG of QH reporting to CMC on PHC in NQ*

*(Director General of Queensland Health reporting to the Crime and Misconduct Commission on Primary Health Care in North Queensland)*

These uses of language forms have been around as long as people have been writing and the objection is

usually not to the form - the abbreviations and acronyms - but to the fact *they are new*, and often outside the experience of those who are annoyed by them:

LOL - laughing out loud  
AAMOF - as a matter of fact  
ASLMH - age sex location music hobbies  
g2g - got to go  
HAGN - have a good night  
CWOT - complete waste of time  
GF - girlfriend  
DL - download  
OMG - Oh my God

The creators of these new forms use all the symbols available to them - and they have been highly inventive with punctuation forms to indicate emotion. Punctuation, per se - like the apostrophe - is on its way out!

:) smile  
;-) wink  
:-@ screaming  
(\*o\*) surprised  
(^\_^) cute

## New literacies for new times

None of these adaptations of language are new although the particular examples might not previously have been in daily use. They are an expansion of the repertoire: new literacies for new times. And educators would be better served by treating txtng as a serious literary/language form and by studying its potential and limitations.

Such study would be far more engaging and relevant than the constant carping that txtng is vandalism, the mark of the illiterate, and a pernicious way of undermining standards.

## The new book bag

Some educators are aware of the valuable contribution that txtng (and the mobile phone) can make to teaching and learning and are even calling it the new book bag.

Far from undermining literacy, **studies demonstrate** that txtng is linked positively with achievements in literacy - particularly for those who have been disenchanted with the old forms. And Melbourne University has found that for some students who find writing difficult, txtng can lead to enthusiasm for learning and improved literacy.

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