

Week 6

Mediated Communication



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

From cartoonbank.com

Question: Consider the extent to which different electronic communication technologies such as email, SMS, social networking spaces like Facebook and Twitter merely replace traditional forms of communication. Do they change the nature of the communication experience?

'A...

Los Angeles Times

'Excellent. Crystal presents a compelling argument in favour of texting as a force for linguistic ability.'

The Times

'It's a work that needed to be written. It's wholly persuasive in its arguments.'

New York Post

'Wise, engagingly written, informative book.'

Daily Mail

'David Crystal takes on the h8ers who want to know why kids these days are too lazy to use vowels.'

NPR

David Crystal is the best-selling author of *Words, Words, Words* and *The Fight for English: How Language Fundits Ate, Shot, and Left*.

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DAVID CRYSTAL

'Compelling' *The Times*

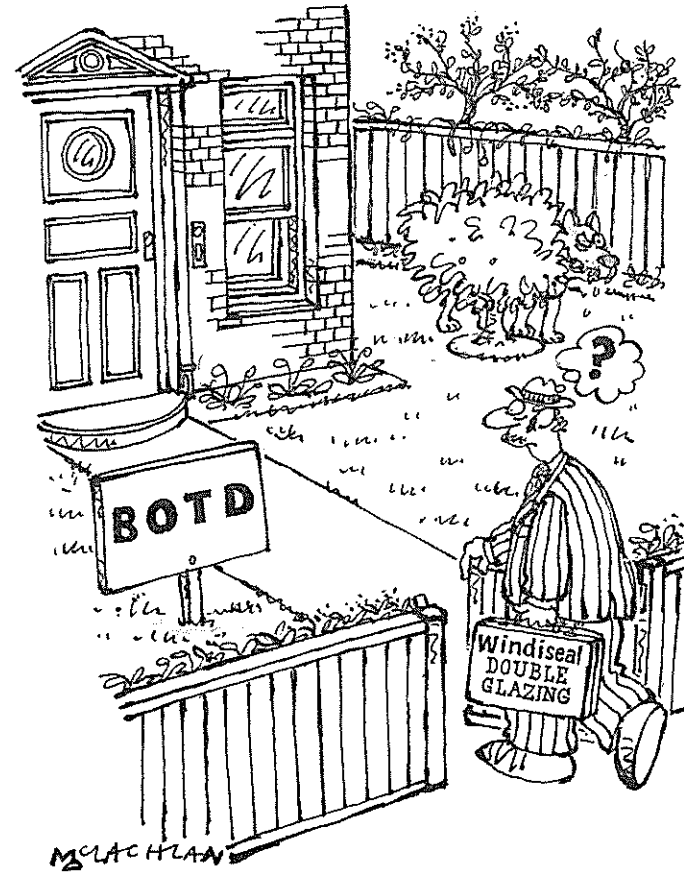
Txtng

CTIA – the International Association for the Wireless Industry – records that 158 billion text messages were sent in the USA in 2006, a 95 per cent increase over the previous year. It concludes: ‘America is in the midst of text messaging mania’.¹³

¹³ <http://www.ctia.org/consumer_info/safety/index.cfm/AID/10672>

CHAPTER 6

What do they text about?



WHAT ARE PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT when they send text messages to each other? This sounds like an easy question to answer, but it is in fact very difficult, because texting data is very difficult to get hold of. Would you let me see the messages you send and receive? I have asked many people, and most give me a knee-jerk negative reaction. I had already encountered resistance when collecting email and chatroom data for my *Language and the Internet*, but people were far more reluctant to let me see their texts. It was as if I had asked them for a window into their most intimate world.

There is an additional problem over the messages you receive. It wouldn't be ethical for me to use those messages without obtaining the permission of the senders, and how is *that* to be arranged? Moreover, if I am doing some work on the age, gender, and social background of texters, how am I to get hold of such information? I would have to ask you to interrogate your senders about these things – and that in itself is a time-consuming and possibly sensitive business. It is easy to see how texters might be reluctant to cooperate with researchers, once they realize the problems.

Then there are the practical problems. Do you keep a copy of the messages you send and receive? Even if your phone has plenty of storage space, the ephemeral content of most messages makes it unlikely that you will keep them for long. And even if you do, how can I, as a researcher, get at them without causing you

unacceptable levels of interference? If I ask you to transcribe them for me, will you do this honestly (without filtering out some intimate or risqué details) and will you be able to do it accurately? Will you be sure to keep the messages exactly as they are, with all their abbreviations and errors? And if, to avoid these problems, I asked you to set up some sort of auto-forwarding system to my computer, would you be happy for this to happen, so that I see everything? And finally, even if these problems are solved, will I be able to understand the messages you give me? They will, after all, be part of an exchange with someone about subject-matter to which I am not privy (p. 52).

Nonetheless, researchers have been able to make useful collections of texting data between individuals, where even a small corpus of a few hundred messages can demonstrate interesting linguistic patterns. For example, Richard Ling's study, referred to on page 90, confirmed several impressions about the linguistic character of text messages:

- Their brevity: if we divide messages into those containing a single sentence or clause ('simple'), and those containing more than one ('complex'), we find that two-thirds of all text messages are simple.
- Their nonstandard orthography: around 82 per cent of all messages had no capitalization at all; 11 per cent had only the first letter of the text capitalized;

and only 7 per cent had more complex capitalization (e.g. using capitals in names and at the beginning of follow-up sentences).

- Their distinct epistolary status: only about 10 per cent of messages had an opening salutation (e.g. *Hi, John, J*) or a closing farewell (e.g. *Bye, xxx, Dave*), and most of these were the simplest possible, such as a single letter or an emoticon.
- Their lack of abbreviations: only about 6 per cent used abbreviated forms of any kind, regardless of age and gender.

Plainly, if most texts are single sentences, and the average length is around six words (p. 91), the routine content of text messages must be pretty limited, concentrating on everyday and largely ephemeral notions of who, what, where, and when (rather than on more profound and long-lasting explorations of how and why). But within this limitation, texts perform a wide range of social and informational functions.

Social functions

All kinds of social relationships can be fostered or disturbed using texting, from the mildest of observations to the strongest of affirmations. People can send messages of support, sympathy, variants on 'missing you', variants on 'get well soon', a request for a call, a

desire to be friends . . . It can be a message reflecting the time of day – a good morning or a good night. It can be a quotation or other remark which simply affirms a shared interest. Exchanging personal news and gossip is as important here as anywhere else. Greetings, such as for a birthday or a religious feastday, are ideally suited to the brevity of a text message. Some industry surveys suggest that as many as a quarter of all text messages fall into this category. Incidence varies with time of year. On New Year's Day in 2007, a new record was set for daily text messages in the UK: 214 million.

By no means all social messages are positive. The system is just as able to send insults, put-downs, accusations, and libels, and a great deal of concern has been expressed about the way texting has been used as a mechanism of bullying among young people. Several cases of text-stalking and harassment have been reported. And at least one study, by Bella Elwood-Clayton, has reported how texting can be used as 'a form of artillery in personal combats'.¹ Many of her Philippines informants commented on how easy it was to quarrel by text.

Slowly, as a need becomes apparent, help becomes available. An interesting development was reported in 2006 by the Samaritans, who had spent some years looking into young people's use of texting. They

¹ Bella Elwood-Clayton, 'Desire and loathing in the cyber Philippines', in R. Harper, L. Palen, and A. Taylor (eds.), *The Inside Text: Social, Cultural and Design Perspectives in SMS* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 197.

found that 94 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds sent personal text messages, and these were beginning to come through to their centres. Their official statement gave one illustration:²

Feel so down n don't know who 2 turn 2. Don't think I cn cope anymore cos things at home are realy getin 2 me. Plz help cos I don't know what 2 do.

Their volunteers are now ready to receive messages by text and are trained to respond to them in the same way. The official statement went on:

Volunteers have received training in the reading of 'abbreviated text language' but all replies from Samaritans will be in full spelling, except for when using small or clearly recognised abbreviations.

And one of the volunteers is quoted as saying:

I had thought that text messaging would be an impoverished version of email. It isn't. It is closer to a phone call with more interactions than email. It goes at a slower pace than a phone call but it is a rich medium that gives us a new way of interacting with callers.

Text messaging has a huge potential for offering help and advice. Parents in particular are gradually coming

² <http://www.samaritans.org/know/pressoffice/news/2006/news_250406_popup.shtm>

to realize that texting can actually help them in their role, if they adopt it. An American survey carried out for Mediathink in 2006 found that 63 per cent of parents who text believed that it improved their communication with their child.³ A similar comment is made below from Japan. And several new ideas have been implemented. For example, 2006 saw the launch in the USA of the PRMTXT Campaign, for parents concerned about their teenagers getting drunk at a student prom (the formal high-school or college dance, held towards the end of an academic year). They visit www.prmtxt.org to register their child's cell-phone number, the date of the prom, and their zip code. On the prom night, the teen receives a message: 'Have fun 2night. Stay safe. Don't drink. Luv u.' The message can be customized with the name of a particular person. It is one of several texting initiatives being promulgated by CTIA, the US-based International Association for the Wireless Industry.⁴

Quite a few messages, especially among young people, engage in grooming, flirting, or their converse, as they enter into relationships or break them. The popularity of this category is illustrated by the many texting abbreviations which swear undying love. A text message is also, according to several online forums, the

³ <<http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/2006/08/013379.htm>>

⁴ <<http://www.ctia.org/content/index.cfm/AID/10664>>

easiest and least embarrassing way to tell someone that you no longer want to go out with them. Texting evidently allows an intimate person-to-person contact while preserving distance. 'You can say some things in text that you can't say face to face' is a common observation in forums about texting.⁵

Observations of texting behaviour, such as this one from Japan, are typical:⁶

At a busy hamburger restaurant in Fukuoka, I observed *keitai* dating [*keitai* = 'mobile' in Japanese], or *go-kon*, a mysterious ritual whose intricacies had to be explained by my Japanese hostess. Four boys and four girls were facing each other across a table. Talking was confined to whispered messages delivered boy to boy and girl to girl. Under the table (which I couldn't see), everyone was furiously typing on their *keitais*, showing messages to their neighbors. The closest direct girl/boy contact occurred at the end of the evening, a shy exchange of phone numbers. Other *keitai* social rituals are documented in 'Keitai Log', a web diary published online by a group of college students researching the role of *keitai* in Japanese society. A recent diarist observed that *Keitai* culture actually strengthens ties

⁵ For example, at this magazine website: <<http://www.mkeonline.com/story.asp?id=343910>>

⁶ Lucy Haagen, 'You go girl, Japanese style', *Community Technology Review*, Winter 2004-5. <<http://www.comtechreview.org/winter-2004-2005/000230.html>>

between parents and children. She reported that GPS systems are now standard *keitai* features, and that many high school girls relieve academic stress by text-messaging their mothers during the long school day.

A great deal of social texting is motivated by boredom. If one has nothing much to do, then one might as well send a text – and at any time of the day – or night. (Around 20 per cent of teens say that they send and receive SMS messages after midnight on a weekly basis.) It is a handy way of killing time. In one study of schoolchildren, Timo Kopomaa draws an interesting analogy with children's play:⁷

Composing text messages in all kinds of places is akin to the tendency, found in children's play, to move away from inactivity towards activity. The text message transports the sender's thoughts to the recipient, offering the sender the freedom from the constraints of the immediate environment: the aim is escape. However, escape in this case is primarily based on the contact established with the recipient rather than a wish to get away from one's physical setting.

The desire to play, as I argued in Chapter 4, is a dominant influence on texting as a genre, so it is not surprising to see text messages which are exclusively devoted to ludic activities, being used to circulate jokes, riddles, clever remarks,

⁷ Timo Kopomaa, 'The breakthrough of text messaging in Finland', in R. Harper, L. Palen, and A. Taylor (see note 1), 150–1.

and chain messages. Timo Kopomaa found that 65 per cent of text messages in his study were sent for fun rather than for a serious purpose. Many websites have been devoted to SMS jokes, in a variety of languages, with the jokes broken down into dozens of categories – marriage, politics, animals, sex – as on any joke site. The limited size of the screen privileges jokes that are one-liners or quickfire dialogues, and the effect is at times not dissimilar to the rapid give-and-take of music-hall repartee. Unlike most other text messages, a word-play message does not require a response; rather, the recipient is expected to pass it on.

Some countries have gone in for ludic texting in a big way. The leading providers of subscription-based text messages in China (Sina, Sohu, Netease) hire teams of SMS authors (*duanxin xieshou*) to write funny or entertaining texts – including jokes, clever greetings and farewells (the number of variants on how to send a good-night kiss is breathtaking), hoaxes, quotes, erotica, and trivia.⁸

Informational functions

One of the most noticed functions of texting is its role in helping people plan their lives, coordinating times,

⁸ See the account by Long Chen, 'I am a backstage manipulator of SMS culture' (*wojiushi duanxinwenhua de muhouheishou*), Guangzhou: *New Weekly (xinzhoukan)*, Guangzhou, 15 July 2002, p. 39. A typical selection of English ludic texts can be found at <<http://www.txtmania.com/messages/text.php>>.

arranging or cancelling a meeting, ensuring that arrangements go smoothly, checking on the whereabouts of someone or something, and so on. In Guadeloupe, a colloquialism for the mobile phone is actually *le t'es où* ('the where are you?'). A remarkable number of perfectly ordinary, daily, family activities are now organized in this way, especially in relation to travelling and redirection of journeys. Not all coordination is lawful: texts have been used in the planning of fraud, terrorism, and other illegal activities.

Messages often ask questions and provide responses to do with specific points of information. Especially popular are enquiries about the results of sports events. The category is increasing with the growth of television programmes which invite viewers to text a vote or response to something they have just been watching. In two-way interactive text messaging, enquiries can be sent to a search engine, which then sends a response (often in a sequence of text pages) to your mobile phone. Here too there can be an 'illegal' side, such as receiving help from outsiders in a quiz or exam.

All kinds of organizations now send out text messages alerting users who are on their mailing list to the latest news from their domain. It might be news about weather conditions, travel conditions, sporting fixtures, school timetable changes, a 'thought for the day'... Broadcasting companies, such as the BBC, CNN, and Sky, offer a News SMS alerts service. Users register their

mobile number with the service, and details of major national and international events are sent as they happen. Some local government authorities (such as Liverpool and Sheffield) have begun to alert subscribers to all kinds of events in their area – floods, traffic holdups, terrorist incidents, planning decisions, rubbish collections... In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007, when email alerts proved so unsatisfactory as a means of warning students of danger, universities began to explore the possibilities offered by texting.

Some countries, such as China and The Netherlands, have been experimenting with texting 'neighbourhood watch' schemes, in which the police use SMS to alert local people to a missing child, a spate of burglaries, and so on. In the USA, a campaign began in May 2006 called 'Wireless Amber Alerts', designed to help increase the number of people who might be able to help in locating an abducted child. It is a development of the Amber Alert system (Amber being the first name of an abducted child found murdered in 1996), which has been in place since 1998. When news of an abduction reaches the police, they issue an amber alert, sending a message to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. The information in this alert is then formatted and sent out via the various service providers to text message subscribers.⁹

⁹ <<https://www.wirelessamberalerts.org/index.jsp>>

A great deal of mobile commerce and banking now relies on text messaging, as does advertising and branding for the marketing industry. Several organizations send out regular SMS newsletters. There are a number of specific applications. For example, in 2005 MasterCard launched a service in which registered customers receive a text message whenever a suspicious transaction has been made, cutting response times by the company by as much as 90 per cent. And in a stock market application, you can do such things as configure the alert system to text you when a particular stock falls below a certain price.

A commonly used metaphor, especially in the context of 'alerts', is to talk about the technology facilitating the 'push' of information. Information is being pushed out to recipients as it becomes available. The contrast is with a 'pull' model, where people poll a server regularly to see if any new information is there. The pull model is obviously wasteful of time, energy, and bandwidth, for most of the time there will be little or no change in the data source. Far better, for many purposes, is to ask to receive only that information which is relevant to your needs and to know that it will arrive at the earliest possible moment. At the same time, it costs the user to receive each message, so services have to tread a fine line between under-sending and over-sending. And a push model is only efficient if you have a clear and narrowly defined focus on the kind of information you want.

Developments in the use of texting are taking place all the time. In one range of applications, your mobile can be linked with others to allow a text-based multi-party interaction, in the manner of a chatroom. Another range includes email, fax, or voicemail notification systems. With email, for example, a server sends a text message to your mobile phone whenever an email arrives in your inbox. The message can include information about the sender, the sender's e-address, and even the opening of the message. You can also customize the procedure so that you get alerted only if the message comes from a particular sender or contains particular keywords.

A third example of a novel application is the use of a 'validity period'. Imagine you are about to watch an hour-long TV programme, and you want to text friends to tell them it's on. You send a text, but you have no way of knowing if your friends' phones are on or not. If they are, your message will reach them. But if they aren't, your message is of value only if they turn their phone on in the next hour. If they turn on their phone two hours later, your message is not only useless; it might also be annoying. However, if you set the validity period of your message to 'one hour', the SMS server will not forward your message once the deadline has passed. A new interpretation of the old maxim, 'What the eye doesn't see ...'.

Another television development is the emergence of SMS-to-TV chat, which seems to have started in

Finland in 2001. Viewers sent messages to a phone number, and these were displayed on TV – after passing before the eyes of a moderator, who monitored message content – in the manner of rolling news headlines. The idea caught on, with some participants texting frequently (despite the cost involved in sending messages), interacting just as they would in a chat-room. Not surprisingly, the idea soon added a game-show dimension, with messages controlling events on screen. Whether this kind of enterprise will spread remains to be seen. In 2004 a new Finnish channel, VIISI, began broadcasting, totally devoted to interactive TV, but it lasted only for a few months.

Text chat has even become art. In 2006, German artist Matthias Haase created an SMS chat sculpture, 'Der Bote' ('The Messenger'), at the University of Fine Art in Dresden.¹⁰ It consisted of a steel table holding a computer, screen, and projector, with a GSM module to receive text messages. Visitors could send a message from their phone to the number shown on the screen, and these would be broadcast a few seconds later; the system then sent a brief reply from the author. Once news of the installation travelled, messages came in from all over the world.

As people become more aware of the communicative potential of texting, the range of specialized uses

¹⁰ A picture can be seen at: <<http://openpr.com/news/2569.html>>.

grows. In politics, for example, text messaging has been repeatedly found as a good way of bringing an issue to the attention of party members, activists, or even larger sections of the population. In 2007 it was reported that the Home Office was using SMS to reach foreigners in the UK whose visas were about to expire. In Nigeria, it was used to monitor the state of affairs at the polls in the 2007 presidential elections. And text messages have reached people who would otherwise be unaware of events. The huge attendance at the demonstrations which followed the Madrid train bombings in 2004 was largely facilitated by thousands of text messages which ended with *pasalo* 'pass it on'. If you wanted to receive regional updates during the 2004 presidential campaign of Howard Dean, an early front-runner for the Democratic nomination, you could sign up to receive two texts a month. Hillary Clinton did the same in 2007. And election campaigns in Korea, Kenya, and the Philippines have all been influenced by texting. Communications commentator Howard Rheingold observes:¹¹

The electoral power of texting could be an early indicator of future social upheaval: whenever people gain the power to organize collective action on new scales, in new places, at new tempos, with groups

¹¹ 'Political texting: SMS and elections': <http://www.thefeaturearchives.com/topic/Culture/Political_Texting_SMS_and_Elections.html>

they had not been able to organize before, societies and civilizations change.

Text messaging is also a convenient way of organizing the ephemeral events known as 'flash mobbing', where a crowd of people gather in a public place at a predetermined time to participate in a (usually pointless) stunt.

The influence of text messages in marketing campaigns is also being explored. One team, at the Clinical Trials Research Unit in Auckland, investigated the use of text messaging as an aid to giving up smoking.¹² They sent out texts to 850 young smokers (average age 25), such as 'Write down 4 people who will get a kick outta u kicking butt. Your mum, dad, m8s?' The smokers received five messages a day for a week before their designated 'quit day' and for the following four weeks. Then they received three messages a week for a further five months. As an incentive, they were also given one month of free personal texting, starting on their quit day. Another group of young smokers received a month of free texting six months after their designated quit day, but no text messages designed to help them quit. Six weeks after quit day, 28 per cent of the group that received the texts claimed to have quit, compared with 13 per cent of the control group.

¹² A. Rodgers, T. Corbett, D. Bramley, T. Riddell, M. Wills, R.-B. Lin, and M. Jones, 'Do u smoke after txt? Results of a randomised trial of smoking cessation using mobile phone text messaging', *Tobacco Control* 14 (2005), 255-61.

The researchers thought that several factors could be involved. Apart from the encouragement that the text messages provided, they felt that the extra texting opportunities given to the test group had a part to play. As recipients of texts, the arrival of messages on a variety of topics could have provided a useful distraction from the urge to smoke. And as senders, the task of texting might have had a similar function, giving smokers something else to do. At one point the researchers describe texting as 'chewing gum for the fingers'.

From the illustrations in Chapters 5 and 6, it is easy to see that text messaging is a worldwide phenomenon. The mobile phone companies have a global reach, and people everywhere seem to text with similar motivations. The one major point of difference is that they text in different languages. Hitherto, my examples of usage have been restricted to English. It is time now to see whether what holds for English also holds for other languages.