

Text Messaging and the Dilemma of Digital Panic Creation in Africa: Nigeria in Focus

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Abstract

Since the introduction of the mobile phone in Nigeria in 2003, a lot has been experienced in its usage; some positive and others, negative. Among the negative experiences is the use of its SMS to spread messages capable of creating unnecessary tension and panic among the populace. This situation has, in the past, generated lots of fear, troubles, hate, vengeance and violence in the country to the extent that, at times, not only that innocent lives were lost but even the corporate existence of the Nigeria state was touched. This paper therefore, examines the incidence of panic-creating SMS in Nigeria. It pinpoints as the case may be, specific instances just as it explores their implications in a volatile entity like Nigeria. With the strong theoretical formula provided by the Multi-Agent Model for Panic Behaviour in Crowds, it argues that panic-creating SMS is a serious and dangerous pastime capable of tearing the nation apart. This is because it is so easy to engage in or generate, trouble-free to circulate widely just as it has overwhelming devastating impact: it touches the sensibilities of men. It concludes that SMS is really good but when abused, as is the case in Nigeria, it could be an inescapable time-bomb on which the corporate existence of the Nigerian nation relaxes on. It also proffers solution believing that it is the responsibility of all, including the relevant government agencies to fight this kind of abuse which must be done as a matter of urgency.

Keywords: Text Message, Digital Panic, Communication, Nigeria

1. Background

... So it was with profound relief that I embraced the arrival of e-mail and, later, texting. They meant a conversation I could control — utterly. I get to say exactly what I want exactly when I want to say it. It consumes no more time than I want it to and, to a much greater degree than is possible with a phone call, I get to decide if it takes place at all. That might make me misanthropic. It surely makes me a crank. But it doesn't make me unusual

(Kluger, 2012: 1).

Perceptibly, the above statement is simply a confirmation of the fact that one of the largest areas in communication that has witnessed tremendous growth is the Short Message Service (SMS) or text messaging as it is more popularly known. Short Message Service (SMS/Text Message) was first developed in 1990 in an effort to allow operators to notify customers when there was some type of a service issue or a network problem. The first-ever text message was sent December 3, 1992, by software engineer Neil Papworth, to Vodafone Director, Richard Jarvis, who received the message on his husky Orbitel 901 cell phone. It simply reads: "Merry Christmas" (Kelly, 2012). This service has grown to become one of the most common ways in which individuals use their cell phones to communicate with others. In 2002, 80% of all cell phone users in the United States were 'Talkers', however by 2006 that number was almost reduced by half, dropping to only 42%, with the other 58% being 'Texters' (Fernando, 2007 cited in Corbett, 2009). Six billion SMS messages are sent every day in the United States, according to Forrester Research (2012) and over 2.2 trillion are sent a year. Globally, 8.6 trillion text messages are sent each year, according to Portio Research (in Kelly, 2012). Global SMS revenues will reach US\$133.8 billion in 2013 (in Lennighan, 2013).

Agar (2003) has opined that SMS grew out of what was initially a by-product of the mobile phone industry. It was never expected to take-off in the way that it has and was taken seriously at first by the telecommunications companies. The information-poverty of developing countries has helped make the impact of mobile all the more powerful, as mobile penetration (i.e. number of subscribers per 100 people), which is on a rising trend everywhere, has increased even more rapidly in poor countries. The average annual growth rate in the number of subscribers was over 30% in Asia and nearly 50% in Africa from 2000 to 2004. While Africa still lags behind other regions in mobile penetration rates, there are now on average, 9 mobile subscriptions for every 100 inhabitants. Africa has been the fastest-growing mobile region in the world, though there has also been rapid growth in Asia and Latin America (Coyle and Childs, 2005).

There is also growing understanding among researchers that mobile phones have made it possible for people to receive messages without having to meet face to face. Mobile phone thus becomes a powerful instrument for networking participation and advocacy within the society, advancing socio-economic development through the creation of new types of economic activities and employment opportunities. Text message is one type of mobile

phone communication that allows for both one to one and one to many textual communications without regard to an individual physical location. It has provided the means to satisfy man's innate desires for connectedness and man's desire to reach beyond himself and commune with others (Agba *et al*, 2010). It is possible to reach people in all strata of the society through a simple text message. The bulk-SMS sent by marketing agencies to promote their latest products are familiar to all.

In spite of the benefits of mobile phone communication in fostering contact, advancing economic and social development through text messaging, experience suggest that text messaging has been employed into criminal activities such as rumour spreading and panic creating, pornography, frauds, obtaining goods by trick etc. These problems created through text messaging are not only taking place in Africa and Nigeria, they are rather witnessed world-wide. For example, in a report on PC and Tech Authority website, Jager (2011), reports that, a hoax text message was spreading across Asia, causing widespread panic amongst citizens. The text message, which purported to be from the BBC, claimed that radiation from Japan's damaged Fukushima nuclear plant had spread to neighbouring regions. According to the text:

Japan Government confirms radiation leak at Fukushima nuclear plants. Asian countries should take necessary precautions... Do not go under the rain. ...Radioactive particles, which may cause burns, alopecia or even cancer, may be in the rain.

Also mentioned in the SMS were Hong Kong and the Philippines as areas at risk of radiation. However, in a reaction to this, the BBC confirmed that it issued no such warning and that the text message was a hoax. It maintained that "Disasters such as that currently unfolding in Japan often trigger a rise in scam texts and e-mails intended to fool users into downloading malware or simply to spread panic". Therefore such a channel of communication can cause detrimental effects to individuals, establishments, groups, organizations and even states during a crisis if not handled appropriately and with care. Thus, one of the negative and dangerous impacts of the misuse of text messaging is panic creation among the members of the public, organizations, groups and even the government of a country. Much of the problem arises due to people forwarding false text messages or rumours without bothering to verify their credibility. When faced with a possible mishap, many people tend to think that it is better to be safe than sorry and that they do not have much to lose by forwarding a warning. Though the intentions may be good and to alert people to a dangerous situation, the repercussions might be far-reaching. Also many a times, the intentions are plain malicious and intended to cause widespread unrest.

Across Africa and Nigeria in particular, text messages have most times, become source of worries and panic to people due to their nature and contents. This work therefore, thinks it necessary to study text messages in the contemporary information age and the dilemma of creating panic in the society citing instances where this has taken place and the possible problems emanating from same to the Nigerian public. Suggestions were also made.

2. Theoretical Explication

Of all the contending models and theories, such as communication or cybernetics, globalisation etc, for explaining the incidence of panic-creation through messaging, the Multi-Agent Model for Panic Behaviour in Crowds stands most appropriately. It does not only provide enabling explanation of the issue of discussion but goes a step further to providing possibility of further engagements in the area. Multi-Agent Model for Panic Behaviour in Crowds was developed by Robson dos Santos Franca, Maria das Gracas Bruno Marietto, and Margarethe Born Steinberger in 2009 as a Model for explaining the actions and reactions of people to events. The Multi-Agent Model is a result of the combination of many frameworks borrowed from different disciplines including sociology, psychology etc. They argued that many factors combine together to determine the reaction of individuals when there is an external stimuli and this helps to explain the panic displayed by people when certain events take place. One of such influences includes the bandwagon effect and group think. According to Franca *et al* (2009), "specifically, the panic in crowds' phenomenon is a kind of collective behaviour which involves a certain amount of people being exposed to a dangerous situation. In such situation there is always an imminent risk and a feeling of urgency for action". Dividing the crowd into three categories, they explained that the Panic Crowd is formed when people are exposed to a dangerous situation and that leads them to create the perception of need to stay away from danger in a social and shared way, such as earthquakes and fires. Franca *et al* (2009) further explain that:

Initially, the individuals are in an ordinary condition which norms and social structures are aligned with what is socially accepted. When is perceived a disorder on the established social structure the individuals feel uneasy and apprehensive, trying to understand the non-structured and ambiguous situation that just happened. A disturb is an event that presents itself as an imminent threat to the agent's life, like a fire alarm or a smoke cloud, and such event draws the person's attention and forces him to act, leading to a social unrest. After that, the individuals start looking for information that could help them in redefining the current context. In these conditions, people become more susceptible to rumours, since

there is a feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. The conventional behaviour starts to break down. Since there is a need to understand the situation, people engage themselves in a milling process, looking at the other individuals' reactions and comparing those reactions with your own set of expectations.

Applying this model to the panic creation through text messaging, we can understand the reasons why people panic. When events or news which is unexpected happen abruptly, people out of fear of the unknown, begin to interpret the event or message in different ways. They begin with their social background and then to what other people think or the reaction of others to the same event. Then, people tend to fix their conclusion and reaction to the reaction of others. Thus, if others have condemned a particular product because of a text message, other recipients of such message could also cue in and this leads to further spreading of such message out of fear and panic, thus creating more panic in the society with less rationale thinking. This has manifested itself in the way people reacted after receipt of dangerous SMS in Nigeria which have led to dangerous situations. At times, some reprisal attacks in the North and South of Nigeria cannot be explained outside the meaning of this miasma.

3. The Incidence of Text Messaging and Panic Creation in Nigeria

It is of course, indisputable that every technology comes with some risks and that is why it is believed that the influx of smart phones and social networking sites has brought necessary trouble with enormous benefits and vices thus, the computer and internet we all use move along with numerous advantages and risks such as identity theft and swindling, fraud, and panic creation. Health issues have also been associated with computer usage, Ear-Phone devices applied to answering cell phones as well as a range of impacts. Some of these issues and problems naturally come along with information technology itself. However, some are also created by the users of the technologies themselves.

In Nigeria, text messaging through the use of mobile phones has become a source of worry and concern to both the government and citizens due to the nature of the messages sometimes being spread across the country through such medium. One of these concerns is the panic being created among the public and even in governments as a result of rational action from the public in reaction to the messages and some other times as a result of bandwagon effect or group think. The panic such messages create ranges from political, health, religious, social to environmental etc and these are present in Nigeria.

Political panic-creation through text messages in Nigeria involves sending out messages informing people of one political crises or the other and warning them to avoid certain areas in the country. It is sometimes targeted at a political personality, political party or a geo-political zone. The aim could be to tarnish the image of the target person or group which most times creates panic and pandemonium among the public. This puts the public not only in panic but also in the dilemma of believing or not believing such story and the proper action to take. This most times results in bandwagon action. It can also go to the extent of instigating more political crises which can result in conflict and death of people. According to a report by News24 (2012), rumours of looming sectarian violence sparked panic in Nigeria's Kaduna on Thursday, July 05, 2012. Shops closed and parents raced to school to pick up their children, after an unexplained car explosion and SMS reports that Muslim groups in the divided northern city were planning to protest. One of the victims of this event, Esther Dada said, "I received a call from a teacher at Christ Church School that I should come and take my children back home. I arrived there and saw parents picking up their kids, saying there was an SMS that Muslims are going to protest." Again, Thewillnigeria.com (2011) in a report cited the SSS spokesperson, Mrs. Marilyn Ogar to have said that the Nigerian SSS Wednesday, November 02, detained two secondary school boarding students for circulating panic text messages threatening to bomb the Presidential Villa (the official abode of the Nigerian President), and the National Assembly, both in the nation's capital, Abuja. In March 2013, the message that the government of Bayelsa State had been sacked by the Supreme Court and the State House taken over by soldiers was strong and did cause pandemonium in the State.

In the area of health, people have often received text messages indicating the existence and circulation of a poisoned food item and warning the recipient of such message to desist from consuming such or risk death or certain health damages. This has made the public to avoid buying and consuming some food items in Nigeria due to the fear of contracting one disease or the other due to food poisoning or even dying from such poison. A major concern here is that the public do not take time to run a laboratory test on these food items or any other kind of confirmation test, rather, the message is immediately forwarded to immediate available contacts or persons and so the message continues to spread together with the panic that goes with such.

Again, such health panics also arise through messages that warn GSM users of answering calls from particular numbers indicating that answering such calls amount to death. This has often resulted in people, especially the less educated ones, switching off their phones to avoid such calls entering their phone or not answering any calls that come into their phones just to avoid dying prematurely. PM NEWS (2009) reported that, panic gripped Nigerians over a text message that was circulated in September 2009, warning everyone to abstain from eating Apples. The message, which also was posted on various social networking sites on the internet, including

Facebook, said a lot of people have died in the country after eating Apples, most of which the message claimed, were contaminated. The message read:

Tell your loved ones and anybody you know that some of the apples in town are poisonous to eat. All the ones imported into the country currently are contaminated and have been killing people. The statistics is nationwide and it is increasing. This message is from NAFDAC. It is not a rumour.

But the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and control (NAFDAC) disowned the message and announced that the information was false. After further investigation by PM News, Abosede Lawal, one of the sellers explained that due to the perishable nature of the fruit, the sellers often sorted out bad ones and sold them at lesser price. Normally, an Apple costs between N50 and N70, but when the apple was getting bad, it was sold at N20 or N30. Those who eat rotten ones could become ill and probably, people think that it was apples in general that caused such illness. In the same vein, Iroegbu (2011) reported of a text message which spread across the country in September that year, warning people to the effect that they would die if they answered mobile phone calls from 09141. However, the Nigerian government also countered same when it denied that a phone call can kill at all. In a related development, Okoh (2011) also reported that panic gripped mobile phone users in Nigeria on 14th September, 2011 as news spread that people were dying after answering calls on their mobile phones. Places most hit by the reports included Abuja, five South-East States, Rivers, Lagos, Oyo and Ogun States. As a result of that, relations were busy calling their loved ones and warning them to avoid any number that began or ended with 09114.

At the social level, people have often been warned through text messages not to live in certain areas in Nigeria or to leave such areas or risk losing their lives to crises or murder situation. Some others received text messages warning them not to attend parties or wear certain colours of clothing on particular days. Such messages also warn deviants of dying. Sometimes, the messages quote religious leaders as authors or sources of such warnings. This has often affected the social lives of the people by making them live in panics and avoiding people, things or places they would ordinarily not have avoided. According to *The Nigerian Village Square*, Sahara Reporters (<http://saharareporters.com/news-page.kano>) reported that gunmen invaded the Federal Government College of Education in Kano, Kano state. The gunmen numbering about ten entered the school premises Monday, June 11, 2012 night with sporadic gunshots, despite a downpour, targeting college students in their hostels. It further said that details of the attack were still very sketchy but witnesses said that as at 9.00 pm, the attack was still ongoing. According to Olokun (2012), another one which hit the social sites was, "Please I don't know how true this is, but someone just sent this to me that nobody should put on anything with a trace of 'red' in anyway tomorrow. Some Nigerians are performing some rituals across the country. Please do not ignore, send it to friends and family. Our blood will not be used to redeem Nigeria in Jesus' name". It was even rumoured that the prophecy came from the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Pastor E.A Adeboye. However, contrary to that, the highly respected clergyman refuted the claim, declaring on Facebook that he never gave such prophecy. It has also been observed that some of these messages sound 'religious' and also, are compelling, ordering the receivers to forward them to all the contacts on their phones. Most of such messages end ridiculously as "failure to do this, something bad will happen to you within 48 hours."

Furthermore, the religious sector is not left out in this problem as religious denominations and their leaders have also been victims of such text messages. Some religious groups have in the past been accused of sponsoring one crises or the other or working against another sister denomination/s. Also, the leaders of religious denominations have become the target of the text messages accusing them of engaging in one unethical act or the other. Sometimes, these messages create hatred in the hearts of the public against the victim which makes the public to call them all sorts of names. It also brings about hot arguments between and among faithful of the different religious denominations over who is right and who is wrong and could lead to serious quarrels and denominational antagonisms.

4. Implications of Text Messages as Instrument of Panic Creation in Nigeria

While it is true that organizations like *PeaceNet Kenya* have demonstrated the positive power of mobile technology for conflict resolution (Harwood, 2010), the role text messaging played in instigating the 2010 sectarian violence in Northern Nigeria serves as a grim reminder of how technology can also be used in destructive ways. This is because, the system is not only available to all and sundry, it is also so easy to engage in or generate, trouble-free to circulate widely just as it has overwhelming devastating impact: it touches the sensibilities of men. For instance, According to Guinness World Records (2013), Melissa Thompson set the record for fastest text. In 2010, she took 25.94 seconds to type and send, "The razor-toothed piranhas of the genera *Serrasalmus* and *Pygocentrus* are the most ferocious freshwater fish in the world. In reality they seldom attack a human." By 2013, the fastest text message (SMS) using a touch-screen mobile phone is 20.53 seconds and was achieved by Mark Encarnación (USA), outside the Microsoft Studios in Redmond, Washington, USA on 24 April 2013. Thus, the effect of SMS is simply overwhelming.

In January, armed men descended on Muslims living around Jos, the capital of Plateau State. They slaughtered women and children, tossed bodies in wells, threw acid on people and castrated victims, leaving well over 500 people dead and countless homes burnt to the ground. In March, retaliatory attacks by Muslim Hausa-Fulani herdsman resulted in the death of hundreds of Christians. It could be recalled that prior to the first major attacks in January, tensions between the two groups escalated as text messages circulated warning Christians not to eat food from Muslim vendors as it had been poisoned. In the same vein, Muslims circulated messages that the state governor had shut off water to Muslim communities. There were about over 150 messages that circulated throughout the community inciting respective groups to violence such as "Slaughter them before they slaughter you. Kill them before they kill you," or "Throw them in the pit before they throw you. Encircle and suppress them before they encircle and suppress you." Those text messages played a role in turning those rivalries into ethnic and religious massacres.

Sending such unverified text messages is not only capable of causing panic and untold psychological trauma among the people, it also aggravates an already bad situation. For those who suffer from high blood pressure, receiving such messages can increase their problem all the more. It can also bring heart attacks to some others depending on how one is affected by the message or their manner of perception. For example, the parents and relatives of students of the school in Kano were thrown into serious panic on receiving SMS on the threat to the lives of their children. This type of message makes people to continue to live in fear. In a report by Olokun (2012), Mrs Eunice Dogunro, a church leader, confessed that whenever she received any of the messages, she forwarded to all her contacts as directed by the senders. According to her, she did that to be on the safe side, because something bad might really happen to those who refused to broadcast the message. Mrs Evelyn Olokun, a nurse, admits that the scary messages are dangerous to people especially, the elderly ones. Olokun says that too much of such could pose health risks like high blood pressure, which could eventually lead to sudden death.

On the other hand, alerting the public of the possible existence of a particular threat could also be unwittingly drawing the attention of the mischief makers to such act or crime. Thus, even when such rumour is untrue, criminals could take advantage of the situation to commit the said crimes. Thus, enemies could cash in on those messages to hurt their victims. This situation turns crime rumours into actual crimes thereby threatening the security of the country. The implication of such alarm could result in ignoring genuine information in the future on the suspicion that it may be like the 'Apple Story'.

In the economic sector, such panic has two implications. First, the businesses of the sellers of the products which the public had been warned not to consume suffer serious down turn as many people cease to buy from them. It dries up pockets as it subjects people to untold hardship. Second, it goes on to affect the macroeconomic condition of the country since business activities are retarded in that sector until such rumour is cleared by the appropriate authority.

Moreover, such messages could instigate religious crises in the country due to the already tensed up relations between religious bodies in the country especially the Christians and Moslems. It instigates ethnic conflicts among Nigerians especially in the areas where groups are weary of one another, and waiting to hear any allegation of unwelcomed act committed by their opponent against any of them in order to pick up arms.

Socially, due to the warning messages of possible death if people answer calls from particular numbers, many people lose important calls from business partners, relatives, family members, friends and loved ones since many do resort to putting off their phones or not even picking calls when these panic-creating text messages are in circulation. This can create problems or even distance in the social lives of people.

The ultimate implication of this panic especially for the government is that it heightens the already tensed level of insecurity in the country. This is because in a state of panic and restlessness, people can do inordinate things which they might not ordinarily do. It creates crime opportunity too. Such messages could instigate serious crises that can result in major conflicts in the country. It could also act as a platform for criminal-minded people to act to the detriment of the entire system. The current Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has been discovered to be making tremendous use of SMS and other social networks for its information circulation. This is the reason the federal government shut down all GSM facilities in the five states in northern Nigeria under the state of emergency to flush out the terrorist elements.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Information technology (IT) is a very useful instrument for better relationship among people in the contemporary world especially in Africa and Nigeria in particular. However, the way people relate with the gadgets of IT and how Nigerians put them into use is a major determinant of the real effect of IT in the society. There is no doubt that Mobile Phones have been abused in Nigeria as people use it indiscriminately to achieve inordinate desires including, of course, the creating of unnecessary panic and tension within the polity. This has made text message an instrument of crime which is not the really the reason for its making. In the light of the above, Nigerians are advised to use text message for issues that will promote all sectors of the lives of the citizens and not for criminal purposes.

Consequently, Nigerians should do well to properly ascertain the origin and credibility of text messages and the veracity of their contents before acting or forwarding such to the next person. This will reduce the rate at which those panic-creating text messages spread across the country. People need to understand the need to use technology responsibly for the general good and advancement of the course of humanity. Thus, the Non-Governmental and Community-Based Organisations also have a role to play by sensitising the people on the situation as well as finding means of utilising the system for democratic consolidation in the country. For instance, anticipating violence around the 2007 Kenyan Presidential elections, PeaceNet, an umbrella group for Kenyan NGOs, in collaboration with Oxfam, established a system of collecting information via text messaging on potential conflict. This enabled human rights advocates working at a “nerve-center” to alert local groups to intervene and avert violence. No such mechanism to manage the flow of information existed in Nigeria when sectarian violence erupted in January 2010.

The government should also resort to the same means of communication for sending out emergency notifications or important information for calming down the general public in such situations. This should also be supported by other means such as the radio and television which are readily available to the people. Such counter messages should also be conveyed in local languages so that even the uneducated ones in the villages will still understand them. This action should be taken as fast as possible in order to reduce the extent of damages caused by the panic-creating text messages.

Finally, the Police and other law enforcement agencies, in collaboration with the GSM network providers and the National Communication Commission, should liaise and always ensure that they find a way of tracing the origin of such panic-creating messages. They should go ahead to prosecute such criminals adequately when they are apprehended to serve as warning to others.

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