

SMS

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

Bip-bip-bip, beep-beep, bip-bip-bip.

The sound indicating the arrival of yet another text message rang out across the crowded pub, cutting through the rumble of conversation and the clatter of glasses. How many people knew what that sound actually means, I wondered. SMS, in good old-fashioned Morse Code, standing for Short Message Service, although almost nobody calls it that these days.

The bloke whose phone had just beeped put down his pint, picked the Nokia off the table and casually flicked the cover open with his thumb. His face twisted into a smile as he read the message, nodding his head and stroking his beard thoughtfully. After a few seconds, he turned the screen to show it to his companions. They displayed a variety of different reactions: some laughed aloud, some chuckled silently with their shoulders heaving, while yet others reacted with a nod and a thoughtful silence. The recipient then pressed a few buttons on the keyboard, presumably to forward the message to some contacts of his own.

Soon, it seemed that every phone in the place was alerting to the arrival of a message. Beeps, buzzes and ring tones of every kind erupted throughout the public house, including that immensely annoying one announcing “A Message from the Dark Side, there is,” in a voice vaguely like that of Yoda from the *Star Wars* films. This twenty-first century instant communication technology jarred irritatingly, I considered, with the contrived but familiar ambience of the English country pub, with its atmosphere steeped in log fires, low beams and horse-brasses.

No-one seemed to care. Throughout the bar, people interrupted their conversations, and rummaged in pockets and handbags for their phones to read the message. I watched as they demonstrated varied reactions on a theme of mild amusement and wry smiles, then almost invariably showed their companions – if they had any – to further amusement for all. Another topical text message joke doing the rounds, I thought.

I suppose I must be a bit of a dinosaur – the green scales are usually concealed beneath my everyday clothing – but I do not regularly send or receive text messages. No-one sends me these jokes, although sometimes an acquaintance shows me one, or reads it out in the office across the low partitions which separate the desks. I laugh politely, of course, but I never ask for the joke to be forwarded on, and decline any such offer, suggested that they should save their money for someone who would appreciate the thought. Now, everyone who knows me even slightly does not even bother to ask.

Oh, I know how to text, of course, and I do send messages very occasionally: to warn that I will be late for a meeting at work, perhaps, or sometimes to announce that I will be late home – best to avoid the “your dinner’s in the dog” scenario with the good lady wherever possible. When I do send a message, it is always properly spelt and punctuated, with capital letters and everything. Personally, I cannot abide that lazy abbreviated modern style which is apparently intended to make the sender’s task easier while transferring the effort to the comprehension of the recipient.

I sipped my drink and listened in a desultory fashion to my companions’ conversation going on around me. The topic (football) did not interest me at all. I found myself wondering about the origin of these messages. It seemed to me that no-one ever seems to create these jokes; no-one types them in, laboriously keying in their own imaginative thinking for the amusement of their friends and acquaintances. Invariably, they are forwarded from someone else: a mate, a colleague at work, that bloke in the pub, even family members – I know that my wife gets a surprising number from her mother.

Unlike messages from most people I actually knew, these joke messages are generally properly spelled and self-evidently written to be comprehensible to anyone with a reading age of six – exactly the target audience specified for journalists working for those red-top tabloid newspapers. Oh, there is often a liberal sprinkling of rude words – perhaps more than a time-served curmudgeon like myself would really like – but the general impression is one of a careful, even professional standard of writing.

By this time, my companions’ conversation had moved on to the even more boring topic of politics, comparing the reputation of the current Prime Minister, in power unelected and with his reputation for financial prudence apparently in tatters, with the previous one whose reputation seemed to be holding up well. A masterful example, I

considered, of that old adage: *get out while the going is good*. I ignored their chat.

Now, forwarding on text messages costs money. Oh, not much, of course, and it may even seem like it is free, if you have a “500 free texts” tariff – or whatever – included in your monthly fixed charges. Sending on all those jokes means that you feel that 500 text messages a month is a necessity, rather than a luxury, and worth paying for.

This was not the first time that I had wondered whether the whole text message joke thing was a scam, a deliberate attempt by the mobile phone companies to increase the traffic on their networks and therefore their revenue. I knew that the incremental cost of handling an individual SMS message is effectively zero, since this is entirely automated. As is so much in the modern world, the price of this service – to the punter in the street – of sending a message is almost entirely unrelated to the cost to the telco.

All these mobile telcos are chasing the magic ARPU – Average Revenue Per User – figure which is such an important measure of success for these companies – at least, as seen by the all-important stock market analysts. Their strategy is simply a matter of charging what the traffic will bear, which is why there are so many confusing packages, deals and offers.

It would not be hard to arrange, I considered. All the mobile phone companies run numerous SMS Centres: basically computer systems that are the first hop for any new message from a phone. For there, the text is forwarded on fast optical fibre networks to the appropriate SMSC for the recipient’s mobile network - which might belong to a different operator, of course, or even be in another country.

The SMSCs support a bulk sending capability made available by the telcos to companies large and small, offering a reduced cost per message, although it is definitely not free. Of course this could be used - indeed, it has been used - for the sort of aggressive bulk-mailing scheme these days known as spam. Mercifully, this seems to be less prevalent than, say, junk email, probably because, for SMS, it is always the sender who pays.

Even so, I could imagine some near-automated process, probably sited in some overseas call centre. A few people would be needed to maintain lists of subscribers to a “free joke” service, supported by a small group of talented copywriters paid to craft numerous short messages on the news of the day.

Just at that moment, my own phone beeped. It was a discreet *feep* set at a volume intended to alert just me, rather than being audible to all fifty people in the pub. Even so, my drinking friends stopped their chat for a moment and looked at me slightly strangely, as if I had erupted in a fanfare of discordant oompah music to the accompaniment of tortured piano accordions and the brisk slapping of *lederhosen*.

“It’s just a text message,” I explained, reaching the mobile from my pocket.

My acquaintances looked at each other.

“I didn’t realise you actually had a mobile phone,” one said, while the other nodded in agreement.

I snorted, a harrumph of good-natured tolerance, or so I’d like to think. My friends shook their heads again and returned to their political conversational topic.

I read the message that had just arrived in silence: “*Thirteen year old dad Alfie Patten has joined Fathers for Justice. He doesn’t understand the politics but he already has a Spiderman costume.*”

It was the first joke text message I had ever received.

But who on earth had sent me this? I did not recognise the number, and there was no corresponding name stored in the phone’s address book memory. I did not want this kind of interruption, this distraction in my life. Irritated, I swallowed the last of my drink and stood up to leave, making some excuse about a busy day at work tomorrow to cover my confusion and annoyance. I walked back home up the hill to the welcoming blare of *Coronation Street* on the TV, still fuming.

I soon put the unexpected message out of my mind - although I have come to think back to that evening in the pub with increasing frequency. I have started to get these messages myself, on a regular basis; jokes and anecdotes, usually topical and often witty, each time a different number and always from a number I did not recognise.

These texts rapidly became a kind of low-level annoyance in my life, the kind of irritation best overcome by following the adage *grin and bear it*. I set the phone’s message alert sound level even lower, but I could not bring myself to turn the sound off altogether, just in case there was a genuine emergency at home or work I had to react to immediately. So, ten or twenty times a day, I would find myself distracted from

working, or a conversation, or just my own peaceful ruminations, just to delete yet another carefully-punctuated joke message.

Not all of these jokes were topical, of course. Presumably the copywriters still had to produce their quota even when there was nothing particularly troubling going on. “*A company has come up with a new medicine for depressed lesbians. It’s called Trydixagin.*” Even so, these messages always seemed to provide a comment on the modern world and our place in it.

When the texts started appearing, I sometimes called the number from which they appeared to come. Invariably, I would get a bland recorded message, or the number would simply be unavailable. No human being ever seemed to be available, or returned my calls. After a certain amount of frustration, I simply gave up trying.

Then, out of the blue, someone called me, this time from a number I - or at least the phone’s address book - did recognise. It was someone called Dave who was a colleague at work a year or two ago, a distant acquaintances I rarely spoke to and, to be honest, barely even remember. When Dave called, I was surprised to hear from him although, somehow, less startled by the topic of his conversation.

“This joke message you sent me,” he said angrily, “It’s a bit tasteless, isn’t it?”

I spluttered, then swore blind did not send him a message of any kind. Frankly, he did not believe me, and seemed to be angered more by my denials. I felt I was required to apologise abjectly, even though I am certain I had done nothing, and promise that it would not happen again. Not that I was in a position to ensure that promise, of course, although I have not yet had a return call.

I was forced to the conclusion that, somehow, the senders of these messages had a way of spoofing the “From” phone number. Whoever - or whatever - is creating these messages is capable of fraudulently inserting a fake number to replace the actual originating one.

I found the timeliness of these texts most curious, too. I noted that these mysterious messages offered immediate comment on the news of the day; indeed, they could be construed as defusing the current calamity - whatever today’s crisis is: the collapse of further part of the banking system, another war in the Middle East, a 14-year boy becomes a father again.

You may well have noticed the effect yourself, when a major item of news comes close to home, when it strikes the man in the street where he will feel it - in the wallet: in increased interest payments, or threats to savings or pensions, or the imminent re-possession of over-mortgaged homes.

When something like this happens, it's all very tense for a day or two. Then the jokes start to fly, everyone just relaxes and gets on with it. These messages provoke a cathartic physiological reaction, social tensions are purged and released, and life simply gets back to normal.

After a few weeks, I noticed that a few of the jokes referred to events I had no knowledge of. At first, I thought it was because I was failing to keep up with current events. Increasingly curious, I made a conscious effort to read more of the newspapers and the Internet news sites, and watch additional TV reports. Soon, I was convinced that I was getting jokes about an event, an item of news, which had *not yet been reported* publicly, which had not made it into the online newspapers and the "breaking news" sections of the television reports.

Somehow, it seemed I had managed to get in the first hop of the delivery chain. No doubt, most recipients of these messages got lots of joke texts, from real friends and acquaintances, and simply did not notice that a few extra had been snuck in. But why me? Perhaps it was just some random selection from a trawl of a database of mobile phone numbers, or some automated system algorithmically profiling and selecting likely candidates for receiving messages. Whatever the mechanism, it had been unable to detect my oft-expressed but never recorded dislike of text message jokes.

I am now convinced that these messages are carefully contrived, the result of considerable expert analysis by people with a deep knowledge of applied sociology and practical psychology. These texts are exquisitely designed to influence the psyche of the entire nation, to modify public opinion and private mood, to act as a calming, moderating influence over a large fraction of the population, for those for whom the mobile phone is an essential part of their everyday lives.

I have no doubt the entire process is overseen by some shadowy arm of Government, loosely - and untraceably - linked to Whitehall, and supported by their Establishment chums in the telco companies.

I have finally realised that SMS does not stand for Short Message Service at all. I am absolutely certain that it is really a Social

Management System, acting as social glue, or lubrication or perhaps sedative, for the turmoil that is modern life in this country.

It is a system designed to keep us all under control.

2480 words

7 pages

28/02/2009 10:48