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E-MAIL SCAMS AND THE COMMUNAL TEXT: AN ANALYSIS OF A PHONE FRAUD LEGEND

BY PAUL DURICA '00

WINNER OF THE 1999 ROBERT T. WILSON AWARD FOR SCHOLARLY WRITING

A couple of months ago a friend sent me an e-mail, the uncertain subject of which was "Urban Legend?" He knew about my study of urban folklore transmitted on the Internet and was not certain if a message he had received qualified. The message took the form of a warning and urged recipients to pass it on. The message text I first received read:

Mandley, Vicki wrote:

I received a telephone call from an individual identifying himself as an AT&T Service Technician who was conducting a test on our telephone lines. He stated that to complete the test we should touch nine (9, zero (0), the pound sign (#) and then hang up. Luckily, we were suspicious and refused. Upon contacting the telephone company we were informed that by pushing 90#, you give the requesting individual full access to your telephone line, which allows them to place a long distance telephone calls billed to your home phone number. We were further informed that this scam has been originating from many of the local jails/prisons. I have also verified this information with UCB Telecomm. Please beware. This sounds like an Urban Legend - IT IS NOT!!! I further called GTE Security this morning and verified that this is definitely possible. DO NOT press 90# for ANYONE. The GTE Security department requested that I share this information with EVERYONE I KNOW!!! Could you PLEASE pass this on. If you have mailing lists and/or newsletters from organizations you are connected with, I encourage you to pass on this information.

Upon reading this text, I was reminded of other stories about phone fraud. Brunvand provides the text of one such legend, the "Burt Reynolds Telephone Credit Card Number" legend, in *The Choking Doberman*. Another legend concerning telephone fraud has been circulating over the Internet. In this legend, long-distance dollars are stolen by criminals in the Caribbean. Like the above text, this legend revolves around the criminals' use of a particular sequence of numbers that, when dialed, makes the innocent caller prey to telephone fraud. Mikkelson provides an adequate summary of this persistent story:

Circulating on the net are dire warnings not to call numbers in the 809 area code, because these codes are part of scams designed to run up your phone bill. The warnings are correct in that if you call one of these numbers in pursuit of a "mystery shopper" job or information about an "injured" relative, or you simply return a call to a mysterious number on your pager, your phone bill will go way up. Not because calls to the 809 area code are billed

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at a higher rate than calls to any other area code, but rather because you will deliberately be kept on the line while the clock is ticking. So the warnings are right that you will get suckered, just not about how this will happen.

Unlike the 90# story, the 809 story is believed to be true and has resulted in a warning posted on both the Better Business Bureau and the National Fraud Information Center web sites (Mikkelson). The degree to which these two texts are connected is difficult to determine. The 809 story began circulating in early 1997, and I first received the 90# story in the summer of 1998. I simply provide the 809 story to show the 90# story's connection to a tradition of telephone fraud tales and to illustrate the current popularity of this brand of legend. The 90# story did not really capture my interest until I received a second version of it—a version that superficially resembles the earlier text but that also contains subtle and, I will argue, important differences.

In my previous work with e-mail and urban legends, I have studied how the technology of transmission stabilizes a legend text, allowing for countless reproductions with no alteration in form or content. I have also discovered that this technology allows variations to develop. When I received the second version of the 90# story, I was surprised by the alterations made to the text. I was surprised because the alterations were minor. Usually, variants possess distinct characteristics. For example, I have studied two e-mail versions of a popular kidney theft legend collected a year apart and identical in form and content—indicating the textual stability permitted or perhaps fostered by the technology of transmission. I have also collected e-mail variants of the kidney theft legend different enough from the stabilized version to suggest modern technology permits some of the variation associated with oral tradition. The differences between these texts are blatant: different locales, different victims, different thieves. In the two versions of the 90# story I have collected, the differences consist of the changing of a few words, suggesting a development quite different from the kidney theft legend. In presenting the second text, I have taken the liberty of italicizing places where it varies from the first text:

I received a telephone call from an individual identifying himself as an AT&T Service Technician *that was running a test on our telephone lines. He stated that to complete the test we should touch nine (9), zero (0), pound sign (#) and hang up. Luckily, we were suspicious and refused. Upon contacting the telephone company we were informed that by pushing 90# you end up giving the individual that called you access to your telephone line and allows them to place a long distance telephone call, with the charge appearing on your telephone call. We were further informed that this scam has been originating from many of the local jails/prisons. I have verified with UCB Telecomm that this actually happens. Please beware. This sounds like an Urban Legend - IT IS NOT!!! I called GTE Security this morning and verified that this is definitely possible and DO NOT press 90# for ANYONE. It will give them access to your phone line to make long distances calls ANYWHERE!!! The GTE Security department told me to go ahead and share this information with EVERYONE I KNOW!!! Could you PLEASE pass this on. If you have mailing lists and/or newsletters from organizations you are*

The text ends abruptly—the last lines lost—and, as noted above, the differences between this text and the first text are minimal. The first text appears to be the more concise, the more polished of the two. The italicized portions of the second text tend to be verbal stumbling blocks, clusters of words missing or smoothed-out in the first text. These changes suggest either an evolution or devolution of the text. One of these possibilities is suggested by the dates attached to the texts. Although I received the second text on June 21, 1998—five days after I received the first text—the story itself is dated May 7, 1998. If this evidence is taken as valid—there are reasons it may not be—then the second text is older than the first. The concision of the first text may be the handiwork of a concerned grammarian who received the second text and was mortified by its butchery of the English language. In any case, the text has been changed, changed consciously by one or more individuals. Whether or not the mysterious grammarian is Vicki Mandley—the stated author of the first text—is inconsequential. Vicki Mandley is probably not the “I” in the text, the concerned individual who called GTE Security and so forth. The “I” in the text may never have existed and, when the changes in the text are considered, has diminished in authority. This text is a communal text shaped by its recipients. By communal text I mean a text that circulates among a group of individuals, with some shared interest, who construct the text as they transmit it to one another; the text does not have a single author whose textual authority is respected. The community, in this case, refers to computer users who spread the 90# story to their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. Journalist Howard Rheingold calls these large groups of computer users “virtual communities” and defines them as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (5). Rheingold calls the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL)—the virtual community to which he belongs—“a small town” that meets all the various social needs of a small town community:

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends, and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. (Rheingold 3)

Rheingold speculates that individuals are drawn to virtual communities like the WELL by a “hunger for community” that increases “as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives” (6). In regard to the 90# story, a virtual community has used the technology of transmission and a piece of computer folklore to subvert the permanence and, thus, the authority of the printed word.

Although this group shaping of a text may be seen as a positive event by individuals like Rheingold, seen as a fortification through technology of interpersonal relationships fragmented by society, the text itself has diminished. As noted, the authority of the “I” vanishes the moment a change in the original text is made. The “I” no longer controls the text; the recipients of the e-mail effectively control the text’s content and message. Previous forms of printed media would not cede this control to the recipient. An individual may take a copy of Plato’s *Republic* from the library and

scribble his own thoughts across the pages, but the original printed words—although obscured—would endure, their authority intact. With a text transmitted through e-mail, the individual in the above example can insert his words in the place of the sender's words and forward the text without any evidence of his alterations being apparent. What results is a body of texts—any forwarded e-mail—whose authority must be questioned, for the technology of transmission allows ample opportunity for alteration. These texts should not be trusted, for the "I"s may be masked "We"s. The paranoia pervading the 90# story easily translates to the paranoia fostered by the technology of transmission.

At first the above situation may seem strangely similar to the oral development of a legend text, prompting one to speculate that oral texts produce similar suspicions. I would argue that oral texts are quite different from e-mail-transmitted texts like the 90# story. Transmission of an oral text usually merits a face-to-face encounter; the transmitter and recipient trust one another to a certain extent. The transmitter usually claims to be the source or close to the source of the story, using an introductory remark like, "I heard this from my cousin whose friend. . ." The source of an e-mail story may be much more obscure. The header on a message may contain several hundred names, making the original sender difficult to locate; even the name at the end of the header may not provide an accurate source. Stories are frequently posted on electronic bulletin boards or serve as chat-line topics; an individual can copy the legend text from one of these sources and forward it to others. Even a forward from a respected friend, by its nature as a forward, has come from a different source; an individual may trust the friend without having to trust the forward. In many ways the e-mail story seems to emerge from the ether, and a certain degree of healthy skepticism is understandable. Secondly, variation in oral transmission is expected and, thus, more acceptable; when re-telling the legend, the transmitter may unintentionally forget a word or two, without the recipients suspecting his honesty. A printed text presupposes a certain degree of stability; changes in wording are more easily determined than with an oral text, and one must inevitably question why these changes were made. With the e-mail legend, one must wonder why the transmitter altered the text when he or she could have forwarded it without any alteration. When the technology for exact reproduction exists and is actively used, a simple change from "that" to "which" in a legend text assumes significance.

All of these speculations have been generated from the assumption that the second text is older than the first text, that the second text has been "corrected" either individually or communally with the end product being the first text. In fact, there is nothing to prove the two texts are even connected. No means exists for tracing e-mail messages. Since e-mail allows for a rapid and diverse dissemination, these two texts may have circulated in vastly different social groups, never once coming into contact with one another. Instead of one giving birth to the other, they may both be born of a third text, an Ur text of sorts, or even of a fourth and fifth text respectively that may have both originated from a sixth text. The trail of development is hopelessly muddled. Whereas oral legends developed slowly enough for folklorists to acquire a sense of geographic dispersion and overall dissemination, e-mail texts shoot out in countless

directions making tracking nearly impossible. Despite the fact e-mail cannot be traced, belief in an e-mail tracer exists. This belief is reflected in another urban legend circulating via e-mail, a legend that bears some similarity to the 90# pound story.

The same summer I collected the 90# story I came across another text that involved fraud of a sort. This particular text was not a warning of fraud but fraudulent in itself. The text assumed the form of a friendly letter written by America's wealthiest man:

Hello Everyone,

And thank you for signing up for my Beta Email Tracking Application or (BETA) for short. My name is Bill Gates. Here at Microsoft we have just compiled an e-mail tracing program that tracks everyone to whom this message is forwarded to. It does this through an unique IP (Internet Protocol) address log book database. We are experimenting with this and need your help. Forward this to everyone you know and if it reaches 1000 people, everyone on the list will receive \$1000 and a copy of Windows98 at my expense. Enjoy.

Note: Duplicate entries will not be counted. You will be notified by email with further instructions once this email has reached 1000 people. Windows98 will not be shipped until it has been released to the general public.

Your friend,

Bill Gates & The Microsoft Development Team.

Even for a moment, I will not grant this text any validity. For one, e-mail, as previously noted, cannot be traced: once an individual sends out a message, he or she cannot control nor determine to whom that message is subsequently forwarded. Secondly, one hopes the wealthiest man in America possesses a better command of the English language or at least enough sense to employ a secretary who does. Despite my skepticism, this message has been taken seriously. In fact, the subject heading of the version I received read, "I don't think this is a joke." Many people must share this opinion for this particular e-mail sported the largest header I have ever encountered: four hundred and sixty-two people had read and forwarded this text before it made its way to my mailbox. The appeal of the text is understandable: easy money. Although no one is really hurt by what is obviously a joke, a teasing of greed, the text still succeeds in undermining a willingness to believe. The text is fraudulent, and this fraudulence is what connects it to the 90# story. If blatantly false texts are actively taking advantage of people—as the header to this particular text easily proves—then belief in the 90# story is strengthened. A legitimate reason to be afraid exists. The Bill Gates text feeds the fear upon which the 90# story thrives. Of course, the 90# story is a false text itself, a warning about a fictional crime. Legitimate reasons exist to be wary, but the e-mail recipient repeatedly encounters illegitimate sources of fear. The problem facing the e-mail recipient is how to see through these illusions—the scams and scam warnings—how to avoid being blinded like Quixote by a circle of textual mirrors. The solution and the shield may be one of the current sources of the problem: the communal text.

Recent legislation—such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the Com-

munications Decency Act—has attempted to apply a national code of morals to the Internet. Although this legislation has pertained primarily to restricting children's access to Internet pornography, it is still relevant to a discussion of community. This legislation suggests the establishment of a system of values to be applied to computer mediated communication. Whether or not a system of values acceptable to the majority of computer users can be established—through legislation or other means—is still a matter of heated debate. I would argue that any attempt at establishing communal values for the Internet is an attempt to lessen the problems generated by communal texts. Internet communities need to function like traditional communities, to develop a public trust, if the paranoia bred by stories like 90# is to be contained. Several virtual communities currently do exist that seem to have developed a sense of public trust; Rheingold's description of the WELL community, "a form of psychotherapy" for some, is a good example (4). These virtual communities tend to be small, scattered bands of computer users: "There is no such thing as a single, monolithic online subculture; it's more like an ecosystem of subcultures, some frivolous, other serious" (3). At the same time, increased access to the Internet is drawing these communities together:

Suddenly, the isolated archipelagos of a few hundred or a few thousand people are becoming part of an integrated entity . . . part of an overarching culture, similar to the way the United States became an overarching culture after the telegraph and telephone linked the states. (Rheingold 10)

To contain the problems caused by false texts on the Internet, a more widely accepted set of values needs to be established. In a practical sense, communal texts should be recognized as communal texts. Instead of simply forwarding the 90# story and perpetuating the false authority of the "I" in the text, the e-mail user should comment on the issues and problems raised by the text. He or she should endeavor to create a dialogue with other e-mail users in which the text is deconstructed and its message reappraised. This kind of communal, close reading may cut down on the number of kidney theft messages the e-mail user receives in a given year; scare stories can be replaced by thoughtful discussion, a bridge to public trust. My suggestion that the communal text should be recognized as such and used as a means to build community may seem overly idealistic. I may also be panicked by the very texts to which I suggest a calm response. In preaching Internet honesty to such an extreme, I may be guilty of overestimating the effect of scare stories. After all, these stories are prevalent in traditional forms of community, and folklorists regard the oral variety of scare stories as a means in which communal anxieties are expressed (Brunvand 2). The boy who cried wolf has had a long and colorful history.

Despite the prevalence of scare stories in the history of communities, the underlying message of the 90# story, to me, seems to be a call for public trust. The threat in the 90# story originates outside the community: criminals, jailed and otherwise. These individuals have corrupted technology for their own gain; they have violated the safety provided by community and the technology that binds the community together. Only by recognizing this threat and re-asserting control over the technology, the story suggests, can the community contain this threat. In order to contain this threat, the

threat must be known, the story must be shared, and a communal trust must be developed.

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