

Rumors of cell phone deaths greatly exaggerated

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From Chris Pinney, UCL Anthropology and Northwestern University:

An Example of the New American Orientalism, but raises interesting questions of the materiality of transmission. William Mazzarella's "Internet X-Ray: E-Governance, Transparency and the Politics of Immediation in India" *Public Culture* 18(3) Fall 2006 has an interesting analysis of new technologies and 'rumour' in South Asia.

See the following news story from the Chicago Tribune, (full story pasted in the 'continue reading' section for those of you who are not registered):

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0704260009apr26.1.6246569.story?ctrack=1&cset=true>

LETTER FROM KARACHI

Rumors of cell phone deaths greatly exaggerated

Tales of a virus that kills with one call became the talk of Pakistan, the Tribune's Kim Barker writes
By Kim Barker

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KARACHI, Pakistan -- The rumor spread quickly, from the small town of Sialkot to the nation, from cell phone to cell phone, friend to friend. The text messages warned of a virus if people answered phone calls from certain numbers.

The virus would not hurt the phone. Instead, in a scene out of a horror movie, it would kill the recipient. Immediately.

"Plz ignore calls frm 0A9-888888 or with screen with dancing snake & changing colours its a deadly virus and in some regions of Pakistan death are being reported," began one message.

Another said: "it's a virus to kill a person. Plz it's not a joke it's damn serious virous."

In mid-April, these messages swamped Pakistani cell phone users, causing many to turn off their phones -- better safe than sorry -- and many others to grow frustrated that anyone could possibly believe the prank. Newspapers, television stations and cell phone companies were flooded with questions from worried consumers.

For Pakistanis who treat cell phones as a necessary appendage, this was serious. People talk on cell phones while watching a movie in the theater, while walking on a treadmill at the gym. Literate, illiterate, urban, rural, such distinctions did not matter. Even the skeptical seemed to know someone who knew someone who died from answering a cell phone or who had read about someone who died.

Shaukat Ali talked to a friend who saw it in the newspaper -- that a man dropped dead just after answering his mobile phone. "When he got the call, he died like he was poisoned," said Ali, 45.

"There was blood and foam coming out of his mouth."

Other Pakistanis said they did not believe the rumor because it was not technically possible. And

some discounted the rumor out of bravado or fatalism.

"I'm standing here where suicide bombers could hit," said Fareed ul-Haq, 22, a security guard outside the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi. "If I'm not afraid of them, why would I be scared of a cell phone message?"

But the panic forced the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to issue a denial. Phone companies sent out text messages urging people to be calm.

Still, the rumor continued to grow, evidence of the power that word of mouth has in Pakistan and all of South Asia, of the tendency of some people to suspend logic and believe in a kind of magic, in spirits and dreams and the unknowable.

This is not the first rumor to sweep the country or the region. A countrywide power outage last fall sparked widespread rumors of a coup against Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. After the deadly earthquake in Pakistan in fall 2005, people were convinced that rumors predicting other earthquakes were true, no matter the logic used to try to dissuade them.

An earlier rumor insisted that 2-rupee coins featuring three clouds, worth about 3 1/2 cents, were actually made of gold. Some entrepreneurs sold these coins for up to \$1.70. Another rumor said that a man was injecting a deadly virus into provocatively dressed women in malls.

Pakistan is hardly alone. Last year, the cell phone threat hit India, which earlier struggled through the hysteria of the dreaded Monkey Man, a half-human, half-monkey who terrified cities and villages, allegedly marauding and killing people wherever he went. More seriously, in all of South Asia, health workers routinely have problems persuading people to vaccinate their children against polio.

And no wonder people in Pakistan were confused about the cell phone rumor. The News, a respected newspaper here, ran a story on the front of its city section discounting the rumor. But another story in the section, written by the vague "Our Staff Reporter," said two people were seriously hurt when they answered the bad phone numbers. One fell unconscious, the other started bleeding from the ears, and doctors had no medicine to treat this kind of virus. The story then concluded: "However, we will provide medicines to these patients on [an] emergency basis, the doctors said."

Another newspaper rejected the rumor but featured the headline of "Killer Mobile Virus."

A few days later, political cartoons began mocking the phone virus. Another text message warned people not to attend work meetings because that would bring on a virus instantly causing them to work. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority bought quarter-page newspaper advertisements titled "Beware of rumors" that clarified: "There is nothing true about the rumors saying that a call from various numbers can damage the human body. There is no such virus found in mobile phones anywhere in the country."

And a new rumor gained credence -- that the death threat had been cooked up by the mobile phone companies, which wanted people to spend money by sending out text messages. A weary Mubashir Naqvi, the chief executive officer at Ufone, one of the largest cell phone companies in Pakistan, said this conspiracy was also false.

"In our part of the world, people like gossiping," Naqvi said.

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