Silencing SMS: The anatomy of 'mCurfews' in India

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Vibodh Parthasarathi and Arshad Amanullah contextualise recent curbs on SMS messages in India and argue that such measures question the efficacy of traditional regulatory responses to emergent media technologies.

This year, the Eid holiday in India passed silently, without the customary exchange of wishes via SMS messages, an integral part of festive celebrations in a country with over 500 million mobile users. The silence resulted from government curbs on bulk SMS and MMS for 15 days starting on August 17 . These curbs sought to curtail rumours of violence against people from Assam and other northeastern states living and working in Bangalore and other south Indian cities, and sparked a chain of events leading to their exodus from these cities.

A closer look suggests this curfew on mobile services emerged out of a sequence of events between June and August across the Indian subcontinent. The sequence unfolded with the trickling in of news reportage in June about violence against Rohingyas in Myanmar and the Kokrajhar riots in Assam, north-eastern India, in July. The victims in both these unrelated instances of violence, covered in the Indian English-language and vernacular press, were Muslims of local ethnicities.

In this media milieu, various protest rallies were organised across India: the Raza Academy organised a protest in Mumbai on August 11; the Social Democratic Party of India rallied in Bangalore on August 13; the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind organised a protest rally in Lucknow on August 17; and some individuals took to the streets after the Friday prayer in Allahabad, also on August 17. Indian newspapers and news channels covered the violence against Rohingyas and riots in Assam, and subsequently all the protest rallies that occurred.

Independently of this, on August 16, newspapers in South India began reporting on threats and attacks against people from Assam and adjoining states in north-east India working in Bangalore—and threats of further violence once the Muslim holy month of Ramzan concluded on August 20. These news reports were amplified and circulated further through SMSs at a time when people from Assam and other north-eastern states residing in Bangalore had started fleeing this relatively cosmopolitan city. The circulation of such information not only intensified the exodus from Bangalore, but also triggered mass departures of people from north-eastern states residing in other south Indian cities, including Chennai, Hyderabad, and Pune.

It is difficult to ascertain whether rumours of violence against people from Assam preceded, or stemmed from, the protest rallies at Mumbai and other cities. Nevertheless, rumours of all sorts went viral through SMS, both before and after the rallies, and before and during the exodus. What is also clear is that the protest rallies across India and the exodus of people from Assam and north-eastern states from Bangalore and other south Indian cities together informed the government decision to restrict SMS messages.

For the most part, SMS in India are associated with shared jokes, festival greetings, and exchanged ring tones. Subscription services increasingly allow users to access news alerts, cricket scores, stock market updates, horoscopes, and even the financial assets of local MPs. As tariffs dived over the last decade, SMS messages quickly became a marker of mobility and a barometer of desire within a free-market framework.

The use of SMS for mass persuasion and mobilisation precedes the recent events. Bulk SMS were first used in

2004, when the incumbent BJP-led coalition campaigned through mass mobile messaging in the run-up to the national elections, a plan widely believed to have been hatched by the coalition's former telecom minister turned chief election strategist. Taking a cue from the BJP, the Election Commission, tasked with supervising polls, also took to sending bulk SMS through one private and one government telecom operator: "Please exercise your right to vote – Election Commission".

Since then, incremental drops in the prices of mobile phones and SMS enabled diverse actors to deploy bulk SMS messages to various ends. In 2006, a news channel asked viewers to text in messages to protest the acquittal of nine men accused of murdering a model in a Delhi bar. More frequently, rural activists and urban NGOs use bulk SMSs to increase the reach of their campaigns and seasoned columnists and young journalists increasingly use bulk SMSs to advertise their publications. In 2011, SMS were used to great effect to mobilise the multitudes who supported the Anna Hazare-inspired, anti-corruption sit-ins.

In the same way that the use of SMS for mobilisation precedes recent events, government-imposed curfews on mobile services, 'mCurfews' for short, also have numerous precedents. In 2010, after large-scale, non-violent protests in Jammu & Kashmir, the state government clamped down on cellular services and blocked SMS messaging to prevent "anti-national and vested interests from spreading trouble". In September that same year, in the days leading up to a much-anticipated court verdict on the Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, the government blocked all bulk SMSs and MMSs to prevent any incitement or organised acts of aggression.

But earlier mCurfews did not sway the nation to the extent the one in August did, perhaps because the restrictions were perceived as excessive: the cap of five SMSs per day – subsequently revised to 20 per day – applied to pre-paid mobile users across the country, including those in places far from the organised rallies, threats of violence, and exodus. The virulent reaction to August's curbs also comes on the heels of broader regulatory interventions on SMSs. In November 2011, the telecom regulator capped daily SMSs from a single number at 200. This cap aimed to prevent telemarketers from bulk-transmitting pesky messages, technically called Unrestricted Unsolicited Commercial Communication (UUCC). While this was a relief for most mobile users, incessantly irritated by unsolicited commercial calls and messages, these restrictions were challenged by a consumer group in the Delhi High Court. In July, the court ruled that this stipulation of 200-messages-per-day, in so far as it covered non-UUCC messages, violated the constitutional right to freedom of speech, and gave the telecoms regulator time to review its protocols.

Recent restrictions on mobile services also stem from, inter alia, a strange conversation between two types of media. Reportage on protest rallies by Muslim groups, attacks on people from the north-east, and their exodus from certain cities created an information milieu wherein it became almost impossible to ignore hearsay. Rumours, and apprehensions arising from them, spread faster than TV news, and that too to a targeted constituency through SMSs: pictures of men showing an SMS on their mobile phones to press photographers sums up this information implosion. It thus seems that the exodus of people was further fuelled by the synergy of these two types of information flows–via the news media and via mobile phones. But only the latter attracted curbs and restrictions.

Government bans on media are not new: MMS bans are akin to the fate of some movies; SMS caps echo curbs on newspapers pages in India during the 1960s; and periodic SMS curfews remind us of the proscription of pamphlets during the anti-colonial movement in the 1930s and 1940s. However, periodic mCurfews have exposed the government's vulnerability to the challenges of uncertainty; equally, they question the efficacy of traditional regulatory responses to media technologies. Together with the August 18 blocking of over 300 virtual addresses—URLs, blog postings, Twitter accounts, img tags, websites etc.–these restrictions mark a backward shift, from governance to government. More significantly, periodic over-rulings by courts and bureaucratic caveats on restrictions—such as the court ruling on UUCC and government's revision of daily caps on SMS–lay bare not only regulatory but also epistemic disconnects with regards to ubiquitous communication technologies.

While the viewership ratings of most news channels climbed during the violence and exodus, the revenues of mobile operators saw a seven to eight per cent dip over this period. It is unclear who gained from the Indian government's

blanket bans on mobile services and websites or whether such measures actually succeeded in stemming rumours and violence. But some of us, having come to terms with the absence of SMS greetings during the Eid festivities, continued receiving unsolicited commercial SMSs during those tumultuous weeks.

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