Balancing Trust and Anxiety in a Culture of Fear: Text Messaging and Riots

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Abstract
To date, there is no empirical research on the risk perceptions of Sydneysiders following the Cronulla riots nor are there any connections made between risk perceptions and ontological security in the mobile communication literature. This article addresses this gap by exploring the risk perceptions of individuals in the wake of these riots, specifically, their reactions to the new surveillance measures and policing of text messaging. This qualitative study uses empirical data collected from 30 one-on-one interviews conducted 12 to 16 months after the riots. To provide a theoretical framework for these risk perceptions, Anthony Giddens’ notion of ontological security, the inner balance between trust and anxiety is used. The data analysis shows that while individuals risk perceptions are complex and contradictory, they use a range of methods to create a balance between trust and anxiety. This article argues that to manage fear in a present or perceived threat, individuals are disposed to mediate any actual or perceived risks by bracketing out anxieties to manage their everyday lives.

Keywords
text messaging, mobile phones, ontological security, risk perceptions, surveillance

Introduction
Since the war-on-terror, information gathering and the monitoring of everyday life is pervasive and, in some cases, expected by the general public. This expectation is particularly prevalent during outbreaks of violent social unrest or any other situation that simulates the often latent culture of fear (Furedi, 2002; Green & Smith, 2004; Lyon, 2006; Mythen & Walklate, 2006; Rule, 2002). While there is less familiarity with pain and suffering, debilitating disease and death, in developed countries, than ever before, fear has become an omnipresent part of everyday life. A central element of this culture is the inherent conviction that humanity continually faces threats, which challenge daily existence; consequently fear becomes an all-pervading force in the everyday life (Furedi, 2002). A culture of fear is driven by “risk perceptions,” as Furedi asserts “fears about the future are linked to anxieties about problems today” (2002, p. 18); thus, risk perceptions are expressed through shared cultural beliefs and political judgments about an uncertain future (Wilkinson, 2001a, 2001b, and 2010). After the Cronulla riots in December 2005, Sydneysiders risk perceptions escalated from the threat of further violence to terrorism. In an effort to restore social order, the government introduced legislative changes that increased police powers; hence, the text messages used to promote and expedite the Cronulla riots became a target of police surveillance. The general reactions to the policing of text messaging were crude links to the wide-ranging risk perceptions situated within a culture of fear. To provide a theoretical framework for these risk perceptions, Anthony Giddens’ ontological security is explored to offer empirical examples of the distinction between reality and possibility, which are the bases for all risk perceptions (Beck, 1992; Wilkinson, 2001a, 2001b, and 2010). This paper argues in order to manage fear in a present or perceived threat individuals are disposed to mediate any actual or perceived risks by bracketing out anxieties in order to manage their everyday lives.

Background: The Cronulla riots
To understand the risk perceptions that existed during this time, a background of the Cronulla riots is essential. Cronulla Beach is situated on Sydney’s south coast; it is the only Sydney beach on the metropolitan railway system and is easily accessible by train or car from the Western suburbs. These suburbs of Sydney are historically lower socio-economic areas and friction between Cronulla “locals” and Western suburbs “outsiders,” particularly on the beachfront has a turbulent past (Morgan, 2005, 2007; Poynting, 2007, 2009). On the afternoon of Sunday 4th December 2005, an altercation occurred on Cronulla Beach between four young
men and three off-duty volunteer lifesavers (Evers, 2009; Michaels, 2006; Poynting, 2007, 2009; The Daily Telegraph, 2005). Strong, aggressive language was used by both groups of men and physical aggression followed, resulting in one lifesaver sustaining a cut near his eye and the other two suffering facial bruising (Lawrence & Gee, 2005; Poynting, 2009). In newspaper reports, the four young men were positioned as the perpetrators of this attack and were described as being “of Middle Eastern appearance” (Lawrence & Gee, 2005; Malkin, Tadros, & Kennedy, 2005; McIlveen & Jones, 2005). The label “of Middle Eastern appearance” has a history of use in Australian broadcast media dating back to the late 1990s and peaking in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York on 11th September 2001 (Collins, Noble, Poynting, & Tabar, 2000; Poynting, Noble, Tabar, & Collins, 2004). This relatively unremarkable squabble between seven young men at Cronulla Beach resulted in an outpour of public indignation. Commencing on Monday 5th December, popular commercial media demanded a tough crackdown on “the ‘Middle Eastern’ assailants” (Poynting, 2007, p. 159). Radio talkback programs, newspaper editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor all contributed to the rising hysteria (ACMA, 2007; Jones, 2005; Poynting, 2007, 2009); at the same time, chain text messages and emails began to circulate summoning Australian “patriots” for a “Leb and wog bashing day” (McIlveen, 2005, p. 39; Morgan, 2007, p. 144; Lattas, 2007, p. 321; Poynting, 2009, p. 46). On 10th December, NSW State Police Commissioner Ken Moroney issued a statement saying that there would be no tolerance of antisocial or violent behavior, and advised everyone to ignore text messages and emails enlisting people to attend Cronulla Beach the following day. In this public statement, Police Commissioner Ken Moroney said that his officers had launched an investigation into who was responsible for initiating the chain text messages (Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC], 2005a; Moroney, 2005).

On Sunday 11th December, the words “100% Aussie Pride” were marked out in the sand at North Cronulla Beach (Morgan, 2005; Taylor, 2009). Five thousand people reportedly gathered at the site, encouraged by the week’s events and fuelled by sun and alcohol, the crowd turned on the streets of Cronulla, attacking anyone who they identified as “Middle Eastern” (Morgan, 2005; Poynting, 2007). One victim recalled how the violence erupted when a man deemed to be “of Middle Eastern appearance” was walking along the beachfront with his girlfriend and “two girls turned around and screamed . . . ‘get off our f__king beaches’ [and then] the whole street turned on them” (M. Brown, 2005, p. 7). Police officers recollected how one young man was badly beaten after having bottles smashed across his back, and they found another man lying in a pool of blood (Overington & Warne-Smith, 2005). The violent rampage continued, and by the afternoon, it was reported that at least 13 people had been injured and 12 had been arrested (Kennedy, Murphy, Brown, & Colquhoun, 2005).

After Sunday 11th December, text messages sent and received in the days before the violence were labelled “messages that incited violence” in Australian newspaper reports and positioned as an “uncontrolled” broadcast system (ABC, 2005b; Lawrence & Gee, 2005; McIlveen, 2005; McIlveen & Jones, 2005; Pearlman, Paine, & Baker, 2005) and the initial response from the NSW State Government was to increase police powers. On 15th December 2005, amendments to the Law Enforcement Legislation (Public Safety) Act 2005 No. 119 were presented and passed through the NSW State Legislative Council (NSW Parliament Transcripts, 2005). These emergency powers for police included the ability to seize and detain, for a period of no more than 7 days, a vehicle, mobile phone or other communication device if the seizure and detention of the vehicle, phone or device will assist in preventing or controlling a public disorder . . . The Local Court may, on the application of a police officer, authorise the continued detention of a vehicle, mobile phone or other communication device . . . for an additional period not exceeding 14 days if satisfied that its continued detention will assist in preventing or controlling a public disorder. (NSW Legislation, 2005, p. 10)

In the week before the Cronulla riots, another form of surveillance to monitor text messages was initiated by the Australian Federal Government and Federal Police. Special police units were given access to text messages stored on the servers of telecommunication network providers through the Telecommunications (Interception) Amendment (Stored Communications) Act 2004 (ComLaw, 2004, No 148, section 3), which defined stored communication as a communication that is stored on equipment or any other thing, but does not include:

(a) a voice over Internet protocol (VOIP) communication; or
(b) any other communication; stored on a highly transitory basis as an integral function of the technology used in its transmission.

The design of the text message system supports this form of surveillance. Text messaging is a store-and-forward service: A text message is not sent directly to the recipient’s mobile phone. Instead, the message is stored on the Short Message Service Centre (SMSC), for days if necessary, until the recipient turns the mobile phone on or moves into range, at which point the message is delivered (Hillebrand, 2002; Trosby, 2004). The storage of text messages on the SMSC provides easy access for those wishing to monitor their content. Access to text messages on the SMSC is technically uncomplicated, but permissions for this access still depend on obtaining an Interception Warrant.
The Interception Warrant for National Safety issues can only be issued by the Attorney General . . . Warrants issued for the interception of any communication medium, are provided only [once authorities have] confirmed the extent of the offence and are convinced that all other methods of surveillance have been duly exhausted. (SS8 Networks, 2007, p. 7)

It was not until after the Cronulla riots that this process was revealed as applying to text messages stored on telecommunication servers.

During the Cronulla events more than 270,000 SMS messages were obtained from the carriers and analysed. It was only then that the names of those involved and their service numbers could be determined. By accessing messages without the knowledge of the sender or receiver, police were able to arrest those who were inciting violence or about to commit crimes. (Australian IT, 2007; The Sydney Morning Herald, 2007)

This quote from a media report published on two online sites relates to the authority of the Telecommunications (Interception) Amendment (Stored Communications) Act 2004. These amendments allowed law enforcement agencies to analyze the time and date of phone calls and the content of text messages as “stored communication” with the carriers, without the knowledge of sender or receiver (Telecommunications [Interception] Amendment [Stored Communications] Act 2004; SS8 Networks, 2007, p. 5). More than a quarter of a million text messages were obtained from the telecommunication carriers before, during, and after the Cronulla riots, although this figure does not represent the number actually subjected to this form of surveillance, which could be considerably higher. The news reports also signify that the text messages in question were recorded and stored within other systems, such as police records, to be used as evidence against those responsible for sending “messages that incited violence.” Subsequent arrests were made as a result of this form of surveillance. Twelve days after the riot, police made their first arrest, when a 33-year-old man was charged with using “a carrier service to menace and harass” as well as “publish to incite a crime” (Box & Stapleton, 2005, p. 1; Burke & Cubby, 2005, p. 7). In February 2006, police made three more arrests for using a telecommunication carrier to harass and offend (Australian Associated Press [AAP], 2006a, 2006b). The legislation that supports this surveillance technique and the material infrastructures that enable it effectively established that individuals are accountable for their communications.

**Literature Review: Text Messaging, Risk Perceptions, and Ontological Security**

There are many academic texts that have focused on exploring the social and cultural dimensions of mobile phones and text messaging in various everyday contexts with ample attention given to young people (B. Brown, Green, & Harper, 2001; Glotz et al., 2005; Goggin, 2006, 2008; Green & Haddon, 2009; Harper et al., 2005; Ito et al., 2005; Kasesniemi, 2003; Katz, 2005, 2008; Katz & Aahkus, 2002; Kavoori & Arceneaux, 2006; Kopomaa, 2000; Ling, 2004, 2008; Pertierra, Ugarte, Pingol, Hernandez, & Decanay, 2002). There are also many research studies which have explored the notion of accountability in mobile communications (see Green, cited in B. Brown et al., 2001), the challenges mobile communications present to government authorities (Agar, 2003; Goggin, 2006; Pertierra et al., 2002; Rheingold, 2002), and the risks attached to the overuse of mobile communications, with a particular focus on health and public safety (see Ling, 2004; Goggin, 2006; Green & Haddon, 2009; Lai, 2012). Despite this significant attention to mobile communications, there are only a few studies that have predominantly focused on text messaging and challenges to government authorities (Hirsch & Henry, 2005), the most famous being *Txt-ing Selves: Cellphone and Philippine Modernity* (Pertierra et al., 2002). There are also only a few short reflections and analysis on the Cronulla riots and “the messages that incited violence” (see Goggin, 2006, pp. 124-125; Lattas, 2007, p. 321; Poynting, 2009, p. 46); however, to date, there is no empirical research on the risk perceptions of Sydneysiders following these riots nor are there any connections made between risk perceptions and ontological security in the mobile communication literature. The following paragraphs will explore research on text messaging and how it has posed threats to government control, risk perception literature, and Anthony Giddens’ notion of ontological security.

It is often celebrated that mobile phones open communication possibilities, as their inherent mobility means that conversations can happen “anywhere, anytime.” It is equally significant to observe that opening up communication possibilities has on occasion presented challenges to the state and its authorities. A well-publicized international example of such a case was when Filipino people began to gather at Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) in Manila, summoned by the text message “go 2EDSA, wear blk” (Pertierra et al., 2002, p. 107; Rheingold, 2002, pp. 157-158; Agar, 2003, pp. 108-110). This chain text message was sent to organize and coordinate a protest rally against the Filipino Government during President Joseph Estrada’s impeachment trial. According to popular belief, “text power” was responsible for the eventual demise of the Estrada government (Rheingold, 2002, p. 157; Agar, 2003, pp. 108-110); however, the social unarrest was present before the text messaging campaign. The contribution of text messaging in EDSA, similar to the Cronulla riots, was its capacity to expedite the arrangement of the masses (Goggin, 2006; Pertierra et al., 2002), which has posed various challenges to governments and authorities, particularly when used by large numbers of people in unison. The use of mobile technologies can challenge how information is distributed and controlled, as a
digitally written discourse generated through mobile phones, whether it is through Internet or the store-forward-service of text messaging, leaves traces of conversations on all the technological devices the message encounters. In the United Kingdom, records of mobile phones use are kept and in exceptional circumstances can be used by State authorities in criminal cases through the Data Protection Act 1998 (Green, 2001). One of the most recent illustrations of this practice is the 2011 London riots and the use of Blackberry messenger (BBM). These messages were widely reported as being “untraceable”; however, Research in Motion (owners of Blackberry) reportedly surrendered BBMs to the Scotland Yard in an effort to control the coordination of further violence (Dodd & Davies, 2011; Prodhan & Sharp, 2011). These reports illustrate that the extension of police powers was buried within the language of “risk,” which Wilkinson asserts is strategic measure “for the purpose of refining techniques of surveillance and social control” (2010, p. 84).

A discorse-historical approach to key political crises in the last millennium shows a repetition of the same tactics to unite the populace (Graham, Keenan, & Dowd, 2004). When social solidarity is placed under some kind of threat, people react by evoking shared beliefs about an impending disaster (Beck, 1992; Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; Furedi, 2002; Graham et al., 2004; Wilkinson, 2001a, 2001b). Since the terrorist attacks in technologically advanced global cities of New York, Madrid, and London, methods of surveillance have expanded (Arvanitakis, 2008; Mason, 2006), which is justified by the rhetoric that “increasingly taps into individualised insecurities and fears” (Mythen & Walklate, 2006). The wider ramifications of this broad insecurity is an explosion of anxieties that become embedded to form a culture of fear and uncertainty (Furedi, 2002; Mythen & Walklate, 2006). The Cronulla riot is a case in point. The violence on 11th December 2005 at Cronulla was linked to wayward text messaging practices; moreover, the racist slants in the text messages, the broadcast media representations, and the public reactions crudely connected this violent behavior to terrorism. The rhetoric of “keeping up” with changes in technology to fight terrorism was the Australian Government’s justification for changing the laws to increase police powers and to access and intercept text messages (Grubel, 2006).

The perpetuation of a risk society relies upon the concept of risk being bound to modernization and the insecurities induced by it (Beck, 1992). Social scientists like Ulrich Beck have been criticized for not embarking on an empirical investigation of the reality of risk perception (Wilkinson, 2001a, 2001b). Empirical data from risk perception research reveals it to be considerably more complex and obscure than Beck portrays in his seminal “risk society” thesis (Wilkinson, 2001a, p. 5). There is evidence that the heightened anxieties of “late twentieth-century society [are] . . . connected with the extent that we are becoming more risk conscious” (Wilkinson, 2001a, p. 5). Content analysis of Western newspapers in the 1990s found that the word “risk” was used as a synonym for “hazards,” “threats,” and “disasters” (Lupton, 1999, pp. 9-10). The broadcast media’s attention to ‘risk’ may have contributed to a risk conscious society, but it is more likely an expression of anxiety than of risk consciousness. However, Wilkinson (2001a) asserts it is debatable to conclude that ‘society is more anxious because it is more risk conscious’ (p. 8). The anxious condition of individuals in modern society has been interpreted as “a product of the social conflicts and cultural contradictions which comprise their experience of day-to-day life” (Wilkinson, 2001a, p. 9). To provide a theoretical framework for these risk perceptions Anthony Giddens’ notion of ontological security, the inner balance between trust and anxiety will be explored.

Ontological security is a central but small component of Giddens’ (1990, 1991) theoretical basis for understanding sociality and modernity. In its broadest sense, ontological security is “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1990, p. 92). Giddens defines security as resting between “a balance of trust and acceptable risk” (1990, p. 36), with ontological security being just one form of security, albeit a “very important form” (1990, p. 92). Ontological security is an emotional experience and situated within the unconscious, but its source lies within a sense of “being.” Ontological security, therefore, is “an emotional inoculation which protects against existential anxieties to which all humans are potentially subject” (1990, p. 94). It must be understood predominantly in the “context of trust and forms of risk or danger,” as it acts as an anxiety-controlling barrier (Giddens, 1990, p. 100). Giddens articulates ontological security as a “defensive carapace” or a “protective cocoon” that allows individuals to detach themselves from risks or dangers, thus “screening off” anxieties associated with day-to-day life (Giddens, 1991, pp. 39-40). Thus, individuals screen off any negative possibilities in favor of “a generalised feeling of hope that derives from basic trust.” Basic trust is considered foundational to ontological security, operating as a defensive carapace to any thoughts that might cause distress (1991, p. 40). Anything that disrupts the practical consciousness that anchors feelings of ontological security is rationalized through the natural attitude, a tacit acceptance, that “brackets out questions about self, other and the object world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep up with everyday activity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 37).

Research Method: Exploring Participants Attitudes and Perceptions of Text Messaging

This is a qualitative study. The aim was not to draw statistical conclusions; instead, the study intended to produce nuanced understandings of how people use text messaging to communicate with their social networks in everyday life. Experience is central for studying and researching everyday
life (Pickering, 2008), although it is acknowledged that analysis of an individual’s experience can be troublesome as it is never pure or transparent. To balance this, three methodological approaches were used: dialogic, deconstructive, and contextual. This approach to empirical research lies in the interplay between lived experience, discourses, and the social context, which are always representative of more than one lived reality (Saukko 2003). The chosen method of data collection was one-on-one interviews; prerequisites for inclusion in the sample were knowledge of how to send and receive text messages, age between 18 and 40 years, and living in Sydney. According to Silverman (2000), qualitative methods like one-on-one interviews “exemplify a common belief that they can provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena that would be obtained from a purely quantitative data” (p. 80). This particular form of data collection was selected to gain a “thicker description” and to bring to light the many subtle contradictions of the sociocultural dimensions of everyday text messaging practices (Geertz, 1973).

During a 5-month period, 17 women and 13 men (Table 1) were recruited using two forms of nonprobability sampling: convenience and snowballing. To keep the sample to a manageable size, 30 one-on-one interviews were conducted using an interview guide to stimulate conversation about each research participant’s text messaging experiences, practices, and opinions about the technology. The same topics were raised in each interview, but as the interviews were based on open-ended questions, their durations ranged between 30 min and 2 hrs.

The interviews were transcribed and coded initially under four broad categories: convenience, privacy, regulation, and safety. In using the three methodological approaches—dialogic, deconstructive, and contextual—it is essential to be aware of any bias through continual reflection, sensitivity toward social contexts, and an awareness that social worlds are constantly shaped by the historical and political (Saukko, 2003). After reflecting on this initial analysis, the interview transcripts were re-coded to explore an extension of the original four categories as it became evident that the research participants’ comments were shaped by wide-ranging social and cultural influences (Saukko, 2003), particularly when discussing text messaging and the Cronulla riots in Sydney (see the appendix). When the conversation turned to this topic, there was evidence of a balancing act between trust and anxiety in the research participants’ comments. This article is representative of this aspect, specifically, the discussion and analysis of the research participants’ responses to the recent changes in Australian law. This research was conducted between 12 and 16 months after the Cronulla riots; however, the social context was still a fresh memory for the research participants. In each interview, an explanation was given regarding the new amendments to NSW State and Commonwealth laws and the policing of text messaging. In the following sections, the research participants’ responses and comments are analyzed using the theoretical framework of ontological security to enrich an understanding of risk perceptions in a climate of fear and uncertainty. As Michael Pickering (2008) argues, theory provides an understanding of how social worlds are configured, but unless these experiences are explored, there are no insights into the lived and living landscapes to which the theory relates.

**“It Is Absolutely a Good Thing”: Policing Text Messages**

In all the interviews, the topic of the text messaging system was discussed. Some participants confirmed they knew that their messages could be accessed by their service provider; either through personal experience, knowledge of the new surveillance laws, or understanding of how the store-forward

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**Table 1. List of Research Participants.**

| Pseudonym | Age | Occupation | Nationality |
|-----------|-----|------------|-------------|
| Hayden    | 18  | Retail     | Australian  |
| Jessica   | 19  | Student    | Australian  |
| Chloe     | 20  | Student    | Australian  |
| Katrina   | 21  | Retail     | Australian  |
| Nicolas   | 22  | Student    | Australian  |
| Morgan    | 22  | Therapist  | Australian  |
| Anita     | 23  | Student    | Australian  |
| Belinda   | 23  | Student    | Australian  |
| Sally     | 24  | Accountant | Australian  |
| Jeanne    | 24  | Student    | Australian  |
| Kyla      | 24  | Office administrator | Australian |
| Anthony   | 24  | Engineer   | British     |
| Will      | 24  | Office administrator | Australian |
| Joshua    | 26  | Retail     | Australian  |
| Nicola    | 26  | Student    | American    |
| Martin    | 26  | Barista    | French      |
| Barry     | 26  | Student    | Egyptian    |
| Mark      | 28  | Musician   | Australian  |
| Dave      | 28  | Musician   | Australian  |
| Toby      | 29  | Emergency services | Australian |
| Cameron   | 29  | Project manager | Australian |
| John      | 30  | University Lecturer | Greek     |
| Olivia    | 32  | Office administrator | Irish     |
| Chantal   | 33  | Self-employed | Australian |
| Paul      | 34  | Financial advisor | Australian |
| Michelle  | 35  | Self-employed | Australian |
| Sylvia    | 35  | Florist    | Australian  |
| Susanne   | 37  | Self-employed | Australian |
| Elizabeth | 38  | Freelance writer | Australian |
| Natalie   | 40  | Lawyer     | Australian  |

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**Access Act 2006** (ComLaw, 2006). During the research interviews, participants were asked for their opinions on the amendments to State and Commonwealth laws and the policing of text messaging. In the following sections, the research participants’ responses and comments are analyzed using the theoretical framework of ontological security to enrich an understanding of risk perceptions in a climate of fear and uncertainty. As Michael Pickering (2008) argues, theory provides an understanding of how social worlds are configured, but unless these experiences are explored, there are no insights into the lived and living landscapes to which the theory relates.
system functions. A few participants openly expressed discomfort in thinking about the new laws or any form of potential monitoring. The most extreme example was Dave, who chose to completely disengage by asking “Can we go to the next question please?” Disengaging from the discussion or from even thinking about an issue is an overt form of “bracketing out” anything that is the cause of uneasiness. A more subtle form of bracketing was seen in pragmatic rationales, one example of which was Olivia’s response:

Yes [pause] I don’t really think about it too much, I mean I don’t put really private information in there but obviously people don’t delve into your business or your own private affairs.

In using text messaging for daily communications, Olivia does not think “too much” about her service provider having access to her text messages, but at the same time, she does not put “private information” in text messages. This daily practice suggests that she is conscious of the possibility of surveillance. Olivia’s comment evidences a “defensive carapace,” in trying not to think about surveillance practices as well as in her conviction that information about her private life remains uncompromised. Her stance of “invulnerability” blocks any negative possibilities, in favor of a generalized attitude that derives from “basic trust,” the foundation to ontological security (Giddens, 1991, p. 40).

“Basic trust” operates as a defensive carapace; thus, if any thoughts disrupt a sense of stability, barriers are set in place. In the research, participants’ matter-of-fact responses to the knowledge that telecommunication companies have access to text messages revealed this demarcation.

John: I don’t mind because they are not going to check my messages, I think, I hope, because they have so many customers. I mean they may pick people randomly but because I do statistics I know the chance of them picking me is very small.

So what about word searches?

John: I don’t know.

John relies upon his knowledge of statistics that gives his rationale a groundedness, but the thought of computerized word searches is dismissed with a simple reply of “I don’t know” to end the conversation. To manage day-to-day life, individuals’ main emotional support is a “defensive carapace”: Feelings of security rely firmly upon “basic trust” that functions by “screening off” any “risks or dangers in the surrounding settings of action and interaction” (Giddens, 1991, pp. 39-40). Here, John achieves stability in the surrounding social and material environment by actively placing a defensive carapace against certain thoughts (Giddens, 1991). In general, the participants’ uneasiness in thinking about the new surveillance measures was shown in their simple dismissal or rationalization of the measures as applying only to terrorists or other criminals. The demarcation therefore is the distancing of self from the any form of surveillance.

Being “at risk”

is subject to a variety of influences . . . social and cultural climate [being one] . . . many panics or overreactions . . . provide interesting insights to how society makes sense of itself. Such reactions can only be understood in relation to the wider social processes. (Furedi, 2002, p. 17)

In this social context, the violence at Cronulla and the way it was organized using a number of communication mediums (although text messages were the focus of most media reports) meant that people felt safer knowing that text messaging was being policed.

Sylvia: I think that it is a good thing. If they can do anything to stop the violence, if it helps people stay out of trouble, then I think that it is absolutely a good thing.

Sylvia’s comment was a response to the “stop and search” surveillance technique used after the Cronulla riots. The NSW State Police action of randomly searching people’s mobile phones was an effort to discipline the wayward text messaging practices after the riots. Sylvia’s opinion that this was “absolutely a good thing” denotes her belief that this form of policing would somehow make everyone safer. Her repetitive statement “that is a good thing . . . that is absolutely a good thing” suggests that the policing of text messages appeases her anxiety about further violence. The salient aspect of Sylvia’s comment is not so much fear or insecurity about further rioting but her conservative attitude. It is noted that often analysis of risk “does not make a connection between the preoccupation with safety and the impulse of conservatism [as a consequence] safety and the attitude of caution are treated as inherently positive principles” (Furedi, 2002, p. 9).

In a period of uncertainty, people fear any form of risk (Furedi, 2002), and chain text messages were seen as putting people at risk. As outlined, young men “of Middle Eastern appearance” were linked to a range of threats, terrorism being one of those. This had a cumulative effect of increasing the imagined risk and threatening stability and certainty (Arvanitakis, 2008). Safety was a prime consideration for the research participants when discussing the Cronulla riots and the formal surveillance measures.

Will: I don’t mind it. Obviously with the Cronulla riots, the text messages going round didn’t really help anything. So I guess, if they were able to track who, I don’t know, the organisers or whatever, through text messaging I was quite happy about that.

Will’s comment shows satisfaction with this form of surveillance, relating not only to the policing of text messages but also to the knowledge that they could be traced and used as evidence. His expression “quite happy” denotes a curt
emotional experience. It can also be likened to an affective state, a feeling of being happy because the materiality of text messaging allows it to be used as a trace. This particular use of text messages by police could promote stability and coherence, a settled feeling that contrasts with the occasional chaos in social worlds. As Giddens asserts, ontological security is “an emotional inoculation which protects against existential anxieties” (1990, p. 94). According to these research participants, the policing measures appeased anxieties about public safety by seemingly assuring a broader sense of security and certainty.

“Yeah, Anything to Stop Terrorism”:
Mapping Risk Perceptions

The surveillance measures sanctioned through the Telecommunication (Interception and Access) Act prompted many of the research participants to link this form of policing with terrorism or other criminal activities. Some participants used the words terrorist, terrorism, or terrorist activities to explain why these surveillance measures were necessary. In their responses, a process of “bracketing” was evident, as some participants were convinced that the amendments to the law would have no impact on them but instead would allow monitoring of illegal activities. John’s comment here evidences his “defensive carapace” as he expresses a sense of disbelief that anyone would scrutinize his text messages:

John: I am not a terrorist so who would be interested in any of the messages that I send?

The “invulnerability” expressed in this comment is like a protective cocoon rather than a firm conviction of security; it is a defense against any possibility that could threaten or cause discomfort. John’s differentiation allows him to “bracket out a host of actual and potential happenings” (Giddens, 1991, p. 128). Isolating himself from any kind of suspicion by concluding that formal surveillance would target only terrorists, John, like many of the participants, equates access and interception of text messages exclusively with terrorist or other criminal activities.

Chantal: I knew that it was something that they could do but it is not something that I consider because most of my texts are pretty mundane. It is not like I am organizing terrorist activities.

To maintain a sense of security and stability in individuals or surrounding environments, a certain level of positiveness is required (Giddens, 1991). This is seen in Chantal’s comment as she makes a joke about her text messages being monitored. In his analysis of “adaptive reactions” to risk, Giddens (1990) analyzes, “pragmatic acceptance” which involves not withdrawal from the outside world but “pragmatic participation” that focuses on day-to-day difficulties and tasks (1990, p. 135). It is John’s and Chantal’s basic trust in the law and the actions of the authorities that sustains the notion that any form of policing text messages functions to safeguard against terrorist activities. This was the dominant position taken by the research participants.

A sense of being at risk, according to Furedi, “has become a permanent condition that exists separately from any particular problem” (2002, p. 5). Risk is often discussed and referenced in “sweeping terms” which transforms the notion into an independent and ubiquitous force, ultimately converting any human experience into a “safety situation” (Furedi, 2002, p. 5). When discussing Cronulla and new regulations for text messaging, the participants in this study produced a spectrum of different interpretations of how text messaging was a threat to public safety. The consensus in their responses was that risks existed in the form of terrorism or other criminal activities, bullying or other forms of harassment, and thus open surveillance was deemed necessary. In Wilkinson’s analysis of risk perception, he states that people may express a pessimistic view about risks in society, but the majority of people will not relate it to their own lives (2001a). In the participants’ responses, this was mostly the case. This acceptance of the new surveillance laws by the participants is an expression of ontological security as they bracket off any potential threat to their safety, not only through basic trust but also by applying the risks to others. For example, during Cameron’s interview, the Cronulla riots and how the police used the “stop and search” technique to check people’s mobile phones for “messages that incited violence” were discussed, and he said:

Cameron: I think that is good. Yeah anything to stop terrorism and rioting or acts of violence is good.

So you wouldn’t care if the police said that they wanted to check your phone?

Cameron: Yeah I would care because I haven’t done anything wrong. I would find it an invasion of privacy but I think that it is good that they can and I wish that they would go through more . . . messages . . . anything that will stop acts of violence.

In the context of Cronulla riots, this police action seemed a necessary safety measure to Cameron, but when asked about his response to the police potentially checking his mobile phone, his position changed. Wilkinson (2001a) argues that risk perception can be so abstract that people often dissociate themselves from the process. Thus, Cameron finds it an “invasion of privacy” but also believes it is “good” that police can monitor text messaging practices. In this case, Cameron relates the risk of an invasion of privacy to others who used text messages to incite violence but not to himself. Within the wide spectrum of diversity in participants’ comments, this was the only other dominant agreement, namely, that text messages are a record of a dialogue and could therefore be used as evidence that a conversation or an event took
place, but this accountability attached to text messaging communications was not necessarily connected to their everyday lives.

Awareness of the potential use of text messages as a form of evidence reveals the participants’ internalization of the traceability of this digitally written discourse. There is a sense of safety in knowing that text messages are monitored and an innate belief that such monitoring will always be used for the common good.

Michelle: If there was a criminal case and you could prove something through a text message then [long pause] yeah gosh I guess at the moment it feels really safe . . . but if that started to change and there were cases of people being violated or some kind of abuse . . . If that was to happen then yes I think, like in cases of abuse, harassment . . . like when relationships have gone into that really bad space like when one of the partners is constantly texting or if there have been threats or if it is used for any sort of racist things or at schools with bullying.

Michelle contextualizes her response to the new laws through potential cases of abuse or harassment, demonstrating a positive stance about the surveillance of text messages. In Giddens’ lexicon, this position would amount to “pragmatic acceptance” as it seemingly relieves the burden of anxiety (1990, p. 133). Michelle separates herself from this situation that “at the moment it feels really safe,” but in her description of the potential danger of text messages, she is articulating anxieties as well as appeasing them with the thought that the text can be used to “prove something.” Correspondingly, Olivia advocates open surveillance when discussing the policing of text messaging:

Olivia: Yeah, just because there are so many threats now, it has to be open. The same as phone tapping and all of that . . . [there is] a point where it does need to be something that people can trace.

Olivia’s comment speaks to one of Furedi’s (2002) central arguments “that the perception of being at risk expresses a pervasive mood in society [which] influences action” (2002, p. 20). Furedi describes a “free-floating” risk consciousness that is attached to everyday experiences, which combats a potential threat with a safety measure (2002, p. 20). Olivia’s belief that “there are so many threats now” and her assertion that there needs to be a “trace” of conversations links the violence at Cronulla with the notion of formal surveillance in the interest of public safety. A “generalised climate of risk,” Giddens asserts, becomes “a source of unspecific anxieties” for most people (1991, pp. 181-208). This is the ideal environment for the acceptance of increased surveillance measures.

“I’ve Got Nothing to Hide”: Safety in Surveillance

One of the most common responses to idea of formal surveillance of text messages was the attitude—“I’ve got nothing to hide.” This is not a unique finding; other studies on changes to privacy laws have reported a similar rhetoric (Solove, 2007). “I’ve got nothing to hide” is a defensive carapace based on the proposal that if you have nothing to hide, you would have no problem with formal surveillance measures. A few participants used the exact phrase “I’ve got nothing to hide,” and other participants’ comments complemented this stance by arguing that the surveillance measures concerned only criminals or terrorists. The significance of this position is that it denotes the fusion between anxieties and the participants’ expressions of ontological security in an environment of heightened fear (Furedi, 2002, 2005). Susanne’s comment is a synthesis of this:

Susanne: I have no problems with it because I have nothing to hide and I think in the [Cronulla] situation that was absolutely right. I think that it is the same as anything isn’t it, like if the police want to pull you over and search your vehicle then they have every right to do that and so they should. It’s in the interest of public safety. So yeah I don’t have any problems with that, I think that it is more than appropriate in this day and age.

Furedi argues that fear dominates public life; he asserts that “we have become very good at scare one another and being scared” (2005, p. 1). Policing text messages, according to Susanne, is “more than appropriate in this day and age,” and her comment suggests that society is unsafe in comparison with the past. Susanne’s comment indicates that she has internalized a fear about potentially being unsafe, thus she supports the formal surveillance of text messages, arguing that it is “in the interest of public safety.” In this approach, she simultaneously expresses anxiety about not being safe and assurance that these laws do not apply to her because she has “nothing to hide.” In justifying the recent change in the law, Susanne likens the formal surveillance of text messages to the “stop and search” technique of other personal possessions. Morgan also relies on this claim to validate the extension of police powers:

Morgan: I guess [it’s] the same as having a search warrant, to search the house, and to search someone’s belongings. I think it’s ok. I’ve got nothing to hide.

Equating the formal surveillance measures of text messaging to other surveillance techniques provides a sense of familiarity and security. Morgan’s “natural attitude,” “I’ve got nothing to hide,” also indicates that she believes these changes to legislation do not apply to her. Solove (2007) cites a range of rhetoric associated with the “I have nothing to hide” argument, one of the most compelling is underlying the phrase an individualized attitude “I don’t care what happens so long as it doesn’t happen to me” (p. 751). Susanne’s and Morgan’s approach to surveillance is similar to Mirko Bagaric’s argument that “if you have done nothing wrong, you have nothing to fear . . . Privacy is often no more than code for the ‘rights to secrecy,’ which is destructive of an
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open and free society” (Bagaric, 2008, p. 22). The “nothing to hide argument” essentially rests within the rationale that “there is no threat to privacy unless the government uncovers unlawful activity, in which case a person has no legitimate justification to claim that it remain private” (Solove, 2007, p. 745). While this argument, its history, and critique extend beyond the boundaries of this article, it highlights the balancing of “risks.” Being safe, the feeling of being safe, trumps any threat to privacy. Balancing trust and anxiety requires the research participants to have confidence the new surveillance laws, while creating a barrier between them and the implementation of any surveillance techniques. Cameron states a comparable position:

Cameron: Oh yeah it is an invasion of privacy but if they want to be that pathetic and read the messages that I am sending then [laughs] I think the only time that you would be concerned is that if you are doing something dodgy. I don’t do anything dodgy . . . so it doesn’t really worry me.

A crucial part of maintaining ontological security is reliance on deflecting any potential risks by adopting an outlook of “what could go wrong?” thereby pushing any doubts out of mind (Giddens, 1991, p. 129). Cameron casually refers to privacy being jeopardized through formal surveillance of text messages but simultaneously claims that the likelihood of some authority going through his text messages is minimal. He laughs while making this comment, using humor to rationalize how people would only need privacy if they were doing something unlawful. While saying this Cameron describes any potential interest in his text messages as “pathetic”; this is another form of a defensive carapace against any thoughts that may arouse anxiety (Giddens, 1990, 1991).

Conclusion

This article argued to manage fear in a present or perceived threat individuals are disposed to mediate any actual or perceived risks by bracketing out anxieties to manage their everyday lives. The empirical analysis provided an understanding of the complex, and sometimes contradictory, balance between trust and anxiety. The research participants’ reactions to the policing of text messages revealed how they either bracket out anything that is the cause of uneasiness by offering pragmatic or matter-of-fact responses as a defensive carapace (Giddens, 1990, 1991). Disengagement from wider political processes, such as the ever-expanding forms of surveillance and how that facilitates accountability for all digital discourse, highlights the approach of a predominantly anxious society. Equally, the generalized attitude of acceptance derives from “basic trust” which is the foundation of ontological security (Giddens, 1990, 1991). While disengagement and acceptance could be considered as binary opposites, both display the spectrum of an emotional response to any perceived risk.

Opening up communication possibilities through text messaging has produced another form of surveillance as this store-forward service leaves traces of conversations on all the technological devices the message encounters. The research participants in this study did not show concern about the surveillance of their words nor the extension of the law enforcement legislation to include mobile phones. In fact, the trust they placed in the authorities balanced any anxieties about further threats to public safety. The policing of text messages was linked by many of the research participants’ to terrorism, thus the expansion of surveillance was rationalized as a necessary safety measure. Risk perceptions are often contradictory; as Wilkinson (2001a) argues, many people express a pessimistic view about risks in society, but the majority of people will not relate it to their own lives. This was the case in this study as the research participants again produced a range of “adaptive reactions to risk” (Giddens, 1990, p. 135) expressed as invulnerability, positiveness and a reliance upon the discourse “I have nothing to hide,” which is commonly attached to privacy and surveillance debates.

A sense of being at risk is subject to a variety of social influences the social and cultural climate being one (Furedi, 2002) accordingly the timing of this research is significant as it was only 12 to 16 months after the Cronulla riots. The research participants’ comments indicate that concerns for public safety were paramount and the empirical analysis demonstrated how various expressions of ontological security act as an anxiety-controlling barrier (Giddens, 1990). While this article presented an empirical based study that addressed a gap in mobile communication literature by exploring the relationship between risk perceptions, ontological security, and text messaging, future research could investigate gender and risk perceptions, understandings of privacy in relation to text messaging and the public and private dimensions in mobile communication technologies considering this research outlines the impact text messaging has on notions of surveillance and public space.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Sample text messages were requested at the beginning of the interview, including three sent and three received messages and the contents were discussed in the interview.

1. What do you think are the benefits of text messaging?
2. How often do you send text messages?
3. How many text messages on average would you send in a day?
4. How many text messages have you sent today?
5. Who do you send text messages to and who do you receive them from?
6. Tell me about:
   (i). The typical type of text messages you receive,
   (ii). The typical type of text messages that you send.

Discussion of sample text messages:

7. Do you always compose your text messages in the
   same way?
8. What situation would you not use it? Can you give
   me some examples?
9. Have you ever been shocked or surprised by any text
   messages you have received? Can you give me an
   example?
10. Have you ever been shocked or surprised by a
    response to any text message that you have sent? Can
    you give me an example?
11. There is a trend overseas to keep any special text
    messages in a journal and with some phones you can
    upload your text messages to your computer. Would
    you do this or have you ever done anything like this?
    Why/Why not?
12. Do you like having the option of communication
    through text messaging for those awkward moments?
    Can you think of any examples where text messaging
    has helped during one of these times?
13. Do you think that text messaging has changed the
    way that you communicate with people (friends, fam-
    ily, colleagues?) how and why?
14. Has there ever been a time where you have been hav-
    ing a conversation in a public place such as on the
    street, bus or at a café that you have forgotten that
    your conversation can be heard by others around
    you? Do you think that text messaging changes this?
15. Would you prefer to have a text message exchange
    rather than a conversation in public places?
16. Where would you typically send a text message?
17. What time of the day or night do you think it accept-
    able to send/ receive text messages? Why?
18. Have you ever sent or would you be happy to send
    intimate text messages while out at a pub/club or café?
19. Do you think that text messaging changes face-to-
    face encounters? Can you think of any examples?
20. Do you believe that the use of mobile phones and text
    messaging decreases or increases human interaction?
    If so, why? If not, do you think that it reduces face to
    face communication?
21. Have you ever thought about the circumstances in
    which the receiver gets the message? Yes/No what
    we your considerations or reservations?
22. Would you be concerned about sending a romantic
    text message to your partner while they are at work or
    out with friends? Do they let others read the text mes-
    sages that they receive?
23. Have you ever shown another person a text message
    you have received?
24. Have you ever read your text messages out to a group
    of people?
25. What would you think if someone read a text mes-
    sage you sent to them out aloud? Do you know if this
    has ever happen before? If so, what was the occasion?
26. Have you ever caught someone going through your text
    messages? If you have what happened? If you haven’t
    what would you think if someone did that to you?
27. When you send a text message do you ever think
    about how it is transmitted? (discussion about the
    store-forward system)
28. Did you know that your telecommunication company
    can access your messages? (explanation of
    Telecommunications Interception and Access Act
    2006) What is your opinion?
29. Following the Cronulla riots, there were amendments
    made to the NSW Law Enforcement Legislation
    Public Safety Act 2005 that gives police powers to
    stop people and check their mobile phones for text
    messages and confiscate their phones for up to 7
    days. What is your opinion on this change?
30. Do you think that text messaging needs to be policed?
    Why/Why not?

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