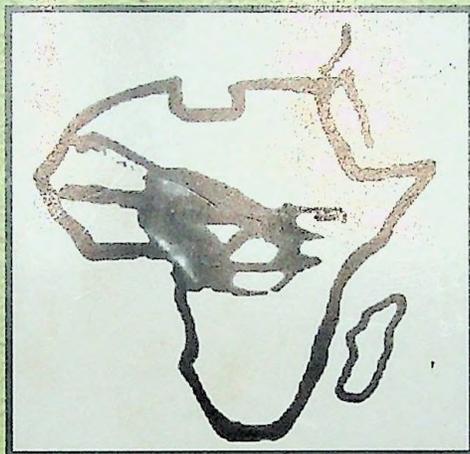# ABIBISEM

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Freedom of Speech and the Discourse of Flaming in Ghana: Evidence from Radio Panel Discussions

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Abstract

Following the liberalisation of the airwaves in Ghana in the mid-1990s, the right to freedom of speech has been guaranteed althoughh not without abuses. This freedom is evident in the activities of radio networks that urge listeners to participate in radio panel discussions (RPDs) through making interactive telephone calls or by posting text messages. In this paper, I explore the discourse of flaming on the panel discussions of Joy FM and Peace FM, two popular private radio stations. Grounded in Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis, the study shows that listeners of RPDs use SMS to deprecate other selves. The study also reveals that flaming is precipitated by such technological affordances of mobile telephony as anonymity, pseudonymy and facelessness. The analysis further shows that social dissatisfactions were more frequent on RPDs than political complaints. Based on these findings, the study recommends that media houses educate the public on the face-threatening potential of the SMS technology, given that derisive messages undermine the social, cultural and national cohesion.

Keywords: discourse, flaming, radio panel discussion, SMS

Introduction

Following the liberalisation of the airwaves in Ghana in the mid-1990s, the right to freedom of speech has been guaranteed. This sense of democratic awareness has well been expressed by the media, prominent among which are the radio networks (McLuhan, 1964; Karikari, 1994). It is, therefore, not surprising that there are now over a hundred private commercial radio services despite a freeze in frequency assignments that lasted from 1999 until 2001 (Ghana Broadcasting Study, 2005). In recent times, many radio stations encourage Ghanaians to participate in panel discussions by posting text messages. Yankah (2004) has observed that a number of these messages are gradually being 'Ghanaianised' because they are occasionally interspersed with Ghanaian expressions and interjections. Regrettably, there has arisen a high incidence of flaming and abusive discourse in the messages posted by the Ghanaian listening public. Yankah (1998) and Akyea and Aziaku (2009) have noted that the use of mobile telecommunication has wrought a negative impact on the cultural values of Ghanaians despite its communicative usefulness.

However, research on the discourse of flaming via texting in the electronic media in Ghana is rare though "as people become more aware of the communicative potential of texting, the range of specialised uses grows" (Crystal, 2008: 117). Besides, Yankah's (1998; 2004) attempts at exposing this

phenomenon are anecdotal, although they expose the reader to an emerging culture of flaming in Ghana's electronic media. This paper, therefore, explores the discourse of flaming in text messages posted to media panel discussions, using two popular radio stations in Ghana. In what follows, I first sketch a brief vignette of works on flaming in order to show how similar to and different from other studies the present work is. The theoretical framework next receives attention followed by the methodolgy adopted. The analysis and discussion of data is presented, and summarised by way of key findings. Given the findings, some recommendations are finally made.

In computer-mediated communication (CMC), the term *flaming* is usually associated with the e-mail. Flaming first appeared in print in *The Hackers Dictionary* where it was defined as "to speak rapidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude" (Steele, 1983: 63). Although it is widely known that flaming is negative in tone, scholars do not agree on what actually constitutes a flame (Kayani, 1998; Aiken & Waller, 2000).

One common view of flaming relates to verbal attacks and aggressive communication. Among scholars who hold this position are Parks and Floyd (1998), Landry (2000) and O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003). For instance, Landry (2000) refers to the phenomenon as "uninhibited and aggressive communication" (p. 139). According to Parks and Floyd (1996), flaming is a "verbal aggression, blunt disclosure, and non conforming behaviour" (p. 81). Clearly, a common thread that runs through these definitions is that persons flame other selves in order to offend and threaten the faces of others (Aiken & Waller, 2000). Sometimes also, people flame institutions or organisations (Reinig & Mejias, 2004).

Others hold that flaming refers to mere unfriendliness and sarcasm. Baym (2006) identifies sarcasm, flyting and uneasy humour as examples of flaming in the new media. According to Baruch (2005), most people mention intimidation and insults to be the most common form of negativity in e-mail. Thompsen (1994) and Kayani (1998) see flaming in terms of hostile attitudes displayed via e-mail communication that are regarded as insulting, hostile and offensive.

It has also been observed that certain visual and typographical features of some messages can be seen as flames. The use of capital letters throughout a message, for example, in some contexts may be used to exteriorise the emotion of anger (Extejt, 1998). As Cleary and Freeman (2005) intimate, "Some construe large bold font in uppercase as aggressive" (p. 63). Another visual aspect of e-mail is the use of emoticons meant to mimic emotional or facial cues not present in text-only communication. Such acronyms as LOL! (Laughing out loud!) and J/K (just kidding), though often Eurocentric, are sometimes used to wrought a feeling of discomfort on the reciever of the message.

Clearly, flaming can be caused by lack of social cues. Landry (2000) contends that the depersonalisation of the other and the lack of social cues such

as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures found in face-to-face communication create misunderstandings between communicators thereby leading to a hostile behaviour. For example, although SMS generally allows for the reformulation of thought (Hollingshead & Contractor, 2006), texters can present a message without thinking about the consequences. In their study of e-mail and organizational dispute management, Friedman and Currall (2003) contend that e-mail is inherently more "asocial" than other forms of communication, because "e-mails are typically received and written while the writer is in isolation, staring at a computer screen—perhaps for hours at a time, so that awareness of the humanness of the counterpart may be diminished" (p. 132).

In Ghana, Yankah (1998) has argued that Ghanaians also use abrasive language in the media, especially in the electronic media. He maintains that as communication becomes more faceless, the indigenous norms of restrained discourse are bound to slacken, and taken over by greater openness and candour, where affront is inevitable. This development, Yankah (1998) regrettably observes, deepens the communication crisis because faceless communication on radio-phone in programmes, for example, yields emotionally charged contributions which are sometimes interpreted as discourtesy to authority (*See also* Agyekum, 2004). On the strength of existing literature, this work sets to examine the nature of flaming and the motivations that account for it on the panel discussions of *Joy FM* and *Peace FM*. Given the focus of this work, I draw on Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analytic framework as the basis for the analysis and discussion of the data.

Methodology

In this section I discuss the research design, research setting, data collection procedure and sampling method as well as present how issues of ethics were resolved.

Research Design

First coined in 1995 by Herring although earliest studies date back to the mid-1980s (Murray, 1985), computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) is a tool-kit for analysing electronic and online discourse as a way to understand the effects of the new medium. This inquiry is done by focusing on the technical and situational properties of specific computer-mediated modes of communication such as weblog, e-mail and SMS. Such examples of technical features as size of the message buffer and synchronicity and situational characteristics as purpose, tone and scene act in tandem to provide an accurate description of the nature of CMDs (Herring, 2004: Georgakopoulou, 2006).

Two key assumptions underpin research in CMDA. The first is that discourse exhibits recurrent patterns. This is because the basic goal of this approach is to identify patterns in discourse that are present but may not be

obvious to the casual observer or to the discourse participants themselves. Patterns in discourse may be produced consciously or unconsciously. Second, it is assumed that discourse involves speaker choices. These choices are not conditioned by only purely linguistic considerations but also social and cognitive factors (Herring, 2004). It follows then that through a study of CMDA, the researcher can provide insights into both linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena.

A major justification for using CMDA in the present study is that CMDA analyses naturally occurring data, though this may raise ethical concerns. Its data collection procedure is highly reliable though it is not elicited experimentally in response to any prompt (Thurlow, 2003; Herring, 2007). Moreover, unlike spoken discourse, text messages do not require longhand transcription and so can be easily collected. I was, therefore, not influenced by the physical presence of participants as is usually the case with other data collection instruments such as the interview and participant observation (Baron, 2005; Herring, 2007).

Also, CMDA heavily dwells on content analysis as a basic tool for analysis. Content analysis is a very useful method for revealing a person's or group's conscious or unconscious beliefs, attitudes, values and ideas. As Herring (2004: 22) asserts:

In fact, it is possible to conduct a perfectly responsible CMDA analysis without drawing on any more specific paradigms than language–focused content analysis.... This approach is well suited to analysing new and as yet relatively undescribed forms of CMC, in that it allows the researcher to remain open to the possibility of discovering novel phenomena, rather than making the assumption in advance that certain categories of phenomena will be found.

Thus, a major advantage for doing content analysis is that it is unobtrusive; a researcher can observe a phenomenon without being observed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000), and so avoids the dilemma of the observer's paradox.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at *Joy FM* and *Peace FM*, two private radio stations situated in Accra, the capital of Ghana radio was selected over above other media because "by far the most people friendly medium for democratic practice is the radio" (Yankah, 2004:5). These networks were selected for three major reasons. The foremost is that both *Joy FM* and *Peace FM* broadcast informative morning panel discussions, namely 'Joy Super morning Show' and 'Kokrokoo Morning Show' respectively. These morning shows include the newspaper review, and therefore urge the listening public to air their views on interpersonal, social and national issues either through an interactive phone-in-segment or texting. Clearly, they act as "a bridge between the private, family sphere and the more impersonal, public domain of work" (Jones & Jones, 1999: 28). It is for this reason that both 'Joy Super' and 'Kokrokoo' Morning Shows

Ethical Considerations

In resolving the ethical snag associated with the study, generic or first names of texters were used. This attempt aimed at avoiding the use of the names of texters without seeking their consent because the researcher could hardly get in touch with them. It was important to do so because "whatever the specific nature of their work, researchers must consider the effects of the research on participants, and act in such a way as to preserve their dignity as human beings" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: 56).

Results and Discussion

The results of the study clearly show that flaming occurred in the data in the form of deprecations expressed through attacks, name-calling and face-threatening complaints. It is important to stress that the examples cited in the analysis are left unedited generally to reflect the natural discourses of the posters.

Deprecations

The analysis reveals texters often flamed by deprecating other selves and/or organisations on the panel discussions of *Joy FM* and *Peace FM*. Deprecations were usually expressed through such discourse functions as attacks, insults and name-calling. Others appeared as flyting and maledictions. The analysis reveals that such behaviours usually arise in a virtual community such as text messaging largely because texters enjoy a degree of distance, anonymity or pseudonimity. The data elucidate an earlier observation by Yankah (1998) that Ghanaians use abrasive language in the media, especially in the electronic media due to the technological growth of mobile telecommunication. Yankah's (1998: 40) concluding remarks on the subject is worth quoting:

> As communication becomes more faceless, the indigenous norms of restrained discourse are bound to slacken, taken over by greater openness and candour where affront is inevitable. But this also deepens the communication crisis; for faceless communication on radio-phone in programmes, has yielded its fair share of emotionally charged contributions, which have sometimes been interpreted as discourtesy to authority.

From the citation above, one becomes convinced that texters threaten the faces of their addressees and are discourteous to them because they are aware of the distance and anonymity the medium provides. Landry (2000) and Baym (2006) describe the negative use of language in the new media as uninhibited and aggressive behaviours. These include flyting, sarcasm and humour. The following examples attest to this:

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Text 1

> *Sammy-madina) we're sick & taied of Rawlings's Maafia &*
> *tctice aftrall what? If he want to move into his bedroom*
> *house...* (Kokrokoo Morning Show)

In Text 1, Sammy, the texter, expresses in strong terms his disgust at the perceived monopoly and control of state affairs by former president Jerry John Rawlings. For the texter, it would have been better if JJ, as he is affectionately known, remained silent. Certainly, the cliché "sick and tired" will not be appropriate in this context, given that it is impolitic for a reference for an ex-president. The text is, therefore, a kind of imprecation on a leading political figure in Ghana. This motivation stems from the knowledge that social accountabilty on the airwaves is low so that texters can seldom be held answerable for their use of irreverent language (Friedman & Currall, 2003).

Name-calling and Insults

As can be appreciated, the use of flaming to condemn others in Ghana is usually influenced by a politically motivated ideology. For this reason, texters sent messages to directly or verbally abuse political figures and/or the party a said figure is believed to be associated with. Goshgarian (2004) intimates that name-calling is the foremost tool in propagandist politics. In my view, discourses of propaganda are frequently accompained by distortions of facts and by appeals to the passions and prejudices of the public.

Goshgarian (2004) adds that the primary objective of propaganda is to persuade the audience to believe the propositions of the speaker or writer. For instance, in deprecating other people of influence in the Ghanaian society texters exploited the discourse function of name-calling in order "to make us form a judgement without examining the evidence on which it should be based" (Goshgarian, 2004: 157). The author further adds that propagandists appeal to people's hate and fear by giving bad names to those individuals, groups, policies, practices, ideas and beliefs which they would have the masses to condemn and reject. This, they achieve by sometimes using foul language. Tracy (2008) refers to the use of innocuous language as face-attack because "it is intentionally rude, disrespectful and insulting" towards its target (p. 171).

From the data, name-calling was normally directed at the two leading political parties in Ghana namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the National Patriotic Party (NPP). Consider the text below:

Text 2

> *KOJO SOME NPP MPS ARE BEHAVING LIKE*
> *FOOTBALLERS ON THE BENCH. THEIR ONLY*
> *PRAYER IS THAT A PLAYER IS INJURED SO THEY*
> *COULD BE SUBSTITUTED TO SHOW THEIR SKILLS.*
> *MARTINS, KSI* (Joy Super Morning Show)

The text above explicitly demonstrates the insult and invective the sender of the message uses to paint black his opponents on other the political divide. It is possible that the writer of the message is a member of the NDC, and therefore aims at expressing his or her derision for the leading opposition party, the NPP. Note that the message is rendered entirely in block letters and thus expresses the intent of the anonymous texter to emphasise his or her convictions about the NPP. This point confirms the view of Extejt (1998) that the use of capital letters throughout a message, for example, in some contexts may be used to exteriorise the emotion of anger. Also, it lends weight to Cleary and Freeman's (2005) assertion that large bold font in uppercase are aggressive.

Abusive Complaints

Available evidence also shows that texters made abusive complaints on Joy Super Morning Show and Kokrokoo Morning Show. It is generally known that people make complaints in order to express their dissatisfaction about someone or something that may not be necessarily present at the scene (D'Amico-Reisner, 1985; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1987; Boxer, 1993). A complaint may therefore be direct or indirect. The data show that people sent text messages on RPDs often in the form of indirect complaints. Despite the indirectness of complaints on RPDs, most complaints were face-threatening. They appeared as direct confrontations with the objects of complaint. Genereally speaking, some complaints expressed social dissatisfactions and while others contained political dissatisfactions. And though social concerns are to a large extent be concerns of politicians, I refer to political dissatisfactions as complaints relatable to party politics.

Social dissatisfactions were more frequent in the data. As users of radio, texters expressed their dissatisfactions on social concerns whenever the opportunity presented itself on panel discussions as part of their contributions to the programmes. Social dissatisfactions using text messages dealt with education, health and sanitation, business and finance. Others include science and agriculture. Here is an example of a social complaint:

Text 3

> *Pls Kwame, what is ECG doing about this constant power interruptions? It's so frustrating. Is Ghana now becoming like Nigeria hmmm! Tk ofankor. (Kokrokoo Morning Show)*

Here, the anonymous complainer is expressing his dissatisfaction about the constant power interruptions by the Electricity Company of Ghana to the host of 'Kokrokoo Morning Show', Kwame Sefa Kayi. This gratification is conveyed by the linguistic forms such as "What is ECG doing about this constant power innterruptions?, "it's so frustrating" and "hmmm". Together, these linguistic resources enable the texter to express his or her utmost disappointment in Electricity Company of Ghana's (ECG) poor management of

electricity in Ghana. In this case, the texter is seen to be threatening the face of the management and staff of ECG as he points to their perceived inefficiency.

Political discontents in the data were critical of the performance of governments and their parties. The messages usually evinced the vituperation of senders towards their objects of complaint. One important thing to note here is that texters are very much aware of the anonymity the technology of radio and texting afford them. As a result, they found it easy to express their views freely and even in the most offensive way. This development is in line with earlier claims by Boxer (1993) and Baym (2006) that distance and often anonymity can result in the use of abusive and face-threatening language. Below are some typical examples of political complaints:

Text 4

> *If our Politicians can deceive us by turning their campaign pledges into nightmare, whom then do we trust for our economic development? The nation deserves a better deal from the NDC. Kabiesi sek, di "* (Kokrokoo Morning Show)

In Text 4, the anonymous writer thinks that the NDC government has deceived all Ghanaians by not fulfilling their campaign promises. Although this conviction is produced from the texter's personal assessment of the incumbent government, the texter assumes that all Ghanaians agree with him or her on this score. Thus by making this complaint, the texter expects the government to be more responsible in the management of the nation's economy. Notice that he does not mince words in expressing this dissatisfaction. The use of such verbs as "deceive" and nouns like "nightmares", according to the poster, express the ademocratic nature of politicians because they leave no room for the accused to defend his image. Besides, the rhetorical question "whom (*sic*) then do we trust for our economic development?" underscores his disdain of Ghanaian politicians, as though there are no honest ones in the country.

Texters also attacked public institutions and corporate organisations. This was often conveyed through requests and inquiries that sought to let the addressees do a task on behalf of the senders of the texts. A close analysis of the data, however, reveals that the some of the requests and inquiries were harsh in tone. Here is an example:

Text 5

> *I want to know why we have not consulted Antoa Nyama on the fire outbreaks? Paa Nii, Adenta "* (Kokrokoo Morning Show)

In this text, the writer would like to know why Ghanaians did not consult with Antoa Nyama, a deity in the Ashanti region of Ghana who is believed to be very powerful. The writer implies that only a divine force can

intervene in the lives of Ghanaians, given that they themselves are not capable of managing their own affairs. The message demonstrates that Paa Nii believes that Ghanaians lack the technical know-how to minimise the effect of fire outbreaks in Ghana. The text is, therefore, an affront on the management and staff of Ghana Fire Service.

Conclusion

Using *Joy FM* and *Peace FM* as a case study, the paper has demonstrated that texters flame other selves on radio panel discussions in Ghana. A key finding of the study concerns the use of SMS to malign others on panel discussions, using deprecations, name-calling, insults and abusive complaints. The study also reveals that flaming in radio panel discussion is precipitated by such technological affordances of mobile telephony as anonymity, pseudonymy and facelessness.

These findings have two major implications. First, it presents discourse analysts and commuication scholars with the means to extend the study of computer-mediated communication into mass communication. As a result of the emergence of new technology, that is CMC, traditional frameworks of communication are fast becoming obsolete. The need to include CMC and CMDA in mainstream communication studies is, therefore, crucial. Given that "the media are consequential in social life" (Altheide, 1996: 6), an analysis of electronic discourses such as text messages will help linguists and communication students to appreciate the nature of the public discourse of texters of SMS on radio panel discussions.

Finally, it is important that both radio and television networks censor the content of text messages that are read on the airwaves in order to maintain sanity of expression of thought. Though the media in Ghana, as in most countries, guarantee freedom of expression (Yankah, 1998; Ghana Broadcasting Study, 2005), it remains a challenge to media practitioners to sift uncomplimentary text messages that they receive on their shows. Text messages in the form of invectives need not be entertained on the airwaves in Ghana as part of the social responsibility and accountabiltity of the media to the public. Such derisive text messages have the potential of undermining the social, cultural and national cohesion of the nation. Besides, the youth could pick up wrong behaviours from these anti-nationalist and often propagandist discourses (Goshgarian, 2004; Yankah, 2004).

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