



Phone: +27 (0)21 528 3420

Fax: +27 (0)21 552 2848

Website: www.bulksms.com

4th Floor South Lobby
Boulevard Place Heron Crescent
Century City 7441 South Africa

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BULKSMS.COM**

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With technology comes responsibility

The spread of mass panic through SMS is unnecessary and people need to learn to look at information with a more critical eye.

People in general are too quick to pass on information without checking if it originates from someone they trust. Propagating certain dubious and false information can often have devastating results. The origin of such messages is rarely known, but the intentions are often far from good.

We live in a world where everyone is a potential publisher. Modern technology gives us the opportunity to spread information far and wide through a variety of different channels. Through blogs, social media applications, e-mail, SMS, and chat programs, we can send information, opinions and multi-media to virtually anywhere in the world.

Having so many means available to spread and gather information has many benefits. For one, governments cannot get away with hiding information. Protests of doubt around the legitimacy of last year's Iranian elections results were proof of this. The protests were dubbed "The Twitter Revolution" due to the protesters' dependence on social networking platform Twitter and other similar Internet sites to communicate with each other.

This mass-panic through technology is not a new phenomenon - in 1938 the first segment of HG Wells' *War of the Worlds* was aired over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network. Since the first episode was done as a simulated news bulletin, many listeners thought that an actual Martian invasion was taking place. As the news spread from person to person, America was soon caught in a state of mass panic and widespread confusion.

More than 70 years on, people are still letting themselves fall victim to rumours and hearsay without first determining the accuracy of so-called 'facts'. Take the recent politically-laden SMSes that did the rounds around the time of Eugene Terre'Blanche's murder. The messages were highly sensationalist, potentially damaging and very much untrue. Yet, they managed to spread mass panic, unrest, fear and scepticism among citizens of the country.

Don't just send it on

What many fail to realise is that with the increased power of mass information dissemination, comes increased responsibility. One has to become more discerning in how one approaches communications using new technologies.

The SMS channel is an especially dangerous means of transmitting upsetting messages. Because it is delivered directly to your phone and generally used as a means to alert, the gravity of the situation is amplified. The key is to stop and think before sending an SMS. Before potentially adding to or building on an already existing problem, ask yourself what the purpose of the message is and what the results would be if you were to send it on. Simply put, society needs to change and begin looking at the source of their information more critically.