

Research Article

Problematic Empowerment: West African Internet Scams as Strategic Misrepresentation

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Abstract

Internet scamming strategies associated with West Africa typically involve the creation and deployment of fictional narratives depicting political turmoil, corruption, violence, poverty, and personal tragedy set in a variety of African nations. This article examines Internet scammers' complicity in promoting these creatively dramatic, yet stereotyped, representations of Africa and Africans. Their approach exemplifies what de Certeau describes as a "tactic" where scammers manipulate the space of representations produced by hegemonic forces in the West to realize subversive ends. The attempts of Internet scammers highlight the difficulties of creating self-representations that are both authentic and persuasive. Marginalized communities face difficult compromises in their efforts to be heard by those they perceive as powerful. This remains the case, despite new mechanisms of communication, such as the Internet, that make connecting (in a purely mechanical sense) much easier and less expensive.

Keywords: Internet Scamming, Information Society, Ghana, Ethnography, Technology, Socio-Economic Development

Internet fraud and scams, particularly the "419" scams associated with the West Africa region, are activities that raise some important new questions about the potential impact of improved connectivity on a global social order. A causal relationship between the capabilities of computing and networking technologies and certain beneficial socio-economic effects is frequently asserted in the documents produced by development institutions and in the political discourse of many national governments. The recent UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) that brought together over 11,000 participants from 176 countries is evidence of a growing conviction in this theme. The WSIS process firmly positioned the "information society" as one of the central development themes of our time, alongside other World Summit topics, including gender equality, environmental sustainability, and human rights. Yet the emergence of Internet scamming destabilizes an assumed relationship between technology and socio-economic progress. In an eight-month period of ethnographic fieldwork in Accra, Ghana, I was able to observe the activities taking place at Internet cafés and conduct in-depth interviews with 75 Internet café users, operators, and owners, many of whom addressed the issue of Internet fraud with concern and deep insight. Among these Internet users were a few who admitted to attempting scams.

The way Internet users in Accra spoke about fraud and scams served

not only as a commentary on the technology, but also reflected how citizens of this developing nation perceived their position in the global economy. These Internet users described a model of the world where vast accumulations of wealth were located primarily in the West. They attributed the failure of their society to develop, not to a lack of information or ideas, nor to inadequate farming practices or insufficient healthcare, but to a lack of access to this wealth. Gaining access required establishing contact and persuading foreign gatekeepers to form partnerships. This perceived economic order led directly to the trends in Internet use that predominated in Internet cafés in Accra—namely, the search for foreign pen pals, romantic involvements, advisors, philanthropists, and business partners. Scamming was a related attempt to make contact with these gatekeepers to wealth sharing the same underlying theory about the global order and the same essential practice. However, scams were a more cynical and disingenuous reworking of what, in most cases, were well-meaning attempts to build social capital. It should be emphatically noted that scamming is not the primary motive behind Internet café use in Accra. Its worth as a subject of study centers on the debate it provokes among scammers, non-scammers, and publics inside and outside of Ghana, and on certain important, contested issues in Ghanaian society and in Ghana's relationship to the West. The commentary provided by Internet users in Accra raises many questions about the value of connectivity: What are the consequences when one locale realizes improved connections to many others?; What are the effects of new flows of data moving into and out of this locale (and of what exactly is this data composed)?; and What is the impact when marginalized groups are provided with new capabilities for authoring and distributing information? I will be addressing these questions from a sociological perspective, drawing on theories from both media and post-colonial studies. These approaches are centrally concerned with issues of representation and language, particularly how the categories and narratives people produce in the media and in everyday conversations, both online and offline, define a social world that has consequences for their own activities and the activities of others. From this perspective, the Internet is a space where opinions are formed, expressed, and cemented about gender, race, and nationality. Taking this particular theoretical approach to examine the experiences of Internet

users in Accra is meant to develop a more nuanced picture of what it means to be connected, while moving away from notions of a cyberculture composed of the disembodied minds of cyber-citizens, or of the Internet as a networked database where neutral and impersonal information circulates, freed from any social context. Instead, the information produced online is often heavily worked through by users (in Ghana and the West) to reflect a self-affirming version of a global moral order that may run counter to ideals of improved cross-cultural understanding.

Methodology

The findings of this research emerged out of a methodological approach that brought together multiple sources of data. Not surprisingly, it proved difficult to recruit, hold open and direct conversations with Internet scammers. Several Internet users I approached (not just scammers) expressed suspicion that I was covertly working for the American government and merely posing as a graduate student and researcher. To help facilitate initial introductions, a Ghanaian male research assistant in his late 20s sought out contact with Internet scammers. He explained the purpose of the research and the possibility that the information they provided could be published, assured the anonymity of all interviewees, and gained permission for further contact.

This analysis of scamming draws from a broader study of Internet café use. Among the Internet café users, operators, and owners I interviewed most had no known involvement with these activities, but, nonetheless, contributed information in their interviews about what they had witnessed or heard about Internet scamming. These contributions almost always emerged without prompting (explicit questions about scamming were not part of the interview guide), suggesting the significance of these activities to Internet users. Analysis of the collected data was accomplished through a comprehensive coding of field notes and interview transcripts for references to scams, fraud, and any other illegal practices related to the Internet.

In addition, a small number of Internet users who admitted to attempting online scam or fraud activities (eight in total) provided some information about their activities to a research assistant. Half consented to and were interviewed by me at a later date. I developed an ongoing connection with two of these

scammers whom I visited on multiple occasions in various settings. One allowed me to observe and discuss scam strategies with him in chat rooms at an Internet café. The other consented to an interview with his family. A local traditional/Muslim healer was also interviewed about his knowledge of the activities of Internet scammers who made up a portion of his clientele. None of the individuals who provided the information included in this article were interviewed covertly. Every effort was made to clearly and accurately describe the nature of the research and possible outcomes (including publication) and to provide them an opportunity to decline participation. Among those interviewed, there was no credible evidence that any of their scamming activities had resulted in financial gain. Yet, overall, there is evidence that these scamming strategies can be successful. The most recent report of the U.S.-based Internet Crime Complaint Center showed that Nigerian e-mail fraud resulted in an average (median) loss suffered by victims of \$5,100. This is a much higher average loss than any other category of Internet crime. In total Nigerian e-mail fraud generated \$3.3 million in reported losses over the course of one year in the United States (IC3, 2006). The ineffectiveness of the scammers who were interviewed indicates that, outside of high-profile cases, there is also a (possibly much larger) body of less skillful, free agent scammers trying these strategies on their own, generally without much success.

Additional data gathered and analyzed included publicly available articles about scamming distributed through the local mass media—the main local newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, and the online news source ghanaweb.com—and a recording of a broadcast radio program on Internet scamming from a local radio station in Accra. Interviews with ordinary Internet users who were not involved in scams and articles in the local mass media provided a sense of the social climate surrounding the scamming activities that took place in Accra, as well as perceptions of their wider impact on individuals and society in Ghana.

Examples of scam e-mails were also collected from multiple sources—one was handed to me in an Internet café in Accra, eight were sent (by strangers) to my personal e-mail address, and many

others were collected from two Internet resources: www.scamorama.com and www.419eater.com. Broadcast media responses in the West to scam strategies were gathered from publicly accessible online sources, including abcnews.com, bbcnews.co.uk, and the online magazine slate.com. The decision to collect data from a variety of sources providing a multitude of perspectives adheres to recent theoretical directions in media studies that argue for the complexity and flexibility of media reception and the interpretative capabilities of audiences (Barber, 1997; Ginsburg et al., 2002; Larkin, 2004; Newell, 2000; Silverstone, 1994). This scholarly work also underlines the influence of material aspects of reception, such as the space of viewing (i.e., cinema or living room) and the reception technology (i.e., television or computer screen).

The Evolution of West African Internet Scams

This money I want to invest into any business of your choice in your country was acquired through the Construction Of the newly completed Abuja National Stadium which was used for the just concluded All African Games (COJA) Abuja 2003. During the time the contract was to be awarded to a foreign ! contractor, I used my position and office then as the Parmentent Secretary [sic] to the Senate President to over invoice the sum of US\$15.5M from the main contract sum. (personal e-mail received August 15, 2006)

Among Internet scamming strategies associated with the West Africa region, Nigerian 419 e-mails¹ are the most widely known and the most widespread. In these e-mails, the author often claims to be a wealthy former member of the corrupt Nigerian government needing to quickly transfer money out of the country. The extraordinary circumstances are explained by the death (often by plane or car crash, or murder by political opponents) of a family member or business contact. The e-mail recipient is asked to provide assistance, often by making their bank account available for the money transfer. As a reward, the recipient is promised a hefty percentage of the gain, often amounting to several million dollars. Victims are asked to pay upfront fees for bribes or other costs, then this money disappears. There

1. 419 is commonly referred to as the Nigerian police code for fraud. They are alternately called Advance Fee Fraud, referring to the "fees" that are collected in "advance" of the big money transfer payoff promised by scammers to their victims.

are a number of variations on this e-mail scam, including ones about lottery winnings, church projects, or business deals, all falling roughly into the same category. The e-mails are not limited to the Nigerian political scene and authors often claim to be from other African countries. The conflict over diamond mines in Sierra Leone and Liberia and the seizure of white-owned farm land in Zimbabwe are some of the plot points that have been employed. While Nigeria continues to be commonly identified as the source of these e-mails, the content locates them more broadly on the African continent.

Smith traces the history of such scams in Nigeria to an era of military coups, government corruption, and economic decline (Smith, 2007)². The strategy of "advance fee fraud" employed in 419 e-mails predates the commercial Internet; it was previously carried out through fax, telephone, or postal mail. The scenarios these letters maintain to this day, Smith suggests, trace their origins from schemes actually carried out by the Nigerian military governments of the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, the narratives in these 419 e-mails are more plausible than they may seem to skeptics in the West. In fact, before the Internet, when these scams took place via telephone, the very limited availability of telephone lines led some Nigerians to believe that the national telephone company (NITEL) was, itself, behind many of these scams (Smith, 2007). In one sense, the wider availability of mobile phones and the Internet has enabled a less affluent segment of Nigerian society to employ these strategies and is, therefore, a realization of the promise of these technologies as a populist tool, albeit with some less-than-desirable consequences.

The sorts of scamming strategies described by Internet users in Accra, Ghana were a variant of the classic Nigerian approach that employed misrepresentation and persuasive story-telling. However, the scammers I encountered in Accra used stories that did not reference the region's political history. They often initiated contact with potential victims through chat rooms or dating Web sites instead of by e-mail. Rather than pose as a wealthy government official, young male scammers typically took on an alternate female persona while online to lure

a foreign "boyfriend." Invariably, the primary scammer was male, although he might recruit a sister or a female friend to assist in taking phone calls from the foreign boyfriend, or to sit in front of a webcam while the scammer typed. The female accomplice lent her face and voice to the scheme. Where a female accomplice was not available, photos of attractive black models were sometimes used, downloaded from sites like blackcuties.com. Once the boyfriend was properly seduced, the scammer would invent a scenario. He might ask for money to pay for travel so that they could meet in person, or he might claim a family member was gravely ill and ask for help with medical expenses. In contrast to the Nigerian approach, these Ghanaian scammers tended to appeal to the sexual desires or altruism of foreigners more often than their greed.

Credit card fraud was another typical form of online crime taking place in Accra's Internet cafés. In interviews, I was told that credit card numbers could be obtained through insiders at major hotels in Accra, through contacts abroad working in jobs where they came across credit cards regularly, through Internet café operators, or by generating credit card numbers at certain hacker Web sites. This activity shared some similarities to chat room scams because it also typically involved finding and wooing foreign contacts to receive and forward packages. For example, one young man described how a fellow scammer had sent flowers to a pen pal abroad in advance of a request to forward packages. This partnership was necessary since most e-commerce sites would not deliver directly to addresses in Ghana and had to be routed through a developed country.

As in Nigeria, the particular scamming strategies used in Accra predate the Internet. In contrast to Nigerians' emulation of corrupt government practices, the style of Internet scamming carried out in Accra was an extension of a more benign practice: writing to foreign pen pals via the postal system. Pen pal collecting is an activity many young Internet users participated in as students as part of an educational exchange experience. Collecting foreign pen pals was among the most popular activities young people took part in at Internet cafés. The term "pen

2. The general form of "advance fee fraud" goes back much further to the 16th century "Spanish Prisoner" scheme that also employed a compelling story about rescuing a prisoner that appealed to both the altruism and greed of scam targets (Glickman, 2005).

pal” is used to refer to a very wide range of relationships, including same-age peers, boyfriends, girlfriends, older patrons, mentors, sponsors, and business partners. Some young people valued these relationships for the enlightening conversation and the creation of social bonds. Others valued them primarily as strategic affiliations for realizing material gain. Scams derived from pen pal exchanges reflect how scammers drew on established patterns of communication as a resource for modeling their strategies for economic gain.

Scamming Practices in the Context of Internet Use and Everyday Life

To distinguish the Internet activities that were considered to be scams from those that were not requires a broader discussion of Internet use in Accra. What Ghanaian Internet users explicitly identified as scams constituted only one form of Internet use that made use of knowing misrepresentations. The Internet was widely used to contact people abroad to make requests for assistance with finances or migration. These contacts abroad could be foreigners or they could be family or friends from Ghana who had migrated. To represent oneself favorably and sympathetically online was the goal. From speaking with Ghanaians living abroad, I learned that requests from one’s family in Ghana were often treated with skepticism as these requests could also involve misrepresentations. Samuel, a Ghanaian working as a social worker in the U.S., was interviewed as part of a related study on technology use among Ghanaian transnationals (Burrell & Anderson, 2008). He noted, “They will even tell you stories about ‘well I’m not feeling well the doctor says this’ it’s medical, so you send money to them. Then they just go and spend the money . . .” To a certain extent, this problem arose from a misunderstanding between those abroad and those in Ghana who believed the former (family or foreigners) to be stingy (or in the case of some foreigners, racist) and who viewed themselves as legitimately in need of the money. As Samuel added, “the concern has always been like every other family . . . they always think that you are making too much money, you’re here, so you have to send them money.” This motive for misrepresentation (stinginess, greed, the failure of the wealthy to redistribute wealth) is a theme that carries through to other forms of Internet

use, including Internet crimes. It also illustrates a main theme of this article—that strategies of self-presentation online among Ghanaians were shaped in relation to perceptions of an audience living outside of the country, whether Westerners or family living abroad. Even in ordinary non-criminal social interactions, the presented self was flexibly formed to reflect this audience, rather than serving to simply report current conditions.

Beyond cases of what would be considered socially acceptable misrepresentation for financial gain, there were, in contrast, examples of legitimate gains made over the Internet that were portrayed as transgressive. For example, a few young men described how, as schoolboys, they used to go to the café in groups and visit Web sites to request shipments of CDs of computer gambling games or free Bibles. Among friends, they would compete to see who could get the most copies. The magic of “gaining something for nothing” through the Internet provided a thrill. At the same time, this behavior was criticized in the same way many criticized Internet crime. One of these former schoolboys, Kwaku, described the motive for CD and book collecting as “you just want to be greedy, that is the reason . . .” Some of this sense of greed or criminality related to different perceptions of value. The level of general poverty in Accra is such that access to books and papers are fairly limited. In Accra, to give someone your business card is an act treated with reverence and the card considered a material gift. Business cards are referred to as “complimentary” cards, highlighting its characterization as a gift. Similarly, from time to time, people I encountered in Accra presented creased and stained “letterhead” from an organization as proof of their affiliation, but did not have the resources to provide me with a copy. Some of this reverence for paper documents relates to the power of affiliation and having contacts, but some of it is also about what producers in the north see as valueless paper being interpreted as valuable by consumers in the south.

Local distinctions between need and greed explain how, among similar activities, some could be interpreted as scams and others as socially acceptable. The nature of the social tie and the level of obligation between giver and receiver was another factor. Financial gains made through established ties of obligation, where some form of misrepresentation is employed (i.e., a non-existent illness, money

sent for a school book and used for something else), was a gray area. This rationale of need was also used by Internet scammers and fraudsters to justify their activities. On the issue of obligation, a young woman who had assisted a male friend in an Internet scam defended her role by asserting that it was her duty to help a friend whenever asked. This was true, she implied, despite any personal reservations she might have about the activity. One reason gender-switching Internet scams were defined as deviant was that the obligation between the male scammer and foreign boyfriend was illegitimate by virtue of the scammer's misrepresented gender. Obligation and need were justifications used to distinguish between what Internet users defined as Internet crime/deviance and ordinary or harmless misrepresentation. Internet users often contextualized their stories about Internet crime using this rationale of need versus greed, providing an instant register of their position as sympathizer or critic of these activities.

Observation of scamming practices in Internet cafés also provides some context for these activities in the broader scheme of Internet café use. From time to time, I witnessed individuals sitting at a computer in the café with a list of credit card numbers (sometimes handwritten) that they would diligently type, one by one, on e-commerce sites in an attempt to purchase goods they intended to either keep as personal property or resell in Ghana. On occasion, scammers working in small groups could be observed clustered around a screen collaborating on chat strategies, although the logic of such collaboration was debated in interviews. Several scammers suggested that scams were carried out primarily by criminal "clans," some of them even linked into transnational networks, although they themselves worked alone. One interviewee suggested that the most successful scammers worked entirely on their own due to concerns about getting caught and the trustworthiness of partners. While observing scammers working in chat rooms, I found that their online conversations were, in many ways, similar to those of non-scamming Internet users in Accra. Both involved a lot of time-consuming small talk, sexual innuendo, and requests for material assistance. One major conclusion to draw from these observations was that typical scamming attempts took place over long periods of time and rarely yielded any financial gain. None of the scammers I observed or encoun-

tered were making use of spam software as is presumably the case with the very successful high-level 419 scammers. Instead they were laboriously writing to scam targets one by one. Given these observations, it is not accurate to categorize these activities as arising out of a desire to "gain something for nothing." Instead, they appear to be informal attempts to realize personal gain by individuals who perceive legitimate channels of opportunity as being closed to them. This perspective was expressed among young people (not only Internet scammers) such as Stephen, an unemployed 21-year-old, who asserted that in Ghana, "You can only get a job when you have a relative in that job. He will just link you to the money jobs. But if you don't know anybody there, just forget it, you're not getting any jobs . . . you sell on the roadside." Some scammers consequently described their efforts as a launching pad to a legitimate, non-deviant lifestyle. They planned to use the proceeds of their scams, for example, to pay for IT training courses, to start a business importing Western goods for resale, or to pay for a trip abroad. Scamming was never described in interviews as a permanent arrangement or a way to avoid a conventional career.

The personal histories of two scammers will further illuminate the context of scamming activities within everyday livelihood strategies. Gabby and Kwaku are young men in their 20s, like all of the scammers I interviewed. Gabby pointed out how his scamming interests were formulated through peer relationships. He described witnessing and hearing about scams conducted by friends. He noted, "It was the influence of my friends . . . my friends used to take me there and sometimes I would accompany them to the banks for the money." Gabby came from a troubled family. His mother had died when he was young, his father had left, and he was estranged from his uncle, who was the only family member left to assume the role of his guardian. His uncle, at one point, had Gabby thrown in jail for stealing some stereo equipment from his home. Both Gabby and Kwaku had completed senior secondary school, were fluent in English, and more than capable of conducting online text-based conversations. Kwaku's family—his father, mother, and two sisters, one of whom was away at school—lived together, without suffering from the interpersonal strife that Gabby faced with his uncle. Yet, in an interview with Kwaku's father, a forklift operator

at Tema Port, he made it clear that their living conditions were poor. The small room he rented for the family was “very hot and me like this I should have moved from this place, but I don’t have the money to do that so I have to squeeze myself over here with my children and my wife.” The water taps were not functioning and there were problems with property theft, fire, and road infrastructure (or lack thereof) that prevented municipal services from reaching them. Gabby’s financial situation, although insecure, was more promising than Kwaku’s. When Gabby was on good terms with his uncle, an affluent University-educated journalist, he was able to live in a spacious, self-contained home and seemed to have access to a source of funding that allowed him to spend nearly all his time at the Internet café. Young men, like Gabby and Kwaku, came to scamming through a growing lack of faith in legitimate opportunities for personal development, through peer influence and emulation, and through perceptions of limitless wealth in the West. While relatively well-educated, given the deprivations and insecurities they suffered, it would be difficult to categorize them as part of an “elite” segment of Ghanaian society.

Manipulating Representations of Africa for a Foreign Audience

The previous section has given some indication as to how scammers end up scamming, drawing upon historical continuities and contextual conditions. This section will clarify the reasoning scammers use to justify their activities. Additionally, it will examine why they do it in this particular way, drawing on narratives of corrupt governments, shady business deals, religious piety, illness, war, untimely accidents, and natural disasters. Goffman’s theories about how people perform for each other in social situations are applicable when speaking about Internet crime as a drama of persuasion (Goffman, 1971). Individuals are able to control the impression they make on others through verbal and non-verbal cues. Likewise, Internet scammers in Accra were heavily invested in “impression management” as their success entirely depended on their ability to dupe foreigners by carrying out a believable self-representation. The

Internet provided a rather unique “front stage” that, through digital mediation, provided opportunities for dramatic manipulations of identity. Non-verbal cues that were usually impossible to control, such as race, gender, and geographic location, were easier to alter in mediated online environments than in face-to-face interaction. Scammers brought a variety of disparate elements together to construct these identities, including female friends and family, digital photos of black models, Web sites with “love quotes,” fake ID cards, webcams, etc. Scammers stepped out of themselves to imagine the foreigner’s “gaze” and sought to meet the expectations of that “gaze” in a way that gave them a strategic advantage.

The Internet provided an open-ended, flexible opportunity to invent a fictional identity, but to do so convincingly, scammers drew on their real-world perceptions of the West. In terms of the foreign “gaze,” Ghanaians saw themselves as marginalized in the world; they were aware of the way the foreign media typically represent Africa as homogeneously war-torn, poverty stricken, and chaotic. Ebron describes the persistence of this style of reporting about and representing Africa as a legacy of colonialism and one of the ways that “Western administrative regimes” justify dependency relations with African nations (Ebron, 2002, 3). This representation was a source of frustration for many Ghanaians who felt these characterizations were simply inaccurate. The country’s status as a Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC)³ is also a source of shame and was sometimes publicly lamented in church services and in the local media. To be deemed heavily indebted and poor and, therefore, in need of special foreign aid and debt relief was a threat to many Ghanaians’ sense of agency and dignity. This sensitivity about foreign representation meant that both friends and strangers, at times, tried to dissuade me from taking photos of scenes that might suggest poverty. They demonstrated an awareness of the Orientalist tendencies of foreigners to depict their society as passive, poor, and strange through imagery (Said, 1978). This was one way in which Ghanaians were able to effect control over their representation to the outside world, but, otherwise, they had few

3. *Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC)* is a World Bank initiative that has approved 18 countries, including Ghana, for debt relief.

other options for challenging the foreign representations that were imposed on them.

Foreigners' representations of Africa in chat room conversations often mirrored images from the Western media. Ghanaian Internet users found that many foreigners were quite ignorant about Ghana, and about Africa more generally. Some Ghanaians encountered foreigners online who abruptly abandoned chat conversations after they identified themselves as African, whereas others expressed fear over visiting Africa due to perceptions of widespread violence or disease. Through exposure to media representations and through interactions with foreigners online and in person, Ghanaians confronted how they were characterized by Westerners as the Other—the socially-constructed portrait built by one group about another, shaped primarily by anxiety and the threat of difference. This portrait is often constructed in terms of what the viewer *has* that the viewed *lacks*. The Other is defined by absence and is always a warped portrait, emerging as it does out of the desire for self-affirmation. Media and online sources have played a role in delivering images of the Other in print, broadcast, and digital forms (Morley & Robins, 1995; Nakamura, 2002). While much attention has been paid to the way Africans have historically been studied and represented by white Westerners, the “white man” has also been the subject of an ongoing examination by Africans (Nyamnjoh & Page, 2002). Internet scammers similarly constructed Westerners as Other in developing their online personas, but using a form of “double consciousness,” a term W. E. B Du Bois defines as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 2003 [1903], 9). Westerners are described in terms of what they have that Africans lack. The Western Other is, therefore, an inversion of the African Other. As Africans are typified in the West by poverty-stricken famine victims on television, Westerners are typified by wealthy celebrities.⁴ Whereas Africans are needy, Westerners are greedy. This mutually agreed upon asymmetry is exaggerated into mutual misunderstanding.

4. Rumors circulated among Internet users that wealthy people and celebrities, including Oprah Winfrey and Michael Owens, the football player for Liverpool, were often the successful targets of credit card scams. Part of the effect of these types of rumors was to reduce the sense of immorality about the activity. For example, as one young, unsuccessful scammer rationalized, “sometimes the people whose credit cards are being used are these rich people . . . they don’t really notice it, the money is reduced.”

Young Internet scammers believed these foreign perceptions of Africa could be usefully manipulated, perhaps in a way that even served as subversive justice. In this way, marginalization brought on by the perception of outsiders could be reinterpreted to develop a more positive self-representation and could be used pragmatically as a tool for extracting money. As young Ghanaians imagined themselves as Other, they found a limited set of archetypal identities that would be treated as believable and sympathetic by foreigners. They believed that their desire for the funds needed to start a legitimate business, or to go to an IT school, were not persuasive enough to grab the attention of a foreign contact. Or as Gabby, an unemployed scammer, notes, “. . . if I put my real picture or if I tell you this . . . my family background, my status, my financial background you will not even want to talk to me.” Scammers came to understand the foreign “gaze” as one that expected an asymmetry. It expected and responded to them as needy, but not as potential partners. It expected medical bills, not IT schools. In response, scammers created alternate identities that catered to the perceived prejudices of their foreign chat partners. They performed as a needy African orphan, as an attractive African woman seeking rescue, as a participant in or victim of a corrupt African government regime, or as a God-fearing Christian pastor seeking funds to help improve his impoverished community. The performance of neediness maintains continuity with the history of foreign involvement in Ghana, conforming to established relationships of patronage or dependency that have taken on a multitude of forms, from missionary work through colonialism and into the contemporary age of development work.

For example, one scammer wrote a letter, using the persona of an elderly, white, American woman to appeal on his behalf to an American televangelist:

Dear Paul Crouch ' I am sending this to ya begging ya to help this man of God in Ghana Africa ' I found him on the Net and he adopted me as his mom but w/ tears in my eyes I am an elderly

woman on s security and have no means to do what's necessary for him . . . he doOes not have food/shelter amnd money and sleeps at times at the bus station and park as he is " black " and no one gives him aid and cannot get a job of this reason . . . [I am a white woman from the south] God bless ya !! [name and address omitted]⁵

In this strategy of persuasion, he constructed a third-person narrator to be a sympathetic, but unbiased, advocate. This narrator, by virtue of being the same religion, nationality, and race as the televangelist, was thought to be a more persuasive figure. This reflected the young man's perception that sympathy was difficult to generate across great social differences. The letter makes reference to its author having difficulty getting a job in Ghana, because he is "black" and being forced to sleep in a park, generating images that are coherent with an African diasporic identity—the plight of marginalized minority immigrant groups in industrialized countries. This scammer illustrated an extensive awareness of not only Western media representations of Africa but also representations of the African Diaspora.

The manipulation of foreign stereotypes for financial gain was a strategy that preceded the Internet. Gabby started exploiting these stereotypes when he was still in secondary school. Before he used the Internet, he tried to send letters to foreign pen pals, appealing for money. He noted, "if I have the contact address of these pen pals I will write to them and if they start corresponding I will start asking money. My parents are dead, please help me, I'm in Africa, you know the situation in Africa. You see Africa is never printed as it is out of the continent Africa . . . if you are not in Africa all the pictures you see in Africa are diseases. . . . These nice, nice places will not be broadcasted. . . ." In his comments, Gabby implicated both foreign print and broadcast media as the culprits for such misrepresentations. Since childhood, he had an awareness of this tendency in the foreign media.

Yaw, another interviewee, claimed to be in touch with a number of very successful scammers operating out of a large, centrally located Internet café. He told stories that cast Westerners in a darker light, not as ignorant people susceptible to the influence

of their biased media, but as blatantly prejudiced and as actively depriving Ghanaians and other Africans of a better existence and, therefore, deserving of the Internet crimes committed against them. Yaw noted that his friends didn't feel bad about scamming because, as he ambiguously noted, "they say the white man is the biggest thief." This rationalization made scamming activities an expression of vigilante justice rather than truly a crime. Yaw also pointed to feelings of resentment over the harsh restrictions on migration that prevent young Ghanaians from seeking better opportunities overseas, noting that "because they can't go to America they will take money from Americans." He added that Westerners perceive Africans as not clever and capable enough to carry out a scam. In a satisfying sense of revenge against this racism, it is precisely by this prejudice that Westerners are taken advantage of in the ideal scam. Scammers and their sympathizers imagine the moment when racist scam victims realize they have been outwitted by individuals they had thought to be inferior.

Internet scammers felt compelled to work within a set of false perceptions and distorted archetypes that they viewed as alien and even openly resented. In this way, they were operating with what de Certeau defines as a "tactic." A tactic is the strategic work done by "the weak" who lack a space of their own from which to relate to what is external. The lack of space is determined when external forces refuse to recognize that position as they define it for themselves. This forces "the weak" to relocate. A tactic "insinuates itself into the other's place" (de Certeau, 1984, xix). Internet scammers were doing this in both a material and discursive space. As de Certeau notes, "the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them" (de Certeau, 1984, xix). Through "tactics," Internet fraudsters and scammers sought to subvert and transcend their disadvantaged position within society and the world, using the very representations of Africa defined apart from and against them by hegemonic forces.

It should be noted that few Internet users shared the degree of cynicism expressed by Internet scammers about the impossibility of legitimate ac-

5. The original version of this letter was written in all caps, which I find both hard to read and disruptive of an even-handed assessment of the content of the letter. Therefore, it is noted here, but has been changed in the body of the article.

cess to the global economy via Internet use. Many believed that it was possible to participate in and gain from socially acceptable forms of online business. However, they also expressed a sense of persistent disadvantage in their online activities that was consistent with the scammer's perspective. For example, Isaac, a 26-year-old Internet café operator, in his attempts to find a business partner online, was repeatedly told he would need to come up with some financial capital of his own to invest. As he noted:

. . . I'm spending my time [on the Internet] trying to search for business partners. And a lot of people say I have the brains, I have the ideas, I have the courage, but sorry we can't do business, I'm supposed to bring some money so we start a joint venture. I don't have monies, that's one drawback of this . . .

Similarly, Sandra, formerly a bilingual secretary, had used the Internet to get all the information and clients she needed to start a profitable label-making business, but despite her solid business plan, she had several times been denied a bank loan to buy a \$15,000 label-making machine. Frank, a student at a well-regarded local IT school, spent hours and hours on the Internet trying to sell traditional glass beads to people via e-mail, but struggled with gaining trust from his customers. There was general agreement among Internet users like Isaac, Sandra, and Frank that the lack of start-up capital, as well as their position as latecomers from marginalized societies, made gaining some form of access to the global economy no straightforward matter and only marginally easier with access to the Internet; it would require struggle and compromise. It was among Internet scammers that those compromises took on the shape of more extreme forms of deviance and misrepresentation.

Internet users in Accra, who, by and large, used the Internet for legitimate and legal purposes, often harshly condemned the activities of scammers as greedy or lazy. They were concerned with the effect of scamming on Ghana's national reputation. They also expressed a more immediate fear over falling victim themselves. In several interviews, young people described losing money in small or substantial amounts, often in the pursuit of opportunities to go

abroad. Sometimes the Internet played a role in these scams. For example, Charles, a senior secondary school student, described how he had learned about a school in Sweden from an ad in a phone booth. He and a friend sent an e-mail to request more information. In the course of pursuing this opportunity to go abroad, his friend gave 1 million cedis (approximately US\$100) to a representative of the school who then disappeared. This highlights problems of media and technology literacy. As Charles noted about evaluating these kinds of opportunities for legitimacy, "I really have a difficult time. Actually yes I'm not able to tell." He admitted to being somewhat blinded by his hopefulness, commenting, "Sometimes you are eager for something and you come across it, wow you are happy. You want to go into it. You don't even take your time to explore it . . ." Scamming was not uniquely a problem of the Internet in Accra; many stories were also related about losing money to "connection men"⁶ in face-to-face situations. However, an incomplete understanding of the technology, coupled with the absence of technology-specific evaluation skills, made Internet users vulnerable in new ways. Furthermore, the Internet made it possible for highly organized, tech-savvy criminal collectives, operating from a great distance, to reach individuals who often had not yet acquired the knowledge that would protect them from manipulation.

Internet scammers' use of alternate identities, gender switching, and constructions of economic and professional backgrounds is one realization of what was recognized early on as the promise of the Internet: to liberate individuals from bodily and social constraints (Turkle, 1996; Kitchin, 1998; Lupton, 1995). Yet it is a giant step back from the extremes of disembodied, even language-less (Sherman & Judkins, 1992) and "post-symbolic" (Frenkel, 1995) communion online that were once thought to hold promise toward transcending differences of gender and race (Nakamura, 2002; Robins, 1995). Idiosyncratic characters appearing in certain online communities, particularly those that don't conform to male or female gender categories, or are depicted with cyborg or hybridized human/animal bodies, were propped up as a supreme example of such possibilities. In various discussion forums, cerebral text-

6. "Connection men" operate in the black market, offering back-door ways of getting travel visas as well as other services.

based interactions that shed bodily representation entirely in favor of pure argumentation were also treated as examples of this transcendence.

By contrast, the scams associated with the West Africa region illustrate how embodied identity prevails in online interactions. The common question “asl?” (meaning “age, sex, location?”) that begins almost every conversation in Yahoo’s chat rooms, plus the popularity of webcams in these virtual spaces, is a reminder that many Internet users around the world remain very interested in bodies and locations in a real-world context. The strategies devised by Internet scammers affiliated with the West Africa region involved the production of narratives that were embedded in a particular socio-political context with real-world referents. While ultimately fictional, the narrators in these tales were embodied; they had an identifiable race and gender. They were also socially and politically located by their specific nationality, family ties, and professional affiliations. Scammers treated such embodiments and affiliations as a strategic resource, drawing upon (rather than shedding) prejudices, stereotypes, and enduring social roles. Rather than transcend bodily difference, their activities play with and reify such real-world social norms. Furthermore, the desired outcome of these scams—to realize monetary transfer—made it necessary to divulge such information because, ultimately, the scammers’ locally accessible financial institutions, such as banks or wire transfer facilities, would be revealed. This calls into question the capacity for productive and/or empowering interaction, particularly transculturally, that is not embedded in some sense of the offline world. The form of these narratives underlined the challenges of obtaining that increasingly scarce commodity on the Internet: attention.

The Dis-embedding of Information on the Internet

In this era of “information society” rhetoric, it is worthwhile to ask whether the concept of “information” is relevant in the context of the self-representation strategies of Internet scammers. Shifting attention to issues of representation has highlighted the way scammers invest their energy

into interpreting and constructing an author–audience relationship through the content of their messages. Much of the information contained within these messages was an accounting of social status, social ties, and available resources that was meant to persuade the target to act in a desired manner. This is a sharp contrast to conceptualizations of the “Information Age” that value the dis-embedding and circulation of “information” as a move toward egalitarianism. That view neglects the way social context and relations of trust function as a source for knowing how to interpret and use information and is, itself, vital information (Granovetter, 1985; Molony, 2007; Overå, 2005).

One example of such dis-embedded circulations within technology for development discourses is where telecommunications networks are depicted as facilitating a boundary-less digital marketplace. Access to networks provides a point of entrée into an abstracted global economy. Connectivity is thought to reconcile previous asymmetries that gave preference to nearby sellers and those with a privileged position in powerful social networks or with access to scarce information (Eggleston et al., 2002; Goldstein & O’Connor, 2000; UNCTAD, 2005).⁷ Through the elimination of geographic distance and through the encapsulation of information into transferable units, newly connected individuals are thought to share the same advantages through access to the same global resource.

In conceptualizations of the “Information Age,” the origins and sources of the data circulated via network technologies are often invisible. Instead, information is treated as homogenous and impersonal, without variation in quality, validity, or relevance. Manuel Castells promotes this perspective by drawing an analogy between electricity and information, the former the driver of the Industrial Revolution and the latter the driver of the Information Revolution (Castells, 2001). In contrast to Castells’ portrayal of information as a vital and beneficial force, Mansell and Wehn question the notion that it has an inherent or universal value, yet maintain the notion of its impersonal neutrality, so long as it remains in a digital format. They treat information as something that, by itself, is non-semantic in the assertion that “. . . technologies

7. Geertz also addresses information asymmetries, but not within the context of technological connectivity, in the now classic article on the “Bazaar Economy” (Geertz, 1978).

. . . may provide a new potential for combining the information embedded in ICT systems with the creative potential and knowledge embodied in people" (Mansell & Wehn, 1998, 12). In this recipe, meaning is produced only after information is appropriated and interpreted by humans. Information, by itself, may not be helpful, but neither is it harmful. Roszak points out that this way of portraying "information" draws from the post-war emergence of information theory—a mathematical concept focused on the mechanisms for transporting data. It is a theory that is agnostic about the content of the data itself. This way of perceiving information has become the "common-sense" definition in popular and political discourse (Barry, 2001; Roszak, 1986). The effect, Roszak notes, is that information is perceived as "bland to the core and, for that very reason, nicely invulnerable. Information smacks of safe neutrality; it is simple, helpful heaping up of unassailable facts" (Roszak, 1986, 19). Where information is regarded as neutral, the power dynamics at play in the production of "information" are obscured, and the reality that what traverses the Internet may include opinions, lies, nonsense, and biased, incomplete, flattering, or defamatory representations of individuals and social groups is not confronted.

In early theoretical research, an overextended notion of cyberspace as a distinct spatial terrain completely disconnected from offline life prevailed (Slater, 2002; Wakeford, 1999). Similarly, the way the Internet is described as a massive information accumulation, storage, and distribution system disconnects from the story of how such information is constructed and consumed. In particular, where impersonal information is described as the central catalyst of development, the Internet's well-documented history as a space of meaningful personal communication is sidelined. The Internet's capabilities are compartmentalized. Ultimately, concrete case studies of how these issues play out on the ground can be drawn upon, as in this article, to show how distinctions between information and communication—in practice—are unclear.

Complicity

The coda to this tale of scamming and self-representation is that Internet scammers' complicity in employing stereotypes of Africa and Africans to carry out scams ironically has the effect of exacerbating exactly those representations they resent most. It is

an unfortunate reality that Nigerian 419 e-mail scams are likely to be the primary association Westerners have between the Internet and the West Africa region. A recent ABC news report (archived in both text and video format on the Web site) suggested that an e-mail should be handled cautiously if "the letter is from Nigeria or another African country. Or it's from an African living elsewhere, like Europe . . ." (Leamy, 2006). This is an example of how cases of criminality are extended to cast suspicion on all letter writers on the continent. Similarly, the practices of "scambaiters" (see www.419eaters.com) involve tricking scammers, for example, into producing photos of themselves holding sexually explicit signs that are then used to publicly ridicule and dehumanize them (Zook, 2007). The messages carefully constructed by scammers are thereby reappropriated and used against them.

Prins examined a related form of complicity in an analysis of what he terms the "Primitivist perplex" where indigenous groups make use of outdated and inaccurate portraits of a primitive and nature-centered way of life to make appeals to the larger, dominating society for autonomy and preservation (Prins, 2002). Such misrepresentations were embraced and promoted for pragmatic purposes. In both cases, these marginalized groups created representations they thought would help secure material gains such as money, land ownership, or government resources. However, the cost, according to some Ghanaians, was the damage done to Ghana's national reputation that had an effect on all Ghanaians, not just those directly involved in scamming. During a radio program on Internet fraud, broadcast in Accra in February 2005, the discussants suggest that, in the wake of the Internet, the nation's reputation is in decline:

Jimmy [guest from GCNet]: ". . . where the impact is on Ghana and Ghana's credibility and I don't think anybody likes the idea of Ghana being described as the rising star of Internet fraud."

Bernard [host]: "We were the black star of Africa, now we're the rising star of Internet fraud."

Jimmy [guest from GCNet]: "Well both of them have star inside, let's try and move negativities out of our stars."

As a point of contrast between the past and the present, they make reference to the national pride over Ghana's independence movement: it was the

first state in Africa to carry out a successful and peaceful campaign to end colonial rule achieving independence in 1957. Kwaku, an employed 21-year-old and former Internet user, described more prosaic, non-scamming activities, such as the request for small amounts of money from chat partners, in similar terms. He commented:

I tried [to ask a chat partner for money] . . . I think I lost the friendship that I had with the friend . . . if I write to her she doesn't reply. So I say we should stop doing those things, but if we keep on asking for money people will think maybe we are beggars . . . It is very bad. Because we are smart people we can use our brains because when Ghanaians go to the U.S. if you go most of the time they are on top. They go to the Universities and schools they are on top of the schools . . . we should use our intelligence and stop requesting money and people referring to us as . . . beggars. That's what will help us and it will create a good image for people in the nation too.

Despite the way Ghana and Africa have been, in their view, misrepresented over the years, and despite the complicity of Internet scammers in these misrepresentations, these Ghanaian citizens maintained the hope that a more positive representation of their nation could somehow be sent out into the wider world.

Conclusion

On the issue of media representations, it has been proposed that technologies, like the Internet, that de-professionalize media production make it possible for members of marginalized societies to represent themselves, make their interests known, and reach a wider public (Castells, 1997; Froehling, 1999; Ginsburg, 1994; Spitulnik, 2002; Turner, 1992). However, Internet scammers point out that, beyond the technological capabilities of publication, there is the important matter of audience. Scammers felt that they could not get attention without misrepresenting themselves in a stereotyped fashion, that foreign audiences were deaf to more authentic representations. Scammers perceived the strategic employment of fictional identities as a way of gaining attention from a disinterested Western audience. Through their efforts, they sought to unite their own interests with the self-interest of their audience. For this reason they were willingly complicit in

the exacerbation of the stereotypes of Africa and Africans that they portrayed.

The arguments made for connectivity as a valuable social good often point to the capacity for disembedding information from location and social context. Yet, the case of Internet fraud demonstrates that the Internet is not universally experienced as a neutral space, an impartial repository of information. Particularly, where it is used (as it was among Internet scammers) to address real-world aspirations and privations, the Internet does not escape from the complexities of human relationships and problems of ethnocentrism, prejudice, and greed. It is yet another space where the complex and problematic conditions of post-coloniality and embodied identity are played out.

Growing awareness of scamming exists in high level government offices and in the sphere of international development work (U.S. Department of State, 1997; UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2005), yet this awareness has not been linked to debates over technology and development. The fear expressed by Internet users in Accra of becoming a scam victim suggests that they associate risk, not just promise and possibility, with Internet connectivity. Yet information technologies are consistently portrayed at events like WSIS as tools for risk reduction. For example, technology is thought to reduce the risk of accidents traveling on bad roads (Danofsky, 2005), of being victimized in a natural disaster (Stauffacher, 2005), and of falling behind in a competitive global economy, where a divide is growing between those with and those without access to new technologies. Emerging technology practices like scamming that challenge the benefits of connectivity must be more directly addressed in technology for development movements. The creation of necessary supporting structures—specifically, training in media and technology literacy—that would mitigate these disruptions should be integral to all technology access initiatives.

While successful Internet scams may transfer wealth and, therefore, some degree of power to scammers, they come at a broader cost to national and ethnic reputations and representations. Ultimately, they affect access of the larger society to legitimate venues for self-improvement. Scamming is, therefore, a problematic empowerment. The potential for empowerment through media production relies on producers who represent themselves in authentic as well as strategic ways, ideally, "render-

ing visible indigenous cultural and historical realities to themselves and the broader societies who have stereotyped and denied them" (Ginsburg, 1994, 378). This involves knowing how to speak to these broader societies to gain attention and inspire action. The argument made here is not that empowerment is impossible, but rather that further discussions need to address conditions that facilitate empowering self-expression versus conditions where individuals become complicit in their own damaging self-representations. Researchers need to examine the exchanges and interactions that take place within these new transcultural connections. Looking solely at the material possibilities, without considering the resulting social dynamics, provides an incomplete answer to the question of empowerment. ■

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