Tantalisingly Close

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Preface and acknowledgements

The following is a true story, as related to me by a student in my Masters course on wireless communication. This student (whose identity I will protect by calling him Oliver) had had a big night out on the town. At three in the morning he and a flatmate decided to head home, only to discover at their front door that they both had forgotten to bring their keys with them. There was no need to worry, they thought; Oliver quickly took out his mobile telephone from his pocket, and dialled the number of their one flatmate who had stayed home. Much to their dismay, however, their sleeping friend had no desire whatsoever to be disturbed at that late an hour, and had shut off his mobile telephone. Dumbstruck by this unexpected setback, Oliver could think of only one solution for the awkward situation he and his friend now both found themselves in: get on their bikes and cycle twenty kilometres out of town to his parents’ house to get a spare key. Once there, however, it turned out that his parents were away for the weekend. It was only on their way back home, exhausted by their nightly workout and still wondering how they could get into their house, that it finally dawned on Oliver. There had been a much easier way to signal his flatmate to have him open the door than trying to call him on his mobile… the doorbell.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, mobile communication devices are everywhere. What is more, they have quickly come to be considered – sometimes foolishly so – as essential tools to handle almost any problem or situation in life. It is astonishing to realise that merely two decades ago only very rich business people could afford them, and that owners of mobile telephones were regularly being mocked for thinking that it was necessary to be in constant touch. I can still distinctly remember a Dutch comedian sneering, when he ridiculed the rising use of mobile car phones in 1992, that truly important persons were supposed to be unreachable. Today, his point arguably still stands, but the mobile telephone has long ceased to be the rare and pompous status symbol of the wealthy. Moreover, it has been joined by countless other communication technologies that keep people and objects inconspicuously connected. We now live in a world in which Blackberrys, WiFi-enabled laptops, iPhones, RFID chips, Android smartphones, and so forth, have all but completely pervaded everyday communication processes, making many people wonder how they could ever have done without them. It is at times such as these that we have to be aware that mobile communication devices, in their mundaneness, become almost invisible, as they come to
constitute our living environment. Herein lies the opportunity for the observant media scholar to intervene, and expose what is actually happening... and why.

I was still studying to become a media scholar when, at the end of the 1990s, I got my first mobile telephone. It was an Ericsson A1018s, a light-blue device measuring around thirteen centimetres long, five centimetres wide and three centimetres deep, with a big antenna dangerously protruding from the top. It could make mobile calls and send and receive text messages, but that was it. No games, no camera, no polyphonic ringtones, no MP3 player, no video capabilities, and certainly no Internet or apps. By today’s standards it would be considered a bulky and feature-poor device, but at that time I was as happy as could be, very much aware of my newly acquired position in a rapidly changing communication landscape. And it happened quite by accident, actually. Although I had already been considering buying a mobile telephone – especially after my grandparents had beaten me to it that summer, having purchased one for use in their rural holiday house in France – I was waiting for just the right opportunity, model, and price. However, I ended up acquiring one in a rather unconventional way: when my parents bought themselves a new bed, they received with it a complete mobile telephone package for free. As my father already had a car phone and my mother saw no use for it, they decided to give it to me. Without having to think twice about it, I happily accepted the device.

I still have that first mobile telephone. It is kept in a drawer, next to the Sony Ericsson T65i, K700i, Z600, and K800i that I have owned in the past couple of years. They are tangible evidence of not only my personal preference for Sony Ericsson mobile telephones, but also of the pace with which the devices have evolved, boasting more and more features with every generation. On a very small scale, my collection represents what for many may seem to be a natural process in the development of communication technologies: they become better every time, increasingly fulfilling our communication desires. This highly charged idea of communicative progress is what has fascinated me ever since I began to study media, and it fascinates me still. It has led me to write this book, and I expect it will provide me with many more projects, as it will continue to influence media development. Every time someone asks whether I fear my work on mobile communication devices might soon become outdated because of the rapid rate of new product introductions, I smile, and say that each press release touting the long-awaited arrival of the world’s best communication device actually reconfirms what I firmly believe: like the torment of Tantalus, we are convinced that if only we try harder, we will be able to reach far enough and finally fulfil our desires. And yet, we always fail.

This book, then, is about communication utopia. It is about what could be considered a tragicomical quest for communicative fulfilment, a quest that has manifested itself countless times in human history, and that will likely continue to be part of us forever. Mobile communication devices have become the latest
embodiments of that quest, and probably more literally than one might think; in every single device, you will find capacitors that are made with a heavy metal called tantalum. So, each time you use one of them to fulfil your desire for communication, remember: a true and pure connection is, and always will be, tantalisingly close.

There are many people I would like to thank for helping me in my own personal quest to finish this book. It has been a long and winding road, but never a lonely one. First, I must thank the people at the Faculty of Humanities, at the Research Institute for Culture and History, and at the Department for Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University for creating the best job in the world; it truly is wonderful and inspirational working within the New Media & Digital Culture (NMDC) Masters programme.

Ah, the NMDC group! Could there be a friendlier, funnier, more creative, intelligent, and highly entertaining bunch of people than those that made me feel so much at home at Utrecht University? Our irregular meetings in classrooms, restaurants, conference halls, and homes have always been truly pleasurable and exciting, and I hope to be part of many more. The group would not be complete without its mafiosi, though; my utmost gratitude goes out to Marianne van den Boomen and Mirko Tobias Schäfer, without whom my academic and personal life would not have been enriched with so many memorable experiences. Our seminars, trips to faraway places, nights out on the town, heated debates, revelatory and consolatory encounters, and, above all, our discussions on our research projects, have all contributed to what I consider to be the best stock-in-trade a person can have on the route towards academic achievement. May we continue our fabulous friendship for many years to come.

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