Tantalisingly Close

de Vries, Imar

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Epilogue

It would be practical if for everyone there was something like a dictionary, in which you could look up the correct meaning if you do not understand someone. It would take away a lot of confusion. Everything would be clear and certain. But for now, I will have to keep communicating, in all possible ways and with all kinds of people, so that I will find out everything myself. And maybe, there will come a day when I will directly understand everything and anyone. And they understand me.

(We all communicate. But do we understand each other? Anne Geelen 2006)

In 2006, the 14-year-old Dutch high school student Serena Croes asked Anne Geelen, a television director of children’s programmes, if she would be interested in making a documentary about the many ways in which people communicate these days, and whether all the various means of communication such as email, text messaging, chat software, notes, and telephone calls actually helped in improving our understanding of each other. Geelen agreed, and for a few days she followed Serena with her camera, recording conversations with friends and parents, and interviewing Serena at home. As it turned out, Serena, as adolescents are prone to do, struggled with the fact that with some people it is easier to communicate than with others, and that it can be difficult to determine, and switch between, the many different modes of communication needed to relate to her family and friends. At the end of the documentary, we see her writing in her diary while hearing her say the words I used as the motto for this epilogue: what if everyone had a dictionary, and we could look up what people actually meant when we do not understand them? Wouldn’t that be convenient? Wouldn’t it be even better if, someday, we could understand everyone and everything directly?

Serena reiterates the central thesis of this book in just a few sentences: at one point or another, we can or will be aware of the desire to know pure communication, and maybe secretly long for it ourselves, but the reality of everyday life leads us to realise that it will always be just that: a wish for something that will never fully materialise but will haunt us nevertheless. Serena is not alone in expressing this urgent yet ultimately unfulfillable hope for communication utopia. It is a fundamental human need to recount myths that tell of progress, of paths that lead to a utopian sublime state. These myths, powerful as they are, recurrently pervade every imaginable narrative space, constantly affirming and (re)constructing stories that establish a two-pole system: on the one end, we live in a world in which we are confronted with mysterious and age-old questions about the purpose of our existence, and on the other end is the place where those questions are
answered, made redundant, or are even deemed irrelevant. The path between those poles is often presented as one of great hardship and is never really completed, but the crux of the myths is that at least there appears to be a road that can be travelled. No matter how unreal or irrational it may seem to actually arrive at the other end of the two-pole system, necessary fictions tell us it can be done.

Ideas of purpose and progress are thus employed as a heuristic tool to structure an otherwise chaotic world of phenomena and objects. The creation, telling, and retelling of stories of hope, progress, and accomplished utopias through time bolsters our belief that the promise of the new brings with it an endless range of possibilities, and that it therefore justifies any means necessary to invade this space of possibility in order to come closer to a certain ideal. From Greek myths via More’s Utopia to Enlightenment ideals and commercial advertisements in the information age, we can see that the results of attempts to reach or construct the ideal state have always been ambiguous and never final. Invariably, all outcomes have at best shifted the status quo, leaving wide open new possibilities and maintaining the lure of the not-yet-become. The line of thinking exposed here is that there is always a tomorrow where the problems and anxieties of today could be solved; there is always a motive for foreseeing that there will be closure.

This explains the seemingly trans-historical character of necessary fictions that tell of reaching the communication sublime: full closure is never achieved, as we perpetually believe that it is just around the corner. The remarkable thing is that desiring this closure is actually a tragic feat: communicative noise is a constitutive element that cannot be circumvented, so while it is seen as an obstacle to true understanding and therefore has to be eliminated, it also makes communication what it is, namely a process that through continuous negotiations and struggles with misunderstandings defines us as unique individuals. The desire for closure by constructing the perfect language or by developing the ultimate communication technology is thus a desire to transform the human self, to have it become subjected to universalising tendencies that seek to create a world in which everyone is equal. A fulfilment of this desire would present us with the paradox of a fulfilled utopia, a sublime state where conflicts are amended, differences have disappeared, and only a zombie-like blissful existence remains. Still, even though dystopian and anti-utopian narratives point us to the sombre outlooks of worlds in which universalising tendencies lead to the totalitarian regimes that make possible the elimination of obstacles and differences, the longing for improvement towards a better, final goal abides.

This longing interacts with our continuous struggles to understand ourselves and others, as the example of Serena’s wish very aptly shows. Communication ideals are predominantly expressed in terms of guaranteeing closeness and reciprocity, reaching consensus, unifying channels, making and sharing multiple connections, removing semantic fog, tuning to the right frequency, and synchronising thoughts. The ways in which these ideals are to be reached focus largely on
language and technology; the reasoning being that a common universal language would remove the problem of interpretation, and ubiquitous communication technology would guarantee perpetual contact, with which people would be in direct and constant touch. We keep being confronted and lured by these myths of the communication sublime for three reasons: first, the instrumental dimension of communication, in which error-free transfer of information is emphasised, provides powerful marketing slogans that readily tap into desires for improvement; second, our notions of what lies ahead of us and what we have to do to get there are influenced by images of beckoning or onrushing futures, and both these images regard communicative noise as an obstacle that either is or has to be removed; and third, future-making in itself generally presents only clear-cut outcomes, and conveniently leaves out the noisy consequences of the programmes that are presented as leading towards those outcomes. In other words, there is a clear symbiosis between imagining what improved communication could be, and acting upon it: on the one side, those working in the business of producing and selling new communication technologies make very good use of our susceptibility to myths about ideal communication, and on the other, we let them do so, as, in the end, we think the same.

We should therefore be fully aware of the strong influence of myths in orienting inventors, scientists, entrepreneurs, producers, marketeers, politicians, consumers, and so forth, towards creating specific materialisations and uses of communication technologies. The interpretative flexibility of media may engender many media dispositifs, but there are limits to that flexibility, and an inquiry into myths of communication can help identify what those limits are. In the words of philosopher Lee Worth Bailey, ‘[a]n entirely new consciousness is needed’, one that is aware that ‘technological culture is teeming with dreams, visions, hopes, goals, expectations, and imaginative premises’, and that we need to understand that technological thinking ‘contains a far larger and more influential component of enchantment by unconscious fantasies than is commonly acknowledged’ (Bailey 2005: 17). This is exactly what a media-archaeological and evolutionary approach to technology development can provide: it has a non-teleological view on history and it acknowledges the various environments in which military, economic, political, scientific, and social factors play a role in shaping technologies, but it also recognises the agency of necessary fictions that orient development towards ‘good tricks’, or, in other words, towards the material expressions of our desires for utopian communication. When we look at media history from this media-archaeological and evolutionary perspective, we see that, despite reality proving many utopian claims wrong, new communication technologies have been and still are presented and perceived as providing opportunities for finally realising true democracy, cultural and social unification, the unlocking of all the world’s knowledge, and so forth. It is what ‘the new’ does: it perpetually gives our technological imaginary, our yearning for wholeness and completeness
that is projected upon technology, fresh impulses by portraying existing technolo-
gies as inadequate, and, in the same sweep, by introducing us to the next big
thing as a solution.

Mobile communication devices are undoubtedly the next big thing of today.
They did not suddenly originate in contextual isolation, nor were they exclusively
the result of a carefully planned corporate strategy. They slowly evolved out of the
ground of scientific and technological competence that existed around the 1920s,
during which their development was propelled by, in the first place, a drive to
fully uncover the affordances of the electromagnetic spectrum; second, by superv-
vening social necessities such as enhancing the response time of emergency ser-
VICES; and third, by a continuously present demand from potential customers who
could afford the technology. In all of these motives, myths of ideal communica-
tion played their powerful and strategic discursive role, doing so through justify-
ing the need for investments and large-scale experiments, through orienting
developers towards realising popular imagery of what the ‘original dream’ of
mobile wireless communication could be, and through advertisements that
upheld the notion that the way that ordinary people experienced mediated com-
munication still needed improvement. We should be careful not to give these
myths all the credit, though; regulatory decisions, political motives, and plain
technological impossibilities also influenced the process, making it far from self-
evident that the mobile communication condition would naturally evolve into the
one we now live in.

Still, today the general attitude towards mobile communication devices seems
to be, despite heterogeneous reception, one of almost unconditional acceptance,
as if the devices truly meet an inherent communicative need. Not only are they
integrated into all kinds of everyday activities in enormously large numbers, but
their accompanying discourses make it very seductive to think that they indeed
present the most logical and natural solution to our communication problems.
Many people experience mobile communication devices as primary and indispen-
sable tools for increasing opportunities to connect, socialise, find relief, and
gather knowledge, giving credence to the idea that they are perceived as being
best suited to fulfil long-held desires for improved communication. What is
more, the devices’ propensity to also further stress the dark sides of a realised
communication utopia is yet another sign that they are part of an evolutionary
path towards what we think is communication utopia: relentless connectivity, a
blurring of the private and public, terrifying closeness, and anxiety over transpar-
ency and accountability are all outcomes of the universalising tendencies that are
inherently present in utopian projects. Moreover, by the looks of things, the
future of wireless communication technologies will only intensify the communica-
tion paradox: when everyone and everything becomes part of the all-encom-
passing Internet and Internet of Things, we will have to learn to live with living in
the ‘absolute present’ (Allon 2004), in which communication, human relations, and identities will have taken on a radically different meaning.

This is no small matter. It has to be recognised that, within the current state of affairs in the communication media landscape, mobile communication devices have been endowed with the full weight of hopes and desires that have given shape to many previous attempts to come closer to communication utopia. In this sense, there is nothing new about their hyped production, marketing, and reception; we have seen it all before. Nonetheless, we should not be naive to think it is simply business as usual, because mobile communication devices do have an unprecedented and very specific impact on our lives. If basic prerequisites for the constitution of communication utopia are indeed to be understood as being omnipresent, omniscient, and therefore ‘omniconnected’, then the affordances of mobile communication devices come a long way in meeting those prerequisites, as they virtually guarantee real-time contact with anyone, anything, anytime, anywhere. The paradigm of ubiquitous connectivity has been in the cards for quite some time, and the growing presence and discursive importance of the imagery of mobile communication devices emphatically reflect that. However, omniconnectedness does not necessarily mean that we will, by definition, move towards understanding each other better; with ever-growing opportunities to connect and retrieve and store information, successful communication in the mobile communication condition has de-emphasised the pragmatic dimension of getting to know the other, and has increasingly taken on more instrumental connotations such as establishing and maintaining contact, or collecting data. In this sense, communication’s ‘good trick’ might turn out far more relentless in its consequences than we are able to acknowledge, or are actually willing to see.

Let me conclude this book by saying that the process of writing it has also revealed itself to be an exercise in duly accepting that while the desire to know ideal communication exists, it will never be fulfilled. There have been many times when I just knew that there had to be a better way of expressing my thoughts, that the words were there, somewhere, yet not readily available for me to write them down. In those moments of despair, I felt like I was one of the inquisitors in Jorge Luis Borges’s ‘Library of Babel’ (1998): men who, forever unsuccessfully, search the infinite collection of books that hold all knowledge for that single volume that will reveal the fundamental mysteries of humankind. At this last page of my own addition to the library, I know, more than I ever did before I started writing, that all we do is perpetually live through the same tragic yet highly meaningful struggles with finding pure communication.