The vanishing points of mobile communication

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At the beginning of the 21st century, mobile communication devices are virtually ubiquitous. The attraction of their ability to potentially connect anywhere, anytime, to anyone or anything in the informational network, combined with an ongoing emphasis of the individual as the nexus of communication and entertainment, has sculptured the apparatuses into vital cultural artefacts. Their pervasiveness has rendered them ordinary and, in a sense, invisible; they seamlessly blend into almost every social activity imaginable. As such, they represent the strangest breed of new media we have come to study in the past ten years: instead of being subject to initial feverish 'buzzification', mobile communication devices have steadfastly insinuated themselves among us, and in contrast to the widespread academic enthusiasm that for instance the Internet generated in the 1990s, they sparked very little scholarly interest.

However, in a remarkable reversal of the steps from hype to reality, mobile communication devices have increasingly been framed in utopian terms during the last few years. This is primarily visible in how dominant mobile communication discourses advance a very specific notion of the all-important place that mobile devices should take in the overall media landscape. A detailed analysis of such discourses would show that what is stressed are the potential gains to be made in productivity, sociability, efficiency, safety, reassurance, and mutual understanding; in other words, they stress communication improvement and its benefits, and present wireless communication technologies as the ultimate facilitator. In many ads, press releases, and expressions of popular culture, a similar reasoning process can be distinguished, one that is repeated as a guiding mantra: mobile communication devices are the self-evident technological expressions of a presumed 'natural' progression in the quest for perfected communication.

So, the pressing question that confronts us today is to what extent the infrastructures and everyday practices that co-construct the ways in which we experience mobile communication actually sustain idealized ideas of communication. In one rather straightforward sense, the adoption speed alone suggests that there is a large overlap between what dreams of ideal communication prescribe and what mobile communication devices can offer. A quick glance at their break-

neck-paced integration into everyday life could easily lead to the conclusion that the age-old desire to bridge distances and instantaneously communicate with anyone and anywhere, which has expressed itself countless times in predictions and glorifications of new media, is now for many people more fulfilled than ever. But such an explanation would obscure the different reasons why people in various demographic categories adopt mobile communication technologies, and neglect the inevitable problems and challenges that arise out of a shift towards a radical wireless connectedness. Mobile communication devices may indeed facilitate the kinds of contact that fit idealized conceptions of the zenith of communication, but do we experience them as such? Where are the kinks in the ideals, what are the paradoxes in today's mobile communication condition?

In this chapter, it is therefore my aim to make an analytical cut along the discourses of what I perceive as three of the most striking characteristics of current-day mobile communication, namely those of facilitating ubiquitous connectivity, fluid sociability, and real-time relief of anxiety. In these analytical cuts I will describe how the various aspects of idealized communication run into paradoxes when confronted with everyday communication, and I will support my claims by using illustrative examples of research conducted by media and communication scholars who set out to empirically measure and gauge the impact of mobile communication devices. In the conclusion I will argue that the feverish embracement of mobile communication technologies forces both mobile telephone users and media scholars to realign their notions of concepts such as connectivity, privacy, accountability, and information flows, if they are to understand the latent consequences of the dreams that are deeply rooted in media evolution.

Ubiquitous connectivity

The obvious and single most defining characteristic of wireless communication technology, one that precedes and co-defines its other specific features, is that it renders space almost irrelevant as a variable in constituting mediated contact. And, due to contributing factors such as the standardisation of communication protocols, the ease of construction of basic technological frameworks, the portability of devices, the intuitive use of mobile telephones, and the high social and cultural value of personal communication devices, wireless services are steadfastly becoming truly ubiquitous indeed. What is significant about this process is that the supporting infrastructure is often made virtually invisible, as a conscious attempt to create and uphold the illusion that the wireless connection is 'just there', to be invoked at will to magically synchronise different space and time co-ordinates. As in early seventeenth-century fantasies of magnetised compass needles that would move in communicative rapport wherever they were, a certain sense of – and need for – telepathic immediacy pervades modern wireless communication

technologies; just turn on the mobile device, and a connection will be guaranteed to exist almost instantly.

With their omnipresence, wireless communication technologies thus facilitate the further compression of geographical space into what Manuel Castells (1996) calls the *space of flows*. In the space of flows, people, goods, and information are in a constant state of flux, moving between physical locations while being part of a dynamic network that is linked together through the use of communication technologies. Because wireless communication devices radically alter the long-lasting relationship between communication nodes and fixed locations, in the space of flows, spatial vectors become increasingly heterogeneous, and thus simultaneous social interaction at a distance turns into a pervasive activity that can be engaged in anywhere, at any time. What follows is that we become more and more immersed in what Kenneth Gergen identifies as the 'relational net', in which everyone and everything can potentially link up (Gergen 2003, 111). Having a wireless communication device like a mobile telephone at one's disposal implies having access to ever-present, real-time communication channels, and thus to the means to engage in dialogue or to disseminate information whenever and wherever one wants. A mobile telephone therefore provides a very strong psychological fix by supplying the abundant availability of *communicative choice*, the freedom to electronically connect and mediate knowledge, opinions, and desires; it is an apparatus of opportunity, a potential-rich portal.

The tendency to depict mobile telephones as powerful devices that possess an unlimited connective potential is reflected by the strong emotional and cognitive investments that people make in wireless communication technologies. Mobile telephones have become considered as essential and vital extensions of the body, which is for instance vividly illustrated by their naming conventions. In many countries they are called 'hand phones', or their names refer to the fact that communication is 'always on' and can always be carried along on the body (Townsend 2002, 68-69). In one particular case, the name quite dramatically expresses the urge to attribute magical powers to the body extension: in Israel, a mobile telephone is called *pelephone*, after the name of Israel's first cellular communications company, which literally means 'wonder-phone' (Thompson 2005, 21). Also, mobile telephones and their invisible but potentially present connections have now become so intimately integrated into our being, that many people experience feelings of panic when they find they have not brought their mobile telephone with them, or think it is lost (Vincent 2003, 220). The severance of the Hertzian umbilical cord is felt like an amputation that many would like to avoid.[1]

There are some paradoxical ramifications, however. True, from a socio-psychological standpoint, wireless communication devices can be said to be perceived as the latest candidates to gratify the yearnings for wholeness and completeness that have continuously risen from our collective 'technological imaginary'. And indeed, at first, a perpetually connected state seems to be a perfect point of depar-

ture for establishing and managing all kinds of successful communication situations, and thus for reaching the ideal goal of a common understanding. But a closer inspection of what is at hand reveals that merely increasing the opportunities to connect might actually not help in bringing people closer together in a utopian fashion. George Myerson, for instance, comes to the conclusion that what he calls the process of 'mobilisation' is predominantly geared towards just making 'basic contacts' (Myerson 2001, 27). And indeed, there are research findings that can be interpreted as supporting Myerson's claim: people generally spend less time calling on mobile telephones than they do on fixed phones (Licoppe 2003, 175), they think of asynchronous text messaging as 'quicker and more convenient than voice telephony' (Ling 2004, 150), and they sometimes lock themselves in 'tele-cocoons' from which they only keep in touch with their most intimate friends, refraining from communicating with the outside world (Ito et al. 2005, 10-11). While some of these phenomena can be explained as user strategies aimed at managing billing systems and keeping costs low, the suggestion remains that mobile telephony and its infrastructure offer affordances that primarily invite what Christian Licoppe calls a 'connected' practice of interaction instead of a 'conversational' practice (2003, 174; 183). The 'anywhere, anytime' paradigm so much pervades interaction in everyday life, Licoppe found, that users prefer to think of their mobile communication practices mostly as intuitive whenever-you-feel-like events, which often primarily serve to acknowledge the connection that people share (ibid., 180-181).

   While such short communicative gestures are important elements in the shaping and maintenance of what can be called a 'performative value' in social relationships (Green 2003, 207), they do add to swelling flows of information, messages, and data, all of which affirm one's connectedness up to a highly redundant level. If always being connected is what brings pure communication a step closer, it is also what foregrounds the communication paradox, and forces us to realize that pure communication is relentless in its intrusive nature. Studies have shown that when, for whatever reason, the times and places at which people can be contacted are extended to all possible environments, and those contacts become more frequent, a tension arises between on the one hand the desire and expectancy for immediate and unlimited access to others, and on the other hand the need to filter out and restrict incoming access requests in increasingly variable circumstances. Hence, the presence of a perpetual connection pressures users of wireless communication devices into managing all kinds of complicated communication schemes (Sherry and Salvador 2002, 114-115), into employing inventive ways to cope with awkward social situations caused by disruptive incoming calls (Ling 2004, 123-143), and even into being deprived of sleep when they are kept awake at night by calls or text messages (Turrettini 2007).

   Discourses of wireless communication technologies, then, reflect how the compression of space by making connection nodes ubiquitous is of constitutive

importance in the transformation of our understanding of communication. Across a wide range of demographic compositions, many social activities that used to rely on physical proximity or on the pre-arranged coordination of interaction are now reshaped into ad-hoc patterns of de-spatialised and heterogeneous contacts. With the shift towards more connectedness, we experience faster and more often than before that the desire for pure communication brings us both pleasure and discomfort. As Michael Arnold holds, the mobile telephone is Janus-faced, a socio-technical system that is 'not reducible to a direction or valence tipped with a single arrowhead, but better understood as a conflation of tangential implications, at least some of which can be read as ironically and paradoxically self-contradicting phenomena' (Arnold 2003, 234). Because of mobile telephony, the paradox hiding in the desire for ideal communication becomes more articulated than ever.

Fluid sociability

User accounts of reconfigurations of connectedness can provide a good view of how people seek to exploit the range of communicative affordances of wireless communication devices, and subsequently of how they experience what are presupposed to be idealized ideas of communication sparked by a desire for perpetual contact. This is especially visible in one particularly poignant theme that runs through these user accounts, which is the theme of social coordination, or rather what Richard Ling and Birgitte Yttri (2002) distinguish as a combination of 'micro- and hyper-coordination'. Micro-coordination is the type of nuanced instrumental coordination typical of a significant part of mobile telephone use: trips that have already started can be redirected, people can call or send a text message to say they will be late, and meetings can be scheduled at a rather loosely defined time or location, only to become more definite when those who want to meet call each other while they are on their way (Ling and Yttri 2002, 143-144). Hyper-coordination adds an expressive layer to this instrumental use, both in the form of social and emotional communication (chatting, gossiping) and in the form of mobile etiquettes telling where mobile telephones should not be used or which models are in fashion (ibid., 140). Both types, then, are specifically about how to manage increasingly connected social networks: micro-coordination in a logistical way that makes full use of enhanced communicative availability, and hyper-coordination in a cultural way that establishes the mobile telephone as today's *ne plus ultra* means to create, maintain, and express social bonds and values. In user accounts of both types, elements of ideas of fulfilment through improved communication seep through voiced expectations and desires.

First examining micro-coordination, Ling and Yttri find for instance that a strong need for connectedness is conveyed in many comments about the motives for using mobile telephones, aimed at making instrumental communication pro-

ceed as smoothly as possible. This instrumental approach to mobile telephony is widespread, if not constitutive. Ling and Yttri retrieved their data mainly from interviewing Norwegian teens, but similar attitudes towards the importance of being connected for instrumental reasons have already been registered in the earliest social analyses of the adoption of mobile telephones – most notably by Kopomaa (2000) – and have been identified as largely age-indifferent and cross-cultural phenomena (cf. Castells et al. 2007; Katz and Aakhus 2002) The emphasis in such mobile communication lies on orchestrating each other's movements and positions in the space of flows to the point where they ultimately overlap and merge. This is only possible, however, if permanent availability is guaranteed and is incorporated in the ideology of mobile communication. The main motivation for using wireless communication devices in such cases lies in the assumption that if there are more opportunities to connect, it means that there will be an improvement in how we arrange social interactions, and thus in how social groups function as a whole. Of course, this assumption only holds when there is an agreement on how social interactions should actually be arranged, but in the mobile vision – availability solves everything, together is good – the mere possibility to contact anyone from anywhere is enough to suggest that such problems can easily be dealt with, simply by making another call or sending another text message.

In hyper-coordination, the value of being connected is less related to efficient planning or dealing with practical issues, and more to achieving a certain status and maintaining intimate social bonds. Such communicative activities are about sharing experiences and confirming personal links, and can take the form of gossiping, catching up on each other's adventures, or exchanging symbolic gifts (see Johnsen 2003). These practices have been around for a long time, but the ubiquitous connectivity that the mobile telephone promises to deliver represents a new and particularly potent means to establish one's identity and earn a meaningful place in the social hierarchy of family members and friends. A cross-cultural study done by Scott Campbell (2007) showed that people find that through mobile telephones, group connections are enhanced, conversations gain in intimacy, and opportunities for emancipatory praxis increase. The mobile telephone thus acts as an apparatus that 'liberates' expressive communication, largely because it makes opportunities for mediated dialogue and dissemination available to demographic groups which did not readily enjoy that privilege before the age of wireless communication devices, and because those people use mobile communication as a way to actively establish and manage their own social position in relation to others. In addition, compared to the fixed telephone, the mobile telephone offers far more direct and individualised links to other people, properties that have quickly turned the device into the primary locus where one's collection of social connections resides. Because mobile telephony is perceived as extending access to others to virtually infinite dimensions, the thought of being perpetually

connected in the symbolically charged mobile network gives an increased existential significance to relational ties.

However, increased social connectedness comes with some unintended consequences that do not readily fit within idealized ideas of improved communication. The fact that mere connectivity has come to engulf present-day conceptions of communication has a compelling effect on our relational self, changing the perception of what it means to co-exist and communicate with others. The people we interact most with – those who reside in our more intimate social circles, like family members, friends, and colleagues – are now always only a phone call or text message away. As Kenneth Gergen has aptly diagnosed this social condition, we find ourselves continuously in a state of 'absent presence': physically absent, but electronically at hand (Gergen 2002). While the arrangement of absent presence offers a psychologically reassuring feeling of closeness, perpetual connectedness does not necessarily guarantee reaching a global coming together; Gergen notes that because communication with absent present others takes place via readily available channels, and therefore does not require a lot of effort or time in setting up, it tends to become simpler, shorter, and distributed among several fragmented micro-communities (Gergen 2003, 106-107). In addition, when people are inclined to enclose themselves in connections to their absent present social network, they exhibit a diminished care for those outside of their communicative bubble (ibid., 109).

What does markedly happen while the mobile network grows is that mediated communication is brought more out in the open, which presents us with new scenarios for experiencing being-with-others and strengthens the notion that anyone carrying a wireless communication device can, potentially, become part of anyone else's technology-mediated network. The drawback of the 'invasion' of the public by the private, however, is that mobile communication behavior in public spaces often invades and disturbs social events and face-to-face conversations with what is perceived as trivial and redundant chitchat or gossip. Now, gossip is the hard-wired social glue with which humans build and maintain social bonds, and mobile telephones are very apt at facilitating it anywhere and round-the-clock (see Fox 2001), but when experienced intrusively and only one-sided, it tends to aggravate companions, bystanders, and eavesdroppers, causing them to feel disempowered (Plant 2001, 31) or convinced that communication in the mobile age has become tawdry (Palen, Salzman and Youngs 2000, 207). This strained intermingling of public (outside) space with private (inside) space is what Kathleen Cumiskey (2005) calls the paradox of techno-intimacy: to ourselves, our mobile telephone is a highly convenient personal item and our own mobile communication behavior is perfectly acceptable, but we tend not to appreciate the same behavior and attitude towards the valuation of mobile communication in others. I would argue that techno-intimacy, the ambivalent relationship between the desire to be connected and know all on the one hand, and the

need to stand apart from the multitude on the other, is itself a typical exponent of the paradox of idealized communication: an achieved complete togetherness will necessarily entail the loss of individuality, and mobile telephony will continue to stress this phenomenon.

Real-time relief of anxiety

If we are to see mobile telephones as personal apparatuses full of communicative potential that, through their capability to transgress space and time, can maintain and strengthen bonds with primary social group members and make coordination activities more ad-hoc and prominent, one of the following observations must be that the psychological fix attached to wireless communication relies heavily on the involvement of feelings of reassurance. For many, the emotional immediacy of the device has registered itself as an indispensable part of their everyday life, like the aura of a talisman worn for good luck and protection. And indeed, research has shown that a need for security, safety and reassurance is high on the list of initial reasons why people decide to buy wireless communication devices, either for themselves or for their children and other loved ones. In a 1999 qualitative survey of 36 focus groups in six European countries, Richard Ling reports,

> respondents were asked to what degree they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'The mobile telephone is useful in an emergency'. We found that approximately 82% of the respondents were in complete agreement. There was no other attitudinal indicator with regard to mobile telephony that had such an extreme score (Ling 2004, 37).

Similar results were obtained from studies in the United States and Australia (ibid., 38) and from cross-cultural field studies undertaken in Berlin, San Fransisco, Shanghai, and Tokyo (Chipchase 2005).

The human fear for calamities evidently provides a sound reason why feelings of security and safety play a significant role in the adoption of wireless communication technologies. The many folk-stories that tell of amazing rescue missions that involve the use of mobile telephones are adamant examples of how strong the desire is to stress that increased connectedness is a Good Thing. Idealized ideas of communication thrive on compelling anecdotes that 'prove' that progress has been made, and arguably nothing provides more conclusive evidence than accounts of lives saved or loved ones protected thanks to new communication technologies. So, we read in *The Guardian* that two British climbers caught in a blizzard on a Swiss mountain texted five friends, one of whom received the message in London at 5 am and immediately notified the rescue services in Geneva, who then finally rescued both climbers (Allison 2003). Similar stories tell of peo-

ple being lost in a pass, shipwrecked on a boat off the coast of Indonesia, or stranded in the outback of Australia, who were all able to alert friends or family through their mobile telephones and consequently receive life-saving help (Turrettini 2004). Such stories readily feed myths of improved communication: without the new mobile communication devices, lives could have been severely impaired, or even lost.

However, increased security through networked wireless communication technologies can only be guaranteed if people are willing to sacrifice some or even all control over when they can and should be reached, and by whom. Forceful evidence of this highly charged problem created by the need to relieve anxiety can be found in one of the more common social relationships where reassurance plays an important role, namely that between parents and adolescents. On the one hand, the mobile telephone offers parents the ability to let their children discover the world on their own, with the added safety of knowing that the teenagers can always call in case of an emergency. But, on the other hand, notions of surveillance and accountability are sure to follow from a heightened absent presence of others. When one's whereabouts and activities are continuously under potential scrutiny, the mobile telephone becomes a mobile leash, exerting a strong influence over its carrier. Thus, in their adolescent quest for independence and in response to overly concerned parents, teenagers often develop 'parent management strategies' with which they regulate their reachability (Green 2002, 39).

While Green notes that the dominant association of terms like 'surveillance' and 'accountability' with state-controlled law enforcement does not do justice to the new ways in which individuals gather and share information, she holds that the proliferation of wireless communication technologies has 'normalized' the activity of checking up on others (ibid., 33). Through mobile devices, Green says, individuals 'engage in routine monitoring of themselves and each other (...), and assume that others are self-regulating and accountable for their use of devices in both co-present and tele-present contexts' (ibid., 43). Thus, everyday notions of what it means to feel reassured increasingly come to rely on knowing what others are up to, because the technological means to gain that knowledge are at one's disposal at all times. As a result, questions of privacy become more manifest. As sociologist James Rule asserts, compared to older, mass media systems, today's infrastructures of perpetual contact inherently generate more personalized information available to large institutions, corporations, and groups of individuals, making a future world of 'total surveillance' a conceivable reality (Rule 2002, 247). Although, like Green, Rule does not want to attach a specific value connotation to the term 'surveillance', he does point out that we should be cautious not to dismiss the dangers of this outlook too easily, or think that we can always escape observation by simply turning off our connections when we want to (ibid., 248). In the mobile age, perpetual contact becomes the norm, and participating without it difficult indeed.

These observations of ambivalence in mobile 'reassurance technologies' highlight the pitfall of the desire for pure communication: the more opportunities are created to connect and communicate, the more struggle there will be to hold on to established boundaries between the private and the public, between what can be known, should be known, and needs to be known. Wireless communication devices may be able to function as symbolic crowbars, breaking open social patterns of communicative behavior, but they can only do so at the expense of disclosing a lot more information than people might care to consider. What is more, there will always be the nagging uncertainty whether extra information is truly enough for one to be relieved of all anxiety. In fact, by seeking reassurance through radical connectedness, another type of anxiety is created, one that stems from simultaneously being connected to someone far away and knowing that that distance cannot be bridged physically. This spatial discrepancy may not be so problematic when a call is made for trivial reasons, but when related to an emergency, the state of being 'distant but present' can instil overwhelming feelings of isolation and powerlessness. A fickle balance between fear and relief manifests itself in the continuous search for reassurance; when Henrietta Thompson for instance states that mobile 'phones offer the best peace of mind it is possible to get', she does this in the context of Israel's continuous preparedness for terrorist attacks, where with 'the fear of [terrorism] always present, the need to communicate is paramount [and] people need to be able to check-up on their loved ones on short notice' (Thompson 2005, 55).

So, not only does the longing for perpetual contact create privacy issues, it also multiplies instances in which people are connected in extreme emotional circumstances while being physically apart. The torment of such 'intense immediacy', as James E. Katz (2006, 104) calls it, becomes adamantly clear in situations of life and death. Imagine, for instance, the conversation between the stranded mountaineer and his wife, whom he had called to say he was going to die (Cusk 2001). Or think of those other, highly profiled accounts of mobile calls in which Eros met Thanatos, made during and after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. People in the hijacked planes and those trapped inside the struck towers called family members to tell them that they loved them, sometimes right up to the moment when they died. After the towers had collapsed, rescue workers could hear people from under the wreckage use their mobile telephones to call for help, not seldom in vain. Most dreadful are the accounts of unanswered mobile telephones ringing in the rubble, or even in body bags.[2] All these cases vividly illustrate how feelings of reassurance and distress can come palpably close to merging into a single sentiment, how wireless communication technologies can augment both intimacy and isolation to such a degree that pure communication is indeed virtually reached, in all its real-time glory and ugliness.

Conclusion

As I aimed to show in the analyses of three of the most striking characteristics of mobile communication, a complex, ambivalent pattern can be distinguished in the ongoing process of mobilization. By increasing connectedness, transforming sociability, and opening up access to and the production of personal information, mobile communication devices fervently confront us with the paradoxes of pure communication, bringing us closer to the technological fulfilment of the desire for immediate togetherness, but at the same time letting us experience its ruthless blending of all actors involved. In all their ordinariness, mobile communication devices have showed and continue to show the potential to stealthily yet radically alter our perception of what it means to co-exist with others in a connected society.

This also means that our traditional understandings of concepts such as availability, privacy, accountability, safety, and security, which are all in particular ways dependent upon dominant modes of media deployment, will inevitably have to be rethought in order to reflect what it means to be in perpetual contact. In today's mobile communication condition, where the ability to 'just call' or 'just look up' is increasingly perceived as the primary solution to all kinds of problems, it becomes difficult – or even nonsensical – to think of people not being connected, or of information not being available. Not only will the social and political-economic pressure to join the growing interconnected communication network become more intense, the prevalent ideal of a fully transparent society will also force us to realize that everyone and everything is becoming subsumed within a single, all-encompassing communication regime, when it continues to be used as the fundamental guiding principle for new media developments. Unless we come to grips with the profound consequences inherent in the proliferation of mobile communication, we will fail to adequately address concerns of privacy, accountability, and safety in the connected society.

Notes

1. To illustrate this further, during the short-lived offer in 2000 by several mobile telephone operators to provide free calls in the evenings and on weekends, some people even chose to maintain a constant connection through their mobile telephones, and listen to each other sleeping (Licoppe 2003, 177).
2. Similar stories of 'ringing body bags' could be heard after the Madrid terrorist attacks in 2004 (BBC News 2004) and the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 (King 2007).

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