Infinite Availability
On Hyper-Communication (and Old Age)
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Abstract: There has been much speculation among intellectuals and philosophers about the qualitative changes in our habits of communication that have come with electronic technology — so much so that we have perhaps neglected the most obvious quantitative effect: without any doubt, human beings have never been obliged to communicate as frequently as is the case in our electronic present — with the unsurprising and well known consequence that we constantly feel “behind” in our electronic obligations to communicate. From a (pseudo-) ethical point of view, the even more oppressive flip side of this phenomenon is one’s need to be constantly “available,” the result of which we all know: seminar discussions, religious services, or moments of erotic delight interrupted by ringing cellphones or by a constant anxiety that one needs to check one’s e-mail. The main interest of this essay is to explore the existential consequences of this new — and enslaving — law of “universal availability.” But this entire polemic is accompanied by the author’s concession that his own — very subjective — reaction to electronic communication may well be the (legitimate) reaction of old age.

1.

We have more opportunities to communicate than ever before in the history of homo sapiens. This is the elementary fact that I am referring to with the word “hyper-communication,” and I refrain from saying that hyper-communication is either a very good or a very bad thing. Now the frequency with which we talk to other people face-to-face, that is in mutual physical presence, has most likely not increased — but it has probably also not dramatically declined during the past decades. If we have more opportunities to communicate than ever before, in the sense of conducting interactions based on the use of natural languages, then this increase is clearly a function of technical devices whose effects neutralize the consequences of physical and sometimes also of temporal distance. Telephone and electronic mail, radio, gramophone, and television are examples of the range of such devices. Of course there is a basic structural difference that differentiates telephone and electronic mail, as media that allow for exchange and mutual influence and
interaction, from the more “asymmetrical” media like radio, gramophone, and television where only persons at the – irreversibly – receiving end get to perceive those individuals who initiate communication without ever getting any immediate feedback themselves.

But the most fascinating electronic instruments of communication are the ones that produce the physical impression of an interaction at a distance, although there is only one body actually involved. Different from the spectators who, especially in the eighteenth century, were intrigued by those chess-playing “machines,” we know for a fact that there is no bank or airline employee involved when, for example, we use an automatic teller machine (ATM) or when we check in at the airport by using a screen; nor are we really deceived by the usually female voices that lend spatial presence to the navigation system in our cars. And yet we often act – and we like to act – as if a real person was involved on the other side. Who, quite honestly, has never called their electronic female navigator “a bitch”? And who has not been pleased or put off, at some point, by the polite language and the efficiency of those airline screens helping us to get ready for our next flight?

My opening sentence, then, was presupposing that we are inclined to subsume all these different kinds of technically facilitated “interaction” under the concept of “communication.” Many of them, like the ATM around the corner, the check-in device at the local airport, or the program at the customer service number of your Mastercard, simply replace former institutions and situations of face-to-face interaction. They are never exactly the same as the structures that preceded them but the difference between the real person (of earlier times) and the electronic function (of today) is obviously meant to remain at a level that avoids confusion. I also think that this is the disappointingly banal reason why all these new varieties of techno-permeated communication have in the end not inspired theories as earthshaking and grandiose as some of us had originally hoped for (remember with what excitement we once read Jean Baudrillard, Vilém Flusser or Paul Virilio). Evidently, we are far from completely controlling, say, the addictive temptations of e-mail. But this is not so terribly different from people having spent more time than they could afford, for millennia, in pointless face-to-face conversations.

The innovation brought about by those devices, therefore, does not lie in any specific features through which they copy or exceed the possible performance of a human person – it lies rather in their ubiquity. Without any doubt, the number of cash machines that we can use now, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, exceeds the highest number of bank employees ever hired and paid in order to provide customers with cash. Airlines can now spread their welcoming presence more widely throughout the airport buildings, with those touch-screens, than they ever could while they were
limited to a designated segment of space for the check in. Whatever we need seems to be more available than before through electronic communication. But, whether we desire this or not, we, i.e. those who use ATM’s and touch-screens, become more available too.

At my University, I have the enviable privilege of using a small office in the middle of the Library whose occupant (and I am the present occupant) is supposed to remain anonymous. Among other things, this office, unlike my other office on campus, where I see students and colleagues, was meant to protect me or, rather, to distance me from the invasiveness of electronic communication (and any other type of communication that I do not actively choose to engage in), like the private space of my home where I don’t do e-mail either. I used to deal with the several hundred e-mail messages that I receive on a normal working day, during deliberately limited hours of the morning and of the evening in my official campus office, while the time in the carrel and the working time at home were exclusively dedicated to reading and writing. What, naively, I had not taken into account was the strange agency exercised by my laptop itself – my laptop that I had meant to use exclusively as a writing instrument, something like a functionally much improved electronic typewriter. One day, to my surprise, the laptop screen informed me that, thanks to an upgrading of the library buildings to the level of electronically sensitive spaces, it was now making available all the messages in my carrel that I had wanted to reserve for the computer in my other on-campus office, thus making me too available to the world – very much against my intention. From the perspective of my personal work and my subjective well-being, this excessive availability was vulnerability. I know that universal availability is generally considered to be the main effect and the unconditional value of electronically provided hyper-communication. It has been celebrated as a democratic value but it is one of those democratic values that Nietzsche would have associated with a situation of slavery. Whoever is electronically available must break all democratic rules of politeness to avoid e-mail addiction and e-mail victimhood. Since it is considered rude not to communicate, it proves difficult not to do so. And what is more, ready availability also undoes all hierarchies and social differences. Pretty much every day, I receive some messages in which students tell me that they have a real necessity to talk to me, that they would consider it a great favor and privilege if I set up a meeting with them – and then they continue by letting me know the time and the electronic addresses under which they will be “available.” How impossibly old-fashioned is it if I regularly feel that in this type and under these conditions of interaction it should be exclusively my privilege to be “available” or not?
Vis-à-vis all these electronic gadgets, vis-à-vis the hyper-communication that is their effect, and even vis-à-vis the very trendy academic attempts at theorizing them both, I take a position resembling the attitude of those fifteenth century monks, scribes, and scholars who feared, criticized, and finally even actively rejected the printing press. While I do not literally believe that electronic communication devices are the devil’s work and will have a generally deteriorating effect on culture at large, I give in, quite often, to the temptation of describing them as agents and symptoms of intellectual decadence, and I try to know as little about them as I can possibly afford. I have learnt, proudly, that my University cannot legally oblige me to change office computers each time that we are offered the opportunity to do so – and I relish the shock that some of my colleagues register when they realize, for example, that the size of the computer screen in my office is three and a half technological generations behind what they consider to be standard. But I doubt whether they could ever explain me in a really convincing way why it is so much better to have a very large screen.

Nor have I ever believed in that very teleological faith according to which we make inventions when we most need them. Of course this can happen, randomly or as the result of an intense effort, but it clearly is the exception. Quite often – and perhaps even most frequently – new technical devices or cultural practices emerge independently of the collective needs in their environment, and even whether, once invented, they will be broadly assimilated by a society or not, hinges not only upon their practical value but may well be motivated, for example, by their aesthetic appeal. There was no real pragmatic “need” for radio and television, for example, but radio immediately and television after a long period of incubation ended up profoundly transforming not only our sphere of leisure. Once such innovations have become institutionalized, their existence and their presence appear irreversible, and it is in this sense that Niklas Luhmann called them “evolutionary achievements.” Such an optimistic-sounding phrase obscures the experience that many of the innovations that we refer to in this way, end up placing human beings in situations of dependency and victimhood that greatly reduce their range of agency and efficiency. Ironically enough, some Silicon Valley companies were among the first to realize that they lost billions of dollars, year after year and at an increasing rate, due to the addiction that prevented their employees from working in front of a computer screen without feeling the need to check its e-mail functions every few minutes.

At any event, these so-called “evolutionary achievements” are inevitably piling up, and this cumulative effect produces the impression of a trajectory that we can then interpret, in a Hegelian mood, as “historically necessary.” Nobody will ever be able to prove or to disprove the “historical necessity” of
a fact after the fact – and within this unmarked space of uninhibited speculation, we may easily encounter exciting hypotheses, like that of the French paleontologist André Leroi Gourhan, for example, who has claimed that civilization, with technology as its core, may have replaced the biological (?) energy that used to propel the evolution of our species, and that this happened at a time when the biological evolution of humankind has greatly slowed down and may indeed have come to a standstill.

In this technical, cultural, and intellectual environment, all I have – very modestly – been hoping for during the past ten years (and I am now sixty-one years old) is that certain objects and situations that I grew up with and which, therefore, belong to my being-in-the-world, will not disappear under the pressure of the latest evolutionary achievements. I am also claiming the (moral?) right to be exempted from the obligation of embracing each and every technical innovation. Not necessarily because I have profound reasons for my resistance to so much communication but because I encountered its forms and phenomena too late in life, perhaps only by a few years, for me to assimilate them all in a comfortable way. I know how ridiculous it would be if I pretended that I am trying to slow down or even to stop the historical drift of events. I would simply like to be accorded polite tolerance when I give lectures without using power point, and I would like a chance to convince my students that it might be better for them if I do not give in to their regular demands for me to “use more visuals” in my courses. At some point, perhaps, I will end up being convinced that the gap between my own communicative style and that of my students has grown to a degree that is seriously problematic. This will be the day for me to change my approach to teaching – or, more likely, to retire. But I refuse to make the effort of laboriously adapting myself to an environment that I do not feel comfortable with and that makes me look inept. For example, there are too many potential virtues – and even democratic values – in “distance learning” for us actively to combat this development. And yet I know that my University will effectively have disappeared if the day comes when we will no longer be allowed to sit around a table with our (not too many) students. I also know that I would not be very successful and would certainly not look very impressive if I tried to take notes, at a lecture or a discussion, with a laptop on my knees. And I believe that this is also the case for most of the colleagues of my age who claim to have been early champions of the electronic revolution (I recently saw one of them dropping the laptop from his knees three times in one hour of discussion). What I most fear when I use communication technologies that I have not grown up with is an embarrassing lack of grace in my behavior. In other words: the strongest reason for my anti-electronic attitude is an anticipated aesthetic judgment about myself.
3.

There is an entire repertoire of forms and configurations that are emblematic of a world that has filled its formerly vacant zones with technology-facilitated opportunities to communicate and yet, strangely, these forms and configurations strike me as emblems of solitude and isolation. The most salient among them is the solitary walker who, at first glance, seems to be talking to himself, often with great emphasis and expressiveness, and also quite loudly, and thus appears to perfectly fit one of the traditional images of the fool as “someone who talks to himself.” As we all know, the problem in this case lies in the eye of the beholder. For as soon as we discover evidence of an electronic communication device around the person’s neck, or behind her ear, then she turns from an uncanny figure of foolishness into somebody who is privileged to spend time with a beloved one, say, on her way to work. Now let us assume that the beloved one, in the specific case of the solitary walker-talker whom we are watching, is her lover. In such a case, they may well use electronic communication, during their working day, to allude to moments of erotic intensity that they remember from the night before, or that they are perhaps looking forward to again. Such an exchange will draw its specific excitement from establishing a bubble of ecstatic privacy in the very midst of the most formal and sometimes even most public or work related situations. I can still remember one late afternoon when, driving back to our house, the road was blocked by all the books and furniture that the wife of a colleague had thrown through the window after she had read the mail he would exchange on a daily basis with his two extramarital lovers (who were unaware of each other’s existence: one an undergraduate student and one a senior woman colleague) – mail which he had accidentally addressed to his spouse and to the Provost of the University. Possible Freudian interpretations apart, interpretations for example about an “unconscious desire for confession” manifesting itself in accidents of this kind, I believe that it is the dangers of contiguity that lend a background of erotic charge to the solitude of electronic communication.

There is nothing less erotic, by contrast, than those mails and cell phone calls to spouses or relatives that more than half of the passengers on a normal flight feel the irresistible urge to make in the very first moment – right after touch-down – that they are allowed to do so. This reaction is no different from smokers grabbing their pack of cigarettes as soon as they arrive at one of the few remaining spaces in our world where smoking is not banned; both are symptoms of addiction. Nobody waiting for us at the airport really needs to know, again, that our plane has touched down, given that there is a multiplicity of screens, in the waiting area, that provide the very same information. Nor do they need to know, ten minutes later, that we are still waiting for the suitcase at the baggage claim and that, four minutes later, it is finally in sight. By
the time the arriving passenger embraces his wife, it may feel that he already had arrived “too much,” that his body, which he now adds to the mind and voice that have already been made present, has no existential place of its own.

That it is a body-less and space-less medium, and thus will never turn into an ecological burden, lends an aura of political correctness to electronic communication, at least in the perception of those who aggressively use it. If you ask for texts in hardcopy to be airmailed or fedexed because your eyes suffer from reading long texts onscreen or because you want to forego the ordeal of printing out endless materials, you will often face the threat of a refusal that gives itself the triumphant aura of ecological responsibility. For who would be so selfish and audacious as to care more about his own remaining eyesight than about the remaining trees in the world? Finally, there is this other aura, the ultimate aura, that is generated by the line, encountered at the end of some electronic messages: “Sent from my Blackberry.” The aristocratic design of this device, the tone conveyed by the four words quoted, and the knowledge that his Blackberry is the one accoutrement of President Barack Obama that gives him credibility as one who belongs to the present and even to the future – these and other factors may come together to produce an effect of hierarchy in the communication with Blackberry users. Are they perhaps those happy few who let us know that they are graciously available – but that their availability should not be taken advantage of? Whenever I receive a message saying: “Sent from – somebody’s – Blackberry,” I feel that I am at the lower end of a regal message and that, rather than offering a response, I should wait for subsequent messages – or perhaps even commands.

4.

Not only do I have so many more opportunities than ever before to communi cate which, if I only managed to control myself, might well be a blessing, these opportunities also make instantly available to me a large range of those human beings whose segments of lifetime overlap with mine, among them many who I actively care about, like the two of my four children who live in Europe and my only granddaughter. Then what am I complaining about, apart from the victimhood that comes from having to be so tremendously available myself? My answer is that hyper-communication erodes those contours that used to give form, drama, and flavor to my everyday life. Here is an example. Whenever I agree to give a reasonably well-paid lecture these days (“reasonably well-paid” meaning that the organizers, on whatever grounds, attribute a certain importance to it), I am asked, early on, to provide a title and a summary of non-negligible length, for the purpose of (mostly electronic) advertising and public-
ity. And almost simultaneously, somebody will demand that I make available a manuscript of my lecture to those who, for one reason or the other, will not be able to attend. On the day of the lecture, at the very latest, somebody will want me to sign a form giving my consent to the production of a recording. All of this is partly flattering (one feels “in demand”) and partly nerve-wrecking (especially for somebody who relies, for lectures, on barely handwritten notes, i.e. notes that are usually the very condensed result of a long process of reflection). But taken together, all these interventions tend to flatten out those contours and rough transitions that used to give a specific event-character to lectures in the pre-electronic age. Anyone who now attends a lecture – this is the new ideal – should do so by essentially re-reading or re-listening to a text that is already known, and whoever chooses not to attend should definitely not forfeit the possibility of reading it or to listening to it at a later date. Since we are so eager to make our consciousness universally available, we end up spreading our actual physical presence rather thinly: nothing is ever absolutely new any more, and nothing is ever irreversibly over and done with.

If hyper-communication levels the excitement that arises from the discontinuity implied in any beginning, it also smoothens the pain or the tragedy of ending and separation. Your girlfriend maybe eight hundred (or six thousand) miles away but, in contrast to when I was young and the telephone was both very expensive and even more unreliable, there is the consoling privacy of “Facebook” (if it produces “privacy” at all, I have to ask, while admitting that I have never used face book). Along with the contours that define the event-character of experience and with the existential contrasts between presence and absence, private and public, we may also lose, with the availability of so many “sites” externally juxtaposed on the web, a sense for what matters and what does not. Of course some sites receive many more “hits” than others – but the hope that electronic sites of all kinds will ever provide the physical and intellectual intensity of a discussion in the shared physical presence of the participants has long since vanished. Has anybody ever seen a truly good debate in electronic form, a debate where the mutual resistance of the discussants turns into mutual inspiration and generates new ideas in the process? While it is difficult to explain why all that electronic discussions produce, at best, is a level of intellectual mediocrity, we all know that this is the case – and somehow inevitably. Even on the website of my best friend, I can only be alone, and what I may feel there, as a hint of closeness, never transcends the closeness of a tourist or that of a voyeur. Is there anything more pathetic than those tens of thousands (I fear it is hundreds of thousands) of blogs that are being written with such a sense of self-importance – and will forever remain unread (for good reasons, I want to add). On the web, eliminating the risk of catching a cold from anyone is more than balanced, at least for me, by the loss of the chance to be moved to tears.
5. But what then do I really want, what is my (practical) ideal? One strong wish that I have is for the continuation of that “philosophical reading group” where we meet, in a group of about thirty faculty and students, at Stanford every Thursday night for a good two or three hours, for the sole purpose of discussing, in small segments, just one philosophical book (mostly classics) over a period of ten weeks. Regardless of whether the text chosen for a certain trimester is close to my own working agenda or not, the energy of that reading group has become my intellectual lifeline. But there is no doubt that, for all of its intensity, our philosophical reading group has lost, in recent years, important participants to an ever growing number of other workshops whose emergence benefits from the electronic gesture of juxtaposing so many options and possibilities.

I also have a much more romantic, archaic, and unrealistic memory of a moment that I loved, a memory that I am obsessed with, a recollection of a world that was never mine and must by now be gone forever. About fifteen years ago, a former student of mine took me to a small town in Louisiana called New Iberia, with the purpose of visiting a former plantation that boasted that it was “the home of the first pair of blue jeans.” On our way back to the car, I believe, we walked by a bayou where two very old black men stood looking into the water. After a few minutes, one of these two very old black men turned to us to explain, very politely and in a French whose sounds were conjured up from the late seventeenth century, that alligators up to three feet long were very tasty and tender, whereas the flesh of alligators four feet long was tough and impossible to eat. Five or six years later, I returned to beautiful New Iberia with my family. For the second time in my life, I saw the first pair of blue jeans, and once again I walked by the bayou where, I swear, I saw those same two very old black men again who had not aged and told us, again, what they felt my family and I should know about the gastronomic qualities of three- and of four-foot long alligators. No event in my entire life had more vivid contours, and no experience is more present in my memory than that double communication with two very old black men at New Iberia, Louisiana.

6. Nothing by contrast is more Cartesian than all the different kinds of electronic communication, nothing is more seamlessly connectable with our consciousness than they are, and nothing is more withdrawn from the dimension of space. This is the reason why electronically based hyper-communication brings the process of Modernity to its insuperable completion: the process in
which the human subject as pure consciousness has emancipated itself from and triumphed over the human body and every other kind of res extensa. Not that there was much left for consciousness to conquer, at least in mainstream Western culture, before the first chip was invented and before the first personal computers were sold. But in order to become perfect and, above all, irreversible, the democratically enslaving principle of universal availability required the reduction of human existence through the medium of the computer screen. Since contours, discontinuities, and borders tend to vanish in this dimension, we now spend most of our lives invariably in the same position, i.e. in front of the eternal computer screen. We are there while we fulfill our professional duties, when we communicate with our beloved ones and, above all, when we are faced with the threat of being alone. For we have traded the pain of solitude caused by physical absence for the ever-lasting semi-solitude of those who make themselves infinitely available.

Everything melts together, everything is a process of “fusion.” In spite of all the talk about it, there are no “mixed realities” that would deserve this name. Our new pride is based on the particular type of alertness required in order to manage an existence of complex simultaneities. While I was writing this text, I occasionally checked the incoming e-mails and, as it is mid-July, I also just saw who won today’s stage of the Tour de France (it was, to my great American regret, Alberto Contador from Spain). This predominant situation of early twenty-first century human realities converges with the impression that the “imperceptibly short” present of the historicist construction of time – namely the construction of time that had emerged in the early nineteenth century and had become so dominant that we tended to confuse it with time as such – that the imperceptibly short present characteristic of the historicist chronotope has now been replaced by an ever-expanding present of simultaneities. In today’s electronic present, there is neither anything “from the past” that we need to leave behind, nor anything “from the future” that could not be made present by simulated anticipation.

Some of us older ones feel that this is simply too much – and at the same time not enough – presence. If the process of Modernity has largely been a process of disenchantment, we have now written “Rational Re-enchantment” on our revolutionary banners. But I am fully aware that this is but another Gray Panthers’ revolution.