Chapter 5.17
Propagating the Ideal:
The Mobile Communication Paradox

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, visions of mobile communication are explored by focussing on idealised concepts surrounding wireless technology. By examining sources on the development, marketing, and use of wireless technology, I contextualise these visions within earlier accounts of ideal communication found in media history and isolate the regularities that are part of these accounts. On close examination, a paradox reveals itself in these regularities, one that can be described as resulting from an uneasiness in the human communication psyche: an unfulfilled desire for divine togetherness that clashes with individual communication needs. While the exact nature of this paradox—innate and hardwired into our brains, or culturally fostered—remains unknown, however, I assert that the paradox will continue to fuel idealised ideas about future communication technology. I conclude with the observation that not all use of mobile technology can immediately be interpreted as transcendental, and that built-in locational awareness balances the mobile communication act.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2003, two British climbers were caught in a blizzard on a Swiss mountain. Rachel Kelsey and her partner Jeremy Colenso, both experienced climbers, were forced to stop behind a large rock at 3000 meters up and wait for the weather to clear. They soon realised that their chances of finding the abseil points in heavy snow were very slim, which meant they were stuck. They texted five friends, one of whom received the message in London at 5 a.m. and immediately notified the rescue services in Geneva. After having to wait another 36 hours because the conditions were too severe for the rescue team to pick them up, the two climbers were finally rescued (Allison, 2003).

The idea that Earth is becoming entirely networked is not new,[1] but the characteristics of mobile communication media have—just as with the first wireless revolution in the beginning of the 20th century[2]—fiercely fuelled the Western notion that through better communication technology all problems of communication will—finally—be solved (Peters, 1999). The "anywhere, anytime, anyhow, anyone" slogan, subliminally attached to every mobile apparatus, opens up a vision of a universally accessible communication space, in which the exchange of information comes to stand for the single most important condition of human progress. More than at any other time in history, this human progress is thought to depend on technological progress.

Rescue stories as those described in the opening paragraph play their part in keeping the idea alive that improvement through technological progress can be measured. The conventional wisdom is that human lives are the single most valuable things we can think of, and if new technology can help save them, it must be treasured. Moreover, if new technology such as mobile telephony makes possible a way of life that is never forsaken of human contact—which therefore is taken as *safe* because there will always be someone who can help—this technology is surely poised to be seamlessly adapted to and integrated in our being (Katz, 2003). Through the remediation of older dominant forms of communication and entertainment technology, the mobile device (or personal digital assistant (PDA) or smart phone, as it is increasingly being called by mobile phone operators and providers) does seem to try to provide an ultimate extension of the natural balance of our sense organs (Levinson, 1997, 2004). Future visions of mobile communication strive for setting up globally accessible meeting points that cater bodiless but perfect interaction, and ultimately for opening up a communication space in which everyone is represented.

This is the inherently human dream of reaching an ideal state, which is cunningly exploited by advertisements, telecom operators, service providers, and the like. We know it is a dream, and we know that we are confronted by it day after day. It will probably haunt us for centuries to come. However, just as "our desire for each other [is] a poor substitute for the primary Eros—and therefore doomed to fail" (Campe, 2000), so are our telecommunication media substitutes for the primary *closeness*—and bound to fail (Vries, 2005). The end result of this is a tragic search for ideal communication through a continuous so-called improvement of communication technologies, a search that will never end.

This chapter will investigate the paradox of this eternal futile quest that we seem to keep embarking on, and will do so by looking at how mobile discourse is framed within quest-ending narratives. By analysing texts from influential scholars such as Pierre Lévy, Howard Rheingold, and Paul Levinson, we will get a grasp of how idealised ideas of the power of new communication technology have pervaded the mobile realm. From there, an attempt is made to single out the recurrent elements in those ideas, whose pervasiveness in our culture will then be examined. Finally, we will look at a few current trends in mobile cooperation techniques that potentially realise certain ideals of communication, albeit in a more pragmatic sense than a sublime one.

UNWIRING THE KNOWLEDGE SPACE

So far, it has mainly been cyberspace and its accompanying access points in the form of personal computers and laptops that are associated with potentially establishing the universally accessible communication realm. However, with the amount of mobile phones growing at an enormous pace,[3] the mobile device has with stunning speed become an essential tool to establish and maintain social networks, as well as managing all kinds of data flows. In this capacity, the device seems perfectly

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