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The mobile telephone as a return to unalienated communication

KRISTÓF NYÍRI

For at least one and a half million years, until about ten thousand years ago, human communication was invariably face-to-face, restricted to communication among people inhabiting a common physical space. According to evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, language emerged as an instrument to maintain community cohesion in groups that were growing in size, enabling a constant, effective exchange of social information (Dunbar 1996). Dunbar's work had a marked influence on social science research on mobile communications. It was echoed by, among others, Kate Fox in her widely-cited essay "Evolution, Alienation and Gossip" (Fox 2001). As Fox has put it: "In the fast-paced modern world, we had become severely restricted in both the quantity and quality of communication with our social network. Mobile gossip restores our sense of connection and community, and provides an antidote to the pressures and alienation of modern life."

Mobile telephony amounts to a kind of return to primordial patterns of communication in a different way as well. According to another evolutionary psychologist, Merlin Donald, two main phases can be distinguished in the appearance of those patterns (Donald 1991). The first: the emergence of the ability to mime, i.e. to visually represent events. The second, beginning some fifty to one hundred thousand years ago, the emergence of the human speech system, the development of verbal language built upon the foundations of a language of gestures. Finally, some ten thousand years ago, there appeared entirely new patterns of communication, namely patterns of mediated communication, which came into being as a consequence of what Donald calls the emergence of external memory, the invention of pictorial, ideographical and phonological symbolic systems. We should note that some steps along this road brought not just better capabilities in communication, but also a growing disharmony between the primordial mindset and some of the new means of expression. My point in the present chapter is simply that recent developments in mobile telephony, while further, and vast-

ly, improving these capabilities, also promise an opportunity to overcome the disharmony in question.

An initial slight estrangement between content and medium must have already occurred with the development of verbal language. This development allotted new tasks to the left cerebral hemisphere, but not everyone's brain was equally well suited to deal with these tasks. What today is called dyslexia in the broader sense—that is, difficulty with words—has an anatomical basis (West 1997: 271), and is quite widespread. Clearly, this difficulty did not become conspicuous before the rise of literacy. As West puts it, “certain special abilities and dyslexia tend to come together”, but “in preliterate societies only the advantages would be apparent, not the disadvantages. And, because these conditions have prevailed through most of human history, it is not surprising that dyslexia should be relatively common and would not be evident as a problem until secondary and higher education (with their great degree of verbal orientation) is required for very large proportions of the society” (West 1997: 20). But to some extent dyslexia must have made itself felt in pre-historic times as well, when the masterly user of an elaborate gesture language and the inspired creator of cave paintings suddenly found themselves looking for words and stuttering. West cites Stephan Jay Gould quoting Goethe: “We should talk less and draw more. I personally would like to renounce speech altogether and, like organic nature, communicate everything I have to say in sketches” (West 1997: 257). The citation is from Gould's *Eight Little Piggies* (Gould 1993). As Gould puts it in that work: “Our attraction to images as a source of understanding is both primal and pervasive. Writing, with its linear sequencing of ideas, is a historical afterthought in the history of human cognition.”

Generally speaking, the handing-over of inner mental contents to external memory devices liberates, rather than alienates, the mind. Marx criticised Hegel for equating *Vergegenständlichung* with *Entfremdung*, objectification with alienation; the propensity for objectification, beginning with tool-making, is an essential human trait. However, objectification does result in alienation when a system of imposed division of labour is the basis of the production of material goods. Marx believed that primitive societies were indeed characterized by a more or less natural or organic system of division of labour. In a well-known passage in his *Capital*, vol. 1, ch. 1, sect. 1 (“The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof”, here quoted from the English edition of 1887) he refers to “the patriarchal industries of a peasant family, that produces corn, cattle, yarn, linen, and clothing for home use. These different articles are, as regards the family, so many products of its labour, but as between themselves, they are not commodities. The different kinds of labour, such as tillage, cattle tending, spinning, weaving and making clothes, which result in the various products, are in themselves,

and such as they are, direct social functions, because functions of the family, which [...] possesses a spontaneously developed system of division of labour." As the young Marx had implied, there is a core of truth in romanticism: the early, "raw" conditions were, so to speak, "naive Netherlandish paintings of the true conditions" (Marx 1964: 78). Now we might say that there is a division of labour also between the visual, oral-aural, verbal, tactile, etc. communication channels. Unalienated communication presupposes a spontaneous harmony of these channels, but such harmony could hardly be maintained after the emergence of the first writing systems.

Pictorial and hieroglyphic writing systems were difficult to master, constituting priestly knowledge, and alien to the masses. Alphabetic literacy fostered democracy and rational thinking, but it also led, as the Platonic reaction shows and as Nietzsche emphasized, to excessive preoccupation with abstractions, to a neglect of the sensory world. As another distorting effect of alphabetic writing there arose, as McLuhan liked to point out, the dominance of linear thinking. And McLuhan's favourite, J.C. Carothers, was of course right in recalling in his seminal paper of 1959 that written words lose much of the emotional overtones and emphases that characterize vocal speech. As a consequence, written words "can much more easily be misunderstood; few people fail to communicate their messages and much of themselves in speech, whereas writings [...] carry little of the writer" (Carothers 1959: 311). Writing alienates us from ourselves and from each other.

Most importantly, during the centuries of writing and of the printing press, we had become alienated from images. The main reason for this was technological. Prior to 1400, when picture printing was invented, there existed no proper technology for duplicating illustrations; and until the age of photography, as Ivens stressed in his *Prints and Visual Communication* (Ivens 1953), no faithful representations of particular objects were possible. Also, it was much easier, both for the author and the printer, to deal with texts instead of pictures. In his 1924 work *Der sichtbare Mensch* ("The Visible Man"), a book dealing with the aesthetics of film and one that had considerable influence on McLuhan's Toronto circle, the Hungarian poet, playwright, and film critic Béla Balázs observed that it was as a consequence of printing that all forms of communication other than reading and writing have receded into the background. However, the new medium of film, Balázs wrote, would bring back the happy times "when pictures were still allowed to have a 'theme', an 'idea', because ideas did not always first appear in concepts and words, so that painters would only subsequently provide illustrations for them with their pictures" (Balázs 1982: 52). Balázs's hopes were premature. As late as 1967, cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser could still note that eidetic imagery—mental imagery of a quasi-sensory vividness and richness of detail—is not uncommon in young

children, but very rare among adults (specifically Western adults), consequently this capacity must somehow diminish with age. "Some visual factor connected with literacy", Neisser remarked, "may be responsible" (Neisser 1976: 149 f.).

Photography was a crucial leap forward that technologically enabled the faithful visual reproduction of the particular object, the particular person, and the particular moment; however, photographs, too, can deeply distort. The volume *Family Snaps*, published a mere thirteen years ago (Spence and Holland 1991), provides a depressing description of conventional domestic photography conveying a false sense of loving familial togetherness, excluding any suggestion of alienated relationships. Today, such a description has become obsolete due to the much-despised indiscreetness of mobile phone snapshots. Those shots are not designed to present idealized images to future viewers; they are meant to deliver, via MMS, authentic here-and-now visual information to intimates. You see something; you do not want to keep it to yourself, and you need not keep it to yourself.

Similarly with texts. You are haunted by a memory, you have a piece of news, you have an idea: you need not keep them to yourself, and indeed you cannot keep them to yourself. Carothers quotes a passage by an ethnologist reporting on illiterate Eskimos: "All the Eskimos we saw talked a great deal. A rule of Eskimo life is that a man must not keep any thought to himself—for if he does so he will go mad" (Carothers 1959: 314). Modernity's isolated thinker, Descartes' and Locke's epistemological ego, is an individual alienated from his community. With ubiquitous multimodal connectedness, and with devices dramatically reducing the effort necessary to think and to convey multimodal thoughts, a return to less-alienated conditions of communication seems to have begun. "Could it be", West asks, "that mankind might be entering a [new-old] stage, one in which [the dyslexic] set of traits might come once again to the fore [...]?" As he puts it: "it may be that we are now at a turning point where a new family of relatively inexpensive and powerfully visually oriented technologies is making it possible to complement the long-effective use of verbally oriented technologies" (West 1997: 23, 258). Certainly this transition raises philosophical questions of its own. After all, it was Descartes' and Locke's cognizing individual that created Western science and political institutions. Will a return to collective thinking not diminish the analytic and synthesizing powers of the Western mind? Or, will it, rather, amplify them?

For we must of course realize that while the internet, particularly the internet accessed through the mobile phone, represents a genuine revolution in communication, indeed no less than the reversal of humanity's centuries of communicational alienation, it is still true that real problems can arise with new information and communications

technologies. I will mention four problems that must be confronted by both the technological and the philosophical worlds.

First: orientation on the internet. Anyone who uses the internet knows well that the level of information available means both a volume that is virtually impossible to manage and dearth of usable information at the same time. The demands of everyday life—establishing contacts, shopping, travel, entertainment and news consumption—are generally well covered on the internet; enter the more timeless and comprehensive ocean of knowledge, however, and you will soon discover that we are navigating without a compass. Today's search engines are fantastically efficient: entering your keywords results in countless apparently relevant documents; but finding a suitable starting point for more detailed information, or in some cases even knowing which documents to believe, often leaves us wishing for expert guidance. Such guidance can be found on internet portals, information collection points maintained by qualified organizations, which are common enough in the major languages of the world, though there is still a lack of portals in the lesser-known languages.

Another problem: chatting on mobile phones in public spaces—streets, trams, trains, airports, or waiting rooms. We are all familiar with the situation, and many of us suffer because of it. But what exactly are we suffering from? After all, private conversations have always been held in the presence of strangers in the widest variety of places. James Katz suggests that perhaps what disturbs the involuntary observer of a mobile call is the cognitive disharmony brought about by the unnatural situation where only one side of a conversation is ever heard—they are half-present in a communicational space that happens to randomly blend in with the given actual space (Katz 2004). Our third problem involves a related issue: the mixing of activity spaces in the wake of mobile communication, a phenomenon we have all experienced. Right now, you are listening to my talk, but at the same time you are receiving and sending SMS messages—you are simultaneously being active in a multiplicity of spaces. It can be disturbing during meetings when participants are communicating not only with each other, but at the same time they are in touch—virtually—with third parties who are somewhere else entirely. My fellow educators, from elementary school through to university, are positively livid when students pay attention not to them, but to their SMS partners. The phenomenon is real, but what does it tell us? Perhaps it tells us that organized gatherings of individuals are not always of the essence, that we happen to be exchanging words or pictures with our virtual communication partners regarding more important matters than the subject of the given meeting or class... At any rate, the arrival of an SMS message disturbs the given here-and-now communicational situation less than

an incoming call: if the simultaneous accumulation of communicational situations could be separated and spatially arranged as side-by-side communications events, the problem of the mixing of activity spaces would immediately be more manageable.

And the fourth, again related problem: time management in the age of the internet and mobile communication. The given day's work schedule can be thrown into disarray at any moment by an e-mail, SMS message, or mobile call. We are frazzled and frustrated, frantic in several directions at once, and we can't focus on a given task. But how real is this problem? If I observe teenagers, I become uncertain. Incoming calls and SMS messages seem to enliven teenagers rather than disturb them. Their time management is different, and quite likely so is their concept of time: less linear than that of our generation and the previous centuries' generations whose sense of time were informed by the processing characteristic to the written/printed word.

We are the first generation to live in the world of these new information and communication technologies, and the last generation that was fully socialized in the Gutenberg galaxy. We are the first generation to be citizens of both worlds—the world of the written word and the world of interactive digital-multimedia communication alike. We have an enormous responsibility. Our activities must serve as an example showing that the internet can be a wondrous agent of cultural renewal and revolution. And the mobile phone is part of this new revolution in culture, not only as a new instrument of communality that is still reminiscent of the older communality, but increasingly as a tool of mass communication, as a medium: a new, interactive, individually-tailored medium. Yet the network revolution is not without its counter-revolutionaries—ignorant, but vociferous. Techno-pessimism is unfounded, harmful even; but of course it has always existed. Every era has its own techno-pessimism, each occurrence of which can seem somewhat silly in retrospect. Let me give a brief survey.

The founder of the Western philosophical tradition, Plato, lived in Athens in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, during a time when Greek society was moving from an oral culture towards a literate one. In his dialogues, he refused to trust the wisdom of philosophy to the written word, insisting that philosophical thought can only be properly conveyed through a live dialogue. In the 15th century, in the first decades following the invention of the printing press, the more refined reader was quite put off by mechanically reproduced copies. Early mechanical printing had to mimic the now-counterproductive solutions of handwriting at the time, such as combined letters (ligatures), in order to be acceptable in cultivated circles. The last third of the 18th century saw an abundance of books, and people learned to read quickly and silently. Characteristically, the guardians of culture at the time eschewed silent and continuous reading, with its hours of back-and-forth head move-

ments. Silent readers must take frequent breaks, stand up, and walk around; all this reading is bad for the health. The telephone was the big worry of the last third of the 19th century: social boundaries will collapse if just any stranger can call and impose themselves into the family home. Actually, the democratizing effect of the telephone for the last century-and-a-quarter is indisputable, and nowadays we haven't the slightest such qualms.

Neil Postman saw television as the cause for concern in the 1980s. His bestselling book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Postman 1985), sheds a harsh light on the changing nature of political discourse as it increasingly resembles entertainment and advertising, but it is blind to the limitations books and newspapers impose on the democracy and effectiveness of open political debate. A few years earlier he had written *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman 1994), in which he bemoaned the weakening and even waning of the difference between childhood and adulthood in the age of television. Postman's analysis failed to provide a satisfactory interpretation for the historical fact that the sociological distinction between childhood and adulthood (as opposed to the biological differences) was a product of the late Middle Ages or the Early-Modern Age; if the cultural/sociological divide between children and adults is currently diminishing, we should regard it as a natural and healthy development.

When techno-pessimists, and today's techno-pessimists in particular, worry about how technology affects culture, they misunderstand the essence of culture. They think of "Culture" with a capital "C", whereas the focus should be on culture with a lower-case "c"—think of the candle as a cultural artifact. This is culture in the sense first referred to by Nietzsche in the last third of the 19th century: a tool of human evolution, an instrument of collective and individual survival. We should regard even knowledge as having just lower-case letters; knowledge is primarily practical, as opposed to theoretical. Small "k" knowledge. To know is to know how: to discover, to follow through to the end, to create, and to solve. Theory is just one of the tools of practice, of action: akin to other instruments, equipment, and devices. The bulk of our knowledge is embedded in the tools we possess. Human culture has always existed in our objectified tools; there is no natural human environment: the human environment has been human precisely ever since it ceased to be natural. From the point of view of cognition, human nature itself has always been tied to tools. Recall Merlin Donald's position according to which human memory characteristically functions through external tools (Donald 1991). Granted, we store an enormous amount of information in our brains, but the ultimate cognitive evolution was the evolution of tools, from cave paintings to the internet; the internet today is no less an external memory tool than books, handwriting, and cave paintings were earlier. The thinking indi-

vidual has always thought with and through his tools; nowadays more and more through network communications and the tools of the internet. But then the techno-pessimist also sees cultural deterioration in the fact that, through the internet and mobile telephony, individual thought is inescapably and constantly connected to collective thought—pushing back the boundaries of isolated thinking. However, there is nothing really new in this pattern—recall Robin Dunbar’s suggestion (Dunbar 1996) that language came about primarily as a tool of social intelligence.

Human culture is by necessity a culture of artificial tools. We can certainly ask whether our tools and instruments are developing in a promising direction nowadays, and whether this direction can be influenced at all. The position held by technological determinism, according to which changes in our way of life are determined by the development of our tools and technologies, is true only to a minor degree. Generally, the approach found in the concept of the social construction of technology is much sounder: we develop and use those technologies and technical tools that we require socially. The concept of social constructivism is a thought-provoking aspect of Carolyn Marvin’s *When Old Technologies Were New*:

“New practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings. [...] Media [...] are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication. The history of media is never more or less than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate. New media, broadly understood to include the use of new communications technology for old or new purposes, new ways of using old technologies, and, in principle, all other possibilities for the exchange of social meaning, are always introduced into a pattern of tension created by the coexistence of old and new, which is far richer than any single medium that becomes a focus of interest because it is novel.” (Marvin 1988: 5, 8)

The proliferation of mobile phones dramatically underscores the thesis of the social construction of technology. The mobile phone is a characteristic tool of communication in postmodern society. Here “postmodern” applies primarily to the radical decentralization and fragmentation of social communication, resulting in the casting aside of hierarchical structures, centralized control, and linear logic. There is no question that this state characterizes the disintegration of the late twentieth-century metropolis into subcultures. The mobile telephone is an answer to the postmodern challenge—and at the same time it is, of course, a reinforcer of continued decentralization. This offers an explanation as to why mobile technology only really found its stride in recent years, even though all the elements were already present in the late

1940s, including the principle of cellularity. In the volume *Wireless World* (Brown et al. 2002), Anthony Townsend highlights the idea of the social construction of technology, which implies that societies develop those technologies that best fit the values, norms, and goals of the time. Townsend quotes from Herbert Casson's *The History of the Telephone* (Casson 1910): "No invention has been more timely than the telephone. It arrived at the exact period when it was needed for the organisation of great cities and the unification of nations." Townsend posits that the same convenient timeliness applies in the case of mobile phones as well: "Similarly, in the 1990s it seems that the mobile telephone arrived at just the time when it was needed to facilitate dramatic decentralisation of communications channels required by the new social systems in the postmodern age." But whilst fulfilling postmodern needs, the mobile phone, to sum up, is also a machine which corresponds to deep, primordial human communicational urges. Mobile communications point to a future which promises to re-establish, within the life of postmodern society, some of the features formerly enjoyed by genuine local communities.

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