

[Essay]

The Degradation of Human Relations Through Instant and Ever-present Communication, and the New Etiquette It Requires

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Abstract

The new possibility opened up by recent technology of ever-present, unbroken and potentially instant communication has had a fundamental effect on human relations, presenting us with modes of communication unprecedented in human history. Although there are some good effects, one of the bad effects is the potential for degradation in human relations in respect of the capacity for, and habit of, empathy, understanding and thoughtfulness between individuals, and an undermining of the expectation of reasonable anticipation in relation to others and the consequent relief from the responsibility of having such anticipation. Many technological developments have changed human life. But one that so strongly determines communication, when communication is such a central part of what it means to be a person and to have relations with others, is bound to have far profounder effects than most other technological changes. The significance of new modes of communication is set against the fact that it is very recent and utterly unprecedented in human history, and is not something that could have been taken account of as part of the adaptations of human evolution.

There are some benefits of ever-present, unbroken and instant contact between people made possible by modern technology. There are, for example, undoubted advantages bestowed by the internet in allowing beleaguered, otherwise isolated, groups to be heard. But the focus here is not that. Rather one is particularly thinking of mobile phones and texting, but some other related technological inventions for communication have a similar implication. It may be questioned as to whether the benefits here are not often outweighed by the deleterious effects. These effects include a loss of privacy, of peace, and of the delights of at least temporary isolation. One may be expected to give an unrelenting account of one's movements as required, rather than being able to get 'lost' for a while. One may lose the opportunity of not being bothered by others without significant cause. One may be troubled by worries unnecessarily, things one previously would not have been able to know about. There may be a

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tendency to take risks with the often false security of the possibility of contact, while at the same time there is a weakening of the ability to take risks and overcome the concomitant fears and anxieties, because of the possibility of contact and support which one may come to rely on. There may be a loss of blissful ignorance about things one does not really need to know about. And a loss of the capacity to surprise since contact is unbroken. The charm of distance is lost. Things may be said unwisely that would not before have been said, and their saying may be damagingly mistimed. Also, there may be a significant unwelcome change in someone's normal personality or an exaggeration of other personality features. What was perhaps first seen as a more convenient way of doing what one did before — by meeting people, sending emissaries, using landline telephones and write letters — as well as something that could be used in emergencies to avoid harm and promote good, has become something so ubiquitous that it fundamentally affects the nature of when and what is communicated — no longer a mere enhancement to communication that would otherwise naturally be in place, but rather a basic determinant of the existence and content of the communication itself. A new mode of communication has wiped out millions of years of the way we are naturally adapted to relate to each other as we deal with togetherness contrasted with true separation. Now both are diluted; both presence and absence; half there when present and half not there when separated. Once we would value highly the times we were together — and this valuation would determine how we acted in those times — precisely because of the contrast with periods of genuine separation. These features of the effect of instant and ever-present communication are quite often discussed, and I give an outline of them in order to distinguish what follows from these effects. Something further important has been missed.

Some of these effects of constant, light-speed, communication have been explored, particularly by the philosopher Paul Virilio. There are two dangers in particular he points to. One is that “Reality is no longer defined by time and space, but in a virtual world, in which technology allows the existence of the paradox of being everywhere at the same time while being nowhere at all.” And this can lead to something he calls the “polar inertia”, whereby communication technology is such that “real space has been supplanted by real time due to the advances of electro-optical transmission technology. The speed of light has been realized as a technological reality in the post-industrial age, thereby obliterating spatial distances and reducing human perception to a kind of ‘polar inertia’.” In

this state, one need not go anywhere, as the world comes to you while at the same time you are everywhere and nowhere.¹ It is also true that Heidegger, although long pre-dating the huge effect of communication technology, sees the fundamental impact that technological change may have on human life, moving away from its natural origins.²

This paper however focuses on one deleterious effect not yet mentioned. And it is ubiquitous and corrosive. It will be argued that the effect may be countered by conscious reflection and discipline; but there is also the possibility that the technology is simply too easy and tempting to be resisted. It is a matter not just of fact, but also of normativity. A case virtually, as will be seen, of *can* implies *should*.

The subject of this paper, then, is the degradation — one might say corruption — of human relations, in particular of empathy, understanding, and thoughtfulness towards others brought about by the possibility of ever-present, unbroken and often instant communication between individuals. This consequence has slipped by almost unnoticed, since it might be supposed as obvious that an increase in communicative capability would also increase the ability to be empathetic, understanding, and thoughtful towards others, perhaps on the basis that more information cannot be bad. Sometimes this may be so, but overall and pervasively the danger is that it will not be so and should certainly not be assumed be so. The new increased communicative capability means that other ways of being empathetic, understanding, and thoughtful towards others, will tend to die, while the new communicative capability cannot replace them — but, worse, may yet appear to do so. Other means will go unpractised, and thereby atrophy — such as bothering to gain a deep insight into the character of others in order to know what they might want and what is best for them. There is less motivation to cultivate such skills and habits because there is no, or a reduced, need for them. The recent technological changes presents a radically different situation from what went before, since until very recent times the only ways of human beings communicating for millennia were being in the presence of someone, sending them a letter, or getting someone else to travel and convey one's message. Recently, in terms of human history, there has been the landline

¹ All quotes here are from Paul Virilio's faculty website at the The European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/paul-virilio/biography/>> His works covering this subject include, (2005), (2008). An overall study of his ideas is to be found in, James (2007).

² For reflections on this see, Polt (1999).

phone and telegraph; but these are either, respectively, relatively non-transportable or used sparingly. The recent possibility of unbroken, ever-present, and instant communication,³ is a colossal alteration, something that has fundamentally changed, and may distort and degrade personal human relationships. It is something we might expect to be ill-adapted to as it is a new phenomenon that was not available for nearly all of the previous millennia of human evolution and social development. It presents a state of affairs wholly new as part of the human condition. Widely available and easily transportable modes of communication mean that individuals may virtually never be out of touch. This new technology has deep effects on the basic features of human life. It has led, it will be maintained, to the blunting of human sensibilities and sensitivities; a weakening of the expectation of anticipation; it relieves responsibility for knowing about others without being asked or told. Many new technological changes have presented us with ways of living that were unknown to our ancestors. But communication is such a fundamental part of the human condition, and in particular of human relations, that its effects are far deeper than most other changes. That this is a philosophical issue is, as has been said, a result of the normative implications for human behaviour. How should one respond to this new fact?

For millions of years human beings have had to use, and were adapted by evolution and social reinforcement to use, and habits of empathy and imagination to understand what others might be doing, feeling, or thinking. But now people are content to be ignorant of, and need not try to know, others' doings, feelings and thoughts, because they assume that the others can always tell them if they want to. In one sense, this was always true. But now the contingencies that would have made it impossible — separations of time and space — are assumed, tacitly or even explicitly, to no longer exist, so no effort to overcome them is required — nor moreover, is the habit of mind nurtured and propagated that might bring it about that one understands others and their needs readily, without others explicitly telling you what they are. Since others now always can tell us what is on their mind, and indeed for many they therefore should, ignorance of it is excusable. To not be told may even be regarded as the fault of the other. Ever-present and instant communication, such as texts, may make us less thoughtful towards others and their needs and wants, because we

³ The kind of capability suited to what one might ideally want in a state of war. The connotations of that thought might be interesting.

assume they can always tell us about them, relieving us of the requirement to make the effort to understand other people and work it out from that.

What is the case now, it is contended, is that people are losing the capacity to anticipate and have sensitive empathy towards others in what they do, feel and think, and what they might want or need, on the assumption that if there were anything one should know, one would, and perhaps should be told, since one always can be. The existence of unbroken and instant communication makes people less considerate because they assume as a new habit of mind that they will be told of the needs of others rather than having, as an old habit of mind, to work the needs of others out for themselves and anticipate them in the manner in which human beings have been adapted to do so done so for millennia. Not knowing is now always a good reason for not knowing, with the onus on the other always to tell you what you should know, thus removing any requirement to make an effort to work out such things by means of age-old human forms of sensitivity and imagination. Or, to put it another way: not knowing, and in particular not knowing what one should have done, is now always an excuse for not knowing, since being told what one should know is always possible. It is no longer incumbent on those who share instant and ever present communication to try and work out what the other is doing, feeling, and thinking, and act accordingly — rather the incumbency has switched to the other that they should tell us, or should have told us. Otherwise, one may ask by way sometimes of excuse, how may we be expected to know? Of course, to this last question there used to be a traditional answer.

True intimacy may be undermined by ever-present communication, because there is no longer the requirement to get to know each other in a deep sense so that one might know what the other wants or needs. The self is hollowed out, leaving the supposition that there is nothing to the nature of a person other than what we have or have not been told by them. Or if not this, then we merely skim off the surface of the personality of others, leaving the deeper self something we no longer need to explore or truly acknowledge. There is effectively nothing behind the surface information that we need to consider. This is bad for everyone, with or without the means of ever-present communication.

In addition, in order to have one's needs and wants taken into consideration, one may be 'forced' to take part in the ever-present, unbroken and instant modes of communication, otherwise one runs a serious risk of being neglected. This is all very well for those who are willing to take part or who do not mind the

neglect. But since the taking part is not without its serious drawbacks, the tacit coercion involved may be thought of as an unjust and burdensome imposition, especially when the consideration of the needs and wants of others could be sustained and expedited without the existence of such communicative excrescences, as it has been for most of human history.

Not only does it punish those who are not part of such a network of instant communication, it pushes against the grain of human nature in various fundamental ways. It takes a cussed-minded person, or at least a person who may appear to others as cussed-minded, not to take part in the available new modes of communication that almost everyone is using; and one seems wilful if one does not use them to nearly the maximum. It takes great discipline not to throw oneself into it. And the fact that one does not may itself lead others to draw conclusions about one that are mistaken, misconceived, and unflattering. At the least one may be regarded as most odd, or the kind of person who prefers a privation of the interest from others, whereas the very opposite may be case. Yet there are many good reasons for a self-imposed denial when it comes to such modes of communication, as has been noted. That one prefers not to wholly embrace such instant communication may be taken as a sign that one does not mind neglect and thoughtlessness. But this may simply be false.

There is something that enhances human intimacy, and even love in a broad sense, involved in being understood, and perhaps appreciated by others, when this happens without having to ask, or tell, or give an account of oneself. Indeed the very act of giving an account may destroy the thing one is trying to convey and value. Showing it to the light of day can cause it to shrivel and die. One would hope that others would work it out for themselves and act accordingly, guided by sensitivity, empathy, imagination, and understanding.

The alternative is rather like choosing one's own birthday present, or perhaps even having to remind someone who might be expected to remember it that it is one's birthday. The other person now knows that it is one's birthday and knows what one wants just the same; but the effect and value of it coming from the other person without being asked or told is necessarily lost, and so too is the sign of care and intimate understanding involved and implied by it.

It's hard to see how the empirical aspect of the claim here could be tested, for most of the cases clearly depend upon counterfactuals: what would have happened, or would happen, where the technology not in place. But, of course, the current presence of the technology also changes the initial conditions. One

may, however, I suggest, reflect thoughtfully and honestly on how things were before the technology and how they are now, and couple this with *a priori* reasoning combined with astute observation and experience. It is always possible to use perfectly plausible thought-experiments of course.

An example. You're out on a walk. Your friend doesn't know whether you want to be left alone, or would be cheered by his or her intercepting you. With constant communication you start to think as a matter of new habit that if the other person wanted you to meet them, or not, they can say so. And you get out of the habit of thinking what they would want otherwise, as you no longer need to in most cases — people just tell you. Before one would have had to work out what the other person is like in a deep sense, and what mood they were in when they left, and why. Now when they come back, and they say they would have liked to have been met or left alone, you can say: well, you only had to tell me and I would have known, and how do you expect me to know otherwise. True, but it rather misses the point, and would have destroyed the delight of the other person turning up or not, and with the understanding of the other that would have required and indicated, along with the thought and work that would have to be put into acquiring it, thereby revealing care, possibly love. In addition asking — as in all cases of asking — to be met also risks the pain of refusal and the possibility of the unwelcome requirement of an explanation.

Another way of seeing what is happening is to liken it to a form of autism. It is characteristic of those with autism not to be able to work other people out, or 'read' them, and so understand their natures, their feelings, and their wishes and needs, without being explicitly told these things. Ever-present, unbroken and instant communication engenders a kind of autistic attitude towards others, since the other ways of understanding people are no longer required or need nurturing — and so they may be progressively and fundamentally eroded.

There are a couple side-effects connected to this. An expectation of communication also has a destructive effect on privacy and the respect of it by others. Privacy is no longer seen as something to be cherished in others, which we are privileged to have access to should the other choose to permit it, rather it is castigated as secrecy, perhaps even regarded with suspicion whether there are grounds for it or not. This cannot help but undermine trust.

Another side-effect of such instant communication is an accusation of unacceptable mysteriousness in others. Once, this mysteriousness was simply a function of the inability to always communicate where one is, what one is

thinking, what one is doing. Now, since none of this applies, so that any of these may be communicated with ease if one desires, any tendency not to do this is commuted into dubious, perhaps even sinister, behaviour. In any event, it is certainly felt to be justifiably open to question.

If the other person wanted something, then the situation now is that one may ask why they did not say so. This ignores not only the practical difficulty of such communication if one chooses not to take part — and the very act of not taking part may itself be questioned and an explanation or defence demanded, where before neither could arise — but it also ignores the value of people thinking of an other person and acting appropriately without being told explicitly what the other requires. This is not just a matter of doing it one way rather than another; understand the needs of others by taking the trouble to understand them, as opposed to being told. It may also be claimed that the mode whereby one understands the needs of others through understanding them, engenders a more profound and subtle response than the clunky explanatory medium of direct explicit communication. Asking for something or making one's wishes known runs the painful risk not only of crudity, but also of refusal in a matter that might be expected; something that does not occur but is desired is easier to accept when it is not asked for, for then one may suppose that it had merely been benignly overlooked.

This engenders a certain kind of breakdown in trust. Rather than trust that someone will think of you appropriately and do the right thing — perhaps bring about a pleasant surprise — you had better get in first and ask them to do it for fear of disappointment. Of course, there is then the risk of refusal. But as the other person is now set up not to know what you want anyway unless you tell them, so the chances have been reduced that you will come to their mind when you should, and that they will then work out, without being bidden, what is the right thing to do.

In fact, pleasant surprises of a certain sort can become impossible. If one wanted to turn up and surprise someone, this is utterly scuppered if they ask you meanwhile whether you are coming, for then you are put in the position, if you still want to surprise them, of having to lie — something that the surprise itself may not compensate for, since in the meantime the person has the disappointing impression that you are not coming — indeed the plan may be destroyed, as on the basis of that information the person may change their plans and not be there

when you turn up to surprise them. This may happen anyway; but in that case it is nothing one could help; nothing one could have done anything about.

The absence (or presence) of communication becomes seen as wilfully chosen, rather than forced upon one by mere fact of circumstances, which were not only once regarded as commonplace, but also in addition nothing was or could be read into it from which someone might acquire a mistaken idea.

As with the birthday analogy, if one does not tell someone something hoping they might think of it themselves, and then one brings up the subject with them, this may be seen as an accusation of thoughtlessness, or insensitivity, or a mistaken order of values. But not bringing up such a matter means that the person to whom it applies has to live with it not being thought of in a way in which, if driven by human empathy, understanding, and thoughtfulness, it should have been. Either way the person who might have expected empathy will feel as though they have lost out.

The question then is what may be done to resist and restore the degradation of human empathy, thoughtfulness and understanding when it occurs created by the recent modes of communication. Perhaps a new consciously applied code of etiquette is required, promoting a new habit, such that one should think and act by default most of the time *as if* ever-present, unbroken and instant communication did not exist, or at the very least should not be assumed to exist. Then no requirement for its use, or explanation for its non-use, could be reasonably demanded, except in circumstances when its non-use would be unreasonable — for example, in a life or death emergency, or news of great importance that should not be held back. Such modes of communication would then be seen as what they surely should always have been seen as: a bonus, not an unavoidable necessity. As something that comes on top of the usual ways of constructing human relations, not as an essential requirement for them or an irremovable shaper of them.

It might be argued that the battle has been lost; that there is no way we may go back to a state of affairs where ever-present, unbroken, and instant communication is not assumed to exist pretty much for everyone. But I think this is to fail to fully register the newness of the technology and the capacity of people to adapt and treat technology in different ways as the novelty wears off and time goes by. However that may be, it may be possible for individuals to be more aware of the effect of ever-present, unbroken, and instant communication on human relationships — and to do this by starting to see that it will indeed

have an effect, and will not leave things unchanged — and then to see what that harmful effect, as described above, might be. In that way we might be motivated to compensate for the effect and set up new habits of mind so that what is most valuable in human relations is preserved. This might be seen as optimistic. Nevertheless, since a ‘can’ in one’s thinking and behaviour remains for each individual in this matter, the normative ‘should’ is also in play and, it is argued, justifiably so.

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