

Eleven Theses on^{*} Communicative Abundance

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explores the unintended effects of today's exponential media boom

*This is a shortened version of his keynote address at the inaugural meeting of the Amsterdam School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, 18 September 1997. This article was first printed in CSD Bulletin Volume 5, Number 1 (Autumn 1997)

1. Modern communications media since the invention of the printing press have been dominated by images of scarcity. Time lags, transportation difficulties across geographic space, and high production and distribution costs, frustrated the circulation of opinions and information among individuals, groups and organizations. The coach which brought news to London of the battle of Waterloo in eighteen hours was considered to have performed a miraculous journey; in the same year, the mail coach journey from London to Leeds regularly took thirty-three hours. Power groups, above all early modern governments and states, took advantage of these restrictions to exercise sovereign power in arcane ways. Power that tried to be sovereign with reference to natural law, divine right, or the right of conquest, saw itself as duty-bound to be invisible. The argument for preserving and cultivating scarcity of information nevertheless soon rebounded upon despotic power. It helped to popularize calls for liberty of the press and fuelled struggles to expose the men of power and their arcane institutions – in other words, struggles for the replacement of scarcity with enlightened abundance. The freedom of men of learning to make public use of their own reason in all matters before the reading public (Kant) became a cherished revolutionary principle. And so the struggle for *Mehr Licht*. Enlightenment: to lighten through reason, to illuminate and alleviate the world, to make it less dense and heavy.

2. The old utopia of casting light on power continues to motivate journalists, citizens, lawyers, judges, NGOs, and others. They ensure that corruption scandals and objections to state secrets and crypto-government are nowadays commonplace in all the old democracies, as demonstrated by the public controversies generated by Watergate, the Rainbow Warrior bombing, and the Gladio affair. Such uncoverings have a clear implication: if in a democracy power should be subject to public scrutiny then more searching media coverage is required to ensure that controversies about government by moonlight and secret power are frequent and continuous.

3. Today, the old language of scarcity is being superseded by images of abundance, talk of information overload, and cornucopias of communication. This change of intellectual climate is overdetermined by a variety of cultural, organizational, and market-driven forces. Technical factors – such as electronic memory, tighter channel spacing, new frequency allocation, direct satellite broadcasting, digital tuning, and new compression techniques – certainly play their part. Chief among these is the invention and deployment of cable and satellite-linked, computerized communications, which effect both product and process innovations in virtually every field of media. When Diane Keaton told her workaholic husband in Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam* that he should give his office the number of the pay phone they were passing in case they needed him, it was a big joke. But farce in 1973 is reality today. In the space of a few minutes, an individual at home can send a fax, be paged, send an e-mail, watch satellite/cable television, channel hop on radio, make a telephone call, read a newspaper, open the day's post, even find time for a face-to-face conversation. Such trends encourage talk of abundance, to the point where it can be said that abundance is the ideology of computer-linked electronic communications networks. An early example is Ithiel de Sola Pool's *Technologies of Freedom*: 'There is nothing about spectrum technology that today mandates bureaucratic control of what is transmitted... There need be no scarcity of capacity or access.' John Perry Barlow's *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* even makes the point that computer-linked networks 'are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth'.

4. The new age of developing communicative abundance is unstable. The time may have well have come to bury the old clichés about scarcity (de Sola Pool), but that does not mean that communicative abundance brings harmony, freedom from conflict, unrestricted sending and receiving of messages: in a word, transparency. The development of an abundance of communications media not only fails to bring social harmony by putting an end to old controversies about the maldistribution of and restricted access to the means of communication. It also contains new contradictions and produces public conflicts. Confusions, enigmas, disagreements about who gets what, when, and how actually multiply. The point may be put paradoxically: communicative abundance prevents communicative abundance. The observation, analysis, and interpretation of this self-paralyzing tendency of communicative

abundance has hitherto been neglected. It should become an important priority of contemporary research in such field as communications, politics, and sociological analysis.

5. The widening gaps between communication rich and poor, who seem unneeded as communicators or consumers, is the most obvious contradiction. Three-quarters of the world's population today cannot afford to buy books. The city of Tokyo, whose population is 23 million, has three times the number of working telephone lines than does the whole of the African continent, whose population is 580 million. Only one person in ten in the world has ever made a telephone call. A mere one per cent of the earth's population has access to the internet. In developed countries, probably a third of the population suffers from fear of switches, electrical devices, and keyboards, a pattern reinforced by the user-unfriendliness of current hardware, software, and operating instructions; by widening disparities of income and wealth; and by a corresponding 'utility gap', that is, the lack of perceived significant applications of communications technologies in certain areas of life, especially households. So, for example, a recent US study shows that computer availability ranges from 4.5 percent of poor rural households to 66.4 per cent of rich suburban neighbourhoods. Such statistics stimulate demands for public policies covering matters like universal access to affordable (tele)communications, improved design of hardware and software, and lifelong education. Communication poverty is understood as remediable, not as the work of God, or chance, or a necessary condition of market forces.

6. High density communications media also generate conflicts over 'quantity versus quality'. Quantity does not equal quality; but it is difficult, probably impossible, to specify uncontroversial criteria of what is to be counted as 'better' or 'best' media or media coverage. Simple questions like 'Should children concentrate on books, rather than on watching television or playing videogames?' are hard to answer with anything but platitudes about the need for balance and variety. The same holds true for discussions, say, about what counts as 'quality' television. Is it television led by producer-defined technical qualities, such as superior camerawork and lighting, intelligently written scripts, professional direction, or superb acting? Is it television that has stood the test of time? Is quality simply in the eye of the beholder? Or is talk of quality a meaningless hangover from the late eighteenth-century distinction

between ‘persons and things of quality’ and ‘the vulgar’? In practice, in market-based media economies, the wide and conflicting spectrum of available criteria for deciding what counts as quality pushes towards pluralist conclusions. This has the paradoxical effect of encouraging audience segmentation, still further growths in the quantity of media possibilities and outputs, and yet more disputes about whether the effects are more or less pluralistic.

7. The culture of communicative abundance desacralizes ‘privacy’, destroying the early modern representation of property ownership, market conditions, household life, the emotions, and biological events like birth and death as ‘natural’. It also weakens the older, originally Greek presumption that the public sphere of communicating citizens necessarily rests on the tight-lipped privacy (literally, the idiocy) of the oikos. The realm of unmediated privacy disappears. Communicative abundance consequently nurtures a new category of public disputes about the merits of keeping ‘private’ – in the hope that they become nobody else’s business – certain areas of social and political life. There are individuals’ considered decisions not to get a mobile ‘phone or use e-mail, legal challenges to junk mail, calls for the paparazzi to exercise moral self-restraint, legal codes of media conduct, and workers’ complaints to their unions and employers about the problems of e-mail gridlocks and communication stress. Some even accuse high-pressure media coverage of exhibiting killer instincts.

8. High intensity communication stimulates the growth of backlash ideologies, among the most prominent of which is the reaction of nostalgic modernism, which fears the consequences of information overload and mourns the death of informed, rational debate. Nostalgic modernism blames viewers’, listeners’ and readers’ indigestion on multimedia, the segmentation of audiences, low quality outputs, and it calls on governments and citizens to invent schemes for reducing information. In the United States, the most media-saturated democracy in the world, examples include ‘TV Turnoff’ initiatives, organized satirical attacks on the couch-potato, and Jerry Mander’s well-known *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*.

9. The development of communicative abundance unsettles and disorients intellectuals. Intellectuals – the modern architects, masters and manipulators of signs,

the tamers and challengers of the art of crafting ordinary words into stories – first emerged during the sixteenth century. Despite continuous self-questioning of their legitimacy, they tried to exploit their pretended superiority by skilfully manipulating words and inventing grand stories, or ideologies. Their Faustian pacts with power often proved self-destructive – as the tattered public reputations today of figures as diverse as György Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Carl Schmitt testify – and no doubt the folly of arrogant, power-seeking intellectuals has done much to destroy the public reputation of the species of intellectuals as a whole. But the contemporary growth of communicative abundance also contributes to the humbling of intellectuals. Many master craftsmen of words sense correctly that they are no longer living in a world of king’s courts and Party meetings and scarce, state-controlled media channels, but that, instead, they now inhabit a pluriverse of words and signs nurtured and sustained by a dynamic and complex plurality of communications systems, segmented audiences, and authorities. Only a very few – like Umberto Eco, Salman Rushdie, Germaine Greer, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, and Václav Havel – manage to become media literate and famous, most often because of their heterodoxy, their dislike of despotism, their capacity for self-correction, and their sense of responsibility for language. In the age of communicative abundance, in other words, virtually all intellectuals are forced to come to terms with their own powerlessness. Inclined to keep their distance from politics, disinclined to support ideologies, concerned mainly to excel as paid professionals, intellectuals become experts and academics withdrawn into secure and specialized fields of research. They tend to be treated (at best) as either garrulous professionals or (at worst) as wafflers, charlatans, or even loafers or parasites. The latter stereotype is unfair, for more than most they sense the uncertainty and precariousness of our existence. In the age of communicative abundance, intellectuals find that they must be humble, that there are many variously-sized public spheres over which their authority is stretched thin. The days when intellectuals aspired to be legislators capable of dissolving human irrationality, warding off uncertainty, and making sense of the fragmented utterances of the half-articulate public are slipping away.

10. The dislocation and humbling of intellectuals directly weakens the grip of ideologies, including the rationalist ideal of ‘rational communication’. Those who chase perfect knowledge of the necessary structure of reality – the Big Picture – in

order to act on it are pursuing a will-o'-the-wisp. Under conditions of communicative abundance, Wittgenstein's counter-philosophical plea (in *Philosophische Untersuchungen*) for recognizing the legitimacy of lay or 'ordinary' reasoning becomes a fact of life. There is growing public recognition of the huge variety of forms and modes of communication, a growing number of them being available cheaply to individuals; and growing public awareness that such communicative abundance multiplies the genres of publicly available programming, information and storytelling. Political oratory, preaching and quarrels, hypertext, commercial speech, chatting and storytelling, in which points are built up in a haphazard manner by layering, recursion, and repetition: all of these increasingly jostle for public attention. The myriad forms of reality they express make it ever more difficult to conceive of the world as a single reality. The converse point also applies: communicative abundance tends to destroy the metaphysical idea of 'reality' itself. Instead, 'reality' is understood as the resultant of a multiplicity of competing interpretations whose production and circulation by the media lacks any coordinating centre. This trend is evident, for example, in the logic of exhaustion inherent in the hitherto dominant medium of television, whose controllers, editors, programme makers, and schedulers have a habit of treating themes to death, eventually boring their audiences and moving onto something different, without offering any final, 'true', conclusion. The combined effect of communicative plenty is to call into question the solar ('enlightenment') metaphors of the early modern period, that is, to weaken claims to a transparent society based on rational communication of the truth. A sense of contingency and disorientation spreads. Profusion also breeds confusion.

11. Communicative abundance is a potential friend of the democratic project. Many philosophers are now interpreting the world but some, fearing the replacement of 'reason' with 'irrationalism', cling tenaciously to their belief in 'facts', 'data', 'rational argumentation', and 'Truth'. They are entitled to do so, as long as they respect the entitlements of others of different persuasion, for the emerging point is to change the world so that those who live in it become more capable of nurturing a sober sense of its great complexity, more aware of the corresponding need to tolerate diversity, and better able to cultivate the art of exercising judgements about the world. Communicative abundance arguably nudges the world into accepting that the cultivated art of making public judgements is not only politically important, but also

an existential imperative. Communicative abundance prods individuals into taking greater responsibility for how and when they communicate. Today, individuals are forced to recognize that if they were constantly required to involve themselves fully in the multiple outputs of the media, they would quickly go mad, or else be swept away in the vast, semi-structured tide of events we call life.