2. Communication ideals, communication woes

> *What [the] eschatological belief in the 'information society' hides is the fact that, as the ideal of the universalism of values promoted by the great social utopias drifted into the corporate techno-utopia of globalization, the emancipatory dream of a project of world integration, characterized by the desire to abolish inequalities and injustices in the name of the imperative of social solidarity, was swept away by the cult of a project-less modernity that has submitted to a technological determinism in the guise of refounding the social bond. The ideology of limitless 'communication' – but without social actors – thus takes over from the older ideology of limitless progress.* (Armand Mattelart 2000: 120)

Echoing the central question that communication theorist John Durham Peters critically assesses in his book *Speaking into the air* (1999), what exactly do we think is so wrong with communication that it needs to be fixed all the time? Why is it that, while the general experience of communication in everyday life can reveal itself to be a complex but also a rewarding process of self-affirmation, knowledge gathering, or social bonding, there remains a poignant longing for an overall improvement of communication – one that underlies communication theories, managerial efficiency recommendations, marriage counsellors' advice, anecdotes of communication gone wrong, and, last but not least, advertisements for and predictions about mobile communication technologies? And what remains of our attitude towards this so-called communication problem if we follow the paths of utopian communication ideals to their radical conclusions and find that, as suggested at the end of the previous chapter, they paradoxically lead to a place where there is no longer a conception of that which we desired? Surely, there is a reason why ideas of progress and utopia recurrently pervade the thinking about communication?

This chapter aims to provide answers to these queries by turning its attention to the power of the communication sublime and its integral function in engendering discourses of progress and utopia in the evolution of communication technologies. In order to uncover the ways in which the myth of 'ideal communication' expresses its questionable discursive role as 'solver of all problems', the observations made on necessary fictions in the previous chapter will therefore be used as a framework for the analysis of various forms of idealised ideas of communication. We will see that, although there are many approaches to describing what communication is and in what configurations it can be understood as being

improved, they all, explicitly or implicitly, relate to the idea of removing conflicts and misunderstanding from the process, and thereby set up a paradoxical relationship between the practice of communication and its projected ideals. As will be argued further in chapters 3 and 4, this strained correlation is recurrently visible in discourses of media evolution, and especially those of mobile communication technologies.

First, I describe where and how idealised ideas of communication reside in theoretical discourses and models of communication. In order to sift through and categorise the vast body of work in this field, I will step away from using a chronologically ordered overview, and instead draw from Peters' work and concentrate on a collection of specific and exemplary theories and conceptions of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication. As will become clear, what is considered to be ideal in idealised ideas of communication differs from model to model, but the common characteristic is the proposition that there is an ideal to begin with, and that this ideal can be reached by improving existing models of communication through the elimination of communicative noise (often by technological means) and thus by bridging the gap to the mind of the other.

Next, I question both the nature and the theoretical productiveness of the ideals found in the analysis of communication models. It will be demonstrated how visions of communication as a lossless transferral of information – the immediate and direct connection of minds – may seem to promise the banishment of miscommunication, but when these visions are taken to their extreme, they do not turn out as ideal as is supposed. We can even say that the ideal human act of communication *depends* on the possibility for miscommunication, that dreams of pure communication inevitably clash with the actual social experience of being with others. Nevertheless, these dreams play an important role in the discursive constructions surrounding every new medium, and therefore it is necessary to look at the motives behind the production and use of these dreamlike ideals. Placing media marketing strategies and industry decisions that use myths of improved communication within Rein de Wilde's (2000) models of future-making, this chapter ends by making clear that, again, there are many ideals of communication, and they are not merely reflections of imaginary desires in the human collective unconscious but are actively used, engaged, and re-enacted to serve very specific goals.

Tracing communication ideals

Models of communication are never neutral; each implies an ideal scenario.
(George Myerson 2001: 43)

Both following and extending Peters' classification of 'dialogue and dissemination' as 'two *Grundbegriffe* in communication theory' (1999: 35, emphasis in original), the communication theories and models discussed here are presented in three categories: one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communication. The theories and models selected for scrutiny here are in part those identified by Peters as examples of how we can understand both idealised and problematic conceptions of dialogue and dissemination. These examples are then supplemented with theories and models that reflect typical present-day thinking about the presumed effects and future of networked communication media. In each category, the following questions will provide the basis for investigating the theories and models involved: what problems in communication are identified; which ideal communication situations are therefore implied; with what means are those ideal situations to be achieved; and what problematic consequences automatically arise out of the use of those means, which then set up another quest for improvement?

One-to-one communication

Keeping it together – Socratic dialogue: The Greek philosopher Socrates is arguably one of the most important figures in the history of Western thought. His tutoring on eros, politics, and knowledge, available to us mostly through the writings of his most ardent student, Plato, still echo in many of today's debates on love, ethics, democracy, and education. Most interesting in this respect are his ideas about how all that knowledge should be 'birthed',[1] or communicated, to use an anachronistic term. For Socrates, this birthing process had to have an appropriate structure, one that he based on the ideal of dialectic inquiry through the use of dialogue. It is no wonder that Peters, in his foray to construct a comprehensive view on the nature of dialogue, chooses to approach Socrates as if the philosopher were a communication scholar *avant la lettre*: as Peters observes, the notion of dialogue as an ideal means of true communication is still present in current communication theories, giving dialogue 'something of a holy status' and making it 'the summit of human encounter, [...] superior to the one-way communiqués of mass media and mass culture' (Peters 1999: 33).

There are two connected and very intuitive reasons for dialogue, or face-to-face conversation, to serve as a blueprint for the ideal transferral of ideas, knowledge, and information. Firstly, and richly described by Plato,[2] Socrates saw the virtues

of dialogue in its interactive and reciprocal nature. Every question can be answered with another question, every ambiguous utterance can be followed by a request to explain, every non-verbal sign can be picked up and acted upon. The presence of two equal individuals in the same space, questioning and debating without obstacles, is for Socrates a prerequisite for the true bonding of souls; there needs to be a close relationship between the communicating parties for them to actually connect.[3] This leads us to the second reason why dialogue can be seen as the preferred and ideal communication model: media such as writing physically separate the communicating parties and thus enlarge the danger of scattered messages and misunderstandings. Socrates was not so much opposed to the act of writing per se, but he lamented the distance it creates between the writer and the reader, which emphasises the impossibility to give feedback to or question the indiscriminately dispersed text. Dialogue is ideal in its staging of a physical and live encounter, and therefore – at least for Socrates – preferable as a communication model to ones where the conversing parties are separated in distance, and technological means need to be used to establish contact.

Dialogue is thus framed in contrast to mediated communication, or rather, dialogue comes to serve as the presumed 'natural' form of communication that is compromised when it is mediated. As such, its myths hold that one should strive for dialogue as the primary means to exchange knowledge. According to sociologist Michael Schudson (1978), this notion that we need a model of communication to which all communication processes should adhere, even if such a model is fictional, is implicitly present in our culture. Dialogue as 'conversational ideal', as he calls it, is 'not one concocted by social scientists [but rather] a widely shared ideal in contemporary American culture which social science has uncritically adopted' (Schudson 1978: 323), and it would be reasonable to add that this is not only so in American but in Western cultures in general. Although there are many arguments against promoting dialogue as the ultimate and universal form of communication – and we will encounter some of those arguments later on in this chapter – culturally grounded ideals such as those of face-to-face communication have had and continue to have a sizeable influence on the direction of media evolution. Moreover, they stand at the base of the classic and ongoing debate whether media are bad because they contaminate 'real' interaction, or good because they provide continuously improved simulated face-to-face conversation at a distance, bringing people together even when they are physically apart.

In short, the myth of dialogue tells us that 'true communication [is] personal, free, live, and interactive' (Peters 1999: 50). The implied ideal is that only in an environment where there is the opportunity for direct verbal and non-verbal contact is it possible to truly connect, and even when two people in conversation freely decide to agree to disagree, there has to be no misunderstanding of what both parties agreed upon. If any of these conditions is not met, for instance when dialogue becomes mediated, we are facing communication breakdown.[4] What

this means for the use of words, themselves a medium, is dealt with in the following subsection.

Reducing semantic fog – Charles K. Ogden and Ivor A. Richards' *The meaning of meaning*: The idea that language is the necessary vehicle for our thoughts – if they are to be conveyed to the mind of the person we talk to – has been explored by many, but, as Peters puts forward, when it comes to entertaining the notion that the use of language should be streamlined, none have done so with more conviction than literary theorist Ivor Armstrong Richards and literary critic and writer Charles Kay Ogden (Peters 1999: 12-14). In the first quarter of the twentieth century, both Ogden and Richards realised that they were concurrently engulfed in attempts to understand the functions of language, and especially how misunderstandings in the use of language could be remedied. To tackle this challenge, they went on to write *The meaning of meaning*, in which they established a 'science of Symbolism' and devised a model describing the functioning of linguistic symbols (Ogden & Richards 1956: 8, 11). This model, known as the semantic triangle, consists of a diagram in which all the possible relationships between thought or reference, symbol, and referent are drawn.

The most important observation that Ogden and Richards made was that the relationship between symbol (or word) and referent (or thing) is an *imputed* relation; echoing the semiotic work of Charles Sanders Peirce, they held that only through conceptual thoughts in the mind can words refer to things. This immediately lays bare the crux of the communication problem Ogden and Richards wanted to address: too often, they noted, symbols are used as if their reference is inherently attached to a single referent, stemming from a 'once equally universal' belief that words 'meant' something by themselves (ibid.: 9-10). The problem was that the same words were used in multiple instances by a multitude of people with different perspectives, resulting in these words pointing to all kinds of referents and thus creating 'almost all the difficulties which thought encounters' (ibid.: 12). So, even if two people would have been able to construct the ideal conversational structure in the form of a face-to-face dialogue, they would still encounter misunderstandings because of differences in interpretation.

Here it should be plain to see how a fundamental human feature, that of being able to interpret language in multiple ways, is approached as if it were a problem, one that needs solving for the benefit of humankind. To Ogden and Richards, the use of words is a necessary but often crude and error-prone way of expressing thoughts, a process based on causal yet arbitrary and unstable rules, which, unless improved by employing a system of universal semantics, stand in the way of clear and unconfused communication. In this stance we recognise a concern over looming mental isolation: without a common descriptive framework of words and their meanings, thoughts cannot cross and human communication necessarily fails. Thus moving forward from their theoretical analysis, Ogden and

Richards proposed a solution to remove all this 'semantic fog'. The solution was to be found foremost in educating the public in the unambiguous use of words, with the underlying thought that familiarity with a 'Theory of Definition [...] not only conduces to ease of deportment in reasoning and argument, but offers a means of escape from the maze of verbal cross-classifications' (ibid.: 15, 247). In other words, learning to strictly adhere to a fixed set of sign definitions would solve most interpretation problems.

Expanding on this positivist solution in later years, Ogden adopted a pragmatic approach and went on to construct a new language system that inherently would suffer less from ambiguity. His 'Basic English'[5] was to be a universal language, a 'solution of the problem of Debabelization', consisting of only 850 words that had the effective expressive power of 5000 words and 'could do all the work of 20,000' (Ogden 1935: 7, 14).[6] Reducing the amount of words in a language might seem a slightly odd solution for the problem of misunderstanding, but according to Ogden this would force people to be exact in their wording and sentence building, and thus promote clearness. He found that there was still much merit in learning strict rules and grammar, and held that the 'idea at the back of the[se] old rules [is that] because our thought is based on language, *and because it is important for our thought to be clear*, a great respect for form might be a help in the development of our minds' (Ogden 1935: 1, emphasis added).

What can be recognised here is a yearning for clarity in the meeting of minds, which in Ogden's view is to be achieved by simplifying the semantic structures of language and so by facilitating progress through shared understanding. In this attempt, he joined a wide array of people who also searched for a universal language, worked on creating artificial ones, or claimed that their mother tongue was the only one that could rejoin all the people of the world in harmony. As semiotician Umberto Eco has shown in *The search for the perfect language* (1995), many such endeavours can be found in European history, all in one way or another invoking the tragic story of the Tower of Babel and interpreting it as telling of 'how a real wound had been inflicted on humanity, a wound that might, in some way, be healed once more' (Eco 1995: 17). Pointing out that the proposed healing processes are invariably aimed at finding or (re)creating the pre-Babelian 'one language, a perfect language, a language spoken by Adam with God and by his posterity' (ibid.: 34), Eco notes that this divine unity has been and continues to be a powerful source of inspiration when thinking about solving problems of coexistence (ibid.: 18-19). Therefore, and echoing the utopian impulse described in the previous chapter, we can uncover in Ogden's Basic English the underlying idea that through communication improvement a harmonious and unified grand togetherness can be brought about, where there is nothing but a blissful state of being.

To summarise, the myth of removing semantic fog holds that although people can freely engage in dialogue, their communication will still be hampered by dif-

fering interpretative frameworks unless these frameworks are perfectly synchronised. The success of Ogden and Richard's quest – a search for a 'utopia of a concourse of consciousness' as Peters (1999: 14) calls it – thus depends on an unambiguous and clear transfer of information. In the next subsection, we will see how this problematic desire for a clear transfer of information has, in the present day, come to dominate much more than just attempts to improve the functioning of language, and has taken on a more technological dimension.

Noise reduction – Claude E. Shannon's 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication': Notions of purifying communication, like those of Ogden and Richards, were popular amongst early twentieth-century thinkers,[7] and gained an extra boost in the middle of the twentieth century with an increasing demand for improvements in efficiency in communication technology systems. Exemplary for this quest for improvement was the work of mathematician Claude E. Shannon, who in 1948 wrote a paper on a new way to measure the dispersion of information – or, as he coined it, to measure 'information entropy'. His ideas, which were first published as 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication' in two issues of the *Bell System Technical Journal* and were popularised later in 1949 in book form with a foreword by fellow mathematician Warren Weaver, revolved around proving that it was possible to transmit digital data error-free across a channel, no matter how much noise interference there was in that channel.[8] As it turned out, Shannon's paper and subsequent book marked the start of a whole new field of scientific research later called information theory – first known as communication theory – geared predominantly towards the optimisation of technological data transfer and compression. Over the years, information theory gave birth to and became closely associated with many other applied informational disciplines, such as cybernetics and the study of artificial intelligence.

What is important to note here is that, originally, information theory and its related academic fields dealt with the quantity of data, not quality: having defined 'information' as a measure of uncertainty in received signals, Shannon was less concerned with the meaning of those signals than with finding ways to successfully receive them exactly as they were sent. In other words, it was technological perfection that Shannon was after.[9] However, quickly after its inception, information theory lost its exclusively mathematical and technological character and became something much more in popular and collective consciousness; by illustrating his proof with a schematic 'general communication system' (Shannon 1948: 380), Shannon inadvertently presented the world with a model of communication that did not decidedly stress its quantitative nature. Bearing a slight resemblance in its linearity to Harold D. Lasswell's model of communications,[10] which was completed shortly before Shannon wrote his Bell paper, Shannon's model effectively became a one-size-fits-all blueprint that seemed applicable to

both quantitative *and* qualitative acts of communication, including the perfect transfer of thoughts and meaning.

As a consequence of this generalisation of the model's applicability, it was readily employed in a multitude of academic fields, engendering a significant cognitive shift. As Peters notes of this shift, things were increasingly seen as types of 'information' which were then cast in 'communicative structures': DNA became known as 'genetic information', the brain turned into an 'information processor', and people (even whole nations) could begin to truly understand each other if they 'shared information' and communicated better (Peters 1999: 23). This 'informationalisation of our perspective on the world', as Dutch philosopher Jos de Mul (2002: 129) calls it,[11] has increasingly led to the view that we can see things as bits of information in a communicative system like that of Shannon's model, moving unaltered and unaffected by noise from source to destination.

The ideals of communication that are visible in this model echo those found in the attempts of Ogden and Richards to minimise and ultimately eradicate semantic fog. Whereas in Ogden and Richards' case thoughts and meanings faced the danger of never coming across unaltered (because multiple interpretations of words themselves create semantic noise), Shannon's schematic diagram invites us to transpose that semantic problem into a technological (that is, a computational) process, in which the application of the right mathematical formula seems to promise to do the trick. When captured in Shannon's model, all that stands in the way of people, institutions, or nations connecting their minds and really understanding each other, it seems, is simply a question of perfecting the channel and filtering out the noise.

In the observations of these three theories and models relating to one-to-one communication, we can see the perceived problems reflected in a distrust of remoteness, a suspicion of language, and an aversion to noise; the underlying ideals and proposed solutions point to a common desire for closeness, unison, and a banishment of obstacles that stand in the way of error-free connecting. The solutions themselves, however, are all problematic in the sense that they constrain the process of one-to-one communication to that of an ideal type that has no real world counterpart, either because language can never be perfect or because too much expectation is invested in technology. These problems will be given more attention later in this chapter; now it is time to look at how idealised ideas of communication are expressed in situations where there is just one source but many receivers.

One-to-many communication

Sowing the seeds – Christian dissemination: There is a long history of examples of how those in power usually have the best means to make themselves heard, and how they make good use of mass communications to send their messages.

This is especially visible in the frameworks of religious belief systems. Chapter 1 already showed how key elements of the Christian tradition have had a significant impact on the philosophical and collective consciousness of Western societies, ranging from propagating the notion that the Garden of Eden represents humankind in all its sublime bliss, to the eventual adoption of a sense of progress that intended to (re)construct a paradisiacal state. The means with which such ideas were expressed and have been presented through time – often resurrected and appropriated, in different guises, to suit specific socio-political or economic goals – have been identified as the telling of necessary fictions. According to Peters, the rhetoric of the parable can be seen as the best representative example of how necessary fictions take on their shape in Christian sources, and the best way parables are told is by dissemination (Peters 1999: 51). It is in these dispersed religious narrative structures that myths are typically used to pass on certain values, which are derived from an interpretative reading of what constitutes the religious or transcendental highest good.

Dissemination, then, is the opposite of dialogue: instead of a one-to-one, interactive, and reciprocal exchange of minds, dissemination deals with the indiscriminate, one-way, and asymmetrical spreading of messages. It wants to do away with having to put a lot of dedicated effort into communicating with many people. There is not so much a distrust of dialogue to be observed in using dissemination for communicating a message, but a preference for not wanting to single out individuals as having more right than others to hear that message, and for creating the opportunity for many people to feel they can relate to it (ibid.: 53-54). Indeed, central to the Christian doctrine is the responsibility to treat everyone the same, no matter their background and deeds.[12] Illustrated best in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christian neighbourly love extends to love of the stranger, even the enemy, and aims to include all people in kinship with each other and with God. For this reason, dissemination is an ideal way to communicate: it circumvents the problem of continuously having to talk to individual people by making sure that whole groups are reached at once, or, inversely, by making available a ubiquitously accessible message.

There is a catch to this approach, though. Even if dissemination might be the best way to ensure that no one is left out during the communication process, only those who know how to listen will receive the message as it was intended. This is especially so when speaking in parables, something the parable of the sower exemplifies.[13] Dissemination is thus predominantly receiver-oriented, and because the onus is on the receiver to decode the information she has acquired, this leaves all the more room for multiple interpretations. This does not necessarily mean that messages do not come across, because compared to dialogue more people will concurrently receive a message (which virtually guarantees that someone will understand what that message entails), and it might not even be imperative to derive a single meaning from what was communicated. And yet,

dissemination needs to be aimed at reaching a large audience in order to secure a sizeable 'yield'. Moreover, when we take into account that religious doctrines are often conceived as tending to declare one truth, it should not be surprising to see that in notions of dissemination a tacit underlying assumption can be pointed out, namely that while it may be that only those who have ears to hear will hear the message, it ought to be just a matter of time and repetition of that message before everyone has developed the right ears to hear.

The idealised characteristics that the act of dissemination possesses, in short, are an inherent tendency to celebrate standardised communication approaches, and the ability to spread messages across a wide range of people, which makes sure that those messages will be heard and understood by more than just one person. These characteristics also make clear, however, that there is a fine line between communicating the one truth and hoping that some will hear it, and manipulating the masses. The consequences of making assumptions about the suspected effects of repeatedly disseminating the same messages, prominently visible in twentieth-century mass communication models, is discussed in the next subsection.

Mass models – propaganda and hypodermic needles: The power of dissemination, especially when coupled to large-scale communication technologies, was to find a disconcerting expression in the first half of the twentieth century. In the decades when more and more people came to own radio and television sets, from the Great War up to and extending after the Second World War, it became increasingly evident that media were crucial components in strategies to sway public opinion. In Germany, as part of National Socialist propaganda efforts, radio was monopolised by the state and put under the control of *Reichsminister* Joseph Goebbels. Successful German experiments with mechanical and electrical television were touted as the results of 'a great achievement of technology and the natural sciences', creating a 'national technological myth' (Elsner, Müller & Spangenberg 1994: 129). In England, multiple fake radio stations were set up to mislead and demoralise German soldiers and civilians (Rowen 2003), and in the US, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's memorable fireside chats created an intimate atmosphere in which he tried to reassure the American people and gain support for the involvement in the war. Idealised ideas of communication here take a far more economic form: as long as messages come across as intended and reach many people, their transfer has been successful.

These experiences of media use in wartime, along with the emergence of a powerful advertisement industry that also employed radio and television to the fullest, gave rise to one of the first major theoretical schools concerned with the functioning of mass media, which subsequently developed the hypodermic needle (or magic bullet) theory. Its main proponents, Walter Lippmann (1922) and Harold Lasswell (1938), both argued that the general public was intrinsically

unable to form an educated opinion on important matters such as politics, and both called for the employment of directive and corrective propaganda that had to be carefully composed by a governing class. The assumption that Lippmann and Lasswell made was that there is a linear relationship between media causes and effects, between the intention of the sender's message and the interpretation by the receiver. Hence the theory's names: both a hypodermic needle and a magic bullet metaphorically conjure up images of an unstoppable flow of messages, injected in or shot at a passive receiver, who can do nothing but digest these messages exactly as they were intended. In these views, the sower has super seed, and uses it only for what is perceived as the good cause.

Although not everyone believed that the good cause was actually good, the notion that media inject ideas into the minds of unsuspecting people was not uncommon. In the early academic critique on mass media, found most notably in the Marxist work of scholars of the *Frankfurter Schule*, we see a mistrust of the effects of radio and television that is based on a premise similar to that of Lippmann and Lasswell: audiences are passive victims, and are manipulated into becoming part of the culture industries' attempts to sustain capitalist societies by having them consume mass-produced goods.[14] Expressed most vehemently in the works of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1947) and that of Herbert Marcuse (1964), the criticism was that we would see a homogenisation of culture, an increasing inability of the public sphere to critically comment on society's values, and ultimately an indoctrination of the people by totalitarian politics. This fear of the power of mass media is deeply rooted in the popular mind; even today, in a time where theorists have long been determined to attribute audiences with far more agency than the Frankfurt scholars did,[15] large-scale events, converging desires, and rampant consumerism, all produced by global industries, still make the Frankfurt School's assessments of the effects of mass media very relevant.[16]

There is another reason why the hypodermic needle theory remains valuable as an example of key theories describing communication as a process in which messages follow a linear and undisturbed path from one source to multiple receivers. Although it was abandoned after the 1950s as an accurate way to model mass media effects, the appeal of the hypodermic needle theory's linearity is still intuitively tempting enough to be invoked for use in strategic argumentation. Partly an expression of folk wisdom and often the result of hasty assumptions about the effect of media on humans, the basic linear principle of the theory continues to rear its head today, for instance in debates induced by moral panic. Typical moral panics concerned with media effects use arguments in the form of 'A causes B', and are often seen in discussions on the 'alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms – comics and cartoons, popular theatre, cinema, rock music, video nasties, computer games, internet porn' (Cohen 2002: xvii). What matters here is not that these discussions are too superficial, but that their argumentative structures are based on the belief that communication media

serve to spread messages, and directly influence the minds of the people that receive those messages.

The underlying myth of communication in the hypodermic needle theory is one that connects the Christian method of dissemination with the intention or desire to have all listening ears tuned to the same fork. In this respect it also resonates with Ogden and Richards' belief that it is possible to minimise the amount of interpretations of communicated messages, and Shannon's desire to ban noise from the communication channel: in the optimal situation there is to be a direct and undistorted mediated transfer of meaning. In the criticism levelled at the supposed effects of mass media, as exemplified by the Frankfurt School and found in moral panics, we read the presence of a media pessimism comparable to the one implicit in the positioning of Socratic dialogue as facilitating ideal communication; mass media are believed to disrupt an authentic state of being together, and to manipulate receivers because of a lack of reciprocity. This criticism, too, however, acknowledges the force with which mass media are supposedly able to supplant the contents of sane minds with foreign thoughts.

The next subsection will turn to idealised ideas of communication that, in some sense, counter these fears of totalitarianism by virtue of seeing everyone as senders and receivers on a global scale, and thus as constituting a grand, interconnected web of knowledge exchange.

Many-to-many communication

Meeting of minds – Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The phenomenon of man*: One of the most original thinkers to theorise about 'global connectedness' and its beneficial characteristics was undoubtedly Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who believed that a continuing convergence of every matter and entity on Earth would eventually lead to planetary peace and unity. His stance was highly controversial at the time of its first reception in the second quarter of the twentieth century, and still is in some respect: as a Jesuit priest and paleontologist, he sought to combine two seemingly contradictory viewpoints on the origin and direction of humankind, namely that of Christian religion (which relies on biblical testimony) and that of evolutionary theory (which relies on paleontological facts). In his quest, Teilhard de Chardin was looking for a way of thinking that could support his conviction that 'the stuff of which all stuff is made [is] reducible in the end to some simple and unique kind of substance' (Teilhard de Chardin 1959: 41).

He found his answer, extensively described in his posthumously published book *Le phénomene humaine* (translated as *The phenomenon of man* in 1959), in the idea that God was not in the heavens above, watching us, but actually inside every organism and object on Earth, including humans. It was this divine essence, he thought, that was steering evolution, and not a secular Darwinian struggle made up by a survival of the fittest and random gene mutations. Moreover, whereas

classic Darwinian evolution knows no direction or endpoint, Teilhard de Chardin postulated that the divine essence of life meant that there *was* a direction to evolution, inevitably culminating in what he called the 'Omega Point', a final unity equivalent to 'the new spirit; the new god' (ibid.: 258). The way this zenith of evolution was to be reached lay in a natural succession and transcendent unfolding of Earth's self-consciousness. Elaborating on a categorisation originally proposed by geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, Teilhard de Chardin saw three stages in the development of the Earth: first, there was the geosphere (the solid crust of the Earth), then the biosphere (the life zone of the Earth), and finally he saw the coming of a noosphere[17] (Earth itself become conscious). The seeds of this noosphere, he thought, were carried by humankind, because 'since the birth of thought man has been the leading shoot of the tree of life', and therefore 'the hopes for the future of the noosphere [...] are concentrated exclusively upon him as such' (ibid.: 276). The continuous growth of interactions between human minds would then ultimately lead to a mega-synthesis in which '*all together* can join and find completion in a spiritual renovation of the earth' (ibid.: 245, emphasis in original).

Teilhard de Chardin's ideas on an emerging noosphere do not so much constitute a theory of communication, as present us with the bold observation that human minds become more sophisticated and connected through time, bringing about a unified consciousness. That this process was both expressed in and was a result of expanding global communication networks was nonetheless very much clear to Teilhard de Chardin; writing in an era when electronic media had started to open up windows to the world, he identified 'the machine' (with which he designated technology in general) as fundamental in bringing about the structure of the noosphere, and pointed especially to

> the extraordinary network of radio and television communications which, perhaps anticipating the direct syntonization of brains through the mysterious power of telepathy, already link us all in a sort of 'etherized' universal consciousness. But, I am also thinking of the insidious growth of those astonishing electronic computers which, pulsating with signals at the rate of hundreds of thousands a second, not only relieve our brains of tedious and exhausting work but, because they enhance the essential (and too little noted) factor of 'speed of thought', are also paving the way for a revolution in the sphere of research. (Teilhard de Chardin 1964: 167)

Thus, for the noosphere to truly come into existence, time, space, and knowledge would have to be linked, and the technological advancements in the fields of communication in the first half of the twentieth century provided just that. For Teilhard de Chardin, the fact that the globe was in a process of becoming encircled with communication cables and radio waves was enough proof that

under divine guidance human consciousness had indeed started to expand to global proportions, and in the ultimate end would know only an ideal and blissful state of being.

Another aspect that connects the noosphere with communication theories is that its emergence relied heavily on the direct and unobstructed transfer of thoughts. Emphasising the effects of mass media in a very similar vein as done by the Frankfurt School – but seeing this as a *positive*, instead of a negative, process – Teilhard de Chardin stated that through communication all thought would eventually be harmonised into a 'single thinking envelope', in which the individual mind would be subsumed by the collective mind (ibid.: 251). Also in contrast with the Frankfurt School he contended that this subsummation would not be the result of one-to-many communication; because everything would be connected to everything, all possible thoughts would be broadcasted to all possible listeners and, once internalised undistorted, would form a singular and complete body of knowledge.

Both the noosphere philosophy and the requirements it needs in terms of supportive communication technologies have become very relevant again since the boom of the Internet at the end of the twentieth century. Mainly following up on the work of Marshall McLuhan, who is arguably indebted to Teilhard de Chardin for his identification of electronic communication media as the prime movers of Earth's civilisations towards a global village,[18] contemporary scholars have begun to ask questions regarding the nature of the Internet in terms of creating a 'telepathic society' (Levinson 2004: 57), or becoming an all-encompassing 'sentient environment' (Rheingold 2002: 86). Whether or not the Internet indeed makes up the present-day structural foundation for the noosphere, what remains noticeably visible is that many cyberspace myths recount religious and teleological travels towards a final endpoint.[19]

The communication ideals found in Teilhard de Chardin's vision can thus be summarised in a single mantra: together is good. Divine forces will guide humanity in a converging fashion towards the ultimate transcendent and sublime togetherness, a singularity equal with God. The role of communication networks here is predominantly to facilitate the necessary channels; the mere act of connecting beings and things is considered to provide enough leverage to construct a global consciousness. The content of communication, although not completely irrelevant, gets to play an inferior role. What has rendered Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary arguments for the creation of a singular super-mind somewhat challenging to follow is that they are heavily influenced by his religious beliefs, but as the next subsection will show, there are secular versions of his arguments to be found as well.

Rising out of chaos – The emergence of a 'Global Brain': The urban anthropologist and self-appointed 'omnologist'[20] Howard Bloom is a prominent candidate

for providing an academically informed view on communication and cooperation in biological evolution. As a neo-Darwinist, Bloom's interests lie in explaining virtually everything he encounters in what he calls 'society's myth-making machinery', and while doing so he is able to make grand and sweeping connections between evolutionary phenomena and social behaviour. This is especially visible in his book *Global brain: The evolution of mass mind from the Big Bang to the 21st century* (2000), in which Bloom specifically engages a question that is closely related to the observation made previously: why is it that, while enough evolutionary evidence is at hand to make the claim that a collective mind has already been around for millions of years, only now, with the advent of the Internet, 'an army of equally august specialists' is beginning to warm up to the idea of 'a planet pulsing with a more-than-massive data-sharing mind'? (Bloom 2000: 3). Bloom posits that networked communication has always already been present in evolution, and that it necessarily is the single most important paradigm with which we can understand communication per se.

The keys to Bloom's lengthy and heavily annotated justification for his claim can be found in two propositions. Firstly, according to Bloom, '[f]rom the beginning, we living beings have been modules of something current evolutionary theory fails to see, a collective thinking and invention machine' (ibid.: 2). Here, Bloom follows the point made by Teilhard de Chardin that the seeds of a networked global brain have long been visible in biological evolution. Moreover, he holds that '[n]etworking has been a key to evolution since this universe first flared into existence' (ibid.: 14). Bloom nonetheless distinguishes himself from Teilhard de Chardin – and from contemporary techno-advocates of the global brain philosophy – because he does not think that 'microchips or mystic intervention' are necessary ingredients to ultimately establish a global brain (Bloom 2000: 2). He admits that present-day myths of improved communication in cyberspace will surely heighten our awareness of what global interconnectedness entails, but he argues that in the process of connecting things that has already been going on for millions of years, neither cyberspace nor divine essence is constitutive. In other words, new communication technologies merely open our eyes to what has been happening all along.

Secondly, he argues, group selection is more important to successful evolution than individual selection.[21] It is in every organism's biological make-up to work together and protect the group's interests; connected cooperation wins in the end. The ways in which this networked, connected cooperation sustains itself can, according to Bloom, be grouped into five mechanisms: 1) conformity enforcers (which give the group a shared identity); 2) diversity generators (which do the opposite of conformity enforcers by spawning variety); 3) inner-judges (which judge the actions of their host organisms and give positive or negative feedback); 4) resource shifters (which give to the organisms that contribute to the whole, and take from the ones that do not); and 5) intergroup tournaments (which force

each 'group brain' to improve itself in order to survive) (ibid.: 42-44). When viewed as a whole, we can see how these mechanisms form a cluster of elementary evolutionary rules that set up a dialectical motion towards ever-growing interdependency: too much conformity and diversity will kick in; too much apathy and a battle will sort out the weak from the strong. Communication in this process is found at every point where a network of cells, bacteria, ants, cats, apes, humans, societies, or civilisations reshapes itself according to basic rules; the ideal is in its ongoing existence and expansion.

The idea that many small but relatively simple entities can, when combined, form a higher-order intelligence is a principle very much acknowledged in evolutionary biology, where it is called 'emergence'. More specifically, writes Steven Johnson, these sets of rules form 'bottom-up systems', or 'complex adaptive systems that display emergent behavior' (Johnson 2001: 18). Johnson explains that the process of self-organisation among lower-scale agents is a recurrent phenomenon, visible in the beginnings of life as well as in brain-simulating software. Here, Johnson shares the argument put forward by Bloom that networking and therefore intercommunicating capabilities have always been part of biological make-up, and as such are not specifically a consequence of modern communication and computer technology. However, Johnson does want to investigate the particular role of those technologies, and engages the myths that cyberspace itself shows signs of developing a global consciousness in a less dismissive way than Bloom does. Referring to Robert Wright's *NonZero: The logic of human destiny* (2000) – in which Wright presents a view on the transhistorical nature of self-organising and emergent principles similar to that of Bloom and Johnson himself – Johnson writes that today it is not as strange as Bloom makes it out to be to argue with Wright that '[m]acrointelligence emerged out of the bottom-up organization of city life [...] and it will do the same on the Web' (Johnson 2001: 116).

Despite its ability to connect things like never before, says Johnson, there is also a very important reason why the Web itself will *not* automatically morph into a conscious global brain: 'intelligent systems depend on structure and organization as much as they do on pure connectedness' (ibid.: 118). He proceeds by demonstrating that the Web knows no structure similar to that of a city or a brain; it merely connects, and in contrast to Teilhard de Chardin's view, this is not sufficient. What is needed to obtain an orderly structure is, according to Johnson, a feedback mechanism, and 'given the Web's feedback-intolerant, one way linking' (ibid.: 121), a global brain will not spring out of merely interlinked channels of communication. Only if artificial adaptive systems adhere to the basic rules of emergent behaviour will there be a chance for a higher-order intelligence to arise.

Looking at the communication ideals found in their work, we can see that Bloom and Johnson emphasise that the communicative processes that form, maintain, and grow networks are 'quasi-natural' processes, ones that have been with us from the beginning of time. The idealness of these processes is already

implied in their functioning; there is nothing that can fundamentally disrupt them, because they constitute an adaptive system that will automatically sort out problems to find its new and improved synthesis. This vision of how an ideal state of being is already part of nature echoes Teilhard de Chardin's views: just let the simple, basic rules do their work, and communication will inevitably improve itself so to accommodate ever-growing connectedness. The problem with both Bloom's and Johnson's accounts, however, is that they tend to discard human agency in giving a particular shape to that connectedness. Humankind's contribution in bringing about a global consciousness is nil if we follow Bloom, and marginal at the most if we follow Johnson. The next subsection will look at how a more dedicated perspective on human agency is presented in Pierre Lévy's view on global interconnectedness.

Reinterpreting the Internet – Pierre Lévy's *Collective intelligence*: The wrapping of the Earth in multiple layers of interconnected electronic communication networks, which started in the eighteenth and continues into the twenty-first century, has given validity to the question whether we have indeed become part of the establishment of a higher order of intelligence, as Teilhard de Chardin believed. Although an increase in connectedness, seen from the views of both Bloom and Johnson, is nothing new in evolutionary biology, it was only when people started to surf the World Wide Web and contribute to its informational growth that the question of the emergence of a global brain truly began to register among media theorists.[22] By dismissing cyberspace as simply a footnote in the history of connecting things (as Bloom does) or by focusing on how the Web *itself* can become conscious (as Johnson does), there is a risk of decreased attention for how particular and increased human interactions, mediated by communication technologies, might harmonise into something like a universal understanding. It is at this point that philosopher Pierre Lévy's (1997) imaginative notion of 'collective intelligence', located in what he calls the 'knowledge space', presents a solution.

Lévy describes the evolution of earth-bound living as a process that has known a succession of four types of space, in which the organisation of knowledge and information is determined by the tools and symbols predominantly available in those spaces. The first three spaces Lévy defines as the nomadic, the territorial, and the commodity spaces. Here, respectively, Lévy sees humankind tell myths and perform rites; develop writing, geometry, and cartography; and build a global economy of 'material and statistical goods'. The knowledge space is the fourth space, the one we are now starting to inhabit. This space constitutes an 'informational cloud', a 'space of living-in-knowledge and collective thought' (Lévy 1997: 140-141). It is in this cloud that Lévy locates cyberspace, and in which he identifies the possibility for the emergence of an 'economy of knowledge' (ibid.). An important premise for the existence, growth, and preservation of the informational

cloud is that all people interact with it by adding, changing, and retrieving data in whatever way possible. As such, and very much resonating with Teilhard de Chardin's notions of the noosphere, this activity of global communication will 'unfold and grow to cover an increasingly vast and diverse world' (ibid.: 111-112), ultimately creating a universally accessible information realm.

Lévy's hierarchical description of the evolution of knowledge storage and transmission reverberates with Albert Borgmann's (1999) historical analysis of the nature of information, in which he makes a distinction between propositional knowledge (information about reality), procedural knowledge (information for producing and realising reality), and virtual knowledge (information as reality). Both Lévy and Borgmann present us with historical shifts in the dominant forms of information, in which that information is being ever-more dematerialised through the use of new communication technologies. They differ, however, in their opinion on whether this is good or bad; while Borgmann warns of a potentially dangerous split between information about/for reality and information as reality,[23] Lévy does not seem to believe there is any risk of leaving material reality behind. He frames the knowledge space firmly within the other three spaces: '[It is n]ot exactly an earthly paradise, since the other spaces, with their limitations, will continue to exist. The intention of collective intellect is not to destroy the earth, or the territory, or the market economy' (Lévy 1997: 141). For Lévy, it is clear that a collective intelligence, virtually established in the informational cloud that is cyberspace, presents us with a progressive, and not a regressive, reality.

Because the first three spaces are not obliterated by the arrival of the knowledge space, in a circular movement – 'a return of the earth to itself' (ibid.), as Lévy calls it – the knowledge space connects back to the other spaces. As such, a spiral pattern emerges: old habits and identities remain present in the structure of life, but as a whole this structure is raised to a harmonious state in which more and more people will come together, all through the sharing of knowledge. Traces of the search for a perfect language can be seen again as well: central to the success of the constitution of a knowledge space, according to Lévy, is the creation of a set of signs and symbols that is contributed to by anyone and accessible to everyone. Indeed, Lévy sees that these languages 'become ever more interconnected' and that as such they present us with what he calls the 'surrealist mirror-image of the collective intelligence' (ibid.: 197).

Whether it constitutes an earthly paradise or not, Lévy cannot help but describe the knowledge space in terms of a utopia 'waiting to be born', 'a cosmopolitan and borderless space', 'an electronic storm', and 'a sphere of artifice shot through with streaks of light and mutating signs' (ibid.: 138-141).[24] There is undeniably a transcendental element visible in the way Lévy writes about the knowledge space, in which information is to be uncoupled from its static bases. This dematerialising movement fits perfectly with the religious undertones found in other myths of networked communication: liberating things by releasing them from their car-

riers promises more opportunities to interconnect those liberated entities, as they have become free-floating nodes in a dynamic network. Thus, in the end, in its most radical form, the idea behind a collective intelligence – one that is brought forward by people's creative and straightforward use of cyberspace's connections and freedom of expression – is that each node can be directly or indirectly connected to all others, providing instant and complete transferral of whatever form of information. Lévy stresses that this information always constitutes meaning, for all users of cyberspace will gather knowledge of all existing signs and symbols, simply by their online presence. The idealised idea of communication found in Lévy's collective intelligence is thus that mere participation in a network will eventually result in a global and shared production and transferral of knowledge.

The conceptions of many-to-many communication, as visible in the works of Teilhard de Chardin, Bloom, Johnson, and Lévy, display a range of various perspectives on what the driving forces behind the processes of interconnection are (be they divine powers, quasi-natural evolutionary forces, or the combined actions of people collecting knowledge and handling information). What all of these perspectives have in common is the premise that the formation of networks, in which multiple and dynamic connections ensure the spread of information and knowledge to multiple nodes, is generally a good thing. Their underlying idealised ideas of communication aim to bring about and maintain those networks, so as to establish in the end an ultimate network of networks in which all nodes are interconnected.

Taking the analyses of all three forms of communication outlined in this section together, we can distinguish different basic notions of what communication is, and different strategies that describe to what extent it can, should, or will be improved in order to eventually arrive at a communication utopia. There is the idea that true communication is about unifying channels, or about synchronising thoughts. Another approach to improve communication is to have everyone speak a shared language, and yet another is to just have everything connected to everything in a quasi-naturally evolved all-encompassing network. While there are many nuances in these ideas of communication improvement, as well as in the underlying dissatisfactions from which the ideas originate, they share distinct similarities with the reasoning behind the utopian projects analysed in chapter 1. What they have in common is a desire to mend conflicts – *any* conflict – by trying to establish an ideal situation in which there can hardly be a conflict at all. As was the case for utopian societies, the implication is that if every act of communication is to be a seamless and conflict-free process, this then calls for a universalising approach to the organisation and functioning of communication. We saw that this type of reasoning is not only impossible without running into paradoxical situations, it actually ignores the contents of communication processes by mostly stressing their phatic function only, and denies the humanness of not being con-

tinuously in rapport. Remove the cause of conflict, and what is left is a serene but zombie-like bliss (Crombag & Van Dun 1997: 49). So why even ponder this tragic desire to remove communicative noise?

The importance of noise – and its repression

> *[N]oise is the interference that is simultaneously disruptive and creative. There can be no information without noise and vice versa. Noise can no more be silenced in the world than parasites can be exterminated; life depends on parasites as much as information depends on noise.* (Mark C. Taylor 2001: 121)

The focus so far in this chapter has been on how regularly returning discursive elements in the search for optimised communication invariably contain the idea that there exists a communicative framework that encompasses all ideals. We saw that, although the ideals which were discussed allowed for various degrees of interpretation of their ontological status and differed in the way they could be fulfilled, their common denominator was that they were *there*, linked as interrelated family members born out of the communication sublime. Each exudes a sense of fulfilment, of complete togetherness, of utter understanding and of conflict-free being-as-one. In this sense, myths of ideal communication share many utopian narrative strategies; moreover, there is a lot to suggest that utopian stories that depict a perfect society by default presuppose that there can be no misunderstanding, not of the ground rules which constitute and uphold that society nor between its inhabitants in their day-to-day encounters. Perfectionism, after all, does not tolerate deviant behaviour or ambiguous interpretation.

It is therefore both fascinating and troubling at the same time to see that universalising communicative blueprints have, for so long, held a firm grip on the human imagination – and judging from the recurrent mantra in ads for mobile communication technologies, still continue to do so. While there is clearly a positive psychological function to be found in the promise of never again having to experience frustration in understanding one another, the ultimate fusing of minds at the same time requires the playing field of communication to be evened out to such an extent that the communicating subject loses its 'self', and becomes subsumed by an anonymous cloud of pure and continuous understanding.[25] Referenced in dystopian and anti-utopian narratives and echoed in the critique of idealised models of communication, the price paid for the human wish to eradicate disruptive noise from universalising processes is a loss of personhood, and hence a negation of that which makes us human in the first place.[26] A paradox! Thus, in order to provide a better understanding of what communication is when it is not being idealised (and why people think or say it should be), we need to examine the role and function of communicative noise.

Celebrating noise

Although a large portion of attention so far has been given to the overwhelming power and pertinence of myths that tell of overcoming obstacles and reaching a final and fulfilled state, this does not mean that these myths dominate the field of communication theories. The notion that communication loses its meaning when there are no hindrances in the communicative act has not been lost upon communication scholars – let alone the platitude that what is ideal for one person can be a nightmare for the other. To communicate is to struggle, to acknowledge the differences between the communicating parties, even to misunderstand. Failing to recognise the fundamental role of noise, the 'messiness of life', is to see communication from a particularly unproblematic and instrumentalist perspective, as Kaustuv Roy notes: 'It is when we take this messiness of lived life seriously, the "noise" that techno-rationality seeks to brush aside, communication appears much more problematic than previously imagined' (Roy 2004: 299). When the constitutive function of noise is taken into account, communication thus becomes something quite different from the perfect transparent transmission of meanings-in-themselves, and stops being the mythically envisioned tool to bring about a sublime togetherness.

Communication theorists generally distinguish four types of noise: mechanical (or physical), psychological, cultural, and semantic noise (DeVito 1976). The first type, mechanical noise, is present at the physical level and manifests itself as breakups of a signal: hisses on a telephone line or any other interruption or distortion of a flow of data. This is the type of noise that Shannon was primarily concerned with, and he succeeded in filtering it out of the communicative process. The second type, psychological noise, occurs when the psychological state of a person is such that it influences the interpretation of a received message in an unexpected, skewed, or biased way, for instance when a recent widow is inadvertently told that the hearse carrying her late husband will arrive 'dead on time'. The third type, cultural noise, is in some respect similar to psychological noise, in that it, too, involves biases and as such is visible in situations where culturally determined messages are understood differently by people who are not familiar with that culture or have a certain bias against it. Both psychological and cultural noise appear as nemeses in the therapeutic and global brain discourses in idealised communication, like those of Ogden and Richards or Teilhard de Chardin: if both types of noise are transcended, the argumentation goes, there is nothing that stands in the way of truly understanding each other, irrespective of one's culture, and letting us glide into a perfectly peaceful world. The reality is of course that both psychological and cultural noise are hardwired into our being and upbringing. The fourth and final type, semantic noise, is the type that is connected to ambiguities present in language, stemming from the ways in which multiple meanings can be attached to the same signs and vice versa. Again,

Ogden and Richards give a good example of wanting to tackle this type of noise, and also Lévy is known to have tried to extensively map all semantic codes in cyberspace;[27] tragically so, however, because semantic noise not only produces ambiguities but also lies at the root of irony and paradox, both of which, since Gödel, have been acknowledged as inherent to any symbolic system, and cannot be ironed out.[28]

So of the four types of noise mentioned above, only the first, mechanical noise, can said to be actually suitable for elimination by technical means.[29] What is striking, however, is that in myths of ideal communication, the other three types are often approached as if they were merely disguised versions of the first type, which opens up the idea that 'the imperfections of human interchange can be redressed by improved technology or techniques' (Peters 1999: 29). Chapter 3 will give a more extended historical overview of such discourses of communicative improvement through technological means, but for now it suffices to note that the reason the communication sublime has continued to perpetuate myths of ideal communication over time is to be found in the eternal presence of noise *in general*. Noise engenders the longing for a communicative utopia, it is the necessary opposite, anti-perfect form of communication; more specifically, and recalling the language of Bloch, communication can only be defined in relation to non-communication, as it expresses a longing that can only exist when there is something not-yet-existing. As a complex system of signs, language, and meaning, communication is inherently dependent on noise in order to exist and survive at all; like an oyster produces pearls when its shell is infiltrated by irritants, people produce communication when their life is confronted by disorder.

In understanding this notion of communication as a process fundamentally revolving around the presence of noise, a useful perspective comes from the work of Sören Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who is well known for his attacks on ideas of direct, transparent, and unmediated communication. Living at a time when Hegel's writings on the attainment of absolute knowledge dominated philosophical debates in Europe, Kierkegaard sought to debunk the claim that pure thoughts could be dialectically made available.[30] The key to this firm stance against communication as the neutral vehicle of objectively shared messages is found in *Frygt og bæven* [*Fear and trembling*], in which he presents his critical reading of the story of Abraham's offering of his son Isaac. Here, Kierkegaard – or rather his pseudonym Johannes de Silentio – highlights Abraham's act as utterly incomprehensible, and asks how it could ever be understood when it is precisely the point of the story that some things are simply incomprehensible. If every witness would have known of God's command to Abraham, the act would have immediately lost all its demonstrative power. Abraham cannot communicate his thoughts, because that would undermine the essence of his faithful deed, Kierkegaard/Silentio writes: 'The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he intended to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he intended to sacri-

fice Isaac. But in this contradiction lies precisely the anxiety that indeed can make a person sleepless, and yet Abraham is not who he is without this anxiety' (Kierkegaard 2006: 24).

Kierkegaard argues that Abraham is who he is, exactly *because* his thoughts and acts are not understood; they are *supposed* to be fundamentally out of reach, for that is what marks him as a man of flesh and blood, a particular instead of a generic person. Kierkegaard provides us with a very useful way to think about communication as a private undertaking that can engender mixed interpretations, as opposed to it being an open and public process that should be readily understandable by anyone. This distinction between the private and the public runs through many of Kierkegaard's writings, and it not only underlines his critique of Hegelian philosophy; according to Peters it also emphasises '[h]is insistence on singularity rather than generality as the ruling principle of our relations with each other' (Peters 1999: 134). What we should take from this, is that the tension between what is good for the individual and what is beneficial for the group is at the root of many of the problems that arise when forging idealised ideas of communication. There is a notorious danger in thinking that communication is ideal when it has become generalised and universal, a danger that has been identified earlier in the analysis of utopian narratives and one that Kierkegaard as well warned us about: we can *think* the universal ideal, but we exist in a particular, lived moment, and there is no way that those opposite polarities can be reconciled. Easy communication with others does not exist, and it is a mistake to think it can or should be made easy by trying to eliminate what is perceived as unwanted noise.

Communication from this perspective is an activity that, while trying to bridge the gaps between minds, continuously has to deal with facing the otherness of 'the other', without ever coinciding with it. This understanding of communication spans the broad existentialist movement following Kierkegaard,[31] and has informed a range of philosophical enquiries into the nature of communication in the twentieth century. We see Martin Heidegger (1927) stress that expressing the differences in being-with-others is precisely what makes us human, and Karl Jaspers (1935) argue that it is only by continuously reinterpreting the world that we experience our authentic existence. Also in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's poststructuralist explorations of language we find similar non-instrumentalist notions that celebrate communicative noise and shun the idea that communication should or could lead to a perfect one-to-one understanding or even a grand unified togetherness. In analysing language as indirect discourse in *Mille plateaux* [*A thousand plateaus*], they define noise as a necessary element of language, breaking down the dialectical opposition between meaningful information and meaningless noise (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 87-88). Thus, in multiple approaches towards understanding communication, the notion can be observed that in the act of facing others and trying to convey meaning, there can be no single measure

of the trueness or purity of a transmission, as all utterances are equally part of everything that can be said.

To sum up, myths of ideal communication fly in the face of lived experience, that is, they tend to ignore the fact that to struggle *is* to communicate; transferring or sharing things takes effort. While the notions of improved communication described earlier focus on how individuals or groups of individuals can be unified in a single understanding, the more experiential view on communication reminds us that we are individuals precisely *because* there is misunderstanding. Imposing a totalitarian scheme upon communication will result in the same problems as those found in attempts to realise utopian projections. The remarkable thing about this is, of course, that ideas of idealised communication retain their seductive powers of promise – even when we are aware of the grave consequences of fulfilling those promises. We have seen this paradox again and again in history, and we continue to see it, especially in contemporary discourse on communication media in general, and on wireless technology in particular. This then calls for an investigation of the ways in which the promise is upheld, by whom and for what purpose.

The art of repressing noise

It should now be clear that idealised ideas of communication share the same double-edged relationship to paradoxes as utopian narratives do. They arise from a central paradox in our eternal hopeful quest for purpose, while simultaneously, when pursued, they create and sustain further paradoxes. The communication paradox is that, in the desire to ban noise from communication and create an all-encompassing sea of understanding, there is at the same time a push for losing that very element that makes communication what it is. Realised utopias and pure understanding end up being experienced as either nightmares or seas of ignorant and zombie-like bliss; in both cases we cease to be human in the sense of what we currently experience humanness to be, *including* the act of desiring pure communication. So, as was the question with utopian narrative, why desire such a state at all? Why advocate the idea that communication inherently *suffers* from noise, and that it should be improved by eliminating noise altogether?

To answer these questions, we only need look at the ways in which myths of the communication sublime are translated into concrete motives for communicative strategies in everyday life, and how these are used by social actors in various (cultural, commercial, political) settings. The motives that arise from bodies of fiction and myth, after all, are not neutral. People have all kinds of goals in their lives, and the ways in which communication can be used to achieve those goals will more often than not collide with how others understand what communication is for. Following literary critic Fredric Jameson's description of shared ideas of progress as a 'vaster narrative movement in which the groups of a given collec-

tivity at a certain historical conjuncture anxiously interrogate their fate, and explore it with hope or dread' (2005: 282), motives for interpreting myths of the sublime in specific ways are informed by a multitude of social and historical factors. In gauging how master narratives of communication bliss are appropriated to steer both individual and public expectations towards hope or dread, therefore, it is vital to recognise that attempts to isolate key elements for improvement also strategically set agendas for reinforcing underlying ideologies.

In the case of communication, ideologies of hope and dread revolve around the issue of noise, whether it should either be abolished or upheld to improve communication. In both cases, the right action clearly depends on what images of the future are entertained, and, more importantly, by whom these images are produced. If the future of communication is presented as a world consisting of uninhibited understanding, noise is what should be taken out of the equation; if it depicts human uniqueness as the highest good, noise is what makes that uniqueness possible. What often tips the balance in favour of cancelling out noise in communication ideals is that the two visions of the future have, over time, not received equal attention. As the previous chapter showed, especially since the Enlightenment and during the development of communication technologies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been an ever-increasing emphasis on working towards futures that would be efficient, would know no wars or violence, would provide ample goods for everyone, would promise equality and, above all, would realise a Universal Brotherhood of Man. What becomes apparent when dissecting these futures is that clear communication is invariably seen as a key in manufacturing their success; only through true and complete understanding can universality be attained. This idea is so powerful that it continuously sustains itself, even when lived experience favours images of a future that incorporates noise. As Peters writes of the deceiving lure of the idea of clear communication: 'It invites us into a world of unions without politics, understandings without language, and souls without bodies, only to make politics, language, and bodies reappear as obstacles rather than blessings' (Peters 1999: 30-31). Thus, in a now-familiar paradoxical fashion, plans to reduce communicative noise in visions of ideal futures always inadvertently generate new obstacles, for which improved communication again seems to be the answer.

This power of the notion of communication as something that, when it is noiseless, is capable of finally bringing about an earthly paradise, has not been lost on social actors involved in the act of future-making. It has proven to be a very effectual strategy to stress that, precisely through obstacle-free communication, all kinds of doors will open that were previously locked because of inadequate understanding. In this view, communication works like a metaphysical crowbar, bestowed with no particular function other than to catalyse improvement, and as such it carries what historian Leo Marx would call a 'hospitality to mystification' (Marx 1994: 249). Writing about the word 'technology', Marx

shows that its relative abstractness has 'a kind of refining, idealizing, or purifying effect' so that it 'invites endless reification'(ibid.: 248), and it is clear that the word 'communication' also fits this characterisation very well. Communication works as an 'ideograph', a discursive building block that rhetorician Michael McGee defined as

> a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal [that] warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable. (McGee 1980: 15)

People who produce predictions about the future make very good use of the fact that the lure of a better tomorrow, be it through the so-called improvement of communication or technology (or both), thrives on the powerful grip that these particular ideographs have on our imagination. Future images that do not incorporate other ideographs such as 'peace', 'democracy', or 'equality' are not attractive, and in contemporary culture they are even less so when they omit communication technology as the primary means with which they are to be realised. For this reason, we can see that most of the concrete motives to improve things are used by social actors who are active in the field of producing and marketing communication technology.

Invariably, these social actors employ ideographs in two specific strategies, aimed at portraying the future in such a way that it stimulates an urge to improve things. Philosopher Rein de Wilde (2000) identified these strategies as invoking either a 'beckoning future' or an 'onrushing future'. The beckoning future presents us with the promise that anything is possible, owing to the prospect of radical new beginnings. It is often cosmopolitan, De Wilde observes, in that it advocates breaking down boundaries between countries and cultures and promotes the building of a tolerant world society (Wilde 2000: 88). This is an image we recognise in the revolutionary aspects of utopian narratives: a desired break from the present is projected upon the existence of a radically new and different place or time, which is glorious and knows only happiness. The gist of beckoning future stories is that it might not be straightforward to reach that place or time, but it can be done; De Wilde points out that most prophets of the beckoning future do acknowledge that the road to the promised land can be full of risks, but by reframing these dangers as 'challenges' that can be overcome, the prophets are able to brush aside any obstacles (ibid.: 82). The catch is, of course, that in the present time we need to establish the conditions under which the beckoning future can become reality, and this is the point where ideologies and ideographs come into play: improve technology, improve communication and use it efficiently, and the future will then unfold itself as promised.

The second form of future-making can be traced in stories of what De Wilde calls the onrushing future. As its adjective suggests, compared to the beckoning future, this type is at the opposite end of the spectrum of the not-yet-become, telling us that it will inevitably engulf us. There is no escape, no chosen road towards the promised land, the future itself will have arrived before we know it. De Wilde notes that onrushing futures always present themselves as already fully shaped, highlighting problematical differences with the present and therefore urging us to prepare ourselves *now* or run the risk of being 'wiped out' (ibid.: 86-87). A typical example of how this logic works is found in the prophesied coming of the 'knowledge economy', which on a global scale imposes the need to invest in information and communication technologies. Instead of working on the conditions that will make possible the future as we would like it to be, we are panicked into thinking that it might be too late for making certain choices, if any at all. Thus, De Wilde adds, stories of an onrushing future are often framed as a contest in which there can be only winners and losers; the mantra tells us to keep on doing what needs to be done, 'or else...' (ibid.). And again, it is evident that the right courses of action in these cases are in no sense neutral. They are constructed by those who have invested in certain future scenarios, by industry lobbies or special interest groups, by various political forces, and by science and technology policy programmes. The resulting agendas, conditions, and priorities typically leave out alternative or unwanted views, thereby emphasising that the future is of a singular and unobstructed nature.[32] Reiterating the example of the knowledge economy, an ideograph such as communication subsequently plays a large role in these singular and unobstructed futures, as its attractiveness as an umbrella term for anything that has to do with 'removing obstacles' automatically places a great sense of urgency on the need to extend and improve it.

To recapitulate, the art of repressing noise thus works on three levels. First, on the level of speech acts, communicative noise (be it technical, psychological, cultural, or semantic) is experienced as disturbing the transmission of the very ideas, mindsets, regulations, and actions that make it possible to bring about a better future in the first place. Ergo, the instrumental thinking goes, the less communicative noise there is, the closer we get to an improvement of communication. Second, projections of the future work because they either stress the importance of removing obstacles on the road to an earthly paradise, or warn us that if we do not prepare ourselves by removing obstacles from the scene where the future will land, we will be cut off from partaking in that future. In both cases, whatever is represented as an obstacle is seen as the noise that needs to be eliminated in the channel that links the present with the future. Third, and in its most general sense, repressing noise is part of the intrinsic logic of future-making. As De Wilde demonstrates, both beckoning and onrushing images of the future function in a similar way, because although they each might have a different point to make, they both typically pay no attention to the extremely varied (noisy) conse-

quences of their respective programmes, and instead focus on clear-cut and singular (noiseless) outcomes (ibid.: 95).

Finalising the analysis of the function of noise in communication, the conclusion must be that it has an ambiguous role. On the one hand, noise is placed at the root of communicational problems, which subsequently fuels the urge to translate idealised ideas of communication into strategies that suppress noise and, as such, promise to bring forward a better future or prepare us for its arrival. On the other hand, noise can be regarded as the fundamental reason why communication exists at all; just as happiness in an achieved utopia will have lost its meaning, communication without noise would cease to be the characteristic that defines us as part of a globally interconnected web of unique human beings. Noise is the quirk, the necessary paradox in communication, and any amount of trying to eliminate this noise will just ensure that the attempt remains an impossible dream.

And yet, we continue to try. It is like the wish to communicate as angels, who 'either understand the thoughts of others, or [...] can read them in the divine mind' (Eco 1995: 37), and it is a wish that continues to haunt us. As Peters notes, angels

> provide us a lasting vision of the ideal speech situation, one without distortion or interference. Angels – a term that comes from the Greek angelos, messenger – are unhindered by distance, are exempt from the supposed limitations of embodiment, and effortlessly couple the psychical and the physical, the signified and the signifier, the divine and the human. They are pure bodies of meaning. (Peters 1999: 74-75)

The next part of this book will therefore turn towards the role of communication technologies in the many expressions of such dreams of angelic communication and investigate the numerous technologically driven endeavours in history that have tried to solve the perceived problems of communication, from the telegraph to the present-day mobile communication device. Again, we will encounter the necessary fictions that tell of how improvement will enable us to reach the utopian communication sublime.