

Communicative In-Betweens of E-mail Communication

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Abstract

In this paper I seek to deconstruct internet-based communication. I highlight Derrida's focus on the margins and in-betweens of communication, and relate it to the genre of e-mail. I argue (i) that the silence between the dialogic turns becomes more marked, while (ii) the separation of present and previous statements becomes less marked. The visibility of the silence between the turns (i) can be a resource for increased awareness of how communicative exchanges are shaped by self-arrangements and -presentations. The dissolution of the separation between present and previous statements (ii) can be a source for unfruitful quarrels.

Keywords: deconstruction, in-betweens, digital communication, self-reflection, conflict escalation

Derrida demonstrated in his writings that communicative media are essentially shaped by the silence, the in-betweens, the margins, the spectres that surround the media. He did, however, never relate thoroughly to the digital media. However, in the past thirty years, the communicative landscape has changed with, among other technological innovations, an overwhelming use of digital media. These media have in turn engendered numerous new communicative relationships, which again has engendered changes in language and social constellations.¹ To what extent these changes will alter the way people communicate, and on what particular social levels (among intellectuals, political activists, businessmen, etc.) these changes will be transformative, is yet to be seen. Since the technologies are still evolving, and users are still exploring their new affordances and limitations, there is no reason to believe that the changes in communicative relations have yet come to a halt.

The intimate relationship between communicative media and communicative content is also well known in the present philosophical landscape.² A key philosopher whose work helped shape the issues and vernacular of the discourse around this relationship was Jacques Derrida. Derrida continuously reflected upon (or to use his own language: deconstructed) the impact various kinds of communicative media had on communicative, social, cultural, theoretical, etc. practices.

Derrida, who died in 2004, was quite aware of the impact of digital media, and acknowledged its significance. He thus makes the strong claim that:

... *in the past* psychoanalysis would not have been what it was (no more so than many other things) if *E-mail*, for example, had existed. And *in the future* it will no longer be what Freud and so many psychoanalysts have anticipated now that *E-mail*, for example, has become possible. (Derrida 1995, s. 34, italics in the original)

However, though Derrida's claim supposes a view of basic communicative changes wrought by e-mail, ultimately, his reflections on digital media remained sporadic and somewhat distant. They do not reveal the same level of acquaintance as his reflections on other media.³ The aim of this

paper is therefore to transfer some of the Derridean reflective approaches to the digital medium known as e-mail.

In my approach I will highlight Derrida's focus on the margins of communication, which has included the exploration of such tropes as the silences, the in-betweens, the non-said, the ghosts, and relate it to the evolving genre of e-mail. Derrida has in various ways argued that in order to designate the significant differences between media one should focus upon their differing ways of shaping the silence. I will thus point out the way in which e-mails shape silence (or more generally: the communicative in-betweens); and what the significance of this shaping might be.

I will argue that e-mails, when compared to speech and paper-based writings, accentuates the silence in one respect, since the silence in the dialogic turns is marked in new ways. In other respects silence becomes less apparent, since previous exchanges keep on being immediately ready to hand and thus keep on "talking" while the exchanges continue. The accentuation of silence is, on the one hand, a resource for reflection upon the communicative context in various ways. The diminishment of silence may imply, on the other hand, a form of agenda management, a conversational convention pressing the writers to stick to the agenda laid down by previous communications. This may lead either to a narrow fixation of topics or to conflicts.

I will justify these claims in the following way: In my first section (I), I start out by situating the e-mail medium in relation to other digital media, written letters, and face to face exchanges. My analysis will focus on the communicative construction of the e-mail in terms of a combination of four significant material factors: limited anonymity, a well-defined field of addressees, an absolute separation between the turns, and the ready-to-hand availability of an archive. The combination of these factors is decisive for the arguments in this paper. In section two (II), I will extract some key points in Derrida's thought. I will demonstrate that while he continuously emphasizes the media-dependence of communicative relations, it misconstrues this theme to present it as though Derrida were demonstrating that different media make us *communicate* something different. Rather, Derrida's point is that different media, on the one hand, shape the in-betweens of the communicative exchanges in various ways, while, on the other hand, the variations produced in the shapes of those in-betweens can itself be a resource for bringing the importance of those in-betweens to light. In section three (III), I will analyse the formal aspects of the in-betweens of e-mails. As stated above, I will argue that the silence between the dialogic turns becomes more marked, while the separation of present and previous statements becomes less marked. Finally, in section four (IV), I will sketch some possible scenarios related to these points. I will argue that the visibility of the silence between the turns can be a resource for increased awareness of how one is exposed to the reaction of the addressees. And it can be a resource to become more aware of how communicative exchanges are shaped by self-arrangements and -presentations. I will furthermore argue that the dissolution of the separation between present and previous statements can be a source for unfruitful quarrels, where the disputants tend to stick to their own agenda, and where it can be difficult to end quarrels. This insight can be a resource for a more subtle understanding of the content of communicative exchanges. The content is not something that is given in advance, but is something that is gradually found or created during the exchange and shaped by the medium.

Before moving to the actual analyses, a word of clarification about the starting point of this approach. When reading Derrida it is often tempting to interpret him as being committed to a determinist theory of technology – due to his rhetoric style. I do, however, not think this is the best interpretation of his view. If one were to pick-up Feenberg's distinction (e.g. in [Feenberg 2002](#), pp. 3-13) between *instrumental* theories (technology as merely a neutral tool for reaching

pre-defined ends), *substantialist* theories (technology as altering and determining practices in various ways) and *critical* theories (technology as possessing certain *potentials* in various directions), he should most certainly be put into the latter category. Technology does not determine human interaction; but as its affordances become stereotypical, they tend to shape the relations of us in certain ways, because some kinds of practices become more natural than others. Human beings are, however, reflective and creative beings, and as soon as they become aware of certain tendencies they are usually able to transgress the limitations that might stem from these inclinations – if they find such transgressions desirable. This is, however, not to say that the new practices will not carry limitations and negative consequences. Or to put it Derridean: Every practice carries its own blind spots, margins, in-betweens and silences – but no blind spot, margin, in-between and silence is necessary.

This is also my view in this paper. Technologies are neither neutral nor determining for human relations, but they do carry certain potentials that naturally shape social relations in various ways. If they did not alter our social relations there would, as it were, be no reason to use them. Changes in the overall media-landscape thus naturally entail changes in social relations. The aim of the following analyses is to reveal some new tendencies that stem from new communicative media. We are not determined by these tendencies, but in order to relate rationally to them, a good step forward is to become conscious of them.⁴

I.

As a communicative medium for exchange of files and messages, the e-mail actually precedes the internet. MIT demonstrated a prototype e-mail in its “Compatible Time-Sharing System” in 1962.⁵ In 1969 it was implemented on ARPANET – the predecessor of the internet. The establishment of ARPANET (and later the internet) transformed the communicative landscape. Communicative media such as e-mail, instant messaging, newsgroups, bulletin boards, internet forums, blogs, virtual worlds and WWW came into being – just to name a few of the most prominent interfaces.⁶

These media vary in many respects. There are varying degrees of (i) anonymity (do we actually know the physical person(s) with whom we correspond?), (ii) synchronicity ((a) how instantly can one expect the messages to be available to the addressee? (b) For how long are the messages available?), (iii) global reach (what is the (a) geographic and (b) public reach of the exchanges?).

(i) In e-mails there is a rather low degree of anonymity (which one has to go to extraordinary lengths to preserve – hence, the complications of sending spam). Most often, we know something about our e-mail interlocutors. We exchange e-mails with friends, relatives, colleagues, bureaucratic or administrative staff, etc. In other internet based media there is a more extended degree of anonymity; identity is affiliated with usernames that in varying degrees hide the physical person (this is the case in many chat rooms, virtual worlds and internet forums); or there is no identification of the author at all (this is the case on some websites). It is certainly *possible* to have anonymous exchanges through e-mail, but most often not desirable (I will return to this below).

(ii) E-mails are furthermore (a) asynchronous; there is an absolute separation between any singular turn – an author cannot expect the addressee to be immediately available when dispatching the message. E-mails are, on the other hand, potentially readable within seconds after they have been sent. That does, however, depend on the e-mail software- and server capabilities,

and it can be exploited only if the addressee is online and checking her e-mail. As soon as the e-mail has been received it is (b) available and ready to hand until the receiving agent actively deletes it.

(iii) As to the global reach of e-mails, (a) they can easily be distributed over long distances (on a technical level there is no difference in sending an e-mail to your neighbour or someone on the other side of the globe), while their (b) public reach varies between private (one to one) and local (a definite group of specified addressees).

A comparison of e-mails with traditional paper based textual exchanges would find a number of shared features – especially with the paper based form of the *letter*. In relation to (i) anonymity there is only a sporadic tradition for anonymous *exchanges* in letters. It is true that there is some tradition for *sending* anonymous letters, but since it is quite difficult to *respond* to such letters (due to the limits of the exchange systems) they seldom evolve into actual exchanges. In e-mails it is easy to respond to an anonymous e-mail, but it is most often not desirable (anonymous e-mails are most often spam, and responding to spam generates more spam). In relation to digital media, paper based media are (ii) more asynchronous. The (a) delay between sending and receiving a contribution in an exchange is more marked, and inscribed in the act of correspondence by both the sender and the receiver. At the same time there is (b) an asynchronous availability of previous contributions to the dialogue: As soon as the letter has been dispatched, it will normally not be available to the writer. It will be available to the addressee as long as she keeps it, but in responding to a letter, one cannot assume that the addressee has access to the exact content of the original message. Finally, in relation to (iii), the global reach of e-mails, paper based letters in comparison are (a) geographically more local; with the time span between sending and receiving more spread out with letters exchanged between more distant areas, the pragmatic usefulness of this feature is reduced. Exchanges have to concentrate on matters that are not of urgency. As to their (b) public reach, they are just like e-mails always submitted to a well defined field of addressees. The ready-to-hand possibility of adding several addressees to an e-mail do, however, on average increase the number of addressees in comparison with paper based letters.⁷

In this paper I will demonstrate that the combination of (i), (ii,a) and (iii,b) (limited anonymity; the well-defined field of addressees; the absolute separation between the turns in the exchanges) all accentuate an awareness of the in-betweens of the communicative exchanges. This tendency is on the one hand emphasized by the ready-to-hand availability of archives (ii,b), but at the same time these archives carry a structural inclination to lose this awareness at another level in the exchanges.

Many of these features can in varying degrees be found in other media (both digital and analogue). It is not decisive for my argument to claim that e-mails stand out with a specific core set of features against any and all media. Some features will be overlap variously with this or that digital or paper media. However, the introduction and success of e-mail entails that this combination of the features I've labelled (i), (ii,a), (ii,b) and (iii,b) has come to be widespread, as yet relatively unresearched, in communicative relations. And the claim of this paper will be that this combination is reciprocally conditioned by and conditions the communicative in-betweens. Subsequently, similar properties have appeared inside other media (most significantly in newsgroups, internet forums and blogs), some of which – for instance, instant internet comments on on-line newspaper articles – have begun to impact the public sphere.

To repeat, my point is not to claim that each of the following mechanisms could only happen in the e-mail medium. In fact, the (partly) paper based *fax* might have prefigured many of the same mechanisms (for instance, the ease of sending the same fax to many addresses at the same time in a relatively brief interval).⁸ Technology does not determine human interaction; but as its affordances become stereotypical, they tend to shape the relations of use in certain ways.

II.

The significance of media in communicative exchanges has been a prime focus in Derrida's writings since 1967, when he published *De la Grammatologie, L'écriture et la différence* and *Le voix et le phénomène*. Originally these investigations were centred on a discussion of the relationship between spoken and written language. Derrida attacked the contention that written language should be considered to be a mere derivative of spoken language.⁹

His strategies for this attack are difficult to summarize in few sentences. However, for the sake of our argument, two points should suffice to substantiate the attack: On the one hand, (1) Derrida showed that writing is used to express various kinds of statements that lack a phonetic counterpart. Examples of this are the symbols that can be found in mathematics (Derrida 1967a, pp. 20). Furthermore, certain distinctions that can be made in writing are not understandable when transferred to spoken language. An example of this is the difference between the French *différence* and *différance* (Derrida 1972b, p. 4).¹⁰

On the other hand, (2) Derrida showed that the reason why we are *inclined* to think of spoken language as more primary than written language is that the media in spoken language (the voice) tends to escape us.¹¹ This is so, because the voice is narrowly tied to the immediate context. The voice is only perceptible at the time where it is uttered, and the focus of the speaker is thus to be understood immediately in the time of speaking, whereas in written exchanges the writer has to be aware of the future context in which the reader will access the message. In the spoken exchange there is thus no time span that separates the creation of the medium and the perception of it – content and medium thus tends to conflate. Since the temporal distance between the author and the received message is increased in written exchanges, the question of the relationship between the author and the message becomes more pressing: what is the relationship between the time of writing, and the time of reading? In spoken exchanges the speaker and the message tend to be conflated.

This latter point actually made Derrida emphasize the *primordially* of writing – at least in a non-chronological sense (Derrida 1967a, pp. 16-7 + 81). He claimed that the written in a certain sense could be considered to carry the *trace* of language – i.e. that a focus on writing in the archaic sense will enable us to see important aspects of the constitutive elements of language.

This is a very substantial claim, which ought to be spelled out more clearly in order to be justified. I will, however, not commit myself to this point. The reason why I mention it here is that it led Derrida to a refinement of the concept of the written. It was clear to him that writing, as it is normally understood, did not contain that key to the constitution of language. He realised that it is important to notice other facets of writing than what is found in books and letters. Writing is able to play with the relationship of time in such a way that the relationship between the past, present and future is made available for contemplation on the part of the agents within the communicative community.

This kind of playing with time led Derrida to an interest in the relationship between philosophy and literature. He analysed various kinds of artistic forms of expression (e.g. literature, poetry, theatre, music, drama, ballet, dance, fable, mimicry, film, TV), and how these forms, due to their different media, can serve as templates for different kinds of deconstructive contemplations.

It is, however, important to notice that Derrida's primary aim is not to show how these different media can carry different kinds of expressions. Rather he wants to demonstrate how these media make us aware of different kinds of silence:

All the "genres" of this generalized writing [...] are distinguished by trace effects whose structure is in each case original. The different "silences," for example, never merge. (Derrida 1972a, p. 297)¹²

Even though Derrida is writing, here, of the different forms of expression as "genres of *generalized writing*" one should not be misled to think that he is assuming a unified form of expression. This is clear in the ending of the quote: The *silence* of different media differ. This is an important point. The point is that different media differ in how they establish a relationship between something that is emphasized as significant and important on the one hand (the focus of the media); and, on the other hand, something that constitutes the margins, the "silence" particular to a given media (with its own in-betweens and blind spots).¹³

According to Derrida there are no spots that are blind *in principle*. But every media carries blind spots because it is necessary to introduce structures of focus and patterns of repetition in order for significance to stand out from the insignificant. Languages are constituted by (among other things) (i) a focus on something that is said, to the detriment of something that is not said; (ii) a stipulated relationship between signifier and signified; and (iii) empty spots that separate the signifying signs. The blind spots of the media are thus to be found in the (i) "in between" of those aspects of the world that are articulated (what is *not* being said)); in the (ii) "in between" of the signifier and the signified (the *relationship* – as such – between language and world); and in the (iii) "in between" of the structures and patterns (what is the significance of the space between the signifiers).¹⁴

To focus upon the in-betweens of the languages that are carried by various media may reveal important insights about the constitution and limitations of these languages. It goes, however, without saying that it is difficult to contemplate the in-betweens of languages, since they shed their silent aspect by becoming objects of linguistic focus. At the same time, the dissolution of one kind of in-between can only happen by establishing another. The aim of deconstructive analysis can thus not be to make everything explicit. The aim is rather to achieve an *awareness* of the contingency of *any* implemented linguistic constellation.

Derrida demonstrates in his analyses that there are contingencies of the constellations which stem from the media that carries them.¹⁵ Changes in the media-landscape will thus inevitably entail changes in the cultures in which they are used. Analyses of this landscape may thus reveal new aspects of the cultures.

As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Derrida unfortunately never analysed the new digital communicative media in detail. In 1997 he gave an interview about the disengagement of the paper-based media. He acknowledged that digital media might lead to a disengagement from paper in the media. In 1997 the actual shape of this disengagement was, however, not yet visible – and Derrida refrained from a detailed analysis of the digital media, because he was not well

acquainted with them. The aim of the remainder of this paper will thus not be to dive into Derrida's actual reflections on digital media, but rather to *use* Derrida's points about the in-betweens in a reflection on these media. Since the digital media take very different forms, I will, however, mainly focus upon one of these forms – the e-mail. I will furthermore focus the paper in only discussing the third kind of in-between mentioned above: What is the significance of the space between the signifiers.

entre... un silence (“enter/between ... a silence”; [Derrida 1972a](#), s. 278)

III.

It makes sense to compare the e-mail media both with written letters and with spoken language. D. Crystal has demonstrated that the language in e-mails carries resemblance with the language used in both spoken language and written letters (op. cit.). In this paper, I will focus upon what happens in the between of the dialogic turns. What happens in the separation of the utterance of speaker A and the utterance of speaker B? I will argue for two claims.

(1) E-mails emphasize a property of written language in that the separation between the turns is absolute. In the process of writing and after having send a letter or an e-mail you are confronted with absolute silence. The separation between writer and addressee means that the writer has no sensible impression of how the message is received by the addressee.

(2) In another respect e-mails differ from both spoken language and written letters in that earlier statements in the exchanges are more ready to hand in an e-mail archive. This means that agents are able to more quickly and more closely relate the content of a newly received e-mail to earlier contents – something that may entail a heavier emphasis on relevance in relation to previous contents.

1. The Silence of the Addressee.

During the writing and dispatching of a letter, the author is normally separated from the addressee, distinguishing this communication situation from face to face oral exchanges. In the face-to-face situation there is a continuous reaction on the part of the addressee. The addressee will, often unconsciously, raise or knit her eyebrows, nod approvingly, shake her head, comment continuously during the statements, place herself in bodily positions that express her feelings, etc. The speaker can in this way continuously edit the ways in which the statements are presented, in order to secure that they are understood in the right spirit.

In this sense writing generally introduces a new kind of in-between that is often not immediately apparent in spoken exchanges, because the reactions of the addressee are delayed severely in written exchanges. It is true that sometimes the difference is not as radical as described above. The telephone call is an example where the continuous response is less apparent, since the visible aspects are not available. But even on the telephone it is possible to sense the reaction of the addressee through various cues, such as vocal reactions, or the sound of respiration; and even in cases where this is not possible, the reaction will (most often) follow immediately after the statement and leave no gap.¹⁶

In the following I will focus on the gap between sending the letter and receiving a response. This gap (or in-between) can play an important role in the flow of the communicative exchange. This is especially clear in cases where the writer is excited about how the addressee will respond to the

content of the letter. Every letter writer has experienced what it means to wait for a response in such cases. The letter writer will also take the length of the time lag between sending the letter and the response as a cue. If the response arrives later than expected this may be understood negatively as the expression of a neglectful or a supercilious attitude. Or it may be understood positively as the expression of a painstaking attitude. Likewise, if the response arrives sooner than expected, this may be interpreted as over-zealous, submissive, spontaneous and/or emotional. And this shapes the next turns in the exchange, because the addressee of the response will interpret the contents of the response in the light of her interpretation of the premature or delayed reception.¹⁷ A focus on the time lags between letters will thus illuminate ways in which the writer is exposed to the reactions of the addressee.¹⁸

The gap between communicative turns is especially marked in paper based letters and in e-mails, because they are *addressed*; you usually know the exact recipients of your writings; and the recipient knows that you know. Communication through e-mail is generally non-anonymous and the field of interlocutors is well-defined. In other digital media – such as newsgroups, bulletin boards, internet forums, blogs and WWW – the field of recipient is often less well-defined. Communication through less well-defined fields of interlocutors impedes to some degree clear cut expectations about reasonable responses, because it is not clear who should be responsible for creating responses, and it is furthermore even less clear whether they have become aware of the urge for response.

The gap accentuates something that is also at play in spoken exchanges: The insecurity and significance of how the communicated statements will be received by the addressee. It is, however, much more accentuated in written exchanges. Due to the extended distance in writing between the sender and the addressee, it becomes evident that the significance of statements cannot be solely extracted from the intentions of the writer. The significance of statements comes into being in the *between* of the writer and the addressee.¹⁹ So, when A for example wants to write a letter with nice compliments to B, she will often not be able to use the same formulations as if she wanted to write the same compliments to C – because B and C have different temperaments, and will thus receive the compliments in different ways.

This kind of attitudinal adaptation to perceived character traits among communicants is something that we do spontaneously all the time. Since different people respond differently, a repertory of corresponding accommodations is continuously evolving. The need for these skills is important both in spoken and written exchanges. The difference is that the time lag between the turns creates down time on the communicative axis, in which one of the communicating agents neither articulates, expresses nor listens to the other. The agents stop being active. At the same time, the sender knows that the recipient is receiving, reading and reacting to her message. It is an empty space that creates room for contemplation upon the communicative relationship – the waiting sender feels that she has exposed herself to the addressee. Written exchanges in this way illuminate an in-between of communicative exchanges. The gap between the turns illuminates ways in which the senders are exposed to the reactions of the recipients.

I take it that the above analysis exemplifies the Derridean point that was presented in the previous section: Different communicative media carry structures that can illuminate how the in-betweens of other media shape our communicative relationships. E-mails share many of the characteristics of traditional letters, as, for instance, the absolute separation of the communicating parties, the well-defined group of interlocutors, and a similar gap between the sender's dispatch of the e-mail and the reply to that e-mail, during which there is time for contemplation upon the relationship

between the dispatched messages and the addressee. But there are two coordinates that differ, and in so differing, effect the shape of e-mail silence:

(i) The time between dispatch and possible reception of a response is potentially shorter, as the technology speeds up the whole cycle of dispatch, reception, and response. It is technically possible to receive a response within less than a minute. And even in cases where a thorough response is called for, it is realistic to finish it within half an hour. This certainly presupposes that the addressee reads the e-mail immediately, but in today's digital landscape this is not an unrealistic presupposition, and it forms the background of expectation in which e-mails are sent and responded to. A lot of people are extensively online, with an e-mail client running that signal every incoming e-mail at short intervals.

This difference entails that the gap between the turns becomes significant much sooner than the exchange of traditional letters. The gap between sending a letter and receiving a response depends on the speed of the postal delivery, but, at best, the circuit will take at least two days to complete. E-mail technology thus dramatically shrinks the time gap between the turns, making it possible that the communicating agents will still have the exchange fresh in their minds. It is thus more likely that the significance of the gap will be perceived at a time where the initial statement is closer to hand, giving the writer a better opportunity to reflect upon the relationship between the written content (in greater detail) and the succeeding silence.

(ii) This point is further supported by another difference between paper-based exchanges and e-mails: The writer can always have an exact copy of dispatched e-mails archived. This is seldom the case when the exchanges are mediated by paper. In some cases the writer can have access to a draft, and in rare cases perhaps even a photocopy. Drafts are, however, rarely identical to the final version, and often they are discarded after dispatch. Photocopies are admittedly close to identical to the original, but the existence of such copies is quite rare, while they are created automatically by most e-mail clients. Sometimes the content of the initial message is also copied into the response – something I will return to later.

The availability of the exact content of the dispatched e-mail in the period of the gap or silence makes the significance of the turns of e-mailing more prominent, so that if, for example, the writer starts to wonder why no response has arrived, she can take a look into the dispatched e-mail and ask herself whether there is something in the e-mail that could be perceived in another way than intended. Or if the response arrives sooner than expected, she can take a look into the initial message to see if, for example, there is something in the articulation that indicates urgency. The e-mail media thus carries some (visible) tools that not only permit a contemplation of the invisible and silent margins of the exchanges, but make it natural and explicit in the construction of the e-mails. These tools may also, to some extent, be available in traditional letter exchange, but the relative slowness of that circuit make it less likely that the letter writers will be as conscious of the time lags between letters. They are, however, emphasized in the higher pace of e-mail exchanges and the recurrent availability of the initial articulations.

2. The Noise of Previous Positions.

The existence of archived previous statements in an exchange can thus potentially serve as a tool to become aware of the significance of the silence between the turns. In another respect it can, however, also prevent an awareness of how something significant can happen in the between of the turns. In communicative exchanges, it is natural that the parties have different agendas. It is furthermore natural that they interpret the situation and the issue(s) of the exchange differently. If

not, there would, as it were, be no reason for the exchange to take place. This often entails that the topical focus of the exchanges gradually drift. So when A utters something, this will make B think of something slightly different, and this will shape the response of B and the response will thus not be straight to the point of the exact questions and points made by A. B's response will, once again, be interpreted in a slightly different way than intended, which will make the response of A slightly lopsided as to the response of B – etc.

This gradual drift is a natural dimension of most exchanges – something that makes exchanges appear vivid and intense. The communicating parties affect each other in a dynamic way. Exchanges where the drift is absent or minimal are felt to be static, claustrophobic and awkward (frustrating). However, exchanges where the drift is exaggerated are not fruitful either. They are felt to be chaotic, incoherent, disjointed and fluctuating (frustrating as well).

E-mails contain structures that may exaggerate both the topical drift and the rigidification of topics. The drift away from the topics at hand is supported by the less flexible mechanisms for turn-taking. This means that it can be tempting for writers to extend each contribution in a way that makes it difficult for the responder to survey the content, which can mean that the slip between the focus of the initial and responding contribution will increase.²⁰

I will, however, mainly focus on the tendency in e-mails to fixate and rigidify communicative exchanges. I will argue that this tendency shows something significant about how silence is differently at play in e-mails as opposed to spoken and paper-based written exchanges. This tendency arises, once again, in the archival availability of previous contributions in the dialogue. As mentioned above, the instant availability of previous contributions can highlight the silence between the turns – namely, in the actual gap between the turns. However, as soon as the response has been received and read, the availability can be used differently. It can be used as a yardstick against which the response can be assessed. Did the responder take the initial contribution seriously? Did she answer the questions, or sufficiently reflect upon the points made? Is she adhering to the agenda of the initiating message? Or is she evading the agenda by shifting the focus or the subject?

The novelty here is not in the policing of topical relevance, which is an assessment concomitant of most communicative exchanges, but in the strength of the tools for doing it. Given that every single character is potentially available to all participants, it is tempting, especially if the dialogue turns into a heated discussion, for communicating agents to undertake pedantic investigations of previous statements in order to show that their partners are not sticking to the point, or are misinterpreting previous e-mail contents. Not only are previous contributions instantly available, but most e-mail clients make it easy to copy and paste previous statements into a response, allowing for a sentence by sentence commentary.

In extreme cases such rigidity can lead to discussions that continue endlessly, with mutual recriminations about disingenuousness, agendas, misquoting, etc., each party accusing the other of not responding to the contributions made by oneself.

Notice, my claim is not that such quarrels (or “flames”) could not happen through the sending of traditional paper based letters. Nor is it my claim that paper based exchanges never have an archive of previous contributions. But it is, for one, rare that such complete archives exist; and, secondly, even in cases where such archives exist, they will not be as ready-to-hand as in e-mails – the availability of editing tools will be reduced in comparison to the tools available in e-mails.

To return to the discussion of how communicative media are shaped by the in-betweens, this tendency in e-mail exchanges can be seen as a reduced awareness of the role of the gap. In returning to the previous statements, the communicating parties annuls the significance of the lags between e-mails. By sampling the archive of previous e-mails in an attempt to establish a communicative authority that has the final say in the way the exchange is supposed to go (by urging the responder to stick to the point), the gap between messages is dissolved as a significant factor influencing the exchange. This is an unhappy result, since the gap is a point where the disputants could have become aware of how the communicative exchange basically must happen as a *collision* and *negotiation* of (at least) two agendas and horizons. And if the agents tend to hold on to their own agenda and horizon it will, on the one hand, generate a rejection from both sides of the communicative circuit, and, on the other as the communicative object becomes communication itself, the information gain diminishes dramatically.

* * *

Thus, there is a distinct tension in the technical structure of e-mail communication between the potential to become aware of ways in which the in-betweens shape our communicative exchanges and other structures that prevent an awareness of the in-betweens. On the one hand, e-mails facilitate a heightened awareness of the silence of the other as the speed of the exchange, in comparison to other written exchanges, has so dramatically increased. The silence of the other becomes significant while the latest contribution is still present in mind. This awareness is facilitated by the time lags between the turns. On the other hand, by making the archive of messages instantly available, the awareness of the significance of the in-betweens is diminished, thus resulting in a competition between agendas.

Neither of these mentioned structures should be taken as the inevitable destinies of the communicative exchanges. It is one thing to point out facilitating or preventing tendencies, but quite another to make strong claims about determining factors on the mechanisms in communicative exchanges.

This is also the reason why it is not possible to generalize over the effect of e-mails in facilitating or preventing an awareness of the significance of the in-betweens. In some cases the facilitating mechanism is the strongest. At other times the preventing mechanism will win. This depends to a large extent on the atmosphere of the exchange, the individual characters of the participants, and the content of the exchange. But under *certain* circumstances communication through e-mails may have the above mentioned effects.

IV.

I will now outline some, although not all, of the implications and perspectives of my argument. Generalization is difficult here because the new ways of relating to the communicative in between are still evolving together with the technology, and the contingencies marking exchange, (as mentioned above) create different behaviours in different situations. The following should thus only be understood as an outline of which directions further research into this field could take.

1. Becoming aware of the Significance of the In-betweens.

The visibility of the significance of the in-betweens facilitates an awareness of how one is exposed to the reactions of the other and how the communicative exchanges can never be

unilaterally determined. In spoken face-to-face exchanges, this aspect of communication tends to slip out of our minds as communicative adaptation to the reactions of the other happens continuously *during* the articulation. This facilitating feature is something that e-mail exchanges have in common with paper-based writings. It is, however, accentuated even further, because the exchanges happen at a higher pace (cf. the arguments put forward in the previous section).

The attempt to make the addressee understand the received message in the right spirit is certainly at play in any communicative relationship. However, in written communication this has to happen without an immediate contact with the addressee. The sender is thus urged to adapt more reflectively: How will the addressee react? What can be done to prevent misunderstanding? Etc. The sender is urged to a larger extent to anticipate how the other will react, since the sender will not be able to be present with the receiver to continuously rephrase or elaborate during the exchange. A consequence of this is that the communicating parties will have to be more aware of their rhetorical and argumentative means. Another consequence is (as mentioned above) that the communicants become more aware of how the media shape the content of our communication. These are some of the reasons why it is important to accentuate the in-betweens of the exchanges in e-mail communication, especially as they directly inflect content.

It can furthermore be argued that the accentuation of the in-betweens has another consequence. The internet is a medium for extended experiments with self-engineering. Users of the internet experiment with the creation of virtual characters in various boards, chatrooms, blogs, virtual worlds, etc.²¹ This phenomenon is not as accentuated in e-mails as in other internet based media, and this is probably due to the lack of anonymity in most e-mail exchanges. However, the awareness of how self-engineering affects the reception of communicative contributions is most likely also an important source of these experiments. And this awareness is, as demonstrated above, increased due to the accentuation of the communicative in-betweens in e-mails. This is thus another way in which the in-betweens of the media have had a significant impact on our communicative relations.

2. The Reduction of the Impact of the In-betweens.

As demonstrated in the previous section, the unhappy consequence of having at hand archives of e-mails is the annulment of the structuring in-between-ness of the exchanges. This is certainly in a narrow perspective a negative consequence. It would, however, be more Derridean to take the failure itself as an occasion for deconstructive research. On an immediate level, the lesson to be learned from the stigmatized exchanges should be that we use the conserving mechanisms less litigiously. It can certainly be valuable to return to previous statements in an exchange, but only if the effects of the in-betweens are respected so that the communicating agents acknowledge that the agenda of the exchange must encompass a degree of freedom allowing for changes in the topical structure derived from the nature of the exchange itself.

On a broader scale the failure can be a source for a revitalization of an important hermeneutic insight: In communicative exchanges the subject or the content is not given in advance, but is something that is gradually found or created during the exchange. In Gadamerian terms, one could say that the subject of the exchange is something that unfolds during the fusion of communicative horizons. Or, to put it less strong (and more Derridean): during the *collision* or *clash* of horizons. This collision of horizons is however not mainly or only shaped by what is actually said by the participants. What is being said should rather be analysed against questions of what is *not* being said, and questions of what kinds of media are used in the exchange.

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Endnotes

- 1 Some of these changes are articulated in [Crystal 2006](#); [Slevin 2000](#).
- 2 This relationship is for example reflected in the works of Crystal and Slevin (op. cit.). Other examples are [Thompson 1990](#) and [Thompson 1995](#). Earlier examples of this kind of reflection can be found in [McLuhan 1964](#) and various works from the Frankfurt school – for example in [Horkheimer/Adorno 1944](#) and [Habermas 1962](#).
- 3 Derrida was a reluctant user of internet and e-mail ([Derrida 1997](#), p. 56)
- 4 To rephrase this point inside another tradition ([Friedman et al 2006](#), pp. 352-3): Even though media support certain forms of *usability*, it is not certain that these forms of usability are desirable, since they may be inconsistent with other human values. Human beings are not *determined* by usability, but in less reflected situations, they are certainly shaped by what is seen as the most natural approaches.
- 5 <http://www.cis.usouthal.edu/faculty/daigle/project1/ctss.htm>
- 6 These media are to a large extent text based. One could also mention *webcasts* which is a growing phenomenon that contain audio content (e.g. through the *Voice over Internet Protocol*) and/or video content (IPTV). For simplicity I will, however, mainly focus on text based media. My aim is not to exhaust the communicative aspects of the internet, but rather to reveal some mechanisms that are significant.
- 7 This mechanism is also furthered by the forwarding function. It could be argued that this function reduces my point about the well-defined field of addressees – one can forward an e-mail, just as it is, instantly, to destinations that the original e-mailer never intended. However, if the e-mail is forwarded to destinations not intended, I think it fair to say that the original e-mailer is not the actual author of the forwarded e-mail. It is, however, true that in special cases an e-mail is sent with an invitation to forward the message indefinitely. In such cases the field of addressees is indeed not well-defined. This special case does, however, not refute my point that *generally* e-mails are exchanged between well-defined fields of addressees.

- 8 Even though it *could* have happened with the fax, I do not think it is a coincidence that it did not. The argument for this would, however, take this paper off the track.
- 9 Despite their other differences, Derrida and W.J. Ong equal on this point (Ong 1982).
- 10 One could argue that since the distinction between *différence* and *différance* is created by Derrida himself (since he is the one who created the *différance*-term) this example is artificial. This does, however, not change the fact that Derrida, when writing his text (“La différence” – published in Derrida 1972b), was able to create meaning that could not be immediately (i.e. without some amount of explanation) presented in oral form.
- 11 This point is carried out in Derrida 1967c, esp. in ch. VI, pp. 91-7.
- 12 The English translation is taken from B. Johnson in Jacques Derrida *Dissemination*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, p. 243.
- 13 In his later writings, Derrida speaks of this as the relationship between spirits and spectres (Derrida 1993).
- 14 Derrida 1972a, pp. 295-7.
- 15 Derrida 1967c, p. 42+83; 1993, ch. 2; Derrida & Stiegler 1996, pp. 67-8.
- 16 The difference between written and vocal exchanges is, however, not fundamental. It is for example possible to tape vocal statements and exchange them through the postal system or electronically. In that case the vocal exchanges would also be characterized by an absolute silence of the addressee during the writing and dispatching.
- 17 It is probably possible to point out examples where the contents of letters is not that vulnerable to the shape of the vacuum. This is, however, not decisive for the following points. What is important is the actual vacuum between the turns in a written dialogue *can* teach us something about the interrelatedness of the communicated statements – it is not that important whether this is *always* apparent.
- 18 There are cases in which silence can become immediately significant in face-to-face spoken exchanges too. The most obvious example is if someone does not answer your appeals. In written exchanges this feature is, however, more widespread because the vacuum is a technical necessity. And it is furthermore radicalised due to the lack of gestic and facial reactions.
- 19 A similar point is carried out in Briggie 2008, p. 77.
- 20 For an illuminating discussion of the unfruitful consequences of large e-mails, see Friedman & Currall 2003.
- 21 For an elaboration on this phenomenon, see Crystal 2006; Slevin 2000; Madsen 2007.