

Communicating by Accident:

Stuttering, the Involuntary, and the Catastrophic

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“ To invent the sailing ship or steamer is *to invent the shipwreck*.

To invent the train is *to invent the rail accident* of derailment.

To invent the family automobile is to produce the *pile-up* on the highway.

”

Paul Virilio, *The Original Accident*

Outline

- ▶ Communication accidents & the transmission model of communication
- ▶ Communication accidents & the ritual model of communication

Transmission and Social Acceleration

- ▶ Hartmut Rosa: “the most obvious, and most measurable form of acceleration is the speeding up of intentional, goal-directed processes of transport, communication, and production (2003, 6).
- ▶ James Carey: “The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages for the purpose of control. It is a view of communication from one of the most ancient of human dreams: the desire to increase the speed and effect of messages as they travel in space” (p. 12).

A Catalogue of Dysfluent Accidents

- ▶ **The blurt.** Stutterers pepper their language with so-called “fillers” that ostensibly sit outside of, and even detract from, the message. We sometimes grimace and groan in the act of speech. In addition, we sometimes *find ourselves* in the midst of speaking sounds, words, or phrases we didn’t fully intend.
- ▶ **The misfire.** The phenomenon of stuttering includes both prolongation and repetition. Stuttering can extend the opening sounds of a message (e.g. ---aaaaaaaagree or bo-bo-bo-book), which an ableist grammar recodes as misfires that communicative parties can tacitly agree to ignore.
- ▶ **The stall.** A repetition can be a redundant redundancy (one that serves no discernable purpose), like repeating most of a sentence multiple times to get a “running start” on the difficult finish that was long ago anticipated by our impatient interlocutor. Or, in a hard block, the voice *suddenly and unexpectedly* runs dry. A word stops in your throat, and you must wait for infra-bodily traffic to clear while the absence of meaning gapes wide and dangerous in the social world.
- ▶ **Crossed wires.** A regular experience for stutterers, crossed wires describes the state of “talking past each other” that might begin when one party “mishears” the other and then feedbacks error into the conversation.
- ▶ **The swerve.** Clinicians prefer the term “avoidance” to describe the strategy stutterers employ when we sense an oncoming phoneme over which we expect to trip. I might, for example, begin to say “I agree” but change course, swerving around a potential misfire to substitute on the fly: “I don’t know.”
- ▶ **The cut-off.** This accident is one of attempted repair, caused when interlocutors or bystanders rush to the scene of an accident, interrupt, and reimpose order by attempting to predict and finish the stalled (or otherwise damaged) message according to a dominant grammar.
- ▶ **The gridlock.** Stuttering ferociously at the front of a queue, for example, halts the flow of information, people, and capital; it stalls a lane of traffic and tempts impatient honks in the form of tapped toes and glances, as everyone waits for an *undetermined time* until information and thus bodies will once again flow free.

Functional Accidents and Distributed Agency

- ▶ Charles Perrow: an accident is “a failure in a subsystem, or the system as a whole, that damages more than one unit and in doing so disrupts the ongoing or future output of the system” (1999, 66).
- ▶ James Gleick: “[O]n June 16, 1887, a Philadelphia wool dealer named Frank Primrose telegraphed his agent in Kansas to say that he had bought—abbreviated in their agreed code as BAY—500,000 pounds of wool. When the message arrived, the key word had become BUY. The agent began buying wool, and before long the error cost Primrose \$20,000, according to the lawsuit he filed against the Western Union Telegraph Company” (2012, 166).
- ▶ Who or what is responsible?

Untidy Systems

- ▶ William James: “philosophers have always aimed at cleaning up the litter with which the world apparently is filled” (1996, 45).
- ▶ William Connolly: James takes seriously “a place for something like an element of chanciness or volatility within [the world’s] loose regularities and historical flows” (2005, 73).
- ▶ In an untidy world, the actant is “a being or entity that makes a difference in the world *without quite knowing what it is doing* [emphasis added]” (Connolly, 2005, p. 72).

Communication as Ritual

- ▶ Communication, commonness, communion
- ▶ James Carey: the model directs our attention “not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs”
- ▶ Akin to religious mass
- ▶ Akin to reading a paper “[n]ews reading, and writing, is a ritual act and moreover a dramatic one. What is arrayed before the reader is not pure information but a *portrayal of the contending forces in the world* [emphasis added]” (p. 16).

Dysfluent Accidents as Ritual

- ▶ Carol Padden: Ritual emphasizes “performance, activity, and the materiality of communication itself. In this framework, meaning is not so much the definition of a word or sentence but instead is constructed *in situ*, in social and cultural activity” (p. 44).
- ▶ Unlike sending a message, meaning gets enacted in the very midst of unruly bodies that excrete “all levels of expression, from the minute details of discourse—from pitch, emphasis, gesture, head tilts, and eye gaze” (p. 44).
- ▶ Moreover, since communication happens “on site,” time cannot be transcended or otherwise avoided with speed but must be lived through.

Dysfluent Accidents as Ritual con't

- ▶ Crossed Wires: perhaps its not that my grumpy co-worker “misheard” my stuttered speech, but that he didn’t *want* to listen and did not *want* to belong in time to a common world with this disabled person.
- ▶ The Stall: “Part of it feels like my body goes into a kind of supplication or prayer almost. I have a friend who once referred to it as ‘watching me ask for the word’” (Ellis, 2020, n.p.).
- ▶ The misfire: “The unexpectedness of stuttering forces both listener and speaker into a space of trust and vulnerability. They must both give up control of the situation. The person speaking does not know when and for how long they will stutter. Likewise, the person listening does not know when to expect a stutter. In order for both people to communicate, they must trust one another. (Constantino 2016, para. 5)
- ▶ Ritual? Anti-ritual?



Questions:

- ▶ Normal vs pathological accidents.