Love your windows as little as you possibly can : Communication avoidance as Ulysses pacts from Siren to screen

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Résumé

Communication scholarship has roots in information science, which tends to focus on noise rather silence as communication's 'other'. But it also has roots in departments of speech, the inheritors of the ancient rhetorical tradition. This is reflected in the common understanding of "communication avoidance" as referring to behaviors associated with phobias of public speaking and clinically severe shyness. Speech scholars often consider public and other forms of speech through especially pedagogical and clinical lenses, with prototypical avoidant subjects being non-participating schoolchildren and patients terrified of public speaking. But these are not the only people who avoid communication. A surge of recent interest in digital over- and dis-connection has been conceived somewhat differently, often in terms of 'non-use' of devices or services. This peculiar phrasing reflects the yet different and largely ahistorical disciplinary framework of engineering and human-computer interaction research, which tends to think of people as 'users' (or potential users) of products.

In this paper, we reclaim the concept of 'communication avoidance' and the silences we thereby carve out for ourselves - digital and otherwise - as not only healthy but fundamental. In particular, we consider methods and tools by which people strategically create gaps in their own future communications. This form of silence making, which we define as the *willful choice to limit one's own future communication*, is best understood as an idiosyncratic example of what economists call 'commitment devices' or, colloquially, 'Ulysses pacts', which are constraints we place on our own future choices. This framework makes it possible to analyze and compare communication avoidance from different historical periods, with different motivations, in different media, by various means including rule-based practices, physical tools, and software. To that end we work through an historical case study of anchorites and anchoresses who elected to be spend their entire lives permanently sealed into brick enclosures through which communication was limited not only by physical constraint of tiny windows but also by elaborate systems of rules about what communication was and wasn't to pass through those windows. We then conclude by considering strategies and tools for digital disconnection in light of this theoretical and historical context.

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Biographical note
Dr. Ethan Plaut is a Lecturer in Communication at the University of Auckland specializing in computational media, disconnection and communication avoidance, digital journalism and

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propaganda, and media ethics. He previously held postdoctoral fellowships in both Computer Science and Rhetoric at Stanford University. Plaut's projects on silence include the article "Technologies of avoidance: The swear jar and the cell phone" (*First Monday,* 2015), which was based on his doctoral research at Stanford, as well as conference presentations and invited talks given at various institutions in the US, Canada, and New Zealand. His work on other topics has been published in journals including *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *Communication, Culture & Critique*, and he previously worked as a journalist, including three years at an independent newspaper in Cambodia.