

Transcript of “Interview with author/futurist Arthur C. Clarke, from an AT&T-MIT Conference, 1976”
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Interviewer: We’re talking today with Arthur Clark, the man responsible for communication satellites. Mr. Clark, you’ve said not too long ago that in terms of communications, we’re still in the semaphore and smoke signals stage. Would you put that in context, please?

Arthur C. Clark: Well, as far as the home is concerned, we have TV and radio and telephone. The telephone is the only way we can communicate outside yet. We’ve got a lot of communication [coming to us] “inwards” through the radio and TV.

But we’re going to get devices which will enable us to send much more information to our friends. They’re going to see us, and we’re going to see them. We’ll be able to extend, exchange pictorial information, graphical information, data, books, and so forth.

Interviewer: What would the ideal communications device be in your eyes?

Arthur C. Clark: Well, it would be a high-definition TV screen and a typewriter keyboard and through this you can receive any type of information and send messages to your friends so that they can read it – they can wait [for example,] when they get up, they can see what messages have come in the night. And you can call in through this any information you want: airline flights, prices of things at the supermarket, books you’ve always wanted to read; news you’ve selected.

You will tell the machine, I’m interested in such and such items, sports, politics, or so forth. And the machine will hunt the main central library and bring all of this to you, selectively – just what you want, not all the junk which you have to get (you know, when you buy the two or three pounds of wood pulp, which is the daily newspaper).

Incidentally, this is going to save whole forests for posterity. Because the newspaper is on the way out. We’re not going to ship all these tons and tons of paper around when all we need is information.

Interviewer: Well, if we have face-to-face communications from our home, does this clue in with your slogan, “Don’t commute, communicate.”

Arthur C. Clark: Yes, and we are moving slowly -- perhaps too slowly – toward this type of world. And that’s where we’re going to solve the traffic problem ultimately, not by covering the world with concrete, but by eliminating the traffic. And in the world of the future, travel will be for pleasure, not necessity.

Interviewer: And how will this sort of communication and travel for pleasure affect our social lives, do you think – in terms of say, time zones?

Arthur C. Clark: Well, at least, well it’s going to affect our social lives in many ways, as much as the automobile has done in the past, in many ways negatively, as much as the telephone has done in the past. You mentioned time zones, which are a concern in a country like the United States already where you telephone from one coast to another, and your friends may be asleep, or they may wake you up in the middle of the night.

But in the global village of the future, it will be like living in one small town where anytime about a third of your friends are asleep. But you won’t even know which third. So, we may have to abolish time zones completely, and all go on the common time – same time for everybody, which will cause all sorts of problems.

Interviewer: When you first came up with a concept of communication satellites, didn’t many scientists think this was a pretty far out and unreasonable idea?

Arthur C. Clark: Well, it was far out – 36,000 kilometers out. But no, not at that time. This is 1945, and the v2 rockets had arrived. And when my paper was published, the atomic bomb had been dropped. So, at that time,

people were prepared to accept almost anything. So, I don't think, I don't remember any negative criticisms, in fact, I don't remember anything negative comments saying this is nonsense. Ten years before, there would have been, but 1945, no.

Interviewer: What do you see ahead in terms of, really far ahead, in terms of communications?

Arthur C. Clark: Well, the thing that really interests me isn't so much human communications but communications with other intelligences elsewhere. And this is the biggest unknown, it's one of the most exciting prospects: Will we ever pick up signals from space – radio signals or any other kind of signal?

Everybody feels, sure, there must be all sorts of higher civilizations out there, with tremendous technology capabilities. And if we're ever able to pick up their signals, even if not beamed at us. We must have tremendous powers to play with, and I hope that I live to see the first reception of a signal from outer space.

Interviewer: Do you think that you will, do you think that it's that close?

It could happen tomorrow. Nobody knows. It could happen tomorrow; it might be in the evening papers right now that someone has picked up the first signal. Once ... they've been several false alarms, and people have thought they have done this. The pulsars, people who have found the pulsars, for instance, the very arrhythmic signals – they thought they might be artificial.

Interviewer: This is very exciting. You also talk about a wristwatch.

Arthur C. Clark: A wristwatch radio. Well Dick Tracy had this, of course, many years ago. A wristwatch telephone, you know, will be technologically feasible very soon. And, so, the telephone will no longer be sort of fixed in one place. It will be completely mobile, and this would again restructure society. And, of course, it has its advantages as well as disadvantages. Anyone can get you anytime you like. And, of course, you can switch off the call-in signal, but you might have to explain later why it was switched off.

But the advantages are so great. A number of thousands of lives will be saved every year, with such a thing and that it seems to me to over-ride almost all other considerations.

Thank you very much, Mr. Clark. We've been speaking with Arthur Clark, the man behind the communication satellite. This is Pat McCallum for AT&T Monitor