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Telephone

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The Telephone

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The basic telephone has become a taken-for-granted of our everyday life, but when it first appeared its role was far from clear. This entry charts that early history and subsequent development, before outlining some of key social research relating to this technology.

Telephony provides an example of how difficult it is to point to a first 'inventor' of a new technology given that several researchers were working in this field (Flichy, 1995). Some of these were trying to improve telegraphy, by enabling it to carry more traffic, when they discovered how sound could be sent over wires. However, the telegraphy industry was not interested in developing this line of innovation because from its perspective the telegraph left a permanent record, which a sound message would not, and the development of automatic telegraphy for sending telegrams had led to one telegraphic vision of a telegraph going into every home and business. Even when first promoted by Bell, for many observers the telephone at that time had no obvious use – it was perceived as being a toy (Aronson, 1977).

Partly because of some technical limitations on the quality of two-way communications, there were early experiments using telephony for broadcasting music, drama and news as a way of popularising the technology. However, Bell himself had a long-term vision of point-to-point telephony replacing telegraphy and campaigned for this, including using advertisements that taught the general public how to use the telephone, in terms of telephone etiquette, and for what purposes it might be used.

The early focus of the telephone industry was on commerce and the telephone as a business tool only, but as telephony spread and became cheaper it moved into professional homes. Although Bell had foreseen socialising by phone the industry initially concentrated on promoting more functional uses – e.g. shopping by telephone – and was generally critical of social chatting, seen an inappropriate use of the technology (Flichy, 1995). The social use of the phone was noted as early as a 1909 survey but only appears more substantially by the 1930s, as an innovation coming mainly from the actual practices of telephone users (Fischer, 1992).

In the early years of the telephone, as was later to happen with the internet and other innovations, there were various visions of the wider social impact the telephone might have but also of what issues it might raise. For example, discussions amongst the engineering community speculated about how the new possibilities of communication by telephony might facilitate world democracy, overcoming social difficulties, creating and supporting new communities (Marvin, 1988). But the technology also threatened to make the private world public, becoming a channel for revealing personal information. It could make children's contact with outsiders more difficult to supervise by parents and it had the potential to support criminal activities.

Over the century since its introduction telephony has clearly undergone many changes. Technical landmarks included the early development of automated exchanges, long distance and then worldwide coverage, the use of satellites, and the shift to digital telephony, with related innovations such as mobile telephony and telephony over the internet. There has been innovation in terms of what the phone is used for and the services it supports (including its use as a channel for internet connection). And the industry itself has undergone profound transformations, for example with the break-up of the AT&T monopoly in the US, and in many other countries the privatisation of a service that was for many decades run by the national government controlled postal systems. This led to a reconfiguration of the industry in many countries with both new entrants and take-overs, and new product packages (e.g. companies offering mobile phone, landline, internet access and TV subscription combined).

In terms of research, while there were some histories of telephony (de Solo Pool, 1997; Fischer, 1992 and Flichy, 1995) until the late 1980s the domestic phone was a medium neglected by the social science community. While some of the subsequent telephone research emerged from academic interests, it was in part spurred on by the plethora of new and potential telecom services and equipment, the privatised telecoms companies' greater awareness of the importance of home users as a market and these companies' perceived need to know their markets in a more competitive environment.

Understandably much of the first research involved charting phone use and (types of) users. This involved identifying 'heavy' and 'light' users, as well as psychological factors that shaped those patterns of use. There were classifications of call types, initially with the binary division of 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' (i.e. social) calls (e.g. Moyal, 1989) but also with more detailed and differentiated typologies and motivations for calling. And that early research explored the issue of who is called (e.g. friends, family, acquaintances), the frequency of calls (including when the phone is only for emergency use) and short- versus long-distance calling.

When we turn to the socio-demographics of users, gender received most attention in the early stages relating telephone use to women's wider social roles. A qualitative study in the US underlined how women held together the fabric of communities, while a combined qualitative and quantitative research in Australia emphasised the importance of contact between mothers and daughters and amongst networks of women friends (Moyal, 1989). By the late 1990s the picture became more refined showing the complexities of how gendered calling patterns changed over the life course both for males and females (Claisse, 2000).

There was some, albeit limited, research on telephony and class (socio-economic status), as well as the use of the phone in relation to homeworking and its significance for the unemployed (Häußermann and Petrowsky, 1989). In terms of age, there were number of early studies on elderly people's phone use and a little on youth . One German study explained children's telephone use in relation to the changing experience of childhood in the later part of the 20th century, mainly focusing on the decline of street culture, where interaction had previously been more spontaneous with peers who happened to live nearby (Büchner, 1990). Since this led not only to more home based leisure but to more free time being spent at a distance from the

home both in after-school institutions (e.g. sports, clubs) and also in the homes of friends, the phone becomes more and more essential for arranging meetings and for organising logistics of transporting children. Some youth participating in a later French study referred to domestic tension as 'the war of the telephone', a conflict between the pressure on youth to be attentive to the family and to their studies versus the demands by youth themselves for a zone of liberty of movement and expression (Martin and de Singly, 2000).

Other research included the influence of social network size on the patterns of telephone use, the influence in households of changes over the life course (e.g. the reorientation of social ties, and hence telephone calls, after the birth of the first child and understanding the (non-)use of the telephone by particular communities, most notably the resistance of the Amish in the US to telephony.

The mainly qualitative domestication studies that started in the early 1990s examined the role of the telephone in people's life alongside the role of other information and communication technologies (ICTs). This also asked how use changed over the long term, exploring what this technology meant for cohorts or generations who had lived their lives through different eras (Haddon, 2004). Part of that interest, reflected in a quantitative study, dealt with how household member managed calls, controlling incoming and outgoing calls, as well as the privacy of calls. Several subsequent studies also moved away from treating the phone in isolation, as in research examining the emotional and subjective ways people felt about the phone compared to other ICTs and exploring how and why people choose between different communications channels. While there are studies that continue to look at fixed line telephony, more so in this comparative way, the technology has been somewhat eclipsed by more interest in newer ICTs, especially the mobile phone, which for some time has generated a much larger research literature.

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