

The Strowger telephone

The Strowger telephone represents another level of innovation and potential for the telephone. This invention by Almon Brown Strowger, an undertaker from Kansas City, Missouri, revolutionized the function and capabilities of telephone networks for much of the twentieth century (National Inventors Hall of Fame, 2002).

Strowger was convinced that operators were diverting customers to his competitors. Early telephone exchanges relied on operators to connect lines by hand, based on the request of the caller. This was time consuming and operators could listen in on conversations if they were so inclined. Strowger developed a system to enable people to dial local numbers for themselves to increase privacy and efficiency (Pollard, 1991).

The eleven digit dial eliminated the need for operators and led to the creation of the Strowger Automatic Exchange, which later became the Automatic Electric Company and then GTE (Triant, 2013). Not only did the Strowger provide a quicker, more secure service, it was also cheaper.

An article from *The Globe* from 1912 illustrates how the telephone continued to impact communication in all sectors of society. In a rural community in Ontario a farm couple was concerned that they had not received any letters from their daughter in Toronto recently. It suddenly dawned on them that they could "ring her up" and talk to her. They were unaccustomed to this form of instant long distance communication. The ability to confirm the safety of their daughter using the telephone eliminated the need for days of worry ("Rural Telephone Works Evolution", 1912). The telephone was becoming an integral part of the culture and its utility was taking on many forms.

The Strowger telephone permitted greater independence without the reliance on an operator and the fear of being monitored. Charles Horton Cooley, a sociologist, wrote in 1912 that

in our own life the intimacy of the neighborhood has been broken up by the growth of an intricate mesh of wider contacts which leaves us strangers to people who live in the same house...diminishing our economic and spiritual community with our neighbors (Fischer, 1992).

Although the impact on communities was not as dire as Cooley prophesized, telephone use did affect society. The titles of telephone songs in the late nineteenth century demonstrate the impact of the telephone on society and culture. "Kissing Papa Tho' the Telephone", "Love by Telephone", and "Hello, Is This Heaven, Is Grandpa There?" are some examples (Fischer, 1992). With each new innovation, exposure and access to information altered the impact of the telephone on the culture of communication.