The Telephone Changing Communication

Nate Lott

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Introduction:

The overall goal of my presentation was to touch on the profound impact that the telephone as a communication device has had on societal change. As I delved deeper into the research I started to come up with some interesting connections with technology and society. For example the freedom it provided for women in a society that was fairly restrictive on their rights. As well the balance of power that something that can shift when a new technology rises up. Something as simple as the speed at which we communicate can create knowledge monopolies in which individuals centralize and hold great power. I expected just to uncover how we all felt more interconnected by the telephone but found much more beneath that simple fact.

Script

In the realm of communication technologies one cannot deny the importance of the telephone across history. Connecting humanity across vast distances, oceans and mountains it allows us to relay information, data and talk to those we love as if they were right next to us. To understand the profound effect the telephone has had on communication we must first look at a brief history and how it came to be.

The word telephone comes from the Greek word tele which means from afar and phone which is voice. As simple as it might seem the idea for the telephone is what we passed as a possible communication device as kids, which was basic tin cans and a string. A child's toy with the idea being the can could collect the sound and and a string or wire can transmit ones voice over a certain distance. Long before the invention of the electromagnetic telephone there have been numerous ways to transmit speech over extended distances through pipes or other sound enhancing devices.

The man credited with the vast majority of this work was Robert Hooke "I have, by the help of a distended wire, propagated the sound to a very considerable distance in an instant" (Lewis, 1995, p.41) While he was the first to create the mechanical acoustic telephone Alexander Graham Bell the Scottish inventor is credited with creating the first practical telephone. In 1874 the essential idea of the telephone formed in his mind. As he later explained it, "If I could make a current of electricity vary in intensity precisely as the air varies in density during the production of sound, I should be able to transmit speech telegraphically." (History.com, 2009) His dedicated

research in the area of speech and hearing led to the creation of the U.S. patent on the telephone in 1867. From there in 1877 the first commercial telephone company was created near Berlin followed by the first coast to coast long distance telephone call from New York to San Francisco 1916.

Changing communication and society forever

The telephone is what can be deemed as a piece of the secondary orality. Ong speaks on the fact that the telephone has ushered in the age of the secondary orality (Ong, 1982, p. 133) it is a means for socialization rooted in our base oral tradition. What the telephone has done is change the way we build community. It forms the speaker and the listener together in a moment, an auditory space is created. The spoken word brings the two individuals much more closely together in the moment than a written interaction ever could. The two people are not physically present together but their voices are in the same place at the same time. With this comes a sense of intimacy and closeness that was not present with written interactions. Of course the telephone had a profound effect on the speed and efficiency of communication as well. Writing a letter and the movement of that letter to the recipient was the first form of communication to feel the effects. Now communication could be delivered instantaneously and in real time. Writing a letter would fall to the wayside as a means for people to communicate effectively and quickly when time was an important factor.

The telephones first use was strictly for business. "The first subscribers were usually doctors, druggists, and businessmen, and the phone was not immediately available to private homes. Service was expensive at a time when wages were a few dollars a week." (Wehrend, 1996)

Looking at a business standpoint, determining how a large business would communicate with customers would be forever altered. For example prices are always fluctuating and the telephone would give businesses the ability to monitor and react to prices in the market as they changed. Businesses entire operations did not have to remain in their country but could now be internationalized as the telephone allowed for them to move their product to new markets and new countries.

One of the overlooked societal changes that the telephone ushered in was the creation of women as telephone operators in businesses and the movement of them into the business realm to handle customer complaints and billing issues. "The telephone was effective, though, in freeing women from traditional social limitations, and it was also important in offering them economic opportunity in the growing telephone industry." (Wehrend, 1996) As well in Muslim societies where men and women are meant to live in seperate zones it "makes communication between the sexes easier, creating a social space where they can meet. It also enables women to organize their lives more independently while still taking the societal norms seriously." (Nkwi, p.19)

The telephone of course was not immediately available to everyone as it was an expensive piece of machinery when first introduced. "The main communication was for business and political transactions and the telephone remained, therefore, a tool of the colonial elite." (Nkwi, p.55) However as it became more affordable it started to appear in every home and families that lived towns, states, provinces or countries apart could now stay in touch. It improved communication within the family unit even across vast distances. It allowed families to "be in two places at the same time" (Kern,p 13) improving interconnectedness.

Contribution To The Formation of Mass Media

One can see few greater contributions to the growth of the media than the telephone. Where the speed and time that information travels is of the utmost importance the telephone has been a central player in the growth of mass media. When a breaking story occurs of course that information can be immediately relayed to the media via telephone and the journalist dispatched to the affected area. This in turn increases our access into news information and current events as we are immediately aware of the news events occuring in real time. This can be taken even further as a news story breaks we can communicate with one another about the events unfolding.   As Innis states, "As communication improves there is a shift in perspective and concern "from local and regional units to national and international ones" (Innis, pg.52) Media can report on issues that lie far outside our immediate locals and that information can be communicated back instantly giving us a more global perspective on events and a broader understanding of the changing world around us.

The Dark Side

So far we have looked at the telephone and the conveniences it brings along with the enhancements it delivers when it comes to speed and efficiency of communication. Yet there remains a flip side to this technology that we have not discussed. As Postman states "Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that" (Postman, 1993, para.2) There is no give without take and the advancement of the telephone is no exception to that rule. In Innis's "The Bias of Communication" he talks about "monopolies of knowledge" in

which those that control access to that knowledge hold powerful positions. While the telephone is a device that connects us it also has cut a wide divide between the haves and have nots in our society.

"Those that cultivate competence in the use of a new technology become an elite group that are granted undeserved authority and prestige by those who have no such competence" (Postman, 1993, para.8) When the telephone was introduced there is no doubt that only the wealthy could afford such a machine and this intern created a divide in those that held the knowledge and power through mere acquisition of the new device. The speed at which information could be relayed and obtained with the advent of the telephone afforded those that could obtain this technology great power. Innis speaks on this when he states "The decisive advantage gained by those with an advance warning of events or prices" (Innis, 1964, p.94)

This is true for the outcome of a war where one could tell where the enemy was approaching from and the position is instantly communicated resulting in a higher death toll. As well in the business realm the ability to reach a business contact ahead of your competition through the use of the new communication medium. Or perhaps even more personal is the replacement of writing with a medium that involves much more exposure. To get hung up in a phone call relays a much stronger and immediate message to the recipient than a written conversation. Attached to this is the removal of the body language that we use to communicate so much of what we say to each other. The telephone strips us of that method of communication and replaces it with a purely auditory base means of expression. Regardless of the pitfalls it is apparent that the advent of the telephone as a means of communication has a side that is not so positive.

Through this presentation we have looked at a brief history of the telephone, how it has changed society and its darker side. There is no denying that the telephone has changed the way we communicate and forever altered the social structure of our society. It has created advancements and caused fear and anxiety. It is not merely a simple communication device but a driver for societal change. Yet it is a form of technology that we cannot live without as instantaneous voice communication has become a central component of our history and culture.

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