MODERNITY CALLING: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AND THE TELEPHONE IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES, 1880-1990

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I. Introducing the Telephone: Communicative Innovation and the Established Communication Order

“The young man had been trying to tell her how madly he loved her for over an hour but couldn’t pluck up the courage. ‘Excuse me for a moment, Mr. Featherly,’ she said, ‘I think I hear a ring at the phone.’ And, in her queenly way, she swept into an adjoining room. Presently she returned and his mad passion found a voice. ‘I am sorry, Mr. Featherly,’ she said, ‘to cause you pain, but I am already engaged. Mr. Sampson, learning that you are here, has urged his suit through the telephone.’”

The 1888 newspaper story beautifully illustrates the representation of the telephone during the first few decades after its invention. Even though the number of telephones in private households increased slowly in most modern societies until World War II, the impact of the telephone on private life became a prominent topic of discussion soon after the device became available to consumers in 1877. The newspaper anecdote of the telephone suitor shows how the telephone was thought to affect specific areas of society long before it became a customary means of communication.

The main goal of the woman in the story is to get married. It seems to be of no great importance to whom. In this respect, the account does not go beyond a well-known cliché about middle-class women at the time. However, this traditional cliché is then confronted with a technological innovation, the telephone. More generally, in the story about the distant suitor the telephone is pictured as being integrated into the existing social and cultural order. It is represented as a new resource in the context of an established communicative practice. At the same time, however, in the newspaper story, the telephone is pictured as deeply affecting communicational practices. In its dramatization of the impact that telephone communication would have on courtship the episode displays a satirical quality. One technological device alone seemed sufficient to bring about a significant

2 Claude S. Fischer, America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940 (Berkeley, 1992), 24-28, 72-85; see also: Marvin, Old Technologies, 59-89.
change in social practice. Representations of what contemporary sources call the “telephone suitor” probably entered the cultural consciousness of several western societies. Henceforth suitors relying on the telephone threatened — or promised — to change the rules of courtship.3

The story of the telephone suitor thus suggests that the communicative situation in which marriage proposals took place, even the whole communicative setting of marriage initiation was about to change profoundly because of the telephone. The telephone did not simply make the physical co-presence of the two potential future fiancées unnecessary — the letter and other forms of mediated communication had already achieved this. Because the telephone rendered possible instantaneous space-transcending communication, it seemed to dramatically reduce all the constraints that spatial distance imposed on vocal social interaction. In fact, whatever the key to a successful face-to-face marriage proposal may have been before, the telephone — allowing for the space-transcending even if only vocal imitation of the face-to-face encounter — made timing the decisive factor. In the view of contemporaries, this affected the basic social and cultural rules applying to this particular communicative situation. Therefore the episode about the telephone suitor really is about the impact that increased speed as a general modern condition was about to have on communicative cultures in general.4

The idea of the telephone causing changes in established communication routines or creating new routines is demonstrated by many of the representations of the device in the first decades after its invention. Although a wide range of technical experts and social analysts and commentators described its presumed effects on public service and the business world, it seems that most observations dealt with its impact on private life. In the field of “love and the telephone” alone several narrative patterns evolved. There is, for instance, the man falling for the telephone operator, the young girl being lured into an inappropriate relationship by a telephone suitor or the marriage swindler having his victims believe in the legality of a marriage concluded over the phone. All these narrative patterns built on the idea of the new telecommunication prompting the kinds of interpersonal relations that had previously developed exclusively from face-to-face interactions. Although the narratives oscillated between elation over the prospect for new class-transcending interactions and fear of the telephone promoting “irregular” courtship or fraudulent practices, all

3 Marvin, Old Technologies, 73–74.
of them resulted from the firm conviction that the telephone changed many of the communication routines that interpersonal relations were based on.5

II. Representations of the Telephone and Representations of Telephoning

Representations of the telephone did not necessarily mirror common contemporaneous practices of telephoning. In the United States telephoning was not established as a way of maintaining preexisting intimate personal relations until the 1930s. In Germany and other European countries this occurred even later.6 Contrary to contemporaneous representations, the telephone was even less effective as an instrument for creating new relationships. Contemporaries also erred in their belief that all kinds of important emotional and relationship decisions would soon habitually be made over the phone.7 Contrary to what the episode about the telephone suitor would have us believe, asking for somebody’s hand in marriage over the telephone never became a sanctioned practice in most modern western societies. That representations of the telephone did not necessarily mirror customary contemporaneous usages of the device, however, by no means diminishes their empirical value.

My research project draws on the idea that representations of the telephone from the 1880s to the 1980s reflect perceptions of changes in the communicative culture of modern societies. Yet the very nature of representations of the telephone changed over time. In the decades immediately following its launch, representations of the telephone primarily addressed the desired or feared effects that the telephone’s spread would have on modern societies. Mostly technological and social experts commented on the observed and expected effects of the implementation of the telephone, which grew to symbolize the changes both desirable and dreaded that societies underwent on their path to modernity.8 However, because in this early period the telephone was still subject to debate, its use as a symbol of modernity was still rather arbitrary and its cultural association with isolated and varying aspects of modernity unstable and inconsistent.

During the second quarter of the twentieth century two notable changes in the representation of the telephone occurred. First, the debates over the blessings and curses that the telephone had already brought or could be expected to bring in the future greatly diminished. To be sure, the telephone continued to figure prominently

7 Fischer, America Calling, 175-192.
8 Marvin, Old Technologies, 59-89.
in texts and images created not only by experts of technology and society, but also by journalists, writers, painters, and filmmakers; but it almost ceased to be an object of debate. Instead, representations of the telephone now showed that the device had become culturally accepted as a daily means of communication — the small number of actual users notwithstanding. Second, the cultural meanings of the telephone became relatively standardized and generalized: the telephone started to function as a symbol of modernity per se. The simple act of displaying a person on the phone alone indicated that the individual embraced technological and social progress. The telephone had already begun to symbolize certain aspects of modernity after the beginning of its implementation in offices and private households in the 1880s. Only about fifty years after its invention, however, it finally came to symbolize what could be classified as a modern life style and modern values. The high degree of abstraction that the symbolic representation of the telephone had reached by the 1930s showed itself when the representation of the device became detached from actual telephone practices. Hollywood and UFA stars’ posing with a telephone on autograph photos, for instance, made them seem approachable — no matter how unlikely a call from a fan was to actually reach them.

This development notwithstanding, representations of the telephone and telephone practices remained interconnected in several regards. Not only the symbolic content but the usage of the telephone changed over time. From the beginning, telephone technology and the telephone network shaped telecommunications by creating a unique communicative situation with specific possibilities and limits. While conventional telephones permitted vocal interaction between persons located out of earshot of each other, for example, they failed to transfer visual conversational signals. Technological preconditions and the technical features of the device thus played a role in establishing the common usages of the telephone. That they allowed for certain communicative practices while inhibiting others, however, did not mean that they determined how the telephone would be used. How contemporaries actually perceived the technological properties and potential of the telephone proved much more influential in shaping the usages of the device.

The telephone represents a technology-induced innovation in the sense that no demand for telephone service had been articulated before its launch. As a result, the usage of the telephone did not conform to

9 Fischer, America Calling, 175-183.

10 Universum Film AG.


any pre-imagined practice and remained undefined for several decades. Many of the different usages that the telephone as a technical device permitted were explored and applied over the course of its history. Revealing its potential as a medium of point-to-point communication, the telephone was at first used to transfer written messages. After the first telephone connections had been set up, they served to compensate for the gaps in the telegraph network between cities in several countries. The telephone was also used as a mass or one-to-many medium for several decades. Concerts, for instance, as well as the weather forecast or crop prices were transmitted over the phone. Eventually, the telephone “yielded” these functions to competing mass media such as the radio. By the late 1930s, a single basic form of use for the telephone had prevailed. Its prevalent function was to enable instantaneous communication between two spatially separated individuals. Since then, the telephone has mainly been used to provide interactive, synchronic, one-to-one and point-to-point space-transcending communication. As one basic type of use was established, the social debate about the telephone wound down. Simultaneously, representations of telephoning seemed to shift from the imagination of potential telephone practices to the observation and reproduction of established ones.

By the late 1920s, the implementation of the telephone was beyond social debate. Now representations of the telephone and telephoning were no longer about its social impact or about imagining completely new modes of use or about what by then appeared as unlikely ways of using the telephone. Nevertheless, representations of telephoning were by no means limited to reflecting only well-implemented telephone practices. Although one basic type of usage of the telephone had prevailed, much about this usage still needed to be specified. Cultural negotiations, especially representations of telephoning, now played a central role in the shaping of telephone practices, in shaping rules pertaining to telephone conversations, and in the cultural meanings attached to telephoning. In this sense, representations of telephoning anticipated changes in telephone routines and reflected continuous changes in communicative routines. Moreover, representations of telephoning disclose contemporaneous perceptions of change not only in telephone routines but in the communicative culture of modern societies as a whole throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

III. The Culture of Telephone Communication

Communication constitutes a central form of social agency. It relates individuals, groups, and organizations to one another and to society...
as a whole, allowing for their social interaction. The culture of communication therefore is an important part of any cultural order and consists of procedures and routines of communication, the rules guiding them, and the representations providing them with meanings. Routines and representations of communication are key, both in legitimizing established patterns of interpersonal communication and in initiating their transformation or replacement. Modern societies rely heavily on mediated communication, which produces its own set of procedures and routines of communication for which rules have to be established. As telephoning became widely customary in several distinct social contexts, telephone practices became routines and telephone procedures were established. More precisely, certain conversational genres and contents were deemed appropriate for the telephone situation. While giving condolences over the phone, for instance, became frowned upon, calling a crisis helpline and opening up to a complete stranger became an established practice. Moreover, rules were framed regarding under which circumstances and at what time one ought to call. Finally, appropriate greetings and farewells were established, the adequate length of time for a call was set, and the jargon befitting a telephone conversation identified. And it was established that all of these depended not only on the purpose of the call but on the relationship between the callers.

Representations of telephoning further validated routines and procedures of telephoning. They drew on a widely shared ensemble of collective cultural representations of communication and added to it. Because the telephone provided a completely new form of long-distance communication by permitting instantaneous vocal communication with absent others, it probably had a direct impact on communication practices and, more importantly, was widely perceived as having this kind of impact. At first, the act of telephoning probably mainly symbolized changes in the established communicative order brought about by the adoption of a new technology of communication. Very soon, however, it seems to have come to epitomize the change of communication patterns resulting not from one technology but from modernization in general. Contemporaries probably processed major changes in the established communicative culture when they observed and imagined practices of telephoning. It thus stands to reason that representations of telephoning, even if they did not provoke modifications of the established communicative culture, reveal contemporary perceptions of changes in the communicative cultures of modern societies to the historian. Therefore, I will analyze

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15 See, for instance: Jürgen Hesse, “Telefonseelsorge in Deutschland,” in Mensch, Telefon.

observed and imagined telephone practices in order to trace the social and cultural impact that telephoning was perceived to have on shaping the communicative culture of modern societies.

IV. The Historiography of the Telephone

Drawing on current notions of the telephone, the historiography of the telephone has reconstructed the establishment of the now dominant mode of telephone use: instantaneous dialoguing with personally related, but absent others. More precisely, scholars have traced how the telephone as a technical device gained general acceptance and telephoning became a customary communication practice. Historians of technology have delineated the technological innovations prompting the invention of the telephone and the further development of the entire technical apparatus of phones and cabling. Scholars have examined the establishment and operation of telephone companies and public telecommunication networks. They have plotted the gradual geographical extension of telephone networks, the slow but steady increase in the number of subscribers over the course of a century, and the growing number of private calls since 1945. Scholars approaching the history of the telephone from a social constructivist perspective have contributed narratives of how the telephone was incorporated into the social and cultural order. They have argued that its usage and interpretation, rather than its technological characteristics, account for the success of the telephone. Hence their focus on the political, economic, social, and cultural structures that allowed the successful embedding of the telephone in the everyday life of most modern populations.

These historical studies rely heavily on well-known historiographical narratives of modernity. They relate the routinization of telephoning to modernity in two different ways. They view it both as an explanans, that is, a factor that helps to explain the rise of modernity, and an explanandum, that is, a phenomenon that is explained by the conditions of the modern world. Seeing the telephone as an explanandum attributes its spread and its incorporation into the socio-cultural order of modern societies to processes that are part of modernity. In other words, scholars identify patterns in the telephone’s spread and incorporation that fit the features distinguishing modern from traditional societies. The state regulation of telephone networks, for instance, seems to have matched the modern trend towards more regulation, and the telephone’s evolution from an elitist status


20 Fischer, America Calling; John, Network Nation; Michele Martin, H ello, Central? Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems (Montreal: Buffalo, 1991); Frank Thomas, Telefonieren in Deutschland: Organisatorische, technische und räumliche Entwicklung eines großtechnischen Systems (Frankfurt/Main, 1995); Jan-Otmar Hesse, Im Netz Der Kommunikation: Die Reichspost- und Telegrafenverwaltung 1876-1914, (München, 2002), 351-420.
symbol to a product of mass consumption appears to epitomize the formation of the consumer society. At the same time, regarding the telephone as an *explanans* for historical developments has led historians and social scientists to point to the effect that the spread of the telephone had on modern societies. In this view, the telephone does not merely reflect some of the most significant changes that modern societies experienced but, at least partly, accounts for them as well. The telephone thus appears to have promoted the processes that constitute what we have come to call “modernity.” Rather than merely satisfying existing needs specific to modern societies, such as the need for long-distance (vocal) communication, the telephone nourished such needs by supplying technological possibilities. It mostly reflects, yet to a certain extent also promotes the shaping of a modern social order.

By relating the rise of the telephone to the shaping of modern societies scholars have followed the contemporary notion of the telephone as a symbol of modernity and have adopted narratives that modern societies have developed to describe themselves. The expansiveness of telephone networks, for example, has been traced back to the conviction that spatially extensive communication networks are essential, which is a creed that itself can be retraced to the territorialization of the nation-state. Scholars have shown how long-distance calls played an important role in the imaginary of the telephone, yet accounted only for a small percentage of the total calls placed in the United States until American Bell Telephone Company dedicated more of its advertisements to the notion of connecting people all over the nation via telephone cables. Bell, and later AT&T, adopted the paradigm of expansion and promoted the nation-wide growth of the telephone network without anticipating immediate profits. Serving yet another narrative of modern self-description, historians have portrayed the telephone as one of the first communication technologies to transcend space in virtually no time. This idea embodies the more general belief that the acceleration of modern life renders spatial distances insignificant.

While most studies on the telephone convincingly demonstrate the connection between the telephone and basic social processes and self-descriptive narratives of modern societies, they fail to add to our knowledge of modern cultures of communication. To be sure, scholars have analyzed the impact that the rise of the telephone had on social relations or the social order, sometimes taking into consideration

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22 Fischer, *America Calling*, 72-85.
23 Marvin, *Old Technologies and New Media: Medien- und Diskursgeschichtliche Studien zur Tele-Kommunikation*, Medienanalysen (Bielefeld, 2010).
contemporary accounts. But their research usually relates the telephone to processes and narratives that are not genuinely communicative. Routines and procedures of telephoning, let alone the representations they created, have not in and by themselves been systematically analyzed. How representations of telephoning impacted modern cultures of communication and how they reflected their development has thus remained unexplored.

V. The Telephone as an Element of Communication History: A Research Gap

Not only histories of the telephone but also general histories of communication fail to relate the telephone as a means of interpersonal communication to more comprehensive changes in modern cultures of communication. The historiography of modern and contemporary communication traditionally focuses on mass communication because the latter is generally considered to be responsible for the advent of the so-called “information age.” Mass communication has been defined as working over long distances, relying on one-to-many media, and not necessarily involving interaction. Interpersonal communication, by contrast, is the interactive communication between at least two people — either face-to-face or space-transcending and involving one-to-one media. The historiography of communication has neglected this form of communication, and until recently its historical change has implicitly been denied.

The currently intensifying historical research on interpersonal communication has generally adopted social science concepts and has mostly targeted face-to-face communication (or interaction). Early modern historians were the first to investigate rumors or conflicts over issues of honor. Scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries broadened the area of study to include communication genres such as debates, arguments or jokes, and places such as taverns or hotels, which they conceptualize as spaces of specific types of communication. The genres and spaces of interpersonal communicative interactions have, however, been mostly analyzed in different societies. Rammert, “Telefon und Kommunikationskultur.”

26 Fischer, America Calling; Marvin, Old Technologies and Martin, Hello Central?
27 I have found one notable exception so far: Werner
28 See, for instance, Ute Daniel and Axel Schildt, eds, Massenmedien im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts (Köln; Weimar; Wien, 2010); Habbo Knoch and Daniel Morat, Kommunikation als Beobachtung: Medienwandel und Gesellschaftskritik 1880-1960 (München, 2003); Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet (Cambridge, 2002); Anthony Fellow, American Media History, 2nd ed. (Boston, 2010).
tion have, in fact, received more attention than its media. The small amount of historical research done on the media of interpersonal communication has focused on written communication. According to this research, interpersonal exchange in the past appears to have been mostly structured by written communication, as exemplified by the cultural significance of epistolary routines or the impact of telegraphy on diplomacy. Media of interpersonal communication that are not based on writing have remained the almost exclusive domain of sociology and media studies. Scholars in these fields have analyzed the effect that interpersonal telecommunication had on general communication culture. Unsurprisingly, however, their focus has been on present-day media such as the mobile telephone or the computer.

Scholars of communication history in general and interpersonal communication in particular have largely overlooked the telephone because it does not seem to fit these categories. It is modern but not part of the mass media; it is interpersonal but not face-to-face; it is long-distance but not based on writing. The telephone allows for synchronic vocal interaction with absent others, creating a sense of social presence despite the physical distance. It provides mediated communication only but imitates face-to-face communication. Thus, the distinction between face-to-face and long-distance communication does not fully apply to the telephone.

Despite extensive scholarship on past communication the telephone as a medium still remains undefined to a certain extent. This is all the more surprising since the spread of the telephone accounts for a change in the communication with absent others that was (arguably) at least as dramatic as the transformation provoked by the rise of mass communication. Hence, instead of resorting to master narratives of modernity to explain how the telephone was established and how phone calls became a daily routine, my research aims at introducing a new narrative. This narrative will not focus on mass or face-to-face communication but contribute to the history of modern communication from a perspective that uncovers the impact that the emergence of the telephone had on modern communication cultures.

VI. Approach, Organization, and Primary Sources of the Study

My study will explore the perceptions, interpretations, and classifications of telephone practices, which are all part of the self-descriptive narratives of modern societies. As previously detailed, since its launch the telephone was seen as one of the central achievements of

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33 Höfl ich, “Telefonsituation.”
modernity. I will therefore use a definition of modernity that factors in the self-descriptive narratives of modern societies. According to this definition, the beginning of modernity can be dated back to the 1890s, when the use of narratives that labeled western societies as “modern” increased sharply. Representations of the telephone are modern self-descriptions in this sense without, however, necessarily evolving in a linear fashion towards current notions of the telephone.

Even if it seems to epitomize modern communication, the instantaneous communication between spatially separate but socially close individuals only became the dominant mode of using the telephone during the last third of the twentieth century. Other, previous ways of using the telephone have commonly been regarded by scholars as straying from the path that led to presently dominant mode of usage. Historians of the telephone have rated them “dead ends.” Two kinds of practices fall into this category. First, there were short-lived practices that evolved aside from the alleged linear development that led towards the currently predominant usage. Second, there were imagined practices of telephoning that never became actual practices. Sometimes an exact classification proves difficult as the episode about the “telephone suitor” shows. On the one hand, the idea of the suitor proposing over the phone found its way into so many publications, mostly magazine articles, in the late nineteenth century that it appears to reflect a popular practice of the time. On the other hand, it sometimes seems as if only these publications and no other kind of empirical evidence document the prominence of this practice, which makes the telephone suitor appear as a product of the contemporaries’ imagination.

Whether imagined, discontinued, or anything in between such practices have drawn hardly any scholarly attention. As stated earlier, neither historians of the telephone nor scholars from neighboring disciplines have examined representations of telephoning as indicators of perceived changes in modern cultures of communication. Short-lived practices of telephoning have hardly been analyzed at all and imagined practices have been dismissed almost entirely. I would suggest that the quality that led to these practices’ dismissal in the history of the telephone is exactly the quality that makes them so valuable for a history of modern cultures of communication. Discontinued and imagined practices did not directly relate to established practices and they did not simply shape and reflect the evolution of telephone practices. Instead, they picked up and assimilated broader
contemporary perceptions of change in patterns of communication. For this reason they will be examined in this study alongside representations of permanently realized telephoning practices. Assuming that the analytical value of all observed and imagined practices of telephoning lies precisely in their ability to disclose contemporary perceptions of change in cultures of communication, the dead ends in the history of telephoning seem especially significant for assessing the perception of changes in the patterns of interpersonal communication and the culture of communication as a whole.

The representations of the telephone were partly detached from the evolution of actual telephone use because they centered on specific social settings. First, contemporary observers were preoccupied with how the spread of the telephone would impact kinship relations, friendship-based relationships, and, as the story of the telephone suitor illustrates, romantic relationships. Second, they pictured the influence of the telephone on business-client relations and business connections. Finally, they considered the impact of the telephone on citizen-state relations as well as personal connections inside the political power structure. Therefore, the contemporary perception of a changing culture of communication focused on distinct areas of private communication, business communication, and communication in public service and politics. My study will be organized according to the emphasis that contemporary observers of telephoning placed on specific social settings.

In order to grasp the variety of observed and imagined practices of telephoning, my research will be based on a large and diverse body of sources. For the early years, I have identified contemporary and retrospective newspaper and magazine articles capturing the experts’ debates on the telephone. Many of these rather dry and prosaic sources cover technical details but also include at least some remarks about the social relevance and expected impact of the new technology. A more comprehensive debate in the print media begins around 1900 but declines during the 1930s.

The cultural negotiations over the forms of telephone use are reflected in the letters that customers addressed to telephone companies and the postal services throughout the hundred-year period under scrutiny. They are especially useful when it comes to tracing the continuously intensive social engagement with the telephone and its permanently changing usages. Their authors not only filed complaints but also suggested new ways of using the device. The strategies of
telephone companies and state authorities as well as their interactions reveal the constraints that followed from the telephone’s establishment as a part of daily life.

The same is true for legal proceedings, which addressed, for example, whether the recording of a telephone call ought to be admitted as evidence in court. These documents also discuss the overall social relevance of the telephone. In the 1920s, German authorities inquired whether the telephone company could be sued for intolerable cruelty if the customer is forced to wait for a connection. Such telling sources are unlikely to be found for the postwar decades. By contrast, advertisements for the telephone and documents on marketing can be found throughout the century. Interestingly, the first ads that used the telephone as a symbol to advertise another product materialized during the interwar period. The performing arts, the visual arts, and literature also used the telephone in a symbolic fashion. Franz Kafka’s use of the telephone, for instance, transcended the portrayal of actual practices and pointed to contemporaneous perceptions of the consequences of new communication technologies and routines for the culture of communication.

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