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

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The way the telephone is used and understood is emblematic of the modern condition. The telephone helps individuals transcend ever more space in ever less time, increases the frequency of communication between people, and contributes to the mechanization of everyday life and the democratization of human exchange. Almost as soon as commercial telephone service became available the act of telephoning was widely linked to notions of modernity. Accordingly, the scholarship on the history of the telephone relies on well-known narratives of modernization to explain the spread of the device and its cultural incorporation within very different societies. Historians of the telephone have documented in detail the successful embedding of the phone in modern everyday life. They have also shown how the telephone gained general acceptance as a technical device.

The historiography of the telephone draws on media studies definitions of the telephone as a means of instantaneous dialogue. Consequently, this body of scholarship focuses almost exclusively on explaining why instantaneous dialogue has become the usual mode of using the telephone. Nowadays this might appear as the natural function of the telephone. Yet instantaneous communication between spatially separate persons did not become the predominant function of the telephone until the last third of the twentieth century. In the decades following the stringing of the first telephone lines in the late nineteenth century, several forms of usage coexisted. Although technological possibilities and limitations certainly influenced telephone use, they did not determine it.

Intertwined with the changing uses of the telephone were shifting depictions of the telephone itself. Although usage and interpretation of the phone did not march in lockstep, they certainly influenced each other. The cultural meanings assigned to telephone practices contributed to the selection of socially more acceptable uses from a multitude of potential and experimental forms. From its earliest appearance, the telephone was portrayed and discussed as the prototypical medium of the modern world. Long before long-distance calls
became an integral part of most people’s routines, for example, the telephone was praised as a means of communication across borders and became a symbol of modern cosmopolitanism. The telephone also figured prominently in horror scenarios of dystopian worlds where anonymity and social indifference ruled. Whether regarded as a blessing or as a curse, the telephone was expected, at least until World War I, to fundamentally transform the communication routines of modern societies.

The spread of the telephone may or may not have directly affected cultures of communication. However, modern societies’ growing reliance on mediated communications has been thought to impact their communication cultures. Since the end of the nineteenth century, it has been argued that mediated communications tended to produce their own sets of communication procedures and that the adoption of new technologies provoked changes of communication routines. It therefore stands to reason that representations of telephoning can disclose contemporary perceptions of changing communication cultures in modern societies to the historian. Contemporaries of the large-scale adoption of the telephone, I argue, processed major changes in the established communications culture whenever they observed and imagined practices of telephoning. My research focuses on exactly these observed and imagined practices of telephoning and aims at tracing the shaping of a modern communications culture.