

The Shaping of Communication Practices

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Abstract

Based on recent empirical research at Sussex University in the UK this paper examines factors shaping communication practices in households. It considers:

1. how communication practices involve more than the acquisition and usage of telecoms technologies.
2. how the emergence of new practices reflects changes in on-going developments in the telecommunications environment, changes in the wider social context and the dynamics of individual households over time
3. what types of changes in the telecommunications environment might be important
4. what types of changes in broader historical and social developments might be worth attention
5. what types of changes in household dynamics might affect communication practices.
6. the influence of past experiences on contemporary consumption and receptivity to new communication possibilities.

Framework

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a six years research project was conducted in the UK on the consumption of domestic information and communication technologies (ICTs) These ICTs included telecoms products and services along with those based around mass media and the computer. The work was initiated by

Professor Roger Silverstone at Brunel University, where a team developed a general theoretical framework and carried out initial empirical research (Morley and Silverstone, 1990; Silverstone, 1991; Silverstone et al, 1992). The last three years of that research were conducted at Sussex University. This latter phase entailed empirical case studies of teleworkers, lone parents and the young elderly, each of whom were seen as strategic for developing different facets of our framework (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995 and 1996). Apart from the individual reports on each social grouping, examples from all three have been used to exploring themes such as issues around the phone (Haddon, 1993), the longer term careers of ICTs after they have been acquired (Haddon and Silverstone, 1994), how household composition and non-work commitments outside the home affected ICT use (Haddon, 1995), and how access to ICTs relate to debates about new 'haves' and 'have-nots' (Silverstone, 1996).

These studies posed questions about lifestyle, household and individual values and orientations and the way people organise their lives. How do ICTs fit in, or how are they made to fit in, with all of these? On the one hand, ICTs come pre-formed with meanings through such processes as advertising, design and all the media discourses surrounding them. But then households and individuals invest them with their own significance through a process of 'domestication' (Silverstone et al, 1992). This includes the effort involved before acquisition in imagining how they might find a place in the home and a role in people's lives, the household

discussions about the decision to acquire them and the process afterwards of locating these ICTs in domestic time and space

Clearly this framework implies that there is a good deal to the process of consuming these technologies - far more than just buying and using them. Technologies and the services they deliver are also symbolic. Their presence is the subject of negotiation amongst household members, the ICTs have to be located and at times relocated in the home, while access to them is regulated and sometimes contested. Their presence can raise issues or create problems according to the domestic politics of the household, especially the politics of gender and age. While standard quantitative measures of diffusion, possession, patterns of use, etc. can be useful they do not tell us so much about the phenomenological experience of ICTs, about their meaning, about their role in the home and about their significance. They do not tell us about pleasures derived from consuming ICTs nor about the anxieties or conflicts which they create. And they do not show us how people are constantly trying to maintain control of these technologies. It is all these dimensions of consumption that are the concerns of our research.

Changing telecommunications possibilities and issues

What telecommunications options are available is clearly one factor that can have a bearing on communications practices. Here we might think not just about some of the potential interactive services or new facilities in the pipeline but also about those innovations which have been available for a few years but are now starting to be taken up as a mass market product. Examples in the UK would be mobile telephony or Internet access. One first observation is that, apart from the fact that these innovations themselves entail new forms of consumption, their arrival raises new issues around the already familiar technology of the basic phone. For example, our research indicates that in many households

there are already concerns or dilemmas, as well as complaints, about the cost of telephony or about some members blocking the line with their outgoing calls or about the disruptiveness of incoming calls. As more and more can be achieved through the telecoms link into the home this potentially adds to existing concerns about overuse of this medium¹.

A second observation is that in addition to the latest high profile telecoms options we should not forget how more mundane innovations can have consequences for communications. These can sometimes touch upon people's lives in a more meaningful way than the more newsworthy developments. For example, some of those in our young elderly study discussed the consequences of being allowed to buy phone extensions from the 1980s at a time when cheaper handsets were also becoming more readily available. For those recently retired, who at that stage in their life were taking on the role of caring for their own elderly parents, the new extension phone in the bedroom allowed them to be more instantly contactable in case their parents had an emergency. Some of our elderly participants were also aware of their own health problems, so extensions near at hand provided some reassurance in case they got into difficulties. And both the elderly and lone parents mentioned a greater sense of security from having more phone handsets nearby because they felt vulnerable - e.g. to intruders.

This same example also reminds us that it may not be the entry of totally new innovations which makes a difference but rather the multiplication of already familiar technologies: in this case telephone handsets. Having extra handsets in private spaces such as bedrooms enabled more privacy for individuals within the home. However, this has also led to conflicts of interest. For instance, extensions helped some teenage children more easily to

¹ In some households the arrival of the fax machine has also created additional problems of blocking the phone line, prompting people to subscribe to a second telephone line in some cases. It remains to be seen whether Internet use will push this process further.

evade the surveillance of parents. On the other hand these parents often not only wanted to know who their children were speaking to on the phone but also, being conscious of phone bills, preferred such phoning to take place in locations where its use could be monitored. As a result, in some households there were attempts to deny children the use of the extension².

The next factor to consider is the range of innovations which have emerged over the years which have had a bearing on what we can use the phone for. For instance some of the young elderly we interviewed remembered when it first became possible to order by credit card over the phone and how their subsequent usage of the phone increased as they got into the habit of buying various goods and services in this was. There has been an increase in access to technical helplines, to social support lines (e.g. the Samaritans), and to chatlines. For some of the lone parents we studied who were undergoing the trauma of separation and social isolation, the availability of such support and chatlines had proved to be highly significant for them. At the same time and in other households the fear of teenagers running up huge bills on chatlines, or indeed accessing sexlines, led to some anxiety and conflicts. Finally there are innovations such as the radio phone-in and the promotion by TV companies of competitions where the audience is invited to phone in with answers - at premium phone prices. This latter development also required new forms of negotiation, with some parents limiting how much their children could take part in such competitions because of implications for the phone bill. Clearly, the increasing availability of all of these options, making the role of the phone more and more complex, has caused new types of interaction and regulation within households.

Finally, we can consider not only what new facilities and options have become available but also how public representations of technologies and services have changed, attempting to give them different meanings for

consumers. Looking at the example of marketing policies various national telecoms companies, including BT in the UK, shifted their promotional policies at different points in time to emphasis the social uses of the phone. In the UK we have witnessed (successful) advertising campaigns to change the identity of the mobile phone from that of a Yuppie/business tool to that of a mass market commodity which is of use to everyone. Both initiatives aimed to change the identity of these telecoms technologies.

Changing social contexts

Although households and individuals make choices they do so in a social context which shapes what those options and decisions mean. The second dynamic that can affect communication practices is that of the changing social and cultural circumstances in which households are located. When exploring such change we might consider social trends relating to demography, employment, migration etc. which are relatively easy to quantify³ and which are routinely measured by official statistics. But in addition experience is socially constructed and subject to historical change. For example, to be a teleworker in the 1990s was not identical to being one in the 1970s, say, because of factors like increased media visibility, more awareness of the concept, experiments by various agencies etc. The conditions experienced by lone parents also had their historical specificities. Here we will demonstrate this point in more detail through the young elderly study.

In the UK the whole experience of retiring has been changing in recent years with an increase in early retirement and leaving the workforce through redundancy, decreased chances of retaining or finding new work after official retirement age and the growth of occupational pension schemes which have reduced the number of poor young elderly. In these circumstances, and with some encouragement from institutions like the University for the

² The cordless phone sometimes raised similar issues.

³ Although the accuracy of quantification may come into question at times.

Third Age, some young elderly have sought to replace work by taking a more active role in education and in their own self-development. Others sought to stay active by taking on more organising roles within voluntary groups, sports groups etc. which provided them with a constructive and social involvement structuring their day-to-day life, keeping them mentally alert and adding purpose to life. Meanwhile the wealth and better health of many young elderly (compared to previous generations of those who had retired) encouraged a number to pursue their leisure interests, taking several holidays and breaks in the year. All such activities in turn shaped communications practices, such as using the domestic phone to organise or to find out information.

When considering the various forms of change in social context which might have ramifications for communications practices it can be useful to consider changes which affect our relations to space and time. This is well exemplified through changes in mobility, which Raymond Williams has already noted as being a key factor which first generated public interest in a range of earlier innovations (Williams, 1974). In various senses, more and more people operate over larger area both over the course of their life and on a daily basis. There is more geographical mobility in the sense of changing the location of the home base (which was certainly reflected in the experience of our recently retired participants) as well as more day-to-day movement over wider areas. Such longer term trends in mobility in everyday life have implications for how we use telephony, both mobile and fixed, to maintain links with dispersed family and networks of friends⁴ and for organising the logistics and co-ordination of social meetings.

For example, German research discussing the changing experience of childhood traces the decline of street culture, where interaction was to some extent spontaneous with those peers

who happened to live nearby (Büchner, 1970). Increasingly more free time is spent at a distance from the home both in after-school institutions (e.g. sports, clubs) and also with friends who live outside the vicinity. Maintaining such social circles requires more co-ordination and planning, and children have become more dependent on being transported by adults. In this context that research demonstrates how the phone becomes more and more essential not only to arrange meetings, which can be partly done at school, but also to confirm them after negotiations with adults.

The other dimension of changing social contexts which can have implications for communication practices are those which somehow affect the boundaries of the public and private⁵. The study of teleworkers provided a vivid example of the consequences of blurring the boundaries of the private home and the public world of work. For example, telework often introduced new issues concerning contactability for work purposes. While many teleworkers allowed colleagues and clients to contact them at home about work, this produced the dilemma of how to avoid such calls disrupting family life. Some felt they were almost 'on-call' 24-hours a day. The domestic phone was now a work phone whose intrusiveness had to be controlled either by re-negotiating the circumstances under which calls could be made, teaching other household members how to handle phone communications or acquiring new technologies and services (the answerphone, fax, call-barring etc.) to regain control over this technology.

One other specific problem relating to this issue of controlling the boundaries between home and work concerned impression management. Teleworkers were often conscious of the need to present themselves as competent, 'professional' and working in

⁴ A recent example of this within universities is for foreign students to use E-mail to keep in regular, sometimes daily, contact with family and friends at home.

⁵ However, it is worth noting that the terms 'public' and 'private' can take on different meanings - e.g. creating private spaces for using mobile telephones in public areas (Haddon, 1996).

convivial conditions in order to convince employers and clients that home life was not a distraction from work. Indeed, some even concealed the fact that they were teleworkers, fearing that potential clients would doubt their ability to shut out domestic life and manage the tasks at hand. The phone became much more of a device for managing such that teleworkers knew who was calling and impressions: it became a "work phone" specifically in the sense of being used to portray the home as a workplace. Sometimes that teleworkers knew who was calling, and this led teleworkers to install separate phone lines, not only to avoid blocking the work phoneline with social calls, but also so that teleworkers knew who was calling and hence how to present themselves. The

became more essential for emergencies or for critical moments, such as when the children were ill. The phone also became a social lifeline, both because of the need felt by many to talk through the aftermath of family dissolution and because of the isolation which lone parents often felt through being trapped in the home in the evenings because they had to stay in with the children.

The legacy of past experience

If the focus so far has been on the dynamics involved in the shaping of communication practices one final consideration is to what extent our relations with telecoms are shaped by past experiences. Once again, such legacies would include the three dimensions discussed above: the technological context in which people grow up and live out their life, the wider social context and the particular past experiences of individuals and households.

It is commonplace to hear comments about how each younger generation has a different experience through growing up with new technologies. But it may be equally useful to look beyond childhood in order to consider how different cohorts of people who are born, grow up and live their adult lives at certain historical periods encounter technologies and services at different points in their life course. In other words, we have to ask not only about the technologies which people encounter in their youth but also about the ones they meet when they reach early adulthood, when they form partnerships and perhaps families, when they reach middle age, when they retire and when they enter into in the latter end of their lives. The demands and circumstances of each of these life stages can have a bearing on what these technologies can mean to them.

For example, in the case of the current cohort of young elderly we found that for many familiarity with the basic phone had often emerged first through work as this technology became an increasingly common tool in many jobs, especially the expanding white collar ones after the war. The majority of our interviewees were both familiar and at ease

with the phone and they often compared this with the unease of their own parents for whom the technology had arrived later in life. In contrast to the phone, this cohort was not on the whole a computer-oriented generation. Many of those now nearer to being 75 years old had not lived through office automation during their working lives. Others had actively tried to avoid computers: being very near retirement age they had and had not been enthusiastic about taking on new ways of working and learning computer skills at this stage. While there were some elderly computer adopters who had been used to the technology at work, for most the computer was beyond their horizons. This was not only because it would be difficult to master but because these elderly people could not envisage how they would fit the technology their lives and routines⁶.

The social context in which different cohorts had grown up and passed through during their life course helped to shape their habits and routines, their values and tastes and their very perception of what that technology can offer. Returning to the young elderly, many of this cohort were from working class backgrounds and had undergone upward social mobility in their own lifetime as middle-class occupations expanded. Hence, it was common to have lived as a child in somewhat austere conditions from the pre-war era into the early post-war years. Although they enjoyed more affluence from the 1950s, in certain respects they retained non-consumerist values. Those in our research would often talk about knowing the value of money. They were careful spenders, interested on getting a good deal. They often resisted rushing to buy the latest version of a commodity, and had always been more inclined to replace items when they were sufficiently worn out. Hence, coping with fixed and somewhat reduced income was not necessarily too much of a hardship for this cohort: they had managed before and they knew that they just had to be careful. All this

⁶ This would be a relevant consideration for those new on-line telecom services which are accessed through computer terminals based in the home.

meant a certain conservatism as regards acquiring newer ICTs, including telecoms ones or additional facilities. On the whole they were not impulse buyers, and acquisitions had to be justified. They had to have a perceived usefulness - like the phone extensions described earlier. Hence in interviews this age group argued in terms of not 'needing' any more equipment, facilities or services rather than not desiring them. They already had all the ICTs which they had got used to and would often point out that they had been without all these various new facilities on offer for all their life so far and had managed. While some were more adventurous, most clearly did not want to try too much experimenting at this stage.

Finally there are the particular individual or household experience which shape competencies, attitudes and orientations and which once again reflect to lesser and greater degrees wider social trends. For example, some of our lone parents will probably retain an enduring appreciation of social isolation and stress (and the potential role for telecoms) even when their circumstances improve. For some the past experience of technology (e.g. technologies breaking down) could affect their faith in new innovations. But perhaps some of the clearest examples relate to the individual and shared household interests developed in their earlier years. For instance, participation in the war or taking holidays abroad affected tastes for and appreciation of media programmes concerning history and travel. Although not a telecommunications practice per se, such considerations might well be relevant in the future given the possibility that telecoms operators will either deliver mass media in various forms or other audio-visual material (e.g. video on demand).

Conclusions

Reviewing the aims of this paper:

1. The first section indicated the framework we have adopted for thinking about communication practices in terms beyond acquisition and usage

2. As regards the changing role of telecoms in the home the three influences considered were the dynamics of the telecom related innovation, changes in the wider social context and changes in the experience of individuals and households.
3. Socio- technical change included not just new product innovation but the effects of such innovation on the already familiar technology of the phone, more mundane innovation and the multiplication of technologies in the home, new users for the phone and new public representations of telecoms.
4. The changes in the social context would include not just those more easily measurable social trends but changes in the social construction of experience. Particular dimensions relevant to understanding telecoms were those relating to changes in our experience of time and space and of the boundaries between the public and private.
5. Household dynamics and their repercussions for communication practices were illustrated by the examples of changes in work and in household composition.
6. All three forms of change could also be considered when examining the ways in which past experiences can also have a bearing upon contemporary communication practices.

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