Issues and opinions

Same old story: On non-use and resistance to the telephone and social media

Robin Rymarczuk

University of Groningen, Nieuweweg 20-1, 9711 TE Groningen, Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The growing resistance to social media is not a unique story. The telephone, which today is embraced almost completely, was a matter of concern for many. Most people that resisted the phone had privacy concerns and seemed to have intuited the breakdown between distinct spaces like established private space and public space as a threat to psychological integrity. By zooming in on the particular concerns people had at the dawn of the telephone's birth and its early development new light can be shed on the contemporary discussion surrounding social media today.

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1. Introduction

It seems that nowadays everyone's *tweeting*, and everyone owns a Facebook profile. Social media is seeping into every crack of society. Perhaps this is not surprising. In fact, isn't this what you'd except from a social animal that is infatuated with communication and has the technological capability to pursue its ideas? Social media platforms are our latest attempts to expand communication and perfect relationships. Marshall Mcluhan called these social technologies *mediums*, the "extensions of man" ([29]; p. 32). The wish to extend our reach and the desire to *connect* are, however, not shared by everyone. Even though social media platforms play an increasingly significant role in our everyday lives and older communication technologies are deeply rooted in our society, some individuals choose not to participate in this social technological endeavour.

The growing resistance to social media is not a unique story. In fact, it isn't the first communication technology that people had issues with. The telephone, which today is embraced almost completely, was a matter of concern for many. From the very start the telephone met significant disinterest and resistance. "Even after the telephone had been widely discussed and its principle had begun to be understood", says Aranson ([4]; p. 16), "for many the telephone—as remarkable as the idea seemed—had no obvious use". Still in the shadow of the telegraph, the device that amazed

the world at the time, the telephone was slow to pick up. Surprisingly, in its earliest forms, the telephone found a niche as a transmitter of music, drama and news. That is, it started out as a broadcasting system, not a two-way communication device. Only later, through slow technical advances and societal demand, the idea of the 'talking' phone appeared, changing the very notion of its function. However, the new talking phone exposed people to new issues. Citizens were faced with a new technology's intrusion into the personal space of the home, leading to a massive inflation of social availability, and a sense of never being alone. The history of telephone usage is the story of a long tug-of-war between commerce and citizens adopting the telephone, inventing how to use it, and shaping its function within society.

The tug-of-war that fashioned the telephone within society seems only to be at its beginning regarding social media platforms. Although the realm of social media will most likely keep expanding into all aspects of modern life, there are individuals challenging this digital imperative [42]. One of their major concerns is that the lines between what's personal, private, public, and professional are getting blurry. Social media seem to, on the one hand, give rise to the same privacy and boundary concerns that people had regarding the telephone and on the other hand turn them into features incorporated into the platforms. To today's non-user though, these concerns are as real now as they were then.

Although a minority, these individuals are found throughout the world. Who are these people? And why do they resist a phenomenon so very dear to most others? It is becoming clear that, contrary to early explanations of consumer behavior, mere familiarity and

E-mail address: rymarczuk.robin@gmail.com.

access to (social) technology does not guarantee usage [42]. As large parts of society employ these technologies, it is important to understand the people who exclude themselves from these social technological worlds, and gain insight into the elusive 'non-user'. The spectrum of resistance is broad. It includes active organized resistance but also rejection as a casual, sometimes indifferent 'waving away' of the wish to integrate technology into our lives. I shall explore 'resistance' and 'rejection' to communication technology through the motives and explanations of the non-user. This thesis will study the development of two mass-communication technologies and the resistance that they met by the 'non-user', starting with the invention of the telephone and ending with the development of social-media platforms.

The main focus of this article will be the non-use of the telephone. It focuses on the people that feel discomforted and become discouraged to participate, specifically how they shape motives for resistance, rejection and non-use. The telephone-line offers a sense of shelter and sanctuary to some, yet seem a prison to others. By zooming in on the particular concerns people had at the dawn of the telephone's birth and its early development new light can be shed on the contemporary discussion surrounding social media.

2. Resistance to the telephone

"When people can order everything they want from the stores without leaving home and chat comfortably with each other by vocal telegraph over some bit of gossip, every person will desire to put money in our pockets by having telephones".

Alexander Graham Bell (1877)

No one foresaw the transformative power that the telephone would become at the dawn of its invention in the 1870's, even when it was right before everyone's eyes. The majority was confused and amazed, but didn't care for it. "The future of the telephone", says [4]; p. 16), "was not evident from the mere fact of its invention". The papers weren't raving about the telephone, people weren't camped outside stores to be the first to possess this new machine of magic—no hysteria, no fuss. The story of the telephone isn't as spectacular and sweeping as one might think it was, certainly not in its early years. Yet, the nature of its evolution and impact within society at the turn of the 19th century was probably only paralleled by the automobile.

On March 7, 1876, a patent[1] entailing "the method of, and apparatus for, transmitting vocal or other sounds telegraphically", was issued to Alexander Graham Bell. It took time, however, for the general public to get to know and appreciate the telephone. The corporate world had no interest either. Aronson notes in *Bell's Electrical Toy* [4] that several top figures in the world of communication, including the Western Union Telegraph Company, disregarded the invention, refusing to buy the patent. Moreover, the public in the early years of telephony was not yet sure of the phone's function. "To convince Americans that they needed the telephone", says Aronson, "they first had to be taught *how* to use the telephone and what to use it for" [4]; p. 26). The invention and development of a new means of communication can't be explained, it seems, by intrinsic functionality, certainly not primarily. Function and use have to be explored and discovered, then constructed and organized. "In fact", says Grosvenor [19]; p. 18, "by 1880—when one might expect the device to have been growing increasingly

popular—the novelty of a telephone call was wearing off". Telephone calls might have saved a lot of time, but they were also expensive, intrusive, and often very unreliable. Many people, content with the telegraph, even insisted that the telephone was entirely unnecessary [19]. When the Great Depression came, people had to choose between their luxuries and decide what was really important, and Americans liked their cars better than their phones. Consequently, between 1930 and 1933, over 2 million Americans cancelled their telephone subscriptions [38].

In the beginning American Bell marketed telephones almost exclusively to businessmen and the urban elite, ignoring housewives, farmers, and anyone who lived in a small town. The idea of an affordable household communication service, available to all, did not come up. In many other countries the exclusion of groups of people from telephone use persisted until the end of Second World War. In Italy, white telephone films, or *Telefoni Bianchi* emerged. These films were melodramas and comedies about the upper class made in Italy in the 1930s and 1940s, often featuring an elite setting. The films acquired their name from the many white telephones displayed in the scenes. The white phone turned into a symbol of social status, to be differentiated from the black telephones, as the non-ordinary color could only be bought by people with significant amounts of money. Many Italians resisted this game altogether, choosing not to acquire a telephone at all [30].

In Italy, like in the rest of Europe, the development of telephone-use came much slower than in the United States. In France the people were always suspicious of government and technology. "In the late 1700s", Guthrie reminds us ([20]; p. 1), "Claude Chappe introduced the first optical telegraph system across France. Peasants, believing that the device was a spy mechanism destroyed several stations".

In France the telephone did not distinguish the rich from the poor like in Italy. Rather, the telephone reignited the discussion about the power distance between government and the people, and obviously the government was never particularly fond of that. "Communication", says Attali ([6]; p. 98), "as understood by the French centralized state, was primarily a lecture which the State, with professorial wisdom, delivered to society". Communication instruments were analogous to political instruments and were kept out of the hands of the people. Nevertheless, the first public function the telephone acquired, although modest, was what Attali termed "replacing the summoning bells" ([6]; p. 104)— in other words; a device with which to call servants upstairs. For many years it remained that way. Lawmakers kept calling the telephone a nuisance, and the police disliked the telephone caller's anonymity. In sum, the function of the telephone in France was the ability to quickly issue orders and for the government to broadcast public service announcements [6].

In America, the telephone kept gaining popularity. Finally it sparked the interest of businessmen, because it enabled them to work faster and more efficiently and be more personally involved at greater distances compared to indirect means of communication like letters and telegraphs [15]. New roles and expectations started to evolve. The first people that worked as operators of the telephone adopted a news-reporting role aside from their appointed tasks, and informed whoever 'called in' as to what was happening locally. In 1980, individuals in Canada could "satisfy their curiosity as well as their thirsts by monitoring a sensational murder trial in the pub by phone" ([28]; p. 209). It was not uncommon to 'call-in' to so called 'theatre lines' in the early years of telephone use. For a small fee, people could merge the space of theatre, of leisure, with that of the private home. "Not only instantaneous knowledge could be shared ubiquitously", says Briggs in The Pleasure Telephone [7], "but instantaneous entertainment programs as well". Although in

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[1] United States Patent No. 174,465 (1876).