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All dressed up with nowhere to call: Fashion victims in the new look Telecom industry

E. Maria Lohan

Introduction

The Telecom industry in Ireland is currently in training to tone itself up in preparation for both convergence and competition in the new look telecommunications industry. Only those companies who have completed extensive tummy tucks on staffing and removed the weight of subsidized charging may enter this new telecommunications club. Not only this, but you must of course have the right personality to attract partners with dowries of infrastructure. An important characteristic is a willingness to invest in anything electronic – but property will do too. And what should the fashion conscious Telecom player be sporting this season? Well POTS or Plain Old Telephone Services are definitely passé whilst PANs or Picture and Network Services will take you anywhere you want to go.

The slow and incremental development of the Telecom industry in Ireland, as in other modern Western countries, stands in contrast to the current explosion of new communication technologies, expansions in broad band capabilities and the rush to overhaul the industry to find its feet in the technology. All of this accentuates the impression that the Telecom industry is currently fashion crazed. The recent and upcoming price-restructuring in Ireland, the search for a new business partner to expand the industry way beyond the basic telephone (interactive television, smart homes and video telephony), the push for new POTS plus services (such as voice mail and call waiting) into our homes and the heavy investment in ISDN and fibre optic cabling to facilitate increased volume of calls and particularly the growth of tele-call centres in Ireland, are all symptoms of the new fashioned Telecom industry in Ireland.

The intention in this paper¹ is to take a more long term view of change in the Telecom industry and to ask what has been the impact of these new changes on the domestic telephone users? What sort of resistance might it expect and how will this resistance be translated into a communications culture? In particular, my focus will be on women, both in terms of how the industry affects women's lives and how women effect the development of the industry.

The conclusion is open-ended. It is not necessarily women who are the fashion victims in this industry since more recent socio-historical accounts explore ways in which the diffusion of technology does not occur in a linear direction but rather involves more complex inter-relationships between the producers and the consumers of the technology (Maddox, 1977; Martin, 1991; Fischer, 1986).

It suggests that promoters of a technology do not necessarily know its final uses; that they seek problems or 'needs' for which their technology is the answer (cf. the home computer business), *but that consumers may ultimately determine those uses for the promoters.* And the story suggests that in promoting a technology, vendors are constrained not only by its technical and economic attributes but also by an interpretation of *its uses shaped by it and their own histories*, a cultural constraint that can be enduring and powerful (Fischer, 1988: 116).

1. I am grateful to the members of the Department of Communications, Dublin Institute of Technology, for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

The sources for this research will be: first, the Anglo-American social histories of the telephone which explore women's participation in and influence on the telephone system as we know it. Such studies outline the potential, at various stages, of alternative kinds of systems, removing on the one hand a sense of neutral or value-free technology and, on the other hand, the notion of technological determinism (Martin, 1991; Fischer, 1991; Maddox, 1977; Rakow 1988, 1992 ; Moyal 1989 and Flynn, 1994). The second source for this paper is drawn from my own empirical research on women and the domestic telephone in Ireland and offers a current view of change and resistance to the structuring of domestic telephony in Ireland². This research took place six months after the September 1993 price-restructuring³ when calling patterns had re-stabilized (TUAG, 1995).

Women's early involvement in and influence on the Telecom industry

The most notorious early involvement by women in the telephone industry was as operators. The Telecom industry sought employees at a time when women were moving into white collar employment and vacancies emerged both on the public switchboard and in private companies where no special pre-training was required (Maddox, 1977). The British Post Office, in common with other post office offices at the time, actively sought women as employees because according to them:

the work of successful telephone operating demanded just that particular dexterity, patience and forbearance possessed by the average woman in a degree superior to that of the opposite sex (Maddox, 1977:266).

Curiously omitted from the list of female qualities for the industry, however, was that female labour was cheap, working to a quarter of that which men were paid, and that women were indifferent to, or excluded from, trade unions. Their status was equivalent to that of child labour, and indeed their employment replaced the earlier but 'disruptive' employment of young boys (Maddox, 1977).

Furthermore, this industry was feminized to smoothen the introduction of technology into the community. According to Rakow, low wages did not explain the trans-cultural practice of employing young attractive and single women. Rather, it was to give a feminine face to this new technology: 'the voice with the smile' (Rakow, 1988). Women, regarded as the moral guardians of society, were entrusted with conveying this new technology within and to the community. The industry fostered the 'cultural myth of the operator embodying new and old values and mediating new social relations' (Rakow, 1988: 214).

Careful attention was also given to minimizing the disruption to conventional constructs of femininity in this new form of employment and potential power for women.

These young women were to be both innocent and efficient, desirable yet unattainable, business-like but adept at soothing the harried and demanding captains of industry of the public sphere as well as the stereotypically portrayed petty and demanding matron of the private sphere (Rakow, 1988: 214).

It was regarded as acceptable employment since women were protected from the public eye, yet the industry imposed strict public standards for women including conservative code of dress, and lessons in deportment and demeanour were constituents of the occupation. Evidently, a conservative yet stylish dress code continued as part of the job requirement into the 1960s American telephone company; it was essential to a woman's appearance on entering and leaving the telephone company, to protect the image of femininity and the company simultaneously.⁴

2. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the women who participated by interview or questionnaire, and to the Western Women's Link, of which I am a member, for access to other groups within the organization. The research was carried out between April and June 1994; it involved a detailed questionnaire followed by interview. Some of the interviews were group interviews within the women's group meetings; others were individual interviews which took place primarily in the interviewee's home. Names of interviewees have been replaced with fictional names. It is my hope that future Telecom policies will more adequately reflect the needs of women.

3. Telecom Eireann restructured their telephone charges from un-metered to metered local calls on 15 January 1994. This was substantially revised on 1 September 1993. Local calls now cost 11.17p for 3 minutes daytime (8am-6pm) and 11.17p for 15 minutes evening time excluding VAT. VAT @21% was passed onto the consumer from 1 April 1994. At the same time, the local calling area was enlarged outside of Dublin and the cost of national and international calls were reduced. Weekend national calls were reduced to the local economy rate (11.17p for 15 minutes excluding VAT). It is perhaps the cheap weekend calls and expensive day-time calls which carry the largest changes.

4. I am grateful to Dolores Ahern for bringing to my attention the fact that the practice of 'feminine fashion' as a dress code for operators continued into the 1960s in American telephone companies.

Finally of course, women were attractive employees in this industry since they were easily disposed of as automated switching began to displace the need for the large number of operators. Based on life histories of operators, Martin reports that:

as operators became increasingly subjected to the technology, their relations with subscribers became increasingly impersonal so that their role shifted from one of 'community worker' who provided a range of emergency and other services to that of remote 'connecting voice' (Martin, 1991:12).

The continuous expansion of telephony within private industries, though, created a demand for telephonists and receptionists an occupation which was likewise quickly feminized. As telephone operators had proved, handling telephones was something women were good at and so in turn, the secretary's voice became established as a woman's voice. The telephone was somehow seen as the natural extension of women. According to the voices of industry, 'Few devices were so well matched to the needs and styles of women' (Rakow, 1988: 215). More importantly however, Rakow has pointed out that women's voices were (and arguably continue to be) commoditized to distinguish hierarchies amongst men, between men and women, and between spaces: board room and ante-room (Rakow, 1988: 215).

Outside employment in the telephone company itself, women were directed by the telephone industry through their husbands in the home. Men were encouraged to raise the efficiency of their homes by encouraging their wives to use the telephone. The telephone, introduced initially as an intercom system by which the middle classes could summons their servants, may ironically have contributed to the decline of such employment and consequently more work for women in their homes, though initially for the middle classes.

This work was anticipated and encouraged from the outset of the telephone. An 1878 advertising circular in New Haven Connecticut advised men, 'Your wife may order your dinner, your hack, your family physician etc. all by telephone without leaving the house or trusting servants or messengers to do it' (Fischer, 1991, 5-6).

Cowan (1983) has noted that the introduction of other technologies into the home, such as the vacuum cleaner and the washing machine, had a similar effect in that though they were introduced as 'labour-saving' devices; the consequent rise in standards of hygiene and spread of middle-class standards amounted to greater pressures on the standards of household maintenance. What was interesting about these prescriptions for women's usage of the telephone was that they were addressed to women through men. He became the 'conscience of the household' (Martin, 1991) but also he became the 'controller of this technology, the cultural legacy of which, I would argue has scarcely dissipated to this day' (Lohan, 1995). In other senses, the telephone did not radically alter women's lives but merely mapped itself onto their position within families. Yet, women's usage of the telephone did radically alter the development of the telephone system.

Women change the telephone industry

Technological processes developed by men for men are nearly always interpreted by women in ways other than those intended by men (Benston, 1988:2).

The telephone was introduced in the modernist rationale of increasing efficiency by saving on time and distance costs for business and errands. Yet, the telephone is perhaps a classic example of a technology which was defined as having certain functions but within which women created their own space albeit set within constraints. Women

began to use the telephone to chat and talk to their friends and relatives. It was not that the sociable potential of the phone was not discovered.

Bell himself forecast social chit-chats using his invention. He predicted that eventually Mrs Smith would spend an hour on the telephone with Mrs Brown "very enjoyably... cutting up Mrs Robinson" (Fischer, 1991:103).

However, both women and sociability being one and the same were actively *discouraged* on the telephone. This was mainly for two reasons: First, women's usage of the telephone as an instrument of sociability threatened the seriousness of the technology. It hijacked a technology whose natural roots were seen in telegraphy built upon the need for urgent and 'important' information only and economy of time and space. 'For men who wanted control of all communication conducted through the technology that belonged to them, women did not meet for important reasons but merely to gossip' (Martin, 1991:164). Second, sociability by women on the telephone needed to be controlled as it threatened not only the seriousness of the technology but the moral order of society.

Use of the telephone, like that of the bicycle was seen as a moral issue necessitating a specific set of rules (both technologies became popular with women in the 1890s). The bicycle was considered a curse because like the telephone it provided women with 'evil associations' and opportunities for contacts with strangers without the presence of a chaperone. The use of both technologies by Victorian women then had to be controlled by correct etiquette elaborated by men (Martin, 1991:151).

Codes of etiquette were voiced through the phone manuals, in etiquette books and newspapers of the day. They were most stern in relation to cross-sex telephony:

It is not good for a woman to call up a man either at home or in his office. It is sure to be an interruption; it is quite likely to be embarrassing and above all this is the fact that a tactful girl will avoid all appearance of pursuing a man of her acquaintance (Telephony, 1907 in Rakow, 1988: 221).

The problem was seen to lie in the medium itself – as a direct and intimate means of communication. Women's 'natural affinity' to the telephone was resulting, it was thought, in increased female aggressiveness and change in sex roles:

The telephone gives the flapper courage – and more it permits a girl to lie in her bed and to talk with a man lying in his bed; it permits her half-clothed, to talk a moment after its ring had made him hop nude out of his bath tub. Its delicate suggestiveness is not lost in these instances. The most modest girls in America, the girl who blushes even at a man's allusion to his chilblains, once she gets her nose in a telephone mouth piece acquires a sudden and surprising self-assurance and wheeze (Bell Canada Archives, 1922 in Martin, 1991:164).

Very slowly the telephone industry began to soften its resistance to sociability and women's usage of the telephone. It recognized that one of the key call stimulants to long-distance communication was not in fact business but rather dispersed family networks and thus began, 'the Reach out and Touch' campaign in 1920s America (Fischer, 1991). In Britain and Ireland the telephone was even more strictly preserved as a business tool only. Tariffs remained very high and unlike the American case, a lower rate was not offered to domestic subscribers. Initially, the telephone industry here was privately owned and regarded as unsuitable for state investment since the state was unsure of its potential. Even after nationalization in 1911, and transfer to the new Irish government

in 1922, there was a reluctance by the government to invest in what was seen as a commercial business available only to about two per cent of the population. Flynn (1994) has pointed out that the sparse population density of Ireland meant the party line system which had helped to popularize the telephone in other countries was impossible here; in addition, the political culture of the day was more immersed in questions of nationalism than economic development.

Probably the first real catalyst to the usage and development of the telephone system was due to emergency needs and fuel shortages during the second world war. This provoked a government acknowledgment of the social need for a telephone and that profitability by the telephone company alone would not ensure an even and dispersed system (Flynn, 1994). This acknowledgment was articulated through the instigation of the 'Rural Call Box Campaign', designed to bring a call box to every post office in the country and completed during the mid-1950s. Though investment continued after the 1950s in the Telecom industry, the emphasis was on developing a resource for industry and business so that even supply to residential subscribers up to the mid-1970s was secondary to the needs of business until new technology made it possible to meet demand.

Women, men and domestic telephony

5. Seventy-five per cent of Irish households are connected; this is low compared to the EU average of eighty-five per cent.

Today as penetration rates of domestic telephony have grown substantially⁵, both sociability and women's usage of the domestic telephone is very acceptable. Women, in fact, are the domestic telephone company's best customers, making more and longer calls than men (Claisse, 1989, Schabedoth et al, 1989; Dordick and La Rose, 1992; Adler, 1993, Perin, 1994).

Arguably, then, domestic telephony has been feminized. Yet, my more recent research into women's usage of the telephone suggests that there remains enduring cultural barriers to women's usage of the telephone as a legacy of the negation and disapproval of women and sociability on the telephone as part of the telephone's earlier history. This is particularly so in regard to cross-sex telephony. In addition, as the telephone industry is currently being vigorously injected with capital investment to meet the needs of global industry it has erected two new impediments to domestic telephony by underestimating the importance of (and by penalizing) the local area network to the day-time telephone user.

To turn first to the enduring cultural barriers to cross-sex telephony, a clear reluctance by women to phone men who were not relatives in a sociable context was apparent. This was particularly so for the married women in my sample:

Not unless it was someone on a committee, or about a car. I can't think of any other man that I would ring up (Margaret, age 38, married mother, part-time nurse).

Amongst the younger single women involved in this research, there was considerably less reluctance to ring male friends. Yet there were alleged differences in the content of the conversation with male friends than with female friends. The conversations in general were likely to be less personal since personal concerns were likely to be reserved for face-to-face communication.

In general, current telephone culture studies seem to show that men tend to disassociate themselves from sociable uses of the telephone, synonymous with female chat. Men use the telephone more as a 'messaging system': organizing tasks, quick information transfer rather than as a 'communications system' where it is the metonymic quality of the conversation which is important rather than its content. (Lohan, 1995; Claisse, 1989; Schabedoth et al, 1989).

This made the telephone as a medium of romance sometimes difficult. Rachel, a young doctor living in Dublin, whose fiancé was in Galway exemplified this when she explained that their telephone calls would be the main point of conflict in their relationship and that which would need to be patched up at the weekend. She explained that firstly she would seem to feel the need to ring more often than he, just to discuss the day gone by and to seek reassurance. He, on the other hand, would only ring if he had a message or to confirm the arrangements for the weekend. The calls themselves then frequently came to cross-purposes:

Let's just say he's not very verbose which I in turn would interpret as being hostile (Rachel, age 27, doctor, urban area)

Similar cross-lines of messages or communication were identified within father-daughter telephony. Fathers did indeed sometimes initiate calls to daughters or simply rang the number (a little like sanctioning the call) asked how their daughter was, commented perhaps on the weather, and then passed it on to the mother who might anxiously be waiting by to get on with the real communication.

Certainly, I found with him, he'd be inclined to just say one or two things and then pass the phone to someone else. I think that's mainly for reasons of economy. He's aware of the phone bill more than anything else (Rachel, age 27, doctor, urban area).

Alternatively, calls were made by fathers to place one singular piece of information and then some add-on chat might build up around that.

My dad will always ring if he has something specific to ask. My mother will maybe ring me for a chat but my father will always ring me with something specific in mind (Geraldine, 25, married, secretary).

Effects on women and domestic telephony

The current re-structuring of the telephone industry in Ireland is, I believe, negative to both women and domestic telephony. First, it underestimates the importance of the local area network. Though the technical capabilities of the telephone provide a means of overcoming distance, the telephone is most likely to be used in conjunction with other mediums of communication, most particularly face to face (Claisse, 1989; Rakow, 1992) and the predominant use of the domestic telephone in Ireland is in the local area network (TUAG, 1995). This was confirmed in interviews I conducted with women who outlined that those with whom they were in regular contact lived in the local area; long distance or international calls were restricted to close family only.

The advantage of long-distance calls is hideous. They are rare calls. You think a lot before making such calls but local calls are more necessary and normal. If you're alone in the house during the day the phone helps you from going crazy (Hilda, married mother, housewife and local community activist, rural area).

I liked making local calls because it was an ordinary thing to do. It was a relaxing thing to do. You said what you needed to say. The general thing with the phone was that it was a friendly thing. You could pick up the phone and have a chat with it. That's changed now. There's stress involved in all of it. Even though it's cheaper now to make long distance calls, there is still stress involved because it is long-distance. Before the phone was a friendly thing (Veronica, approx. 35 years, married, unemployed, rural area).

Younger women (under 30 years) and older women (over 60 years) were more appreciative of the cheaper long-distance calls and weekend discounts. Some of the

more elderly women regarded the primary purpose of the telephone as being for the occasional long distant (inland or international) call to a close relative rather than a normal routine part of everyday life. Younger women's more dispersed active friendship networks meant they also appreciated the reduction in long-distance calls and cheap weekend rate though many of these younger women also emphasized that if there was not regular face-to-face contact with these friends, telephone contact would also likely diminish over time.

But sometimes I think there is no point. I'm not going to see them for a long time. It's when the phone combines with meetings that it is most fun (Ursula, age 25, student, rural area).

The second way in which Telecom Eireann has erected a barrier to sociability is by effectively banning day-time 'chat calls'. Formerly un-metered, the day-time caller is now timed at three minutes per unit. Within my research, I have found this to be a considerable barrier to sociability for all sorts of reasons but mainly because chat calls require more time to develop. The boundaries around social/chat calls are less defined: what is spoken about, when both parties have said what they wanted to say, and the uncertainty of when exactly the call should come to a close. In task-oriented calls, this is much easier to pin down (usually when task is organized plus some add-on sociability). The ambiguity in this 'ending process' within social/chat calls is apparent from the rather elaborate stories women told me, such as getting someone to ring the door bell (the phone frequently placed in the front hall) or a staged interruption from a child (which indeed rarely has to be staged) all to present a legitimate excuse to end the call. There now exists a restraint on indulging in day-time chat calls since the required longevity of the conversation and difficulty to close will inevitably lead to very high bills.

It was one of the most scandalous and cruel things that a government could allow to happen. It was one of the most important things for some of the most deprived people in this country: for the old and isolated. I used to ring up lots of people during the day, people who are on their own, or often on their own; people who have problems and let's face it when you have MS, you have problems. I just don't do it anymore. I'm scared to do it now. I'm afraid to do it because I know that they will just go on talking and then I'll feel guilty and I never do say I've got to get off it. They forget you know and so you just don't ring unless it is an emergency (Paula, disabled woman, married, approx. 70 years, rural area).

Moreover, there is the strong feeling of loss of 'value for money' now in day-time calls, since economic rationality would dictate making calls at the cheaper times: evenings and weekends.

As far as the industry is concerned '*it's good to talk*' – but only when they say so. It is not necessary to promote sociability during the day since business is already using the network adequately. Yet this is the very time when sociability is most necessary for the well being of many (already under-privileged) groups of people in our society: day-time home occupants such as the long-term ill and disabled, also those confined to the home for the care of the very young or the elderly. The poor and the long-term unemployed are frequently doubly hampered by lack of access to private transport and by invariably living in areas which are poorly provided with essential services such as hospitals, shops and leisure facilities.

Yet the above groups are frequently also the least researched in consumer surveys of services such as the telephone and it is frequently wrongly assumed that they are a homogeneous group. In addition, the current tariff system is clearly geared towards standardized work hours but at a time of intense flexibilization of the work force: part-time work, shift work, etc. This flexibilization is particularly true for traditional female employment sectors, for example the retail and cleaning industries; industries in which

women are also unlikely to have access to personal usage of a telephone in the work place.

Finally the telephone company's re-structuring reflects the assumption of a strict division between the private and the public; between work and leisure time and assumes that the household is one cohesive space. This is a gendered time frame, arguably a male time-frame, which does not correspond to the lives of most women. The evening time is rarely a leisure time for women and, as a result, women are now sacrificing some of their 'optional friendship relations'.

... and it's ridiculous to say that you can do it (phone) after six o'clock. That's when their families are home and you're cooking the tea. I voted Labour last year but I will never forgive Labour for not objecting to these charges (Paula, 60s, disabled, living with partner, rural area).

I'd rarely see them because I have children and they have children and we just wouldn't have time at night-time so I would have sat down during the day and had marathon conversations. Now we have just lost contact (Rosin, late 30s, urban area, employed part-time).

There are really two issues going on here: first, the evening time is frequently a household work-time for women, regardless of day-time employment; second, there exists a need for personal space for those in the home to be able to connect to external friends. Frequently the private and the family are mistakenly dissolved into one. In a critique, for example, of Turner's (gender-blind) concept of citizenship, Walby (1994: 383) points out:

The 'family' is not an 'individual' – it is composed of several people, who are not 'private' from each other. Women are not free from interaction with and dominance by men. The 'family' is not 'private' for women.

The cultural dominance of the marriage/family relationship set against the cultural unimportance of women's friendships and women's talk, most frequently categorized as gossip, chit-chat or small talk, means that male presence and family responsibilities are tangible barriers to female telephony. This trend is not exclusive to domestic telephony but wider cultural communication norms affecting face-to face communication too.

I'd question visiting nowadays, I don't think people are welcomed into houses anymore. One time it was part of our culture; it was geared around visiting. There are an awful lot of things going on in houses now. There is a lot of pressure in houses with kids doing exams. You don't want to be intruding. If people are out all day, you don't want to be going around in the evening because the men are there and you can't have a chat. It isn't as clear cut as it used to be (Margaret, 50s, semi-urban, married, housewife).

Conclusion

Who then are the fashion victims in this new-look telephone industry? A discussion in terms of short-term and long-term victims might be more discerning here. The short-term fashion victims, I would argue, rest with day-time household occupants, a disproportionate amount of whom are women and the poor. The other group of the industry's fashion victims are those whose networks are primarily locally-based, a disproportionate number of whom live in areas of high unemployment (TUAG, 1995). A further group of victims are all those who have no access to a private phone at all and have little chance of procuring one since the likelihood of the subsidization of basic telephony services is steadily declining as the industry runs after the glitzy cat-walk

6. Any aspiration to universal service is being passed from the telephone company to the Department of Social Welfare. No help is provided to install a phone which currently costs £120, one of the highest rates in Europe. In Australia, by contrast, a telephone for incoming calls only may be provided where necessary by the Government. In Ireland, pensioners living on their own may have their rental paid plus ten free units.

technology.⁶ No regulatory body exists in Ireland yet to oversee a fair and balanced structuring of the Telecom system, whilst a concept of universal service obligation (USO) is as vague and as illusory as UFOs.

Yet, in this paper, using socio-historical accounts of the telephone, I have also traced some of the more long-term trends of the development of communication cultures. I believe that the current domestic telephony policies are unsustainable since they run against the grain of established communication patterns, especially those of women. Current domestic telephony policy attempts to revert the domestic telephone again into a business tool only by underestimating the importance of day-time sociable calling and the importance of the local area network. Removing the sense of 'value for money' here effectively penalizes two of the building blocks of the 'friendly phone'. I suspect that once the domestic market is 'liberalized' there will be once again intense flexibilization of the domestic telephone pricing structure to re-facilitate the large numbers of would-be day-time domestic telephone users.

Yet the powers of consumerism which is aimed essentially at dividing the population into viable market segments run counter to the values of citizenship which is aimed essentially at promoting basic human rights and needs. It is those who fall between the lines of market segments or who are not size 10, 12 and 14 who will be the real fashion victims in the 1990s Telecom look.

The long-term victims of the new-look telephone industry then are likely to be low-income and low users of the domestic telephone and a government who will be confronted with increasing disparity between the *information rich* and the *information poor*: those who can and those who can not afford and or be equipped with the technologies which are increasingly becoming essential for social participation (preventing isolation, developing and maintaining networks) and social rights (access to health-care services, welfare, banking and government agencies). The new-look privatized telephone companies no longer regard the telephone as an important national resource but rather as an important commercial resource. In Ireland, already, the big users of the telephone are being granted further accommodations while the basic service is becoming increasingly expensive.

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