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Making the most of the communications repertoire – Choosing between the mobile and fixed line

Leslie Haddon and Jane Vincent

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Introduction

The spread of mobile telephony and the Internet has added to the variety of communications media available to people so that many now have to deal with a more complex communications repertoire. If we look at this repertoire holistically, different research questions present themselves compared to focusing on individual media of communication. For example, what are the continuities between the different elements of the repertoire? How do some of the ways in which we communicate draw upon older practices developed for other media or indeed draw upon other practices in daily life?

In this chapter we specifically address the question of how we manage this repertoire and how we make choices about which option to use in different circumstances. It focuses specifically on the choice between using the mobile phone for voice, for sending text messages and using the fixed phone. An earlier review of telecoms research charted the factors at work in such decisions, noting how choices were shaped by both various qualities of the media and social considerations¹. We now look at the way in which this is lived out. The chapter draws on a recent empirical study² that investigated peoples' communications strategies through a group of case studies. These illustrate and explore the processes shaping these choices and more generally shaping the way we manage that repertoire.

In particular, the case studies presented here underline different ways in which cost considerations can play an important role. The literature of youth and mobile phones has mentioned the appeal of the cheapness of texting, the enhanced ability to monitor expenditure that pre-paid cards offer and the negotiations between parents and children about paying for mobile bills³. While some of these issues will also be illustrated here, this study shows how the concern with telecoms costs also extends to adults and shapes their choices as well. It reveals the myriad calculations at a time when in many countries ever more complex and varied tariff options are appearing. The evidence shows how concern over telecoms costs may not be the only consideration shaping choices, but it can be a very important one

¹ L. Haddon, *Research Questions for the Evolving Communications Landscape*. Paper presented at the conference 'Front Stage – Back Stage: Mobile Communication and the Renegotiation of the Social Sphere', Grimstad, Norway, June 23-24 2003.

² J. Vincent and L. Haddon, *Informing Suppliers about User Behaviours to better prepare them for their 3G/UMTS Customers*, Report 34 for UMTS Forum, 2004.

³ R. Ling, *The Mobile Connection. The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*, San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2004.

The second part of the analysis relates individual decisions to the wider context of the household, reflecting the interests of the ‘domestication’ approach in the negotiations, and indeed power relations, that frame communication strategies⁴. Compared to the pre-mobile era, we explore how the mobile options, including the complexities of tariffs, can change some of that household interaction, giving rise to domestic tensions as well as new rules and practices.

Methodology

As part of a more wider-ranging study for the UMTS Forum, three sets of three generations of people filled in dairies for a day and were then interviewed about both their communications on that day and their use of telecoms more generally. In other words, we had three case studies in each of which one teenage child and the mother took part as did one grandparent living in a separate household. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on the stories of the teenage children and their parents.

Clearly, the numbers of case studies is small, but the detail they reveal offers some insights into how people currently manage their communications. Equally clearly, the participants in these studies share some similar circumstances⁵. We are talking about households at a similar point in their lives. We are only taking the perspective of mothers and one of the teenage children present (of both sexes). Two of the mothers worked part-time, one was a housewife, which means that they had more non-work time available than much of the population who are of a similar age.

Nevertheless, it is sometimes useful to go beyond talking in terms of generalities and average behaviour in order to see how people in particular circumstances cope, how they interact, how they develop new strategies and how they face new issues. To put these findings into some context, we compared them with both qualitative and quantitative data from studies in the early to mid-1990s

Choosing from the communication repertoire

In the early to mid-1990s qualitative British research was already noting how sensitive many people were to the costs of basic telephony, more so when on a lower income⁶. The extent of this was subsequently shown in a five-country survey⁷. For

⁴ R. Silverstone, and L. Haddon, ‘Design and the Domestication of Information and Communication Technologies: Technical Change and Everyday Life’, in R. Silverstone, and R Mansell (eds.) *Communication by Design. The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 44-74; R. Silverstone, E. Hirsch and D. Morley, ‘Information and Communication Technologies and the Moral Economy of the Household’, in R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (eds.) *Consuming Technologies*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp.15-33; L. Haddon, ‘Il Controllo della Comunicazione. Imposizione di Limiti all’uso del Telefono’, in L. Fortunati, L (Ed.) *Telecomunicando in Europa*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1998, pp. 195-247.

⁵ In fact, the households were exceptional in that they were recruited through an agency because they all had picture phones. However, this has little relevance in this chapter since no-one in their social networks had such phones and so they could not send images between mobiles – although Brian Davidson did download his onto the PC and sent them over the Internet as attached files.

⁶ L. Haddon, *The Phone in the Home: Ambiguity, Conflict and Change*, paper presented at the COST 248 Workshop: ‘The European Telecom User’, Lund, Sweden, April 13-14, 1994.

example, in the UK sample, cost sensitivity was indicated by the 57% of people who thought that telecom costs were too high⁸. This issue itself had a bearing on household interactions in that 32% of the sample said that they received complaints about the cost of the calls they made, the figure rising to 65% for the 14-17 years olds⁹. This should not lead us to assume that children make more calls. In fact they make less than adults¹⁰. But these findings reflect how parents evaluate those calls: often the calls are not seen as being worthwhile or necessary. Those cost considerations also had some bearing on communication strategies: 72% made calls at times when the tariff was cheaper because of this pressure (more so women); 55% rationed their own calls; and 35% attempted to limit the calls of other members of the household. Hence, the key point is that in different ways these statistics measure the salience of cost considerations and underline the fact that they are far from being a negligible issue, or concern to only a small minority of households.

When we turn to the three families some years later in 2003, the problem of the telephone bill is most explicit in the Lenny household. Below, Janet starts to explain her response after her husband's shock at seeing the size of the phone bills, and goes on to say how things have changed.

Janet: Don't whinge me about making the odd call! I have cut down. And when I'm out and about the children do not ring me as much on my mobile (now). (My husband) would say "Oh my god, they rang your mobile 90 times last month when you were out ...for goodness sake...stop, it cut it down." So we are trying to cut down.'

Throughout the day, the choice of which means of communication to use is clearly influenced by tariffs in all three households. There were many examples of people using mobiles because calls were free to people on the same network. There were the examples of family members using the mobile rather than the landline because on their tariff packages it had 'free' minutes that could be used. Janet Lenny best illustrated the practice of using the mobile after certain times because calls were free. Some years ago she switched to using her husband's mobile for all her evening and weekend because they were free on his tariff. In fact, she recently returned to the landline to make those same social calls because the family had moved over to a flat rate tariff for the fixed phone. In both the Davidson and Lenny households, the mothers would sometimes borrow their children's mobiles at certain times of day because their mobiles had free calls during those periods when the parents' mobiles did not. And on the day of the dairies, when Lyn Davidson went round to her parents and discovered they were not at home, she used their landline to call them and find out where they were because it was cheaper than using her own mobile to contact them.

⁷ This covered, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. The figures reported here are from L. Haddon, *The Control of Communication. Imposing Limits on Telephony*, A Report for Telecom Italia, 1996. But the general European pattern can be found (in Italian) in Haddon, *op.cit.* 1998. An English version of this chapter can be downloaded from <http://members.aol.com/leshaddon/Date.html>

⁸ Actually, this was the lowest figure of the 5 countries.

There were also significant gender differences: 40% of females received such complaints compared to 23% of males.

¹⁰ G. Claisse, 'Telefon, Kommunikation und Gesellschaft - Daten gegen Mythen', in Forschungsgruppe Telefonkommunikation (Ed.) *Telefon und Gesellschaft*, 1, Berlin: Volker Spiess, 1989, pp.255-82.

Arguably we see some of the more inventive strategies to cut costs in the Lenny household. For example, Janet knew that although in general she had a flat rate tariff, this did not apply to dialling particular holiday firm's number, which was premium rate. She evaded these costs by phoning its sister company, pretending she had got the wrong number and arranging for the call to be passed on to the holiday firm at an effectively free tariff. And when Jenny wanted to ring her mother Janet, she rang her father mobile-to-mobile because it was free since they were with the same operator, he then rang his wife on the free work phone and finally Janet phoned Jenny back using the free minutes on her mobile. While being an inventive strategy to keep down costs, it is obviously somewhat cumbersome and does generate extra communications work. However, the point is that this system really does show the lengths that people will go to in order to keep down costs.

All these examples underline how important cost considerations can be in shaping decisions about which medium to use. But they are not the only ones. Clearly, there were plenty of occasions where the mobile phone rather than the fixed line was used simply because the people were underway when they wanted to call – as when Lyn Davidson reported to her husband that she was delayed in traffic. Sometimes the interviewees simply forgot to think about charges, as when Janet Lenny mentioned reaching for the landline automatically. And her daughter Jenny sometimes resorted to the mobile because the main house phone was in use (and calling on the mobile did not cost any more). Other examples in the case studies suggest that people reply back in the mode in which they are addressed, for example, replying to a text message with another text. However, as Sharon Miller reflected, the interviewees occasionally thought about the nature of the conversation that would follow before choosing whether to text or use voice communication. For example, Sharon thought that some texting was useful if there was a short communication to convey. But if this was going to lead to several texts back and forth then Sharon would probably choose to phone using the mobile instead because it would work out quicker to deal with matter even though it might cost a little more.

One further consideration is the channel they used because of their knowledge of the person they were trying to reach. If we take the example of Sharon Miller's social networks, she might receive calls on either her mobile or fixed line depending on how much other people knew the different routines of her work and non-work days.

Lastly, we had plenty of examples of trying other channels if the first one fails. So if Lyn Davidson's mother Lena cannot get through to the landline, she resorts to trying Lyn's mobile number. The same happened in the Lenny household. Meanwhile Jenny's Lenny's school friends tried her personal landline first, and only then called the family phone when they did not get an answer.

Managing communications within the household

When we focus more specifically on interactions with households, cost consciousness certainly affects the rules laid down for children and the complaints about their behaviour. For example, Becky Millers' mobile is on a contract whereby her parents only pay for actual calls and texts. She has no free minutes or texts. They have a rule that she should not go above spending £10 a month.

Sharon: *'But if she goes over that I'm really not happy. Up to 10. Really it should be a lot less than that because there really isn't any real need for her to actually make any calls.'*

The situation is obviously now more complicated since the days of just arguing over fixed line outgoing calls. In this household we also see a rationing of text messages, that has the potential to raise some tensions, given the culture of texting amongst youth, i.e. texting to be part of a peer group, that has been identified in previous research¹¹. In fact, in the interview Becky admitted to sending more texts than her parents might wish.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that sometimes the parents are not asking children to ration calls but rather to switch to different and less expensive channels of communication. For example, we see Lyn Davidson encouraging her son Brian to text her rather than phone on his mobile during peak tariff times. Then, like Janet Lenny, she can ring him back since this worked out cheaper using her free minutes. And we see Sharon Miller encouraging Jenny to use the landline after 6pm rather than text, because these later calls were free. In fact, free minutes, free calls on certain networks and flat rate systems have all introduced a change to a British telecommunications culture that was previously oriented to pay-per-use. In the 1990 studies there used to be complaints about children using the phone in the evening because even though it was cheaper, it still cost something. This is no longer an issue if various types of call have simply become free. For example, most of the time Brian Davidson said he just *'played'* with the wap facility, since he had 250 free wap minutes a month. He also had 50 free text messages per month that he used up as did his peers. *'So I just call people.'* Towards the end of the month he had to *'slow down'* texting as he neared his limit.

Apart from rules about which medium to choose at any one moment, the changing telecommunications options have also introduced another level of negotiation: around different tariff arrangements. We see how these family members have adapted their tariffs over time, and still consider further change in an effort to cut costs. They even considered the tariffs their social networks and other household members are on if it had a bearing on whether some calls were free¹². In the Miller case described above, choosing a tariff without free texts for their daughter provided a potential basis for further tensions.

It is worth adding that the parents are actually sanctioning, indeed encouraging, new forms of communication that did not occur with previous generations. For example, Becky Miller now phones home to organise being picked up or to tell mother Sharon about a change of plans. Indeed, she, and apparently the other girls, sometimes break school rules in order to contact parents. And Lynn Davidson encourages her children to text (certainly rather than phone) from abroad. However, even in the case of child-parent calls, there is still a sense they are exploring new ground, as when Janet

¹¹ E. Kasesniemi, E. and P. Rautanen, 'Mobile Culture of Children and Teenagers in Finland', in J. Katz and R. Aakhus, (eds.) *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.170-92; R. Ling, *The Mobile Connection. The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*, San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2004.

¹² In a workshop discussing these case studies, one participant pointed out how his daughter had changed tariff when she changed boyfriend for this same reason.

complained about daughter Jenny's 'unnecessary' call to her just because Janet was late picking her up from school.

Janet: "*I'm coming, I'm on my way*". *Sometimes her calls are a complete waste of time really...*'

With new options and new practices, new issues arise leading to yet more negotiations over appropriate communications.

Meanwhile, there are new frustrations over managing incoming calls in the era of the mobile. For example, Janet complained about her mother switching to quickly to trying to call her on the mobile before Janet had had chance to answer the first call to the landline. Meanwhile, at one point in the diary her husband first rang the home phone and when it was engaged he immediately tried her mobile: even though the implication of the landline being occupied was that Janet was busy talking to someone else on the home line. She even notes her frustration at the amount of communication now taking place because of the mobile:

Janet: *'Sometimes it infringes on you privacy. I mean you want to be left alone and unless you switch the thing off...For example, my husband (calls and asks) "Where are you, what are you doing". (And I think) 'Oh, leave me alone, don't drive me mad''*.

Given that all the mothers thought that their communications had increased, which probably applies to the children as well in comparison to previous generations, then there is, literally, more communication taking place. While this can be convenient in various ways, it clearly has the potential to become overwhelming at times.

Conclusions

Since the arrival of the mass markets for the mobile and the Internet in the mid-90s, the communications landscape and the repertoire of options available to people have been transformed. But there has also been evolutionary change, as adoption rates have gradually increased, as the mobile has become accessible to more and more children, as further facilities such as SMS have developed. In the case of the UK, but other countries as well, we have also seen the development of more and more tariff options for both mobile and more recently for fixed line telephony. And in terms of practices, there are still changes taking place. For example, texting was mainly identified with youth for many years, but here we are starting to see examples of adults texting and being texted by their children and by other adults.

It is in this context that one can pose research questions that deal with the ensemble of practices as whole, rather than focus on particular technologies such as the mobile phone. In this chapter, we first asked what factors shaped choices between communication media. Although in principle Internet communication could have been included, and was described in the case studies to provide a more complete pictures of a day in the life of these households, the actual analysis dealt specifically with mobile versus fixed line telephony.

The households examined here illustrate how costs can remain an important influence shaping choices. This is not to claim that on the basis of three studies we can generalise too much. For example, many people have relatively few calls, unlike the busy telecommunications cultures of these households. Many people use up only a limited amount of their free minutes. However, if the statistics from the European research cited earlier demonstrate the how important costs were in the 1990s, then at least we might assume that some of the experiences lived through by these three families might be more widespread. Discovering how much more widespread requires further research.

Meanwhile, the expansion of the repertoire and in particular some of the tariff complexities have clearly changed some of the very negotiations taking place within households. While the overarching concern with costs may still be the same, the emerging rules, questions of what calls or texts are a problem and what are not, the decisions about choosing tariffs, the communication practices and strategies that develop or are encouraged and the new frustrations show us how people are trying to cope with the (ever-)changing communications landscape.