Communication Problems

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Communications problems as issues to be managed

Understanding people's use of telecommunications, their take up of new innovations and the social consequences of this can sometimes be enhanced by considering people's communication problems. Such problems can sometimes be experienced at an individual level, as in the amount of spam some people receive over the Internet. However, the main emphasis of this chapter is on problems experienced in relation to other people, especially in relation to other household members. This is because many of the examples given emerged from the domestication framework of analysis. Through empirical studies, this focused mainly on the household as a unit of analysis, although this could now be expanded to consider interactions with other social network members (Haddon, 2003a, 2004).

The second point to note is that talking about 'problems' is a shorthand. Sometimes people might regard something more as minor irritant, even if they then develop strategies to deal with it. To return to the above example, deleting a few spam messages sometimes falls into this category. At the other extreme there can be real tensions and interactions between people around something explicitly perceived as a problem, such as telecoms bills - as we shall see below. And sometimes some aspect of communications just a matter to be dealt with rather than a source of interpersonal confrontation, such as the wish to avoid surveillance by other household members and enjoy some privacy when contacting others - as we shall also see below. So when talking about communications problems, issues to be handled may sometimes be a more accurate description, conceptualising the user as communications manager.

In the rest of the chapter we first set the scene by looking at some research conducted in the 1990s on problems relating to the fixed-telephone line. This leads us to the question of how things are different now, a decade later, when we have far more communications options, and our communications repertoire has become more complex (Haddon, 2003b). Three different ways in which communications problems can be affected by these new options are then outlined. In the conclusion we return to the opening theme of why this is relevant for understanding communications up behaviour, take up of new options and their social consequences.

Framework and fixed line research in the early 1990s

British qualitative research from the early 90s looking at the domestication of ICTs in general considered how people managed their relationship to the fixed telephone line (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995, 1996). In other words, rather than focusing just on the number and the nature of the calls that people make, these studies explored the types of communications or situations that counted as 'problems' for them, and charted the type of strategies people develop for dealing with these. This sometimes

included efforts to control communications, both outgoing and incoming (Haddon, 1994).

One of the chief reasons for wanting to control outgoing calls was, as might be expected, the cost of calls. However, there were other problems, such as when some household members blocked the phone line with their own calls at a time when others in the home want to make of receive calls of their own. Years later, using the Internet on the single phone line could raise similar issues. The main problem from incoming calls was that they could sometimes by disruptive, if they were received during 'quality' family time together, dinner time, 'relaxing time after work, or times when people were otherwise busy, e.g. getting children for school, preparing meals. Finally, there were some issues around the desire for privacy when making calls, the desire to avoid the surveillance of other household members, which was especially important for teenagers.

These problems, tensions or issues led to various interactions with other household members, e.g. negotiating rules and understandings with about making calls, perhaps trying to persuade others to ration calls. They could also lead to discussions with wider family, friends and colleagues, trying to persuade them to call at some times rather than others. And they could lead to other strategies. In the case of outgoing calls this might involve getting children to pay for some of their calls. In the case of incoming calls it could entail blocking incoming calls at certain times (e.g. unplugging the phone line, turning down the sound of the ringer), not answering the ringing phone or getting other people to answer the phone (to say, often pretend, that they were not available). In the case of privacy, this might mean going to another room, phoning when other household members were not around or going as far as to make some calls from outside of the home, including from public phone boxes. Add

A subsequent 5-country European quantitative study[1] aimed to explore the scale of such problems as well as the degree to which different types of strategy were used (Haddon, 1998a). To give a flavour of its findings, here is a summary of the data for the 5-countries combined. In households with multiple members, 24% on the interviewees received complaints about the cost of the calls they made, but that figure is perhaps understandable over double that for 14-17 year olds[2]. As regards strategies to control outgoing calls, 64% used cheaper tariffs, 64% rationed their own use, and 42% tried to limit the calls of other household members. The scale of the strategies indicates the extent to which telecoms costs are an issue, shaping telecoms usage. Meanwhile, the attempts specifically to limit others and complaints figure provides some sense of the interaction going on in households and the potential tensions that exist.

As regards incoming calls, a substantial minority, 37%, found these to be disruptive at least some of the time. When we look at the different control strategies used, 22% blocked phone calls as least some of the time, 22% had not answered the ringing phone, 29% had got someone else to answer and 32% had persuaded others to redirect calls to other times. While all of these strategies tended to be used occasionally rather

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[1] This covered, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK (Haddon, 1998). The published chapter is in Italian, but an English version of this can be downloaded from http://members.aol.com/leshaddon/Date.html)

[2] This rose to as high as 65% for this age group in the UK.

than often, clearly disruptive calls are an issue for many people - which they try to do something about.

Finally, turning to the question of privacy, 39% used the strategy of phoning from another room, 30% phoned when nobody was home and 18% had phoned from outside the home, all the figures being higher for younger age groups. Privacy, too, is clearly an issue, and a significant number of people develop ways to manage it.

That was the 1990s. The more contemporary question is what happens when we now have many more communications options? The mobile phone and Internet would be the obvious major examples. But then we must remember that there are on-going innovations and developments in relation to these technologies, such as the rise of texting after the mobile had already started to become a mass market, and changing tariff structures for both mobile and fixed lines.

One set of questions one can ask about this expanding communications repertoire concerns the relationships between old and new elements. For example, elsewhere there has been an attempt to explore the circumstances in which new means of communication replace or complement older ones. This involves asking about the continuities between new and old, in that in general we know that much of what people do with new options builds upon past practices (Jouet, 2000). And one can ask how we accommodate new options and in general manage a more complex repertoire. For example, how do we choose between which media to use when we want to communicate (Haddon, 2003, Haddon and Vincent, 2004)?

However, the point of this chapter is that in addition to these types of question we can ask about relationships between communications options in a different way: how do new communications options relate to old communications problems. Three possibilities will be considered here:
1. The first is where new options are perceived as providing solutions to old problems.
2. The second is where new options shift the issue to be managed and alter the negotiations between household members.
3. The third is where new communications options can themselves give rise to new problems, new things to be managed.

Solving old problems

If we take the example of disruptive calls (for some people at certain times) we saw how even by the 1990s people had already developed a range of coping strategies. Yet even by this stage the innovation of the answering machine had provided yet one more option, one more solution to the problem. Despite being sold as a device to take calls when people were out of the home, the answering machine was also in practice widely used for filtering calls. Once again, referring back to the European study, if we take the combined figures for the 5 countries concerned, 18% used the answering machine for filtering calls often, 32% doing this occasionally. At a later stage caller ID provided a related filtering option. This remands use that we need to consider not only totally new communications channels when considering the repertoire of options, but also related innovations in terms of new devices or services.

We noted earlier that in the 1990s privacy was sometimes sufficiently important, for some more than others, that people were developing a range of strategies to manage this. Even by the time of the mid-1990s European research, when the mobile phone was still not so widespread, 14% of interviewees were already acknowledging that the mobile phone was sometimes used precisely because it enabled such privacy (Haddon, 1998). Indeed subsequent research specifically on youth showed how the mobile enabled young people to avoid parental monitoring of their calls (Ling and Helmersen, 2000; Ling 2004).

The same point could be made in relation to other 'problems' identified in the 1990s. For example, the mobile phone and later broadband offering more than one line both helped overcome the problem of one household member blocking the single household line with their calls. In some households parents getting children to pay for their own pre-paid cards for their mobile was one way of avoiding arguments about the cost of the calls they made (Ling and Helmersen, 2000).

While the above examples are used to illustrate the main point, that new elements in the repertoire can offer solutions to older problems, this is inevitably also a simplification. Let us return to the example of the answering machine. They themselves could constitute a new 'problem', or at least an irritation, for callers who did not like to deal with them[3]. Sometimes the knowledge that filtering was an option could create the suspicion that the people being called were hiding behind their machines, and could lead to verbal attempts to persuade them to pick up the phone. Conversely, other callers learnt to expect answering machines and were at ease with asynchronous communication. Sometimes they even preferred this, phoning a fixed line when they anticipate the person will be out – and occasionally they were surprised when and unprepared when the people called were unexpectedly present. In other words, while a new option may address an old problem at one level, it can in turn lead to a whole new set of interactions, issues or strategies.

Shifting problems

In addition to solving old problems, new options also transform the issue to be managed. For example, in the 1990s, we saw how there was evidence of some concern, or at least wariness, about the potential or actual size of phone bills, with examples of parents especially trying to ration children's use of the phone. A recent British small-scale study (Haddon and Vincent, 2004) suggested that this underlining concern with telecoms costs was still present. However, the UK tariff options were far different by now, with a host of mobile phone and even fixed-line tariff packages offering flat-rate tariffs, either for certain times or all the time.

Hence, some households in that study that had moved to flat-rate fixed line calls. This meant that the question of rationing was no longer so relevant, if there were no extra costs incurred in making additional calls. However, there we still efforts to persuade children, for example, to use the fixed line in the first place rather than other channels such as the mobile phone, since that could incur further costs per call. Or if the tariff was such that flat-rate applied to the fixed line or mobile after a certain time, then

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[3] In the 1996 European survey, 55% of people were annoyed when the encountered an answering machine. At that time, 36% said they immediately hung up, 12% listened and then hung up, 44% left a message and 7 % said that their response depended on the circumstances (Haddon, 1998b).

children (and other adults) were sometimes persuade to steer their calls to those times when call were regarded as being effectively 'free'.

Moreover, some of the discussion about how best to keep down telecommunications costs arose not only when particular calls were made or, more often, when bill arrived but also when negotiating which operator and tariff arrangement to have in the first place or deciding whether to change these. To summarise, the problem of telecommunications costs may still be present, it has not necessarily disappeared, but the details of its management and the nature of the search for solutions can change.

New problems, new strategies

New communications options can also give rise to new problems, new things to be managed. A British study of a day-in-the-life of families and their communication choices started to show some of the new frustrations, or irritations emerging as telecoms options have grown. For example, it was increasingly common for callers try one channel, such as the fixed line, and then another one when the first fails or is occupied. However, this sometimes could happen too quickly, or else precisely because the person was engaged in one call they did not want to be contacted through another channel.

'One thing I don't like is when my husband tries the house phone and it's engaged. So he knows I'm on the phone! And (yet) he'll ring the mobile. By the time I get to it it's stopped. He often does that. It's really annoying.' (Haddon and Vincent, 2004).

Appropriate behaviour in these cases had not yet been worked out. Meanwhile the sheer increase in communications that sometimes followed from having more channels could be overwhelming

'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".
(Haddon and Vincent, 2004).

Turning specifically to the mobile phone, various studies have looked at how the mobile can be perceived as being disruptive in different public spaces[4]. This has given rise to observations about how users manage the relationship to co-present others when they are called – be that people they are with or just others in the vicinity - as well as with the interlocutor (e.g. Ling, 1997, 2004; Fortunati, 2003). For example, when do they go off to one side, when do the indicate to others that the call will not be long. They now have to think about how to manage relations with the interlocutor in those situations, perhaps indicating the situation and the time that they can spend on the call. Meanwhile, wow people control and manage their availability on the mobile is issue people now have to think about, developing policies about who they give the mobile number out to, and strategies about when they switch the phone

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[4] In the 1996 survey, 47% of people had a negative reaction to seeing people using mobiles in public spaces (Haddon, 1998b). One would have thought that this reaction would have diminished as mobiles became more commonplace, but use, sometimes perceived as misuse, could still attract surprisingly high negative responses. In research for Eurescom in 2000 (Mante-Meier et al, 2001), nearly two-thirds agreed with the statement that mobile phones disturb other people (Ling, 2004).

on and how they deal with particular calls –answering immediately or sending it to voice mail (Licoppe and Heurtin, 2001, 2002).

There have been various issues related to texting on the mobile phone, this time with problems arising sometimes in relation to peers in social networks. One such issue is when it is or is not appropriate to manage communication by text at all as opposed to some other channel or face-to-face (e.g. when ending a relationship with a boy- or girlfriend). Another problem to be managed was dealing with expectations about how quickly to return the gift of a text message (Taylor and Harper, 2001) – although this could also apply to expectations regarding replying to phone messages or emails. And returning to intrafamily relations and another example from the British study, one teenager caused great anxiety at home and immediate phone calls back from his parents, when he sent a text back from a holiday abroad just mentioning that there had been some problem. This illustrates the more general issue of when it is appropriate to send a text about what topic, and the consequences of doing so.

Similar questions have also been raised about the appropriateness of some emails, not so much spam but from and to known social networks. This had led some to comment on how this medium is still relatively immature, when it can lead to 'unnecessary' emails (almost like spam – when one can be overwhelming), emails that find their way to the wrong people, or emails that create misunderstandings. Once again, people have started to develop strategies for dealing with all of these potential or actual problems, although some still remain frustrated by some of these problems[5].

Conclusions

The very start of this chapter noted that understanding communications problems could throw some light on telecommunications behaviour. Clearly the examples provided above illustrate factors shaping the calls people are willing to make, if there are sometimes interpersonal pressures to limit calls, as well as to receive (if some are disruptive). The example show why some calls are made at certain times, in certain places (if we consider the privacy discussion), and, as our options increase, through one channel or communications mode rather than another (e.g. fixed-line vs. mobile, voice vs. text, etc).

The opening statement also suggested that this was one factor, albeit only one, of relevance for understanding adoption of new channels and options (and, we can now add, amount of their use). This is important for the developers of new ICTs and services. There is a tradition in the telecoms industry, albeit slightly changing now, of looking at user needs. Perhaps in part this might be conceptualised as problems users experience, considering not just usability challenges but some of the more social, interpersonal issues described in this chapter. Maybe reflecting upon actual and potential problems of the kind described here might help to create opportunities for new products and services, or at least avoid aggregating existing tensions or creating new dilemmas. More generally, while telecoms companies would desire use to consume ever more of their products, some of these examples have shown the tensions created by the costs of the current levels of telecoms usage.

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[5] This section reflects work currently being undertaken for the Oxford Internet Institute by the author, involving interviews with people about their experience of email.

When we turn to the social consequences of what, for many people, is an expanded communications repertoire, once again we can start to approach this by asking how much any problems have changed. Have some been solved, have they been transformed, or do new communications options lead to new, and possibly more substantial problems? Often when we ask about social consequences, the question is one of how much has stayed the same how much has changed, and is that change relatively superficial or more significant? In these examples, we see this type of question can be asked of negotiations around the costs of telecoms – it remains an underlying issue, but clearly some of the discussions and decisions within households are different from the 1990s situation outlined earlier.

To finish, and standing back from all these particular examples, we can pose the more general question of why something is felt to be a problem or why something had to be managed. What expectations exist, where do these come from, is some behaviour infringing norms that existed before new telecoms options? Such questions have been posed in relation to some problem with the mobile (e.g. Ling, 1997; Ling et al, 1997), but they need to be asked more generally of each new medium or innovation.

Second, we need to pose the question of how much of the way we manage our communications repertoire is settled and how much is still in flux. In other words, people develop strategies for dealing with problems, but to what extent do tensions or frustrations still exist, to what extent are people still in a process of trying out different ways of dealing with problems and in a process of on-going negotiation with others.

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[6] The various papers, reports etc of the author are available at http://members.aol.com/leshaddon/Date.html)

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