

The first three chapters of Claude Fischer's America Calling chronicle the historical and social developments of the telephone. Much like the chapter "Why Study Science and Technology in Society?" from the reader, the first chapter highlights the sociological effects that technology incurs. The second chapter focuses not only on the invention of the phone, but the rise and fall of the bell monopoly. Finally, the third chapter discusses what lead the public to buy into the telephone craze and how their usage shaped how the telephone companies marketed their product. I found this chapter the most interesting and as I read it, I noticed several similarities between the emergence of the telephone and the internet.

The third chapter recounts how AT&T/Bell marketed their product and service over time. Initially, the cumbersome and complicated nature of the telephone made it a difficult sell. While the public was in awe with the technology, most were not actively buying the product (due to the unwieldy design, the poor service, and the cost). This reminded me of the old acoustic coupler modem that my father used in the early eighties. While it enabled him to work from home, the cost and the overall awkwardness of the product led him to only use it when absolutely necessary. I remember most people were fascinated with the technology and saw the advantages that it provided, but for years I never saw another modem in any other home.

The chapter goes on to explain that even after the phone company lowered its prices and began to offer party lines, there were still many hurdles that made regular usage of the telephone difficult. People had to break into conversations to request use of the phone line and had to trust that no one else was listening to their conversation. This caused phone conversations to be short and were generally not conducive to establishing the phone as a social networking device. Similarly, I recall when my family began to use our first dial-up service in the early 90's . The connection took over our only phone line, so everyone had to be kicked off while it was in use. Each page took nearly two minutes to load and it was nearly impossible to do anything constructive since each time someone would call or pick-up the phone line, the connection would be dropped and the session would end. The hurdles of using the service obstructed how we wanted to use the product; we always kept our emails short and only used it when necessary.

Finally, Claude Fischer describes how the telephone company had to constantly 'educate the public' and invent different uses of the telephone. Many peripheral companies offered innovative services such as wake up calls, lullabies, and weather updates. This in turn reminded me of the early days of the internet when companies fought to come up with innovate ideas. They tried to shape how people would utilize the web by offering services and products (webvan and flooz.com) that people were not motivated to use. It seems that while several products and services have

done well, it was the users who had to define how they wanted to utilize this new technology before any business could capitalize on it.

The phone company learned several lessons. For example, no matter how novel and compelling the idea is, if the product is too cumbersome, it won't be used - and a company cannot force patterns of usage on the public, customers come up with their own unpredictable ways to use products. A century later, internet providers had to relearn these same lessons.