

THE USAGE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY MEDIA IN HOUSEHOLD: HOW FAR IS IT GENDERED-NEUTRAL?

NURULIZZAH MOHAMED

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang, 26400 Bandar Jengka Pahang

Tel: 09-4663323, Fax: 09-4663343, E-mail: nurulmd@pahang.itm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The effects of a technology are not only determined by its production, physical and capability, but they also depend on how they are consumed. Many people see technology as 'the material of male power', rather than neutral. In this paper, I am going to focus only on one example of the communication technology media, which is the telephone. Based on my research, I found out that the usage of the telephone in the household is not gender neutral.

INTRODUCTION

To understand the consumption of technologies in households, we have to understand the practices of everyday life, how new technologies are implicated in household routines and activities. People tend to see that the new technologies are male-dominated. According to Mackay (1997), any understanding of Information Communication Technology in the households has to take on board the 'politics of domestic life' which is the structured relations between young and old, and between men and women. Cockburn (1985) describes that women become excluded from technology with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, with the separation of home from work, and the sexual division of labor that is a part of that.

According to Moyal (1992), telecommunication is traditionally a male-dominated arena. It is the male engineer, technician, manager, strategic planner and policy-maker who have devised and installed the telegraph, the telephone, radio and television broadcasting station, the communications satellite, and the advanced digital and mobile communication infrastructures and networks that link and continue to upgrade our spiraling telecommunication world. Cockburn (1985) also sees technology as the material of male power, rather than as neutral though perhaps biased by the power interests that deploy it.

DEFINITIONS

In order to understand about this topic better, let us see the important definitions. According to Mackay (1997), the technologies, which are used at home, are the television, telephone, videocassette recorder, home computer, computer game and CD-ROM player. These technologies are the artifact, which are designed or used to achieve some human purpose.

Rogers (1986) defines communication technology as the hardware equipment, organizational structures, and social values by which individuals collect, process and exchange information with other individuals. As for the word household, Mackay (1995) defines that household is made up of families or other social units. Household members work with each other and the technology to convert it to their desired ends. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995), the word gender means the fact of being male or female, whilst gender-neutral means not supporting either the male or female involved in an argument or disagreement.

In my opinion men and women use the technologies for different purposes and in different ways. Technologies can help to bring the family to life, which provide us with a wealth of empirical data. The domestic consumption practices link us with the world beyond, rather than isolate us from it. Mackay (1997) explains that the consumption in households of Information Communication Technology depends on and shapes domestic relations, involving negotiation and contest between household and members, and with the technology. In this paper, my discussion will focus only on the use of the telephone.

THE TELEPHONE

The studies of women's telephone use made by Ann Moyal, Deborah Tannen and Lana Rakow, attracts my attention to discuss about the gendering of the technology in household by focusing on the telephone. Their findings help me to understand why women behave in such a way when they communicate by using the telephone. Based on my readings and my personal experience, I would agree that the usage of the telephone in the household is not gender neutral. The particular type of usage is regarded as a feminized medium of communication.

To support my argument, I would like to refer to an American linguist, Deborah Tanner (YEAR), in her best selling book, *You Just Don't Understand*. According to Tannen, men see conversation as a means of conveying information. Women engage in a mesh of connecting communication with close friends and family, keeping each other informed on events in their lives, telling what has happened, empathizing, rejoicing, listening, and, in time of loss or tragedy, sorrowing with each other.

Boys and girls grow up in different worlds of words. Boys' games tend to grow round the hierarchy of a leader who tells others what to do. Giving orders confers status, and there are winners and losers. Girls' games, by contrast, are less concerned with winning personal status. Often, girls simply sit and talk. Within the group, intimacy is key. Girls are eager to be liked. Sharing secrets and personal talk to establish closeness, they are already shaping the character of friendships in their adult lives.

Women's communication, then, is to create intimacy and closeness, to communicate thoughts and impressions, to support and be supported, to connect. Small talk serves a big purpose. Contrarily, men's goal is independence; their world of words is frequently impersonal, factual, and talk-focused, and while personal friendship talk between men is not unknown, the male of the species will commonly choose a woman to confide his intimate thoughts (Moyal, 1992).

Based from Tannen's writing, I think women are born with such characteristics. Their sensitivity and concern in listening, sharing and understanding people are remarkable. That is why we can see women and men's differing styles of communication have been transferred to the telephone.

Evidence from the national survey of Australian Women's telephone use, helps to support my argument about the female-dominant of the telephone usage in the household. A Moyal has identified a distinct pattern of telephone usage by women. In this survey, Moyal administered a questionnaire in Australia to a sample of 200 women and followed this with semi-structured interviews with a range of women in a diversity of social situations, in terms of employment/non employment, urban/rural location, age and ethnicity. Moyal asked interviewees to distinguish between 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' telephone calls. Instrumental calls are defined as appointment and arrangement making, purchasing and seeking information; whilst intrinsic calls are for personal exchange in communication. She found that women make an average of four instrumental calls a week, and twenty-four intrinsic calls, which were longer in duration and many of which were long-distance. Here, again, the telephone was seen as central to maintaining relationships, providing support and care and, in some cases alleviating boredom and loneliness. She also reported, that the interviewees talk more freely and intimately on the telephone than face-to-face. Moyal concludes that the telephone is a crucial technology in holding together families and communities.

Moyal's findings helps me to understand how a telephone plays its roles and helps women to communicate feeling and caring, maintaining intimacy, creating psychological neighborhood which alleviates loneliness, and finally it is great for emotional security.

Rakow, an American researcher, wrote a very interesting article entitled, *Women and the Telephone: The Gendering of a Communications Technology*. According to Rakow (in Kramarae 1988), reported that early commentary on the telephone, repeated by contemporary authors, extolled the virtue of the telephone in reducing women's loneliness and isolation and freeing their time from unnecessary travel.

Rakow also wrote that the responsibility for maintaining family and social relations and home-business transactions that was relegated to women was apparently, then, quickly extended to the use of the telephone. Today, women arrange visits with family members and dinner parties with friends, remember birthdays and anniversaries, and keep in touch. With primary responsibility for the household and family, women most likely take the majority of responsibility for telephone calls with plumbers, optometrists, veterinarians, music teachers, dentists, pharmacists, babysitters and the like (Kramarae, 1998).

What I can see here is that, women use the telephone in carrying out their responsibilities at home, and at the same time they also use the telephone to maintain their social relationship. In my opinion, these valuable works made these women become very special and the lovely characteristics that they have are actually portraying them as a good wife, a wonderful mother and a great friend.

Rakow also raised up the issues of the employment of women in offices as telephonists. The usefulness of women's voices, their ability to speak clearly, politely, mannerly, not only with friendlier voices, but they are more patient, explains the women's natural suitability to telephone. That is why we can see that women are being hired as telephone operators all around the world. We can see here that the suitability of women and the telephone, is not only observed at home, but women have proven to the world that they are not only connecting, families and friends, but they are also out into the world, connecting homes, cities and factories.

After reviewing the writings of the famous researchers about women's relationship to the telephone, I just could not believe that this topic is actually complex and becomes popular in the academic literature. When I relate this topic to my own personal experience, I would agree that the telephone helps me in doing my work at home, and at the same time it also helps me to maintain my networking with my friends and families. It is not only a good communication device, but it is also sort of like a good entertainment for me, because whatever news or stories that I received from the telephone conversation, it makes my life so meaningful. Once I am back from the office, and continue my housework at home, the telephone always helps me to forget about my hectic life. Once I am done with my housework and after taking care of my family, the telephone connects me to my close friends and families. While communicating with them, it helps me to relax and I can share lots of things with my own networking.

An interesting article written by Grant Noble, entitled "Towards a 'Uses and Gratification Approaches' of the Domestic Telephone", captures my interest. His findings are based from some simple questions asked to the respondents, which consist of men and women, about their home telephones. The first and the third question asked in the research, really attract my attention. The first question is why people like to use the telephone? Here are the verbatim answers by the respondents.

- Can be concise – don't have to do much small talk.
- Can chat with friends without having to go out.
- Find out information quickly.
- To keep in touch with relatives/children in college.
- Easier to convey feelings and what's been happening than letters do.
- The phone makes it as if people were with me.
- Keeps me in contact with my husband as he is away a lot.
- Need it for business transactions overseas.
- Quick and easy means of communication.
- Provides information as opposed to emotions.
- Convenience.
- Speed and ease of contact.
- Cheap means of communication.
- Allows me to organize my time efficiently.
- Saves lots of running around.
- To find people.

This list shows that individuals have a huge variety of reasons why they like to use the phone. The third question is why I like to receive phone calls? The answers are:

Knowing that people want to talk to you.
Keep in touch with friends, find out what they have been doing.
Sometimes I just like to talk and the phone enables me to do that.
Feel less isolated.
If from friends and relatives it shows they are thinking of me.
Like to gossip.
Find out family and friends' news. It makes one feel good when they want to find out your news. It shows that they care.
Feeling of importance.
It's good to talk to friends/family. It's a nice surprise allowing me to get news as it happens, or friend's feelings at the time.
Some calls are just to let you know someone is thinking of you.
Can't answer. I don't necessarily like or dislike phone calls.

When I read all the verbatim answers given by the respondents, I think women at home and myself would give the same answers, and it helps to describe the relationship between the telephone and the women. Those answers explain how the telephone helps the women to maintain their social relationship, create intimacy and closeness, express feelings and thoughts, and secure emotions and many other reasons that have been mentioned in the early paragraph.

CONCLUSION

I think I have used sufficient evidences to support my argument that the usage of the telephone in the household is not gender neutral. Based from the findings that I got from the researches, and also from my personal experience I believe that the women dominate the usage of the telephone in household. I am proud to have all those lovely characteristics of a woman, which help me to fulfill my responsibilities as a wife, a mother and a friend to those I love in this world.

REFERENCES

- Cockburn, C. (1985) *Machinery of Dominance: women, men and technical know-how*, London, Pluto.
- Kramarae, C. (1988) *Tecnology and Women's Voices. Keeping in Touch*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995), 3rd ed. Longman Group Ltd, England.
- Mackay, H. (1997) *Consumption and Everyday Life*. SAGE Publications, London.
- Moyal, Ann (1992) *The Gendered use of the Telephone*.
<http://www.telegeography.com/publications/moyal> (internet, 1/7/01)

Nurulizzah Mohamed

Noble, G. (no date) *Towards a 'Uses and Gratifications' of the Domestic Telephone*. Australian Journal of Communication, 15 July 1989.

Rogers, M. E. ((1986) *Communication Technology – The New Media in Society*. The Free Press, New York.