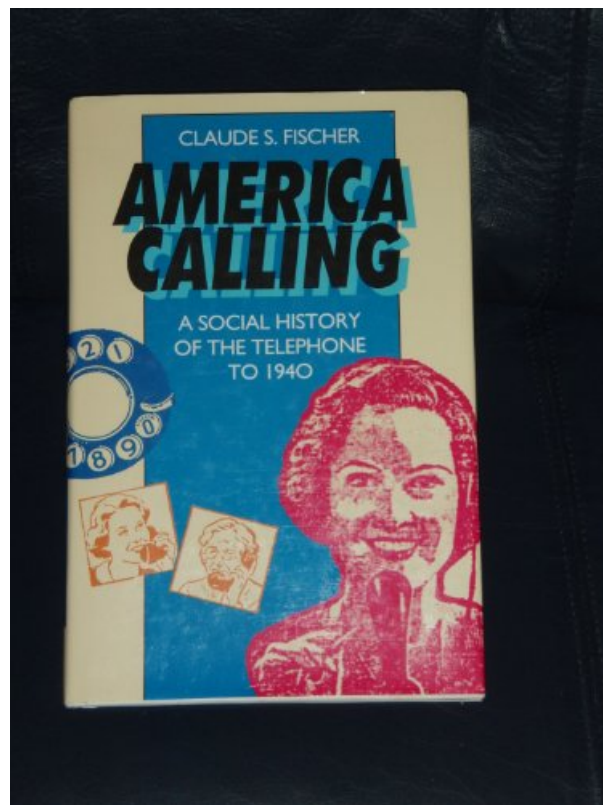
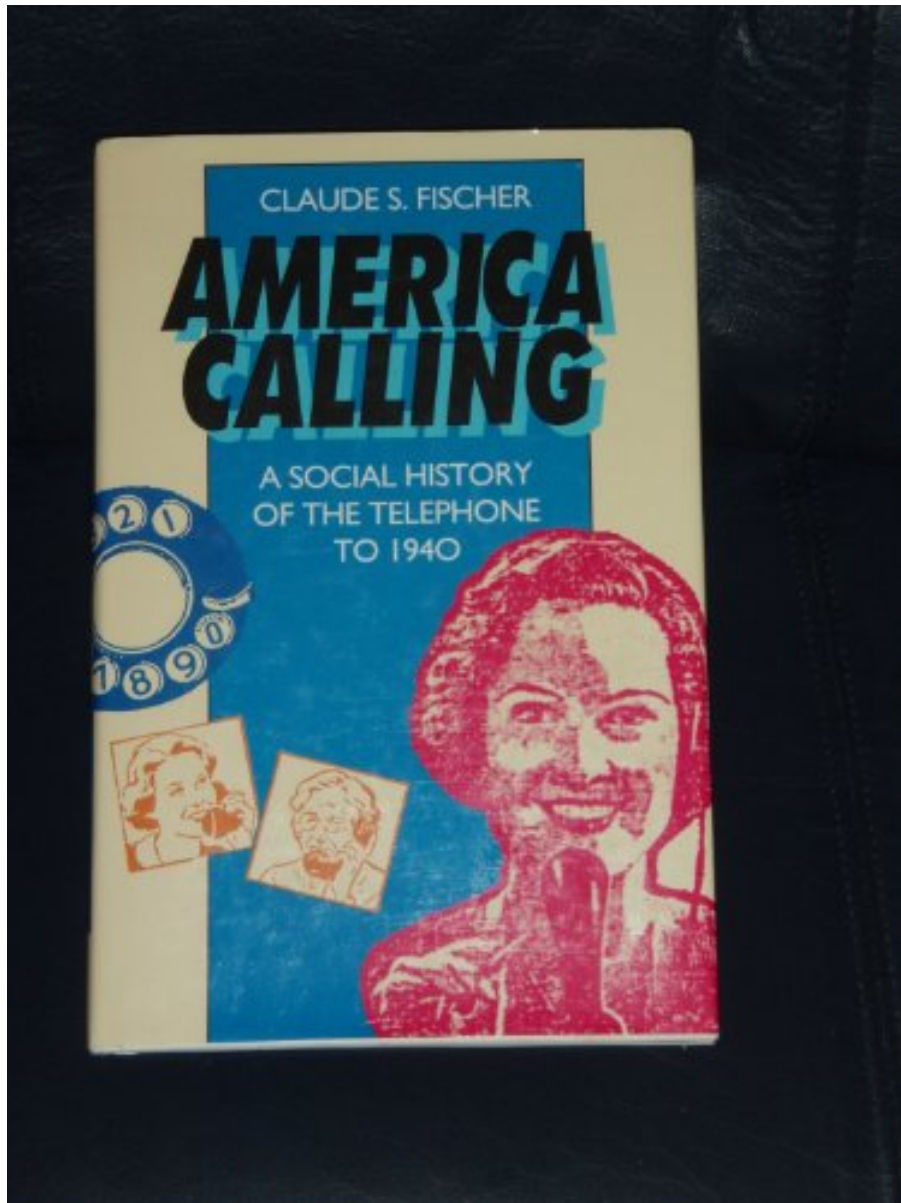


**AMERICA CALLING: A SOCIAL HISTORY
OF THE TELEPHONE TO 1940 BY CLAUDE S.
FISCHER**



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From Library Journal

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The telephone looms large in our lives, as present in modern societies as cars and television. Claude Fischer presents a social history of this vital but little-studied technology - how we encountered, tested, and ultimately embraced it with enthusiasm. Using telephone ads, oral histories, telephone industry correspondence and statistical data, the study explores how, when and why Americans started communicating in this radically new manner. Studying three California communities, Fischer uncovers how the telephone became integrated into the private worlds and community activities of average Americans in the first decades of this century. Women were especially avid in their use, a phenomenon which the industry first vigorously discouraged and then promoted. Fischer finds that the telephone supported a wide-ranging network of social relations and played a crucial role in community life, especially for women, from organizing children's relationships and church activities to alleviating the loneliness and boredom of rural life.

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Has insights about adoption of phones & technology generally

By Ellen Isaacs

America Calling is, as its subtitle says, a social history of the adoption of the telephone from its invention in the 1870s until the 1940s, when it had become widely, but not universally used in the U.S. It is a sociological account of the attitudes held by the people who sold the telephone as much as those who used it. It contrasts the adoption of the phone with that of the automobile, which was introduced during about the same time period and was adopted more quickly. It uses a wide and creative set of data, including statistics of telephone use, telephone company reports, local newspaper stories, letters written at the time, interviews with people who grew up before telephones were commonplace, newspaper advertisements (noting when telephone numbers were printed as part of an ad), and even song lyrics of the time. After giving a national view of telephone adoption, Fischer fills out the story with a more detailed study of three towns in the San Francisco area; one mostly blue collar, one mixed, and one white collar.

Some of the more interesting findings in the book include:

- Farmers were among those most interested in using the phone and were willing to pay more for service, and yet AT&T was slow to recognize their need or the profit potential. AT&T did tend not to market to them, or to be willing to extend lines out to rural communities.
- There was a brief period of competition, before the government sanctioned the AT&T monopoly, which greatly increased the use of the phone and reduced the costs.
- It was not a trivial task to sell telephones to people. The phone company worked hard to contrive situations when a phone might be useful. Most people (especially in cities) had a way to send messages, so it was seen as a luxury.

- The notion of using the telephone for social conversation was looked down upon for a long time, and was rarely played up in sales pitches. Partially because of the "party line," where a whole community shared a single line, it was considered "frivolous" to use the telephone for anything other than short calls to conduct business or make arrangements. This attitude was also shared by the telephone company itself, which tended to encourage its use only for important matters.

- The adoption of the automobile, a much more costly investment, was much faster than that of telephones. People seemed to find them more useful, but also didn't look down upon the idea of buying them purely for pleasure. Even though the use of automobiles did infringe on others (horses spooked around cars and they tore up the roads), their use was more easily accepted than social conversation on the telephone.

- Women were the main customers of the telephone and were most likely to use them for social conversation.

I found this book to be well written and full of interesting information about the adoption of the telephone. I was surprised that it was more of an academic book than I'd expected. Based on the cover, I was expecting it

to be oriented more toward the general public. Having adjusted to that, I found I trusted the figures Fischer gave and found him to be appropriately conservative about making inferences based on incomplete data. I also liked how Fischer compared the telephone to the automobile, which helped tease out some of the many possible factors affecting adoption, such as income, region, and the effects of World War I and the Depression.

I'm not sure if this is a flaw in the book or whether the data just aren't available, but I was disappointed that I didn't learn more about the "social rules" about using the phone. Since I am interested in the adoption of the cell phone and the judgments people make about others who use them (especially in public places), I was curious to learn whether there were parallels in how people treated those who used the early telephones. Aside from learning that people looked down on those who chatted for social reasons, there was little information about how people used the telephone in the home (what room it was kept in, whether there were understandings about giving that person privacy, etc.), how they managed party lines, whether it was okay to call someone when they were visiting someone else's home, whether people made judgments about others based on their phone usage, and so on. However, there was an interesting segment on the evolving etiquette of using the phone to extend and/or respond to invitations. Still, that was just a personal goal for reading this book. I think most people would find the book informative and interesting.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Important book

By P. Mulloy

This is a fascinating book about the rise of the telephone and its impact on society. Interesting and well written.

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Technology in the modern age

By NPK

By using the telephone as a case study, Fischer examines the role of technology as an instrument in modern life. The first chapter provides a terrific overview of the academic literature on technology, though given the time span covered by the book, it does not address the Internet. The book is also unusual in that it actually relies on data when making claims about the telephone and the world that emerged around it.

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