

**Progress in Communication Sciences, Volume XV:
Advances in Telecommunications, edited by
H. Sawhney and G. A. Barnett. Stamford, CT:
Ablex Publishing, 1999. ISBN 1-56750-399-3 (cloth),
1-5670-400-0 (paper). xxiii + 243 pages, \$85.00.**

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The latest volume in the *Progress in Communication Sciences* series is a welcome reminder that telephone technology—the backbone of the contemporary new media infrastructure—deserves far more attention in media research.¹ In the introduction, editors Harmeet Sawhney and George Barnett lay out the ambitious goal of creating a sequel to Ithiel Pool's seminal 1977 collection, *The Social Impact of the Telephone*, which has been the best work to date on the social uses and cultural context of the telephone. Chapters in the present volume are meant to overcome what the editors argue has been an overemphasis in telecommunications research on telephone regulation and pricing. The editors aim for a balance among macro-scale studies of national and international systems and institutions (such as legal systems, markets or international regimes and treaties), and micro-scale studies of telephone uses and behavior.

Several chapters are particularly useful overviews of the research to date. Robert LaRose's comprehensive and very readable account of research on personal telephone use and the chapter by the late Robert Hopper on studies of telephone conversation should both be required readings in any course on the social aspects of information and communication technologies. Harmeet Sawhney's chapter is a theoretical discussion of sociotechnical infrastructure as embodied in telephone systems. Aharon Kellerman's contribution, which is largely an updated synopsis of his book *Telecommunications and Geography* (Wiley, 1993), introduces the invaluable perspective of human geography to analyzing the spatial reach of telephone systems.

This volume raises an interesting question, that is, why telecommunications generally and telephony particularly continue to be relatively neglected objects of social research, especially within the discipline of communication. Put differently, why aren't we studying and teaching the telephone? The question is particularly puzzling given to-

day's popular fascination with all aspects of new media, and the inclusion of the term *telecommunications* in the names of a growing number of communication programs in the United States and abroad.

One answer may be that telephone systems, with their uses and cultural significance, do not neatly fit the production-consumption framework of most traditional research on media institutions and systems. Indeed, the relatively larger body of work on telephone economics, markets, and regulation (very ably represented here in chapters by Ruby Dholakia, Robin Mansell and Edward Steinmueller, Jorge Schement, and Steven Wildman) focuses mainly on the telephone as a service to be produced and consumed, rather than as a context for complex social interactions or in terms of the meanings attributed to the telephone in everyday life and interpersonal relations. Despite recent claims to the contrary, media research still often conceals a linear model of communication at its core that is not always appropriate for studying social networks. And telecommunications surely resembles the contingent, complex topography of social networks more closely than it does the conventional model of channels piping messages to wide audiences. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a number of leading telecommunications researchers—including George Barnett and James Danowski, who have chapters in the present volume—are specialists in social network analysis.

Overall, this volume is an important and wide-ranging addition to the unfortunately small library of social research in telecommunications. It may in fact help us to teach the telephone, and it deserves a wide audience.

NOTE

1. In the interests of fair disclosure, I should note that I reviewed this book previously in manuscript form, and provided one of the endorsements that appears on its back cover.