The Secret Power of Telephone Conference Calls

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Telephone conference circuits are an amazing technology. If they were technically advanced one more step, and if factors which presently constrain their use were relaxed, they could help significantly to increase and facilitate group communication. The existing telephone system is almost completely point-to-point, arranged basically to allow two people to talk to each other. Increased group communication could reduce travel, and hence costs, energy expenditures and pollution.

Now, when a corporation executive wants to explore a matter with his nationally dispersed plant managers, they often must fly to corporate headquarters. Once conference circuits are improved they could dialogue from their respective offices. The same holds true, of course, for hundreds of other such “instrumental” (or “organizational”) relationships, from groups of union leaders to groups of salespersons, from beauty contestants to political campaign managers, all who need to coordinate their efforts and are not in the same immediate territory.

The conference circuit is similarly useful for what social scientists refer to as “expressive” relationships. Imagine Christmas eve, or any other holiday or festive occasion, when each kin or friend who could not make it to the family assembly, instead of calling in individually, could all be on the circuit at the same time, dialoging with the assembled group and with each other. A New York based corporation has already made itself rich by leasing a very slightly modified conference circuit to social groups who meet regularly on the circuit. They discuss anything from cooking to personal problems without having to leave their homes, and make their way through the city jungle. In this way, too, groups which are not neighbors or residents of the same part of town, can keep up with each other.

Last, but not least, the conference circuit can have a democratizing effect. Anyone who served on a committee or board knows that very frequently the chairperson, full time staff member or secretary, wields much more power than the other members. A main reason for this concentration of power is that when decisions must be made or revised between meetings of the committee or board, those in “power centers” tend to make them. (They also tend to form the agenda, control the flow of information, etc.) The rationale is that to reconvene the committee or board for an extra meeting is not practical. (Occasionally, the group is polled by mail, or each person is called individually, but this is a slow procedure and it allows for no group dialogue and joint decision-making). If conference circuits could be easily activated, committees and boards could be readily “convened”, even for short electronic (on the wire) meetings, in between “live” ones.

Why is this so rarely done? The main reason is a combination of economic-social-technical-political factors. Conference calls now must be manually arranged by a telephone operator. It often takes a day until the operator finds everybody at their terminals to arrange for the conference. They, in turn, must be at their office or home at the agreed time. It’s a lot of hassle and rather inconvenient.

It is also expensive. To arrange for such a call may take half an hour or more of the switchboard operator’s time and requires a special technology, a telephone bridge, which is not available in great numbers. When the Center for Policy Research recently ran an experiment providing the residents of all the local New Jersey chapters of the League of Women Voters with telephone conference circuits, there was only one bridge (which can accommodate up to 30 persons) in the whole state.

The telephone companies say that they lose money on most conference calls and, under the circumstances, this is easy to believe. No wonder they do not encourage the use of these technology circuits.

Two kinds of technological developments could solve both of these problems and make the technology readily and conveniently available. Like many other problems caused by manual use, they can be solved through automation. A new, more advanced, breed of telephone exchanges is now being introduced throughout the nation, known in the trade as the E.S.S. (Electronic Switching Systems). They are already quietly at work in about 5% of the nation and are expected to reach 80% by 1982. Aside from many other new “tricks,” the E.S.S. can allow people to dial in. That is, when two people talk, one of them can dial a given prefix and then a third party phone number, and — if the party is available — you have

an automated group call. Unfortunately the group can be increased in this way only up to four parties. Possibly, such dial-in capacities could be expanded to encompass more people.

I have suggested other approaches to further development of automatic group connecting. For committees which meet regularly, an IBM card which carries all the desired numbers could be inserted into a modified phone, and if all stations (or all minus an agreed upon number) "answer," the group would be connected. (The time for the conference call — say each Monday at 4 P.M. — might, but not necessarily, be agreed upon at the preceding meeting).

Dr. Stephen H. Unger, with whom I am collaborating in a study of these matters supported by the National Science Foundation, suggested that people would dial-in the group they wish to dialogue with to a mini-computer at the telephone exchange, that would take it from there. We have developed a telepoller which counts the votes of participants of such group meetings.

Would people feel comfortable dialoging without seeing each other? The Center for Policy Research observed forty groups of nine working on a telephone conference circuit. (The observation was made with the full knowledge and consent of the participants. This part of the NSF study is directed by Mr. Richard Remp). The study established that 81% of the participants felt the participation was "direct and eager" as opposed to "reluctant and cautious." Despite the fact that the participants did not know each other before the telephone meeting, after an hour of dialoging 55% reported feeling friendly and having "a sense of intimacy" with other participants; 30% felt "remote," and 15% chose a middle position. 74% felt the discussion was "effective;" 15% felt it was "ineffectual." Many other similar findings indicate that electronic groups can be as effective and amiable, in some cases more so, than face-to-face groups. (Many participants feel less group pressure and it is easier to cut out and return to an electronic meeting than a live one.)

I believe it is in the public interest that automated (as distinct from manual) telephone circuits be developed and made available. This may well require at least a measure of prodding by the regulatory agencies and Congress; the telephone companies are somewhat reluctant to venture into new fields, having their hands full trying to keep up with existing services and being, by-and-large, old fashioned companies who need not fear that someone else will provide automated conference calls.

Automated conference calls will not solve all our problems, but they could contribute to the reduction of alienation, increase communication, save resources, and democratization of our society. We have a tool which requires only relatively little additional development but could significantly enhance the social well being.