

Michèle MARTIN, “Hello Central?” : Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991, 219 pp., ISBN 0-7735-0830-9)

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Michèle MARTIN, *"Hello Central?": Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, 219 pp., ISBN 0-7735-0830-9)

Michèle Martin has written a fascinating and well-documented account of the early development of the telephone system in Canada, especially in Ontario and Quebec. She uses both class and gender analysis, and makes an extremely good case for the necessity of both. In particular, her use of Bell Canada archives is to be commended.

Martin begins with an introduction to her analytic goals. In her first chapter, "Freedom Can't Be Overheard", Martin presents a brief overview of the technological development of the telephone system in Canada from the late 1870's to the 1920's. Chapter two, "Killing the Competition", describes the growth and monopolization of the industry by Bell Canada and the various attempts at state regulation during the early period. Chapter three, "The Making of the Perfect Operator", begins with the hiring of the first woman telephone operator in 1880 in Montreal. Martin documents changing occupational requirements and images, as well as the occasional resistance offered by female telephone operators to their employment conditions, up to about 1920. "Voicing the 'Pulse of the City'" (chapter four) concentrates on the cultural importance of the voice, ushered in by the new talking device. This chapter also describes the newly developing cultural relationships between the operator and telephone subscriber and the norms for interaction between them. Chapter five, "Bridging the Gap between the Victorian and Modern Eras", discusses the social distribution of the telephone by class in Montreal and Toronto and by rural-urban residence. Bell Canada's attempts to educate telephone users to the uses it deemed appropriate are also documented. In chapter six, "The Culture of the Telephone", the impact of the telephone on women's cultural practices, as well as the impact of women's cultural practices on the development of accepted telephone usage are discussed. Martin ends with a brief "Conclusion".

Through her use of Bell Canada archives, Martin provides for us an insider's view of the political and economic motivations of the company's leaders, as well as the class and gender stereotypes that helped shape their decisions. Those conversant with the political economy perspective will not be surprised by Martin's analysis of ineffectual attempts at regulation by the state. What is fascinating in this book is the historically and culturally specific playing out of competition and profit seeking. The interplay of capitalistic rationality and late-nineteenth/early twentieth century Canadian class and gender ideologies provide insight even to those familiar with political economy theory.

Martin demonstrates the resistance to Bell Canada policy and practices by rural independent telephone companies, by users in small communities, and by women consumers and operators. Her analysis of resistance is insightful, but not as well developed as her other theoretical perspectives. Martin's discussion of how the telephone might have developed differently, especially its potential community uses, helps to shatter our notion of inevitability concerning technological development. Specifically, Martin demonstrates the political and economic decisions which produced the telephone as we know it. By the end of Martin's book, we are convinced that the telephone has indeed been *socially* produced.

We learn from Martin's work that the taken-for-granted social uses of the telephone were not part of the original plan. The predominance of business uses envisioned by Bell Canada and promoted in its early advertisements stand in stark contrast to the combination of business, convenience, and pleasure uses promoted in modern advertising. Martin views the latter uses as "deviant" in the early years and documents this for the reader.

Martin's discussion of women as non-approved deviant users of the telephone is excellent. Although women were not in control of the technology or its planned uses, they used the telephone when it was available to them. They ordered groceries, consulted doctors, contacted friends and relatives, and otherwise eased the isolation and labour of their daily lives. Although it is impossible to gauge the direct impact of these early deviant uses on subsequent use, Martin suggests that Bell Canada eventually recognized the market. Martin's social history is a contribution to that gender and technology literature which demonstrates the active role of women through their everyday use of technology to achieve their own ends.

The author's gender analysis is supplemented by class analysis. Middle-class urban women had more ready access to telephones than working class and rural women. The lack of telephone lines in poorer urban areas and rural areas, as well as the prohibitive cost of urban pay telephones ensured differential class access to the newly developed means of communication.

Martin's extensive discussion of the development of the "perfect" telephone operator constitutes a real contribution to the occupational literature. The switch from "boys" to female operators and the attendant rationalization by the company make for fascinating reading. Martin explores the gradual change from autonomous jack (jill)-of-all-trades to machine operators with a "telephone" voice. Bell Canada archives are used with great effect to document the company's changing ideal image.

The cultural importance of the voice, both that of the operator and that of the telephone user, is explored in various parts of the book. The norms for telephone use, as well as the "deviant" uses of the telephone, are also recurring themes. The issue of privacy appears again and again. One of the difficulties in reading this

book is the repetition of material, although used in somewhat different contexts. The author also repeats needlessly discussions of the various conceptual frameworks and theories. The scholarly reader does not need this repetition and will be annoyed by it, and the non-scholarly reader may become so confused that he or she will give up. That would be a shame, because this book has a great deal to offer. Not too many of us appreciate the social and cultural history of the technology that has become such an essential feature of our everyday lives.

The photographs in the center of the book, all from the Bell Canada Telephone Historical Collection, are well chosen. It is a shame, however, that there are no pictures of harried working-class housewives spending money they can't afford to make calls to doctors for sick children on pay phones far from their homes, or of early female telephone operators repairing equipment on central switchboards. In the representation of company archival photographs, we are once again made aware of the gender and class biases in the recording of technological history. The author's captions provide some corrective, just as her analysis of archival materials provides fresh insight into the importance of class and gender in technological development.

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Magnus EINARSSON (collector, compiler, translator and editor),
Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives (Hull, Quebec, Canadian
Museum of Civilization, 1991, [Canadian Centre for Folk
Culture Studies, Mercury Series Paper No. 63] xii + 456 pp.,
ISBN 0-660-12921-3)

One of the founding trends in Euro-American Folktale scholarship is a marked philological concern with text in print. The transfer of verbal matter from a living oral/aural medium to a fixed visual format poses a problem ignored by some and addressed by others. Continuing efforts to reduce attendant distortions and preserve the original *in situ* presentation are reflected, for example, in Germain Lemieux's important volumes of French Canadian folktales and in