

## **The Telephone as a Medium of Faith, Hope, Terror, and Redemption: America, September 11**

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores how ordinary people used telephone technology during the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA. Personal emergency communication is heavily imbued with emotional meaning. These messages address major life problems and values, such as leaving final messages and expressing love and concern, sometimes requiring extreme efforts. They also show that formal technical characteristics of media, and boundaries across media, are not particularly salient to people who have pressing personal and social communication needs.*

**Keywords:** telephone, Syntopia, social consequences, social aspects of telecommunication.

### **Introduction**

Imagine the start of a good day. The crisp air gives you a sense that you will be able to check-off many lingering items on your 'to-do' list. You are also looking forward to the simple pleasures of a cup of coffee and a chat with some old friends. Then, imagine that suddenly you discover that within a few minutes unknown enemies are going to put you to a horrible, agonizing death. As your few remaining seconds slip away, what would you do? On September 11, 2001, in the skies over America, and in offices perched above Manhattan and burrowed deep under the Pentagon, this choice was being forced on ordinary people.<sup>1</sup> This article explores how people used the telephone and related technology to address their situation and needs during the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington. In general, it would be difficult to overestimate the role of the telephone in modern life despite its near invisibility to scholars of communication.<sup>2</sup>

### **Propositions about Telephone Use on September 11**

A number of different propositions emerge from the human uses and social consequences of the telephone on September 11. These propositions—or

themes—are the result of our analysis of specific incidents of telephone use on that tragic day. Below we present each proposition along with short descriptions of some of the incidents. At the end of this paper, we discuss how these propositions are consistent with a Syntopian perspective.

### *1. The Telephone Allows Intense Immediacy*

Shortly after the attack began, someone who answered the phone on the trading floor of broker Cantor Fitzgerald, whose offices are near the top of World Trade Center 1, was asked what was going on. He said, ‘We are fucking dying!’<sup>3</sup> Rocco Medaglia, a contracting supervisor, was completing a job on Tuesday morning at Cantor Fitzgerald’s offices in Tower One. ‘Just making sure everything was as it should be’, said his daughter, Ms Diana Medaglia. Minutes before Tower 1 collapsed, the Medaglias received in quick succession three phone calls. The family thought the calls must have been from a trapped Rocco. ‘We couldn’t hear anything on the other line but we hope that he could hear us, so we just were yelling into the phone’, his daughter said. Shortly after each call, the line would go dead.<sup>4</sup> Mr Medaglia also perished.

### *2. Contact and Reassurance Communication with Primary Social Group Members is Among the Highest Priority in Emergency Situations, and May Endure Across Time and Space*

For many, letting others know they were loved by their special someone was their highest priority, and they tried to accomplish this by any communication means possible. Last words: We who are about to die love you. Many other messages of love and concern were sent out across landwire, mobile phones, pagers and the Internet that day. Declarations were not frilly, fancy or creative. They were terse and conventional. But they were also extraordinarily meaningful.

Lee Hanson’s son (Peter), his wife (Sue Kim Hanson), and their 2-year-old daughter (Christine) were killed September 11 when their flight, United Flight 175, crashed into the World Trade Center. Peter, 32, used his cell phone to call his parents in Easton, CT, moments before his plane hit the second tower in the World Trade Center. ‘The fact that he called me—he could have called any number of people’, Mr Hanson said. ‘I take a lot of comfort in that. He thought enough to do that’.<sup>5</sup>

The telephone also allowed a mother and daughter to share their last minutes together. In the case of Ms Olabisi Shadie Layeni-Yee, the situation on September 11 was doubly poignant. Ms Layeni-Yee had been working at the World Trade Center in 1993, when it was bombed by terrorists. Ms Layeni-Yee’s mother had watched that event unfold on television, but had no idea what was going on with her daughter. Hours dragged by as the event was covered live on local TV. Finally, she got a call from her daughter. ‘Mom, I’m fine’; she had been helping a pregnant woman walk down from the 79 floor. On September 11, things were different. On that morning, the mother’s phone rang. It was her daughter. She urged her mother to turn on the TV, then quickly told her the situation, concluding with the words, ‘If worse comes to worst, I’m just calling to say goodbye to all of you’. Then she told her mother that the lights were going out and the floor was buckling. The mother turned around quickly towards the TV screen; it was a long shot of the tower collapsing.<sup>6</sup>

The telephone answering machine and voice messaging allowed some to receive a message that they would otherwise have missed, and has continued to give

enduring meaning and a sense of emotional immediacy to the lives and relationships that were destroyed that day. Shortly after September 11, a reporter called the number of a victim's family. A telephone answering machine picked up his call. The pleasant-sounding woman's voice explained that Ian and Christine can't take the call, please leave a message. The reporter commented that Christine would never be able to take the call, as she too was killed by the hijackers. Trying back later, he reached Christine's husband, Ian Pescaia. Mr Pescaia said he had not intentionally left the message on the machine. He explained to the reporter, 'I haven't had a chance to go get another tape. . . It's just the only tape. And I didn't want to erase it'.<sup>7</sup>

*3. Communication Technologies, Separately and in Combination, Were Used to Seek Information and Reassurance and to Establish Contact with Loved Ones*

Adam Mayblum was in Tower 1, which was struck by the first aircraft. His office, which was below the point of impact, lurched back and forth 10 or more feet. No one dreamed an airplane had struck their building but rather thought a bomb had gone off. He, like others, thought the worst was over. Like many others in an emergency situation, his thoughts turned to his family. He relates, 'My wife had taken our 9-month old for his check up. I called my nanny at home and told her to page my wife, tell her that a bomb went off, I was ok, and on my way out. We were moving down very orderly in Stair Case A. Very slowly. No panic. At least not overt panic. My legs could not stop shaking. My heart was pounding. Some nervous jokes and laughter. We checked our cell phones. Surprisingly, there was a very good signal, but the Sprint network was jammed. On the phones, one out of 20 dial attempts got through. I knew I could not reach my wife so I called my parents. I told them what happened and that we were all okay and on the way down. Soon, my sister-in-law reached me. I told her we were fine and moving down. I believe that was about the 65th floor. We were bored and nervous. I called my friend Angel in San Francisco. I knew he would be watching. He was amazed I was on the phone. He told me to get out, that there was another plane on its way. I did not know what he was talking about. By now, the second plane had struck Tower 2. We were so deep into the middle of our building that we did not hear or feel anything. We had no idea what was really going on. We kept making way for the wounded to go down ahead of us'.<sup>8</sup> Note that Mr Mayblum and those around him, though in the bowels of the WTC in New York, only got the first inkling of what had happened by talking by mobile phone to someone in San Francisco.

*4. Transmission of Both Information and Affect are Highly Important, and Users may be Extraordinarily Sensitive to Nuances, Regardless of the Medium*

In terms of coordination and alerting, Tom Burnett, aboard the doomed United Airlines flight above Pennsylvania, used his mobile phone to both alert his family and the authorities. When he reached his family, who lived in a suburb of San Francisco, his wife, Deena, was in the middle of making breakfast for their three girls. The call took her aback, and Tom sounded odd, she thought. She asked, 'Are you OK?' 'No', was his reply. Speaking in a quick, low voice he said, 'I'm on a plane, it's United Flight 93, and we've been hijacked. They've knifed a guy, and there's a bomb on board. Call the authorities, Deena'. Then he hung up.<sup>9</sup>

The BlackBerry and other handheld wireless e-mail devices, like two-way pagers, served as lifelines to friends and loved ones and workmates, and as a way to stay in contact with the office. People without hearing were able to use their mobile technology for text-based communication to reassure friends around the world in the midst of the horror. Susan Zupnik had been deaf from birth, wanted her mother to hear her voice on that fateful day in September. She and Carl Andreasen, 37, both deaf employees of the Port Authority, were breakfasting in a cafeteria on the 43rd floor of the North Tower. 'Suddenly, my face was thrown against a window', Zupnik told a reporter. She then saw debris falling down outside the windows. People were screaming around her, but she could hear nothing. 'I threw my bagel on the floor and ran out', she says. Ms Zupnik had an AOL Mobile Communicator, a device she purchased only months earlier. It allows her to send and receive messages. She keyed in a message to a friend, an administrator at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, that something was wrong. Then she received a news bulletin over her pager—a plane had hit the World Trade Center. As she slowly made her way down the stairs, the communicator buzzed constantly. Friends from all over the world—in California and Maryland and Ireland and South Africa and England—were asking whether she was safe. 'I'm on the 26th floor', she punched on the tiny keyboard to answer one concerned note, and continued her escape.<sup>10</sup>

#### *5. Use of Telecommunication Technology Leaves Important Residues that Reveal Complex Communicative Interactions*

Using new media inevitably leaves residues, because the modern telecommunication infrastructure involves many computers, with associated store-and-forward capacities and with complex abilities to track message flow for billing, routing and system optimization purposes. For example, we have pictures of some of the hijackers using ATM machines, going through airport security, and entering newsstands. Or, they can continue to represent potential interactions. News outlets carried hopeful stories that perhaps someone with a mobile phone could call for help from under the rubble, or even if the individual were unconscious, the mobile phone could still generate signals that would enable rescue. One journalist who traveled to Ground Zero on September 11 said that fire fighters reported that the eeriest sound of all was mobile phones and pagers ringing underneath the debris as loved ones still frantically tried to find and contact those missing.<sup>11</sup>

#### *6. New Social Relationships and Arrangements Emerge Around the Use and Non-use of New Media*

When people find themselves confronted by disaster they will usually band together, overcoming pre-existing social barriers. In studies of telephone service breakdowns, people share their limited resources, and turn to neighbors; friendships and community spirit develops.<sup>12</sup> A young man relates how he and a previously unknown neighbor befriended each other as they stood on their Manhattan tenement roof watching events unfold. 'After exchanging a few scant phrases of disbelief (after all, what could one say?), he invited me down through his window to use his phone. (Like most New Yorkers, mine was nearly useless for most of the day.) I called my mother back in Michigan.'<sup>13</sup> Bill Singer, an attorney who was escaping ground zero by foot, noted scores of individuals milling about,

sobbing. 'They often held cell phones. They cried that they couldn't reach their husband, their brother, their father, their sister, their mother, their friends. And strangers would simply walk up to them, put their arms around them, comfort them.'<sup>14</sup>

*7. Users can be Highly Creative in Developing Ad Hoc Solutions and Crossing Media Boundaries*

People are primarily concerned about the goals and processes of communication, not the technology. Thus people were creative in their use of available telecommunication technology to solve their immediate needs. When their first communication channel was blocked, they tried the next available alternative. If the plausible alternatives failed, they would begin cobbling together their own patchwork and fallback systems to get messages to loved ones, no matter how. For example, many sent Internet email messages asking recipients to phone others about the sender's situation. Or, consider one mother who was vacationing at 'the Habitat' in Bonaire, when a friend ran to her group saying, 'They're bombing America'. A few moments of watching TV in the open-air bar panicked her, as she thought that her daughter might have skipped school and been shopping at Pentagon City. 'Running for a telephone proved to be a futile proposition. There were simply no lines available. Instead, I bought a 45-minute Internet card and stuck myself at the Internet kiosk in the lobby at Habitat. While I was frantically emailing, the first tower of the World Trade Center imploded onto hundreds of rescue workers.. .. Within 10 minutes I got the answer I was waiting for from my ex husband. Morgan and everyone else I knew was fine. That information was priceless.'<sup>15</sup>

*8. Some People may Seize an Emergency as an Opportunity to Use Communication Technologies to Attract Attention to Themselves, Initiate Harm to Others, or Symbolize the Event*

The telephone, mobile phone and Internet of course enabled many things to take place that otherwise might not have happened on September 11, for both good and bad. Indeed, the attack on the World Trade Center was organized and implemented at least partly through mobile communication. The terrorists communicated with each other from one plane to another by mobile phone as they sat on the tarmac that fateful morning.

There were many reports of mobile phone messages being received from people trapped under the WTC. Unfortunately reports of this nature were later shown to be spurious.<sup>16</sup> Although some of these reports to authorities were believed to be correct at the time by the callers, they were often caused by people's misunderstanding of signaling and confirmation records, and a few were malicious. One woman, Sugeil Mejia, was sentenced to three years in jail for leading rescue workers on a wild goose chase through the rubble of the World Trade Center. She had fabricated a story that her husband, who she said was a police officer, and 10 colleagues, had contacted her by mobile phone from the depths of the rubble several days after the September attack.<sup>17</sup>

Many people began using their mobile phone to commemorate the September 11 incident, but not always in the way we would expect. In what was interpreted as an anti-American gesture, a graphic began circulating among mobile phone users

in the Middle East. The message was described by *The Economist* as appealing to 'terrorist sympathizers' throughout the Middle East. The simple graphic, which can be easily sent on the advanced phones commonly used in Europe and the Middle East, shows an airplane crashing into a skyscraper. The caption, in Arabic, was 'It hit and did not miss'.<sup>18</sup>

### Discussion: A Syntopian Perspective

The prior eight propositions, illustrated by the examples from the uses of telephone technology during and after September 11, reflect an underlying understanding of the uses of media that we call the Syntopian perspective. The general theoretical perspective of Syntopia emphasizes the human uses and social consequences of telecommunication technologies in modern society. It avoids a mandatory ideological perspective (whether it be historical determinism, post-modernism, or technological determinism) and instead, embraces an empirical-pragmatic tradition.<sup>19</sup> We use the word 'Syntopia' as it represents: (a) the synthesis of various media and social interactions; (b) the combination of 'syn' and 'utopia', derived from the Greek for 'together place', as new media foster increased connections among people and within communities; (c) the joint potential for both utopian and Syntopian visions of what new media does and could mean; (d) including the dark side of new media represented by the homophone 'sin'; and (e) the possibility that mediated communication, especially synthesized through various media combinations, can provide more wider, more diverse, and possibly more real communication than traditional face-to-face communication.

The particularly dramatic, tragic, and devastating event of September 11 provides many examples of how new communication technologies both represent and shape Syntopia—a dynamic social context where media are used for diverse human purposes, often in combination with other media, both intentionally and unintentionally, both in expected and unexpected ways, to communicate both intense emotions and immediacy as well as objective command control information, for ill and for good. Our examples here have suggested a variety of propositions about new media—especially telephonic media—that emphasize aspects of communication that more traditional media theories have overlooked. The uses of telephone technology as a medium of faith, hope, terror and redemption in the September 11 event are not determined by material forces, but by the interrelations among the uses and capabilities of society's media, and by the heart, spirit, and emotional and social needs of humankind.

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