

Book Award Interview

By Richard R. John ©



John

Richard John received the 2011 AEJMC History Division's award for the best book of the year for his *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications*. The book also won the first Ralph Gomory Book Prize from the Business History Conference. He specializes in the history of business, technology, communications, and American political development. He teaches in Columbia University's Ph.D. program in communications and is a member of the core faculty of Columbia's history department,

where he teaches courses on the history of capitalism and the history of communications. He has a Ph.D. in the history of American civilization, from Harvard University.

Q: Give us a brief summary of your book.

John: *Network Nation* is a history of an epochal media innovation — the popularization, for the first time in the history of the United States, and, arguably, the world — of an electrical communications network as a mass service for the entire population. This network — the archipelago of telephone operating companies that linked the nation's largest cities, as well as thousands of its towns and a large swath of the rural hinter-

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land — was re-envisioned around 1900 as a mass service for short-distance (mostly intracity and local) communications. The most innovative of these operating companies were located in the nation's largest cities (e.g. Chicago and New York City) and were affiliated with the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (then popularly known as Bell, and today known as AT&T). Also important in certain localities were independent (or non-Bell) operating companies. The independents competed with Bell in many markets until 1907, when, as a result of a speculative bubble that was exacerbated by the Panic of 1907, they suffered a crippling defeat. Following the acquisition by Bell of a large financial stake in Western Union in 1909, Bell managers reconfigured the telegraph to provide a comparable service for long-distance (including nationwide, but not international) telegraphy. "Universal service" referred to this hybrid low-cost telephone-telegraph service, which the US Justice Department declared illegal in 1913. The later history of this concept has obscured its origins: "universal service" did not originally refer to low-cost long-distance telephone service, though it did embrace the idea of low-cost short-distance telephone service inside cities and towns and their immediate hinterland. The vast majority of telephone calls in this period were local: the average distance of a telephone call originating in Chicago in 1900 was only 3.4 miles.

The popularization of the telephone was hastened not only by telephone managers, but also by telephone users, social scientists, and government officials at the municipal, state, and federal level. More basically it was shaped by the political economy in which telephone network providers operated. This political economy was progressive, in the sense that lawmakers presumed that the service that (the often quite literally) entrenched network providers operated promoted the public good. The telegraph, in contrast, was commercialized in an antimonopoly political economy that presumed that the public good was best served by competition between rival network providers. The antimo-

nopoly political economy fostered innovation — e.g. the telephone, the phonograph, and sound recording — but was not intended to, and did not, result in the popularization of telegraphy.

The phrase “network nation” is a metaphor. It is meant to highlight the extent to which the evolution of telegraph and telephone networks were shaped by governmental institutions and civic ideals. In addition, it draws attention to the cultural power of the identification of these networks with the nation — an identification that has long been a source of fascination — and misunderstanding. (Consider, for example, the exaggerated significance that many media historians and social scientists have assigned to the completion of the first transcontinental telephone link in 1915.) The phrase “network nation” is not meant to imply that the federal government was the only or even the most important regulatory forum. The telegraph network was regulated first at the federal and then at the state level. The telephone network was regulated first at the federal and municipal level, and later at the municipal, state, and federal level.

The term “telecommunications,” it might be added, would not be used in the United States until the 1930s: I put it in my title as a matter of convenience. Indeed, one might argue that the 1913 consent decree that led to divestiture by Bell of its newly acquired telegraph network marked the end not only of “universal service,” but also of the vision of telecommunications as a united telephone-telegraph-network as had been articulated by the French postal official who had invented the neologism “telecommunications” in 1904.

Q: How did you get the idea for your book?

John: The project that became *Network Nation* originated in 1998-99, when I had the privilege to spend a year as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D. C. Having

recently completed a history of the early American postal system, I was intrigued by the challenge of telling the story of American telecommunications in relationship to developments that it *followed*, rather than to those it *preceded*. The final years of the last millennium were abuzz with portentous pronouncements about the coming “information age,” and, frankly, I was skeptical of all the hype. This supercharged media landscape helped to attune me to the considerable role that advertising and public relations campaigns had played in publicizing an earlier generation of media innovations. I became particularly skeptical of the claims advanced by Bell publicists — who had successfully convinced several generations of media historians, social scientists, and network critics that Bell’s supposed triumph over its rivals in the early twentieth century was due to its superior long-distance network. This claim cannot withstand close scrutiny, yet it was then, and to large extent remains today, a staple of academic and popular writing on the history of American telecommunications.

Q: Tell us about the research you did for your book — What were your sources, how did you research your book, how long did you spend, and so forth?

John: *Network Nation* took a decade to research and write. It takes the form of a monograph that is based on a comprehensive investigation of the relevant primary sources. These included the business records of Western Union, American Telephone and Telegraph, and the Bell and non-Bell operating companies; legal records (including in particular the records of Sidley Austin, counsel for the Chicago Telephony Company); the personal and public papers of inventors, promoters, network critics, and government officials; the archives of the Chicago City Council and the U. S. Justice Department; the trade press (which proved invaluable); the popular press; published government documents at the fed-

eral, state, and municipal level (including laws, regulations, hearings, and court cases); and the pamphlet and social scientific literature. One of the most remarkable collections that I mined were the business records of the dozens of Bell and non-Bell telephone companies that are maintained by AT&T in its San Antonio archive. This archive complements — and in many ways serves as a corrective to — the more familiar archive maintained by AT&T in Warren, New Jersey. For too long media historians have relied on the Warren, New Jersey, archive, which, while invaluable for many purposes, provides an extremely limited and distorted view of the actual operation of telephone operating companies in their formative period.

Q: Besides the sources you used, were there any others you wish you had been able to examine?

John: I have never been able to locate the business records of the Metropolitan Telephone and Telegraph Company (the original Bell licensee in New York City) or its successor, the New York Telephone Company. I have been told on various occasions that these records are somewhere in White Plains — but have not been able to determine where. If they have survived, they would be an invaluable resource for future historians of American telecommunications. In addition, I did not have the opportunity to work in the large collection of telephone operating company records that are located at the Telecommunications History Archives in Denver, Colorado.

Q: Based on your research for the book, what would you advise other historians in our field about working with sources?

John: Media historians often reiterate claims that were originally advanced by corporate public relations flacks to promote a specific agen-

da.

There is, for example, no good reason to call the 1913 consent decree that ended the first anti-Bell telephone antitrust suit the “Kingsbury Commitment.” This bit of terminology has promoted a Bell-centric view of the first great media antitrust suit and has downplayed the extent to which the resulting settlement was a major defeat for Bell.

Media historians should also recognize that the users of new media have interests of their own. In the case of the telephone, for example, these interests sometimes opposed the expansion of the network. In addition, media historians should be wary of the self-serving claims that have been advanced on behalf of inventors, insurgent network providers, and financiers. The only way to avoid being misled is to read widely in the sources; to pay special attention to personal correspondence (which is often franker than public pronouncements); and, in particular, to the trade press. Journalists who cover a “beat” for a living are often better informed about events on the ground than almost anyone else. To be sure, journalists have their biases — but they are rarely as self-interested as inventors, network critics, or corporate public relations departments. Relying on the secondary literature is of course in many instances inevitable. Yet media scholars should be wary of books that, like Tim Wu’s *Master Switch*, do little more than regurgitate the self-interested talking points of inventors, network critics, and corporate publicists.

Q: What were the challenges you faced in researching your book?

John: The sheer magnitude of the source base was almost overwhelming, as was the challenge, early on, of obtaining access to the records of telephone operating companies. Digital keyword searches, of course, pose various problems, but they do generate a mass of material that media historians might otherwise have dismissed as falling outside of

the scope of their project.

Q: Is it possible to get too close to a research subject? How do historians maintain their neutrality of viewpoint when conducting and interpreting research?

John: Media historians should be wary not only of uncritically repeating public relations boilerplate, but also of unconsciously adopting the perspective of inventors, network critics, and users. It is far more important to understand how a communications network evolved out of an *earlier* network than to compare it to networks that it preceded. Literary critics champion what they call a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Media historians would do well to follow their lead. Facile comparisons, — such as, for example, between flat rate internet access in the 1990s and flat rate telephone service in the 1890s — pose a particular peril, since media historians often lack the “soak time” in the archives to interpret correctly engineering reports that date back many decades.

Q: What new insights does your book provide?

John: *Network Nation* reminds us (building on and gently critiquing the foundational work of STS scholar Langdon Winner) that politics have artifacts, as well as the other way around, and that the political structure in which a communications network evolves can profoundly shape its business strategy (an elaboration and critique of a central insight of the magisterial business historian Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., who famously contended that business strategy shaped corporate structure). In addition, it shifts our attention from well-known inventors, such as Samuel F. B. Morse and Alexander Graham Bell, to a much larger constellation of actors, who include network critics, business managers, lawmakers, social scientists, and journalists.

Q: What findings most surprised you?

John: When I began my project, I believed, like virtually everyone who had written about the formative era of American telephony, that Bell president Theodore N. Vail was a critical figure in the emergence of the twentieth-century Bell System. Vail *was* important, and not only because many of his managerial innovations at Bell built on his previous experience in the 1870s as the superintendent of the Railway Mail Service of the U.S. Post Office Department. Yet Vail played a far less central role in the popularization of the telephone (my main interest) than is often assumed.

I did not come to this conclusion all at once. In fact, it took me several years of research to discover that the key innovations in the popularization of the telephone preceded Vail's return to Bell in 1907, and that they had virtually nothing to do either with Bell's much-hyped transcontinental telephone network (long a money loser) or the supposedly nefarious machinations of financier J. P. Morgan. The real action originated in the Bell-affiliated operating companies in the big cities during the 1890s — a decade in which Vail was in Latin America working on projects unrelated to telephony. The full significance of the fact that hundreds of thousands of Chicago boarding houses and private residences relied for many years on a pay as you go "nickel-in-the-slot" telephone instruments (a device that resembled a modern pay telephone) took me some time to digest. I found this innovation to be so unexpected that I sought out the testimony of Chicagoans who remembered how they worked.

I was also surprised to discover that there is virtually no evidence for the common claim that women invented telephone sociability — a claim that seems to have originated in a campaign by telephone managers to deflect attention away from the propensity of male office clerks to clog the telephone network by gossiping about the latest sports

results. Men and not women invented telephone sociability, at least in Chicago in New York City. The assertion that women invented telephone sociability has been so often repeated by sociologists and historians that no one has bothered to return to the sources to see if it was true. I am convinced, based on the mass of materials that I have consulted, that it cannot withstand close scrutiny. The telephone was re-envisioned in Chicago and New York City in the 1890s as a mass service; women telephone users figured little in this epochal development.

I also found startling the existence of scattered (though very persuasive) evidence documenting Samuel Morse's unrequited love for Anne Ellsworth. This is intriguing, since Anne was not only the daughter of patent commissioner Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, but also the person credited with the first telegraph message "What Hath God Wrought." I spent a good deal of time trying, unsuccessfully, to learn more about the Morse-Ellsworth connection: Anne Ellsworth had various chaperones, but none of them left a written record of her feelings toward her much older suitor. Nothing from her own hand in this period has survived — so far as I have been able to determine. I would be eager to learn more about Anne Ellsworth — I have found hints in the popular press that the memory of her relationship with Morse lived on in France.

While I am on this subject, I have long been intrigued by the likelihood that the two most consequential telegraph and telephone patents were dowries. Ellsworth knew about Morse's infatuation with his daughter Anne, and, thus, was aware that the very expansive patent rights he granted Morse might work to his family's benefit, while Gardiner Greene Hubbard (the telephone promoter who helped shepherd Bell's patent through the patent office) was unquestionably intent on building a nice nest egg for his daughter, Mabel, who, as is well known, would marry telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell.

Q: Are there any misconceptions about *Network Nation* that you would like to address?

John: I have been gratified by the very favorable reception that *Network Nation* has received in the popular and academic press. Two reviews, however, puzzle me. In one, it was contended that I neglected telephone users. I am mystified by this claim, since, in fact, I wrote extensively in *Network Nation* not only about the myriad anti-Bell telephone user strikes in the 1880s — a topic almost entirely neglected by previous historians, in large part because it was downplayed by Bell-centric publicists — but also about the support telephone users gave to the Chicago Telephone Company in 1906, when the renewal of its franchise became a public issue. The title of chapter 7, “Telephomania,” drew attention to the frustration of telephone operating company manager Charles N. Fay with his users. Chapter 8 — “Second Nature” — shows how Fay’s successor, Angus Hibbard, popularized the telephone in Chicago around 1900. If media historians were able to fit only one chapter of *Network Nation* onto their syllabus, it might well be this one. True, I did not write specifically about the agency of female telephone users, but this is because I found little evidence that they were important in the initial popularization of the telephone, which I date to the 1890s.

The second review that puzzled me implied that I “love” monopoly. This is an odd criticism, but a fruitful one, since it gets to the heart of the question I was trying to answer. My book was animated by my conviction that it is a worthy goal to make the fruits of invention accessible to all. In my reading of the evidence, this goal was largely attained by Bell — in conjunction with its independent rivals — by 1907 — with many of the key events occurring in the nation’s largest cities (e.g. Chicago and New York City) in the 1890s. In the subsequent decade, lawmakers and network critics mounted a serious (though today mostly forgotten)

political campaign to nationalize the telephone and telegraph. One result of this campaign was the invention in the 1910s of corporate public relations, which Bell managers pioneered to beat back the call for Bell's nationalization — a topic that Roland Marchand wrote about brilliantly in *Creating the Corporate Soul*. I wrote as dispassionately as I could about this campaign, and its result — the legitimation of the Bell System as a managerial enterprise — a development that hastened the ascendancy in the United States of the corporate order that the business historian Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (my mentor) termed “managerial capitalism.”

For the record, I do not regard myself as a lover of monopoly: in fact, I am currently writing a history of the antimonopoly tradition in the United States from the Enlightenment to the present. Rather, I tried to set the record straight. Toward this end, it is important to underscore that the key regulatory contest in this period pitted defenders of *two kinds* of regulated monopoly — the first was a government owned and, presumably, a government operated monopoly, and the second was a government regulated monopoly. No one proposed the atomization of the telephone network in 1913 — a fact that may provide a perspective on the revival of the antimonopoly movement today. The separation of the telephone and telegraph network was, of course, a goal in 1913 — and this goal was, it is perhaps worth repeating, one that federal lawmakers attained.

The primary alternative to the 1913 consent decree ending the antitrust suit against Bell that had been launched by attorney general James C. McReynolds (a consent decree that is most accurately termed the “McReynolds settlement” — and *not* the “Kingsbury Commitment,” a Bell public relations coup that media historians have uncritically embraced) was the nationalization of the telephone network — an outcome that would have aligned telephone and telegraph regulation in the United States with telephone and telegraph regulation in Great

Britain, France, and much of the rest of the world. Whether such an outcome would have better promoted the public good than the Bell System is of course a historical imponderable. Historians, of course, cannot run controlled experiments. But I remain very impressed by the creativity of Bell Labs — which were established in 1925 as a direct result of the cartelization of the telephone network — and regard it as an open question as to whether the federal government could have matched its record.

Q: What advice would you give to people in our field who are considering doing a book in JMC history?

John: Sound historical scholarship on a plethora of media-history topics is in short supply. Write for readers who will not find their way to your publication at least a decade after it first appears in print; this will help you to avoid the temptation to strain for relevance. Nothing dates historical writing more rapidly than a narrowly presentist agenda.

Appreciate the magnitude of the task and the obligation you have not only to your readers but also to the historical actors whose lives you are recovering. Respect the fact that your protagonists might well have different priorities than you might have assumed, or wished for, and try to figure out what these priorities were. Do your best to understand the constraints that your protagonists confronted. Consult the secondary literature, devise a feasible research strategy, and collaborate with other media historians who are working on related topics. Read widely in primary sources — including the trade press — and avoid making facile assumptions linking past and present. Your topic is important on its own terms — don't feel a need to make it hip. Future readers, if you are lucky, will be grateful.

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